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SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY CONSTRUCTION,
VETERANS AFFAIRS AND RELATED AGENCIES
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

STATEMENT OF

RUSSELL SMITH

MASTER CHIEF PETTY OFFICER OF THE NAVY

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY CONSTRUCTION,

VETERANS AFFAIRS AND RELATED AGENCIES OF THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

QUALITY OF LIFE

MAY 13, 2021

Chairwoman Wasserman Schultz, Ranking Member Carter, and distinguished members of the subcommittee — I am honored to speak with you today on behalf of the men and women who serve in our Navy. We have weathered many challenges since my last opportunity to testify, as our nation has, but we remain strong – committed to the defense of our shores and our interests abroad, committed to our citizens, and committed to our shipmates and teammates. That said, I am grateful for this opportunity to discuss with you some of the significant challenges we are facing in the coming year, which directly affect the service and quality of life of our Sailors and greater Navy family. The Navy I joined in 1988 was comprised of approximately 602,000 Sailors; we have a little more than half that number today. At the height of the Reagan build-up, we had nearly 600 ships; with less than half of that today, in an increasingly complex maritime security environment with far less predictability than 33 years ago, we are maintaining the same deployment operational tempo of about 92 ships deployed away from port on any given day. This puts a strain on our force that is greater than has ever existed in our history. Even the increased ability to connect, seen by some as a comfort or means to extend resilience, can just as easily be seen as an operational hindrance; once-focused Sailors at sea are now dealing with the problems on the home-front in real time, not just at mail call, a time when it was operationally safer or more convenient. Mental health, child care, and retention of our best Sailors continue to be the perennial challenges we face, set against the pandemic and unique close-quarters operating environment of our naval forces at sea and in crew aircraft. And through these challenges, we've managed to continue to meet recruiting goals, train accession Sailors, man the fleet, train and prepare our forces and deploy them in support of COCOM requirements. The toughness of our Sailors was best evidenced in NIMITZ Strike Group's record setting 341 day deployment to CENTCOM, extended six times – unexpectedly through Thanksgiving and

Christmas – in support of national tasking. Similarly, the USS STOUT recorded 215 straight days at sea. These Herculean efforts show not what we want our Sailors to have to endure, but what they are absolutely capable of when called upon by the nation. And I am here today to highlight the issues that will bring continued support for the programs that keep our Sailors navigating this strong direction. Our Navy families also face concerns of job security, timely access to medical resources and the ability to find adequate housing, just as many other American families do, and so spousal employment programs, state reciprocity in credentialing, and other efforts by Congress have made great headway in creating the kind of flexibility we need to retain the Navy family, which has helped us in keeping all of our best talent, expertise and passion within our lifelines. In this time of higher unemployment and uncertainty created by the pandemic, most enlistment extension requests have been approved, and we have been able to use their strengths to maintain our forward deployed presence as a result – for the stability our Sailors may have enjoyed, the nation owes those same Sailors a great debt for that. Many Sailors and families felt the impacts of COVID-19, and Sailors were almost exclusively the active DoD component lives lost to the pandemic. As many across our nation did, Navy families felt the pain and pressures of the loss of life, spouses who lost jobs and needed sources of income, and livelihood and long-term health effects. One cadre of professionals in our ranks I need to highlight is our Navy Medicine team. Alongside countless other medical professionals from across the nation, to include my own family in Santa Barbara, they fought valiantly against this invisible enemy, deploying two ships and several thousand Sailors where the need was greatest. Most recently I had a chance to visit Sailors working alongside other services, in partnership with the Federal Emergency Management Administration, operating a vaccination site in Queens, NY. At risk to their own health, they work diligently to administer approximately 3,000

vaccinations per day; as they do so, they also managed to develop an amazing rapport with the local community – further reminding our citizenry of how much we cherish the bond we have with those we protect and defend. I have rarely been more proud of our Navy team in my career than I have been during this past year – our Sailors truly have managed to rise above.

MENTAL HEALTH

This pandemic underscored our continuous need for more accessible and expedient mental health care resources. Many clinics and providers shifted to virtual appointments to try to accommodate as many patients as possible; however, increased operational requirements of the pandemic – that also has touched the lives of many providers - exacerbated the situation. Our Navy leadership leaned in heavily, procuring additional deployed resiliency counselors, maturing a program to put more chaplains at the waterfront on destroyers, and hiring additional mental health care providers to meet the burgeoning need. Our leaders are also taking unprecedented steps, led very boldly and directly by our own Acting Secretary of the Navy, to combat the stigmas that still sometimes serve as a barrier to the use of these services. That said, anecdotal feedback from Sailors consistently expresses frustration with wait times of 30 days or more for appointments, and I myself have found the same when seeking an appointment - we still find ourselves unable to meet the demands on our system in a timely fashion. Our most urgent and dire needs are certainly addressed, but often things reach a more critical point before they are elevated to a level of urgency that gets them into a provider's queue. We know that this is a national shortage, not simply a Navy issue. As we compete with the private sector for providers we will continue to work diligently to achieve the gold standard that TRICARE aims for. At no fault of our providers, we simply have a greater demand for e mental healthcare services than we currently have available to us. ~~So I am asking for your support toward the DHA merger to ensure we do~~

~~not have anyone waiting for care — especially when they need it most.~~ In direct support to our operational forces, we continue to develop and refine the resources that have resonated well with our Sailors. The Mental Health Operational Outreach Division in San Diego serves as a single intake, providing Sailors one point of focus that will then determine the best follow-on resource for care. This unburdens the Sailor from trying to determine where to go, and it leverages the system with efficiency by placing the Sailor at the optimal in-point on the first try – getting them to the point of treatment the fastest and where possible, back to their combat unit and fully ready to deploy. The Sailor Resiliency Center in Rota, Spain provides a convenient, pier side support facility that allows forward deployed Sailors to engage in counseling before the need grows into something that may require medical evacuation out of theater and the accompanying manning loss to their ship. Our Fleet and Family Support Centers across the world are working to increase tele-health options to allow for social distancing and privacy. And for Sailors underway, we have embedded mental health providers ensuring that those who need care can receive the support that keeps them ‘fit to fight’ while on mission. This unique program, pioneered by our submarine force, has increased trust and connectedness within individual units, as well as increased willingness to seek out higher-level mental health care – early on – to offset combat operational stress. Additionally, we have civilian Deployed Resiliency Counselors serving onboard 21 aircraft carriers and large deck amphibious ships to provide non-clinical counseling to mitigate stress on our Sailors. Each of these teams work hand-in-hand to provide efficacy, efficiency, and ease in support of our Sailors and their families.

CHILDCARE

Before the onset of the pandemic, the Navy faced the most daunting challenges of child care across the Department of Defense, accounting for nearly 40% of the entire shortfall – nearly

9,000 spaces, mostly where our fleet concentration areas are located. Finding and managing needed resources in a COVID environment, to include schools closing, daycare centers managing COVID infections, has only made that situation more difficult, as it has for the entire nation. As the Navy could not afford to take a knee – we never appreciably stopped recruiting, training, preparing and deploying forces – it placed an even greater sense of urgency and need for creative solutions. Many child care programs were forced to close for a period of time; as they reopen, many are operating cautiously, considering carefully how to stay open as the pandemic continues. With many civilian child care programs already operating on razor-thin margins, prices have gone up significantly as businesses try to remain solvent. This of course creates further challenges for our Sailors. While public/private partnerships (PPV) with ecumenical facilities, schools, local businesses and others are still in exploration, and most notably we've had some success in the San Diego area with one such venture..

There is a waitlist of about 3,000 families who are seeking support for Fee Assistance from subsidies such as Child Care Aware in high-cost fleet concentration areas. An E-5 with a child under the age of five spends about 11% of their annual income on childcare at our CDCs. In contrast, if they are unable to secure spaces within DoD facilities they are forced to seek commercial care, which would cost approximately 38% of their annual income. We are working hard to increase capacity both on base and in those PPV ventures, because we know the cost of commercial care places a great strain on a family's financial readiness

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Our Navy remains committed to diversity, equity and inclusion. And as our Chief of Naval Operations speaks about so often and eloquently, we must remain committed in our efforts to improve the opportunities for all who come to us to serve, regardless of race, religion, national

origin or sexual orientation. We are working through many similar discussions and challenges that our American society is facing at large. Through Task Force One Navy, our Culture of Excellence and other efforts, we are working to root out instances of biases, injustice, and extremism within our ranks. Our diversity – in who we are, as well as our diversity of thought – is the single greatest reason we will prevail in combat. Diverse teams find the most creative and efficient solutions under the greatest conditions of stress, something that has been proven over and over throughout history; we not only owe it to those who swear an oath to serve our nation, but we owe our nation the best possible defense by maximizing our greatest strength. Our senior enlisted leaders have this mission as their primary charter, and work daily across our Navy to build winning combat teams, ensuring they are a reflection of the people they serve so ably.

SEXUAL ASSAULT PREVENTION

Rather than simply focus on the response to sexual assault, we are also working diligently on prevention efforts to identify and eliminate those cultures and climates that allow sexual harassment and sexual assault to occur. The prevention of sexual assault is the commander's priority; it is the Command Master Chief's priority, it is the Leading Petty Officer's priority, it is the supervisor's priority – it is a team problem. This includes team culture, looking out for one another, understanding how actions affect each other or give rise to an opportunity for sexual harassment and potentially sexual assault to occur. This is where the real work can be done, the real gains made, because once a survivor has to live with the trauma, we have failed that person, even if our response and after-care is on-point. We will continue to work on what we do for our teammates who have been made to suffer indignity at the hands of another, and I am excited to see the findings of Secretary Austin's Independent Review Commission, as I truly hope it will lay the groundwork for DoD-wide systemic improvement moving forward.

WARFIGHTING INFRASTRUCTURE

We continue to highlight combat readiness — to be the Navy the nation needs. Our Sailors have pushed on, forward-deploying around the world to ensure the sea lanes and skies remain free and open to all, wherever international law allows. As our adversaries continue to push the boundaries and conduct aggressive maneuvers in the South China Sea, Black Sea, and in the Arabian Gulf — we are working to remain a ready Navy. With this in mind, we have contracts in progress to establish bridge and navigational trainers at all major fleet concentration locations. Your support helps our Navy increase dominance and survivability at sea as we continue to deter aggression in the most contested waters. Deliberately training and educating our Sailors is key to our warfighting efforts, as we challenge adversaries who dare to threaten our national security.

CLOSING

I sincerely appreciate your time today, and for each day that you spend – unseen by others – in steadfast support for our Navy families. Your support allows us to remain ready to defend our nation, and we will continue to work with the precious resources you entrust to us to be ready to fight for the American people. It is an honor and privilege to serve, and I know that the men and women of our Navy are appreciative of your careful stewardship. Thank you for your time.