

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE OPENING STATEMENT

BEFORE THE
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

MARCH 22, 2023

UPDATE ON RECRUITMENT AND READINESS

STATEMENT OF:

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NOT FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL RELEASED
BY THE COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

UNITED STATES SENATE

Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Wicker, distinguished members of this Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. It is my pleasure to provide testimony on efforts to recruit and retain the best of our fellow Americans for service in the Department of the Air Force (DAF) as military and civilian Airmen and Guardians. I appreciate your support for the DAF mission to organize, train, and equip the U.S. Air Force (USAF) and U.S. Space Force (USSF).

Our Airmen and Guardians stand ready to prevail against the pacing challenge and execute our commitments in the National Defense Strategy. We are redefining how we operate as the world's premier Air Force and Space Force while innovating talent management systems to attract our nation's best and brightest. As we commemorate 50 years of the all-volunteer force, we must use this milestone to demonstrate that service in the Air Force and Space Force offers an incredible value proposition: opportunity, community, and purpose. Our recruitment and retention efforts are critical to ensuring that the all-volunteer force remains a cornerstone of our personnel policy for years to come.

As you know, the DAF – like all military departments represented here today – competes with the lowest unemployment rate in a generation to be the employer-of-choice for our nation's talent. This competition does not end at recruitment, but also impacts our efforts to retain the critical talent that the DAF has spent significant resources to develop. For Americans with the propensity to serve, the Air Force and the Space Force offer unique opportunities for a technologically dependent force to serve as pilots, medics, mechanics, intelligence analysts, security forces, engineers, and countless other meaningful career fields that protect our national security. Our Airmen and Guardians are our best brand ambassadors and embody the

opportunities and benefits of military service, but it is evident that we need decisive action today to meet the recruiting goals of tomorrow.

The FY24 DAF Total Force end strength for active duty, Air Force Reserve, and Air National Guard personnel is about 503,000 Airmen and 9,400 Guardians. Fortunately, the Space Force is projected to meet its recruiting goals of 532 enlistees. But even with the latest budgetary assistance from Congress, the Air Force will likely fall short of enlisted active duty recruiting goals by 10 to 13 percent (equivalent to over 3,000 Airmen), while the Reserve and Guard components are projected to miss their recruitment goals by even higher margins. Retention is faring better than recruitment, however, and data indicate that approximately 90 percent of our officer and enlisted Airmen and Guardians are choosing to stay as they reach career decision points, such as reenlistment or completion of commitment. This underscores the value our all-volunteer force finds once they join the Air or Space Force, but because our retention rates are relatively high, we are seeing fewer transfers over to the Guard and Reserve, leading to outsized recruiting impacts for these components.

The current economic outlook contributes to these recruiting trends. Our country is experiencing an historic low, 3.46 percent unemployment rate that tightens competition in the labor market. Further, the recruiting pool of qualified and interested youth is now only 370,000 people out of a population of 20.3 million. This is the result of 77 percent of 17 to 21-year-old Americans not meeting eligibility criteria for military service without a waiver, often issued for medical conditions or other potentially disqualifying factors. It is estimated that 50 percent of youth today have never considered serving in the Armed Forces, which reflects that the youth market is both disconnected from, and disinterested in, military service. These trends are

unsustainable when we are faced with strategic competition and the requirements of the National Defense Strategy.

We recognize that harmful behaviors within the military not only contradict our values and degrade the readiness of our force, but also undermine our efforts to communicate the value of military service, and remain a barrier for the DAF to overcome in our recruitment efforts. In order to prevent and address sexual assault, sexual harassment, and domestic violence, the DAF has taken significant steps to close our say-do gap between our policies and our actions to address and prevent these scourges. The DAF is implementing the recommendations of the Independent Review Commission (IRC) on Sexual Assault in the Military, as approved by the Secretary of Defense; reviewing an expansion of our Integrated Response Co-Location Pilot program, which physically co-located support services for victims of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and domestic violence; and exploring next steps to continue to reduce our suicide rates. Additionally, the DAF is implementing policy measures to ensure effective oversight and administration of Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) to ensure the safety and well-being of all JROTC program participants. Our intent for these and other initiatives is to not only offer better support to those currently serving, but also to demonstrate to possible recruits that we are an institution committed to taking care of its people.

With thanks to Congress for appropriating additional FY 2023 funding for our marketing programs (\$100 million for active duty Air Force, Air Force Reserve, and Space Force, and \$50 million for the Air National Guard), the DAF continues to lean forward with investments by launching marketing initiatives in mainstream media to better reach the American public as well as nontraditional media spaces. Using local digital engagement through the web, social media, and streaming platforms where our target audience spends time, Air Force Recruiting Service

(AFRS) netted more than 90 percent new user traffic to our recruiting websites. We also increased our reach at the local level by 250 percent while spending considerably less money. In general, by combining all DAF major marketing programs under one umbrella, our buying power has increased considerably.

Additionally, the Space Force – in preparing for potential recruiting challenges in the future – has planned an aggressive brand awareness campaign, while the AFRS is ramping up local digital marketing in traditionally hard-to-recruit areas to increase diversity among the applicant pool for the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFROTC) and U.S. Air Force Academy. The DAF will be able to reach a wider American audience through targeted content across a fragmented media market, including potential recruits and influencers throughout social media platforms.

One notable digital marketing initiative that will increase the DAF's potential talent pool is the Women in Sports Campaign, which aligns DAF recruitment with female athletes through direct marketing as well as enduring partnerships that encourage female participation in sports. Approximately 7.6 million 18 to 24-year-old women watch women's sports on YouTube, and these viewers constitute a key demographic for DAF recruitment efforts. This program will ensure that these women are more aware of the opportunities afforded to them through military service, while elevating past and present DAF female athletes, including Olympic hopefuls. These influencers will be provided a platform to connect their commitment, perseverance, and achievements to their military service and inspire the next generation to follow their example.

As states lifted COVID-19 restrictions, recruiters dramatically increased their presence in schools and at public events, while reconnecting and reintroducing the DAF to America from our wings and bases. The DAF will authorize a temporary increase of recruiters from a volunteer

pool of former recruiters, augment special warfare recruiter staffing, grow the capacity of the Air Force Recruiting School, and expand diversity among recruiters.

AFRS also established a centralized, national “e-Recruiter cell” to virtually engage with potential recruits who express interest online or from other marketing generated leads. E-Recruiters can now process applicants from a centralized location while relieving our recruiters in the field of many administrative burdens. The overall objective of the e-Recruiter cell is to increase the conversion rate from marketing-generated leads to accession. While we are only a few weeks into this pilot, the ratio of those who enter the formal recruiting process after engaging with an e-Recruiter is about ten times higher than the normal rate for marketing-generated leads.

We continue to evolve our messaging to ensure that USAF and USSF values will resonate with a Gen Z audience. This means more focus on opportunity, community, and purpose. Campaigns like “Serve Your Way” and “Ready for More,” as well as the Chief of Staff of the Air Force General Charles Q. Brown’s commercial “American Airmen, kicking your butt...” focus on the transformational and transactional benefits of serving in the Air Force. Our brand study shows that the Air Force brand is strong, and our intent is to maintain brand discipline relying on “Aim High” as the messaging center of gravity. The Space Force is about to launch new creative campaigns that will amplify the Guardian spirit while focusing on diverse points of views and experiences to recruit, develop, and maintain Guardians.

To ensure that these recruiting challenges are met with the urgency they demand, Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force General David W. Allvin championed the establishment of the Barriers to Service Cross-Functional Team to expedite almost 30 lines of effort that will offer more Americans the opportunity to serve to their full potential. The DAF is modernizing

policies on tattoo and body composition, which are estimated to add 2,500 more recruits annually. We implemented a pilot program to revise our enlistment drug screening physicals to allow enlistees who test positive for THC during the accession physical examination at the Military Entrance Processing Station to re-test after 90 days if they are granted a waiver. This policy change aligns the DAF with the Army and the Navy, and ensures that recruits accessing from states that have legalized marijuana use are not permanently prohibited from military service.

Additionally, the DAF is implementing an active duty initial enlistment bonus program, reinstating the active duty Enlisted College Loan Repayment Program with payments up to \$65,000, and gathering the resources to accelerate a path to citizenship for recruits graduating from basic training. Ongoing areas of exploration include the Space Force's proposed single military personnel system, which offers a new model of service to attract diverse candidates with the skillsets required to defend the United States in, from, and through space.

Adding to the intrinsic value of community and purpose, recent congressional appropriations to increase pay and allowances make DAF salaries more competitive. DAF leaders also recognize that the entire family serves. Family members contribute countless hours of unpaid labor, volunteerism, and often their own under-employment or unemployment so their loved one can protect and defend our Constitution. The DAF is demonstrating the value we place on our people and their families through initiatives to increase economic well-being, expand access to childcare, access to and quality of health care, and promote spousal employment. From FY 2019 to FY 2022, the DAF reimbursed a total of \$650,000 in licensure expenses associated with a member's permanent change of station, ensuring that 1,355 spouses did not bear the financial burden of maintaining their credentials. We are optimistic that enacted

legislation that requires military spouse licensure reciprocity will further reduce expenses and barriers to employment. That is only a sampling of the programs that add value to Airmen and Guardian families.

We must not forget our DAF civilians who serve alongside uniformed members around the globe, offering professionalism, continuity, and experience to our uniformed personnel. In the competitive labor market, the DAF continues to advance multiple initiatives for civilian development that double as recruitment and retention tools. We have almost 200,000 talented civilians serving in the DAF, and we can always find a place for more Americans interested in making the Air Force and Space Force more lethal and effective.

Members of Congress also have a key role to play in addressing military recruiting as a national issue. In addition to previously mentioned funding to support strategic marketing investments, you are uniquely positioned to recruit a diverse and talented applicant pool as you interview and nominate future cadets to the U.S. Air Force Academy. We are grateful that you frequently visit our installations and meet with service members stationed in your states, amplifying their stories, achievements, and experiences to potential recruits and their families. This type of congressional engagement is key to reaching a broader audience and highlighting the honor of serving our country in uniform.

The hearing today provides the perfect platform to discuss the recruiting challenges we face, but also to engage in a constructive national dialogue to highlight the value of military service and the extraordinary opportunity to serve our country. I look forward to our continued partnership with this Committee on our efforts to recruit and retain the best talent our country has to offer. Thank you for your time today, and for your support for our Airmen and Guardians, and their families, caregivers, and survivors. I welcome your questions.