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UNTIL RELEASED BY THE
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL

STATEMENT OF
HONORABLE FRANKLIN R. PARKER
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF NAVY FOR MANPOWER & RESERVE AFFAIRS

BEFORE THE

SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL

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Introduction

Chairwoman Warren, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to join you here today. I am honored by this opportunity to appear before you to talk about our Sailors, Marines, (active duty and reservists) as well as their families and our Department of the Navy civilian workforce.

As the 2022 National Security Strategy and National Military make clear, today we face a wide range of threats and global challenges. Coupled with complex systems and advancing technology, our Nation needs a strong, well-trained, well-equipped Navy and Marine Corps. We must leverage our talent to retain our competitive edge and multi-domain dominance.

The changing strategic landscape demands we maintain and strengthen the nation's maritime dominance, so our forces can deter, and prevail against potential adversaries. Our Navy/Marine Corps Team must foster a culture of warfighting excellence, while treating each other with dignity and respect. As an integrated team, collectively demonstrating talent, capabilities, and dedication second to none, our people can overcome any challenge they face.

Our workforce comprised of ... service members and civilians ... are at the core of our success – both as a military and a nation. I am incredibly proud of their performance, commitment, and unparalleled resilience in the face of the dynamic global challenges that have become our present operating environment.

COVID-19

In January, the Secretary of Defense rescinded his direction that all Service members receive the COVID-19 vaccine, as directed by the Fiscal Year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), Sect 525. Like many in leadership, I am proud of the commitment shown by members of our team during the department's years-long effort to reduce risk to the force and preserve combat effectiveness. Our Sailors and Marines received the vaccine, helping to reduce the threat of COVID-19 to the force, their families, and our country. Notwithstanding the rescission of the vaccine mandate, we remain committed to protecting the force from COVID-19 and other diseases and will continue encouraging our Sailors, Marines, and civilians to vaccinate against them. We also have standing procedures for bringing members, separated under the prior policy, back into service, ensuring that such Sailors and Marines who wish to return may re-apply.

Recruitment & Retention

Right now, we enjoy a total force of unprecedented quality. Achieving maritime dominance demands an agile force of undisputed lethality, resiliency and capacity. In our new environment, we must continue to ensure the Services are positioned to meet their recruitment and end-strength goals. We have some challenges.

A general decrease in propensity to serve and several years of the COVID-19 pandemic limited both student attendance and recruiter access to schools, making it difficult for our recruiters to make and maintain contact with potential recruits. The Secretary of the Navy is personally involved in addressing those challenges and we are working with both internal and external partners to foster success. As part of that effort we have reached out to the highest

levels of the Department of Education, seeking to address school access issues, and have also reached out to the school principals who restricted recruiter access. Through these and other efforts, we seek to ensure our Services have what they need to meet recruiting goals and achieve force readiness.

While a picture of the current recruiting environment is complicated, the Navy and Marine Corps are actively committed to overcoming recruiting challenges through strong collaboration and innovative thought. In addition to recruiting, the Navy/Marine Corps Team remains committed to retaining the right talent and experience. This complements our efforts with recruiting. We will explore every lever within our authority to maximize retention and we already are seeing positive trends in retention rates across both services.

Education

Over the course of the last year, the Department of the Navy has made significant strides to assess how education is delivered to the force, and modernize our educational objectives. Today's Navy and Marine Corps Team is a forward deployed, highly sophisticated network, one of the most technologically advanced networks ever conceived, and one that operates either in concert with other combat units or fully self-sustained, able to dominate the air, sea, and undersea. This network has but one purpose – to focus the capability of the American Sailor and Marine, assisted by technology, to serve the national interests of the United States and her allies and partners across the spectrum of engagement, whether for humanitarian purposes, to maintain freedoms in the global commons, or in combat.

As we become a more technologically advanced force, education will be a crucial warfighting enabler to maintaining America's might upon the sea. Our naval education enterprise

is working together to develop leaders with warfighting knowledge, intellectual dynamism, and creativity to maintain a strategic advantage against competitors and global adversaries. Through our Naval University system, we are creating a continuum of learning that develops such leaders to serve at every level and equips them with skills to maintain and operate increasingly complex systems in an ever-changing warfighting environment.

Resiliency & Readiness

Mental health concerns and rising suicide rates are national issues to which the Services have not been immune. We are well aware of the inextricable link between mental health, resiliency and the readiness of our force. To that end, we are committed to supporting and ensuring the mental health, safety, and well-being of all Sailors, Marines, and Department of the Navy civilians. We must do everything we can to foster the well-being of our people and prevent suicide. No one solution applies to every Sailor, Marine, or civilian.

Given the complexity of this challenge, our Office of Force Resiliency has taken a comprehensive approach to enhance holistic, data-driven suicide prevention efforts that draw from and harmonize with the Defense Strategy for Suicide Prevention. We have also taken note of the recently released report from the Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee (SPRIRC), and will work within DOD's coordination framework to implement key recommendations that will further our prevention effort.

The Department of the Navy (DON) is laser focused on countering sexual assault within the Navy and Marine Corps at every level. In addition to the toll on victim, sexual assault directly impacts unit cohesion and ultimately undercuts our readiness. We must maintain environments that foster respect, strengthen the dignity of military service, and increase our

warfighting readiness. Sexual assault is a persistent challenge that requires a multi-pronged approach leveraging a wide range of initiatives, not only to address sexual assault, but also to prevent it before it occurs.

Secretary Del Toro directed the establishment of an Implementation Advisory Panel (IAP) for the Department of the Navy last spring, bringing the leaders of all principal offices to the table to pinpoint strategies for the Navy and Marine Corps to implement the recommendations of the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military (IRC), as approved by the Secretary of Defense. Through the IAP, the DON has already made significant strides to implement the IRC recommendations, focusing first on the highest priority efforts. We fully recognize that we need to continue to confront and prevent these destructive behaviors. We are investing significant resources to fuel the needed changes and we have made substantial progress in standing up a dedicated prevention workforce, professionalizing the sexual assault response workforce to better provide victim care and support, and establishing Offices of Special Trial Counsel.

Additionally, our Office of Force Resiliency actively synchronizes the DON's sexual assault awareness and training, prevention, victim response, and accountability initiatives with the DoD Office of Force Resiliency. Sexual assault is more than just a crime. It undermines the trust and commitment that is foundational to our forces and erodes faith in our leaders, institutions, Shipmates, and Marines. This is a leadership issue, and you have my commitment to clearly and actively support these efforts and to demonstrate that sexual assault and sexual harassment will not be tolerated in any way, shape, or form.

Our Nation needs a strong, well-trained, and well-equipped Navy and Marine Corps to address the wide array of challenges and threats facing our nation. To be a combat-ready force, we must leverage the strengths of all our people. Further, because we are an all-volunteer force, we must ensure that all segments of our society see value in serving and are treated with dignity and respect when doing so.

As Secretary Del Toro stated in his posture testimony last year, “We draw talent from all of America to building our warfighting advantage. We need a diverse force, so every child in America can see themselves wearing the uniform or working in our civilian ranks tomorrow, and every viewpoint is represented in our operations today.”

Thanks to the leadership of Secretary Del Toro, Admiral Gilday and General Berger, our force is more potent today because we do just that – we draw from all of America. Yet, there is still more work to be done.

All Americans qualified to serve in the Navy and Marine Corps should have the opportunity to serve if they can meet the appropriate standards. Anything less would not allow the Navy and Marine Corps to avail ourselves of the best possible talent in America, and would render us less fit as a total force.

We are working to reduce barrier to accession, promotion, and retention, in recognition of the value of the service rendered by all of our Sailors, Marines, and civilians.

Support for Military Families

Quality of life issues are critical to our service members and their families. The stresses on our spouses and children weigh on the minds of our service members, especially when they

are deployed. By caring for our families, we enable our service members to continue their focus on the warfighting mission.

In January, the Department of the Navy implemented increases in the entitlement to parental leave as required by NDAA. Such measures not only are the right thing to do for our Sailors and Marines, but they also are crucial for recruitment and retention by providing necessary flexibilities for families to care for their children.

In addition, last fall, the Department of Defense directed services to make Permanent Change of Station (PCS) moves easier, strengthen support to our military families, expand spousal employment, and ensure affordable basic needs. We have since taken action to support spousal licensing and career advancement, expanding dependent care support and early childhood access. Additionally, we are pushing to end food insecurity among our youngest Sailors and Marines through access to financial literacy tools, spousal employment programs and other forms of support.

Conclusion

Regardless of the challenge, The Department of the Navy's Sailors, Marines, and civilians consistently answer the call. They step forward, raise their right hand, and perform superbly in our country's times of greatest need. Our Navy and Marine Corps Team has invariably risen to the meet all challenges and defend our nation, bonded together by almost 250 years of tradition and an unwavering, deep-seeded sense of duty to our country.

I look forward to working with you to ensure our efforts meaningfully and effectively support the well-being of our Sailors, Marines, civilians, and their families and that we always

best position them to fulfill their vital roles in support of our national security interests. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today, and I stand ready to answer your questions.