

STATEMENT BY

LTG BENJAMIN C. FREAKLEY

COMMANDING GENERAL

U.S. ARMY ACCESSIONS COMMAND

BEFORE

PERSONNEL SUBCOMMITTEE

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Introduction:

Chairman Nelson, Distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. The subject we address today is a tragic one. Suicide is a national problem, one to which the Army is not immune. When a Soldier, civilian, or family member commits suicide, we – the Army at large – lose a brother or sister, a comrade in arms, a member of our Army family. Each loss is a tragedy, with any number of people asking how they could have done something differently to prevent this death. The motivation to commit suicide is rarely simple and often complicated by medical issues, family and personal relationships, job stress, and financial concerns. Army recruiters have particularly stressful jobs, and we are looking at their circumstances to determine how we provide them additional support.

Houston Suicides:

Between January 2005 and September 2008, there were four suicides within the U.S. Army Recruiting Battalion at Houston, Texas. I directed an Army Regulation 15-6 investigation to look into the factors existing at the time of each suicide, and I appointed Brigadier General Frank D. Turner III, U.S. Army Accessions Command deputy commanding general and chief of staff, to conduct the investigation. The investigation thoroughly examined personal, organizational, and institutional factors that might have impacted the four Soldiers. General Turner's investigation concluded that there was no single cause for these deaths. Relevant factors included stress, personal matters, and medical problems. None were diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Additionally, a poor command climate was perpetuated by a few individuals within the battalion, compounded by an artificially inflated mission placed on each

recruiter. This command climate and inflated mission manifested in long hours and unpredictable schedules.

Recruiting Command:

The U.S. Army Recruiting Command employs over 7,000 full-time Soldiers to recruit for the Regular Army and approximately 1,700 Reserve Soldiers to recruit for the US Army Reserve. Maintaining the All-Volunteer Force is a challenging task. Engaged, caring, and compassionate leadership is necessary to maintain the proper balance between mission accomplishment and ensuring the well-being of our recruiters and their families.

Approximately 70 percent of the U.S. Army Recruiting Command personnel live in areas that are considered “geographically dispersed.” That means they live away from military installations and ready access to the care and peer support networks they have come to expect, to include military medical facilities. Peer support networks are often difficult to maintain in recruiting, as most personnel live in surrounding communities, not on an installation where Soldiers can easily socialize.

Lessons Learned:

The investigation made several recommendations that we are addressing across the Recruiting Command and the Army. General Turner’s investigation found there is nothing inherently problematic with combat veterans being assigned to recruiting duty after returning from a deployment, as compared to a wide range of other challenging Army assignments. Although post-deployment screening was not found to be a factor for any of the suicides in Houston Battalion, improvements are required in reintegration policy compliance, post-deployment continuity of

care, and ensuring assignment policies consider the special needs of Soldiers and families, especially those assigned to communities away from military installations.

In addition to the actions that we are taking, Accessions Command, the Army G1, and the Surgeon General have adopted procedures to ensure compliance with the recruiter screening and selection process, the provisions of care for Soldiers who require mental health care, Army-wide suicide training, and access to care and peer support networks for geographically dispersed Soldiers.

Way Ahead:

The Army and the command are taking very specific action to prevent future suicides. Leadership has changed in Houston Battalion, and the Recruiting Command has conducted an initial inspection that showed command climate and morale is much improved. A formal Inspector General inspection will be conducted in the Houston Battalion in June of this year. At my request, the Department of the Army Inspector General is conducting a command-wide inspection of the recruiting work environment. The Secretary of the Army-directed “stand-down day” was conducted across the Recruiting Command on February 13 to address the complex issues of suicide. Additional suicide prevention training is being conducted across the Army, as we work to change perceptions regarding mental health.

The Army G1, through its Human Resources Command, is adapting screening and selection processes for prospective recruiters. The Army’s Office of the Surgeon General and the Recruiting Command are developing a recruiting-specific mental health screening tool to be used in those processes.

The Recruiting Command is revising its regulation to remove any ambiguity about mission assignment procedures. Additionally, we are implementing training programs at the Recruiting and Retention School to improve recruiter resiliency.

To address access to care and peer network support, we are developing a pilot program to assess the feasibility of mobilizing Reserve Soldiers in their hometown as Regular Army recruiters, under the premise that Reserve Soldiers are already actively engaged in their community and have a well-established support network.

We have received significant support from Army leadership. The Secretary of the Army, the Honorable Pete Geren, has taken a personal interest in this matter at every step and offered all support within his authority.

Conclusion:

Losing Soldiers to suicide is intolerable. Army senior leaders have acted swiftly to support recruiters and Soldiers Army-wide in laying the groundwork for understanding that there is no stigma attached to seeking mental health care. We hope with our focus on these issues, along with the additional training and concerned leadership from all levels, all Soldiers will seek the help they need before considering a tragic act. Thank you for your attention to this matter and your continuing support to the Army.