

**Not for publication until released by the Committee**

**PREPARED STATEMENT  
OF  
THE HONORABLE ASHISH S. VAZIRANI  
PERFORMING THE DUTIES OF THE UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR  
PERSONNEL & READINESS**

**THE HONORABLE DR. LESTER MARTINEZ LOPEZ  
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR HEALTH AFFAIRS**

**THE HONORABLE RONALD T. KEOHANE  
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR MANPOWER & RESERVE AFFAIRS**

**MS. BETH FOSTER  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR FORCE RESILIENCY**

**REGARDING  
FISCAL YEAR 2025 DEFENSE PERSONNEL POSTURE  
BEFORE THE  
SENATE ARMED SERVICES SUBCOMMITTEE ON PERSONNEL  
MAY 8, 2024**

**Not for publication until released by the Committee**

Chair Warren, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished members of the Personnel Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today, along with my Personnel & Readiness colleagues. All of us share the honor of supporting the 2.3 million Active and Reserve Service members, their 2.6 million family members, and the 900,000 civilian employees of the Department of Defense.

The Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 President's Budget request supports Secretary Austin's commitment to the National Defense Strategy (NDS), which recognizes that people are critical to our mission and calls on the Department to attract, retain, develop, and promote a Total Force equipped with the skills and abilities needed to solve national security challenges in a complex global environment. The NDS and our ability to successfully implement it depend on our people, and we have an inherent and sacred obligation to take care of our people. My colleagues and I have the privilege and distinct honor of delivering the policies and programs that advance talent management and workforce development across our Total Force and promote the readiness, resiliency, health, safety, and well-being of our workforce. We do so with your support and partnership on this Committee and others. In so doing, we strive to articulate, advance, and deliver on the value proposition of national service, and engender that spirit of selfless service – not only in our current force, but in our future force as well – and maintain the bonds of trust and faith with our retirees and veterans who sacrificed so much in their service. These core principles of service, country before self, and mission apply not only to our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Guardians, and Marines, but also to their families and our dedicated civilian workforce.

We look forward to sharing with you some of the areas the budget request supports, and the initiatives that advance the value proposition of service of those serving our Nation in uniform or as civilians. Our uniformed Service members and civilians have all selflessly answered that call to serve and are rewarded with a vital and dynamic mission, a sense of purpose, and the knowledge that they are contributing to a cause larger than themselves.

## **BUILDING THE FORCE**

### Military Force

Last year we celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the All-Volunteer Force and, despite a challenging recruiting environment, our Force is the most ready and lethal in the world. The outlook for FY 2024, while improving, still must take into account certain enduring challenges.

There is a decreasing connection between Americans and the military. The value proposition that guides our brave young men and women to enlist or commission needs to be ever sharpened, refined, and communicated to those interested in serving.

We seek to advance a national call to service that inspires young people to think about how they can contribute to something bigger than themselves and highlights the broad range of professional career options and opportunities military service offers. And in answering that call to service in uniform, they will join a professional force and develop both life and career skills that will serve them throughout their lives, during their time in uniform and after. They will receive the support, services, and resources they need to thrive, helping them achieve their professional, education, and life goals. We look forward to working with our partners on this Committee, and throughout the Congress, as well as State, local, civic, community, and educational leaders to bridge a growing civil-military divide, increase propensity to serve, and espouse the value of service. For the Department's recruiters, improved, increased, and more consistent access to high school students is critical to achieving that goal. Additionally, civil-military programs such as JROTC, STARBASE, and the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program are important in cultivating the notion of service, whether in the military or in other ways. The budget request continues to support those programs and ensures that they have the appropriate levels of oversight and accountability for a safe and healthy experience for all who participate.

In addition to DoD's unmatched mission, a critical part of delivering on our promise to the force is ensuring that we have a total pay, compensation, and benefits' package that includes retirement and health care benefits. The FY 2025 budget request includes a 4.5% basic pay raise. We thank Congress for its support over the last two years to provide the largest annual basic pay adjustments in over two decades for our Service members.

A new active-duty Service member earns about \$50,064 per year as part of their regular military compensation, and it rises quickly to \$56,990 within the first year and \$63,960 by year three. This compensation package includes either government-provided housing or a housing allowance that is updated annually to reflect rental costs in the local community. In addition, Service members receive generous retirement benefits, including a defined benefit pension and government automatic and matching contributions to the Thrift Savings Plan, as well as health care with few out-of-pocket costs compared to typical employer-sponsored health plans. The

ongoing 14<sup>th</sup> Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation (QRMC) is reviewing the basic pay table, including junior enlisted pay; the allowances for housing, subsistence, costs of living, and special and incentive pays; the impact of dual-income households; and consideration of factors such as military spouse unemployment, frequent military moves, periods of geographic separation, and child care access and cost. We also deliver the Commissary benefit and provide for child care and a world-class education benefit to ensure that we are fully honoring our promise to Total Force members.

This generous compensation package, and the overall value proposition of service, is why today, despite a strong economy, we continue to enjoy high levels of retention across the force. Delivering on our commitments to Service members is the underlying premise of the Secretary's Taking Care of People priority and imperatives. With your support, the investments we have made – and continue to make – in quality of life and family support programs and the myriad other benefits the Department offers are paramount to our ability to recruit and retain, and further develop the most ready and lethal fighting force in the world.

### Civilian Workforce

The value proposition of military service, and the readiness of our Force, is not achievable without the Department's dedicated and professional civilian workforce. Our civilians enable our Service members to focus on their core warfighting tasks by performing mission essential and readiness enabling functions across the globe. They protect the nation from cyber and digital threats; serve as the backbone of DoD's acquisition, medical, personnel and family support programs, and financial infrastructure; and are critical enablers of readiness at our shipyards, depots, and supply centers globally. Competition for talent is high and the Department must attract, acquire, and develop highly talented individuals who might never have considered government service before. The FY 2025 budget request invests in workforce cultivation and talent management, with a focus on attracting individuals with critical skill sets and growing our cyber, data, artificial intelligence, coding, and software workforces. At the same time, our commitments to ensuring the safety, well-being, health, and quality of life of our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Guardians and Marines necessitate investments in our civilian workforce for integrated primary prevention, child care, and mental health care.

The FY 2025 budget request continues to refine the Department's efforts to ensure that its civilian workforce is appropriately sized to complement and support our military personnel in successfully defending the nation, and supports a skilled, agile, and professional civilian workforce ready to meet critical missions. We are committed to right-sizing and optimizing our Total Force – to include military, civilians, and contracted support – to achieve mission effectiveness and deliver warfighting capability and readiness.

## **HEALTH AND SAFETY OF THE FORCE**

### Military Health System (MHS)

For their willingness to lay their lives on the line, our promise to Service members is to provide world-class healthcare across the spectrum of care needs to Service members and their families. In December of last year, the Deputy Secretary of Defense directed a multi-year effort to rebuild the military's direct care system, bring beneficiaries back to Military Treatment Facilities (MTFs), and increase care at MTFs by seven percent by the end of 2026. We strive to make MTFs, staffed by uniformed and civilian medical personnel, the primary choice for care for our Service members and their dependents. This stabilization effort, and the FY 2025 budget request, continues our efforts to ensure adequate staffing at MTFs, ensure access to care, and maintain and sustain clinical skills for our medical force. We are already seeing the results of those efforts, with access to specialty care improving, resulting in a decrease of beneficiaries seeking specialty care from private providers. And we continue to invest in enhanced telemedicine capabilities for access to behavioral health clinicians.

Delivering on our promise of care to the Total Force depends on having the tools necessary to ensure integrated care across patients' touchpoints with the MHS. The introduction of MHS GENESIS, the military's electronic health record system, not only replaced paper medical records with digital records, but also unified disparate electronic platforms to provide more complete medical information about beneficiaries and enable more reliable, informed medical decisions. We believe MHS GENESIS is positively contributing to the long-term readiness of our military forces by improving our insights about the health of our current force, as well as our future force. We continue to make investments and improvements as we increase the capacity of MHS GENESIS, and leverage it to ensure a healthy, resilient, and ready force.

Our continued investments and the FY 2025 budget support the continued evolution of the MHS in ensuring both a medically ready force and a ready medical force. These actions underscore the Department's commitment to Taking Care of People and are absolutely intrinsic to the value proposition of service that we seek to deliver upon. While the MHS' priority is, and will remain, caring for Service members and their families, the Department recognizes that it owes support to our dedicated civilian workforce and their dependents overseas, where securing certain medical care locally may be difficult. For instance, in places such as Japan, where differing medical cultures and language barriers limit non-MHS beneficiaries' access to care, the Department is taking immediate actions to make it easier for personnel to schedule host-nation care.

As part of our commitment to the medical readiness and well-being of the force, we are taking substantive actions and making investments toward addressing brain health and reducing traumatic brain injuries (TBI) as a result of blast exposure and otherwise. The Department has established a joint effort, the Warfighter Brain Health Initiative (WBHI), between operational and medical forces, which focuses on cognitive and physical performance as well as the identification of known and emerging brain threats in military environments. The WBHI unified approach to cognitive monitoring means that Service members will complete cognitive function tests upon entry and every five years after that. The availability of this objective data provides an opportunity to enhance or restore cognitive performance of individuals and extend the health of the force.

### Building a Culture of Safety

We have an inherent obligation to ensure the safety of our people – both uniformed and non-uniformed – and protect our resources and capabilities. As the science continues to develop, the Department is acting now on blast safety and mitigation to minimize and avoid unnecessary blast exposures. We are finalizing updated policy and implementation guidance to expand requirements for managing blast exposure risks and operationalize these guidelines. We are also providing training and tools to our leaders and personnel to ensure they have the information required to translate guidelines to the training ranges, units, and the field. These safety and training standards are central to protecting our Service members and civilians and maintaining the strategic readiness of our force.

The Department will continue to leverage senior leader advocacy, our robust safety governance structure, and data-driven insights and actions as tools to inculcate a culture of safety that is committed to driving behavioral change, reducing future mishaps, and increasing our readiness. We continue to underscore the importance of safety at every level of the force, from our newest recruit to our most senior commander, to ensure an environment where safety is a core value ingrained as an essential and integrated part of our training and operations.

The Department is steadfastly focused on investigating mishaps to identify and mitigate causal factors and drive actions to detect and mitigate risks before future tragedies occur. The Joint Safety Council, established by Congress, is a dedicated senior leader forum playing a key role in protecting our Service members from safety risks in both operational and training settings. It provides advice and recommendations through the Defense Safety Oversight Council as the principal forum governing the Department's comprehensive efforts to manage safety risks and reduce mishaps, as well as occupational illnesses and injuries. These structures are mutually supporting and work to prevent training accidents and protect our Service members.

## **TAKING CARE OF PEOPLE**

Taking Care of People, and the value proposition of service, does not stop with the health and safety of the Service member. Our commitments extend to our military families who serve alongside our Service members. This means ensuring that we invest in programs and initiatives to promote spousal employment, provide high-quality child care and school age education, and deliver on morale, welfare, and recreation programs that result in vibrant, healthy, and resilient military communities – recognizing that military families are central to readiness.

### Military Spouse Employment

The Department provides robust programs to help spouses achieve their professional goals, such as installation-based Employment Readiness Programs and the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities program (SECO). The SECO program offers virtual resources and tools for military spouses to find meaningful careers that can contribute to their family's financial security, stability, and resilience while on active duty and during transition. The Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP) program connects military spouses with employers who have committed to recruiting, hiring, promoting, and retaining them.

The Department also recognizes that the States have differing requirements for licensed career fields, which can impede military spouse careers. The Defense State Liaison Office educates States on 16 occupational licensure compacts for which seven were developed pursuant to a Cooperative Agreement between the Department and the Council of State Governments. And most recently, the Department recently extended and improved its Memorandum of Agreement with the Department of State on the Domestic Employees Teleworking Overseas program, which helps military spouses secure and retain U.S.-based federal civil service jobs while posted overseas.

### Child Care

The FY 2025 budget request also continues to invest heavily in delivering child care to our Service members, wherever they are stationed. Last year, we invested heavily in building additional child care facilities. Building on those investments, the FY 2025 budget request continues that commitment by investing in the child development workforce by addressing recruiting, retention, and compensation modernization. DoD operates the country's largest employer-sponsored child care program, providing care to more than 160,000 children from birth through 12 years of age every year. This integrated system of care operates worldwide, including 739 child development and school age centers, 148 youth and teen facilities, nearly 800 family child care homes, and a robust child care fee assistance program. We are committed to expanding and implementing initiatives to improve child care availability, quality, and affordability while ensuring a safe and healthy environment for children to thrive.

Between December 31, 2021, and December 31, 2023, we decreased waitlists at Child Development Centers by 20 percent, reduced fees for most families making less than \$120,000 annually, expanded the geographic eligibility of families paying for child care in community rather than military facilities through the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood-PLUS initiative and Child Care in Your Home pilot, as well as increased the monthly amount of fee assistance for this program to \$1,800 per child.

### Dependent Education

Beyond early-age child care, every Solider, Sailor, Airman, Guardian, and Marine who is a parent wants to ensure their children receive the best education possible. We believe our school

system is a one-of-a-kind benefit for our Service members. The Department of Defense Education Activity student scores were the highest in the nation across all demographic cohorts, including students with disabilities and English language learners, significantly outperforming the national average.

The FY 2024 budget expanded this support by funding universal pre-kindergarten for four-year-olds at all our schools, and the FY 2025 budget request continues that expansion. The expansion of universal pre-kindergarten will provide military families with no-cost educational opportunities for 4-year-olds and will roll out at 80 of our 90 schools worldwide this fall with the remaining 10 implementing as new or renovated facilities come online. We anticipate as many as 6,000 students benefiting once the program is fully implemented.

### Reduce Harmful Behaviors

The value proposition of military service, and the contract that the Department makes with its All-Volunteer Force, extends beyond just providing a comprehensive pay, compensation, and benefits package. To maintain trust with our Force, we have an obligation to offer a safe, respectful, and accountable environment, free from harmful, destructive, and readiness-detracting behaviors. With Congress' partnership over the past several years, the Secretary's priority improvements in this space continue to be realized, and the FY 2025 budget request continues to invest in combating these problematic behaviors.

Sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and other destructive behaviors have no place in the Department – one instance of any is one too many and can harm the unit cohesion necessary to field the most ready, lethal force. At the installation level, the Department's On-Site Installation Evaluation (OSIE) allows us to comprehensively improve prevention efforts, advance the approved recommendations of both the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military (IRC-SAM) and the Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee (SPRIRC), and inform future policy development. This effort extends to the Military Service Academies, where we also focus on addressing command climate and training challenges. The changes underway are intended to ensure the Department continues to develop officers who are prepared to lead in a challenging and dynamic threat environment.

The Department continues to implement the recommendations of the IRC-SAM as approved by Secretary Austin, and the budget request supports that focus. That includes continuing to implement the bipartisan military justice reforms, enhancing victim assistance care and support, focusing on foundational prevention efforts, and improving climate and culture. As of April 2024, 32 recommendations are completed or have seen significant progress, while implementation of the remaining 50 approved recommendations is underway.

Foundational to our efforts is the Integrated Primary Prevention Workforce (IPPW), which seeks to reduce the incidence of harmful behaviors, such as sexual assault, domestic abuse, child abuse, harassment, retaliation, and suicide. The IPPW promotes the health of military communities while partnering with leaders to change policies and implement prevention activities. Our budget request seeks to continue hiring toward a goal of 2,500 dedicated prevention personnel, providing additional training and credentialing necessary to support their professionalization.

The IPPW also contributes to suicide prevention. Suicide remains a challenge for our force and is being addressed with urgency. The factors that drive Service members to consider suicide are numerous and complex, and the Department continues to respond with the necessary nuance and a range of resources appropriate to the many protective and risk factors that vary from one individual to another. Based on recommendations from the SPRIRC, the Department is taking 83 enabling actions across five comprehensive lines of effort. The budget request supports these endeavors to foster a supportive environment and improve the delivery of mental health care, address stigma and other barriers to care, revise and modernize suicide prevention training; and promote a culture of lethal means safety.

## **TRANSITION FROM SERVICE**

Lastly, our obligation and commitment to the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Guardians, and Marines who comprise the All-Volunteer Force do not end with their time in uniform. The value proposition of service extends well beyond their time with the Department. Military to civilian transition is ever-evolving, complex, and multi-faceted because every transitioning Service member has their own individual goals. The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) ensures that our Service members are as successful after their service as they were during their service. TAP is an individualized, robust program with alternate pathways and multiple levels of assistance.

Each step of the process is guided by trained counselors, allowing Service members to be in control of their transition and utilize programs, resources, and information that fit their specific needs and align with their individual post-transition goals.

In addition to TAP, the Department has other programs bolstering the post-service careers of our veterans and retirees. For example, the SkillBridge program reduces civilian employment skills gaps by providing job training and employment skills training, including apprenticeship programs and connects participants to employers. Our most recent data shows over 22,000 Service members enrolled or participated in FY 2022 alone. SkillBridge is an important part of transition, and the Department is committed to affording maximum participation while ensuring that commanders can meet mission requirements and maintain unit readiness.

## **CONCLUSION**

I want to end on the theme of the promise of service – both to and for Service members. The Department has a sacred obligation to provide for members of the Total Force in ways that might seem extraordinary from an outside perspective. Our efforts consider the risks members of the Total Force bear on behalf of their country as well as the frequent life disruptions they withstand to meet mission requirements. Our FY 2025 budget request recognizes these commitments and makes well-reasoned and analytically based investments to provide our Service members with the very best pay, compensation, and benefits package possible, and essential support programs for them and their families.

In addition, I would be remiss not to highlight our civilian workforce once more. While the smallest and least costly segment of our Total Force, their contributions cannot be overstated. They are key to the readiness, health, resiliency, and safety of our fighting force and capabilities, and to the well-being of our military families. Often unfairly politicized, I would like to stress that our civilian workforce is a valued and essential component in the defense of our Nation.

It is our belief that, with the right national call to service, the value proposition of service for today's youth market will become increasingly apparent. In addition, we are continuing to enhance Quality of Life programs and support for the Total Force to ensure continued high retention. My colleagues and I are privileged to lead this organization, and I want to assure you that we are committed to taking care of the Department's workforce and partnering with this

committee to ensure the health and readiness of our Total Force. Thank you for your continued support, and we look forward to your questions.