

STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE  
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL

KEEPING OUR SERVICE MEMBERS AND THEIR FAMILIES SAFE AND  
READY: THE MILITARY'S PREVENTION AND RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC  
VIOLENCE

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Chairwoman Speier, Ranking Member Gallagher, and members of this distinguished Subcommittee, I welcome the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Department's efforts to keep our families and children safe and healthy.

The Department of Defense (DoD) is committed to preventing and responding to domestic abuse and serious harm to children in the military community as well as enhancing the welfare and well-being of our Service members and their families. As well as being the right thing to do, it is also imperative to the readiness of our force. The Department is also committed to fostering and promoting a military culture in which abuse and maltreatment of any kind are not tolerated, condoned, or ignored. To address domestic abuse and serious harm to children, we use a comprehensive approach that focuses on prevention, emphasizes early intervention, mandates timely reporting, promotes awareness, and utilizes evidenced-based and informed tools to support response and treatment.

Before being sworn in on January 20<sup>th</sup> as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community & Family Policy, I served as the Family Readiness Director at Association of the United States Army (AUSA). In this position, I kept a close eye on all issues affecting Army families, which included domestic abuse and sexual assault. Having spent 30 years as an active duty spouse myself and working with many families during that time, I understand the trauma that results from domestic abuse and the impacts it can have on families. During those years, I also served as a nurse and worked in the community mental health field. I believe my breadth of experience will allow me to bring a balanced approach to this issue, and I am fully committed to addressing this challenge. Working to eliminate domestic abuse within our community is an absolute necessity, and the Department deeply appreciates your continued support for the programs and policies that help our Service members and families and all victims stay safe, strong, and resilient.

Today, I am prepared to discuss the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the GAO Domestic Abuse Report that was recently released, DoD oversight, and the Department's efforts to implement recent legislation focused on domestic abuse and serious harm against children.

## **Overview of the Department's Approach - A Coordinated Community Response**

The coordinated community prevention and response model is central to the DoD strategy for addressing the complex nature of domestic abuse and serious harm to children. This comprehensive model involves the Family Advocacy Program (FAP), along with the Service member's command, medical, military law enforcement, legal, the chaplaincy, civilian child protective services (CPS), and other community-based resources. This model is designed to prevent, identify, and respond to family violence, and within that framework, domestic abuse, specifically. Each component of the coordinated community response plays a role in the safety and welfare of Service members, victims, and families.

The various model components respond to each incident as appropriate, in line with their unique missions, while contributing to the overarching community response. These parallel but distinct processes and functions assemble a holistic system of prevention and support. FAP offers clinical counseling and support to a domestic abuse victim, while law enforcement works to investigate the matter if the victim files an "unrestricted" report. Ensuring victim safety, providing clinical services to reduce and mitigate victim trauma, and supporting family re-stabilization as appropriate are the primary roles of FAP. Law enforcement and legal personnel engage and apply their expertise to investigate criminal allegations and prosecute offenders, as warranted.

### **The Family Advocacy Program**

The Family Advocacy Program is the social services keystone to the Department of Defense's prevention of and response to domestic abuse, child abuse and neglect, and Problematic Sexual Behavior in Children and Youth (PSB-CY). At the Department level, the DoD FAP office is the policy proponent for organizing the coordinated community response. At the Service level, Military Service FAPs ensure awareness of the program; train leaders, Service members, and their families; implement prevention initiatives; and provide clinical counseling and supportive services targeted toward responding to domestic abuse. Each Military Service FAP plays multiple roles in the process. These roles include coordinating with partners and stakeholders to ensure adult and child victim safety, providing victim advocacy and support, managing the Incident Determination Committee (IDC) process for determining if an incident meets the clinical threshold for more intensive intervention services, and recording incidents of

abuse in the FAP Central Registry—the database for tracking trends across DoD. Next, it is important to understand DoD FAP’s role in preventing and responding to domestic abuse.

## **Prevention**

The Department is focused both on “upstream prevention” and ensuring that those in crisis get connected with needed support. DoD has a comprehensive portfolio of programs and services that incorporates evidence-informed strategies and approaches recommended by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to prevent domestic violence, reduce risk factors, and increase protective factors such as financial security, relationship skills, and community support for military life challenges. For example, the My Career Advancement Account (MyCAA) scholarship and the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities (SECO) program assist spouses in getting the education they need to find meaningful and portable employment. These programs are important contributors to financial security.

Safe and healthy relationship skill building is also a focus. In FY20, Service members and families participated in more than 173,000 non-medical counseling sessions through Military OneSource. The same fiscal year, Service members and families participated in 1.9 million engagements with Military and Family Life Counselors, a program that consists of over 2300 counselors serving military communities worldwide in schools, child development centers, embedded within units, at family centers, and other locations where families congregate. For both Military OneSource and the Military and Family Life Counseling program, the top reason Service members and families use non-medical counseling is for relationship support. Non-medical counseling is short-term, solution-focused counseling appropriate for addressing day-to-day military life stressors that do not rise to the threshold of a mental health diagnosis. Non-medical counseling through Military OneSource and the Military and Family Life Counseling Program is provided face-to-face and virtually in response to conditions on the ground.

In Summer 2019, MC&FP established a working group of helping professionals from across the Services, the military research space, and other OSD components, such as the Defense Suicide Prevention Office (DSPO) and Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO), to focus on delivering effective relationship support. As a result of this working group, MC&FP has started training Military and Family Life Counselors in a new, evidence-based relationship intervention called “Brief Relationship Check-Up.”

In September 2020, MC&FP launched a relationship campaign focused on normalizing help-seeking for relationship support and skill-building. Since the launch, the campaign has generated more than 210,000 landing page views on Military OneSource, with individuals spending an average of six minutes engaging with information and resources. Many individuals have gone on to schedule counseling sessions or access a consultant via live chat after engaging with the campaign. This social media campaign has reached more than 2.6 million Service members and families.

Finally, during 2020, DoD FAP conducted a holistic review and environmental scan of all prevention activities (policies, programs, and research efforts) across each of the Military Services. The results of this assessment informed the development of a new logic model to guide FAP prevention, based on the evidence-informed approaches recommended by the CDC, adapted to the military community context, to prevent domestic abuse and child abuse and neglect. DoD FAP also participates in the Prevention Collaboration Forum (PCF), a Secretary of Defense initiative led by the Office of Force Resiliency to holistically address the underlying factors that contribute to multiple forms of violence, abuse, and self-harm. Other PCF members include the DSPO, the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), the Defense Health Agency, SAPRO, and others. Under the auspices of the PCF, the DoD has published a new cross-cutting primary prevention policy which sets standards for a unified approach to preventing domestic abuse, child abuse and neglect, sexual assault, harassment, suicide, and PSB-CY.

### **Fiscal Year 2020 Child Abuse and Neglect and Domestic Abuse in the Military**

The Department of Defense recently released to Congress its Report on Child Abuse and Neglect and Domestic Abuse in the Military for Fiscal Year 2020. The rates of child abuse and neglect reports, substantiated incidents, and unique victims per 1,000 military children decreased, when compared to their 10-year averages, continuing a downward trend over the past several years. For child sexual abuse, there was a decrease in both the number of substantiated incidents and the rate of substantiated incidents per 1,000 military children.

The results for domestic abuse were mixed. The rates of spouse abuse reports, substantiated incidents, and unique victims per 1,000 military married couples decreased when compared to their 10-year averages. However, we saw increases in intimate partner abuse: the

number of substantiated incidents of intimate partner abuse and the number of unique victims of intimate partner abuse both increased when compared to their 10-year averages. There was also an increase in the proportion of adult sexual abuse incidents, as a subset of domestic abuse, when compared to the 10-year average. DoD FAP will conduct a deeper analysis of both intimate partner abuse and adult sexual abuse reported incidents to identify possible drivers of the increases.

### **COVID-19 Impacts**

During 2020-2021, Service members, victims, and families faced many unique challenges. One of the issues our families may be dealing with is an increase in domestic abuse, as reported by mainstream media since last summer. Civilian-led domestic violence programs, including the National Domestic Violence Hotline, state domestic violence hotlines, shelters, and non-residential support programs, have seen an increase in reporting and service provision. While similar impacts to Service members, victims, and families have not yet been observed in the Departments' data, we know anecdotally that reported maltreatment incidents reveal an uptick in severity and risk, which aligns with media reports from the civilian sector. For this reason, we anticipate a surge of reports once individuals and families fully re-enter public spaces such as child care facilities, child and youth activities, and schools, and once parents return to work outside the home and resume in-person interactions with family, friends, and co-workers.

A preliminary analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on Fiscal Year 2020 FAP data suggests that the pandemic had a greater impact on the *reporting* of child abuse and neglect and domestic abuse than on *substantiated* incidents of abuse. Despite fewer reported incidents of abuse during the pandemic, the incidents reported were more likely to meet the DoD definition of abuse, suggesting that the most obvious or severe incidents of abuse were identified. DoD FAP will continue to monitor the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on reports of abuse.

### **Government Accountability Office (GAO) Report on Domestic Abuse**

The GAO report, "Domestic Abuse: Actions Needed to Enhance DoD's Prevention, Response, and Oversight," was released on May 6, 2021. The GAO worked closely with the DoD FAP, Service FAPs, and other offices within the coordinated community response, and as a

result, achieved notable accuracy and alignment between GAO's findings and the Department's position.

GAO made 32 recommendations which are shared between the Department and the Services; the Department concurs with all 32 recommendations. The report identified many ways that the Department was correctly implementing established guidance, while also highlighting areas that needed improvement and identifying gaps. Many of the recommendations were already in the process of implementation within the Department, and others were targeted for upcoming actions. Additionally, there are four recommendation areas that are important to note and acknowledge: comprehensively tracking and reporting on allegations of abuse, defining reasonable suspicion, evaluating awareness initiatives, and tracking domestic violence and related command action data.

The Department concurs with GAO's finding that DoD must improve its tracking and reporting on allegations of domestic abuse. Since 2015, DoD FAP has undergone a rigorous data quality assurance process, focusing efforts on substantiated incidents of abuse. We have learned a great deal about the nuances of the independent data systems of the Military Services and have worked to compensate for those nuances when aggregating data at the DoD-level. The Department recognizes that our quality assurance focus must expand to ensure that we comprehensively track and report on allegations of abuse incidents by abuse type. To that end, the Department is working diligently with the Military Services to clarify guidance on the submission of allegations of abuse in order to gain greater insights into the types of domestic abuse allegations received and the rates at which those allegations are substantiated.

A second critical GAO finding was inconsistency in FAP's screening process for which allegations of abuse are taken to the Incident Determination Committee. The GAO identified examples where FAP staff considered allegations to not meet the threshold of "reasonable suspicion" when, per DoD policy, they should have been presented to the IDC for a determination. DoD FAP recognizes the imperative for specific policy language on the definition of "reasonable suspicion" to ensure standardization of this screening process, and is currently working to modify policy to that end.

The third critical issue raised by GAO was the Department's need to better understand the effectiveness of DoD and Military Service awareness campaigns. Notably, the last time the Department spoke with this panel, the survivors who also testified spoke of their lack of

knowledge of the FAP and the services offered to victims, especially the ability to make a restricted report. As a result, we continue to be laser-focused on raising awareness. Military OneSource online resources supported members of the community via 6.4 million sessions in Fiscal Year 2020, with support for relationships as a key component of those total web experiences. This includes an emphasis on support for victims of domestic abuse and education and awareness of violence prevention provided by the FAP. Important outreach initiatives delivered via Military OneSource channels in conjunction with FAP service providers are the United to End Domestic Violence Abuse Campaign, the creation of a “Safe Exit “button on the website for online content, and content and resources designed to guide victims to safety and support.

We know not every participant is comfortable seeking help in these issues which is why we emphasize a continuum of support along the prevention spectrum. We have worked to integrate information about Military OneSource which provides 24/7 access to non-medical counseling and comprehensive support – starting even before a Service member joins the military, through our Network of Support initiative, and efforts with recruiting. Additionally, just this year, we have been given the opportunity to brief at the Army’s Pre-Command Course for military spouses at Fort Leavenworth. Reaching spouses, family members, and Service members where they are – be it at school, at work, or in the community – is critical to our success in raising awareness. However, raising awareness is only the first step as connecting families with needed support is the ultimate objective.

Finally, the GAO noted the Department’s insufficient process for collecting and tracking domestic violence incident counts and command actions, despite several attempts to address this requirement. The Department recognizes the complexity of this task, which involves multiple key players across the coordinated community response, and we are committed to exploring the full requirements and resources necessary to implement an appropriate data collection mechanism. Currently, the Department is coordinating efforts for an enterprise solution that engages the relevant components with a stake in the process.

## **Oversight**

The goals of DoD FAP oversight are twofold: compliance (to ensure the Military Services are fulfilling applicable law, regulatory, and policy requirements), and evaluation (to



confirm that Service FAP programs and efforts meet the high standards established by Congress, DoD, and Service-specific regulations and policies). Oversight also includes standardization of processes and procedures where appropriate, management of research activities, evaluation of the research results, implementation of evidence-based programs, and to the extent possible, emphasis on the utilization of metrics as the basis for program compliance and evaluation. Since the Department last appeared before this committee on this topic, DoD FAP has made significant strides in three key areas of oversight.

### ***Accreditation, Certification, and Inspection***

DoD FAP policy requires the Services to conduct an accreditation, inspection, or certification review of each installation every four years. Earlier this year, given the recognized need for improved standardization and the recent expansion of scope to the FAP to include Problematic Sexual Behavior in Children and Youth, DoD FAP worked to update and revise the baseline standards for all Service-level reviews in DoD-level policy, which is in the final stages of coordination. Once released, all Services will use these baseline standards for their compliance reviews, with supplemental Service-specific standards as required and as appropriate for their individually-structured programs. These standards can remain the same year to year, or can fluctuate based on identified need and priority.

### ***Staffing Tool Development***

In recognition of the requirement to provide adequate staffing, DoD FAP partnered with the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness Policy at Penn State University to develop a novel staffing tool to assist Service headquarters and installation leadership in making informed decisions about proper staffing levels per Department policy. The FAP staffing tool will address the unique circumstances and considerations of each Service to adequately staff FAP offices as readiness needs change over time, taking into consideration: a) size and mission of installations; b) installation staffing nuances; c) Military Departments' staffing considerations; d) Service-specific requirements and considerations; e) weighted modeling; and f) Service-level enterprise oversight staffing requirements. Beta testing on the staffing tool is projected for September 2021.

### ***Incident Determination Committee (IDC) Quality Assurance Project***

A lack of standardization in implementation of the FAP Incident Determination Committee (IDC) and Decision Tree Algorithm (DTA) tool can lead to errors in case determinations that are inherently unfair to Service members, victims, families and has the potential to put victims at risk. Last year, DoD FAP launched a multi-pronged quality assurance project to accurately assess the quality of implementation of the IDC (including the use of the DTA), Clinical Case Staff Meeting, and the Incident Severity Scales instrument across the Services. The primary aim of the study is to understand the Service-wide fidelity to the IDC protocol for presenting incidents of abuse and voting using the DTA to determine whether incidents meet the DoD definitional criteria for abuse, which require more rigorous treatment recommendations and entry into the DoD Central Registry database. Ultimately, the information will inform the development of an ongoing, standardized quality assurance process, including trainings and fidelity-maintenance tools, for the Services to use to meet DoD policy requirements.

### **Legislative Updates**

#### ***Independent Analysis and Recommendations on Domestic Violence in the Armed Services***

Section 549C of the FY21 NDAA requires the Department to enter into a contract or agreement with a private entity to analyze the Department's prevention of, and response to, domestic violence and to develop recommendations on means to improve the effectiveness. The Department welcomes the opportunity to conduct a full-scale comprehensive research study on the military-specific risk factors for domestic abuse and the best approaches across the coordinated community response to mitigate those factors, which will prove instrumental in finding sustainable solutions to decrease incidents and prevent violence before it occurs. The Department is currently working towards finalizing the execution of this agreement and plans for work to begin in the fourth quarter of this fiscal year.

#### ***Serious Harmful Behavior Between Children and Youth***

Section 549B of the FY21 NDAA expanded the requirement for policy development and data collection to include all forms of serious harmful behavior between children and youth

occurring on military installations. In response, the Department established the Child and Youth Advocacy Program (CYAP) as the policy proponent for all forms of serious harmful behavior between children and youth to include PSB-CY. Most importantly, the establishment of CYAP allows the Department to guard against the conflation of adult-initiated behaviors (domestic abuse, child abuse and neglect, adult crimes against children) from those initiated by children and youth (peer aggression, PSB-CY, adolescent relationship abuse). Child and Youth Advocacy is a new concept, and there is no single reporting point of contact for this broad scope of behaviors at the Service or installation levels. Instead, addressing serious harmful behavior between children and youth depends on strong leadership support for sustaining active and ongoing multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary work across many offices and departments to include Child and Youth Programs, DoDEA, Military Community Support Programs, the directorate within my office responsible for both Military OneSource and the MFLC program, FAP, and military law enforcement. As always, primary prevention is a focus throughout the Department.

## **Conclusion**

The Department of Defense recognizes the imperative to address the findings of the GAO report, to continue to closely monitor and address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on families, and to continue to bolster its prevention, awareness, and standardization efforts. We eagerly support and anticipate the forthcoming research and analysis effort on improvements to domestic abuse prevention and response and will work closely with our research partner to craft a study plan that encompasses legislative requirements, GAO recommendations, and additional internally-identified needs. Every incident of abuse impacts the victim and the military, and we are committed to improving our response every step of the way. The dedication of Department and Service-level staffs across the coordinated community response to the victims and families we serve remains steadfast across the vast scope of this public health issue. I wholeheartedly support and applaud their diligent efforts in preventing and responding to domestic abuse, child abuse and neglect, and serious harm between children in the military. The continued interest and support of this Subcommittee and the Congress remains vital to serving our families who serve.