

**PREPARED STATEMENT
OF
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RECRUITING SERVICE
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE**

REGARDING

THE STATE OF RECRUITING FOR FY24

**BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PERSONNEL
OF THE
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**

DECEMBER 6, 2023

STATE OF AIR FORCE RECRUITING: EFFORTS TO INNOVATE AND EXPAND INTEREST

Chairwoman Warren, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the recruiting efforts of the Department of the Air Force.

At the end of Fiscal Year 2023, our active-duty Air Force did not make goal for the first time in 24 years. Several factors contributed to this; a lingering lack of access during COVID, a declining propensity to serve, intense competition for talent in a surplus US job market and a lack of familiarity of the civilian population with the US military. All of these issues culminated to create a very challenging recruiting environment for all services. These factors are complex, with layer upon layer of cause and effect, but I would like to expand on the declining propensity to serve. We have seen a steady decline in the military even being an option for our youth as they contemplate their future with propensity dropping from 13% four years ago to 10% now. Only 12% of youth have a parent who served, compared to 40% in 1995. DoD's Joint Advertising and Market Research Studies organization characterized the youth market as "having transitioned from being disconnected from the military to mostly disinterested with it." Reconnecting with our youth and breaking down unnecessary barriers to serve in our Air Force and Space Force is our priority over the next several years.

FISCAL YEAR 2023

This past year, we missed our enlisted accession recruiting goals by just under 11 percent for the active duty and 31 percent by the Reserve. We did exceed the Space Force enlisted accession goal by nearly 10 percent.

While the overall goals were missed, there were positive strides made through talent-focused Air Force policy changes and a robust Air Force Recruiting Service summer surge effort. The Department of the Air Force immediately began evaluating ways to help our over-burdened recruiting force. The Department of the Air Force reevaluated societal norms, in certain areas, and adjusted some of our antiquated requirements to build a stronger relationship with this new generation of youth who have a much more limited understanding of opportunities, community and purpose our service provides. Overall, the Air Force began a transformation of the accession enterprise as our Vice Chief of Staff led a cross functional team to conduct a comprehensive review of our policies and requirements with a focus on removing unnecessary barriers to joining and developing effective incentives to attract talent. The team synchronized Department of the Air Force and DoD accession requirements as well as sister service requirements, where possible, to expand the reach for talent across the nation. We have implemented a two-year pilot program to authorize THC waivers which has already allowed us to access 181 new recruits since its implementation last spring and we expect approximately 200 additional accessions each year. We updated our Body Composition requirements to mirror the DoD requirement which brought us another 1,265 accessions with only one fitness failure at basic training. We also amended our tattoo policy to allow for small tattoos at the back of the neck and hands which brought us 176 recruits since we implemented the change last March. Additionally, we funded an Enlisted College Loan Repayment Program to attract even more talent and vector those talents to the needs of the Air Force. Since implementation this summer, 223 new recruits have qualified for this program, and we estimate 500 recruits may qualify annually. Finally, the Department of the Air Force implemented a referral program, which allows our Airmen and Delayed Entry Program (DEP) members to refer contacts to our recruiters. When these contacts

complete the accessions process and fully enter the Air Force or Space Force, our DEP members are eligible to enter the service up to the grade of E-3, and our currently serving members are eligible to receive a medal for a similar process. So far, we received nearly 600 referrals with almost 200 in the Delayed Entry Program. With each of these policy changes, we have changed the lives of individuals who would have otherwise been prevented from service in the Air Force or Space Force. It is important to note the caliber of our recruits remains the same; we have not and will not compromise on quality.

In addition to the policy change initiatives, Air Force Recruiting also implemented a command-wide summer surge focused on increasing recruiter presence in the community. Equal to a deployed operations tempo, this provided critical in-the-field training, incentivized short-notice shipment to basic training, and refined our processes to minimize timelines to the fullest extent possible. These efforts built applicant leads and the Delayed Entry Program, both of which prepared us for a healthy start to Fiscal Year 24. Air Force Recruiting surged and personnel extended duty hours for several months. Continued surge operations are not sustainable as an enduring effort as it will result in an eventual breakdown in the effectiveness, morale, and well-being of our recruiters. There were lessons learned from this surge that are enduring and remain in place, most notably, a more robust training program for our first level supervisors as well as a push to maximize recruiter presence within their communities.

FISCAL YEAR 2024

We are cautiously optimistic heading into Fiscal Year 24, as the gains from the summer surge and cross functional team policy changes were substantial and built solid momentum. We started with 32 percent of our Active Duty goal already identified and banked, compared to just 16 percent last year. That 32 percent is a little higher than what we typically try to have identified to

begin each year, which brings us positive momentum. For the Reserve, we are slightly behind our target, but the miss has been small enough thus far that we expect to be able to overcome the delta later in the Fiscal Year. The cross-functional team initiatives continue to bear fruit as we have produced an additional 850 recruits who have shipped or are in the Delayed Entry Program this Fiscal Year. However, we are rapidly approaching the most difficult recruiting months of the year, February through May.

In keeping with the transformational changes needed to accomplish our recruiting mission, we stood up a Strategy Division and revamped a long-term strategic plan for the organization. Our lines of effort within this strategy are to:

- Elevate favorable brand relevance for the Air Force and build brand awareness for the Space Force
- Drive smart operations
- Bolster force & families
- Transform & Expand the Total Force Recruiting network

There will be continued challenges as we move through Fiscal Year 2024 and beyond however the most disruptive in the recent past has undoubtedly been the Health Information Exchange and implementation of Military Health System (MHS) GENESIS. The Health Information Exchange associated with MHS-GENESIS continues to bring challenges by uncovering more initial potential disqualifying conditions requiring extended and substantial records requests, and subsequently more records to review. To illustrate this issue, in Fiscal Year 2021, 81 percent of all Air Force applicants going to MEPS were qualified on their initial processing visit. In Fiscal Year 2022 (the start of MHS-GENESIS and HIE), this initial qualification rate dropped to 69 percent and ended Fiscal Year 2023 with a 58 percent initial qualification rate. This led to an

increase of nearly 20 percent more waiver requests in Fiscal Year 2023 than in the previous two years. Our accession waiver rates, to the retention standards, remain high at nearly 70 percent, and we estimate that we lost more than 5,000 recruits who walked away from this cumbersome process without even pursuing a waiver due to the delays. Additionally, we have not seen a difference in our medical removal rates at basic training with the implementation of MHS-GENESIS. We applaud the Deputy Secretary of Defense's initiative to resource USMEPCOM at the levels needed to process applicants in a timely manner. In addition to OSD-level initiatives, Air Force Recruiting Service has increased manning in our Medical Waiver Division to tackle the large increase in waiver requests and we also just went under contract to add medical administrators to our team who can take the burden of tracking down medical paperwork away from our recruiters. This will give three to four hours a week back to each recruiter to engage with their communities and potential applicants.

We believe our biggest challenge going into 2024 is connecting with an American society that, as I mentioned earlier, has had a steady decline in the knowledge and propensity to serve in our military. This challenge fuels our need for consistent capabilities to tell our story to the public through a number of avenues. We are using the funding Congress provided for our marketing program in Fiscal Year 2023 to highlight the value of serving in our Air Force and Space Force. With the funding, our marketing division leaned into both lead generation in the current Fiscal Year and postured for future year recruiting success. The funds paid for a website, customer relations management system updates, and built an e-Recruiter program. This virtual interfacing program produced compelling accession rates, which gives our field recruiters additional bandwidth for more high-impact activities such as community engagements and to work more complex applications. We increased the investment levels in our existing partnerships,

organizations like Drone Racing League and eSports, and increased the total number of partnerships that explore new ways to connect with the public. Through these partnerships, we added more than 300 events for our recruiters to engage with the public. These efforts led to a 16 percent increase in new contacts, and a 9.5 percent increase in leads in the first six months alone.

Additionally, these funds helped us launch a “Women in Sports” campaign with the aim of establishing the Air Force as a champion for female athletics at all levels. It started with ads during the FIFA Women’s World Cup and continues through partnership with organizations like the Supergirl Gamer Pro Series, Sorensen Motorsports, Women’s Sports Foundation, and Play Like a Girl. Perhaps most importantly, the funds allowed us to set conditions for future year recruiting through large-scale media purchases, targeting prospects and their influencers alike. These campaigns are airing now and will continue into April of 2024.

Air Force Recruiting Service also executes marketing for our Total Force partners. The marketing initiatives implemented by the Air National Guard (ANG) in Fiscal Year 2023 aided in increased brand awareness among the target audience by 8 percent. The marketing funding allotted to the ANG enabled ground-breaking partnerships in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), Major and Minor League Baseball and select college athletic markets. Combined with other digital campaigns such as “Serve Your Way” and “My Home Base,” ANG marketing garnered more than 1.3 billion impressions. Signage at major UFC and MLB events will be viewed on video clips for years to come, resulting in an immeasurable positive awareness over the long term.

The Air Force Chief of Staff tasked installation leadership to develop a more robust community relations outreach effort that includes expanding access to their bases. Over past twenty-plus years, the communities around our installations have lost an awareness of the military mission

and people who are so vital to their community. We developed a “Go Blue/Stay Blue” campaign designed to give our Wing Commanders a toolbox of resources to spread the message of serving in the Air Force and Space Force when they communicate with their local communities. In addition, the Stay Blue arm of the campaign is designed to communicate early and often to our Airmen on the value of our Reserve components and the opportunities to continue to serve in our Air Force, even after they complete their active duty commitments. Close relationships with our civic partners and community members are paramount to our AF recruiting mission by providing a familiarity of our mission and influencing our target demographic to consider serving in the Air Force or Space Force. We are currently partnering with the Air and Space Force Association as well as Secretary of the Air Force’s civic leaders and local civic leader programs to expand our messaging of the Air Force and Space Force culture and what it means to serve.

Air Force Recruiting’s Detachment 1 operates in the pre-accessions space to inform, influence, and inspire youth through awareness. Our Det 1 recruiters focus on youth with an interest in aviation and hosts events which educate and illuminate a pathway from a notional dream to reality. In Fiscal Year 2023, they hosted more than 600 aviation-themed events reaching more than one hundred thousand youth. Det 1’s notable partnerships include the Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals, Women in Aviation International, the Dee Howard Foundation and Space Camp. A few of Det 1’s programs include their Aviation Inspiration Mentorship, what we call “AIM.” These AIM mentors are diverse Airmen in the flying community who interact with underserved youth and tell their story of being an Airman. Det 1 also works with our flying wings to help them become “AIM Wings,” allowing them to conduct Inspiration Flights for youth and their influencers. Det 1, in partnership with university flight schools, hosts multiple

AIM High Flight Academy events each year helping young men and women experience the thrill of flight for the first time and culminating with the opportunity to solo.

CONCLUSION

I want to thank you once again for the opportunity to speak with you today. We are cautiously optimistic that the actions we have taken over the last year have put us on the path to achieve our FY24 accession goals for the Air Force and Space Force. While this momentum and early goal attainment proves promising, we must keep our hand on the throttle and continue to work the challenge areas of medical processing, predictable resourcing, community involvement, breaking barriers to service -- all while we transform how we recruit in an era of great power competition.