

**Testimony of Rep. Derrick Van Orden (WI-03)**  
**House Armed Services Committee**  
**Military Quality of Life Panel**  
**February 6, 2024**

Thank you, Chairman Bacon, and Ranking Member Houliahan.

I appreciate the opportunity to address the Military Quality of Life Panel today. As a 26-year Navy veteran, with 22 of those years spent as a Navy SEAL, I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on behalf of our service members and to relay my experiences of my time in service.

My experiences have been defined not only by the missions I've undertaken but also by the personal challenges I faced along the way. Shortly after beginning my service, I found myself relying on WIC to support my family, a reality that many service members quietly share. This firsthand experience has instilled in me a deep understanding of the importance of ensuring our service members and their families are adequately supported.

The conversation around military compensation and benefits is critical, especially as we face ongoing recruiting challenges, with the all-volunteer force collectively missing their recruiting goals in FY 23 by 41,000 recruits.

It becomes increasingly difficult to meet these challenges when the compensation package, including hourly pay and healthcare, for a

customer service representative at KwikTrip in my home state of Wisconsin surpasses that of our junior enlisted service members. This discrepancy not only highlights the financial difficulties faced by our military personnel but also raises questions about the value we place on their service.

During my tenure in the Navy, the disparity between military and civilian compensation became increasingly apparent, particularly for our junior enlisted. The current compensation, while recently improved with the largest pay raise for enlisted service members in over two decades, still falls short when considering the full scope of their sacrifice and rising costs of inflation over the last three years.

The principle of ensuring that our military personnel are provided for should be as fundamental as the commitment they make to protect our nation. It's troubling to acknowledge that many within our ranks have had to rely on programs like SNAP and WIC to provide for their families. In 2019, over 280,000 service members reported experiencing food insecurity, a reminder of the financial challenges they face, further exacerbated by the fact that only a fraction utilized available assistance programs due to eligibility restrictions or the stigma associated with seeking help.

The core of our discussion today transcends the mechanics of pay scales and benefit programs; it's about our collective responsibility to those

who serve. Our service members, who stand on the front lines and fight our nation's wars, should never have to ask for a helping hand upon their return home.

In response to these challenges, it's necessary that we take meaningful steps to address the systemic issues contributing to the economic hardships faced by our military families. We must advocate for policy changes that not only increase the pay scales but also consider the unique aspects of military life that impact financial stability.

As we move forward, we must advocate for policy that is aligned with the first truth of the Special Operations Forces: humans are more important than hardware. This principle reminds us that the welfare of our service members is paramount, and our defense policies and priorities must reflect this value. It's incumbent upon us to ensure that those who dedicate their lives to our nation's security are supported both in service and beyond. I look forward to working with this panel and all relevant stakeholders to advance reforms that enhance the quality of life for our military personnel. Thank you for the opportunity to share my insights on this matter.