



STATEMENT OF

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Chairman Tillis, Ranking Member Gillibrand, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today on the topic of military family readiness. Further, I'd like to thank this committee for your ongoing efforts in support of our service members and their families.

The Committee asked that my testimony focus on military family readiness – specifically issues related to the transition from military to civilian life, spousal employment, education and childcare programs, and financial readiness impacting service members and their families. I will address these issues during our discussion, but first would like to situate my testimony within a brief statement related to the central role that our military families play in our nation's defense – specifically with regard to the sustainment and viability of the nation's all-volunteer force.

The U.S. National Security Strategy emphasizes all of the nation's resources as central to our national security, and explicitly identifies America's support of wounded warriors, veterans, *and military families* as fundamental to our defense.

Importantly, emphasizing support for those service members, veterans, and families who have shouldered the burden of our past and current wars is not about patriotism or politics. Instead, this emphasis acknowledges the greatest fear of the architects of the post-Vietnam all-volunteer force; that is, a circumstance where the Department of Defense is unable to recruit and retain citizen volunteers. In this regard, at no time in the history of the all-volunteer force have the costs and consequence of inaction been more profound.

Since the advent of the all-volunteer force, the pool of Americans who meet the minimum standards to volunteer has consistently declined, to a point where today it is estimated nearly three out of every four of the roughly 34 million 17- to 24-year-olds in the U.S. are ineligible to serve. Compounding this situation is the fact that only about one quarter of high-school graduates who might be otherwise eligible, can also pass the Armed Forces Qualification Test, which measures basic math, writing, and reading skills.

Thus, while our nation's defense rests on the assumption of a broad and deep pool of eligible volunteers, the reality is that this assumption has never been more tenuous.

However, the existence of a broad and deep pool of volunteers eligible to serve, by itself, is obviously not enough. There also needs to be a willingness to serve – particularly among the best and brightest of America’s youth.

In that regard, consider that since the early 1980s, the willingness of American youth to consider military service has steadily declined. The University of Michigan’s longstanding “Monitoring the Future Survey,” which has since 1975 annually surveyed about 50,000 high school students about their general attitudes, behaviors, values, including toward military service, suggests today that less than 12% of American youth are willing to even consider military service after high school. Further, this same survey also indicates that perceptions of military service as a ‘means to get ahead’ in life and to ‘secure and education’ have declined sharply in recent years.

All of this is to suggest that today, given fewer Americans eligible for military service, and a declining number willing to volunteer, those both eligible and willing represent a treasured national resource.

Importantly, throughout the now more than 15 years of sustained military conflict, the most reliable and robust pipeline of eligible and willing volunteers is represented by the daughters, sons, brothers, and sisters, of those who are now or have served in uniform. In other words, the health of our military families is inextricably linked to the future viability of the all-volunteer force. This is not speculation or conjecture, but fact demonstrated by research.

Specifically, new research conducted jointly by Blue Star Families and the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University suggests that today, only 40% of military family respondents would recommend military service to their children – a decline from 45% in 2015. Further, the same study highlights that the extent to which military families feel supported while serving, and throughout the transition from military to civilian life, is strongly and directly correlated to the likelihood of recommending military service to others. For example, the research indicates that 71% of families reporting a supported and smooth transition from military to civilian life express a willingness to recommend military service to their own children. However, among those indicating a difficult or very difficult transition, only 56% would recommend military service to a family member.

All of this is to say that many inside and outside of government have long imagined a relationship between action [or inaction] to address the concerns of military families, and the DoD’s ability to recruit and retain the nation’s most skilled, qualified, and service-minded individuals. Today, a much-enhanced ability to leverage robust and longitudinal data – informative of the ‘lived experiences’ of our nation’s military families – supports more than ever before, a comprehensive understanding of the social, economic, and wellness concerns of those families who have shouldered the burden of the nation’s post-9/11 wars. This body of research suggests strongly that the in-service and post-service welfare of our military families directly affects all-volunteer force imperative of recruiting a high-quality and socio-economically representative force.

Accordingly, over the last five years, the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University has engaged in a purposeful effort to inform and act on opportunities to advance in-service and post-service opportunities for service members, veterans, and military families. Over that period, more than 90,000 have benefited from educational, vocational, and business ownership programs offered by the IVMF and its partners. Importantly, the large scale and scope of the IVMF’s programs has set the conditions for extensive study of the in-service and transition-connected challenges facing our service members and their

families. I look forward to sharing some of what we have learned regarding the topics the Committee identified as the focus of this hearing during our discussion.

It is clear to me that investments positioned to care for and support our military families, to include a robust infrastructure supporting the transition of military families to civilian life, represents an investment in the nation's future defense. Further, such investments are also morally and ethically right. These are complex issues, but exceedingly important. I thank the Subcommittee for hearing me and others on the concerns of military families, and look forward to your questions.