

Department of the Air Force

Testimony

Before the House Armed Services
Subcommittee on Military Personnel



Senior Enlisted Leader Perspective

Witness Statement of
CMSAF JoAnne S. Bass
Chief Master Sergeant of the U.S. Air Force

January 31, 2024

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE BIOGRAPHY

CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT OF THE AIR FORCE JOANNE S. BASS

Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force JoAnne S. Bass represents the highest enlisted level of leadership, and as such, provides direction for the enlisted force and represents their interests, as appropriate, to the American public and to those in all levels of government. She serves as the personal adviser to the Chief of Staff and the Secretary of the Air Force on all issues regarding the welfare, readiness, morale, and proper utilization and progress of more than 600,000 Total Force Airmen. Chief Bass is the 19th chief master sergeant appointed to the highest noncommissioned officer position.



Chief Bass was raised as an Army dependent, living in several overseas and stateside locations, prior to entering the Air Force in 1993. Throughout her career, she has held a variety of leadership positions serving at the squadron, group, wing and major command levels. She has significant joint service and special operations experience and has participated in several operations and exercises as well as deployments in direct support of Operations SOUTHERN WATCH, ENDURING FREEDOM, and IRAQI FREEDOM.

Prior to this assignment, she served as the Command Chief Master Sergeant, Second Air Force, Keesler Air Force Base, Mississippi.

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Introduction

Chairman Bacon, Ranking Member Houlahan, and distinguished members of this panel, thank you for your continued interest, and support, in the quality of life of the men and women who serve our great Nation. I am again honored for this opportunity to join my fellow service senior enlisted advisors to address the needs of our military, as well as speak with you, specifically, on the quality of life issues impacting the lives of our Airmen and their families.

We find ourselves serving our Nation at a time of consequence, where we face challenges from two strategic competitors: China and Russia. While China is our most sophisticated pacing challenge, we cannot ignore the threat that Russia also plays in attempting to upend the rules-based international order, nor can we turn a blind eye to the conflict in the Middle East. The character and landscape of the strategic environment has rapidly changed. As we see more Unmanned Aircraft Systems, satellites, cyber attacks, disinformation operations, and even artificial intelligence begin to saturate the battlefield, the time has never been more crucial to understand the complex threats we face, and America's need to significantly outpace them. We can also no longer afford to just maintain strategic dominance in air, land, and sea. We must cultivate the right tools and talent to extend that dominance in the space, cyber, and information domains. *Now, more than ever, we need Airmen who can meet these complex challenges and develop solutions that allow us to retain our competitive advantage.*

As the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, I've been able to meet and converse with Airmen and their families during my travels, hear their stories, their concerns, and the unique challenges they face. I am honored to be their voice. The work that our Airmen do each day in support of our Nation cannot be overstated. For more than 76 years, the U.S. Air Force has answered our Nation's call, without hesitation, and without fail. *And it falls on us to ensure our Airmen have the resources required to continue to serve.*

It is said that we **recruit** the service member, and we **retain** the family. To that end, to be the Air Force our Nation needs, we must prioritize the quality of life of our service members and their families. Our Air Force and Airmen must remain *ready, willing, and able* to deliver airpower anytime, anywhere – enhancing the capabilities we need today to ensure we win tomorrow. The 665,652 Total Force Airmen I represent have afforded me a unique perspective on the direction our Air Force needs to go. Over the past year, I have seen examples of our

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Airmen working extremely hard to follow through on the changes our Air Force needs. They understand the rapidly evolving challenges, and the new domains of warfare that will define future-state operations. In order for our service members to focus on this mission, we owe it to them to provide them with a quality of life that shows we value their service and sacrifice.

As our Department of the Air Force takes a holistic look at re-optimizing for Great Power Competition, much is still being worked out. Yet on the people front we are focused on the force today and the force of the future. We need our Airmen to remain steadfast and committed to the defense of the homeland, and we can't have them distracted by whether or not they are able to live in safe and quality housing and dormitories, have access to affordable childcare and healthcare, all while they endure higher rates of spousal unemployment, and many other challenges as a result of accepting the call to serve our nation. ***We must adequately compensate our service members and care for their families, to be able to recruit and retain the talent our Air Force needs to maintain our advantage in the future.*** Quality of life directly affects the readiness of our military, and our ability to recruit and retain the best America has to offer. ***For more than 50 years, every single Airman has willingly raised their right hand and accepted a life of service to our Nation.*** They answered, and continue to answer, our Nation's call. We must ensure that the care and welfare of our service members remains an undisputed priority. These things are integral to *who we are* and *imperative to our future success*. Continuing to take on these issues demonstrates our commitment to our service members and their families, and ultimately builds their trust in our great institution. Ignoring them will erode the foundations that are fundamental to institutional success. It has never been more critical to maintain the quality of life of our all-volunteer force.

We will continue to work with you, our willing partners, in developing actionable solutions to build that trust and care for our Airmen, and our families, and ensure our Airmen are appropriately compensated for the duties they perform to achieve the Air Force mission.

In addition to pay and compensation, we must also understand that our installations are not only key components of supporting our warfighting mission, but they are also where we call home. Years of competing priorities and fiscal constraints have forced us to manage risk in infrastructure and continue to create challenges and hardships for our Airmen. We must provide

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a safe place, whether it be in the dormitories or in privatized housing where our Airmen and their families can come together as a community.

The need to modernize and equip our Air Force for Great Power Competition is greater than ever. We must look at how our service members are impacted by these quality-of-life issues, and we must care for them with the same intensity as we approach the mission.

Military Pay and Compensation

At the beginning of this year, Department of Defense Military basic pay increased by 5.2%, the basic allowance for housing by 5.4% on average and the basic allowance for subsistence by 1.7%. These increases are very much appreciated and essential to our service members when it comes to the standard of living. While the basic pay increase is appreciated, it did not completely insulate members and their families from the nation's inflation challenges (with the national inflation average of 3.4%) and rising housing costs (i.e., the Federal Housing Finance Agency House Price Index of 6.3%). I am eager and grateful for the much-anticipated work being conducted through the 14th Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation (QRMC) which will dive deep in assessing challenges unique to a military lifestyle (e.g., spousal unemployment due to the frequency of military moves, the strain of geographic separation between service members and their families (to include dual military couples), and access to affordable childcare and quality housing).

While the QRMC will inform long-range decisions, and we look forward to its recommendations, it may take years to complete and our service members need short-term, impactful attention and focus now, which is why I support and appreciate the specific focus on quality of life. It matters.

Access to Quality Healthcare

I'm also appreciative of the work our military medical community of providers and administrators do every day, yet more must be done when it comes to healthcare. In February 2022, the Military Health System (MHS) completed its transition of authority, direction, and control of all CONUS and OCONUS military treatment facilities from the various services to the Defense Health Agency. However, this transition has not been without its challenges. During visits to the INDOPACOM Area of Responsibility in May and June 2023, the DoD Inspector

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General, as referenced in a recent report, was repeatedly informed by senior leaders of difficulties with accessing healthcare – including challenges with access to mental health care.

Additionally, the report provided data showing that some TRICARE networks are not robust enough, or adequate, to meet the needs of beneficiaries – which may result in difficulty obtaining in-network care. There is also report of wait times for routine and specialty appointments that extend several months, resulting in beneficiaries seeking off-base care and paying out-of-pocket.

We believe these are systemic challenges within MHS, and a lack of contract medical personnel, to include a shortage of mental health providers across the nation. Moving forward, we are confident that DHS and the service will address these challenges by identifying specialties, by location, where the managed care support contractor provider network is not meeting DoD access to care standards, and, in coordination with the managed care support contractors, develop and implement a plan to bring those provider networks into compliance with those requirements. The Air Force is committed to working with the DHA to get after this on behalf of our Airmen and families.

When it comes to all aspects of health, the mental health, wellness, and resiliency of our Airmen and families is a top priority. To that end, we have rolled out an integrated “Spectrum of Resilience” model designed to reinforce the power of connectedness and leverage it as one of the greatest sources of strength for meeting the unique challenges associated with military life. Our Fortify the Force Initiative Team (FFIT) has been working hard, in conjunction with the DAF Cross Functional Team, to help overcome the barriers and stigmas Airmen face when seeking mental health care. We have also partnered with the DHA to examine, refine, and expand options for care. We are focused on creating a culture where Airmen are valued, connected to a purpose, and if they need help, we are there to provide those resources.

Suicide Prevention

A cornerstone of our integrated resilience model that we strive to build is one where we work together, at all levels and across all organizations, to prevent any Airman from seeing no other option than to end their own life. Suicide prevention remains a Department of the Air Force priority at every level. According to the Department of Defense Annual Report on Suicide in the Military Calendar year 2022 (release 30 October 2023), suicide rates in the Air Force declined

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from a rate of 25.1 per 100,000 Active Component service members, in calendar year 2019, to 24.3 in CY20, and 15.3 in CY21. In CY22 this number saw a slight increase to 19.7 per 100,000, reflecting the average rate over the past five years. We must keep our intent and goal on reducing this rate to zero. We are focused on four areas and aligning them with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: building connections, detecting risk, promoting protective environments, and equipping our Air Force and our families. Our intent is to take a leadership-driven public-health approach, informed by data and partnerships with academia, industry, and sister services to leverage diverse ideas and innovate prevention activities.

The FFIT has been working to identify the barriers in place that might limit the success of any initiatives and recommending solutions to best help our Airmen and their families. Looking to the future, the continued funding for expansion of resiliency and suicide prevention programs is essential to ensuring our Airmen have direct access to the care they need, when they need it. There is more work to do, and I am confident in the level of effort we continue to provide that we will see positive results.

Military Family Housing & Dormitories

Ensuring the health and safety of our Airmen and their families living in dormitories or military family housing is a leadership imperative for our Air Force and must be treated with the same seriousness as we treat our weapon systems. To that end, we are deliberately empowering our tenants and commanders, through working groups, to address housing challenges at our bases, while continuing to take action to ensure safe and habitable housing for service members and their families.

The Department of the Air Force Military Housing Privatization Initiative (MHPI) inventory contains 52,181 homes with 31 projects across 63 installations. The high cost of construction continues to present challenges to improve DoD-owned family housing. Combined, the family housing operations and maintenance and construction programs will ensure continued support for the housing needs of Airmen, Guardians, their families, as well as our Army, Navy, and Marine Corps teammates living in DoD-owned and privatized family housing.

Additionally, the Department of the Air Force dormitory inventory contains 640 permanent party dorms comprising 53,600 bedrooms, and 155 training dorms with 47,600 bedrooms. Of the two dorm inventory facilities assessed, only 200 permanent party beds fell

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below the facility condition standard set by OSD. Despite the high overall dorm condition rating, the department recognizes the need to focus Military Construction funds to replace dormitories that are beyond their useful lives and installations with dormitory deficits. In FY22-23 the DAF funded 67 projects totaling \$341M in dorm renovations and repairs. The DAF plans to spend approximately \$216 million, across 31 projects, in FY24 Facility Sustainment Restoration and Modernization funds to repair and improve the condition of the current inventory of dormitories.

Access to Affordable Childcare

Available, affordable, and quality childcare programs are an essential workforce enabler for our Airmen and the Guardians we support. Our focus to improve access to childcare includes staffing initiatives for our centers, adding family childcare providers, and increasing community-based fee assistance along with targeted construction investments. These programs ensure the care and support of family members, which allows our service members to clearly focus on training and mission accomplishment. We currently have 269 child development and youth centers on our installations. We also offer expanded childcare programs, utilizing a variety of approaches to meet the needs of Airmen and Guardians who require nontraditional care for irregular duty hours. Unfortunately, this still does not meet the demand for the care our service members need. As of 1 January 2024, there were 3,224 children, ages 0-5, on a waiting list for on-base childcare – with an average wait time of more than 137 days. That is a decrease of 1,563 children from 1 December 2022. To continue combatting this gap between needs and capability, we are working to maximize the spaces and childcare options currently available, pursue initiatives to expand childcare options, and leverage feedback from Airmen, and their families, to make the programs better. We have increased availability and affordability of the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN) program, which pays for a portion of childcare fees. This program supports Airmen living in areas where on-base childcare is not available, or there is an extensive waitlist. In FY23, we provided more than \$28M in assistance across 4,400 spaces for 6,752 DAF children. In May 2023, we launched a pilot program to expand MCCYN fee assistance to DAF civilians living and working in the National Capital Region. Currently, we are tracking participation and costs to determine other locations to include in this pilot program. Of the 644 CDC direct care hires during FY23 Q4, 318, roughly 49%, received the childcare fee

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discount. Currently, 31% of DAF CDC direct care providers are receiving discount, with the total FY23 Q4 value of the reduced fees for direct care staff being more than \$3.1M.

As we continue to leverage these programs, we must also remain conscious of the increasing demand for available, affordable, and quality childcare. This directly impacts the readiness and retention of our Airmen and their families. We must also remember that it supports spouse employment and, in turn, overall financial stability for our families. It is more than just a quality-of-life initiative, it is a force multiplier essential to mission success.

Spousal Employment

The modern military family is more diverse than it has ever been, with more families comprised of dual military and single parents than previous years. In order to recruit the high-quality talent to the Air Force, we have embraced policy that enables members to ensure their families are cared for while also serving their country.

Currently, roughly 21% of military spouses are either unemployed or not available for employment with the top reason listed as a need for the spouse to take care of children. Additionally, 41% of DAF spouses said they experienced moderate to very large challenges in finding employment following a permanent change of station. Furthermore, of the military spouses who recently PCS'd, 34% of them required a state licensure for employment, and 18% of those spouses said they had difficulty obtaining it.

Given these challenges, the DAF is committed to continue improving spouse employment opportunities and license portability. Taking care of those families is an essential foundation of the quality of life of our Airmen and a strong pillar in ensuring a high state of readiness.

Conclusion

Chairman Bacon, Ranking Member Houlahan, and members of this Subcommittee, thank you again for this opportunity to represent our incredible service members and their families. Your Airmen, supported by some of the strongest families, and greatest Americans, our Nation will ever know, stand ready. They fully understand the role they play in employing and enabling Airpower around the world.

My fellow senior enlisted advisors and I are honored for the opportunity to provide insight into the quality of service and quality of life of our service members, which directly affects our force. For more than 50 years, our all-volunteer force has proudly answered the call to

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serve. And in an era of contested domains, defined by great power competition, that service matters more than ever. Our service members are the key to securing a future where American dominance remains uncontested. It is our job to ensure that our strategic edge remains razor sharp. It is our responsibility to ensure that our most competitive advantage, our people, remains strong and unwavering. The decisions we make now will have implications on our Nation for generations to come.