

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

SUBJECT: RECRUITING SHORTFALLS AND GROWING MISTRUST:
PERCEPTIONS OF THE US MILITARY

STATEMENT OF:

THE HONORABLE ALEX WAGNER
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE
(MANPOWER AND RESERVE AFFAIRS)
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE

December 13, 2023

NOT FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL
RELEASED BY THE COMMITTEE ON
ARMED SERVICES
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Banks, Ranking Member Kim, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am proud to provide testimony about the Department of the Air Force's ongoing efforts to inspire and attract talent from across the United States to remain the most lethal, effective, and collaborative force possible—one that deters our adversaries and inspires the confidence of the American people.

This requires us to intentionally design and construct a “team of teams” that takes advantage of the dynamic fabric of our Nation and facilitates a transformation into Airmen and Guardians who exemplify and defend the ideals and freedoms upon which our country was founded. Strong teams like these leverage members' unique problem-solving skills to the fullest and value each individual's contribution.

As we seek to recruit and retain the world's most operationally sophisticated workforce, the American people must view us both as an employer of choice and understand that service in the Air and Space Forces offers a rare value proposition, providing opportunity, community, and purpose.

YOUTH PROPENSITY FOR MILITARY SERVICE

After 22 years of war, with sacrifice borne largely by those who have fought and their families, today's youth are unfamiliar with the military; however, where familiarity exists, the risks associated with service continue to be top of mind. A recent Reagan Institute poll affirmed that the military maintains a relatively high level of public confidence; however, a competitive job market, increasingly negative perceptions of safety risks, and this growing lack of familiarity has resulted in historically low propensity among young Americans. According to the Joint Advertising Market Research & Studies (JAMRS) organization's *Fall 2022 Propensity Update*, propensity for military service in youth (defined as ages 16 to 21) decreased from 13% in 2018 to 9% in 2022.

Risks associated with military service continue to be the primary factor contributing to their disinterest as fewer youth are considering military service. JAMRS finds that youth consider the possibility of physical injury or death (at 70%), the possibility of PTSD (65%), and leaving family and friends (58%) as the leading reasons not to serve. In addition, interference with college education (35%), being stationed in places they do not want to live (35%), and the possibility of sexual harassment/assault (33%) as prominent added reason(s) for not considering service. These negative stereotypes and perceptions are reinforced by media narratives that the military does not provide a safe environment, support mental wellness, or offer sufficient work-life balance.

Compounding these propensity challenges is a strong labor market and fierce private sector competition for top talent. According to the 11th Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation (QRMC), “The evidence found in numerous empirical studies suggests that both recruiting and retention are significantly influenced by the state of the civilian

economy.” QRMC studies also indicate that a 10% decrease in the civilian unemployment rate will reduce high-quality enlisted recruiting by two to four percent. Over the past three years, near historically low unemployment, combined with strong private sector wage growth (a record high of 15% in 2021 compared to the 63-year average of 6%), correlated with decreased propensity to serve.

The strength of post-pandemic economic growth translated into one of the most challenging recruitment environments the Department of the Air Force has encountered in 24 years, demanding innovative approaches to better inform, educate, and inspire service in our force. Additionally, the modern labor market is increasingly seeking flexibility in how and where work gets done, and none more so than the youth who have witnessed their parents and siblings seek to navigate these changes since the spring of 2020. According to McKinsey’s 2022 American Opportunity Survey, 58% of Americans reported having the opportunity to work from home at least one day a week, while 35% of those surveyed were able to work from home five days a week—irrespective of region, sector, or work role (i.e., both traditionally labeled “blue collar” jobs that might be expected to demand on-site labor as well as “white collar” professions).

JAMRS findings also indicate that today’s youth seek maximum work–life alignment, where their jobs and the organizations they work for are an expression of their values. Fortunately, the opportunities offered by careers in our force—both the skills and lifestyle—are values-driven jobs in the eyes of youth’s influencers: mentors such as parents, relatives, teachers, guidance counselors, etc. This is not just something we believe as a matter of faith or legacy. Data from JAMRS November 2023 survey supports the proposition that influencers primarily associate the Air Force with values such as “working as part of a team,” “something to be proud of,” and an organization that “encourages the continuous development of knowledge.” That same group of people would also recommend the Air Force to youth who are academically inclined/successful, particularly in STEM fields. As a result, the Air Force is viewed as the number one service they would support their child’s decision to join.¹

Likewise, the Space Force was associated with being “futuristic” and offering skill development and training in cutting-edge technology. We need to continue to engage with influencers--those parents, teachers, and guidance counselors--to harness these positive perceptions and amplify these sentiments so that youth understand the Air and Space Forces as organizations that align with their values, as teams that they want to join, and as places for growth into the type of professionals they aspire to be.

¹ Joint Advertising and Market Research & Studies, *DoD Influencer Poll* Nov 2023 (fielded April-June 2023).

IMPACT ON RECRUITMENT

FY22 Recruiting Challenges

Despite this positive value alignment from influencers, it was not enough to aid the Department of the Air Force (DAF) in meeting its recruiting mission given a youth increasingly unfamiliar with the military, a historically strong labor market, and the effects of a pandemic. We consider FY22 our first post-COVID recruiting year, and while both the active duty Air Force and Space Force achieved their enlisted recruiting goals, the Air Force was only able to do so by relying heavily on the bank of recruits awaiting ship dates to basic training in the Delayed Entry Program (DEP). By sending recruits to training as they accessed to make FY22 mission, we began FY23 with a DEP of 16%—nearly 9% lower than our ideal 25% baseline (a shortfall of approximately 5,000 recruits).

Standup of the DAF's Barriers to Service Cross-Functional Team

As a result of this initial DEP shortfall and the surprising strength of the post-COVID economic recovery, at times during FY23, the DAF was projecting up to a 17% deficit in its enlisted Regular Air Force (RegAF) goals as well as even steeper shortfalls in the Air National Guard and Reserve (the latter driven in part by unusually strong RegAF retention rates).

Presented with this unprecedented recruiting environment, DAF leaders took decisive action. Our mission was to continue to access a high-quality force while ensuring we have the quantity of people necessary to execute our mission. To this end, we looked to update and optimize our policies by examining both current DoD accession standards as well as successful policies of other Services where their accession requirements differed from ours. In some cases, we noted that our requirements were more stringent, largely as a result of a lack of recent validation, or other factors incidental to applicant quality.

This data assessment led to the January 2023 standup of a “Barriers to Service Cross-Functional Team” (CFT).” The team, led by the Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force, conducted a comprehensive review of DAF policies and standards, prioritized implementation of policy changes designed to remove recruitment barriers, and established incentives for attracting talent.

New Incentives

The CFT examined and approved new incentives to attract recruits.

- We prioritized funding to reinstate the Enlisted College Loan Repayment program that had been successful in the past, but had been dormant since 2014. Since implementation this summer, 223 new recruits have qualified for this program in FY23 and we estimate 500 may qualify annually.

- We also expanded a “Stripes for Education” campaign to include Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate/industry training and cyber certifications and launched an Airman and Guardian Referral Program which incentivizes both serving members and those in our Delayed Entry Program to engage their networks and peer groups to identify qualified recruits. When those recruits complete training and fully enter our force, referring members are eligible to enter at a higher rank or receive a medal. As a result of this program, we have received nearly 600 organic referrals to date.
- Finally, we implemented a process to accelerate naturalization at Basic Military Training (BMT) to attract talent that may not otherwise consider service. In FY23, that effort enabled nearly 370 trainees to perform an enlistment oath alongside the oath of American citizenship at completion of BMT.

Optimizing Accession Policies

Beside incentives, the CFT prioritized policy changes that would expand accession opportunities for high quality youth with a propensity to serve.

- Previously, the DAF forever prohibited recruits that tested positive for THC at Military Entrance Processing Stations (MEPS) from reapplying. Based on the Army’s experience in authorizing retesting, the DAF’s two-year pilot program announced earlier this year allows retesting after 90 days but requires additional safeguards including higher academic requirements and moral standards. For FY23, this pilot resulted in 168 new total force accessions that would have been otherwise prohibited.
- Another policy change updated our body composition standard to align with DoD standards, resulting in more than 1,400 accessions across the Department of the Air Force. We validated that this change worked: out of those 1,400+ recruits that would have otherwise been ineligible to join the Air and Space Forces, only one recruit failed to pass their physical fitness test at BMT.
- We accessed an additional 167 recruits across the DAF in FY23 by expanding our hand and neck tattoo policy, as more youth today are getting tattoos, bringing us into greater alignment with our sister-services’ tattoo policies.
- With only 23% of youth even eligible to enlist without a waiver, the DAF also launched a Conditional Delayed Entrance Program pilot to contract recruits as they await medical adjudication to maintain their interest in service. Medical standards preventing otherwise qualified recruits from enlisting, particularly historically disqualifying conditions that are now more easily managed (e.g., childhood asthma, ADD/ADHD, eczema, allergies, depression) opened the aperture for the DAF to continue a smooth accession for recruits with some of the most prevalent barriers to entry that are typically waivable.

- Most recently, we increased our maximum age of enlistment from 40 to 42, in alignment with DoD's authorization, to open eligibility to more people with a propensity to serve, including those with important skills derived from prior service.

In sum, these efforts resulted in approximately 2,900 new accessions across the Department of the Air Force in FY23. 2,900 individuals with a propensity to serve who would not otherwise have been allowed to serve. This reduced shortfalls across the Department, and most significantly reduced RegAF enlisted accession shortfall to just under 11%, and contributed to the Space Force making its goal.

Let me state unequivocally that the DAF has not changed our high standards, nor compromised the caliber of our applicants; rather, we have expanded opportunities for qualified individuals to join our ranks.

FY23 Updates and FY24 Projections

These initiatives helped to close the gap and rebuilt the DEP to put us in our current, strong position. We not only significantly reduced our FY23 shortfalls across the Department, but also entered FY24 with a RegAF DEP of 31%—about 6% above the preferred DEP start and the strongest DEP of any Service heading into FY24. And in the current fiscal year we have successfully filled 100% of our weekly ship-targets, a trend we are projecting to continue through at least the end of January 2024.

As a result, we are cautiously optimistic that we will meet our FY24 active duty Air Force and Space Force enlisted accession goals, and the trends are positive for the Air Force Reserve to also achieve its goals. Our Air National Guard goals remain the most challenging and complex given both state (Title 32) and federal (Title 10) responsibilities and missions. We will continue to review our policies to ensure they support current and future Department of the Air Force requirements.

MAINTAINING AND SUPPORTING TRUST IN AMERICA'S AIR AND SPACE FORCES

Since the beginning of the All-Volunteer Force, in times of conflict and in times of peace, Americans have answered our Nation's call to protect and serve both at home and abroad to safeguard our democracy and freedoms. But the declining familiarity as a result of not having close family members who have served and who can convey with credibility and conviction the myriad of professional, financial, and social benefits of military service increasingly stresses our ability to engage America's youth. And beyond merely maintaining propensity to serve, if we do not intentionally invest in growing propensity among young women and the Nation's fastest-growing racial and ethnic groups, we risk the future of the All-Volunteer Force. While that recruiting investment is critical to our future success, all our accession, selection, and promotion decisions will and must continue to be based on merit.

As we create a ready and resilient force, we must also ensure every Airman and Guardian on our team is able to reach their highest potential. That is why we are focused on faithfully implementing the 81 recommendations of the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault on time or ahead of schedule, and why we are prioritizing building a prevention workforce that supports leaders at all levels to build a positive and supportive climate.

In all these efforts, we need your help. The DAF alone cannot effectively convey the broad and enduring benefits of a military career and the resulting quality of life. As elected national leaders, we implore you to engage with your constituents and advocate for the opportunities of military service, the community that awaits them, and the sense of purpose that lasts a lifetime. We need prominent voices in Congress, trusted in local communities throughout our country, to amplify the values-based work that is possible in the military, and portray the Air and Space Forces as desirable organizations for youth to aspire to associate their personal brands.

Use your nominations to the United States Air Force Academy to provide young leaders from your districts with unparalleled academic and professional development opportunities as well as experiential learning working on the Nation's most critical problem-sets. Encourage high schools in your districts to bring recruiters onto campus to talk to students about the cutting-edge technology and highly specialized mission sets they will tackle in the Air and Space Forces. Join us in your districts and across the country to engage with our service members and experience firsthand the exceptional work our Airmen and Guardians are doing as they optimize for great power competition while keeping our families safe.

These efforts would go a long way to correct the narrative of what it means to serve in the military and help communities in every corner of our country understand the unique opportunities and benefits of service. It will supercharge our recruiting efforts and I am confident that a shift in the narrative will correlate with a shift in propensity. While the DAF can continue to reexamine our accession policies and qualifications to open service to the broadest pool of qualified applicants, increasing propensity is a whole of Nation challenge and it relies on the credibility and support of our elected representatives.

CLOSING

I want to express our enduring appreciation to the parents, teachers, guidance counselors, veterans, and other mentors who support and educate our youth on the benefits and opportunities of service. We aspire every day to continue to earn the trust they place in us to provide a safe, inclusive, and innovative culture that affords every Airman and Guardian the opportunity to achieve their potential.

With that, I look forward to the conversation and your questions.