

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE PRESENTATION
TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON PERSONNEL
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
UNITED STATES SENATE

SUBJECT: MILITARY DEPARTMENT PERSONNEL POSTURE HEARING

STATEMENT OF:

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Tuberville, Ranking Member Warren, and distinguished Members of this Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and for your continued support. I am honored to share the continuing efforts of the United States Air Force within the human resources portfolio to build and maintain critical Airmen readiness.

As the Department of the Air Force (DAF) looks to the future, readiness continues to be a cornerstone of our mission. While readiness can be assessed through the lens of our platforms, lethality of our pilots, and weapons in our inventory, our most significant competitive advantage is our people—our Airmen. They are the foundation of our force; their knowledge, skills, and abilities are critical to deterring aggression, sustaining combat operations, and defending the nation at a moment's notice. As we navigate evolving global threats, it is essential that we recruit, train, and retain a lethal and well-equipped force that is prepared to successfully respond to current and future challenges. Meeting today's challenges requires a highly capable, combat-ready force that will enable the Air Force to have the right Airmen in the right place at the right time. Ensuring our manpower is aligned to future force structure and modernization efforts requires a focus on recruitment & retention, force readiness, and talent management to develop and retain the talent needed to execute assigned missions and strengthen our lethal fighting force for the United States.

The Air Force relies on the strength of our meritocracy at every level of the personnel system; we must rebuild readiness and enforce high standards & accountability to fulfill the President's objective of leading with peace through strength. The DAF maintains a commitment to excellence across all facets of our force structure. We have a robust, dynamic, well-developed and technically proficient total force encompassing Regular, Reserve and Air National Guard personnel together with our civilian workforce who are prepared to respond to any conflict or crisis. Our comprehensive approach to readiness reflects our unwavering dedication to provide care and support for our Airmen, Guardians and their families to ensure they are equipped to thrive in an ever-changing landscape and remain postured to succeed.

GROW THE FUTURE AIRMAN

To maintain air supremacy, the Air Force must maintain steadfast focus on its greatest strength: our Airmen. We exist to fly, fight, and win—none of which is possible without the dedication and talent of the men and women who volunteer to serve. Ensuring the right Airman is in the right job at the right time requires that we not only attract skilled and adaptable individuals, but also effectively develop them and reward excellence so they choose to continue serving. Our approach to recruitment, readiness and talent management is centered on that principle.

In fiscal year (FY) 2024, with the assistance of Congress, the DAF successfully reintroduced Air Force Warrant Officers to boost and retain cyber and information technology talent across the Department. Warrant Officers will serve as technical experts charged with remaining actively engaged in and abreast of advancements in the cyber and IT fields to ensure the Air Force remains at the forefront of change. In December 2024, after a 297-day sprint to develop the foundation and training necessary for a Warrant Officer Corps, we graduated our first class of 30 Air Force Warrant Officers, selected from a pool of 490 incredibly talented enlisted Airmen. This historical class is the first assessed class since we ceased

accessing Warrant Officers in 1959.

FORCE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY: RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Air Force lethality is grounded in the proficiency, skill, and commitment of its Airmen. Our end-strength force management strategy directly influences recruitment and retention and ensures we have the right Airmen to execute our mission.

While FY23 was a challenging recruitment year, the Air Force successfully closed the gap in FY24 through an increase in recruiter manning, changes to training processes, and an increase in the Delayed Entry Program to its highest level in 10 years. Last year, we also reported declining retention rates, by slightly less than a percentage point. This year, retention rates are up, with overall retention at 90% (up 0.6 percent), with officer retention at 93% (up 0.5 percent), and enlisted retention at 89% (up 0.6 percent). The programs and policies enacted to address the previous dip in retention rates are strengthening our force, reducing gaps in warfighting capability, and shaping future investments.

The Air Force is also closing the gap in our pilot shortage by focusing our efforts on increasing accessions and training throughput capacity. We have deliberately and effectively used monetary and non-monetary authorities granted by Congress to stabilize the force. We've fully implemented the FY25 Aviation Bonus program, which is performing well. As of March 2025, the Air Force opened 485 new Aviation Bonus contracts and anticipate by the end of FY26, additional bonus take rates coupled with an increased training pipeline capacity will further reduce pilot shortfall, significantly improving our ability to achieve full readiness levels and increased lethality. Our FY25 total force end strength strategic goal of 495,300 remains on target and will allow the Air Force to continue to fill gaps in critically manned fields to bolster current operational capabilities.

FORCE READINESS

Air Force readiness is inextricably linked to the wellbeing of our Airmen and their families. While preparing for the complexities of modern warfare and evolving global security challenges, the Air Force equips every Airman not only with necessary operational skills and resources but also psychological fortitude and familial support to excel in their missions. The DAF continually identifies and addresses barriers to wellbeing and overall force readiness through targeted outreach and tailored programing, in areas including economic security, access to quality childcare, sexual assault/sexual harassment prevention and response, and suicide prevention. Many of these programs provide services for Airmen and Guardians, so we work in concert with the Space Force for implementation.

Service members have historically identified "financial stress" as one of their biggest strains, leading to the introduction of the Personal Financial Readiness program. This series of 10 financial training sessions, strategically scheduled at various life and career stages, ensures members progressively develop financial knowledge through targeted training. DAF rolled out initial mandatory training IAW NDAA 2018, but in 2023, the first year with new metrics, 20,000 Airmen and Guardians completed the First Duty Station Personal Finance Course. Evaluation results revealed 67% of participants correctly answered financial knowledge questions after completing the course. For FY24, we continued to see

benefits from this program as approximately 14,000 Airmen and Guardians completed the course, with correct answers increasing to 72%.

For Airmen seeking direct financial assistance, recent Congressional actions have been influential in increasing financial support. The FY25 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) mandates an increase in the eligibility threshold for the Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) from 150% to 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines. In addition to the 4.5% pay raise in January, it also authorized a 10-percent Junior Enlisted Basic Pay Raise. The BNA adjustment may increase the number of our BNA-eligible families from below 40 to potentially 1,800 and consequently may increase the budget requirement for military pay and compensation. However, this estimate will be affected by the Junior Enlisted Basic Pay Raise and will be monitored closely.

The DAF Military and Family Readiness Centers continue to provide education, counseling, and referral services to Airmen, Guardians, and their families with food security concerns. To supplement our continuing efforts to investigate and implement innovative and cost-effective strategies to counter food insecurity, the DAF has contracted a Food System Transformation Study for the total force. This study will provide a current state baseline, data-informed vision of an integrated food system, and an implementation strategy to target these issues in FY26.

Access to available, affordable, and quality childcare programs also directly impact mission readiness. In FY24, the DAF-operated Child and Youth Programs (CYP) served over 56,800 children. An additional 7,800 children were supported with just over \$33 million in community-based childcare fee assistance. Due to targeted efforts to retain staff, such as the childcare fee discount (expanded in the FY25 NDAA to 100% for the first child of all CYP employees and a 25% discount for each additional child), staffing levels increased from 72% in October 2022 to 86% in December 2024. Through staffing increases and retainment efforts, the unmet childcare needs waitlist fell below 3,000 at the end of FY24, the lowest it has been since DAF began tracking unmet needs in March 2018. However, the current hiring freeze has severely impacted our childcare centers by lowering our staffing levels and increasing waitlists, with the current DAF waitlist a little over 4,000 as of 19 March 2025. With the projected reduction of the civilian workforce, we are still monitoring the enterprise impact this will have on DAF childcare.

Responding to and preventing sexual assault and sexual harassment are critical to force readiness. One successful approach DAF has taken is “co-location,” which implements our policies of “Connect to Care” and “No Wrong Door.” These policies establish standards for care providers to maintain accountability and facilitate inter-office collaboration to support our Airmen and Guardians. “Connect to Care” is a collaborative approach to support victims and survivors of sexual harassment, sexual assault, stalking, cyber harassment, domestic abuse, and/or interpersonal violence. “No Wrong Door” ensures that victims and survivors receive a warm handoff between support agencies, regardless of which agency they initially engage. We have achieved co-location and/or collaboration of services at 22 installations and plan continued implementation across the DAF.

The DAF has codified the DoD Suicide Response System within its services to Airmen, Guardians, and their families. The Suicide Postvention Command Support Team (SPCST), with policy and guidance, develops leader-focused training designed to implement rapid response activities following a suicide

event. These efforts help minimize suicide contagion, facilitate individual as well as unit cohesion, and reduce negative impacts on force readiness. SPCST is composed of Headquarters Air Force subject matter experts who provide support and consultation to commanders at installations experiencing a “suicide anomaly”—a greater than expected frequency of suicide deaths given installation size and DAF suicide rate. The team provides immediate and long-term recommendations for suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention, as well as implementation of these recommendations. Together with the Wingman Guardian Connect program, which focuses on building personal relationships, the system hopes to significantly increase cohesion and reduce suicide risk, thereby positively impacting force readiness.

TALENT MANAGEMENT

Talent management is the cornerstone to building the force we need. The foundations of our talent management philosophy are high standards and meritocracy. We believe that advancing the best-qualified Airmen—those with demonstrated performance, leadership, and potential—is essential for mission success. In alignment with the President’s administration and under Secretary Hegseth’s direction, the Air Force has reviewed all personnel policies to ensure they remain grounded in merit.

Each Airman record is evaluated on its own merits, focusing on job performance, demonstrated skills, and warfighting readiness. Promotion boards are determined by Operational Categories to represent the population of the Air Force. Operational Categories include Combat; Combat Support; and Combat Service Support. Our promotion board processes continue to use a whole-person concept to assess duty performance, professional qualities, leadership, experience breadth, and education—without regard to immutable characteristics. This approach is consistent with longstanding Air Force values and Title 10 requirements.

Currently, the Air Force is balancing the DoD commitment to reducing the civilian workforce with maintaining critical talent in career fields that directly contribute to combat effectiveness. We are committed to cutting overhead and improving efficiency but must approach it strategically to avoid harming readiness by losing critical talent. We continue to support NDAA initiatives aimed at strengthening our civilian workforce through the use of direct-hiring authorities, faster hiring timelines, and improved training programs for our civilians. Through process improvements, the Air Force is very competitive in hiring experts in cyber, engineering, and other high-demand, critically manned fields.

The senior-leader focus on standards from Secretary of Defense Hegseth and Chief of Staff of the Air Force General Allvin reinforces that we will not lower the bar in the name of expediency. Whether it is in training, daily performance, or conduct, we expect every Airman to meet high standards and we hold leaders accountable for enforcing those standards. By rewarding individual initiative, excellence, and hard work based on merit and standards, we foster a culture where every Airman trusts that they have an equal opportunity to succeed. This not only unifies our force but also improves effectiveness by ensuring the most capable individuals assume leadership roles. We encourage a culture where innovation is rewarded and seek to empower commanders and supervisors to recognize and advance talent.

CONCLUSION

Chairman Tuberville, Ranking Member Warren and distinguished Members of this Committee, thank you again for this opportunity to represent our distinguished Service members and their families. I want to assure you that the Air Force leadership is wholly focused on maximizing readiness and lethality while caring for our force. We align our policies with a clear-eyed view of the threats we face and a deep respect for the profession of arms. By advancing Airmen who demonstrate exceptional skill and performance and giving Airmen the opportunity to reach their full potential, we will continue to strengthen the world's finest Air Force. Unified in this endeavor, we aim to be One Force, and we look forward to our continued partnership and appreciate your advocacy of the United States Air Force—those in uniform, our civilian professionals, and the families, and caregivers who support them.