

RECORD VERSION

STATEMENT BY

SERGEANT MAJOR OF THE ARMY

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BEFORE THE

PERSONNEL SUBCOMMITTEE

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REVIEW OF SINGLE SERVICEMEMBERS AND SOLDIER FAMILY PROGRAMS

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Introduction

Chairman Tillis, Ranking Member Gillibrand, distinguished members of this subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today on behalf of the more than two million active duty Soldiers, Army National Guardsmen, Army Reservists, and Army civilians to discuss Soldier and family programs. Thank you for your continued support of the greatest Army in the world. I am honored to provide an update on the current state of Single Service members and the status of Soldier family Programs within our Army.

With more than 180,000 Soldiers participating in named operations, working to build partner capacity and deterring aggressors in more than 140 nations around the globe, our Army is in high demand. Despite recent years of force structure cuts and fiscal uncertainty, our operational tempo has not decreased. We have remained the best trained, most lethal, and ready Army in the world, because we have continued to invest in our greatest asset – people.

Our greatest challenge as public servants is keeping faith with the people we serve while remaining fiscally responsible. We appreciate the increase to Army end strength and the pay raise allocated to us in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2017. After visiting and talking with thousands of Soldiers and their families over the past year, their quality of life is good, but I believe it could be improved. If we want to continue to retain and attract quality people for our future All-Volunteer Force, we must provide adequate levels of funding and support our key family and Soldier programs. I am grateful for the support Congress has provided to our Soldiers, their families, and Army civilians over the years and I am confident that this Congress will keep our Army the best trained and equipped force in the world.

Background

Soldier and family Programs are an investment in the Army's most valuable asset – our people. The Army remains committed to providing Soldiers and families a quality of life commensurate with their service, while being good stewards of taxpayer dollars.

Soldier and family Programs remain a top priority for Army leadership, because they have a direct impact on readiness and resiliency among our Soldiers and their families. They are an investment in the Army's most valuable asset – our people. Where there are service gaps, we will continue to partner with our sister Services and local communities by providing alternatives to government-provided programs and ensuring support for our geographically dispersed families.

We will protect Soldier and family programs to meet DOD standards. However, given the recent years of fiscal uncertainty, the Army has, in past, paused to analyze spending in support of Morale, Welfare, and Recreation programs, specifically. We continue to review these and other family programs to ensure the most efficient delivery of service, where and when they are needed most. Local commanders have the flexibility to adjust programs within statute, and policy to support the unique needs of their populations.

The realities of a changing force and a budget level designed to support a smaller Army require that we evaluate where efficiencies can be realized. As good stewards of America's tax dollars, it is our responsibility to consider where we can best utilize limited resources to maintain the Army's readiness.

Integration

The Army has fully implemented gender-neutral occupational standards for all military occupations. Over 233,000 positions have been integrated since 2012. The Occupational Physical Assessment Test became policy in January 2017 for use in gender neutral recruiting and accessions. This test fulfills the Army's obligation from Congress to adopt gender neutral occupational standards. The testing is also intended

to reduce training injuries and attrition. Since integrating women into combat arms occupations, 14 female officers have graduated the Infantry Basic Officer Leader's Course since October 2016, and 15 female officers have graduated the Armor Basic Officer Leader's Course since January 2017.

The Army has successfully contracted with, accessed, or transferred over 300 women -- 49 active component leaders in the rank of Sergeant through Captain, 30 reserve component leaders in the rank of Sergeant through Lieutenant, and 262 junior enlisted Soldiers -- for Infantry, Armor, and Fire Support Specialist occupations since April 1, 2016.

To address cultural concerns identified through Army Studies, the Army will train and assign leaders into previously closed career fields and units before assigning junior enlisted female Soldiers using the "Leaders First" strategy. The Leaders First strategy assigns two leaders in the same career management field into Infantry or Armor company level units prior to the assignment of female junior enlisted Soldiers. Enlisted recruits for Infantry and Armor occupations were placed into the Delayed Entry Program in support of the "Leaders First" strategy and the Army Unit Fill Plan. The Unit Fill Plan designates specific units for assignments during phase III of the Army's implementation plan based on propensity of women to serve. Junior enlisted Soldiers will be assigned to companies in cohorts to prevent isolation and avoid potential incidents of unprofessional behavior.

In another example of the Army's desire to attract and retain the best qualified Soldiers, the Army allows transgender Soldiers to serve openly. Anyone who can meet the standards for military service and readiness is eligible to join the Army. We are committed to treating all Soldiers with dignity and respect while ensuring good order and discipline. No otherwise qualified Soldier will be involuntarily separated, discharged, or denied reenlistment or continuation of service solely on the basis of the Soldier's gender identity.

Accession policies are pending change to address a history of gender dysphoria as a disqualifying factor. Transgender Soldiers currently in service may transition to their preferred gender. The Army provides medically necessary care, either through the direct or purchased care system, to Soldiers to treat gender dysphoria. Medical treatment associated with gender transition is individualized and in most cases does not include sex reassignment surgery. Once the Soldier is stable in his or her preferred gender, as determined by a military medical provider, the Soldier may request a gender marker change. When the gender marker is changed, the Soldier will adhere to all standards of their preferred gender. Approximately 25 of the Army's over one million Soldiers have an approved gender marker change.

Behavioral Health

With more Soldiers receiving care in outpatient settings, behavioral health conditions are being managed sooner, before crises occur. In 2016, there was a 41% decrease in behavioral health inpatient bed days as compared to 2012. We have transformed the behavioral health system of care into a model for the nation. Programs such as Embedded Behavioral Health, Behavioral Health in Primary Care clinics and School Behavioral Health reach Soldiers and families where they live and work to improve access and reduce stigma.

Sexual Assault Prevention

Sexual assault, sexual harassment, and retaliation for reporting incidents have no place in our Army. Army data shows that over the past few years, more Soldiers are making the difficult decision to report sexual assault than ever before, while the occurrence of the crime within the Army has decreased. We credit the changing culture in our units for making Soldiers more comfortable in filing reports. Training and assistance to command teams from Sexual Assault Response Coordinators and Victim Advocates are paying dividends in reducing the stigma and providing support to Soldiers who report sexual assault.

Sexual Assault Response Coordinators are the single point of contact at an installation or within a geographic area and oversee sexual assault awareness, prevention and response training. They coordinate medical treatment, including emergency care for victims of sexual assault, and they track the services provided to Soldiers from their initial report through final disposition and resolution of their case. The Sexual Assault Response Coordinators also explain that Soldiers who experience sexual assault have the right to their own attorney, the Special Victims' Counsel. These specially trained military attorneys help protect victimized Soldiers' rights and provides them with legal advice both before and during the military justice process. Survey data indicates service members highly rate the services of the Special Victim's Counsel Program. All indications are that these attorneys have made a big impact on empowering our Soldiers as they navigate the military justice process.

Victim Advocates provide non-clinical crisis intervention, referral and ongoing non-clinical support to adult sexual assault victims. Support includes providing information on available options and resources available to Soldiers. The Victim Advocate, on behalf of Soldiers reporting sexual assault, provides liaison assistance with other organizations and agencies on care matters and reports directly to the Sexual Assault Response Coordinator when performing advocacy duties.

The Army's ongoing Sexual Harassment/Assault Response Prevention efforts include helping installations identify community and installation risk factors for sexual assault and the development of evidence-based prevention strategies. We are also fielding the Emergent Leader Immersive Training Environment Command Team Trainer, and the Prevention and Outreach Simulation Trainer; two computer based applications to better train both victim advocates and the chain of command. We continuously learn from our experiences. We also challenge our commanders and leaders at all levels to set the right conditions within their units so that all may serve in an Army free of sexual assault and harassment.

Base Operations

Army installations sustain more than one million Soldiers and 2.2 million family members to support Soldier, Family and unit readiness. Installations are platforms of readiness that provide secure and sustainable facilities and infrastructure from which we organize, train, equip, and deploy. Base Operations Support funding provides services much like those associated with a municipality, such as public works, security, logistics, compliance with the environment statutes and regulations, and family programs across our installations. These services and programs enable Soldiers, civilians, and families to work and live on Army installations worldwide.

Balancing readiness with installation services, however, will continue to be a challenge in the current fiscal environment and without consistent, predictable funding. The Army has taken risk in Base Support Operations, but we do so to provide sufficient funds to support training and unit readiness. The risk we assume with reduced funding goes well beyond facilities. Further decreased funding would result in a higher demand for Soldiers to be taken away from their units to support installation services. We do this to an extent already at larger installations where more Soldiers are available and the risk to readiness is lower.

Installations have very little trade space across services and little flexibility to support emerging operational (Europe & Pacific) and strategic (Cyber) missions. We pursue initiatives to right-size our installation footprint and to establish partnerships. Traditional efficiency initiatives are not keeping pace with the decline of the spending power in the budget.

Morale, Welfare, and Recreation

Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) enhance the quality of life for our Soldiers and their families. Like everything in our Army, MWR is a readiness consideration. High morale means better execution of our mission. MWR today impacts the readiness and resiliency of Soldiers, families, and civilians by impacting their physical, social, and mental well-being.

The range of Morale, Welfare, and Recreation programs offered at each installation is based on the needs of the Soldiers and families. We know Morale, Welfare, and Recreation programs and services are great factors in readiness. This is never taken out of consideration during our reviews of such programs. Army leaders will always advocate to provide Soldiers and families the quality of life they deserve within fiscal constraints, while still remaining sustainable.

Child and Youth School Services

Child, Youth, and School Services programs operated by the Army includes Child Development Centers, Family child care homes, school-age care, youth centers, youth sports, and fitness activities. In FY16, there were more than 227,000 youths enrolled in Child, Youth, and School Services programs.

Army child development programs must meet statutory requirements for national accreditation. All Child, Youth, and School Services (CYS) programs also are required to have unannounced inspections four times annually. Additionally, programs sponsored off the installations must be state licensed, annually inspected, and nationally accredited. All Army CYS programs are Defense Department certified, and 98 percent of child development programs are nationally accredited, compared to only 10 percent of the civilian sector child care services.

While we are proud of our facilities and their high standards, some hiring delays occur due to the time it takes to complete background checks. We are concerned that there are currently more than 5,500 children on waitlists for childcare. Most are infants who cannot be placed within 90 days, per DoD policy. The transition to the Office of the Secretary of Defense's online system to request child care will help the Army meet our goal to reduce this backlog.

Education Assistance

Few programs have had more impact on the decline of veteran unemployment than the educational programs offered by the Army. I am confident that the Army programs such as Tuition Assistance, Credentialing, Soldier for Life, or Transition Assistance, in combination with Defense Department and interagency initiatives with the Labor Department, Veterans Affairs Department, and the Small Business Administration have helped lower the unemployment rate for Veterans and Post 9/11 Veterans.

During my visits throughout the various Army installations, Soldiers often have concerns about education benefits. Topics such as variations in tuition assistance, how much assistance is offered, and what programs are available are echoed across our Army. First and foremost, we understand that Tuition Assistance is a privilege and not an entitlement. The Army's Tuition Assistance program helps retain quality Soldiers by enhancing their career progression potential, increasing Army combat readiness, and preparing Soldiers for their eventual return to civilian careers.

Education supports the Army's goal to develop adaptive, agile Soldiers capable of responding to full spectrum operations across the world. The Army's Tuition Assistance program supports three of the seven leader development imperatives of the Army Leader Development Strategy: commitment to the Army profession, lifelong learning and development; a balance of the Army's commitment to training, education and experience components of leader development; and management of the military/civilian talent to benefit the institution and individual.

In addition to Tuition Assistance, our Army is reviewing an initiative to expand our ability for Soldiers to earn certificates and licensing. Currently, there are 1,556 credentials, as identified by each of the Army career fields that are recommended through Army COOL (Credentialing Opportunities On-Line). Last year, about 23,000 certifications were earned by Soldiers through mandatory and voluntary credentialing opportunities, leaving them more prepared to enter the civilian workforce.

Veteran unemployment is below the national average. At the close of calendar year 2016, Veteran unemployment was 4.3%, and the non-veteran rate was 4.7%. As a result, Army Unemployment Compensation (UCX) costs during FY16 were the lowest amount recorded in 13 years. The Army pays UCX for up to 26 weeks for recently transitioned Veterans who are unemployed.

Spouse Employment

Multiple relocations, extended periods of separation, single-parenting, and, simply, the overall tempo and requirements of a Soldier takes a toll on the entire family. The spouse is often the glue that holds it all together. Spouses of Soldiers are extremely resilient and their sacrifices cannot be underestimated. Even during peacetime or when the military spouse is not serving in an operational unit, they often forego careers of their own.

We remain committed to doing all that we can to enhance employment opportunities for military spouses. I agree with what Secretary Mattis recently stated that, “we cannot lose sight of the imperative to keep faith with our Service members and their families.” Eighty five percent of military spouses have some college. Twenty five percent have undergraduate degrees, and 10 percent have earned graduate degrees or higher.

Spouse employment affects financial stability and military readiness. Our Army Employment Readiness program provides assistance to military spouses, active duty, retirees, Army civilians, and survivors to acquire skills, networks, and resources to find employment. The DoD Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP) program has over 340 partner employers with over 5.5 million positions. MSEP focuses on connecting spouses and military-friendly employers, which range from small businesses to Fortune 500 companies to non-profits. These programs have facilitated over 100,000 spouse hires. Still, there is more work to be done to ensure spouses who want to work can do so with proper compensation.

Single Soldiers

Single Soldiers make up a large portion of our force. We talk about family readiness and family programs, but it is often the single Soldiers for which we have the most difficult time providing support. They are young and away from home, their friends, and family for the first time in their lives. This is why programs such as Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers (BOSS), part of MWR, are so important.

BOSS focuses its efforts on single Soldiers 18-25 years old to enhance their quality of life and is not simply focused on recreation events. BOSS gives single Soldiers an avenue to communicate issues important to them to their command. BOSS improves esprit de corps through community outreach events, too. Currently, there are 74 BOSS programs Army wide. Each one fosters fellowship and supports initiatives for fitness, leadership, and pride in service.

Supporting single Soldiers through BOSS reinforces Army strategies and component processes that build and enhance resiliency. It is another avenue for young Soldiers to refine leadership skills, develop public speaking skills, improve communication skills, etc. When fully utilized, BOSS contributes to a higher percentage of comprehensively fit Soldiers. Like morale, comprehensive Soldier fitness is often not measured in tangibles, but directly impacts readiness of the overall force.

Closing

The topics I've highlighted here carry one thread – people. Everything we do is about the people who wear this uniform now and in the future. As decisions are being made about programs to keep, facilities to maintain, services to provide, and people to stay – we are ever mindful of the impact of these decisions on our Army family.

The amazing thing about the American Soldier and the Army family is that despite these challenges, fears, and frustrations – they stand tall in defense of our Nation.

Throughout the recent years downsizing our force and working within fiscal constraints,

our Soldiers have demonstrated their professionalism. The Soldiers who make up today's All-Volunteer Force, their families, and the Civilian workforce that supports us, stand ever-ready and willing to answer the Nation's call. We must ensure that our decisions never weaken such a solemn bond.

In closing, I want to recognize the tireless work that our Army Team does every single day. As the Sergeant Major of the Army, the best part of my job is being around the greatest team the world has ever known. I respectfully request that Congress partner with us to continue supporting and sustaining quality in the All-Volunteer force. Soldiers and families need consistency and predictability from our government to meet the inconsistent and unpredictable threats to our nation. We must continue our commitment to the families of those who serve. Any degradation of benefits and services to our Soldiers and families may hinder our ability to maintain readiness and could add significant risk to sustaining a professional all-volunteer force.