

RECORD VERSION

STATEMENT BY

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BEFORE THE

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HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
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ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE ARMY AND ITS SOLDIERS

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HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**

OPENING

Chairman Banks, Ranking Member Kim, distinguished members of this Committee—thank you for the opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the men and women of the United States Army.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a significant threat to the health and well-being of our military and civilian personnel and to our soldiers' ability to fulfill their missions around the world in support of our national security. Over the course of the pandemic, the Army lost 64 soldiers, 216 civilians, and 50 contractors. Each loss rebounded through a family, impacted our Army units, and affected communities. To protect the health and safety of the Army's people and ensure we remained the world's premier combat force, the Army took decisive action to protect our soldiers, Army civilians, and their families.

At the outset of the pandemic, the Army reacted to the rapid spread of illness during the pandemic by adopting telework policies, following Department-wide force protection health guidance, and instituting contact tracing and other protocols. On September 14, 2021, we implemented Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's requirement to vaccinate our servicemembers. These measures broadly, and the vaccine mandate specifically, saved lives and allowed the Army to continue advancing its mission.

The Army followed guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Defense policy, and expert advice to modify our policies. This responsiveness and vigilance allowed us to institute, and then remove, measures and protections as we followed federal guidance informed by medical expertise. These measures enabled the Army to continue to participate in training events, conduct operations worldwide and maintain a high level of readiness even as our nation navigated a global pandemic.

In compliance with the Fiscal Year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act, the Army rescinded its requirement to vaccinate all soldiers against COVID-19. Though we have returned to pre-COVID status, we remain ready to act to protect our force from any threat. We also will continue to work with experts, our people, and Congress to ensure we remain prepared for any such contingencies in the future.

PROTECTING THE FORCE

In response to the Department's COVID-19 vaccination order, the Army took a deliberate, phased approach to vaccinating the force, centered on command

engagement and continuous soldier education. The vaccine prevented COVID-19 and reduced the risk of significant illness or death to soldiers and their loved ones.

As the COVID-19 vaccination first became available, the Army triaged distribution to ensure soldiers conducting higher risk missions could voluntarily receive the vaccine. We offered the vaccine to the entire Army force as availability expanded.

Once the vaccine mandate was instituted, the Army took specific steps to promote education and counseling for soldiers. Prior to taking any adverse action for refusal to receive the vaccine, soldiers were afforded multiple engagement opportunities with unit level commanders, medical professionals, and chaplains to discuss the vaccination requirement and expectations for their compliance. We also diligently educated our force about the process to submit exemptions for religious and medical reasons.

The Army's intent was to scrutinize every religious accommodation request to ensure that we carefully protected soldiers' religious freedoms. We took a deliberate approach to each request and the process was designed to give each soldier's request individualized review based on the specific facts. Moreover, the Army carefully followed all applicable regulations, which were informed by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. It was important to Secretary Christine Wormuth and the entire Army leadership that we took a case-by-case approach to ensure every soldier's situation was individually reviewed. The Army Surgeon General was tasked to review all religious exemptions and closely consider materials provided by the soldier's medical provider and chaplain. The facts of each case were carefully considered in determining whether accommodations were feasible, with a presumption that soldiers' religious beliefs were closely held. Appeals for any denied exemptions were similarly given careful scrutiny and analysis based on the facts.

Soldiers who refused the order to be vaccinated without an approved or pending exemption request were subject to adverse administrative actions, including suspension of favorable personnel actions (flags), bars to reenlistment, and reprimands. In February 2022, Regular Army soldiers who continued to refuse the vaccination order without an approved or pending exemption were subject to involuntary separation.

Given the unique circumstances in the National Guard and Reserve, we took a deliberate, tailored approach to Reserve Component vaccine implementation. Since many Reserve Component drill locations are remote and far from military treatment facilities, and Reserve Component commanders have fewer engagement opportunities with their soldiers than their Active counterparts, the Army afforded Reserve Component soldiers not on active duty orders, more time to meet the vaccination requirement.

These unique challenges and the evolving nature of the pandemic, informed enforcement actions related to the Reserve Component as well.

Our vaccination efforts resulted in the Army successfully administering vaccinations to over 900,000 soldiers, achieving a vaccination rate of over 94% across the total force, including 98% in the Active Component and over 91% for the Reserve Components. The administration of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines saved lives, decreased hospitalizations, and enhanced mission readiness.

COMPLIANCE ON RESCISSION

Following the passage of the Fiscal Year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act and prior to Secretary Austin's rescission of the COVID-19 vaccine mandate, the Army published an order on December 30, 2022, directing commands to immediately suspend processing and initiating involuntary separations based solely on a soldier's refusal to comply with the order to become vaccinated. After Secretary Austin's rescission, the Army published another order on January 12, 2023, this time directing commands to suspend initiating or taking final action on any adverse administrative actions based solely on a soldier's refusal to comply with the order to become vaccinated.

To further clarify this directive and provide clear next steps to impacted soldiers, last week Secretary Wormuth rescinded the Army's prior directive implementing the COVID-19 vaccine mandate and governed enforcement. The new policy directs how the Army will handle remaining issues related to the rescinded mandate, including cases in which soldiers have pending religious exemption requests for multiple vaccines, and in which soldiers have been denied an exemption but have not been separated.

Specifically, we have ceased review of any pending COVID-19 vaccine exemptions. Soldiers no longer need exemptions, since the mandate is no longer in effect. Similarly, individuals seeking to join the Army will not be required to have received the COVID-19 vaccine.

Soldiers who had been denied a COVID-19 vaccine exemption but not yet separated will not be separated. We will remove any adverse actions in the records of soldiers who applied for an exemption. All Army-specific COVID-19 vaccine travel restrictions have been lifted.

These changes are all effective now and we will monitor vigorously at the leadership level to ensure they are implemented smoothly. If individual soldiers disagree with how their cases were handled, they can seek relief through the Army Discharge Review Board and the Army Board for Correction of Military Records. Former soldiers similarly can apply to change the characterization of their discharges or other records through those bodies. And we, of course, will respond swiftly to any cases brought to us by Members of Congress as well.

AIDING THE NATION

I am deeply proud of the Army's action not just to protect our people—to include soldiers, civilians, and families—but also in playing a vital part in the nation's government-wide response to the pandemic. Since early 2020, the Army has been intricately involved in bolstering our nation's response through support to the medical response to the pandemic. While we worked as part of a team, the Army took on the lion's share of work to acquire and distribute COVID-19 vaccines, treatments, test kits, masks, gloves, supplies, and equipment where they were needed most. Congress appropriated \$74.3 billion to the Army for these efforts and Army acquisition and contracting professionals worked diligently to make things happen at unprecedented speed, saving thousands of lives in the process.

The Army's logistics and engineering expertise enabled us to deliver medical care and supplies where they were needed most. The Army employed Urban Augmentation Medical Task Forces and Medical Response Teams from the Reserve and Active Components to provide relief and increased capacity to civilian medical facilities in both urban and rural communities with over 600 personnel deployed or committed at any given time. 14 Vaccine Support Teams of approximately 170 soldiers each deployed to 14 cities providing over two million doses of vaccine during the initial rollout. The Army utilized Reserve Component military medical personnel to help set up vaccination sites, staff hospitals during critical shortages, and augment urban medical task forces in areas of greatest need. The Army Reserve's largest mobilization in history contributed to the vaccination efforts in underserved communities in 25 states, from rural locations in North Dakota to New Mexico. The Corps of Engineers directly supported the Federal Emergency Management Agency to build alternate care facilities and reduce the burden on hospitals by outfitting over 40 arenas and hotels with over 200,000 beds including at the Javitz Center in New York City and CenturyLink field in Seattle. In all, over 5,000 soldiers from all components deployed in support of the national COVID response.

I am deeply proud of the Army's response to the global pandemic and our collective efforts over two administrations to promote our people's health. This year, we celebrate

the 50th anniversary of the all-volunteer force, which means that for 50 years, each of our Soldiers has made the choice to protect the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. They are always ready, and as the pandemic showed us, always make our nation proud.