

RECORD VERSION

STATEMENT BY

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SENIOR ENLISTED PERSPECTIVE ON QUALITY OF LIFE

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Chairman Banks, Ranking Member Kim, distinguished members of this Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to speak on behalf of the soldiers, their families, and the Army civilians who make up our all-volunteer force.

First, I want to say how proud I am of our soldiers. America's Army is lethal and effective, ready to surge when called upon in times of crisis to fight and win the Nation's wars while defending U.S. enduring national interests. Our deployed forces in Europe now include 42,000 soldiers, of which 17,000 are not permanently assigned to Europe. In the Africa and Central Command areas of operation, there are more than 23,000 soldiers committed. Currently on standby are also 74,000 soldiers serving as part of the Immediate or Crisis Response Forces. Serving alongside each of them is a family enduring the stress of a loved one away from home or prepared to leave at a moment's notice. Their sacrifice is not unnoticed.

Thank you for all the work you have done to support your U.S. Army. It has been my honor to serve over the past 35 years and the impacts of your support could not be clearer. The recent fiscal year (FY) 2023 Appropriations Bill demonstrates your commitment to improve the quality of life (QoL) for our soldiers and their families. The \$1.55 billion in Army Military Construction funding—which directs more than \$574 million toward family housing, \$154 million for barracks, and \$99 million for Child Development Centers (CDCs) directly targets soldier and family QoL.

Additionally, the recent passage of the Veterans Auto and Education Improvement Act of 2022 can have an immense impact for our families by granting professional license reciprocity to all soldiers and spouses relocated due to military obligation. This is something I've personally advocated for, and I'm incredibly proud to see it enacted. I would ask each of you to consider advocating for this change at the state level, as well.

Families support every facet of our Nation, and help make the Army the greatest force the world has ever known. The soldiers, their families, caregivers, survivors, and Army civilians are the cornerstone of your Army, and we have not waived on our commitment to them. Our foundational priorities continue to be people, readiness, and modernization. We are focused on all three, ensuring that your Army is ready and

remains true to our Army Values and Warrior Ethos while fostering a professional, safe, and inclusive culture.

To further build on those priorities, the Secretary of the Army outlined five focus areas: recruiting and accessions; continuous improvement of QoL programs; reducing harmful behaviors across our formations; the Army in the Indo-Pacific; and keeping modernization on track. My role is to ensure the Army can fight and win our Nation's wars by building cohesive teams—founded on trust—that are highly trained, disciplined, and mentally, socially and physically fit.

Recruiting, Retention, and Improving Quality of Life

We are building a culture of cohesive teams that are highly trained, disciplined, and fit, where everyone is treated with dignity and respect. Recruiting and retaining the best talent our Nation has to offer begins with maximizing their potential and meeting the needs of our current force. Developing meaningful career-progression opportunities, encouraging engaged leadership, and ensuring transitioning soldiers have the resources to be successful after they leave the military are significant factors in the improvement of the QoL for our people.

Providing quality housing, barracks, childcare, and services for our soldiers and their families is a key factor in retaining talent. With your help, the Army is committed to sustaining quality housing conditions for soldiers and their families. I am working with the Assistant Secretary of the Army (Installations, Energy, and Environment), Headquarters Department of the Army (HQDA) G9, and Army Materiel Command on the development of an Army barracks resourcing plan to set us on an immediate improvement path for the quality of unaccompanied housing across the Army by defining “quality barracks” and holding ourselves accountable to it. If fully funded, the proposed 10-year plan will repair ALL barracks rated as “poor” or “failing” and reduce our current barracks-space deficit from 25% to 10%—both by FY 2029.

For family housing, privatized housing companies are in the middle of a \$3 billion investment cycle that will run from 2020-2026. We have approved the universal lease at all 44 Army privatized installations and have fully implemented all 18 rights set out in the

Tenant Bill of Rights at all Army installations with privatized housing. We require every privatized home on our Army installations to be inspected during change of occupancies or after a life-health-safety work order. Your assistance and oversight have materially contributed to improve the quality of Army on-base housing.

Supporting military families with access to affordable quality child care is another area of significant focus. Ongoing staffing challenges continue to impact/limit child care availability at some locations despite initial pay increases, bonuses, and expanded hiring initiatives for childcare workers. We have raised entry-level hourly wages to \$17.39/hour, offered a 50% discount on childcare fees for staff, as well as increased bonuses for child development center and in-home family childcare providers. Hiring practices and requirements require significant review to ensure we're able to find quality candidates and quickly place them in these significant places of trust before they are hired elsewhere outside of the CDC system.

More than 431,000 spouses play an essential role in readiness and soldier intent to remain in the Army. When spouses are able to build and transport their careers, have access to quality employment options, and are satisfied with overall QoL, they are more likely to support their soldiers' continued service. The Army continues to support meaningful spouse employment by working with the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) to improve and promote My Career Advancement Accounts, a workforce development scholarship worth up to \$4,000 to pursue licenses, certifications, or associate degrees in portable occupations. We also fully support the Military Spouse Employment Partnership, which connects spouses with hundreds of partner employers committed to hiring military spouses—this is another area where your continued advocacy can make a difference.

The Army acknowledges we must continue improving the experience for soldiers, civilians, and families to avoid hardships caused by Permanent Change of Station (PCS) expenses. Updated policies and processes to provide PCS orders to soldiers and civilians 120 days prior to report dates have enabled better forecasting and scheduling for contracted movers. The Army established a Relocation Advisory Committee made up of Army spouses, subject matter experts, and Army leaders to address PCS issues

within its purview or to be raised to OSD for action. The Army continues to work with OSD, the U.S. Transportation Command, and the other Services to develop and implement meaningful policy changes to make improvements and reduce stressors on service members throughout PCS moves.

Roughly nine percent of the active force has a family member with a condition which qualifies them to be in the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP). The Army is committed to a comprehensive, all-inclusive approach to coordinate community support as well as educational, medical, housing, and personnel services to support families enrolled in the EFMP and help them remain ready and retained in the Army. As we work with these families, we always try to balance Army readiness with their well-being. It is a delicate balance, but at the end of the day, we must ensure EFMP families are stationed where they can receive appropriate medical care and support services. Last year, we launched the integrated Army Enterprise EFMP system to improve enrollment, transparency, assignment coordination, and family support access for EFMP families. We have also stood up to a central HQDA EFMP office to coordinate health care services, permanent change of station order processing, and education support services. Our goal is full operational capability by the end of this year. We continue to listen to families to make EFMP improvements and make family support access easier for Soldiers and their family members.

Recruit and Retain Talented Soldiers

While we are making significant strides to improving QoL initiatives to support recruiting and retention requirements, we must also address specific challenges in those areas. The Army is committed to the All-Volunteer Force by recruiting a qualified, disciplined, and fit force reflective of our Nation's diversity without lowering quality marks. The propensity for military service is 9%, the lowest in 15 years. Of the 9% inclined to serve, the qualification rate for military service among 17- to 24-year-olds has decreased from 29% to 23%. We will continue to pursue quality candidates with the character, competence, and will to serve which our Nation demands.

Helping people see themselves in uniform is a key component to this. Recently, we released the Army Communication Plan, which highlights the Army in four key storylines:

- “Be All You Can Be” reminds people that there are incredible prospects available to those who serve. From infantryman to pilot, doctor to mechanic, or even an artilleryman like me—anyone from anywhere can learn a trade, skill, or craft and be all they can be.
- “Making a Difference” highlights all the ways your Army continues to serve and protect the American people and our Nation’s interests around the world. The no-notice deployment of an Armored Brigade Combat Team to Europe immediately assured our Allies that we would stand by them when the time comes. The Army National Guard continues to rapidly mobilize to respond to disasters in their communities. Both are great examples of how you can make a difference through your service.
- “Army Life” shows that you can serve in the Army and still raise a family, be involved in your community, and enjoy hobbies outside of work.
- “Army of 2030” focuses on our need to support modernization, leader development, and training to ensure we are on a sustainable, strategic path forward in times of competition and prepared for conflict worldwide.

These storylines help tell the Army’s story to potential applicants, but it’s our recruiters who are the face of your Army to most Americans. Recruiters have had the unique challenge of operating in the COVID environment where face-to-face contact was near impossible. Many schools closed, and even those that reopened did not have large gatherings like assemblies for recruiters to introduce young Americans to the Army. While the Army has not met its accessions goals, it is not because of the lack of effort from our recruiters. To better support them, we are looking at factors impacting their QoL and incentivizing high performers. Army Recruiting Command has initiated a “People Week” at the end of recruiting school to ensure our recruiters are fully informed on their benefits and other resources available to them to aid in their recruitment efforts.

As mentioned before, many Americans simply do not meet the standards to join the Army. For those who possess the will to serve, we have instituted the Future Soldier Prep Course at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, to invest in applicants to help them meet the academic or physical standards for entry. To date, we've been able to send an additional 1,500 applicants forward to initial entry training. We plan to expand this program to Fort Benning, Georgia, and beyond.

Once a young man or woman becomes a soldier, it is incumbent on us to train, develop, and ultimately retain them. Some of the ways we're incentivizing retention is through expanded career options to move to a new location or change their job and increased bonuses for initial and mid-careerists. We are also discussing other possible incentives with our soldiers and seeking their feedback on ways to improve retention. I look forward to discussing some of those ideas with you this year as we complete our analysis and research. Incentives alone are not enough to drive retention. The Army must ensure we're fostering positive command climates that people want to be a part of and fielding leaders that inspire soldiers to continue service. On the enlisted side, I'm committed to building on a professional noncommissioned officer corps, which is already the envy of every military force in the world.

In late 2021, we released the Army Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Strategy to help leaders face the challenge of preparing squads to meet the demands of a changing environment. The message is simple: build cohesive teams that are highly trained, disciplined, and mentally, socially, and physically fit. Our Nation expects them to be capable of competing, fighting, and winning in multi-domain operations. We must develop and empower NCOs to leverage their knowledge, skills, and behaviors to lead through standards nested within our Army values and NCO core competencies to meet that expectation.

The Army is supporting these junior leaders' ability to build cohesive teams through a variety of programs and initiatives. This past year, we released an update to Field Manual 6-22 *Developing Leaders* to equip leaders to coach, counsel, and mentor subordinates to becoming leaders of character who build cohesive teams and know their people. I believe that positive command climate, unit cohesion, and engaged

leadership are the most important protective factors the Army can have in preventing harmful behaviors within the service.

Preventing Harmful Behaviors

The presence of harmful behaviors—like suicide, sexual harassment and assault, racism and extremism, and domestic violence—are the antithesis of our values and have absolutely no place in the Army. As Sergeant Major of the Army, I have dedicated countless hours to eliminating these behaviors through the Monthly Solutions Summit. This prevention initiative working group includes the senior-command Command Sergeant Majors from every installation to develop and pilot ideas. Beginning this year, that working group will brief the Army Vice Chief of Staff for approval and resourcing of initiatives. We've allocated \$22 million towards these grassroots efforts—money that otherwise would have come from a units' training and operations funds.

As the Army develops programmatic prevention solutions, we will focus on approaches that are upstream to cultivate protective environments. Bolstering five key domains of the social determinants of health (SDOH): (1) Economic Stability; (2) Education Access and Quality; (3) Health Care Access and Quality; (4) Neighborhood and Built Environment; and (5) Social and Community Context. Getting at the root causes will help identify how the SDOH impact the Army community and helps deliver effective, efficient, and well-executed QoL programs that promote the health and well-being of our people, reduces stress, and increases recruiting and retention in support of overall Army readiness. The Monthly Solutions Summit uses research from academia and industry as well as an ongoing, iterative process to seek input from internal and external prevention experts on the Army's prevention system and activities.

Effective prevention strategies are hard to measure, but we are beginning to see indicators of progress. The total Army had notably fewer deaths by suicide in 2022 than 2021 and the previous five-year average. The DoD Quarterly Suicide report will release the exact data publicly at the end of March. We are not declaring victory, however, each of those soldiers left behind family, friends, and squad mates who mourn them daily; our efforts must bring that to zero.

We are also seeing a downward trend of sexual assault and sexual harassment reporting—7% and 10% decrease, respectively. I am still focused on the gap between existing prevalence data and the number of reports. The enhanced command climate assessment tools, procedures, and policy will provide us with more timely indicators of harmful behaviors and enable leaders to take action rather than waiting on the prevalence survey findings every 2 years.

Holistic Health and Fitness

Holistic Soldier fitness is a key pillar in creating a resilient force. Through the Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) System, we are improving how the Army builds and maintains positive habits in the five domains of fitness: mental, spiritual, sleep, nutrition, and physical. The H2F System employs deliberate proven methods and standards of training to optimize soldier performance and readiness.

To ensure we can execute the Holistic Health and Fitness System adequately across the force, we are committed to resourcing the programs necessary to support our soldiers. Currently 28 U.S. Army Forces Command brigades have interdisciplinary H2F performance teams of Physical Therapists, Registered Dietitians, Occupational Therapists, Certified Athletic Trainers, Cognitive Performance Specialists, and Strength and Conditioning Coaches providing injury prevention and human performance optimization expertise. An additional 12 brigades are being fielded this year, and we plan to continue fielding H2F performance teams at a rate of 10 brigades each year, with the goal of 110 brigades by FY 2030.

Mental. In the domain of mental readiness, the Army is focusing on the prevention of adverse health outcomes while continuing to expend energy and resources focused on response efforts. Soldiers should feel confident and supported in seeking behavioral health support. The Army will continue to explore root causes to enhance mental wellbeing, and is assisting leaders by providing evidence-based indicators to help them identify issues that negatively affect the mental readiness of their formations.

Currently, we are developing a plan to implement an annual requirement for a mandatory Wellness Check, which includes a confidential, non-attributional counseling session between a soldier and a designated counselor to increase soldier resiliency, introduce the soldier to counseling, and decrease stigma associated with seeking counseling. These checks will require a concerted effort with a properly timed and phased approach, supported and messaged appropriately from all Command levels. We have seen early success from pilot programs at Fort Riley, Kansas and in Alaska, justifying the resources required to scale it across the Army.

Spiritual. Spiritual fitness should be addressed through the lens of personal, philosophical, and/or religious teachings and beliefs. The Army has been engaged in continuous conflict for more than 20 years, and the Army's high operational tempo increases harmful behaviors and negative outcomes. To address those consequences, the Army's H2F System now emphasizes the importance of spiritual readiness, especially for 18- to 25-year-olds—an at-risk population in the military and across society. In support of the H2F System, the Army Chief of Chaplains has developed an H2F Spiritual Readiness Initiative in collaboration with the Army Surgeon General and Chief of Behavioral Health, to assist Army leaders in supporting spiritual readiness for members who are religious as well as those who are not.

Sleep and Nutrition. Sleep is a biological need that is critical for sustaining the mental abilities needed for success on the battlefield. Overall fitness and nutrition play a role in sleep readiness. Through an increase in Cognitive Performance Specialists, Registered Dietitians, and Nutrition Care Specialists, soldiers are being educated on sleep and nutrition and can be provided customized diet plans.

Nutrition is the main driver behind the rebranding and modernization of dining facilities to prioritize fresh or frozen ingredients over heavily processed foods. Additionally, we are exploring a "campus style dining" approach to feeding soldiers based off the proven successes of institutions of higher learning and the corporate sector where this is already instituted. We will, through this proof-of-concept, demonstrate how an Army food program can transform to a twenty-first-century model, and how we can encourage a healthier lifestyle for our Army community. Any decisions

will be aligned to the principles of H2F and coordinated through Army Materiel Command and the Army G4.

Physical. The U.S. Army is four months into requiring Army Combat Fitness Tests (ACFT) for record in the active component. The latest revisions to the ACFT maintain the Army's strong commitment to ensure a physically fit force, while maintaining fairness during the transition to a new fitness test of record. Since implementation, soldiers have improved their ACFT score by an average of 28 points for men, and 42 points for women. These increases indicate success in our overall goal of changing the Army's fitness culture.

Based on soldier feedback, in 2021 the Army began studying the relationship between body fat and fitness levels, with the understanding that results could inform changes to the Army Body Composition Program. The study, which ran from 2021 to 2022, was the largest and most comprehensive assessment of soldier body composition and fitness to date. The findings showed that soldiers with a lower body fat percentage scored higher on the ACFT and had fewer muscular skeletal injuries.

The study also found that soldiers with a high volume of lean muscle mass were still at risk of failing the body fat assessment as prescribed in Army Regulation 600-9. To avoid erroneously flagging those Soldiers, one recommendation of the study was to exempt those who scored exceptionally high on the ACFT. All recommendations from the study are under review and will inform any potential policy changes.

Highly Trained and Disciplined

The Army's mission has not changed: deploy, fight, and win our Nation's wars. Building individual and team readiness is vital to accomplishing that mission. This will look different at each echelon and for each individual soldier. However, there are specific areas that apply to most of our soldiers, and these provide the best opportunity for improvement. One of the initiatives that we are extremely proud of is the alignment of standards for the Expert Infantry, Expert Soldier, and Expert Field Medical Badges. By doing this, units can provide more opportunities for soldiers to train and earn these badges. Compared to the previous testing model, this concept has contributed to a 9%

increase in pass rate for all soldiers, and a 353% increase in Expert Soldier and Field Medical Badges awarded.

These badges help build the individual, team, and unit readiness required to achieve strategic readiness. A great example is the no-notice deployment of the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team of the 3rd Infantry Division in February 2022. In less than one week, the entire brigade deployed from the United States and were conducting live-fire exercises in Germany with tanks from the Army Propositioned Stocks. In the past year, the Chief of Staff and of the Army and I have traveled to Europe multiple times, meeting more than 30 of our direct counterparts. Their feedback has been clear: there is no substitute for having American soldiers on the ground for both reassurance and deterrence. This speaks volumes about the readiness and professionalism of your Army's soldiers.

Conclusion

As the Sergeant Major of the Army, the best part of my job is listening to our soldiers, their families, caregivers, survivors, and the Army civilians who makeup an all-volunteer force dispersed across the world. I want to recognize the amazing work done every day by your Total Army and what they've accomplished this year to keep America safe.

The resiliency and determination of soldiers drives Army Readiness, and it begins on our installations with appropriate infrastructure and programs. Your continued advocacy helps to ensure that we will remain an attractive option for current and future generations as we provide opportunity, cultivate cohesive teams, sustain tactical and strategic readiness, and maintain modernization momentum. Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony and for your continued support of our soldiers, families, and civilians. Your support is an investment in the Army's people as they serve and transition back to become outstanding members of their communities.