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SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL
COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ARMED SERVICES

STATEMENT OF
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MASTER CHIEF PETTY OFFICER OF THE NAVY
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL
OF THE HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE ON
MARCH 9, 2023

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Banks, Ranking Member Kim and distinguished members of the subcommittee, as Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy, it is my honor and privilege to speak to you on behalf of the 393,104 active and reserve Sailors who serve our Nation as well as their families. I am grateful for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the quality of life of our Navy's Sailors and families. My goal is to provide insight on this important topic as well as inform you of current issues that are creating barriers to service across the fleet that will impact our readiness and lethality.

I appear before this committee with thirty-five years of perspective and fleet experience to advise and advocate for the improvements to the quality of life for our Sailors and their families. During my tenure, I want to do all that I can within my sphere of influence to improve the quality of Naval service and enhance our warfighting capability so that we remain a dominant Naval Force to deter conflict, keep the sea lanes open and free, and when called upon, decisively win our Nation's wars.

In an era of strategic competition, people are our most valuable asset. We must continue to build, maintain, train and equip a combat-credible force. We owe our Sailors and their families stability in their pay, access to quality and timely health care and services, as well as opportunities to develop personally and professionally. Their individual success and the Navy's collective mission accomplishment rely on our ability to provide an environment that promotes inclusiveness and a sense of value to the team, ensuring we recruit and retain the talent our Nation requires. Fostering these expectations are a top priority for myself, the Chief of Naval Operations, and leadership at all levels.

MEDICAL CARE

When I became MCPON on September 8th, I did not go back to my office in the Pentagon and sit behind my desk to figure out what the issues were. My team and I started tackling these concerns months ahead of the change of office, and when that date finally came, we immediately started our fleet engagements to meet with Sailors and families and hear directly from them about their concerns. They have been heard. Access to adequate medical services and timely care is one of the top concerns they have brought to my attention multiple times across the fleet. In places like the Pacific Northwest, where two Naval hospitals have been downgraded, requiring Sailors and families to drive an hour or more to seek military medicine and specialized care. Obtaining access to care is not just a problem for our service members and their families, it also includes our DoD civilians and their families, who are an integral component to our total Naval Force. In some of our overseas locations, they face medical care challenges because they are unable to access military medical treatment facilities. Because of this, we could begin losing employees that are mission critical and force multipliers very soon. DoDDEA, amongst others, could be challenged to stay on their missions in support, but many of our employees work directly alongside our military teams, and their absence would immediately translate to mission risk.

To prepare our Sailors for combat, we must ensure each member of our team is resilient. Their mind, body, and spirit, must be ready for the increased challenges and stress. Mental health is a warfighting readiness necessity and we are facing significant mental health challenges. The wait times for mental health support are long; we can do better to bring these wait times down where we can, implementing a “no wrong door” approach, whether that be through peer support, Triad support, chaplains, Fleet and Family Support Service Centers, Military One Source. The

emphasis on the critical need for mental health support and resources remains prominent in our fleet. Humana Military and Tricare have partnered with telehealth programs such as Doctor on Demand and Telemind, however active duty members must still make an appointment with their primary care provider for a referral, increasing the wait time therefore missing the intent of more accessible healthcare. We have to do better.

In the six months I have been MCPON I have personally signed fifty-six condolence letters to families who have lost their loved ones to suicide. In 2022, seventy-seven active duty and reserve Sailors took their lives. One life lost is too many. I want to invest more energy into prevention tools and resources that create positive climates that improve Sailors' lives both personally and professionally.

These services and programs are just the beginning, and I implore that we continue to support them. We must continue recruiting efforts and retention incentives for our mental health care providers, while we compete with the civilian sector for talent during a nationwide shortage of these specialists.

PAY COMPENSATION/RETENTION/RECRUITMENT

If our team is to remain a dominant Naval Force, we must continue focusing on the factors that influence our recruiting and retention efforts, assessing situations that impact an all-volunteer force's propensity to serve and build a stronger national call to service.

Although the military has seen a 4.6 percent basic pay increase in fiscal year 2023, we are still falling below current inflation rates. Even with policy and initiatives, such as Basic Needs Allowance and increased Basic Allowance for Housing in many locations, many Sailors are still struggling to make ends meet in their local economies. This has a ripple effect, as our Sailors continue to find themselves struggling to house themselves, feed their families, and find safe and

affordable child care. For our single Sailors, I want to create balance by separating work from home, allowing all of them to live in unaccompanied housing, away from the shipboard environment.

If we want to retain our professional and qualified service members, we must continue to close the pay gap between military compensation and the private sector, and ensure they have a secure place to live. We are asking men and women to be the best and most skilled warfighters to defend our Nation. We also ask their families to share in the weight of service – with the high unemployment rate for military spouses due in part to frequent relocations, many Navy families are unable to share in the benefits of dual incomes like their non-military peers. We cannot afford to lose these talented Sailors. As we recruit and retain the best and brightest our Nation has to offer, we appreciate Congressional support in helping ensure our force is appropriately compensated.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

With the challenges that our Navy and Marine Corps team may face, cultivating a culture of continuous learning, at sea or ashore, is a Department of the Navy priority and imperative to the Navy's mission. Continuous learning creates professional warfighters and a more professional workplace, fostering an environment where people want to belong.

The United States Naval Community College (USNCC) reinforces our warfighting advantage and enhances operational readiness by providing world-class, Naval-relevant education to a globally deployed force. USNCC has continued to partner with colleges throughout the United States to provide degree and professional certificate options in cybersecurity, STEM-concentrated areas, organizational leadership, and military studies to enlisted Naval warfighters. Our Sailors and Marines are expected to be engaged in competition

for future conflict. To better prepare them to succeed in complex and uncertain situations, it is critical to maintain support and funding for USNCC. This enables our force by not only enhancing critical thinking and technical skills, but serves as a force multiplier, and will be the decisive advantage over our adversaries.

CONCLUSION

If there is one thing that I hope you take away from my testimony is that I am passionate about being a Sailor, a leader, and an advocate for my Shipmates. Military service is one of the hardest things our Sailors, Marines, Soldiers, Airmen, and Guardians will ever be asked to do. I am committed to removing barriers from service that prevent them from having a safe and secure place to live and work, so they can execute their oath of enlistment in defending our Nation, without adding unnecessary stressors to their lives. With your continued support to our Navy and our families, you enable us to remain ready for any situation. It is truly an honor and a privilege to appear before you; serving you, the American people, and our Navy. Thank you for your time. I am proud to serve our Sailors and their families as the sixteenth Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy.