

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE PRESENTATION
TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON PERSONNEL
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
UNITED STATES SENATE

SUBJECT: ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE FOR MANPOWER AND
RESERVE AFFAIRS WRITTEN TESTIMONY FOR MILITARY PERSONNEL POSTURE
HEARING FOR FY24

STATEMENT OF:

The Honorable Alex Wagner
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE
MANPOWER AND RESERVE AFFAIRS

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INTRODUCTION

Chairwoman Warren, Ranking Member Scott, Distinguished Members of this Committee, thank you for your continued support of our Airmen, Guardians, and their families. A cornerstone of the National Defense Strategy is building a resilient joint force. Since the beginning of this administration, the Secretary of Defense has prioritized taking care of the people of the Department of Defense: those who wear the uniform, the civilians who support them, and the dependents who rely on them. The human capital portfolio is integral to this strategic priority, and it is reflected in the Department of Defense's Fiscal Year 2024 budget request. I am proud of not only the adaptability, but the tenacity of our force as current world events such as pandemic recovery, inflation, and a return to great power competition pose ever evolving challenges to our Nation.

The Department of the Air Force (DAF) is not just a collection of aircraft, munitions, and computers. The platforms are animated by a highly skilled, cohesive, and expertly trained group of individuals who work together as a team—within our force, across the military services, and with Allies and partners—towards a common goal. Our people are the backbone of the Department's readiness, and their contributions are fundamental to the success of the mission. From pilots and mechanics to intelligence analysts, medics, and security forces, every person in America's Air and Space Forces plays a critical role in ensuring that the organization is prepared to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow—and in particular, our pacing challenge, the People's Republic of China (PRC). As the PRC seeks to increasingly compete with us in the air and space domains, maintaining our competitive edge requires that we fully leverage the talents, diversity, creativity of the DAF's Total Force. I am confident that the quality of our people is critical to deterring aggression; but if deterrence fails, they are essential to providing a decisive edge in denial and defeat of our competitors.

EMPOWERING AIRMEN AND GUARDIANS

End Strength

Air Force. The United States Air Force's end strength is tied to specific weapons systems and our ability to rapidly transition to a wartime posture against a peer competitor. Our Total Force end strength target of about 503,000 reflects the critical balance of readiness, modernization, and the ability to resource future capabilities to compete and win in the high-end fight.

This requires the Air Force to divest legacy force structure to fund modernization for the capabilities the Air Force needs in 2030 and beyond. Our military end strength reductions in FY24 are commensurate with proposed force structure and divestitures. The FY24 end strength reduction is 1,044 Total Air Force Airmen.

Reductions were taken in multiple weapons systems to include Airborne Warning and Control System E-3, A-10, Joint Surveillance and Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS), C-130, F-15, F-16, and Tactical Air Control Parties. Moving away from these platforms and missions redirects manpower to our newest aircraft, such as the B-21, E-11, and F15-EX, many of which require both experienced maintainers and pilots to assure our competitive edge.

Space Force. As we all know, space is increasingly contested, congested, and competitive. Securing space is getting harder, driving the need to increase inventory of space-focused military and civilian personnel beyond what was previously required. Military end strength growth of 800 in FY24 is a result of intra and inter-service transfers from the Air Force and Army.

The Space Force's 9,400 Guardians will support integrated deterrence required by the National Defense Strategy, and ensure our total workforce possesses the competencies to address the actions of our adversaries.

We thank you for your continued favorable Congressional support of the FY 2024 President's Budget request to ensure the Air Force and Space Force can access the talent we need to compete in a world defined by ambiguity, rapid change, and near peer competition.

Recruiting Talent

The DAF is acutely aware of the requirements of our technologically dependent force and the challenges of competing for top talent, particularly given historically low unemployment. As a result, we anticipate a challenging recruiting environment moving forward. More concerning, the youth market is increasingly disconnected and unfamiliar with today's military, resulting in fewer youth interested in or planning to join the military. Today, 50% of youth have never considered serving in the Armed Forces. Additionally, 23% of 17- to 24-year-old men and women in the United States are eligible to serve in the military without a waiver, and only one in eleven have the propensity to serve. The Air Force is currently trending to miss goals across all three components: Regular Air Force by about 13%, over three thousand individuals, while the Air Guard and Reserve components are projected to miss their goals by even higher margins.

While the Space Force will meet its recruiting goal, we must be prepared if recruiting declines. We believe that the proposal for a Space Force single military personnel system offers a new model of service that will attract a broader range of candidates with essential skillsets. Additionally, the Space Force is investing in a "brand" recognition marketing campaign to increase awareness across the American public of this new service, its unique mission and the talent required to achieve it, and the impacts we have both to the Nations' defense and our modern way of life.

The DAF has a series of initiatives underway that I believe will tangibly impact our ability to recruit and meet near-term needs. This includes expanding the aperture of who can meet our high standards by addressing key areas that have led to disqualification from service such as tattoo locations and weight restrictions. Additionally, we revised our enlistment drug screening physicals to allow for a re-test if an enlistee tests positive for THC, which aligns with the increasing number of states legalizing marijuana use. We are also looking at increasing the recruiting force, modernizing the underlying technology systems they use, and creating a centralized e-recruiting cell to virtually recruit and increase national lead conversions. We are also expanding our influencer program to include Airmen and Guardian referral incentives for new recruits. We plan to meet new Airmen where they are with our Directed Recruiting Assistance Program which brings recent recruits back

to their hometowns to assist in outreach. Finally, we are also bolstering incentives, including initial enlistment bonuses to attract high quality talent needed to address peer competitor challenges.

Significant focus is also on increasing our national and local marketing efforts to create broader brand awareness. While we believe any short-term efforts will allow us to access a high-quality force consistent with our standards, our long-term challenge requires us to grow rather than stifle propensity to serve.

Talent Management

The DAF is aggressively defining future competencies and skills required for 2030 and beyond with force management that can adapt to an evolving and uncertain future. This demands digitally savvy and multi-capable Airmen and Guardians. The DAF is moving to evolve talent management processes and systems that create a competitive advantage in shaping, developing, and employing the future force we need.

Modernizing talent management processes and systems is critical to increasing agility, flexibility, and data access needed to meet future force structure and skill requirements. To do this, the DAF is undertaking a five-to-seven-year overhaul to update talent management architecture. We are replacing ~111 HR IT systems, moving into six modern platforms. These new systems will enable us to make data driven talent management decisions while significantly reducing administrative burden.

The Air Force is committed to transforming how we develop, promote, and retain our force to execute the National Defense Strategy. Our work centers on two distinct lines of effort to prepare for the high-end fight. First, we are aggressively defining future competencies and skills required for 2030 and beyond. These include an increased focus on digital and Multi-Capable Airmen. Second, we are modernizing talent management processes and systems to create a competitive advantage in shaping, developing, and employing the future force.

One example of how the Air Force is modernizing talent management processes includes our recently launched new performance evaluation system and transition to how we evaluate Airmen, using the Airman Leadership Qualities. The new performance evaluation process sets clear expectations about what we value as a Service, measures how an Airman's performance and behaviors embody those values and incentivize them to continue their development through meaningful feedback.

Additionally, the DAF implemented a dual track "Civilians We Need" career model that recognizes the need for both functional experts and enterprise leaders in our civilian corps. This model allows our civilian Airmen and Guardians to plan their job experiences, education, training, and leadership opportunities to meet their professional goals. This dual-track civilian career model also offers greater diversity benefits while and enhancing retention.

SUPPORTING READINESS

Taking Care of People

While our service members are compensated competitively, the unique complications of military life, like frequent moves and unanticipated expenses demand an ever-vigilant focus on expanding initiatives that enhance and increase stability for service members and their families. Thanks to the support of Congress, the DAF offers each of our service members a competitive compensation package. We are grateful for the recent increases in Basic Pay, Basic Allowance for Housing, and Basic Allowance for Subsistence that constitute the core of our members compensation. The DAF acknowledges the current economic environment poses a challenge to our Airmen, Guardians, and their dependents, particularly as inflation and the associated housing and rental markets increased. Economic conditions were also exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We know that to build a resilient force, we must provide our service members and their families stability with reliable access to safe, affordable housing and appropriate tools to ensure financial readiness. As a result, we are committed to providing additional support to families through a comprehensive network of resources focused on financial literacy education, improving military spouse employment, and expanding access to quality and affordable childcare on and off the installation. We further sought to enhance economic security by expediting Temporary Lodging Expense extension requests, promoting the DoD's Military Leader's Economic Security Toolkit, and implementing the Basic Needs Allowance.

We knew the stressors of moving can reduce a sense of financial stability, particularly when unexpected expenses are incurred. As a result, the DAF has sought to increase geographic stability for service members and their families by implementing 36-month tour lengths for Unaccompanied First Permanent Assignments in certain overseas locations. Currently, 76,821 Airmen and Guardians have more than 36-months' time-on-station; of those the vast majority, 68,578, are CONUS.

The DAF has also created a Food Service Working Group to review all our dining facilities consistent with the Office of the Secretary of Defense's *Strategy and Roadmap to Strengthen Food Security Within the Force*. Today, our members are saving money at the register, with cost of goods in commissaries on average 25% lower than at local marketplaces. Our future efforts to increase access to healthy food center on four key pillars: expanding dining facility hours, enhanced access to healthy options, effectiveness of the meal card program, and the insights into the installation-wide food landscape. These insights will shape the multiple lines of effort the DAF will undertake in 2023 to improve access to healthy food options across the DAF enterprise.

Child Care

Accessible, affordable, and high-quality childcare is a critical enabler of the Department's mission. This is a readiness issue, as our Airmen and Guardians rely on us to focus on the mission while knowing their youngest family members are being cared for at our Child Development Centers (CDCs). I believe that the DAF's Child and Youth Programs are the gold standard and as a result, they are in high demand. Currently, the DAF has 15,828 children enrolled in military child development centers across 74 installations and 1,682 children enrolled in 381 Family Child Care

(FCC) homes (2,286 spaces) at 57 locations. As of 1 January 2023, 4,630 children have not been placed in an installation CDC/FCC program on the date care was needed with an average wait time of 143 days.

Those numbers are not acceptable, and here is what we are doing about it. The DAF's FY24 budget seeks to improve access to, and reduce wait lists for, childcare includes leveraging staffing initiatives, adding FCC providers, increasing community-based fee assistance, and targeted construction investments.

The DAF has employed various incentives to recruit and retain our CDC providers. We are leveraging new direct hiring authorities, while executing \$2M in incentive bonuses for sign-on, employee referrals, meeting training targets, and longevity. We continue to implement the \$15 per hour minimum rate and increased compensation to remain competitive with employers outside the gate. With these efforts, we saw staffing level increased through 2022 Permanent Change of Station (PCS) season from 65% on 1 July 2022 to 72% on 1 October 2022.

Recently, the Secretary of Defense instructed military departments to provide a minimum 50% childcare fee discount for the first child direct care of providers in our CDCs. Recognizing that this incentive could substantially help with staffing shortages, the DAF went further and directed additional policy changes to include a 100% discount for direct care staff and established new discounts for the additional children of those providers as well as other personnel within the Child Development Program.

So far, the results are promising: 23% of providers have children and are receiving childcare fee discounts. The incentive is attractive to applicants with children who may not have otherwise applied. Preliminary data suggest that DAF direct care staffing levels have increased since implementing the enhanced discount. We continue to look at compensation and incentives to recruit and retain direct care workers in highly competitive national childcare labor market.

While we improve our staffing, we continue to prioritize infrastructure requirements to support the childcare need. The Child and Youth Facility Master Plan identifies 31 new CDC requirements, nine are funded for construction, and 12 are funded for planning and design. In FY24, we are expanding compensation for service members during PCS moves to assist with childcare when services are not readily available upon arrival at new installation. The proposed budget also sets aside \$50M in Facility Sustainment, Restoration, and Modernization (FSRM) funds for focused investment in CDCs. Additionally, installations receive discretionary sustainment funding for routine preventative maintenance and repair for facility projects with costs below the thresholds for centralized funding.

Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)

EFMP is a vital component of taking care of our DAF families. Navigating military and community resources during major life events can be challenging as a military family. EFMP is included in the DAF PCS process to ensure required specialty medical and/or educational care is available for dependents at the gaining duty location. This comprehensive, coordinated, multi-agency program is

integral to serving our 36,000 service members and 55,000 family members who are enrolled in EFMP across the DAF.

Over the last two years, the DAF has made significant improvements to EFMP, as required by the FY21 NDAA, including centralization of DAF EFMP as well as leveraging technology and data to improve consistency of decisions. With the launch of an automated system and implementation of centralized medical screening, the DAF effectively removed the extensive administrative burden on our families. We have completed approximately 70% of the transformation and remain on track to complete these improvements.

To ensure we are doing everything to provide members with the necessary support and services their families need, the Air Force Audit Agency is currently evaluating the EFMP enterprise. Their report will include a full assessment of metrics being used to measure performance and satisfaction, remaining manning gaps, appropriate alignment of roles and responsibilities between the medical and personnel staff, and policy considerations for overall program efficiency and effectiveness.

Resilience, Prevention, and Accountability

Prevention and response efforts against harmful behaviors such as sexual assault, suicide, and domestic violence are critical to building a resilient force. We recognize that one service member experiencing any of these issues is one too many and overall, we need to do more to prevent and reduce these incidents that are counter to our values and undercut the lethality and efficacy of our force.

Sexual Assault. The Independent Review Commission (IRC) on Sexual Assault in the Military recommended improvements to accountability, prevention, culture and climate, and victim care and support. The DAF is on track to complete implementation of the recommendations as approved by the Secretary of Defense. We are increasing the response workforce, developing an independent reporting structure outside the chain of command for our Sexual Assault and Response Coordinators (SARCs) and enabling sexual harassment complainants to access victim advocacy support from a SARC or Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) Victim Advocates. In accordance with the FY22 NDAA, the DAF implemented the requirement for an independent Office of Special Trial Counsel, with exclusive prosecution authority over certain categories of UCMJ offenses, to include sexual assault and domestic violence committed on or after 28 December 2023. The DAF's Office of Special Trial Counsel reached initial operational capacity in June of 2022 and is poised to continue the effort to promote a culture which reduces instances of sexual assault and domestic violence by holding offenders accountable.

Additionally, we have implemented a Safe-to-Report policy that encourages victims to report sexual assault by withholding punishment for minor collateral misconduct related to the sexual assault incident or report, like underage drinking or fraternization. These improvements are aimed at empowering survivors and ensuring they receive critical support and care.

Last year, we launched an Integrated Response Co-Location Pilot Program where we tested a

more holistic approach to responding and assisting survivors of sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence, stalking and cyber harassment across seven CONUS/OCONUS installations. The six-month pilot program centralized five key support service entities including SARC, SAPR Victim Advocate, Domestic Abuse Victim Advocate, Victims Counsel, and the Religious Support Team to simplify access and advocacy processes for Airmen and Guardians. We also comprehensively surveyed providers, commanders, and survivors to assess program benefits as well as areas for modification. Initial feedback demonstrated that co-locating response services increased support, access, and awareness for survivors. We intend to use this feedback to consider how and where to inform decisions on further co-location of these essential services.

Suicide. The DAF recognizes that suicide is a complex issue with no single cause or solution but is committed to reducing the numbers of suicides within our ranks. While we are making strides to increase help seeking behavior, one suicide is too many and we continue to enhance our prevention approach to align with empirically based best practices, including “warm hand-off” policies, time-based prevention campaigns, and encouraging lethal means safety measures.

As compared to DOD-wide trends, DAF active-duty suicides showed the greatest reduction of all the Services since 2019; active duty suicides decreased by 38% over the period 2019-2021. Those who died by suicide were largely enlisted, male, and under the age of 30, across all three Components, with firearms being the leading method of suicide.

On 24 February, the Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee (SPRIRC) published its findings and recommendations. The SPRIRC report focuses on four main areas, including restructuring suicide prevention training, providing additional resources to help service Members access existing support services, promoting lethal means safety, and emphasizing leader stewardship in addressing service Member needs.

The Secretary of Defense has reviewed the report from the Suicide Prevention & Response Independent Review Committee. The DAF will work diligently to ensure processes can continue to make progress toward meaningful, long-term reductions in Total Force suicides. We are positioned to develop plans to implement the recommendations he accepts.

Domestic Violence. While we have taken important steps to better support domestic violence survivors, we must do more to establish a foundation of trust, integrity, and respect that encourages reporting and engenders confidence in our enterprise.

Most recently, the Secretary of the Air Force directed a 90-day cross-functional review to comprehensively look at how we investigate and respond to domestic violence cases, increase survivor confidence in leadership, and enhance our survivor support capabilities. Specifically, this includes identification of leader actions that undermine trust and to better connect all of those involved or affected by domestic violence to services and support; and where an investigation does not result in criminal prosecution, identification, and analysis for the role of any available command administrative actions. This increased focus on improving the experiences of domestic violence survivors will also advance ongoing efforts to deliver better care and support across the range of multiple forms of interpersonal violence, including sexual assault and sexual harassment.

A Ready Medical Force

In conjunction with the Air Force Medical Readiness Agency and the Defense Health Agency, in July of last year the DAF launched a new medical profiling system with the goal of improving both communication and overall readiness. This system, called the Airman and Guardian Availability Management system creates a new way of generating a profile while remaining under the same management system. This program was tested at 14 locations for Active-Duty personnel as well as seven Air National Guard and Reserve units. The idea is to empower service members to be more engaged in their recovery.

The DAF's efforts to protect our service members and their families at the onset of COVID-19 was carried out quite expeditiously while simultaneously executing our global mission. The DAF has acted and continues to act upon lawful guidance from the Office of the Secretary of Defense in a timely manner. When Secretary Austin mandated immunization for service members, the DAF acted swiftly to protect lives and to effectively execute our important mission. As a result of the quick DAF response, 99% of the active and nearly 98% of the 500,000 total force Airmen and Guardians were vaccinated, ensuring they maintained their readiness while enabling their deployment to several states that were experiencing shortages in medical personnel. Our vaccination efforts saved thousands of lives. What we know now about COVID is drastically different than what we knew in the Spring of 2020.

On 10 January of this year, Secretary Austin rescinded his August 2021 memorandum mandating COVID-19 vaccination, consistent with legal requirements of the FY23 NDAA. As a result, the Secretary of the Air Force formally rescinded all mandate-related requirements and in February provided clear guidance to the force regarding removal of adverse actions and handling of pending Religious Accommodation Requests related to refusal of COVID-19 vaccinations. I assure you that implementation of these processes will be efficient, transparent, and fair.

CONCLUSION

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the All-Volunteer Force, a cornerstone of our personnel policy. The commitment of our Airmen, Guardians, and their families is a testament to the success of dedicated, proud, and impactful Air and Space Forces, and we must continue to support and sustain it for the next fifty years and beyond. We look forward to continuing to partner with you.