

NOT FOR PUBLICATION
UNTIL RELEASED BY THE
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
QUALITY OF LIFE PANEL

**STATEMENT OF
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MASTER CHIEF PETTY OFFICER OF THE NAVY
BEFORE THE
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
QUALITY OF LIFE PANEL
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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Bacon, Ranking Member Houlahan, and distinguished members of the Quality-of-Life Panel, as Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy, it is my privilege to speak with you on behalf of our world class Sailors and their families. Taking care of our people and their families is and will always be a top priority for me and the Chief of Naval Operations. Over the last year, the Navy has taken steps to fully understand quality of life issues and concerns and has worked hard toward solutions. Investing in the quality of life for our Sailors and their families today will pay great dividends as we look to recruit the best of our Nation's talent, develop them into world-class warfighters, and retain them while remaining the most lethal and combat-ready maritime force in the world. In order to do this, we must invest in the quality of life of our Sailors' and their families.

I am extremely honored to represent the 347,000 Sailors serving in our Navy today, 48,000 of whom are currently deployed aboard 109 U.S. Navy ships around the globe, providing credible combat power as a response option for our Nation's leaders. These Sailors are deployed aboard ships such as the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN 69), USS Carney (DDG 64), USS Gravelly (DDG 107), and USS Mason (DDG 87), operating forward at points of friction with our adversaries and points of friendship with our allies and partners. The continual operational environment of Navy deployments places unique challenges on each of our Sailors and their families.

Your Navy, when called upon, delivers. Let us not forget - that delivery is made on the backs of our Sailors and their families. In the past few weeks, some of our most junior Sailors from USS

Carney and Mason were actively engaged in combating global threats. When quality of life needs are adequately met, our warfighters can maintain their focus on our collective national defense.

SPOUSAL EMPLOYMENT

The composition of our military family today is significantly different from what it was when the United States created the all-volunteer force 50 years ago. The Gates Commission of 1970 was established to study the effects of ending the draft and led to the creation of the all-volunteer force you see today. From this commission, there were five pillars recommended to sustain a cost effective all-volunteer force; (1) military pay and compensation, (2) quality health care, (3) quality housing, (4) a retirement plan, and (5) ensuring the military remains a reflection of our society. These five pillars were necessary to create the all-volunteer force and these pillars still hold true today. However, a much greater preponderance of our force now are married or are single parents, and we should consider adding support to the military family as a sixth pillar, to include family dynamics such as spousal employment and child care.

The unique nature of the Navy, which often requires Sailors to rotate to different geographic locations every few years, can have a negative impact on the household incomes of our Navy families, mainly due to Navy spouses needing to seek new employment with every move. Special hiring authorities and efforts to provide for license portability, among other initiatives such as remote work options, have proven beneficial to military spouses to help during duty station transfers. However, I believe there is still more work to do in these areas as we try to help Navy families achieve household stability.

Due in part to these frequent relocations, the unemployment rate for military spouses continues to remain high, with the average earnings of employed military spouses being much less than that of their civilian counterparts. This results in many Navy families being unable to share in the benefits of dual incomes. Without ample opportunities for spouses to secure employment, progress in their own careers, or contribute to the financial stability of their families, many service members feel compelled to leave the Navy to better provide for their family. A 2020 Navy-wide Personal and Professional Choices survey found 57-percent of Sailors having participated in the survey believe their careers have negatively impacted their spouses' employment opportunities. In recruiting America's top talent, we cannot afford to lose potential Sailors due to the perception of negative career impacts.

CHILDCARE

Securing adequate child care is a national crisis, not just a military one, and these shortages have a direct impact on unit level readiness and therefore our national security. Our economic and security environment requires a stable child care community. Sailors cannot stand a focused watch if they are worried about the care their child is receiving. Despite our best efforts, we continue to face issues in both capacity and staffing. There are Child Development Centers (CDCs) with available capacity, but lack the staffing to support additional children. While we recognize that there is a national shortage of caregivers, it is critical that we continue to look at all available options to tackle this challenge, understanding that no one size fits all and our Sailors work 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, requiring us to think outside the box on potential solutions.

To this end, the Navy has implemented several initiatives, including increasing salaries, streamlining hiring and onboarding processes, and providing all CDC employees a discount for child care. The Navy must continue to innovate to attract caregivers in this increasingly competitive environment.

The 2020 Navy-wide Personal and Professional Choices survey also indicated that half of the participating women with children identified child care availability as a key reason for them leaving the Navy. With the force composition that we have today, we must change the way child care is viewed. Child care needs to be recognized as a Department-wide responsibility in supporting our military families and as a critical requirement in support of our national defense. I ask you to work closely with the Department to fully resource the President's Budget request and consider child care to be part of the compensation package our service members deserve.

HEALTHCARE

In March of 2023, I testified to the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) that access to quality medical services and timely care is one of the top concerns across the Fleet. As I continue to visit ships and shore commands throughout the Navy, I hear the same concerns from our Sailors and families about access to timely healthcare in close proximity to where they live and work, to include access to mental health care. In the last year through the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), you have allowed the Department of Defense (DoD) to include licensing portability of non-medical mental health care providers through the Military and Family Life Counseling Program. This adopted provision has allowed for the continuation of

care to our service members, no matter their geographic location. I greatly appreciate the hard work of the members of Congress for this improvement.

This is just one needed change, but we must continue to improve on our health care system to prepare our Sailors for combat. We must ensure they are resilient and ready for the increased challenges and stress of their unique forward deployed and shipyard environments. I acknowledge the military is competing for the same scarce medical resources that provide these types of services as the rest of the Nation, but if Sailors cannot receive the medical care they require, they will not be able to deploy when needed. Likewise, if Sailors' families cannot receive the medical care required, we risk not being able to retain the best and brightest talent in the Navy. As we continue our national call to service messaging, I believe it is important we include first line responders, to include health care professionals, in our campaign.

HOUSING

Prior to the authority provided in the FY24 NDAA, our most junior Sailors, E-3 and below, assigned to operational sea duty platforms undergoing a shipyard availability or maintenance period were not allowed by law to receive a housing allowance. We are extremely thankful that our Secretary now has the authority to provide these junior Sailors with a basic allowance for housing.

After an extensive shipyard period rolled into a high, operational tempo environment over the last 15 months, the Sailors aboard USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) spent 316 of the last 365 days underway. The number one quality of life concern of Sailors E-3 and below onboard is the

availability and access to unaccompanied housing upon their return to homeport. This concern is reflected onboard the currently deployed carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70). Over the Thanksgiving holiday the Chief of Naval Operations and I visited these Sailors and personally heard this same sentiment. The ship is working diligently on a solution, however, there remains nearly 800 junior Sailors that will be required to live onboard upon their return to homeport. The Navy is unique from our sister services in this issue.

There is much more that needs to be done to ensure that all Sailors can obtain safe, quality, and affordable housing. Sailors are typically stationed in highly desirable, high cost of living areas, and oftentimes, Sailors end up living an hour or more away from their duty station just so they can afford housing in a good school district or safe neighborhood. This leads to longer commutes, increased transportation costs, extended workdays and the deterioration of the quality of life for our Sailors and families. I look forward to the results of the ongoing Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation regarding changes to Basic Allowance for Housing that better support our Sailors and their families.

PAY AND COMPENSATION

In order to retain a highly qualified and professional force, we must re-examine how we value the jobs of our service members and adequately compensate them commensurate with their scope of responsibilities, skill sets, and daily sacrifices. We have young Sailors who graduated from high school just a few years ago currently on watch responsible for the continued safe operation of nuclear reactors onboard our submarines and aircraft carriers. Even now in the Red Sea, there are highly-skilled young men and women standing watch in combat information

centers who are deciphering which contacts are friendly or pose a direct threat to their ship or those they are there to protect. Under these extremely stressful conditions, our Sailors are delivering prompt and precise action to incoming threats, often with very little response time. One wrong decision could potentially lead to a catastrophic event, including the loss of life. We depend on the expertise of our Sailors who are the best and most skilled warfighters. The risk of losing these qualified and talented Sailors will have severe consequences on our future fighting force. As we recruit and retain the best and brightest our Nation has to offer, we must ensure our force is appropriately compensated. Their pay and compensation should appropriately reflect the level of trust, responsibility, and expectations placed upon them.

CONCLUSION

I am encouraged by the Navy's focus on quality of life initiatives and the commitment of our senior leaders in this venture. While there is much we can do internally to improve our Sailors lives, there are areas where we very much need Congressional assistance. The improvement of spousal employment opportunities, child care, access to timely and quality healthcare, safe and affordable housing, and ensuring pay and compensation appropriately reflects the expectations and responsibilities held by our Sailors are just some of the areas where you can assist. I assure you that these asks I have of you come with low risk, and have an enormous and immediate impact on the quality of life of our service members. The DoD should be an employer of choice and military service a career of great value. The American people should trust that we have the best interest of their sons and daughters in mind, and that they will be taken care of while serving their country.

Just as our Sailors' creed states, "I represent the fighting spirit of the Navy and those who have gone before me to defend freedom and democracy around the world." I, along with every Sailor serving today, are born from the same DNA of the heroes that fought before us. The legacy of our greatest generations are a testament to all of us serving today. I am proud to be a United States Sailor and I proudly serve my country's Navy combat team with honor, courage and commitment. I am truly appreciative of Congress' efforts and I am of the firm belief that with your help, we can make swift improvements in the quality of life of all our service members and their families.