

House Armed Service Committee Member Day

April 3, 2019

Testimony by U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor

Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Thornberry, thank you for letting me testify today about issues my community in Florida are facing that I believe the House Armed Services Committee should prioritize. I am proud to represent MacDill Air Force Base (AFB) in Tampa, home of the 6th Air Mobility Wing, U.S. Central Command, U.S. Special Operations Command, the 927th Air Refueling Wing and a number of additional mission partners. I am also a proud co-chair of the Congressional Air Force Caucus and the Special Operations Forces Caucus.

I would like to take a quick moment to member our colleague Rep. Walter B. Jones. I know he was a proud member of this committee. I was able to get to know him better during our time co-chair the Special Operations Forces Caucus. He was a gentleman through and through. I know he will be greatly missed by me and indeed by us all.

MacDill AFB's 6th Air Mobility Wing is the centerpiece of the U.S. Air Force's Global Vigilance, Global Reach, Global Power mission with its essential functions of aerial refueling and airlift. The scale of MacDill AFB's missions have rapidly increased with the recent expansion of eight new KC-135 tankers and related service members and their families. MacDill AFB's missions are vital to keeping America safe and ready for any contingencies we may face as a nation and it is a privilege to fight for the needs of the airmen, other service members and their families that call MacDill and Tampa Bay home.

MacDill is home to service members from all branches of our military and it is vital that we not only keep them safe on the battlefield, but also at home. Over the years, I have heard from base officials about different mold issues at facilities on base, but over the past few months, I have heard from the families of service members that they are finding mold in their homes located on-base. Plain and simple, military families deserve the best housing available and reports of substandard conditions of on-base housing are unacceptable. Our service members should be able to focus on their mission and keeping our great nation safe without being forced to deal with housing conditions that lead to sick family members and force their families to find alternative housing. My office and I personally have talked to neighbors whose families have been affected by this issue and I have been raising the cases of families affected to the highest levels.

Over the past several months and I met with Air Force Secretary Wilson and we discussed the challenges at the base and also a military family housing bill of rights. I am pleased that the U.S. House is taking this issue so seriously – especially here in the Armed Services Committee. I have raised the issue with Chairman John Garamendi, one of my co-chairs on the House Air Force Caucus and I understand he and HASC are taking steps to ensure the proper oversight is carried out. I am also working with Rep. Charlie Crist, who serves on the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, and Rep. Wasserman Schultz, who serves as chair of Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Subcommittee, on this issue to ensure military families have the resources and housing they deserve.

During my time serving my neighbors in Congress, I worked on provisions in legislation to encourage the Department of Defense and the military departments to continue taking cost-effective, timely and appropriate actions to prevent and remediate reported cases of indoor mold located on military installations. The fact that we are still facing these issues today is unacceptable and I will continue to stand up for these families by pressing the cases of those affected that come to my office and I want to work with you all to push for greater Congressional oversight. These families deserve better.

During my conversations with these families, they have shared how they have thousands of dollars in expenses directly related to the mold in their homes. Whether it is temporary living costs, moving costs, health care bills or other household incidentals, we must work to make these families whole for the out-of-pocket expenses they incurred. These private housing contractors have let our military families down and I hope to work with this committee and appropriators to ensure we protect these families who have already sacrificed so much to protect their fellow Americans.

In addition to addressing mold issues in on-base housing, I hope the committee will stand strong against drilling in the east central Gulf of Mexico. Aside from risks to our tourism-based economy in Florida and across the Gulf, our strong military presence throughout the region needs the east central Gulf for their exclusive use for testing – free of drilling rigs, platforms and supply vessel traffic. It is for this reason that the Military Mission Line (MML) in the east central Gulf (EGOM) was established by the 2006 GOMESA law to delineate the military testing area as being off limits to oil exploration. As the May 2018 Department of Defense report “Preserving Military Readiness in the Eastern Gulf of Mexico” clearly shows, the military is planning to increase testing out in the EGOM in the future.

In one of its most poignant references, the Department of Defense called the eastern Gulf of Mexico an “irreplaceable national asset” for combat force readiness and for accomplishing the goals of the 2018 National Defense Strategy. The MML creates a large-scale, flexible and irreplaceable training ground for our development of our leading defense technologies. The growing threat assessment of security risks in the Arabian Gulf region make this training all the more important. The report notes several times that the proximity to major military bases and its large-scale make the EGOM area a unique asset for national defense that cannot be replicated. It is important to mention the over \$70 billion in economic impact Florida’s military bases have on our state, according to research by the Florida Chamber of Commerce.

My colleague Rep. Francis Rooney and I recently led *all* of our Florida congressional colleagues – including Reps. Michael Waltz and Matt Gaetz of this committee – in sending a letter to Acting Secretary David Bernhardt of the Department of Interior to exempt drilling off Florida’s coast in part because “any oil and gas development would be an obstacle to military preparedness and national security.” I would like to submit our letter for the record.

I again want to thank you all for allowing me to testify today on topics that are important to my community, MacDill Air Force Base and our overall national security. I look forward to working with you during the National Defense Authorization process and beyond to ensure we face our nation’s ongoing and future national security challenges head-on.