

Stenographic Transcript  
Before the

COMMITTEE ON  
ARMED SERVICES

**UNITED STATES SENATE**

TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY FROM THE SENIOR ENLISTED  
LEADERS ON SERVICEMEMBER AND FAMILY QUALITY OF  
LIFE

Wednesday, February 11, 2026

Washington, D.C.

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WASHINGTON, DC 20005  
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1 TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY FROM THE SENIOR ENLISTED LEADERS ON  
2 SERVICEMEMBER AND FAMILY QUALITY OF LIFE

3  
4 Wednesday, February 11, 2026

5  
6 U.S. Senate

7 Subcommittee on Personnel

8 Committee on Armed Services

9 Washington, D.C.

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11 The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 3:01 p.m. in  
12 Room SR-222, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Tommy  
13 Tuberville, chairman of the subcommittee, presiding.

14 Committee Members Present: Senators Tuberville  
15 [presiding], Wicker, Ernst, Sullivan, Banks, Warren, Reed,  
16 Blumenthal, Hirono, and Duckworth.

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1 OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. TOMMY TUBERVILLE, U.S.

2 SENATOR FROM ALABAMA

3 Senator Tuberville: Good afternoon. This hearing will  
4 come to order the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on  
5 Personnel meets this afternoon to hear from the senior  
6 enlisted leaders of armed forces about quality-of-life  
7 investments across the Department of Defense. I want to  
8 thank all of our witness for joining us today, and for their  
9 and for their service and to our country.

10 You all represent the backbone of our military.  
11 Enlisted service members make up more than 80 percent of the  
12 total force, and you are the voice of those who serve us  
13 every day. You see morale, discipline, and readiness up  
14 close. We value that perspective and we need it.

15 I commend the services for returning their focus to  
16 warfighting and lethality, and for moving away from  
17 distracted DEI programs that do not strengthen combat  
18 effectiveness. Our military exists to fight and to win  
19 wars. High standards and discipline matter. I strongly  
20 support returning to a culture focused on performance and  
21 mission.

22 You know, at the same time, quality of life is a core  
23 readiness issue. The Department invests billions of tax  
24 dollars in critical warfighting capabilities, and rightly

1 so, but too often, the most basic investments that directly  
2 support service members day to day, like housing, dining,  
3 facilities, and family support are treated as secondary.  
4 Taking care of the things that take care of our service  
5 members is not a distraction from readiness. It is  
6 foundational to it.

7 In recent years, the Armed Services Committee, and this  
8 subcommittee in particular, has prioritized investments to  
9 support service members and their families, including  
10 increasing pay, expanding access to childcare, improving  
11 spouse employment opportunities, and strengthening military  
12 healthcare. We did this because taking care of our people  
13 is essential to maintaining a strong and capable military.

14 You know, this hearing is an opportunity to circle back  
15 and find out whether those investments have resulted in  
16 meaningful improvements and where our gaps still exist. We  
17 also want to hear directly from you about the initiatives  
18 you are leading to support morale and quality of life across  
19 your formations. The goal today is to get honest feedback,  
20 identify what needs improvement, and ensure both Congress  
21 and the Department are focused on their most important  
22 asset; the men and women in uniform.

23 So, thank you for all appearing today. I look forward  
24 to your testimony. And Ranking Member and Senator Warren,



1 your statement please.

2 STATEMENT OF HON. ELIZABETH WARREN, U.S. SENATOR FROM  
3 MASSACHUSETTS

4 Senator Warren: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.  
5 I'm glad that we're taking time to dig into important  
6 quality of life issues for our enlisted troops. You know,  
7 enlisted members make up over 80 percent of our active-duty  
8 forces. They fill critical jobs across the services from  
9 intelligence and cyber specialists, to engineers and  
10 infantry men, all crucial to upholding our national  
11 security.

12 But too often these patriotic men and women have to  
13 deal with quality-of-life issues that make it harder for  
14 them to effectively do their jobs. One big area of concern  
15 is the quality of our barracks. We require service members  
16 who enlist to live in barracks during basic training and  
17 initial job training. The very minimum we owe them is  
18 housing that is safe.

19 Instead, we've seen health and safety problems for  
20 decades. A 2023 report by the Government Accountability  
21 Office was another wakeup call on this issue. The GAO found  
22 mold covered walls, sewage pipes that were cracking and  
23 overflowing, and rooms heating up to over 90 degrees because  
24 the air conditioning units were broken.



1           Several years later, we continue to hear horror stories  
2 about living conditions. Navy Secretary John Phelan was so  
3 appalled by barracks. He visited in Guam that he initially  
4 thought the buildings he was visiting were condemned.  
5 Troops and other services also continue to report that it  
6 can take months to address maintenance requests at their  
7 barracks.

8           Look, we need real solutions, and we need them now.  
9 Not years from now, now. And one of the proposed solutions  
10 is turning responsibility for these barracks over to private  
11 companies. Instead, I am deeply concerned that we have not  
12 learned our lessons from years of this committee's  
13 investigations into privatized military family housing,  
14 which exposed significant failures. Military family housing  
15 is still plagued by supports of unsafe living conditions  
16 like mold, lead paint, pest infestations, and more.

17           I sent a letter to Secretary Hegseth last year raising  
18 concerns about this. DOD's response indicated that it is  
19 poised to make exactly the same mistakes in privatizing the  
20 enlisted person's barracks, like granting 50-year leases to  
21 companies with questionable accountability and virtually no  
22 oversight.

23           We've also seen private companies try to take advantage  
24 of military families by forcing them to sign non-disclosure



1 agreements in order to receive compensation for things like  
2 damaged property from mold, or reimbursement for other  
3 financial burdens that they face due to terrible living  
4 conditions. DOD and Congress need to act so that any  
5 company's responsible for privatized barracks don't try to  
6 muzzle the troops that are living there as well.

7         And bottom line, we just need to invest more in the  
8 barracks. Congress actually provided funding to DOD to  
9 modernize and repair barracks, but under the Trump  
10 administration, DOD has repeatedly diverted this money to  
11 support border operations instead. In their notifications  
12 to Congress, they haven't bothered to explain why they  
13 thought it was appropriate to take money away from  
14 rehabilitating barracks, leaving troops in horrible living  
15 conditions. I don't think anyone here would want to spend  
16 an extra year, an extra month, even an extra day, breathing  
17 in black mold just because this administration didn't think  
18 their health was important.

19         Another quality-of-life challenge; childcare. Military  
20 families need it to be able to do their jobs, but I am  
21 deeply concerned that military families continue to face big  
22 challenges in getting care for their babies. Getting  
23 childcare is already hard enough for parents all around this  
24 country, and it can be even more difficult for military



1 parents who are dealing with non-traditional hours, changing  
2 hours, abrupt relocations, and deployments.

3 At the end of last year, there were over 7,800 children  
4 from military families waiting for slots to open up at DOD  
5 childcare facilities. Someone's going to have to explain to  
6 me how our service members are supposed to show up for duty  
7 when there's no one to care for their babies. Now, DOD is  
8 known for high quality childcare, and I applaud that. It is  
9 terrific, but there aren't enough slots and one of the key  
10 problems is that DOD cannot attract and retain childcare  
11 providers with its decades-old pay scale.

12 So, in the fiscal year 2025 National Defense  
13 Authorization Act, Congress mandated that DOD update its  
14 child development program compensation model by April of  
15 2025, but the Air Force, the Army, and the Navy all blew the  
16 deadline, and 10 months later still aren't done. That's  
17 making life harder for the moms and dads in the military to  
18 do their jobs.

19 Even as DOD has been hemorrhaging childcare staff, the  
20 Trump administration has made it even harder to replace and  
21 retain those workers. It has slashed DOD's total civilian  
22 workforce by 8 percent. Last year, this subcommittee  
23 received testimony about the severe impacts of the civilian  
24 hiring freeze, reducing childcare staffing, and increasing



1 the length of the wait lists.

2 Although DOD has since provided some exceptions to the  
3 hiring freeze for childcare workers, I continue to hear  
4 about the challenges that families are facing getting these  
5 slots and the challenges you are facing with hiring. We  
6 need to do better by our military families and our civilian  
7 childcare workers.

8 And I'll mention a third problem, and that is  
9 healthcare service members cannot show up and protect us if  
10 they are not healthy. But one of the biggest challenges  
11 that service members and their families face is making sure  
12 they can access the healthcare that they need. A 2023 Blue  
13 Star Family Survey found that four in 10 active-duty  
14 military family respondents had family members who needed  
15 specialty care, and had to wait more than two months for a  
16 first appointment.

17 President Trump's and Republicans' cuts to Medicaid in  
18 the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, threatened to make it even  
19 harder for military families to access these types of care.  
20 Military families with special needs or lower incomes rely  
21 on Medicaid for supplemental benefits that they can't get  
22 through TRICARE, and as hospitals across the country are  
23 forced to reduce services or close their doors because of  
24 the Medicaid cuts, it could make it even harder for military



1 families to access the care they rely on in the communities  
2 surrounding their bases.

3 Every day, patriotic men and women enlist so that they  
4 can protect our country. We owe them everything. It should  
5 not be too much to provide housing that doesn't have black  
6 mold, childcare that doesn't have a 7,000-person wait list,  
7 and doctor's appointments that aren't months away. These  
8 aren't things that would just be nice to have. If we don't  
9 address these issues, we put our military readiness,  
10 retention, and recruitment at risk.

11 So, I look forward to hearing testimony from all of the  
12 witnesses today. I thank you for being here. These are  
13 questions we must address. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

14 Senator Tuberville: Thank you, Senator Warren. To all  
15 our witnesses. Your written statement will be entered into  
16 the record in full. Now, we'll have opening statements.  
17 We'll start with senior enlisted advisor to the chairman of  
18 the Joint Chiefs of Staff, David Isom.

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1 STATEMENT OF DAVID L. ISOM, USN, SENIOR ENLISTED ADVISOR TO  
2 THE CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF,  
3 THE JOINT STAFF

4 Chief Isom: Thank you, sir. Chairman Tuberville,  
5 Ranking Member Warren, distinguished members of this  
6 subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with  
7 you here today, and thank you for your deep commitment to  
8 our warfighters. They are the foundation of our lethality,  
9 and it is an incredible honor to represent them as the sixth  
10 senior enlisted advisor to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs  
11 of Staff.

12 I'm grateful for the men and women of the joint force  
13 who serve our Nation with quiet professionalism, courage,  
14 and integrity at home and around the globe every day. I'm  
15 equally thankful for their families whose love and support  
16 make their service possible.

17 We are living in extraordinarily complex times with  
18 multiple simultaneous challenges around the globe, but I'm  
19 comforted every day by the fact that our incredible joint  
20 force stands ready. As our joint force works tirelessly to  
21 ensure the safety and security of our Nation, we must also  
22 work tirelessly to ensure that they have our full support,  
23 and that they have what they need to fight and win when  
24 called upon.

1 Today, I'll talk about the chairman and my priorities,  
2 and I will reinforce special operations truth number one,  
3 and that is that humans are more important than hardware  
4 because the true strength of our military isn't just in our  
5 ships, and our tanks, or our aircraft, it's the unwavering  
6 spirit in the trusted hands of our people; our total joint  
7 force.

8 The chairman and I have three priorities. First, we  
9 must have a joint force that is properly armed. We must  
10 have the right capabilities and capacity when needed to  
11 fight and win. Second, we must have a joint force that is  
12 globally integrated across all domains with interagency,  
13 with industry, and with allies and partners. Third, we must  
14 build a joint force that is ready. Being ready is about  
15 repetitions, tough training, and building muscle memory.  
16 This also includes being clear-eyed about the future, and  
17 being candid with our force and their families.

18 Underpinning these priorities is our most important  
19 asset, and that's our people. We recruit America's best and  
20 we must retain this talent by taking care of them and taking  
21 care of their families. Chairman Tuberville, Ranking Member  
22 Warren, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, our  
23 people are our strategic advantage. We have the smartest,  
24 most capable, and most dedicated joint force in history,



1 willing to pay the ultimate price to defend our Nation.

2       They're fulfilling their end of the bargain through  
3 tough training, long deployments, and ensuring they're ready  
4 every day. On their behalf, I'm asking that we uphold our  
5 end of the bargain by providing the stable, predictable  
6 funding that they need to succeed, provide the tools and  
7 training they need to win, and the quality of life that  
8 honors their service and their sacrifice.

9       Thank you again for your steadfast support, and I look  
10 forward to your questions.

11       [The prepared statement of Chief Isom follows:]

12       [SUBCOMMITTEE INSERT]

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1           Senator Tuberville: Thank you. Our next witness is  
2 sergeant major of the Army, Michael Weimer.

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1 STATEMENT OF SERGEANT MAJOR MICHAEL R. WEIMER, USA,  
2 SERGEANT MAJOR OF THE ARMY,  
3 UNITED STATES ARMY

4 Sergeant Weimer: Chairman Tuberville, Ranking Member  
5 Warren, distinguished members of this subcommittee, Senator  
6 Reed, thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of  
7 nearly one million soldiers in our formations, and the  
8 civilians, and family members that make up the United States  
9 Army, the single most lethal fighting force the world has  
10 ever seen.

11 For 250 years, the American soldier has been the  
12 underwriter of our Nation's defense. Our motto, "This We'll  
13 Defend," is an unwavering promise we make to the American  
14 people. Today, I'm proud to report that the United States  
15 Army is growing stronger every day.

16 Our strength begins with our people. On the recruiting  
17 front, we have a significant success story. 2025, thanks to  
18 the incredible work of the recruiting professionals and the  
19 patriotism of the American of America's youth, we have not  
20 only met our ambitious goal of 61,000 new soldiers, but we  
21 achieved it four months ahead of schedule. This success is  
22 not a signal to relax. We are committed to sustaining this  
23 momentum into the future, and I'm proud to say we're also  
24 exceeding our retention goals achieving 110 percent of last

1 year's target.

2 Americans joined the Army to stay in our ranks, to be  
3 soldiers. When their focus is diverted from the mission to  
4 fight battles against poor living conditions, we risk  
5 failing them. However, we are fighting uphill to decrease  
6 the facility maintenance backlogs with unpredictable funding  
7 and government shutdowns. A deferred maintenance issue  
8 doesn't just impact morale, it incurs higher costs later,  
9 and potentially exposes our warfighters to health and  
10 performance threats. A soldier's focus must be on their  
11 mission, not on a work order that can't be filled.

12 Taking care of our people is the foundation for a  
13 lethal combat-ready force. The lifeblood of that force is  
14 tough, realistic training. We've declared war on  
15 distractions. We are relentlessly eliminating burdensome  
16 administrative requirements to free up our leaders to do  
17 what they do best; build lethal teams.

18 Every hour a leader spends on a redundant task is an  
19 hour. They are not training their soldiers. But tough  
20 training is not cheap. We're actively transforming our  
21 training to reflect the brutal realities of the modern  
22 battlefield, one saturated with drones, relentless  
23 electronic warfare, and contested logistics. We must train  
24 for the fight we face today, not the one we fought



1 yesterday.

2 Chairman Tuberville, Ranking Member Warren, our people  
3 are the heart of the Army. They're the engine of our combat  
4 power, our commitment to provide them with quality of life  
5 they need, the leadership they deserve, and the cutting-edge  
6 training required to dominate any adversary. Our soldiers  
7 are our credentials. They're the living embodiment of our  
8 motto, and they're the reason I can sit before you today  
9 with absolute confidence and reaffirm our unbreakable  
10 promise, "This We'll Defend." To uphold this promise, we  
11 need your partnership and your support.

12 Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

13 [The prepared statement of Sergeant Weimer follows:]

14 [SUBCOMMITTEE INSERT]

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1           Senator Tuberville: Thank you. Our next witness is  
2 master chief petty officer of the Navy, John Perryman IV.

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1 STATEMENT OF MASTER CHIEF PETTY OFFICER JOHN J. PERRYMAN IV,  
2 USN, MASTER CHIEF PETTY OFFICER OF THE NAVY,  
3 UNITED STATES NAVY

4 Chief Perryman: Chairman Tuberville, Ranking Member  
5 Warren, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank  
6 you for the opportunity to appear before you today. It is  
7 an honor to represent the sailors and families active and  
8 reserve who serve our Nation at home and abroad.

9 Your oversight of military quality of life is not  
10 separate from readiness; it is foundational to it. Since  
11 assuming the role of master chief petty officer of the Navy,  
12 my focus has been grounded in a simple principle; build  
13 competent, confident sailors with the character and fighting  
14 spirit our Nation depends on.

15 Every sailor owns readiness, every leader develops  
16 people, and every command must speak honestly about  
17 performance, and act decisively to improve it. Quality of  
18 life is the human foundation of that vision, especially for  
19 a deployed Navy that spends significant time at sea and away  
20 from home.

21 I'll briefly highlight three priorities. First,  
22 sailors and families first. Sailors are asymmetric  
23 advantage, and the stability of their families directly  
24 affects readiness, retention, and performance. Barracks,

1 housing, childcare, and healthcare are not benefits at the  
2 margins, they're readiness enablers. When access to care is  
3 delayed, when housing is unsafe or poorly maintained, or  
4 when childcare is unavailable, sailors lose time and focus,  
5 navigating problems that should never reach the deck plates.

6 Access to medical and mental health care remains one of  
7 the most consequential quality of life issues we hear.  
8 Readiness depends on healthy people, and family stability  
9 depends on dependable care, continued investment in  
10 appointment availability, provider capacity, telehealth, and  
11 network adequacy, especially for sailors and families far  
12 from military treatment facilities directly supports  
13 operational readiness. The same is true for housing  
14 accountability, expanded childcare capacity, predictable PCS  
15 moves, and enforcing standards in these areas with the same  
16 discipline we apply to operational readiness.

17 Second, technical mastery at every level. The Navy  
18 exists to fight and win at sea. The mission demands  
19 technical mastery from damage control and maintenance, to  
20 cyber and information warfare. Mastery is built through  
21 deliberate training, meaningful qualification, and leaders  
22 who enforce standards while investing in their people where  
23 feasible. Strengthening organic maintenance and repair  
24 capability improves readiness, reduces cost, and builds



1 durable expertise within the force.

2 Third, continuous development and talent management.  
3 Retention begins with development. Sailors stay when they  
4 can see a clear trajectory and when leaders deliberately  
5 invest in their growth. A coherent career, long continuum  
6 of enlisted development anchored in education, relevant  
7 training, and transparent advancement pathways, produces  
8 more competent leaders and a more resilient force.

9 Programs such as the career training continuum, tuition  
10 assistance, and the Naval Community College, are not  
11 benefits. They're readiness investments that strengthen  
12 retention and ensure we remain competitive for top talent in  
13 a demanding job market.

14 In closing, quality of life improvements are  
15 operational enablers. When we remove preventable stressors,  
16 we increase readiness, strengthen families, and retain the  
17 talent the Navy and the Nation require.

18 I appreciate the committee's partnership, and I look  
19 forward to your questions. Thank you.

20 [The prepared statement of Chief Perryman follows:]

21 [SUBCOMMITTEE INSERT]

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1           Senator Tuberville: Thank you. Our next witness is  
2 sergeant major of the Marine Corps, Carlos Ruiz.

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1           STATEMENT OF SERGEANT MAJOR CARLOS A. RUIZ, USMC,  
2                           SERGEANT MAJOR OF THE MARINE CORPS,  
3   UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

4           Sergent Ruiz: Good afternoon, Chairman, Ranking Member  
5 Warren, and members of this committee. I'm grateful for  
6 your continued interest and support.

7           I've come to realize through my time in this position  
8 that quality of service is not a problem to be solved or a  
9 fight to be won. There's no start or finish. It is an  
10 ongoing way of life, just like proficiency and readiness,  
11 like health and wellness, and like professionalism and  
12 morality. There's never a day to hang it up and go home.  
13 We're never done, and we in this room have inherited that  
14 responsibility. It is an honor place in our privileged  
15 hands for however long or short our time may be.

16           What we do today will impact the Marines of tomorrow  
17 and those who serve a decade from now. Your Marines  
18 continue to train and win because that's our way of life.  
19 We have demonstrated readiness, lethality, proficiency, and  
20 commitment around the globe.

21           Over the past year, I have visited recruiters and  
22 journal instructors who do the work of finding and making  
23 the next generation of Marines, and together they're the  
24 gatekeepers of our values, our standards and culture. And

1 on the other side of service, career planners and the  
2 Manpower Division ensure that the best of the best have  
3 stayed in our formations, and thanks to their hard work, the  
4 Marine Corps has again achieved record retention rates.

5 Your Marines are deployed in every combatant command,  
6 and I have visited many of them no matter their rank or  
7 occupational specialty. Every Marine was focused, trained,  
8 and ready. Marines all tell me the same thing. They love  
9 being a Marine, but they need better facilities and  
10 resources, not because they want to be pampered, but because  
11 they want to be more ready, more focused, and the most  
12 prepared for whatever the Nation needs next.

13 In my position, I am responsible for the morale, and  
14 welfare, and discipline of Marines, but the authority lies  
15 with you. It was an Act of Congress that established the  
16 Marine Corps in 1775, and it was also an Act of Congress  
17 that provided the GI Bill in 1944, that in 1958, Congress  
18 reestablished the pride and joy of the United States Marine  
19 Corps, the iconic Lance Corporal and it was you that  
20 authorized 14.5 percent pay raise for our corporals and  
21 below.

22 In 2025, we have the power to create lasting change.  
23 Together, we'll ensure the Marines of tomorrow inherit a  
24 force worthy of their service.



1 I look forward to answering your questions.

2 [The prepared statement of Sergeant Ruiz follows:]

3 [SUBCOMMITTEE INSERT]

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1           Senator Tuberville: Thank you. Next witness is chief  
2 master sergeant of the Air Force, David Wolfe.

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1 STATEMENT OF CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT DAVID R. WOLFE, USAF,  
2 CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT OF THE AIR FORCE,  
3 UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

4 Sergeant Wolfe: Chairman Tuberville, Ranking Member  
5 Warren, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, it is  
6 an honor to be here as the 21st chief master sergeant of the  
7 Air Force. I represent more than 665,000 total force airmen  
8 and I thank you for your focus on their well-being. Your  
9 help is critical because their quality of life is  
10 fundamental to our readiness and our ability to defend the  
11 Nation.

12 Over the last 50 years, military spending as part of  
13 our GDP has been cut in half, while our global commitments  
14 have grown. At the same time, we face the challenge of an  
15 aircraft fleet that has nearly doubled in age over the last  
16 30 years. This has created an imbalance between the demands  
17 we place on our force and the resources available to sustain  
18 them. Because of this, we've had to make hard choices, but  
19 it is also, it has also encouraged innovation and enhanced a  
20 relentless focus on what matters most; our people.

21 Like any advanced system, people require sustainment.  
22 This isn't measured in spare parts or fuel, but in family  
23 stability and quality of life. I'm proud to report our Air  
24 Force as meeting these challenges head on and delivering

1 solutions. We met our active duty recruiting goals last  
2 year, bringing a ready and talented new generation into our  
3 force, and we are on track to meet and even exceed our goals  
4 for this year.

5 We're also making progress to counter the challenge of  
6 our aging infrastructure. We are executing the largest  
7 investment in dormitories in over a decade to ensure our  
8 airmen have a safe, clean place to call home. In childcare,  
9 with this committee's support, we're making powerful strides  
10 by funding 17 new child development centers to directly  
11 tackle our wait lists. And while we appreciate the 4  
12 percent requirement for recapitalization of our facilities,  
13 if it doesn't come with the requisite top line budget  
14 increase, we will find challenges in meeting the goal.

15 Over the last few years, the demands for our Air Force  
16 to modernize have been clear with the announcement of  
17 platforms like the B-21, F-47, and Sentinel. But the  
18 following question remains: If we are going to have a sixth-  
19 generation Air Force, are we going to be able to provide a  
20 sixth-generation quality of life for our airmen?

21 People in platforms are part of the same readiness  
22 equation. When one side of that equation is weak, the  
23 entire system fails. We cannot allow that to happen. We  
24 must ensure our airmen have the training, resources, and



1 quality of life to fight today, while ensuring our force is  
2 modernizing to deter those who challenge our way of life.  
3 It's not either readiness or modernization, it's both. We  
4 are committed to getting this right, and we are proving it  
5 with action. We see this committee as an essential partner  
6 in that effort.

7 I look forward to your questions, and to working  
8 together to ensure our airmen have everything they need to  
9 fly, fight, and win. Thank you.

10 [The prepared statement of Sergeant Wolfe follows:]

11 [SUBCOMMITTEE INSERT]

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1           Senator Tuberville: Thank you. Our next witness is  
2 chief master sergeant of the Space Force, John Bentivegna.

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1 CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT JOHN F. BENTIVEGNA, USSF

2 CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT OF THE SPACE FORCE

3 UNITED STATES SPACE FORCE

4 Sergeant Bentivegna: Chairman Tuberville, Ranking

5 Member Warren, and distinguished members of the

6 subcommittee, thank you for your continued support of

7 Guardians and their families. I am deeply grateful for the

8 recent provisions Congress has provided, including the

9 adjustments to basic military pay, basic allowance for

10 housing, and basic allowance for subsistence. While the

11 recent NDAA changes represent your powerful commitment, we

12 must continue to ensure compensation remains responsive to

13 the real-world market conditions our Guardians encounter.

14 Beyond direct compensation, we know the overall well-

15 being of our Guardians and their families are paramount to

16 readiness. Access to childcare and food security, for

17 example, are essential to quality of life. That is why

18 we're actively addressing these needs through innovations

19 like the program at Peterson Space Force Base in Colorado,

20 which provides 150 off-base childcare spaces, offering our

21 Guardians greater flexibility.

22 Additionally, the NDAA pilot program to help improve

23 food security is now authorized across all military

24 departments, giving us broader options to provide enhanced

1 food quality and accessibility.

2 To continue these positive trends, both quality of life  
3 and quality of service challenges must remain to be our  
4 combined focus. We must continue to invest in flexible  
5 solutions to improve quality of life like strengthening,  
6 licensing portability for spouses, and expanding modern  
7 telehealth services, and access for military members and our  
8 families. Both can provide continuity and readiness.

9 And our commitment to readiness is more critical now  
10 than ever as we face an ever-evolving global security  
11 environment. The space domain is growing increasingly  
12 contested. China is quickly expanding space capabilities,  
13 and Russia's continued development of anti-satellite systems  
14 presents serious threats to our Nation's interests and our  
15 ability to defend them in, from, and into space.

16 In response to this, 2025 was a year of significant  
17 evolution for the Space Force. We made a historic  
18 transition with the establishment of Combat Forces Command,  
19 enhancing our ability to field integrated combat units. Our  
20 operational tempo reached new heights with Space Launch  
21 Delta 45, executing 109 launches in a single year,  
22 representing a 640 percent increase from the 17 launches in  
23 2019.

24 Even with this progress, to confront the threats of



1 today and tomorrow, doubling the size of the United States  
2 Space Force is a national security necessity. While  
3 achieving a force of just over 10,000 uniformed Guardians in  
4 2025 was a landmark milestone, it is insufficient for the  
5 missions we have been assigned. To effectively fulfill our  
6 national mandate, we must increase our infrastructure and  
7 double our size.

8 This critical expansion is not only necessary, but  
9 entirely achievable. A mere five months into fiscal year  
10 2026, we have already exceeded our annual recruiting goal,  
11 achieving 125 percent of our target for those who have  
12 shipped to basic military training, or entered, or delayed  
13 entry program.

14 To support our growth, we must also elevate our quality  
15 of service by modernizing and expanding our facilities. Our  
16 emissions are rapidly evolving, but much of our  
17 infrastructure is rooted in the past. It cannot keep up  
18 with the demands of a larger, more advanced force to train  
19 for and execute in a contested and complex joint multi-  
20 domain environment.

21 In closing, let me leave you with this message. To  
22 ensure space superiority, the Space Force must double in  
23 size. To accomplish this, we need continued competitive and  
24 responsive compensation for service families who can expect



1 consistent quality of life and elevated quality of service  
2 experiences. I look forward to continuing our meaningful  
3 collaboration, and I look forward to your questions. Thank  
4 you.

5 [The prepared statement of Sergeant Bentivegna follows:]

6 [SUBCOMMITTEE INSERT]

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1           Senator Tuberville: Thank all of you very much. We'll  
2 have Senators going in and out because of vote, but we want  
3 to get as many questions out as we possibly can. And at the  
4 end, I'm going to give you an opportunity, if we didn't hit  
5 something that you want to talk about, we'll have an opening  
6 segment at the end.

7           I'll start out the questioning, and we'll start with  
8 Master Sergeant Bentivegna. We'll start down on this end.  
9 And just very shortly, you know, we've kind of refocused our  
10 warfighting training standards, merit-based leadership on  
11 recruiting. From your perspective as senior enlisted voice  
12 of your service, how are these changes being received? And  
13 what impact are you seeing on morale purpose and day-to-day  
14 quality of service this short period of time?

15          Sergeant Bentivegna: Thank you, Senator. So,  
16 recruitment for the Space Force has been phenomenal, like I  
17 said in my opening statement. We have more individuals who  
18 want to commission and are enlist to the Space Force, so we  
19 can take in right now. So, which is why, you know, doubling  
20 the size is something I think that is absolutely achievable.  
21 But I think as a mission-focused service, as small as we  
22 are, the Guardians absolutely appreciate the fact that we  
23 are laser focused on the threat and the need to provide  
24 space superiority for the lethality of the joint force.



1           So, day to day, the leadership at the most tactical  
2 level understand that meritocracy, focusing on the mission,  
3 and the lethality of force is where we need to focus on and  
4 what we're putting emphasis on day to day. And I think  
5 morale is high because of it. That's feedback I receive  
6 from my Guardians every time I'm out in the field.

7           Senator Tuberville: Master Sergeant Wolfe?

8           Sergeant Wolfe: Thank you, Senator. As we focus on  
9 readiness as the number one priority for your United States  
10 Air Force, what we see is as we give people the resources  
11 that they need to accomplish the mission, they immediately  
12 respond. In places where we fall short, that's where we end  
13 up having difficulties in accomplishing what it is that  
14 we're set out to do.

15           Our people, the morale is high. We're focusing on  
16 standards every day trying to raise the bar and make sure  
17 that our folks understand exactly what's expected of them,  
18 and when they understand that, they respond.

19           Senator Tuberville: Thank you. Sergeant Major?

20           Sergeant Ruiz: Senator, yes, the profession in this  
21 service is warfighting, and that's what they do very well,  
22 Senator. And I would I would add, when a young Marine sees  
23 effort, they see an investment. They may not see a brand-  
24 new barracks being built in their camp, but maybe they see a



1 barracks that is refurbished. Because for most of our  
2 Marines, they don't go to an office, they pivot from their  
3 barracks room onto the field to do on dangerous things,  
4 dangerous training exercises. So, to have and to see  
5 barracks being refurbished, and that's almost 8,000 Marines  
6 that we were able to help because we were able to refurbish  
7 23 buildings, sir, is just does wonders for readiness and  
8 definitely retention.

9 Senator Tuberville: Chief Petty Officer?

10 Chief Perryman: Senator, sailors are happiest when  
11 they're on deployment doing the mission. And to something  
12 the sergeant major of the Army said, they're least happy  
13 when I've got them bogged down in administrative and things  
14 don't add to their ability to conduct warfare.

15 And the flip side that -- and the other thing that  
16 detracts from that is the fact that their facilities,  
17 barracks, housing, are a distraction. And so, I think  
18 continued investment in those areas will improve morale when  
19 we're at home, but I've seen nothing but extraordinarily  
20 high morale when we're out on deployment, executing the  
21 mission.

22 Senator Tuberville: Sergeant Major?

23 Sergeant Weimer: Mr. Chairman, thank you for that  
24 question. Morale from the street to deployment is high when



1 our soldiers are filled with purpose. That's what I'm  
2 seeing. Is it always at the highest point it can be? Of  
3 course not, and we know that because there are barracks  
4 issues that we're trying to tackle. There are -- we're not  
5 perfect. We're striving for excellence. But overall  
6 morale, to your question right now, is they feel purpose  
7 from the moment they go to bootcamp till they arrive at  
8 their first duty station.

9 Senator Tuberville: Chief, you have a comment?

10 Chief Isom: Recruiting and retention is good. Morale  
11 is high. I travel with the chairman very frequently. Been  
12 in the job for about eight months, and everywhere I go, I  
13 talk to all of our folks, and they are ready. Our joint  
14 forces are ready to defend our Nation if called upon.

15 Senator Tuberville: Thank you. Senator Warren.

16 Senator Warren: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. So, we've  
17 got hundreds of thousands of our troops living in barracks  
18 all around the world. And, in fact, DOD requires enlisted  
19 service members to live in barracks during basic training  
20 and initial job training require, not optional. But DOD and  
21 the services have failed to address health and safety risks  
22 in unaccompanied housing. Not just for a few years now, it  
23 has been for decades.

24 A 2023 GAO report reaching back uncovered terrible



1 conditions; mold, uncovered ceilings and walls, sewage,  
2 overflows, bedbugs, rodents, cockroaches. These are  
3 problems our troops shouldn't have to live with even for a  
4 day. But barracks managers' report that it takes, "at least  
5 several months to fix these problems."

6 So, here we are a few years later, and these issues  
7 have not gone away. In a 2025 survey, soldiers reported  
8 mold, pests, and outdated and poorly maintained barracks.  
9 This survey also found it's still the case that,  
10 "Maintenance requests often take weeks or months to address,  
11 leading to a frustration among soldiers." Army barracks got  
12 a rating of 68 out of 100 for anyone who's keeping score,  
13 that gives them a D+.

14 Now, I heard each of you talk about readiness. So, let  
15 me just ask you, Sergeant Major Weimer, you are the senior  
16 enlisted leader for the Army. Does it undermine troop  
17 morale and readiness if soldiers report black mold on their  
18 ceilings and walls and they can't get anybody to fix it for  
19 months on end?

20 Sergeant Weimer: Ranking Member, thank you. And when  
21 work orders do not get addressed within an appropriate time,  
22 it does affect morale.

23 Senator Warren: Yeah. And I assume the same is true  
24 for rodents. The same is true for sewage overflows. You



1 know, look, we need solutions and we need them quickly, but  
2 we also need the right solutions. And this is what's got me  
3 really worried. I'm concerned that the services are  
4 increasingly looking to privatize the barracks. And we have  
5 seen this movie and lived through it already. We've seen  
6 what private companies have done with family housing, poor  
7 conditions like black mold, pest infestations, and broken  
8 HVAC units.

9 And even when companies offer compensation because they  
10 have damaged property, or they've created financial burdens  
11 because someone had to move their family out, had to stay in  
12 a motel for weeks on end, they force military families to  
13 sign non-disclosure agreements. Think about that. You do  
14 them wrong, right? Treat them badly, and then as part of  
15 the hostage taking here before you'll repair it, you insist  
16 that they sign a non-disclosure agreement so they can't tell  
17 anybody else about what went wrong.

18 At least we know when the government operates the  
19 barracks, it does not prohibit the troops from coming to  
20 Congress with their concerns, going to their leadership with  
21 their concerns. I am very concerned that privatization will  
22 decrease oversight and accountability, especially if we  
23 don't take action here.

24 So, I'm just going to ask a question of all of you.



1 Does anyone here believe that it is appropriate for a  
2 housing company to prohibit service members from reporting  
3 to their commander or to congressional representatives that  
4 a company has failed to remove toxic mold in their room for  
5 over 10 months? I'll just take a simple yes or no, if you  
6 think it's okay to do that. I'll start down at this end.

7 Chief Isom: I think service members should always have  
8 the access to their commanders to be able to report  
9 problems, ma'am.

10 Senator Warren: Okay. And be able to tell Congress.  
11 This is part of what oversight is about, right?

12 Chief Isom: Yes, ma'am.

13 Senator Warren: Just want to make sure we're clear.  
14 Sergeant Major?

15 Sergeant Weimer: Ranking Member, that chain of command  
16 should be well aware of everything that's going on in that  
17 situation that you just declared.

18 Senator Warren: Okay. So, you are not in favor of  
19 these non-disclosure agreements.

20 Sergeant Weimer: I'm in favor of taking care of the  
21 family in that situation, Ranking Member.

22 Senator Warren: Wait, are you wobbling here on me on  
23 whether or not those non-disclosure agreements are -- should  
24 be permitted?



1           Sergeant Weimer: I don't think a family should be put  
2 in a box where they cannot have accountability and be taken  
3 care of, Ranking Member. I don't -- I've lived in the  
4 houses. I don't quite understand how a family gets put in a  
5 corner for a non-disclosure. I have to do some more  
6 research on that. But that scenario, that 10-month  
7 scenario, there should be a chain of command that knows  
8 everything that's going on in that before anybody signs an  
9 agreement.

10           Senator Warren: You know, Sergeant Major, it -- I  
11 don't understand why you're trying to parse words here. The  
12 question is, as part of getting a repair, should any housing  
13 operator that's working for the United States Government and  
14 getting paid by the United States Government be able to say  
15 to a service member, "I'm only doing the repair after you  
16 sign an agreement that you won't tell anybody in your chain  
17 of command, or you won't tell any congressional oversight  
18 committee about what this place was like."

19           Sergeant Weimer: That right there, Ranking Member,  
20 they should not be able to do.

21           Senator Warren: Good, we're clear.

22           Chief Perryman: Ranking Member, no.

23           Senator Warren: Okay.

24           Sergent Ruiz: No.



1           Sergent Wolfe: Ranking Member Warren, absolutely not.

2           Senator Warren: Good.

3           Sergent Bentivegna: No, they should not be forced to  
4 do that.

5           Senator Warren: Good. I appreciate this. You know,  
6 this may seem like a little side point until it's a family  
7 that has been put in a box, as you rightly put it, and they  
8 got nowhere to go. Our job is to make sure that our service  
9 members are taken care of. And I hear each one of you  
10 saying that, but we got to make this work on the ground.

11 And I just start with something as essential as housing and  
12 letting these private housing outfits come in and do a lousy  
13 job of keeping the housing operational and then refuse to  
14 repair it unless people promise to be silent, agree to be  
15 muzzled on. It is just flat wrong. And I enlist your help  
16 in beating that out of our operations at the housing level.

17           So, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. We'll keep  
18 working on this.

19           Senator Tuberville: Thank you. Senator Ernst.

20           Senator Ernst: Thank you, Mr. Chair. And thank you to  
21 all of our senior enlisted leaders for, for being here  
22 today. This is a really important topic for so many of us,  
23 and making sure that we are caring for our families. And  
24 SEAC thank you for mentioning the first soft truth. I think



1 this is something that every single one of us should live by  
2 here in Congress; is that humans are more important than  
3 hardware. We need to recognize that and always start with  
4 that.

5 So, I'm just going to make a comment about the military  
6 housing. I was married to an enlisted soldier years ago,  
7 and I remember living in housing on Fort Benning, and at  
8 Camp Rudder down at Eglin, and you name it, being in the  
9 South. And I had hoped that since the early 1990s, things  
10 would've changed. I remember living in Indianhead Terrace  
11 on Fort Benning with roaches that would run from one side of  
12 the duplex to the other side of the duplex because we could  
13 not get the exterminator to come do both at the same time.

14 We lived with mold at Camp Rudder, which is something  
15 that it's very hard to get rid of. But just because it was  
16 that way doesn't mean it's okay, and it should not still be  
17 that way. And we have to do better. We have to do better  
18 for our family members.

19 I have -- I'm going to start though with something that  
20 Sergeant Major Weimer, and the SEAC, and I visited with about  
21 the other day. We're going through it right now. Congress  
22 is always wrangling with funding bills, our appropriations.  
23 We're not getting them out on time, and it's important to  
24 recognize that during these shutdowns, and with the



1 continuing resolutions, these funding lapses, our military  
2 members really struggle through these difficult times. So,  
3 we have to do a better job of providing program continuity  
4 and stability, particularly for those junior enlisted  
5 families. We all know that most of them are living paycheck  
6 to paycheck.

7 So, SEAC Isom, let's start, and from your vantage  
8 point, can you speak to how unreliable congressional  
9 budgeting and uncertainty, and program continuity affect our  
10 service members, their families, and then, of course, the  
11 overall readiness of the force?

12 Chief Isom: Yes, ma'am. Thank you for the question,  
13 Senator. I'll share with you; I visit the troops a lot. I  
14 was just out on the aircraft carrier, Gerald Ford, visiting  
15 troops, and a common theme, and not just about the funding,  
16 and it's cross cutting, and that is that we need to reduce  
17 uncertainty, and to create stability in the lives of our  
18 service members.

19 And so, the more that we can do to work together to  
20 solve this problem the better off our service members will  
21 be. I will tell you that there is nothing worse than a  
22 family and a young service member who is uncertain if  
23 they're going to get a paycheck. The impacts are  
24 tremendous. And as you think about their morale, you think



1 about retention of that service member over time. That  
2 continued uncertainty is certainly a real problem.

3 Senator Ernst: Outstanding. Thank you for that  
4 answer. I appreciate it. And Sergeant Major Weimer, if you  
5 could add a little bit onto that as well.

6 Sergeant Weimer: Yeah, Senator. Thank you for that.  
7 And without trying to repeat too much of what was already  
8 said, that uncertainty -- I mean, troopers know they'll be  
9 paid, but they just don't know when, and that uncertainty is  
10 the heavy weight that's going on at home. And if the  
11 trooper's deployed, then that's now on the trooper's  
12 shoulders also because their family, you always want to know  
13 is in a good spot back home. And so, that has a direct  
14 effect on everything that we do. This most recent one,  
15 probably more than it had in the past because of the length  
16 of time.

17 Senator Ernst: Absolutely. So, my daughter with her  
18 unit, they were establishing their own food bank at the  
19 unit. And unfortunately, a lot of those members, the junior  
20 enlisted, were partaking of that food bank.

21 Sergeant Weimer: And, Senator, We had some great  
22 partners come and help us; the Army Emergency Relief Fund,  
23 our non-profit, and some amazing teammates that came  
24 forward, but it doesn't completely fill stand in the gap.



1           Senator Ernst: Yeah. Thank you. I'm going to jump to  
2 childcare just because I'm running out of time. But another  
3 key area for improving predictability and readiness is  
4 childcare. A number of you have touched upon that, and I am  
5 actually partnering with Senator Shaheen on comprehensive  
6 NDAA childcare legislation. We've talked a little bit about  
7 this in our meetings.

8           We're trying to expand the childcare workforce,  
9 improving provider reliability, hiring, and that wait list  
10 tracking, because we do have a lot of families that need  
11 that childcare, whether it's at a DOD facility or whether it  
12 is within the community.

13           So, I'll start down here. Sergeant Major Ruiz, why  
14 don't you maybe address childcare concerns within your  
15 community?

16           Sergeant Ruiz: Yes, ma'am, absolutely. When you can't  
17 have a peace of mind of where your child's going to go,  
18 you're not just -- you're not going to be focused, as you're  
19 alluding to. And so, for us while all of this is happening,  
20 and I love it we have to control what we can't control, and  
21 that is taking a look at how we move people.

22           And so, we found that over 40 percent of the staff in  
23 the CDCs are spouses. And so, if we can just be a little  
24 bit more smart about transferring folks and directly hiring



1 from one CDC to another, we can reduce the attrition.

2 And another quick point is predictability of where  
3 families are going to go. We can let you know ahead of  
4 time, six, nine, maybe even 12 months, that you will go here  
5 and then come back that you can plan better. Right? And  
6 so, there's some things that we're doing on our own map  
7 while this is developing with you.

8 Senator Ernst: That's beautiful, and thank you.  
9 That's one thing we are working on, too, is the pre-  
10 clearance of childcare employees at those military child  
11 development centers. So, we know our commanders have a lot  
12 of great ideas on that. All of our senior enlisted, we're  
13 grateful that you're working on that. Thank you. I yield  
14 back.

15 Senator Tuberville: Senator Reed.

16 Senator Reed: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. And  
17 let me state what I hope is obvious, that the greatest  
18 advantage we have over any adversary in the world is our  
19 non-commissioned officer corps, and I benefited from that  
20 personally. I was smart enough to listen to my platoon  
21 sergeant and my first sergeant, and thus avoided a permanent  
22 assignment to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in the correctional  
23 facility.

24 Quickly now, because your comments are so important.



1 What's the most substantive complaint you're hearing from  
2 the troops? Not just the frequency, but, you know, it's  
3 really a critical issue. And I'll start with Master Chief  
4 Ison, please.

5 Chief Ison: Yes, sir. I'll go back to that common  
6 theme of uncertainty from families, whether it's childcare,  
7 whether it's length of deployments when we coming home.  
8 It's often the uncertainty about what's next.

9 Senator Reed: Thank you.

10 Sergeant Weimer: Senator, it really does depend on  
11 with whom I'm speaking, but a common thread here lately has  
12 been access to healthcare

13 Chief Perryman: Senator, I echo what SM Weimer said.  
14 The most consistent comment we get in our engagements is  
15 access to healthcare.

16 Senator Reed: Very good.

17 Sergeant Ruiz: Senator Barracks and access to  
18 healthcare

19 Sergeant Wolfe: Senator, I'd echo, also, the access to  
20 healthcare, the reimbursement rates that are available in  
21 communities, the saturation in areas where our folks have a,  
22 a lack of availability for appointments. All those things  
23 impact not only the readiness of the military member, but  
24 also their family members. And what we've all seen over the



1 length of our careers is a gradual erosion in the  
2 availability of that healthcare for our service members and  
3 their families.

4 Senator Reed: Thank you.

5 Sergeant Bentivegna: Senator, I will echo what my  
6 teammates said, but I would add that I think one of the  
7 frustrations that I get out from the field is we spend a lot  
8 of time, effort, and money in quality-of-life space here in  
9 this town. And we have a lot of good momentum. I think the  
10 challenges is when they hear about us speaking about the  
11 things we're trying to help improve quality of life. When  
12 you get down to the tactical level, there's a gap, right?  
13 Where a program, a project, something that we had great  
14 anticipation for, we talked about it, they're not feeling it  
15 day to day, not feeling around a kitchen table. They're not  
16 feeling it when they call the -- to kind of get an  
17 appointment. They're not feeling it when they want to try  
18 to get childcare.

19 So, that gap, we just got to do better at all the work  
20 we do here to make sure it actually produces the effect that  
21 we want it to downrange.

22 Senator Reed: Thank you very much. And gentlemen, I  
23 can't say enough about your service. Thank you very, very  
24 much. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.



1 Senator Tuberville: Thank you. Senator Sullivan.

2 Senator Sullivan: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to  
3 begin by doing a shout out to Chief Master Sergeant Wolfe.  
4 Good to see you again, Chief. And I'm looking at your very  
5 impressive bio. It's got a lot of duty time in Alaska. So,  
6 the rumor is that when you're -- someday when you retire,  
7 you're going to go back there. Is that true?

8 Sergeant Wolfe: Senator, that's an absolute fact.

9 Senator Sullivan: Good. That's a great answer.  
10 You're one of the many reasons why we have more veterans per  
11 capita in the country. You come up, you do all this time in  
12 Alaska, and you want to do great things and the military,  
13 and you say, "Hey, when I'm done, I'm going to go back."

14 So, to all the great senior enlisted in this panel we  
15 welcome you to follow the lead of your great Air Force  
16 compatriot right here and come on up to Alaska. We would  
17 love to have you. And when you -- only when you retire.  
18 You guys still have a lot more work to do.

19 Let me ask, actually, an Alaska question. It's for you  
20 Chief Master Sergeant and Sergeant Major Weimer. I want to  
21 thank you as well. And you know, we've had a high suicide  
22 rate up in Alaska, very high with our Army, and to some  
23 degree, the Air Force. But you know our major -- with the  
24 Army is it was a really high number over the last couple



1 years, I think. I think we've kind of gotten our arms  
2 around that.

3 But can you two speak to that issue? It's in both of  
4 your testimony, not just as it relates to Alaska, but  
5 throughout the force. And maybe I'll let all of you jump  
6 in. It's a big issue. But, you know, in my experience in  
7 the military, in the Marines, you know, you give your troops  
8 hard tasks, and you train them hard, and you deploy with  
9 them. And, you know, when they're focused, sometimes those  
10 are the issues on suicide that actually go away.

11 But I'd like to get a sense from all of you on what  
12 more we can be doing. We're pretty focused on that here in  
13 the Congress, but I think it's really -- if anyone's going  
14 to get their arms around, it's going to be our senior  
15 enlisted in all the services. So, Chief Master Sergeant  
16 Wolfe, why don't you start?

17 Sergeant Wolfe: Thank you so much for that, Senator.  
18 And you're right, this -- you know, this is a problem that  
19 doesn't just exist in one state, doesn't certainly just  
20 exist in our country. This is a global issue that happens.  
21 When I talk to the -- you know, the chief master sergeant of  
22 the Japanese Air Force, they have a concern, you know, for  
23 suicide problem. So, this is a human condition problem.

24 What we've noticed is that in places where we can get



1 the funding and the manpower for the mental health  
2 technicians that are embedded in units, whether it's  
3 military, family life counselors, or anyone with some  
4 training in this department, when we can embed that care, as  
5 you know, the special operations command has proven time and  
6 time again that this is a model that works, we can reduce  
7 not just the suicide risk, but also the risk for all the  
8 other kind of self-destructive behaviors that happen when  
9 people are, you know, going through life and having things  
10 happen to them. Right? Tragedies come, and people have a  
11 lot to deal with.

12 So, I think if I had a magic wand to wave, I would try  
13 to get as much embedded care into our units in all of our  
14 services so that we can have that sensor in there that is a  
15 trained professional that can be that kind of outside the  
16 chain of command person that can help folks through those  
17 times.

18 And really what that ends up doing, we've seen it time  
19 and again, is it keeps them out of the mental health clinic,  
20 which is kind of should be your emergency room --

21 Senator Sullivan: Yeah.

22 Sergeant Wolfe: -- for a mental health problem, and,  
23 you know, helps them solve and get through those problems  
24 ahead of the curve. So, embedded care, I think, is great,



1 access to our mental health.

2 Filling our mental health positions is another piece  
3 that that we could definitely use some help on.

4 Senator Sullivan: Yeah.

5 Sergeant Wolfe: I think there's some ideas that all of  
6 us are working on and talking about. We talk together about  
7 these issues frequently. We all have the same concerns. If  
8 we could figure out how to have a pipeline to keep these  
9 positions filled, maybe even using our military spouses who  
10 quite often have these helping profession degrees already to  
11 get them in. We may be coming to you for some help in that  
12 department in the future as well.

13 Senator Sullivan: Good. Sergeant Major, do you have a  
14 view on this real quick?

15 Sergeant Weimer: I'll try to be quick on this one,  
16 Senator. First, thank you for the question. This is  
17 probably the topic -- I don't want to speak for everybody  
18 here, but the topic that I probably bang my head up against  
19 the most. Everything's difficult in our portfolios, but  
20 this is the one that probably I'd lose sleep over if there  
21 is one portion of the portfolio.

22 I remember those days in Alaska, we surged --

23 Senator Sullivan: Yeah.

24 Sergeant Weimer: -- we surged all resources to get up



1 there. Part of it's caring. We learn that part of it's  
2 leadership. You're never going to replace that with a  
3 program --

4 Senator Sullivan: Yeah.

5 Sergeant Weimer: -- with money in a special program.  
6 But there's some new things we're trying. So, we're trying  
7 to take the best-of-breed lessons from an entire army that's  
8 from Poland to Korea. We're trying -- we're consolidating  
9 those now, and we're pretty -- we're giving them all to the  
10 Department. All the services are doing this now.

11 So, like what happened in Alaska, we can learn from it  
12 and not just move on because it's better. Last year, VR  
13 goggles as a small example -- I haven't spent a lot of time  
14 in the virtual reality world, that's not how I grew up, but  
15 they asked me to do a -- to be a coach in the virtual  
16 reality world. And so, I did it and it was one of the most  
17 awkward things I'd ever done in my life because of the  
18 realism and soldiers are responding to the training for the  
19 VR goggles. Our goal is to get left of having to use all of  
20 the in high demand mental health resources we have. And so,  
21 just in a couple minutes, that's where we are.

22 Senator Sullivan: Great. Good. Thank you. Mr.  
23 Chairman, it's a big issue, and I know this committee's been  
24 focused on it in a bipartisan way. And if you gentlemen who



1 really are front lines on all this with the troops have  
2 ideas for us, make sure you submit them for the record.

3 [The information referred to follows:]

4 [SUBCOMMITTEE INSERT]

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1           Senator Sullivan: Because we want to be very forward-  
2 leaning and helping what -- remains a big issue. And your  
3 ideas we want to hear from, and we want to try to implement  
4 those.

5           So, thank you to all of you for your service. Thank  
6 you, Mr. Chairman.

7           Senator Tuberville: Thanks, Senator. Senator  
8 Blumenthal.

9           Senator Blumenthal: Thank you. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.  
10 Thank you all for being here, and for your extraordinary  
11 service to our Nation over many, many years.

12           I want to follow Senator Sullivan's questions about  
13 suicide, highlighting a particular story, which has been  
14 very troubling to me. On December 9, 20-year-old Navy  
15 Seaman Thatcher Rupert, beloved son Ofia, and Kenneth Kelsey  
16 from Winstead, Connecticut, tragically took his own life.  
17 Before his death, Seaman Rupert was stationed at Tinker Air  
18 Force Base in Oklahoma. He was entrusted to the care of the  
19 United States military by his family. He had sought urgent  
20 mental health care at the base earlier on the very day.

21           He took his own life, but the military left him in a  
22 room by himself rather than providing him with an  
23 evaluation. I've been the recipient of various disclosures  
24 and reports that indicate to me that as many as six Navy



1 suicides may have occurred at Tinker, within Tinker Air  
2 Force Base within the last 18 months.

3 So, my concern is twofold. First, is there an issue at  
4 Tinker Air Force Base? And second, what concrete changes  
5 are being made now to assure that service members in crisis  
6 are identified, treated, and protected before they reach a  
7 breaking point? Maybe I can ask you, Master Chief Perryman  
8 whether you're aware of the circumstances surrounding Seaman  
9 Rupert's death, and anything you can tell us about Tinker?

10 Chief Perryman: Senator, I am aware of the number of  
11 suicides that have happened in Tinker over the last year and  
12 a half. After the first, I believe it was three or four,  
13 Air Force sent a team out there to do to do a check on  
14 everybody out there to see if there was some commonality  
15 between the suicides. They found no reason to -- they  
16 didn't find anything systemic.

17 And then we had, unfortunately, several more in which  
18 an EpiAid study is -- was conducted by the department and  
19 has been completed, and we're waiting for that report. It's  
20 my understanding though, that while they were -- that they  
21 found no contagion as part of that EpiAid study.

22 I think to what we're doing about it, I think Tinker's  
23 an interesting place, because the mission there is very  
24 unique. And I think people think because they don't go to



1 see that it must be easy. They spend an extraordinary  
2 amount of time deployed around the country executing their  
3 mission. I think we -- they've had MFL counselors embedded  
4 there for a year or two. They're on an Air Force base and  
5 receive, you know, what I believe and what I've been told,  
6 exceptional service from the Air Force mental health people  
7 there.

8 I think suicide is a tough problem, and I agree with  
9 the sergeant major of the Army that embedded mental health  
10 people will only get us so far. Right? And I think where  
11 we have to focus our effort is in engaged leadership, and  
12 giving our Sailors, Soldiers Airmen, Marines, and Coast  
13 Guardsmen, the tools necessary to manage life in the  
14 military, which I think we're coming to the realization  
15 that, you know, we should have probably went there earlier  
16 than now.

17 Because I think for a long time this -- people my age  
18 think of mental health as one thing, and the younger  
19 generation think of mental health in a totally different way  
20 than us. And I think we've been slow to realize that, and  
21 we've been slow to institute actual prevention programs that  
22 will help us get left to it like the Sergeant Major was  
23 talking about.

24 Senator Blumenthal: I respect your response. I



1 understand that you have so far not found a commonality, as  
2 you refer to it. When is the report likely to be available?

3 Chief Perryman: Senator, I'm not sure, but I'll take  
4 that question for the record and get back to you.

5 [The information referred to follows:]

6 [SUBCOMMITTEE INSERT]

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1           Senator Blumenthal:  As soon as it is available.  Can  
2 you commit to us that it will be made available to us as  
3 soon as it's done?

4           Chief Perryman:  Yes, sir.

5           Senator Blumenthal:  I appreciate your answers.  You  
6 know, I want to raise a general concern which was  
7 highlighted to me by a visit I had just today from an  
8 organization that deals with veterans, veterans who are  
9 involved in the criminal justice system.  Many of them have  
10 less than honorable discharges, bad paper discharges.

11          So, the concern is can we do something to help those  
12 members of our military before they are discharged with less  
13 than honorable?  I'm not talking about necessarily bad  
14 conduct discharges, but people with mental health and maybe  
15 trauma and post-traumatic stress, some of them from the  
16 Vietnam era, when the idea of post-traumatic stress or the  
17 diagnosis didn't even exist.

18          They come out of the military and with a bad paper  
19 discharge, can't find a job.  They have no availability of  
20 VA healthcare.  You know, it's -- they raised their right  
21 hand and maybe through no fault of their own, but simply  
22 because they have mental health issues, they rubbed people  
23 the wrong way and gotten into trouble, whatever.

24          So, I think more than just suicide, it would be much



1 more cost effective to give them the care that they need.  
2 And since many of them are non-commissioned officers, and  
3 since -- or non-commissioned members of our military, and  
4 since you as senior non-commissioned officers are probably  
5 closer to this problem, and I deeply respect, as Senator  
6 Reed said, your service and the importance of non-commission  
7 officers. It's just an idea that I would like to throw out  
8 there.

9 And my time has way expired, so I apologize. But this  
10 is an issue that I would like to follow-up on and welcome  
11 your thoughts about it. Thank you.

12 Senator Tuberville: Thank you, Senator Blumenthal.  
13 Senator Duckworth.

14 Senator Duckworth: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank  
15 you for our senior enlisted leaders for being here today. I  
16 want to focus my time on helping our service members grow  
17 their families. It should be good for the military because,  
18 you know, you have generation, after generation, after  
19 generation of military service. We're just growing our  
20 future force every day.

21 Our servicemen and women risk their lives to defend  
22 this country many at the expense of having a family, and I  
23 know too many service members struggling with infertility  
24 who feel like they have to delay having children to save up



1 to pay for IVF out of pocket, or even worse, who end up  
2 choosing to leave the military in order to afford the care.  
3 That's why I've been fighting for years, to ensure that  
4 TRICARE covers assisted reproductive care, including IVF.

5 And we came close last year with a bipartisan solution  
6 out of this very committee in both the House and Senate  
7 NDAA's, but Speaker Mike Johnson personally took it out in  
8 conference. This was done despite President Trump's  
9 campaign promise that the government would, "pay for all  
10 costs associated with IVF treatment." The commander-in-  
11 chief should make good on his promise for military families.

12 Right now, our heroes suffer from infertility at  
13 roughly twice the rate of the general population, and yet,  
14 the majority of service members who need IVF and other  
15 assisted reproductive services to have children out-of-  
16 pocket cost can easily exceed \$40,000, and TRICARE only  
17 provides limited coverage of IVF to our military families,  
18 far less than we members of Congress receive.

19 For each witness, in your experience, do you believe  
20 service members and the mission would benefit if TRICARE  
21 fully covered IVF so troops and their families would not  
22 have to choose between continuing their service and building  
23 the families they want? And if each one of you could answer  
24 thank you.

1 Chief Isom: Thank you for the question, Senator. Good  
2 to see you again. I can't speak personally. I'm not a --  
3 certainly not an expert on IVF and its impacts, but as a  
4 father of six, I can certainly appreciate the value of  
5 having great children that become great leaders in the  
6 future, much like Senator Ernst's daughter. So, I  
7 appreciate supporting and ensuring that we provide overall  
8 the best possible healthcare that we can for our service  
9 members.

10 Senator Duckworth: Thank you, sir. Major Whiteman,

11 Sergeant Weimer: Senator, great to see you again. I  
12 appreciate the pain that some of these families are dealing  
13 with, with the costs having known a few of them myself.  
14 That is a real issue.

15 Senator Duckworth: Thank you.

16 Chief Perryman: Senator, I agree with my two  
17 shipmates. The right -- I think anybody who serves their  
18 country deserves access to world-class medical care across  
19 the entire gamut of anything they could possibly need.

20 Senator Duckworth: Thank you.

21 Sergeant Ruiz: Senator, I agree with my colleagues. It  
22 is because it doesn't just apply to somebody who had had a  
23 physical injury, or just can't have the child. If in the  
24 future fight we get into something heavy, it also involves a



1 lot of career planning. So, you're about to go into danger  
2 and you want to plan something out, or your -- you have a  
3 family history of something and you want to plan this out.  
4 We do what we can where we -- with the policy of today. But  
5 should this become available in the future, it'd be a good  
6 option.

7 Senator Duckworth: I couldn't agree with you more  
8 because I've talked to many service members who want to  
9 freeze their reproductive material prior to going into a  
10 combat zone, especially after the lessons learned in  
11 Afghanistan where so many troops stepped on landmines and as  
12 a result became infertile. Major Wolfe?

13 Sergeant Wolfe: Thank you for that question, Senator.  
14 We estimate there's somewhere between 1,000 to 1,500 or so  
15 airmen in the United States Air Force that would kind of  
16 fall into the category that you describe of folks that are  
17 seeking this kind of treatment. And like my colleagues, I  
18 totally support anything that's going to reverse the erosion  
19 of our military healthcare benefits that we've observed over  
20 the years, and this would certainly be a welcome.

21 Senator Duckworth: Thank you. Sergeant Bentivegna?

22 Sergeant Bentivegna: Senator, good to see you again.

23 Senator Duckworth: Good to see you.

24 Sergeant Bentivegna: I echo what my teammates said, you



1 know, especially when we talked about, you know, through our  
2 years of service, the kind of decline in access to care and  
3 what's kind of covered in that care as well, to include  
4 reproductive therapy to kind of help military families have  
5 children. So, definitely something that, you know,  
6 concerned about that we have to address when you're serving  
7 your nation. We owe you the best care you could possibly  
8 get.

9 Senator Duckworth: Thank you. I think this is also a  
10 recruitment and retention issue. This is an issue of basic  
11 fairness and honoring the commitment military families make  
12 to our country when it comes to building families that they  
13 so desperately want. Our service members deserve, at least,  
14 the level of care that members of Congress receive.

15 And so, this is why I'm going to continue to fight to  
16 pass my IVF Military Families Act, which would require  
17 TRICARE to cover IVF for active-duty uniform service members  
18 and their dependents. And I hope that President Trump and  
19 my colleagues will work with me to fulfill his promise to  
20 help our family families, and help them achieve their  
21 dreams. Thank you.

22 Sergeant Ruiz: Senator, if I could --

23 Senator Duckworth: Yes.

24 Sergeant Ruiz: -- sorry. You said active duty. Would



1 you also be chasing the Reserve component?

2 Senator Duckworth: So, that was part of the deal we  
3 had to make in NDAA in order to get it passed. I would love  
4 it for the Reserve components as well. I think that if  
5 we're going to call up our troops, you know, I think it  
6 should be there for everyone. But sometimes, in the sausage  
7 making in Congress, you end up having to make some deals. I  
8 think we start with the active-duty families. I would love  
9 coverage to be for everyone who wears our Nation's cloth.  
10 Thank you.

11 Senator Tuberville: Thank you. Senator Banks.

12 Senator Banks: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Master Chief,  
13 three years ago, the United States Navy had the worst  
14 recruitment in the over 50 years of an all-volunteer force  
15 in our military. Last year, we had the best recruitment  
16 numbers that we've had in 20 years. What changed? What  
17 happened?

18 Chief Perryman: Senator, I think a couple of things  
19 changed. I think we got some new leadership at recruiting  
20 command that fundamentally changed the way our recruiters  
21 approached recruiting, especially Gen Z. We instituted a  
22 recruiting operations center that enabled them to more  
23 effectively use their time. So, they were targeting more  
24 viable candidates that would prove more fruitful from the



1 contact. So, I think those two things were pretty big.

2 I'm also a huge fan of our advertising campaign,  
3 "Forged by the Sea." Our data shows us that that resonates  
4 extraordinarily well with this younger generation. It's not  
5 as cool yet as the Marine Corps', but I think if we --

6 Senator Banks: But the Marine Corps didn't have a  
7 recruitment issue.

8 Chief Perryman: No -- well -- okay.

9 [Laughter.]

10 Sergeant Ruiz: I mean, for the record, we've never had.

11 Senator Banks: I appreciate the laughter here, but the  
12 Marine Corps was the steady branch through it all that never  
13 wavered. Their recruitment was never an issue. The Navy  
14 had a recruitment crisis, and last year, had the best  
15 recruitment numbers in 20 years. And you're citing  
16 recruitment commands, and advertising campaigns, and --

17 Chief Perryman: And the recruiters themselves, sir,

18 Senator Banks: Why weren't we doing that all along?

19 Well, I think that seems like common sense. So, what really  
20 changed?

21 Chief Perryman: I --

22 Senator Banks: I mean, do you think it was as simple  
23 as that? That for three or four years during a recruitment  
24 crisis, it was just the advertising slogan?



1 Chief Perryman: Well, I know, and I think it was the  
2 performance of our recruiters, the institution of the

3 Senator Banks: They just weren't doing a good job? I  
4 mean, I'm -- help me out. I'm trying to -- I'm really  
5 trying.

6 Chief Perryman: Yeah. Well, I think --

7 Senator Banks: -- what lessons do we learn from it?

8 Chief Perryman: Well, I think they were trapped in a  
9 kind of a paradigm that had worked for a long time and were  
10 not as agile as they needed to be given the shifting  
11 environments. And so, I think, you know, again through  
12 effort and significantly reducing kind of the administrative  
13 and distracting things that they had to deal with to go be  
14 effective recruiters was one thing. The recruiting  
15 operation centers was another.

16 And I think the other thing I think we've learned  
17 coming out of this, Senator, is that we used to try to get  
18 too cute by landing the number of recruits we needed. And  
19 when you do that, you're always going to miss. And so, I  
20 think one of the things we've learned over the last three or  
21 four years is there's a number somewhere between 40,000 and  
22 45,000 that we're just going to have to stick to every year  
23 and hold there because that creates a constant demand signal  
24 for the recruiting nation out there.

1           So, it's a knowable goal, and then it will enable us to  
2   ensure we have enough capacity in our accession training  
3   pipelines to put through sailors at the pace we need them  
4   because one of the problems -- you know, it's a good problem  
5   to have, for how successful they've been is log jammed  
6   inside of my session training pipeline, because we had let  
7   that capacity atrophy too much because we were bringing in  
8   so few people.

9           Senator Banks: I assume that with the really good news  
10   by recruitment, that there's really good news related to  
11   morale, especially for young enlisted sailors. Do you see  
12   the same?

13          Chief Perryman: Yes, sir. Our retention remains  
14   incredibly good, and we seem to be on a positive and  
15   sustainable pathway.

16          Senator Banks: And what lesson do we learn from that?

17          Chief Perryman: I think, you know, one of the things I  
18   think -- you know, those of us up here have talked about  
19   this, if I can get people in the Navy, I can generally  
20   retain them, right? And so, this is why we've focused on  
21   setting a steady number because that steady diet will help  
22   me be more selective in my retention decisions once healthy  
23   there.

24          Senator Banks: I love the United States Navy, and I'm



1 a proud veteran of the United States Navy. This is really  
2 good news. The recruitment numbers are really good news,  
3 and you're a big part of it. I appreciate your leadership  
4 with that. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

5 Senator Tuberville: Thank you, Senator Banks. Senator  
6 Hirono.

7 Senator Hirono: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I thank all  
8 of you for being here to respond to our questions.

9 This is for the entire panel. As you all know,  
10 Secretary Hegseth has called for a review of the  
11 effectiveness of women in combat roles. And upfront, I'll  
12 just say that it is really -- I would say this is an attack  
13 on women to call for this kind of a review, but there you  
14 have it.

15 And so, I think that he is laying the groundwork to  
16 reverse the policy allowing women to serve in combat arms  
17 positions, and also undermines the sacrifice of thousands of  
18 female service members who have already met the rigorous  
19 gender-neutral standards, and have served in combat with  
20 distinction. And, you know, all you have to do is look at  
21 Senator Duckworth to know that women can very strongly be in  
22 these kinds of roles.

23 So, I want to ask you, for all of you, do you believe  
24 the mere fact of women being in these combat arms units



1 lowers standards? We can start from my left and go down the  
2 line.

3 Chief Isom: Senator, thanks for the question. Good to  
4 see you again. I've seen no data that supports that there's  
5 any lowering of standards or that there's lowering of the  
6 readiness of units with those females in those units.

7 Senator Hirono: So, answer is, no?

8 Chief Isom: Correct. Yes, ma'am.

9 Sergeant Weimer: Senator, great to see you. No, at  
10 this time, I'm not seeing anything that leads me to believe  
11 there's an issue with meeting the standard or affecting  
12 readiness.

13 Chief Perryman: Senator, no.

14 Sergeant Ruiz: Senator, no.

15 Sergeant Wolfe: Senator, from my perspective, I've  
16 served with some of the best warfighters that the world has  
17 ever known in the United States Air Force. Some of them  
18 happen to be men, some of them happen to be women.  
19 Absolutely not, I have not seen any erosion.

20 Sergeant Bentivegna: Senator from the Space Force  
21 perspective, we have not seen any erosion in the readiness  
22 based on any of the administration's positions.

23 Senator Hirono: Again, down the line, do you agree  
24 that every service member, regardless of gender, should be



1 permitted to serve in any role, including in the combat  
2 arms, if they meet the established standards? We'll go down  
3 the line again. Yes or no?

4 Chief Isom: Yes, Senator, if they meet the standards.

5 Sergeant Weimer: Yes, Senator, it's about standards.

6 Chief Perryman: Yes, Senator?

7 Sergeant Ruiz: Yes, Senator.

8 Sergeant Wolfe: Yes, Senator.

9 Sergeant Bentivegna: Yes, Senator, and all the  
10 specialties on the listed side and office side within the  
11 Space Force are all open to men and women.

12 Senator Hirono: When you have a secretary calling for  
13 this kind of research, you know, it does tend to be -- I  
14 would say create a sense of divisiveness. So, I'm planning  
15 to introduce a bill that codifies the current DOD policy  
16 that allows women to serve in combat arms positions as long  
17 as they meet the required standards, and that I hope my  
18 colleagues on both sides of the aisle will join me.

19 And I will say that especially in a time when  
20 recruitment goals are really challenging to meet, except  
21 possibly for Air Force and Space Force, I think that we need  
22 to make sure that everyone who wants to serve our country;  
23 and so men, and women, and others alike, that includes  
24 LGBTQ, and others, that they should have the opportunity to



1 do so.

2 So, this one is very specific, and I want to ask all of  
3 you, again, the frequent permanent reallocations play --  
4 place, a significant financial and emotional strain military  
5 families, and I know you're aware of that.

6 And then to help reduce that burden, I worked to  
7 include language in the fiscal year 2025 NDAA to authorize  
8 reimbursement for shipping and storing two privately-owned  
9 vehicles during overseas moves. And it makes a difference.  
10 A lot of our military families have more than one vehicle.  
11 Because guess what? Maybe they need both to get to, you  
12 know, to work, et cetera. So, the military just pays for  
13 one. And that is a huge burden on families to have to find  
14 the storage for their second vehicle. Meaning, they could  
15 be thousands of dollars out of pocket if they want to have  
16 that second vehicle with them.

17 And my staff has heard from DOD that the services are  
18 responsible for making any updates to allow for the  
19 reimbursement of two vehicles. So, I want to ask each of  
20 the service people; what steps are you taking to advocate  
21 for the important change that would save our service members  
22 and their families, potentially, thousands of dollars. So,  
23 are you all working to enable the service members to store -  
24 - have two vehicles stored?



1 Chief Perryman: Senator, it's my understanding we're  
2 waiting for a JTR change, which is controlled by the  
3 Department. And once that changes, then, you know, I know  
4 the Navy will work to figure out how to make that a reality  
5 for our Navy sailors.

6 Senator Hirono: So, do you, since you're waiting for  
7 somebody else to determine whether you can do that, but I  
8 mean, as a sort of a living -- you know, just to address  
9 some of the real needs of the service members, would you all  
10 agree that it would be a good thing to respond to this  
11 particular need?

12 Sergeant Ruiz: Senator --

13 Senator Hirono: Yes, no?

14 Sergeant Ruiz: Yes. The two vehicles, ma'am, if I  
15 could, it is very -- we are pushing it, and we want that to  
16 be available. But the JTR portion, what I would add is that  
17 if all the services immediately start allowing for two  
18 vehicles to go to any location, it would likely break every  
19 one of our budgets. So, I would just caution --

20 Senator Hirono: Yeah. I realize that there's a cost  
21 factor here, but I think this is an example of addressing a  
22 need that has been brought to our attention, and that we --  
23 there should be an adequate response to that, because I  
24 don't think this is a matter of frivolously wanting two



1 vehicles, et cetera.

2 And so, when it's brought to our attention, it's just  
3 an example, and there are other examples of how the quality  
4 of life of our service members can be improved, and this is  
5 one of them. So, thank you for whatever you all can do to  
6 make this happen. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

7 Senator Tuberville: Thank you very much. Senator  
8 Wicker.

9 Senator Wicker: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.  
10 And I want to thank you and Senator Warren for conducting  
11 this hearing. I've been listening from my office on  
12 television, and I'm really heartened by the participation by  
13 members. And I think we've we will benefit, and our  
14 benefiting from your testimony.

15 I don't believe anybody's asked about Junior ROTC yet.  
16 So, let me ask about that. And I guess I'll direct my  
17 question first to Major Ruiz. I've been an advocate for  
18 high school Junior ROTC in all the branches, and I've been a  
19 little frustrated from time to time on the NDAA. We've  
20 raised the number of allowed Junior ROTC detachments in the  
21 past, and that wasn't necessarily followed. So, now, we've  
22 raised the floor, you must, these branches must find other  
23 high schools to expand Junior ROTC in.

24 I think Junior ROTC, we might as well admit it, it's a



1 great recruiting tool for the services, but also, it is a  
2 citizenship builder. It involves young men and women in the  
3 high schools that volunteer to do a harder thing, to adhere  
4 to requirements that other students are not willing to do, to  
5 go above and beyond and apply themselves. At the same time,  
6 they do learn quite a bit about the military, and my hope is  
7 that some of them will go on to military service.

8 So, Sergeant Major Ruiz, you go first. Do you agree  
9 with me on the benefits of Junior ROTC, and do you agree with  
10 think tanks like the RAND Corporation who've said that this  
11 is an absolute plus for America and for American young people?

12 Sergeant Ruiz: I do, Senator, that it's a great  
13 program. It's been around for quite a long time, and then  
14 the -- our service members who transition back to the  
15 civilian community, they find a home and they have the  
16 ability to give back again. So, is this ever -- you know,  
17 give back to our country thing that we have going that we  
18 should not let go of? And I'd love to work with you to get  
19 it back.

20 Senator Wicker: Does anybody else wish to comment  
21 about that? I saw some people nodding their heads. Yes,

22 Sergeant Weimer: Senator, I'd love to, from Army  
23 perspective, and I appreciate RAND, but we know from  
24 personal experience inside our formations that Junior ROTC



1 inspires a call to service. It is a good effort, and the  
2 Army we're going all in on this, but we're doing it in an  
3 intentional way to ensure we have quality programs as we  
4 expand them because it is our reputation.

5 Senator Wicker: Right. And the point that Sergeant  
6 Major Ruiz made about the retired members, or National Guard  
7 members that are reservists who are back in the community,  
8 the federal government pays a good portion of that salary.  
9 So, the school districts are getting a very experienced  
10 instructor for sometimes half price. It's a good  
11 investment.

12 Let me -- Sergeant Major Weimer, since you volunteered,  
13 I'll ask you to comment on this in terms of the servicemen  
14 with spouses and families. What's the quickest thing this  
15 committee or this Congress could do to help them on a day-  
16 to-day basis?

17 Sergeant Weimer: Ooh, Senator, that's a good one.  
18 You're giving me a massive opportunity for myself and my  
19 teammates in the joint force.

20 Senator Wicker: Okay. And your teammates at the table  
21 can be thinking of their answers.

22 Sergeant Weimer: Spouse licensure reciprocity is  
23 something that you all have helped us with tremendously, but  
24 we're still stuck in some states, Senator, and expanding



1 that would be tremendous. The ability for the remote work  
2 we've seen benefits from that. Those would be overnight  
3 quick wins for all of us in the spousal --

4 Senator Wicker: Is that a state matter, the  
5 reciprocity issue?

6 Sergeant Weimer: It is, Senator, and there are quite a  
7 few states that are on board and moving out. And then,  
8 there's some others that we're still working with.

9 Senator Wicker: Anybody else want to jump in there? I  
10 know it's been a long hearing, but thank you very much for  
11 your participation and for your suggestions. Also, if you  
12 want, if anybody wants to submit answers for the record  
13 after you've had a chance to scratch your head, I would  
14 appreciate that.

15 [The information referred to follows:]

16 [SUBCOMMITTEE INSERT]

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1 Senator Wicker: And I yield back, sir.

2 Senator Tuberville: Thank you, Senator. Senator  
3 Warren.

4 Senator Warren: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. So, SEAC  
5 Isom, I've got a hypothetical question I want to ask you  
6 about. If over half of enlisted service members left the  
7 military within just one year of joining, would that  
8 constitute a crisis?

9 Chief Isom: Yes, ma'am.

10 Senator Warren: And if you found out that the reason  
11 for this attrition rate was low wages, what would you try to  
12 do?

13 Chief Isom: I would come to you and ask for higher  
14 pay.

15 Senator Warren: Okay. And you'd -- and if we gave you  
16 the money to do that, what would you do with that money?

17 Chief Isom: We would pay those service members, and  
18 hopefully, increase recruiting and retention, ma'am.

19 Senator Warren: Well, you may remember we started this  
20 by noting we have a waiting list of more than 7,800 children  
21 who are waiting for their childcare slots and not getting  
22 them. And the principal reason for that is because we don't  
23 have enough people. Do you know what the attrition rate is  
24 for people who are hired to be childcare workers for our



1 military right now? Don't know? It's 50 percent. That's  
2 why I started with that hypothetical. It's 50 percent.

3 And when you go ask those people, we've actually  
4 interviewed them and done studies, why did you leave? These  
5 are people who are attracted to the work, who like babies,  
6 who like little kids who like working in a military setting  
7 who like the fact that the schedules are different, but it's  
8 part of their contribution. Do you know what they tell us  
9 is the number one reason they leave?

10 Chief Isom: Low pay?

11 Senator Warren: Low pay. Okay. So, last year -- year  
12 before last, we got into the NDAA that our military services  
13 would have money and that they would upgrade their pay  
14 scales by April, 2025. We can agree it's now passed April,  
15 2025. Right? Which services have failed to do that? I'm a  
16 little disturbed that you don't know any of these numbers.  
17 The Army, the Navy, and the Air Force have not yet changed  
18 their pay scales, which might be the reason that we have  
19 7,800 children waiting for care.

20 So, I appreciate that everyone says they care about  
21 childcare, they care about quality of life. All of it  
22 relates to readiness. You have the tools from Congress,  
23 we've already given them to you, and you haven't picked them  
24 up and used them.



1           So, here's my question for the Army, the Navy, and the  
2 Air Force. We're going to be back here a year from now. We  
3 do this every year. We're doing this on video right now.  
4 When I come back to ask these questions a year from now, are  
5 we still going to have a waiting list that's 7,800 babies  
6 long, or are we going to have whittled that waiting list  
7 down because we're actually hiring enough childcare workers  
8 to get the job done? Can I hear, please, from the Army?

9           Sergeant Weimer: Senator, our goal is to drop our --

10          Senator Warren: I'm not asking your goal, I'm going to  
11 ask; are you going to get it done?

12          Sergeant Weimer: Senator, we're going to move out with  
13 a purpose.

14          Senator Warren: Navy?

15          Chief Perryman: Senator, I believe the Navy has taken  
16 advantage of the increased pay scales that were authorized  
17 by Congress to the point where our current staffing is at 87  
18 percent, which is up from the 60s. And, roughly, fiscal  
19 year 2022, our unmet need sits at about 1,400. Right now,  
20 we have significantly increased our childcare fee  
21 assistance. And so, I do think, to your point, ma'am, we  
22 have moved out with the authorities. We are making  
23 significant progress in reducing our wait list.

24          Another thing we did inside of helping our childcare



1 workers is for anybody who works for us, their first child  
2 is free, and then, their second child is -- it's reduced  
3 further.

4 Senator Warren: Okay. That's great. But that just  
5 not reduced your waiting list. Do you think it's okay to  
6 have a waiting list of 1,400 kids?

7 Chief Perryman: I don't think it's okay, but if I  
8 don't --

9 Senator Warren: Have you updated your pay scales --

10 Chief Perryman: Yes, ma'am.

11 Senator Warren: -- as you were required to do by  
12 April, 2025?

13 Chief Perryman: Yes ma'am. Our pay scales have been  
14 updated.

15 Senator Warren: You're telling me the information I  
16 have it says you have not upgraded them is wrong.

17 Chief Perryman: Ma'am, in my prep, I was told we  
18 upgraded our pay scales and operate --

19 Senator Warren: Okay. And mine, I was told you had  
20 not. Let's go back and check that one. And how about the  
21 Air Force?

22 Sergeant Wolfe: Yes, Senator Warren, same as the Navy.  
23 I'm under -- the information I have is that we have updated  
24 our pay scales, and --



1           Senator Warren:   And how long is your waiting list  
2 right now?

3           Sergent Wolfe:   Right now, we've got about 2,700 with  
4 unmet need across the Air Force, and that's absolutely not  
5 where we want to be, for sure.   We are seeing initial  
6 indications that the first child free is having an impact  
7 because it's helping us keep people longer.   So, we are  
8 seeing some impact there.

9           We don't have enough time with that policy in place to  
10 know for sure.   We think we've got about a 7 or 8 percent  
11 bump from that policy all by itself.   And, absolutely, we  
12 are committed to making sure that this number goes down over  
13 time and does not creep back up.   You have that commitment.

14          Senator Warren:   Okay.   Can we when we say over time,  
15 can we just keep in mind that parents can't wait.   They  
16 don't have a year that they can just set aside while they're  
17 waiting around on a 1,400- or 2,700-child wait list.  
18 They've got to have childcare.   Now, our position should be  
19 that there are extra slots, so you're there to be able to  
20 pick up the slot.

21          So, I really want to say Space Command, Marines, you  
22 nailed it, and let's keep it up because that's what we've  
23 got to do.   We can't say that we are a military that cares  
24 about our families if we pretend to provide childcare, and



1 then we've got a wait list that's got 7,800 babies waiting  
2 on it. So, I just want to say this is what oversight is  
3 about, and I hope when we come back next year, I will be  
4 offering congratulations to every one of you because we have  
5 no babies waiting for the care they need.

6 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

7 Senator Tuberville: Thank you, Senator Warren.

8 Senator Ernst?

9 Senator Ernst: No further questions, but just a couple  
10 of comments. There have been a lot of really great topics  
11 of discussion today, whether it's the housing issues, the  
12 childcare issues, in particular, as well, the brain health  
13 issues that were brought up. And I like to think about it  
14 in that way, that it is brain health, not just mental  
15 health.

16 And with our troops, you know, we need to think of the  
17 brain as an organ. It is an exquisite organ, but just when  
18 we need that care, just like any other organ in the body, we  
19 need to seek care and encourage our troops to seek that care  
20 and get the proper care for that organ. So, think of it as  
21 brain health. We want to make sure that their organ is  
22 healthy. So, if we can focus on it like that.

23 And then, also, just a closing comment because as  
24 someone who served as an engineer and a logistician in the



1 U.S. Army Reserves and the Iowa Army National Guard, we live  
2 in an incredible culture of warriors and embracing the  
3 warrior ethos. I was always brought up that we're a soldier  
4 first regardless of our MOS.

5 But what I would say, too, is that as we're talking  
6 about our warriors never forget about all of the other  
7 spokes of that wheel that makes that infantryman or that  
8 warrior successful. So, whether it's our administrative  
9 assistants, our technicians our truck drivers, our  
10 maintainers, our fuelers, whatever it happens to be, we're  
11 all an important part of today's military.

12 So, God bless you all, God bless our warriors, but  
13 please, as we're talking about the entirety of the force,  
14 never forget that every single one of us can be a point of  
15 failure. And if we're not all strong, that means those  
16 warriors on the front lines will also fail. So, let's  
17 always remember to recognize every single one of us that  
18 serves in uniform. So, God bless you all for everything you  
19 do. Thank you for a great hearing.

20 Senator Tuberville: Thank you, Senator Ernst. You  
21 ready to reenlist?

22 Senator Ernst: I am.

23 [Laughter.]

24 Senator Tuberville: Senator Hirono, you have another



1 question?

2 Senator Hirono: No.

3 Senator Tuberville: Okay. I just got a couple  
4 questions here, real quick. Does anybody want to follow-up  
5 on the suicide in their purview? You didn't get to talk  
6 about anybody want to say anything? We had a couple that --

7 Sergeant Bentivegna: Yeah, Senator, thanks so much.  
8 You know, our colleagues said, you know, obviously, you  
9 know, suicide is a challenge that all the services in the  
10 Nation really has been facing, trying to tackle, you know,  
11 in addition to, you know, our ability to hire more  
12 healthcare professionals.

13 And I think we all agreed there's a lot of work on at  
14 the tactical level, how do we get leadership involved, but  
15 also how do we get just to rank and file involved. You  
16 know, from a Space Force perspective with six years old as  
17 we stood up, you know, we had the opportunity to kind of  
18 take a look back at what some of the challenges service, you  
19 know, brings to it.

20 You know, that's one of the reasons why, at least from  
21 a cultural perspective, you know, the Guardian commitment,  
22 what it means to be a team member and a team leader at the  
23 tactical level to make sure that there's connection there,  
24 which is also one of our core values to try and help get



1 after some of the isolation and some of the loneliness.

2 And I think in addition to professionals' healthcare  
3 system, it is the work at the tactical level and the culture  
4 that all of us are trying to create so that members feel  
5 connected, and they don't necessarily have to feel -- get to  
6 extremes to the point where it's crisis. And we have to  
7 rely on the medical community that they have that connection  
8 and camaraderie amongst one another with the culture we're  
9 building.

10 Senator Tuberville: Thank you. Well said. Anybody  
11 else?

12 Sergeant Ruiz: If I could just add, sir. It's the 21st  
13 century, and just to one little point on data and for an  
14 organization that is about humans, it's about the Marine.  
15 We are -- we can do so much better with how we develop a  
16 young person today. It is different. And so, we must bring  
17 them up in a different way. We were talking about it. In  
18 my day, there was someone smoking a cigarette and running in  
19 front of leading me in a formation.

20 And those days are over. And some may be sad about  
21 that. I'm not interested in that anymore. This is a  
22 different -- these are our children. These are our  
23 grandchildren that have come up to take the helm. And so,  
24 with the point of data is imagine that the platoon sergeant



1 knows that someone didn't get sleep in the last two days  
2 because I give them something to wear or a shirt that tells  
3 me how much how dehydrated they are.

4 And so, it is a 21st century where we can use all these  
5 AI predictive things to help as a tool. You'll never  
6 replace the human connection with eye by to eye, to eyeball.  
7 But the time it's here to get after the things that sergeant  
8 major of the Army and SEAC that come from that world.  
9 They're small, and they're able to invest, and that's how  
10 they create lethal teams. And we can do that today for all  
11 of our services. It's right in our fingertips. So, I would  
12 just appreciate the help in the future with that.

13 Senator Tuberville: Thank you. As we've finish this  
14 up, if you got something on your mind, I want you to bring  
15 it up, and we're going to start at the end down here.

16 Chief Isom: Senator, thank you. And thanks for this  
17 entire committee. We really do appreciate the focus that  
18 you're putting on people. I will just say that we as  
19 leaders, we do have to always remember that every service is  
20 different. Each one has unique demographics and unique  
21 problems. Every basing location is different. A problem in  
22 Guam looks very different than Alaska, than Pensacola,  
23 Florida.

24 And so, a top-down solution is not always the best



1 approach. I advocate for flexibility for the services to  
2 find solutions inside of their own services, and for local  
3 commanders out at those bases to try to find solutions  
4 because, oftentimes, the local solution is much better than  
5 the top-down solution. But thanks again for all that you  
6 do, and I appreciate your service to our Nation.

7 Senator Tuberville: Thank you. Sergeant Major?

8 Sergeant Weimer: Mr. Chairman, Senator Warren. Thank  
9 you. I hope today one of the things that you see from all  
10 of us here is how close we are. Services have equities.  
11 That's just how it works. We're in the people business.  
12 We're actually tight. My teammate to my left is new, but  
13 his predecessor sitting behind me, we're still tight, and  
14 Dave Wolf's here. This is who we are.

15 And I hope that that comes off today. There's nothing  
16 we deal with that's easy. I've learned that three years  
17 ago. But we definitely want to make sure, since you gave us  
18 the opportunity, that is one thing the committee walks away  
19 with.

20 Senator Tuberville: Master Chief?

21 Chief Perryman: Chairman, Ranking Member. I  
22 appreciate the opportunity, again, and very much thank you  
23 for holding the hearing. And I appreciate the heat and  
24 light you put on us in this, you know, whether it was



1 barracks, or family housing, or childcare. Because I think  
2 everybody in this room knows left to our own devices, my  
3 building in this building will just buy me stuff, right?  
4 You know, it loves kits, right? I got lots of contracts for  
5 warships and airplanes and all kinds of things, you know,  
6 and the thing that often gets a short shrift in the budget  
7 is the things that impact the quality of service of our  
8 sailors, not just their quality of life. Because I think  
9 sometimes, we get too narrowly focused on housing and  
10 barracks.

11 You know, the other place, in my service specifically,  
12 we take a detriment in often when budgets are tight or in  
13 the quality of the training that I give to the enlisted  
14 member, the quality of my peers, the hangers. You know,  
15 we're the richest country in the world with the strongest  
16 Navy in the world. But when you drive on our base, it is  
17 not obvious that those first two sentences are true.

18 So, I appreciate your continued partnership, and I look  
19 forward to engaging with you in the future. Thank you.

20 Sergeant Ruiz: Senator, thank you for the opportunity.  
21 Just one more thing that maybe your influence or your  
22 membership in other committees. I feel like I'm also the  
23 sergeant major of the Marines of the past and today  
24 thousands of Marines exited for the last time their Marine



1 Corps base. And so, building momentum in their lives as  
2 they exit, because I won't be able to keep all of them. And  
3 really, I don't -- I can't, and frankly, I don't want to.  
4 Is the best of the best. Get a seat at the table.

5 But for those that transition, especially for the  
6 culture that we have, the ability to transition from active  
7 duty or the reserve component, whatever they're serving in  
8 straight into a first responder type of billet, that they're  
9 not waiting 12, 18 months to go to a school, right, and that  
10 in-between time when the paychecks run out, when the medical  
11 gets expensive and life hits them. I worry about suicide in  
12 my service, in active duty and reserve, but just as much  
13 when they exit the service.

14 And so, if I can transition them faster to those areas,  
15 shipbuilding, whatever it is -- I met with the Secret  
16 Service director. Build a pipeline where a Marine can go  
17 straight from the last day of active duty to your school.  
18 21st century, eliminate the barriers, let's get after it,  
19 and in turn, the communities get a leader a lot quicker to  
20 go and be the next mayor, the next congressman, the next  
21 congresswoman, and take over the helm of America.

22 Senator Tuberville: Thank you.

23 Sergeant Wolfe: Thank you, Chairman, Ranking Member.

24 We really do care about these issues just like you do. We



1 really appreciate your continued advocacy. One of the  
2 things that I've noticed in just a couple of short months in  
3 this job is we do have resilience problems in a lot of  
4 areas. One area I've noticed that we don't have any  
5 resilience problems is in the bureaucracy. The bureaucracy  
6 is very resilient. And as I look at the issues that have  
7 come before this committee today, there are common themes in  
8 each one of those areas where bureaucracy sometimes keeps us  
9 from delivering what our folks need.

10 So, anything that this committee can do to continue to  
11 put pressure on extra rules that aren't necessary and things  
12 that block us from being able to deliver what we need to our  
13 people, we welcome that opportunity, and look forward to  
14 working with you on that and many other things in the years  
15 to come. Thank you

16 Sergeant Bentivegna: Chairman, Ranking Member. Thank  
17 you so much for the opportunity today to talk about, you  
18 know, these very much important topics. You know, quality  
19 of life and we kind of talked about this a little bit in  
20 quality of service.

21 Having stable and reliable budgets really will be  
22 helpful as we plan some of these things out. So, help with  
23 reliable, stable funding will be helpfully get after some of  
24 the challenges that we talked about today. And the



1 flexibility, I think SMA talked about, right? Having  
2 flexibility because not -- you know, one size doesn't fit  
3 all, I think is really important.

4 You know, Ranking Member Warren, you talk so much so  
5 passionately about childcare and CDC specifically, but so  
6 much goodness and effort with all the, you know, childcare,  
7 in the community, you know, homes of spouses opening  
8 childcare in their homes, you know renting seats downtown  
9 like I talked about they did at Peterson. Having the funds,  
10 and the authority, and the flexibility to get after some of  
11 these challenges in multiple ways is so helpful to kind of  
12 cut through some of the bureaucracy, and actually provide  
13 impact to our service members and their families. So, thank  
14 you for all the help on that. I appreciate it.

15 Senator Tuberville: Well, thanks to all of you. This  
16 has been good. And we need this. We need more of it. I  
17 coached the football team. You can have all the equipment  
18 you want, but if you ain't got the players you got, you  
19 don't have a chance. And we need players. We need men and  
20 women to fight, to sign up and protect our country.

21 About six months ago, I had a family come into my  
22 office here on Capitol Hill, career military, five kids, 12  
23 years old and under. Not one of them is healthy because  
24 they were in a home for years that had mold. Yeah, somebody



1 should go to jail and it probably should be us up here. If  
2 I had a magic wand, we'd take 5 percent and add to the NDAA  
3 every year. If it's \$1 trillion, it's \$50 billion. It goes  
4 to barracks, food, childcare, healthcare, whatever it takes  
5 to build the best, continue to build the best military in  
6 the world.

7 If we don't do that, it's not going to happen. As  
8 Sergeant Major Ruiz said, we've got AI coming, but it ain't  
9 going to take the place of a soldier. Not going to happen.  
10 We can't count on that. But we can count on you training,  
11 but you can't train unless you got people. And you can't  
12 have people unless you got families that are taken care of.

13 It's embarrassing that we have those five kids that  
14 will never live the life that most of us have had a chance  
15 to live in here because of stupidity of not following up and  
16 helping a family that's put their husband or their wife's  
17 put their life on the line to serve in the military. It's  
18 just sad. So, hopefully, we can continue these dialogues.  
19 We hope we can help all of you.

20 We appreciate your service and what you've done for our  
21 country. Continue to push our soldiers hard. Train them  
22 hard. You never know what's down the road. I mean, we live  
23 in a dangerous world, but thanks to the families, also. My  
24 God, if it wasn't for them, we wouldn't have it. So, thanks



1 to all of you. Thanks for what you do, and let's continue  
2 to have the best military in the world.

3 This hearing is adjourned.

4 [Whereupon, at 4:51 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

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