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Testimony of Kathy Roth-Douquet

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Chairman Grothman, Ranking Member Garcia, and distinguished Members of the House Committee on Oversight, thank you for the opportunity to submit my written testimony for this hearing.

My name is Kathy Roth-Douquet, and I am Founder and CEO of Blue Star Families— the nation's largest grass-roots military family support organization, which touches more than 1.5 million military family members every year. By cultivating innovative programs and partnerships, Blue Star Families seeks to ensure that our military and Veteran families always feel connected, supported, and empowered to thrive, wherever their service takes them.

Blue Star Families' research calls attention to the unique experiences and challenges faced by military and Veteran families. Our annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (aMFLS)—developed in partnership with Syracuse University's D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) and fielded since 2009—is the largest annual comprehensive survey of military and Veteran families, and is widely regarded as the gold standard among military family surveys. Data from the aMFLS and other Blue Star Families research has been used at every level of government to help inform those tasked with making policy decisions that impact our military-connected communities. At Blue Star Families, we know that behind every statistic is a story, and it is my honor to share data and stories with you.

This data will demonstrate three points: 1) challenges to families are the primary threat to the All-Volunteer Force, impacting both retention and future recruitment, 2) the issues that are top-of-mind for military families are focused on the impacts of military service on family financial and emotional well-being, and 3) the military is becoming increasingly diverse, and issues surrounding race and gender impact current service member's retention in the military and likelihood to recommend military service to their young family members.

We are gratified to see this Committee's interest in ensuring the readiness of the All-Volunteer Force and believe that our data will shed light on the challenges and solutions that military families share with us through our research.

<u>Challenges to Families are the Primary Threat to the All-Volunteer Force</u>

The Department of Defense has long understood their responsibility to support military families, and is engaged in developing and administering programs to that effect. Indeed, one of Secretary of Defense Austin's three priorities is "taking care of our people"[1], including their families, and he has issued several memoranda[2][3] directing the services to address military family challenges such as spouse employment, child care, and food insecurity. In general, therefore, servicemembers' and military families' quality of life and their ability to thrive is a central concern to the Department of Defense.

Blue Star Families has also seen that the issues driving current families out of military service and limiting the recommendation of military service to the next generation of the All-Volunteer Force are centered on the impacts of military service on the family. A recent Army exit survey reaffirmed this – "Family" was one of the biggest reasons soldiers had left or would leave the Army.[4] Additionally, while military spouse support is a key predictor of the service member's likelihood to remain on active-duty service, that spouse support has steadily declined over the last decade, primarily because of dissatisfaction with the military way of life, which increased odds of favoring leaving military service by over 7 times[5]. By many indicators, the greatest threat to the All-Volunteer Force are the impacts of military life on the family.

Military Families' Top Issues

Blue Star Families' research has allowed us to understand what military family experiences are most stressful, of greatest concern, and best addressed by the Department of Defense. In our aMFLS, year after year, the top issues for active-duty families reflect other research on the key issues for military families[6]. Spouse employment, time away from family as a result of military service, children's education, military pay, and the out-of-pocket costs of military service such as relocation and housing costs have been within the top five concerns in the past 3 years of the

[1] Secretary of Defense.(2021). *Message to the force.* https://media.defense.gov/2021/Mar/04/2002593656/-1/-1/0/SECRETARY-LLOYD-J-AUSTIN-III-MESSAGE-TO-THE-FORCE.PDF

[2] Secretary of Defense. (2022). *Memorandum: taking care of our service members and families.* https://media.defense.gov/2022/Sep/22/2003083398/-1/-1/0/TAKING-CARE-OF-OUR-SERVICE-MEMBERS-AND-FAMILIES.PDF

[3] Secretary of Defense. (2023). Memorandum: strengthening our support to service members and their families. https://media.defense.gov/2023/Mar/22/2003184739/-1/-1/1/STRENGTHENING-OUR-SUPPORT-TO-SERVICE-MEMBERS-AND-THEIR-FAMILIES.PDF

[4] Vie, L.L, Trivette, E.V., & Lathrop, A. D. (2021). *Department of the Army career engagement survey: first annual report.* Department of the Army. https://talent.army.mil/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/DACES-Annual-Report_JUNE2021.pdf

[5] Military One Source. (2023). *2021 Active-duty spouse survey (ADSS).* Defense Personnel Analytics, Office of People Analytics, Center for Retention and Readiness Research. https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Presentations/2021-active-duty-spouse-overview-briefing.pptx

[6] Military One Source. (2023). *2021 Active-duty spouse survey (ADSS).* Defense Personnel Analytics, Office of People Analytics, Center for Retention and Readiness Research. https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Presentations/2021-active-duty-spouse-overview-briefing.pptx

MFLS. Spouse employment has been a top concern for military families since the inception of the MFLS in 2009.

Overall spouse well-being and family experiences also impact the decision to remain in or leave the military. In our 2021 MFLS, nearly four in ten (38%) active-duty spouse respondents said their family expected to exit military service within five years. Among those planning to exit service, the most commonly-cited reason for leaving besides military retirement is "the military lifestyle did not allow me sufficient time with my family"(24%). Given the potential impact on service branch end strength if and when families choose to exit military service, it is imperative that military families' overall well-being factor into personnel policy priorities.

For example, the DoD recognizes that child care is a "workforce issue that directly impacts the efficiency, readiness, retention, and lethality of the Total Force," which is one of the reasons it is the largest employer-sponsored child care provider in the United States.[7] Despite this recognition, however, thousands of military families still struggle to find quality affordable child care. In the 2022 MFLS report, which will be published March 29, 2023, only 50% of employed active-duty spouse respondents who needed daily child care were able to find child care that works for their current situation. In addition to directly affecting a service member's ability to effectively execute their job requirements, child care also affects a military spouse's ability to retain employment. In the 2020 MFLS, nearly one in five (18%) active-duty service member respondents reported that civilian spouse employment concerns were one of the primary reasons for potentially choosing to leave military service. While many Americans are dealing with financial stress, the challenges associated with the military lifestyle – including child care, spouse unemployment, and housing and relocation costs – may be contributing factors in choosing to leave military service.

The Increasing Diversity of the Current and Future All-Volunteer Force
Last year, the armed forces faced the most significant recruiting challenge since the inception of the All-Volunteer Force 50 years ago. In fiscal year 2022, every branch struggled to fulfill its recruitment goals and the Army fell short by nearly 25 percent.[8]

In addition to traditional challenges to recruiting,[9,10,11] generational and demographic changes are also impacting how the armed services recruit. The oldest members of Generation Z are turning 26 this year, meaning that nearly all recruitable youth are part of this generation.[12] Moreover,

[7] Congressional Research Service. (2020). *Military Child Development Program: Background and Issues.* https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R45288.pdf

[8] Baldor, L. (2022). *Army misses recruiting goal by 15,000 soldiers.* Army Times. https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2022/10/02/army-misses-recruiting-goal-by-15000-soldiers/

[9] Warner, J.T. (2012). The effects of the civilian economy on recruiting and retention. https://militarypay.defense.gov/Portals/3/Documents/Reports/SR05_Chapter_2.pdf

[10] Baldor, L. (2022). *Army misses recruiting goal by 15,000 soldiers.* Army Times. https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2022/10/02/army-misses-recruiting-goal-by-15000-soldiers/

[11] Mongilio, H. (2022). Tough military recruiting environment is about more than low unemployment, experts say. USNI News. https://news.usni.org/2022/12/01/tough-military-recruiting-environment-is-about-much-more-than-low-unemployment-experts-say

[12] Dimock, M. (2019). *Defining generations: where millennials end and generation Z begins.* Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/

nearly 90% of the Army active-duty junior enlisted service members and 35% of junior officers are part of Gen Z.[13] A recent analysis of the factors driving youth to a career in the military suggests that social-emotional well-being – including strong community bonds, emotional resilience, and the ability to positively contribute to society[14] – is a key factor youth consider when considering military service.[15] Given this, there is reason to believe that incidents of sexual harassment, assault, suicide, racism, and other types of discrimination in the military may be harming the services' ability to recruit.[16]

Moreover, research shows that "the best predictor [of military service] is a person's familiarity with the military."[17] Most youth in this country are not exposed to military service: less than one percent [18] of the United States population serves on active-duty and Veterans made up only 6.9% of the total adult population in 2021.[19] Understanding that exposure to service is a key indicator of likelihood to serve, Blue Star Families has explored the reasons why active-duty and Veteran families would or would not recommend service to a young family member. In the 2022 MFLS, we will report that about a quarter of active-duty family respondents (28%) were unlikely to recommend military service, with "poor military leadership," "challenges for families," and "financial sacrifice" as top reasons.

Racial- and Gender-Based Discrimination Impacts Retention and Recruitment

Experiencing racial- and gender-based discrimination may also make current service members more likely to leave military service and less likely to recommend military service to the next generation of the All-Volunteer Force. In our 2020 MFLS report[20], only 43% of those who have experienced military-connected racial discrimination would recommend military service to a young person, compared to 63% of those who have not experienced discrimination. Similarly, 47% of those who have experienced gender-based discrimination would recommend military service, compared to 64% of those respondents who have not.

This pattern persists when servicemembers determine whether to stay in military service. A third (33%) of active-duty family respondents of color and 34% of Veteran respondents of color reported that they considered racial/ethnic discrimination in family conversations regarding

[13] Hanks, R. (2022). *What soldiers want: the gen Z perspective.* Army University Press. https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2022/February/What-Soldiers-Want/
[14] Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.) *Emotional well-being, population health.* https://www.cdc.gov/populationhealth/well-being/index.htm
[15] Gehlhaus, D. (2021). *Youth information networks and propensity to serve in the military.* Rand Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/rgs_dissertations/RGSDA1662-1.html
[16]Beynon, S. (2022). *Army secretary blames bad press for making recruiting woes worse.* Military.com https://www.military.com/daily-news/2022/09/14/army-secretary-blames-bad-press-making-recruiting-woes-worse.html
[17] Phillipps, D. & Arango, T. (2020). *Who signs up to fight? Makeup of U.S. recruits shows glaring disparity.* The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/10/us/military-enlistment.html
[18]Department of Defense. (2022). *DoD personnel, workforce reports & publications.* DMDC. https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports
[19]United States Census Bureau. (2021). *American community survey data.* https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html
[20] Blue Star Families. (2022). *2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report.* https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/BSF_MFLS_Results2021_ComprehensiveReport_3_22.pdf

whether to remain in service.[21] Excluding "retirement" or "medical/administrative discharge", 12% of female active-duty service member respondents indicated "gender discrimination" was one of the primary reasons why they would leave the military, and 8% indicated "sexual harassment/assault" was a reason. This trend persists among Veteran respondents. Excluding those who left due to retirement, 20% of female Veteran respondents from communities of color and 15% of white, non-Hispanic female Veteran respondents reported sexual harassment or assault as one of the reasons they left the service. Additionally, one in 10 (10%) female Veteran respondents reported gender-based discrimination as one of the reasons they left military service. Similarly, 8% of Veteran respondents from communities of color cited racial discrimination as one of the reasons they left service. Although Black Veterans are just one racial group among the larger communities of color, nearly one in five (18%) Black Veteran respondents reported racial discrimination as one of the reasons they left military service. More findings on the impact of racially- or ethnically-based discrimination are to be published in May 2023 in an upcoming report from Blue Star Families.

Within five years, the majority of recruitable youth will be people of color. Most of the current All-Volunteer Force (70-80%) are members of families with a tradition of military service[22], but this tradition may be jeopardized when service members experience racial- or gender-based discrimination and leave military service or deter young family members from considering military service in their future. Policies that address discrimination based on race, ethnicity or gender and improve the experiences of female service members, service members of color, and LGBTQ+ service members, are essential to retaining and recruiting a highly-trained and imminently ready All-Volunteer Force.

Closing

Our research shows that military readiness, recruitment, and retention are all deeply affected by policies and programs that support cohesive communities and ensure the health and well-being of our service members and their families. Congress and the Department of Defense have recognized these non-partisan necessities for decades and we've seen major improvements in the experiences of military families since the birth of the All-Volunteer Force 50 years ago. While challenges still need to be addressed, we're grateful for the efforts of this body as well as the armed services that support the quality of life of our service members and their families.

I would again like to thank the distinguished Members of the Committee for inviting Blue Star Families to submit written testimony on this matter, and for their continued attention to military family issues. I am happy to respond to written questions.

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[21] Blue Star Families. (2022). *Blue Star Families' social impact research 2021: The diverse experiences of military & veteran families of color.* Blue Star Families' Department of Applied Research. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/BSF_MFC_REI_FullReport2021-final.pdf
[22] Defense Human Resource Activity. (n.d.). *New recruit survey, wave 1 findings (October 2012-March 2013).* JAMRS. https://time.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/new_recruit_wave1_briefing_final_7-23-2013.pptx