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DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE PRESENTATION
TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SUBJECT: MILITARY DEPARTMENT HEARING ON FOOD SERVICES

STATEMENT OF:

HORACE (H.L.) LARRY
DIRECTOR OF AIR FORCE SERVICES

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Fallon, Ranking Member Houlahan, and esteemed Members of this Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today, and I thank you for your ongoing support. I am here to discuss the Department of the Air Force's (DAF) food services program and the ongoing efforts to enhance a critical element in maintaining the readiness, resilience, and morale of Airmen and Guardians.

FOOD OPERATIONS

The DAF has a long history of commitment to the readiness, resilience, and morale of service members and their families, providing high quality nutritional support to ensure service members are fit to fight when and where they are needed. The DAF initiated transformation of its food delivery system in 2010 to enhance food availability and quality, expand operational hours, and increase the accessibility of healthy food options to service members. This effort included outreach and partnerships with leading industry experts that operate dining programs at colleges and universities, corporations, and public sector facilities across the country. Through these partnerships, the DAF has gained critical corporate knowledge and has been able to implement modern operational standards to improve food quality. The program leverages expertise, to include General Managers, Executive Chefs, expert menu planners, and dietitians from top U.S. food service providers. Consequently, the selection of daily food offerings at an average installation has expanded from 127 to 181 menu items, and the cyclical menu increased from a 14-day to a 28-day rotation, increasing options. The DAF has also introduced themed restaurant concepts that rotate quarterly, featuring various options such as breakfast yogurt bars, taco stations, Italian cuisine, and protein bowls.

Now in its fifteenth year, the DAF's food service transformation initiative has successfully expanded to 28 installations, with an additional six installations scheduled for implementation over the next three fiscal years. This expansion is bolstered by an investment of \$79 million in renovations and facility upgrades and incorporates valuable lessons learned in food service execution. Ultimately, the goal remains to expand and improve the food program DAF-wide while maintaining sharp focus on the needs of service members and their families.

A significant achievement in the DAF food services program is the expansion of operational hours across the portfolio. The DAF centralized the program and established standard operating hours across the portfolio. Operational hours increased from 42 to 84 hours per week on average, thereby better accommodating the varying needs of Airmen and Guardians consistent with their dining habits and work schedules. Given the mission and varying work schedules, utilizing the dining facilities presented challenges for some Airmen and Guardians due to limited operating hours. The expanded hours ensure Airmen and Guardians can access the dining facility when needed and provides greater flexibility to honing critical warrior skills.

The DAF's food service program aims to integrate various dining capabilities into one unified enterprise, creating venues like those found on prominent corporate, college, and university campuses. One key feature of this initiative is the campus dining concept: this feature grants service members residing in dormitories the option to use their meal entitlement to dine at

additional facilities, such as bowling centers, clubs, and golf course snack bars. The introduction of kiosks at flight lines and within workstations provides meals where Airmen and Guardians work and is specifically tailored for shift workers who may be unable to access standard food service operations.

Furthermore, the DAF expanded access to dining facilities from junior enlisted members to the entire on-base community, facilitating enhanced engagement between senior leaders and those under their command and capturing fiscal efficiencies. This concept fosters greater unit cohesion and connectedness, which are key contributors to readiness and mission accomplishment.

Part of the DAF's focus on providing the highest quality nutritional support to service members is the alignment of menus to the Department of Defense (DoD) "Go for Green" initiative, a performance nutrition labeling system designed to help service members make healthier food choices. This system categorizes foods based on its nutritional value: green-labeled items are nutrient-dense; yellow-labeled items are moderately nutritious; and red-labeled items are lower in nutrients and should be consumed sparingly. The DAF currently exceeds the DoD goal of 30% green-coded items, achieving 43% in green-coded items. Additionally, every food station offers at least one green-coded option at every meal. This initiative supports optimal human performance and a leaner, more physically fit warfighting force.

FINANCES

The Basic Allowance for Subsistence (BAS) program is a key component of DAF members nutritional well-being and ability to maintain readiness and lethality. This monthly, non-taxable allowance is provided to active-duty service members to help cover food costs and is adjusted annually, in alignment with the United States Department of Agriculture's food cost index. Junior enlisted members residing in single Airmen government quarters or dormitories are entitled to Essential Station Messing (ESM), which provides access to meals the member may otherwise not be able to prepare or obtain. Service members participating in the ESM program receive \$465.77 per month in BAS, from which a daily meal rate—set at a discounted amount by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (OUSD) Comptroller—is collected and the remaining balance retained by the service member.

The DAF ensures all government-retained ESM funds are used exclusively for feeding Airmen and Guardians and manages the ESM program in accordance with established guidance. In Fiscal Year 2024, the DAF collected \$132.5 million in BAS funds while spending \$299.8 million directly on meals for Airmen and Guardians. The DAF does not redirect funding from ESM dollars to other areas and recognizes that reprogramming of BAS funds requires Congressional approval.

WAY AHEAD

The DAF takes a data-driven approach to modernizing its food service system to ensure greater efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and accessibility for Airmen and Guardians. The DAF leverages industry best practices and data analytics to create an integrated, mission-aligned global network of food service operations that advances force support in meeting the nutritional and operational

needs of its members.

The DAF is conducting an ongoing comprehensive assessment of its current food service landscape, analyzing patron demographics, usage patterns, and operational challenges to achieve success in this effort. This evaluation will inform development of a strategic roadmap designed to enhance food access across varying geographies and mission requirements. The strategy will incorporate a market-informed vision, ensuring that dining facilities, kiosks, and other food venues provide high-quality, nutritious meals while balancing operational costs. The DAF, by aligning with evolving industry standards and leveraging innovative solutions, is shaping a sustainable, forward-looking food service model that prioritizes both mission readiness and quality of life for its personnel.

By leveraging corporate technology, the DAF has increased flexibility in meeting the needs of Airmen and Guardians. The DAF expanded operating hours, improved cyclical menus, and renovated dining facilities with versatile service stations to adapt to the evolving preferences of service members. This progress was recognized in the Office of Secretary of Defense 2023 report entitled, *Strengthening Food Security in the Force: Building on Our Progress*.

CONCLUSION

Chairman Fallon, Ranking Member Houlihan, and distinguished Members of this Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to engage with you on this important matter. I would like to reemphasize the DAF's commitment to providing Airmen and Guardians with available, high-quality, nutritious food that enable them to maintain their readiness, lethality, operational capability, and quality of life for mission success. Over the past two decades, the DAF has made significant progress in aligning food services with the latest nutritional research, adapting to the evolving preferences of Airmen and Guardians, and leveraging innovations from the commercial sector, all while maintaining a consistent focus on ensuring ESM funding is used solely for its intended purpose. The DAF embraces these efforts and remains committed to evolving food service operations with a forward-looking approach that directly supports the warfighter's ability to focus on the fight. The DAF looks forward to continuing its partnership with Congress and deeply appreciates your sustained, exceptional support and advocacy for all Airmen, Guardians, and their families.