

NOT FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL RELEASED BY
THE SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS AND MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

STATEMENT OF

GENERAL ERIC M. SMITH
ASSISTANT COMMANDANT OF THE U.S. MARINE CORPS

BEFORE THE

SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS AND MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

ON

MILITARY READINESS AND THE FY2024 BUDGET REQUEST

MAY 2, 2023

NOT FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL RELEASED BY
THE SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS AND MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

Chair Hirono, Ranking Member Sullivan, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to address the readiness of your Marine Corps.

The Marine Corps remains the Nation's expeditionary force-in-readiness—a forward postured naval force ready to deter adversaries, respond to crisis and conflict, and contribute to Naval and Joint Force operations. Our identity as Marines centers on being ready to deter, fight, and win. As individual Marines, as units, and as a Corps, *everything we do is in support of warfighting advantage and being most ready when the Nation is least ready*. This is our obligation to the American people.

Readiness requires a combination of people, equipment, and training—all of which leaders must resource and sequence to meet both current and future challenges. In alignment with the 2018 and 2022 National Defense Strategies (NDS), we have identified the People's Republic of China (PRC) as our pacing challenge. The PRC is the competitor against which we must measure our ability to deter, fight, and win. Furthermore, Russia's unprovoked and illegal invasion of a sovereign nation has demonstrated their willingness to break the international rules-based order. We must consider our military readiness to deter Russian aggression in collaboration with our North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies and partners. We must also remain ready to respond to persistent threats from North Korea, Iran, and violent extremist organizations.

Our Fiscal Year 2024 (FY24) budget request will sustain key modernization investments from the preceding four budgetary cycles. We will focus on maintaining the tempo and capabilities brought to bear through our Force Design initiatives and investments. Through this deliberate effort we will ensure Marines operating forward can respond to crisis, contribute to Joint and Naval campaigns, enable integrated deterrence, and conduct the day-to-day forward campaigning necessary to build advantages with our allies and partners. We are also enhancing our talent management and training and education efforts to make, train, and retain the Marines that create our warfighting advantage.

While the focus of this modernization is to sustain a warfighting advantage against our pacing challenge, these changes are theater-agnostic and applicable against a range of competitors and adversaries around the globe. We are building a force capable of executing our emerging concepts, not a force exclusively tailored to them. In every possible future environment, Marines will be prepared for the harsh, violent realities that war brings. Force Design training and

manpower enhancements will ensure we remain ready to fight in the most austere conditions imaginable, because at the core, our single greatest asset is the individual Marine. These changes will ensure the Marine Corps maintains its legacy of being ready to fight in every clime and place.

Inseparable from our ability to respond to emergent crises is the readiness and availability of the amphibious warship fleet. The 2023 National Defense Authorization Act codified the requirement for no less than 31 L-Class Amphibious Warfare Ships and made the Commandant of the Marine Corps responsible for developing the amphibious warfare ship requirements for the Department of the Navy. The amphibious warfare ship inventory must consist of no less than 10 LHA/LHDs, 21 LPDs, and an additional 35 Medium Landing Ships (LSM) to provide our Fleet Marine Force with the organic maritime mobility and maneuver platforms required to execute active campaigning as a function of integrated deterrence and the ability to maneuver forces in times of conflict.

We continue to develop, experiment with, and quickly implement concepts and capabilities that best prepare our Marines for the challenges ahead. We will continue to remain good stewards of the taxpayer's dollars, prioritizing investments that provide the Joint Force with a warfighting advantage. Maintaining readiness is central to our efforts and we will continue to devote the funding necessary to ensure our forces remain capable and ready to respond to any crisis, anywhere on the globe, at any time. Every day or dollar lost means your Marines shoulder more risk. The on-time budget passed by this Congress mitigates risk and funds the equipment, training, and personnel required to execute our mission. The work of this committee ensures that we can continue to achieve the readiness our Nation requires and that our Marines and their families deserve. We thank you for your continued support and oversight of our modernization efforts, which ensures the lethality of the Marine Corps and allows us to remain "First to Fight."

Enhancing Warfighting Readiness

Our competitors and adversaries are making advances in areas where the U.S. has historically maintained dominance. Weapons wielded by tactical units now have ranges of hundreds of nautical miles, coupled with tremendous precision. The ability to communicate, once uncontested on the battlefield, is now challenged from our home stations to our objective areas. Even our air and naval superiority is challenged by peers and near-peers using readily available technology. Additionally, China, Russia, and other actors are using maritime gray zone activities

below the threshold of armed conflict that subvert international law, pressure our allies and partners, and jeopardize U.S. national interests. The Marine Corps recognizes these challenges and is taking action to ensure we provide ready and credible forces to deter foes, respond to crisis, fight, and win against any adversary.

Crisis Response

The Marine Corps continues to be the Nation's crisis response force of choice. Over the past year alone, Marines have supported humanitarian assistance operations for the people of the Pacific island of Kiribati, the people of the Caribbean island of Haiti, and the people of Türkiye.

The Marine Corps' ability to project and sustain Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs) from Amphibious Ready Groups (ARGs) provides the Nation and Combatant Commanders with combat credible forces, capable of being launched from international waters on forward deployed amphibious warships without any need for access, basing, or overflight. The demand signal from Combatant Commanders for the MEU to maintain a forward maritime presence cannot be overstated. The MEU provides Combatant Commanders with the ability to campaign, fight, and build critical relationships with allies and partners through security cooperation and interoperability exercises. They also ensure American citizens and our allies can be safely evacuated from anywhere on the planet. The 31 amphibious warship fleet supports the forward presence of the MEUs for crisis response and enables Marine forces to rapidly seize and defend key maritime terrain and sea lines of communication to preclude horizontal escalation in both crisis and conflict. Our MEUs, embarked on an absolute requirement of a 3-ship ARG, ensure that Americans and allies in distress are protected.

The recent deployment of the 22nd MEU with the KEARSARGE ARG highlights the utility and importance of this capability. In May of 2022, the 22nd MEU, in concert with Task Force 61/2, participated in the NATO Exercise NEPTUNE SHIELD 22. This exercise integrated high-end maritime expeditionary strike capabilities and demonstrated the responsive employment of maritime ballistic missile defense capabilities in support of NATO priorities and objectives. The following month, the KEARSARGE ARG and the 22nd MEU supported Exercise BALTOPS 22. This exercise provided a unique opportunity to strengthen the combined response capabilities critical to preserving freedom of navigation and security in the Baltic Sea. It also fostered critical relationships as Marines from the 22nd MEU conducted ground and air insertions and amphibious

landings alongside Swedish and Finnish counterparts. The actions of this MEU while forward deployed contributed to integrated deterrence and strengthened vital relationships with allies and partners.

Key investments within our FY24 budget request, such as the Amphibious Combat Vehicle (ACV), will enhance the readiness of our crisis response forces. This budget request continues procurement of the ACV, which provides significant improvements over the legacy Assault Amphibious Vehicle (AAV) in mobility, lethality, protection, and safety. ACVs enable crisis response forces ship-to-shore mobility from amphibious warfare ships, providing flexible response options for the Joint Force to maneuver to key locations without port facilities. Additionally, ACVs, combined with amphibious warfare ships and organic aircraft, provide the forcible entry capability required when the Marine Corps must seize or defend advanced naval bases in support of our statutory responsibilities. As with any new system, our ACV's have experienced some initial fielding challenges. We are working with our industry partners to address identified mechanical issues as we continue fielding and testing the new platform. We have also experienced training mishaps with four vehicles in the surf zone. After several months of dedicated efforts, and the institution of a Transition Training Unit in our Amphibious Assault School, we have a phased plan that will allow our ACV operators to employ the vehicle safely and effectively.

Stand-in Forces

Another significant Marine Corps contribution to the Naval and Joint fight is stand-in forces. Stand-in forces are units that are task-organized, trained, and equipped to disrupt an adversary's plans at every point on the competition continuum. These forces operate inside an adversary's weapons engagement zone, strategically placed in areas where they can expose malign behavior, gain and maintain custody of maritime targets, execute sea denial and support sea control operations with precision long-range fires, or canalize adversaries into areas where our Naval and Joint Forces can bring even more weapons to bear. They are the leading edge of the Joint Force. Adversaries are not able to simply ignore stand-in forces and accomplish their military goals. Stand-in forces impose costs on competitors and adversaries by causing them to expend their limited assets to attempt to locate them. This capability further enables Naval and Joint Force maneuver. Stand-in forces are survivable, in that they can independently persist for short periods and can reposition using organic maritime mobility to avoid targeting. Their physical and

electromagnetic signatures are not easily detected, and they possess the lethality to fight in cases when detected. Stand-in forces place as little sustainment burden as possible on a logistics system already in need of improvement. They require less support in austere environments than previous formations because they can produce some of their own water and power; use local food and fuel sources; and be resupplied by air, surface, and subsurface means. Finally, stand-in forces operate forward in partnership with other nations to support an integrated approach to competition. This includes conducting security cooperation, security force assistance, and exercises to strengthen relationships and develop maritime domain awareness. These capabilities enable stand-in forces to provide the credible deterrence and credible combat power that supports the NDS in both competition and conflict.

Our FY24 budget request supports stand-in forces by investing in key Force Design programs, including ground-based anti-ship missile capability, sensors, and communication networks. The Marine Corps' anti-ship missile capability, Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS), will provide stand-in forces a precise, lethal, and survivable ground-based anti-ship missile capability. We will field the first six operational launchers to the 3d Littoral Combat Team in the fourth quarter of FY23. We will continue to field NMESIS from FY24 through FY30 prioritizing our units supporting Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR) and MEU deployments. Our continued procurement and fielding of the F-35 provides 5th generation tactical air (TACAIR) capabilities both ashore and afloat to enhance situational awareness and afford commanders freedom of maneuver in a highly contested environment. Uncrewed systems, including the MQ-9A Extended Range uncrewed aerial system (UAS), provide our Joint and Naval Forces with the sensing capabilities necessary to detect targets and pass targeting data to the Joint kill web. These advanced systems increase a stand-in force's situational awareness and extend its area of influence. The Marine Corps is investing in resilient communication networks to transmit and receive information from the Joint Force at the satellite, aerial, and terrestrial levels. This ability will ensure the Marine Corps can provide necessary sensor and reconnaissance capabilities to the Joint Force while simultaneously being supported by the Joint Force when we conduct our own strikes.

In March of 2022, we activated the 3d MLR, which now has an established littoral combat team, combat logistics battalion, and littoral anti-air battalion. The MLR recently deployed to execute the first Service-level MLR training exercise. This exercise focused on sensing and

making sense of the battlefield enabling the MLR's ability to rapidly close kill webs. The Marine Corps will activate the 12th MLR in Japan in FY25. This MLR, operating inside of the first island chain, will be equipped with advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) as well as long range strike and anti-ship capabilities to maintain continuous maritime domain awareness and provide decision space for the Joint Force Commander. These units will enhance our ability to deter our peer competitors, reassure our allies and partners, and contribute a unique capability to the maritime fight.

Organic Naval Mobility

One of the most valuable characteristics of our naval expeditionary forces is their ability to use organic Naval mobility. The ability to position and reposition throughout a battlespace without relying on strategic lift, host nation permission, or deep-water ports is critical to our survivability, resiliency, and lethality and significantly reduces the stress on US TRANSPORTATION COMMAND. Amphibious warfare ships and the agility they provide the Joint Force are a national strategic capability. No other platform, when properly matched with the Navy and Marine Corps team, provides more flexibility and capability to the Combatant Commanders. To ensure our readiness in the future, we must ensure Marine crisis response and stand-in forces have the organic maritime and littoral mobility platforms they require. To sustain a forward presence of two ARG/MEUs, to have the capacity to surge up to five ARG/MEUs if directed, and to execute the missions the Nation requires, the Marine Corps requires no less than 31 L-Class amphibious warfare ships and 35 LSMs.

Amphibious warfare ships and LSMs are complementary, but not interchangeable. Amphibious warfare ships enable MEUs to conduct global crisis response, project and sustain forces in a contested environment, and aggregate combat power for forcible entry. The 35 LSMs will provide the organic littoral mobility required to transport and sustain Marine Littoral Regiments throughout an adversary's weapons engagement zone. These LSMs will be affordable, beachable, and distributable. They will be capable of operating in support of campaigning activities and as necessary, in a contested environment to support Naval Expeditionary Combat Forces. These 35 LSMs will provide task organized Marine units of up to 80 personnel the ability to quickly reposition throughout the littorals and land anywhere, causing adversaries to expend ISR to find them. Deterrence and the ability to rapidly respond to crisis or conflict requires the presence

of combat credible forces. Amphibious warfare ships, combined with LSMs, make that possible. The Navy and Marine Corps recognize the necessity for a littoral maneuver bridging capability until the LSM becomes available. A littoral maneuver bridging solutions evaluation team will explore a wide range of existing platforms to inform future investments.

Support for amphibious investments in FY24 and future years is crucial to our ability to provide the naval expeditionary force our Nation requires. It is also vital to our ability to effectively train for our missions. Without maintaining amphibious warfare ship readiness, Navy and Marine Corps proficiency standards are at risk. Over the past five years, the number of Marines serving aboard naval shipping has decreased by 20 percent; in 2018, 16,000 Marines performed sea-duty, but less than 13,000 did so in 2022. Lack of amphibious ship availability, not because of inventory but instead due to insufficient maintenance, caused this decline. The first time a Marine conducts wet-well operations, or a pilot conducts a night landing on a pitching and rolling deck, cannot be on the way to the fight. It must happen now, on ready and maintained warships, to ensure that the Joint Force is consistently prepared for combat. We cannot build trust and interoperability with our allies and partners from a distance, nor can we contest malign activities without being present. Without the necessary number of well-maintained amphibious warfare ships, we may find that China is the first to arrive at a disaster or crisis, just as they did last year in the Pacific Island of Tonga. This cannot happen again.

Aviation

Marine aviation provides the vital organic mobility, lethality, protection, sustainment, and connectivity critical to Marine Corps combat readiness and Naval expeditionary warfare. Readiness rates for Marine aviation continue to rise. The average mission capable rate in 2022 was 66 percent—an increase from 65 percent in FY21 and 57 percent in FY18. Notably, our deployed squadrons and MEUs are averaging a mission capable rate of more than 80 percent. This combined with our revised construct allows us to deploy 10 F-35Bs aboard our MEUs compared to the traditional six AV-8B contingent; offering the COCOMs a 66 percent increase in TACAIR – 5th Generation aircraft – with our MEUs time now. Maintenance planning and process improvements at the organizational level have reduced Non-Mission Capable Maintenance rates from an average of nearly 23 percent in FY18 to less than 16 percent in FY22. Enterprise-level initiatives at the intermediate and depot-level promise to increase aircraft on the flightline and

reduce the turn-around time for high-level maintenance and modernization evolutions. We owe these readiness gains to targeted funding for key readiness enabler accounts, success of various platform-specific readiness initiatives, and the day-in and day-out hard work of our Marine maintainers.

Several aviation accomplishments over the past year demonstrate our readiness for current and future missions and deserve specific attention. The F-35 continues to provide the Navy and Marine Corps team a lethal and survivable strike and sensor platform for operations in a highly contested environment. In 2022, two F-35C squadrons, VFA-147 aboard the USS CARL VINSON and VMFA-314 aboard the USS ABRAHAM LINCOLN, trained, deployed, and operated together throughout the INDOPACOM theater demonstrating the unique contributions of this platform to integrated deterrence. The Marine Corps' newest heavy-lift helicopter, the CH-53K, continues to demonstrate impressive performance in terms of distance, airspeed, and gross weight lift capacity that no other rotary platform can match. This aircraft will provide the heavy organic lift and operational reach necessary to support distributed maritime operations across vast distances in the Pacific and elsewhere. The CH-53K achieved initial operating capability in April 2022, and our first CH-53K squadron will soon reach full operational capability. With the approval of full rate production for this program in December of 2022, our budget request includes funding for 15 aircraft in FY24.

Our KC-130J and MV-22 squadrons continue to be the workhorses of our aviation fleet. Combatant Commander demand for what these platforms bring to the fight remains high; our Marines continue to fly and fix these aircraft at an impressive rate to support that demand. This past year, the Marine Corps activated Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 153 (VMGR-153) in Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, and by 2026, VMGR-153 will bring 15 KC-130J aircraft to the Pacific, substantially increasing the reach and sustainment capabilities of Marines throughout the theater. While increasing our reach with our KC-130J squadrons, we are working to address our MV-22 readiness rates. This year, the Marine Corps identified the negative impacts of life limits on Input Quill Assemblies on our MV-22 fleet. We are prioritizing our squadrons forward deployed and afloat on MEUs for quill replacement to maintain a ready and capable crisis response force. The MV-22 remains one of our most capable platforms with more than 480,000 successful flight hours. Continued stable and predictable funding in support of Marine Aviation flight hour,

sustainment, and aviation spares accounts will be critical to our ability to continue this level of performance and readiness.

Contested Logistics

Logistics is our pacing warfighting function; our ability to position and sustain our combat power sets the limit on what is operationally possible. In the most demanding operating environments, every action—regardless of the domain—may be monitored, tested, or disrupted by a competitor or adversary. To succeed, we will have to be lighter, more mobile, and more expeditionary than ever before. Therefore, we must focus on the capabilities, relationships, formations, and equipment that will enable us to meet these logistical challenges at every level. If we fail to do this, we will have the very best capabilities that we cannot sustain.

To meet the logistics challenges of our operating environment, the Marine Corps is working to increase our global logistics awareness, diversify our distribution methods, improve our sustainment ability, and make our installations ready for a contested environment. These lines of effort and initiatives will give flexibility to our Marines by allowing them to produce their own support and reduce the need for support from outside units. In an effort to push repair parts availability as far forward as possible, we continue to increase our additive manufacturing capability. In the future, prestaging some of this equipment with our allies will increase our readiness and make us more lethal. We are also developing a family of uncrewed logistics systems tailored to littoral environments, which will increase our resupply flexibility and reduce risk to Marine forces. The Tactical Resupply UAS (TRUAS) will provide stand-in forces an autonomous and organic logistic capability to sustain distributed operations. These efforts, along with others, will provide the reliable and flexible logistics support our Marines will need in the most challenging conditions.

Continued work and investment are required to build a logistics network that is resilient against peer and near-peer competitors. The Joint Logistics Enterprise underpins all of our logistics initiatives, enabling a global, dynamic, and modernized supply chain. Continued investment in logistics information technology systems enabled with artificial intelligence/machine learning capabilities will help ensure a low-signature logistics ecosystem that protects the identity and location of stand-in forces. This work will create the sensor-based, data-driven, and networked

environment necessary for the sustainment of stand-in forces and crisis response forces in contested environments.

Infrastructure

Marine Corps installations are more than buildings, ranges, and airfields; they are warfighting platforms that provide vital support for every one of our missions, our Marines, Sailors, and their families. We must resource them as such and ensure they remain ready to support not only today's requirements but also future challenges.

The Marine Corps is focusing on a facilities investment optimization plan that will improve facilities' readiness over time, beginning with the highest-valued assets. More than 25,000 Marines are currently forward-postured west of the International Date Line and positioned inside China's weapons engagement zone. Modern and resilient infrastructure in the Pacific will enable our ability to stand-in or respond to crisis. With the activation of Marine Corps Base Camp Blaz on Guam, Pacific infrastructure projects such as the consolidated Marine Expeditionary Brigade Headquarters, Artillery battery facilities, and the 9th Engineer Support Battalion's Training Complex will support Marines being stationed on Guam. Additionally, FY24 projects such as the Child Development Center, Recreation Center, and the Religious Ministry Services Facility will greatly enhance the quality of life that Marines deployed to Guam need and deserve.

Information Environment Modernization

Information technology is a critical enabler for the command and control of Marine forces, management and protection of information assets, and collaboration with mission partners. Network modernization is the foundation from which we sense, make sense, and act. We are modernizing our end user devices, improving our enterprise and tactical communication transport infrastructure; migrating to cloud computing; and investing in artificial intelligence and machine learning. Additionally, the Marine Corps has invested extensively in Zero Trust efforts to combat against cyber exploits attempting to infiltrate our networks. Without the ability to secure, operate, and defend our networks in a degraded or denied communication environment, we will not capitalize on the capabilities of the Joint All Domain Command and Control framework. Our investments will provide seamless, agile, resilient, transparent, and secure infrastructure to support Joint Force information advantage.

Training and Education

We are also transforming our training and education (T&E) enterprise to produce the most skilled and ready Marines to meet the demands of the all-domain battlefield of the future operating environment. To achieve this end state, our T&E continuum must continue to evolve, guided by informed decisions through data driven analysis. We will focus on shaping Marines into more cognitively agile, intuitive problem solvers, capable of making bold and consequential decisions in an uncertain environment.

One way we are modernizing our T&E continuum is transforming our learning methodology to an outcomes-based learning (OBL) approach. OBL orients learners on “how” to think about challenges in multi-disciplinary contexts, vice merely “what” to think with respect to procedures or processes. It requires the learner to be more engaged and adaptive and grow as a problem-solver who can confidently and reliably process information and comprehend key variables within a specific contextual environment.

We have launched a new Infantry Marine Course at our enlisted Schools of Infantry, which is incorporating the OBL approach. This course is a four-phase program of instruction that takes Marines, as a unit, through increasingly complex practical application exercises, challenging their critical thinking and decision-making skills. The backbone of this course, the Sergeants of our instructor cadre, remain with their individual squads throughout the entire fourteen weeks of training. The benefits of this new system are multifold: from the earliest stages of their training, Marines build cohesion, learn how to fight as a team, and strengthen our Corps, as the instructors return to the Fleet Marine Force as more capable leaders.

We are also modernizing our training ranges with improved instrumentation, feedback, and safety tools. Additionally, we are developing a Live, Virtual, and Constructive (LVC) Training Environment across the entire training enterprise, which will provide the persistent and adaptive training needed to prepare Marines to project and sustain our stand-in forces and leverage organic aviation and naval mobility capabilities. With our enhanced synthetic training capabilities, we will prepare our Marines to operate within information degraded and contested logistics environments.

Since the beginning of 2021, we have been executing our integrated training model at both recruit depots, fulfilling the FY20 NDAA requirement at Parris Island, and are on track to meet the requirement at San Diego as directed. Our current efforts allow both male and female recruits to receive positive examples of leadership from both genders to produce environments that foster

respect and unit cohesion. Through these efforts, we will continue to shape the resilient, capable, and adaptive Marines required to fight and win in the future operating environment.

Taking Care of Our People

Our single greatest asset remains the individual Marine. By properly equipping the warfighter with the technology and armaments to be the most lethal on the battlefield, we ensure a physical advantage over our competitors. Modernizing our training and education programs will allow us to maximize the talents and skills of our Marines, enabling an even more important psychological and mental advantage over those same competitors. We must still, however, remain equally focused on taking care of our individual Marines. In line with these efforts, we have added \$14 million to our childcare funding line in FY22 to hire more childcare employees at higher wages. We have additionally submitted two military construction projects to build two new Child Development Centers to increase on-base capacity at our installations reporting the largest waitlists. We must invest in our people, ensure their safety, and protect them from stressors on and off of the battlefield so that when crises emerge, our Marines remain resilient and ready to fight and win.

Talent Management

The changes the Marine Corps is making to its capabilities and concepts will only be fully realized if we have parallel advancements and investments in our people. We are executing Talent Management 2030 (TM2030), our strategic plan for modernizing the way we recruit, develop, and retain Marines. TM2030, and its subsequent annual update, describes a fundamental redesign of our personnel system, empowered by new statutory authorities provided by Congress. It details how the Marine Corps will implement new models for recruiting and retaining talent, modernize our assignments process consistent with our warfighting philosophy, introduce new measures to increase career flexibility, and optimize access to modern digital tools, processes, and analytics, consistent with industry standards. Our end state is to improve combat lethality and capability by better identifying and cultivating an individual Marine's talents through education, training, mentorship, and experience, and assigning them to positions where they can best contribute to the success of their unit and the Corps. Through these efforts and engaged leadership, the Marine Corps will be able to capitalize on the totality of America's talent.

The Marine Corps is already executing several initiatives to modernize and improve personnel management. To increase family stability while sustaining warfighting capability, we are increasing Permanent Change of Station (PCS) flexibility and efficiencies, such as reassigning Marines locally when a career-enhancing billet is available or using distributed learning rather than issuing permanent change of station orders for additional education. We are also working to extend individual Marine's tours, vice our legacy three-year model, to better maintain unit cohesion, while minimizing stress on our Marine families. We are in the process of implementing our 360-degree Leadership Review Program to improve leadership effectiveness by identifying blind spots and areas of improvement for personal growth. We have also implemented an opt-out option for promotion boards this year to increase career flexibility.

Our FY24 budget request also includes vital investments in manpower information technology (IT) systems modernization—the digital backbone for our talent management efforts. Our goal is to consolidate the more than 70 disparate manpower applications and systems into a small number of applications on a single IT system, bringing our human resource practices in line with best practices in the private sector. These actions, along with other policy changes and investments will help us more fully harness the breadth and depth of talent within our force and the American people.

We are succeeding in our overall retention goals. However, the Marine Corps is experiencing some of the same recruiting challenges impacting the entire Department. Our FY24 budget reflects these recruiting challenges by seeking an end strength of 172,300 active-duty Marines. For the Reserve Forces, our plan is to recruit and retain 33,600 Marines in FY24.

Suicide Prevention

As part of our larger human performance management efforts, we continue to examine our mental health programs and suicide prevention efforts. Every life lost to suicide is one too many. We continue to pursue all opportunities to reduce the incidence of suicide amongst our Marines, Sailors, and their family members. The Secretary of Defense recently released a report from the Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee (SPRIRC). We are reviewing the recommendations of this committee and implementing those tasks that have been approved. Internally, the Service recently gathered a senior leader advisory group from across the Marine Corps operational force, installations, Chaplain Corps, and medical teams to address suicide

prevention. In concert with recommendations from this advisory group, we are prioritizing integrated training and education, enhancing our prevention workforce, increasing access to information for our Marines, Sailors, and families, heightening our focus on spiritual fitness, and bolstering our new join process. We are committed to ensuring our Marines, Sailors, and their families are equipped and informed to navigate stressors both on and off duty in healthy and productive ways.

Sexual Assault Prevention and Response

As a Service, we will remain steadfast in ensuring commanders and their senior enlisted counterparts are responsible for the climate of our units, assisting victims with care and support, and appropriately holding perpetrators of sexual assault accountable. To combat sexual assaults, the Service continually strives to improve education and training to our Marines. This past year, through updated Combined Commandership Course, First Sergeants' Course, and updated Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) Annual Training for Non-Commissioned Officers, we have equipped commanders and leaders to address command climate and understand risk and protective factors from the individual to community levels. We are engaging in integrated prevention and leveraging trauma-informed leadership and staffs in prevention and response. We have also established the Office of Special Trial Counsel in line with the 2022 NDAA military justice reform. In the coming year with funding enacted in our FY23 request, the Marine Corps plans to hire 369 positions across the enterprise in support of the Secretary of Defense directed Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military. These new positions will include 121 Sexual Assault Response Coordinators, 194 Victim Advocates, 23 Primary Prevention Integrators, and 31 Equal Opportunity Advisors. The integration of these positions will enable communication and collaboration on policy, plans, and training to improve the efficacy of the Marine Corps SAPR program.

Safety

Over the past several years, we have lost the lives of too many Marines in preventable training incidents. Losses of life in training are not the "cost of doing business." It is a price no Marine or Sailor should have to pay. Safety remains a pillar of Marine Corps warfighting advantage and readiness. We have made significant progress in improving our safety performance

and culture; however, there is still much work to do. Mishap rates over the past year have returned to the historical norms observed prior to COVID (FY20 and FY21). This rise coincides with a return to normal operational tempo but is in no way seen as “acceptable”. Our goal is to reduce mishap rates, not accept them.

This past year the Marine Corps has deliberately focused on making our ground forces safer. We are utilizing the aviation safety templates that maximize standardization, checklists, and instruction to reduce mishaps in our ground safety campaign. The Marine Corps Safety Division is also working in concert with the Inspector General of the Marine Corps to reinvigorate the Command Safety Assessment Program. This program will increase opportunities for oversight, share lessons learned, augment training, and communicate best practices across the Marine Corps.

This coming year, we will fund a new contract for the Aviation Safety Awareness Program, an anonymous hazard reporting system for all aviation units. This will leverage advanced data analytics and allow our unit commanders to review submissions to provide an immediate and timely response to safety issues. We will also continue briefs and presentations to our aviation community across the globe to discuss previous mishaps and their causal factors. These efforts, in conjunction with the dissemination of our safety resources and references, will allow Marines at all levels to learn from past mistakes. We cannot eliminate the risks of our profession, but we will do all we can to mitigate those risks and elevate them to senior leaders before high-risk events take place.

Conclusion

The United States is a maritime nation, and as such, it requires a Marine Corps ready to deter, fight, and win in the maritime domain. As America’s premier global crisis response force, your Marine Corps is ready to accomplish these missions today, and with your continued support, will be even more ready tomorrow. On behalf of all of our Marines, Sailors, civilians, and families, we thank you for your support for our efforts to remain the most ready when the Nation is least ready.