

Department of the Air Force

Testimony

Before the House Armed Services
Subcommittee on Military Personnel



Senior Enlisted Leader Perspective

Witness Statement of
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Chief Master Sergeant of the U.S. Air Force

March 9, 2023

NOT FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL RELEASED BY THE
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE BIOGRAPHY

CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT OF THE AIR FORCE JOANNE S. BASS

Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force JoAnne S. Bass represents the highest enlisted level of leadership, and as such, provides direction for the enlisted force and represents their interests, as appropriate, to the American public and to those in all levels of government. She serves as the personal adviser to the Chief of Staff and the Secretary of the Air Force on all issues regarding the welfare, readiness, morale, and proper utilization and progress of more than 600,000 Total Force Airmen. Chief Bass is the 19th chief master sergeant appointed to the highest noncommissioned officer position.



Chief Bass was raised as an Army dependent, living in several overseas and stateside locations, prior to entering the Air Force in 1993. Throughout her career, she has held a variety of leadership positions serving at the squadron, group, wing and major command levels. She has significant joint service and special operations experience and has participated in several operations and exercises as well as deployments in direct support of Operations SOUTHERN WATCH, ENDURING FREEDOM, and IRAQI FREEDOM.

Prior to this assignment, she served as the Command Chief Master Sergeant, Second Air Force, Keesler Air Force Base, Mississippi.

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Introduction

Chairman Banks, Ranking Member Kim, and distinguished members of this Subcommittee, thank you for your continued interest, and support, in the quality of life of the men and women who serve our great Nation. I am again honored for this opportunity to join my fellow service senior enlisted advisors to address the needs of our military, as well as speak with you, specifically, on the issues impacting the lives of our Airmen and their families, caregivers, and survivors.

We find ourselves at a critical point in the trajectory of our great Nation. For the first time, in modern history, we are facing challenges from two strategic competitors: Russia and China. While China may be our most significant pacing challenge, we cannot ignore the acute threat that Russia also plays in attempting to upend the rules-based international order. The constant challenge for our military is to counter China without driving it toward Russia, and to counter Russia without driving it toward China. Scientists call this a “**three-body problem.**” It is one of the oldest mathematical problems we have – and for centuries it was practically unsolvable. That is, until last year, when scientists determined that if they apply a series of random moves to this problem, they can develop solutions that will predict and overcome it. The three-body problem is solved through empowered unpredictability. I am here today to tell you that the solution to our **three-body strategic competition** is found by empowering Airmen. More than any platform, or program, our Airmen are, and will always remain, the biggest competitive advantage we have.

As the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, I’ve been able to meet and converse with Airmen and their families during my travels, hearing their stories, their concerns, and about the unique challenges they face as members of our team. I am honored to be their voice. They are America’s sons and daughters, serving during challenging times and at the forward edge of strategic competition. For more than 75 years, the United States Air Force has continued to answer our Nation’s call, without hesitation, and without fail. We are a multi-generational service, and it falls on us to ensure that the Airmen of today have the resources required to continue to serve in the *highest trained, best equipped, and best led Air Force* this world has ever seen.

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In order to be the Air Force our Nation needs, we must prioritize the quality of life of our service members and their families, caregivers, and survivors. Our Air Force and Airmen must remain *ready, willing* and *able* to deliver airpower anytime, anywhere – enhancing the capabilities we need today to ensure we win tomorrow. The 689,000 Total Force Airmen, who I represent, have afforded me a unique perspective on the direction our Air Force needs to go. Over the past year, I have seen examples of our Airmen working extremely hard to accelerate the change our Air Force needs. They understand that rapidly evolving challenges, new domains of warfare, and near-peer competitors will define future-state operations. We must continue to support our Airmen and families, as they faithfully support and defend our Nation.

How we *recruit, train, develop, compensate, retain, and transition* our Airmen are **key to readiness**. The Air Force is smaller than we have been in years past; however, we have a strong strategy that will move us in the right direction, and we will need your assistance to help get us there. Every single Airman, from every career field, is responsible for generating the Airpower our sister services, partner nations and country expect. We are where we are because of our innovative spirit, devotion to duty, and our love for this Nation.

As we continue to move forward in our strategy and focus on the Air Force of 2030 and beyond, there is **much to be done**. We must continue *developing the Airmen We Need* and creating an environment where *every single one* of them can thrive and be their very best. We need our Airmen to remain steadfast and committed to defending the homeland. We can't have them distracted by whether or not they can find **quality and affordable housing**, obstacles to **spouse employment opportunities**, or any other challenges, such as: access to **childcare, inflation** and **food insecurity**. We can't continue to recruit and retain the talent our Air Force needs to maintain our competitive advantage if we are not able to adequately compensate our service members and appropriately care for their families. These impacts to our service members are deep cuts that directly affect the readiness of our military, and our ability to recruit and retain the best America has to offer. **For 50 years, every single Airman has willingly raised their right hand and accepted a life of service to our Nation.** They answered, and continue to answer, our Nation's call. We must ensure that the care and welfare of our service members remains an **undisputed priority**. These things are integral to *who we are* and *imperative to our future success*. Taking these issues on demonstrates our commitment to our service members and

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their families, and ultimately builds their trust in our great institution. Ignoring them will continue to erode the foundations that are fundamental to institutional success.

As we work with you, our willing partners, in developing actionable solutions to build that trust and care for our Airmen, and our families, caregivers, and survivors, we cannot turn a blind eye to our **infrastructure**, which is intrinsically linked to our quality of service. Our installations are not only key components of supporting our warfighting mission, but they are also where we call home. Years of competing priorities and fiscal constraints have forced us to manage risk in infrastructure and continue to create challenges and hardships for our Airmen. We must provide a safe place, whether it be in the **dormitories** or in **privatized housing** where our Airmen and their families can come together as a community.

It's often easy to see the numbers and statistics behind a situation and miss the ground truth of the people impacted by it. In addition to modernizing and equipping the Air Force our Nation needs for the strategic competition, it is absolutely essential that we take care of our people, our most competitive advantage, with the same intensity.

Recruiting & Retention

To build the Air Force we need to meet the demands of a strategic competition, we must continue to recruit and retain the best America has to offer. More and more, we are learning that the new generation of Americans has the will to serve our great Nation, but they want to serve in their own way. We are focused on matching recruits with Air Force career fields, based on their unique skills and interests – all in an effort to build the **Force of the Future**. We are all aware that this is a challenging time with regard to recruiting. We began the year with a deficit of roughly 5,000 Active Duty Delayed Entry Program (DEP) members. If current recruiting trends continue, the Air Force could fall short in the required number of recruits this fiscal year. To that end, we are focusing on improving our marketing campaigns across the board to reach out to this generation, underrepresented populations, untapped geographic regions and academic sources. Additionally, we are working to modernize recruiting policies and procedures and attract a new generation of top talent into the service.

Again, the challenges we face in the future will rely heavily on our ability to recruit America's best and maintain the competitive advantage our Airmen bring to the fight.

Military Family Housing & Dormitories

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Ensuring the health and safety of our Airmen and their families living in dormitories or military family housing is a leadership imperative for our Air Force and must be treated with the same seriousness we treat our weapon systems. To that end, we are empowering our tenants and commanders, through working groups, to address housing challenges at our bases, while continuing to take action to ensure safe and habitable housing for service members and their families.

The Department of the Air Force family housing FY23 inventory contains 15,200 government-owned homes and over 55,000 privatized homes. However, the high cost of construction continues to present challenges to improve DAF-owned family housing. Combined, the family housing operations and maintenance and construction programs will ensure continued support for the housing needs of Airmen, Guardians, their families, as well as our Army, Navy, and Marine Corps teammates living in DAF owned and privatized family housing.

Additionally, the Department of the Air Force dormitory inventory contains 761 permanent party dorms comprising 57,200 bedrooms, and 119 training dorms with 46,998 bedrooms. Out of 880 dorm buildings, only 200 permanent party beds assessed below the facility condition standard set by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense. Despite the high overall dorm condition rating, the department recognizes the need to focus Military Construction funds to replace dormitories that are beyond their useful lives and installations with dormitory deficits. The DAF plans to spend approximately \$235 million in FY23 Facility Sustainment Restoration and Modernization funds to repair and improve the condition of the current inventory of dormitories.

Child & Youth Care

Available, affordable and quality childcare programs are an essential workforce enabler for our Airmen and the Guardians we support. Our focus to improve access to childcare includes staffing initiatives for our centers, adding family childcare providers, and increasing community-based fee assistance along with targeted construction investments. These programs ensure the care and support of family members, which allows our service members to clearly focus on training and mission accomplishment. We currently have over 134 child development and youth centers on our installations. We also offer expanded childcare programs, utilizing a variety of approaches to meet the needs of Airmen and Guardians who require nontraditional care for irregular duty hours. Unfortunately, this still does not meet the demand for the care our service

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members need. As of January 2023, there were 4,630 children on a waiting list for on-base childcare – with an average wait time of more than 130 days. To combat this gap between needs and capability, we are working to maximize the spaces and childcare options currently available, pursue initiatives to expand childcare options, and leverage feedback from Airmen, and their families, to make the programs better. We have increased availability and affordability of the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN) program, which pays for a portion of childcare fees. This program supports Airmen living in areas where on-base childcare is not available, or there is an extensive waitlist. Additionally, last year we provided an incentive for DAF Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) direct-care employees, by offering a 100% childcare fee waiver for their first child enrolled in installation Child Development Programs, and a 25% discount for each additional child. As we continue to leverage these programs, we must also remain conscious of the increasing demand for available, affordable, and quality childcare. This directly impacts the readiness and retention of our Airmen and their families. It is more than just a quality-of-life initiative, it is a force multiplier essential to mission success.

Mental Health

The health, wellness and resiliency of our Airmen and families is a top priority for our Air Force and has a direct impact on our readiness as a whole. To that end, we have rolled out an integrated “Spectrum of Resilience” model designed to reinforce the power of connectedness and leverage it as one of the greatest sources of strength for meeting the unique challenges associated with military life. Additionally, our Fortify the Force Initiative Team (FFIT) has been working hard to help overcome the barriers and stigmas Airmen face when seeking mental health care. We are also partnering with the Defense Health Agency (DHA) to examine, refine and expand options for care. Ultimately, we are working to ensure that we create a culture where Airmen are valued, connected to a purpose, and if they need help, we are there to provide those resources - but we have much work to do.

Suicide Prevention

A cornerstone of our integrated resilience model that we strive to build is one where we work together, at all levels and across all organizations, to prevent any Airman from seeing no option than to end their own life. Suicide prevention remains a Department of the Air Force priority at every level. According to the Department of Defense Annual Report on Suicide in the

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Military Calendar year 2021, suicide rates in the Air Force have steadily declined from a rate of 25.1 per 100,000 in calendar year 2019 to a rate of 15.3 per 100,000 in 2021. From January 1, 2022 through September 30, 2022, roughly 60 Active-Duty Air Force, Guard, and Reserve Airmen have taken their own lives. We must keep our intent and goal on reducing this rate to zero. We are focused on four areas and aligning them with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: building connections, detecting risk, promoting protective environments, and equipping our Air Force and our families. Our intent is to take a leadership-driven public-health approach, informed by data and partnerships with academia, industry, and sister services to leverage diverse ideas and innovate prevention activities.

As mentioned, the FFIT has been working to identify the barriers in place that might limit the success of any initiatives and recommending solutions to best help our Airmen and their families. Looking to the future, the continued funding for expansion of resiliency and suicide prevention programs is essential to ensuring our Airmen have direct access to the care they need, when they need it.

Sexual Assault Prevention and Response

The Air Force remains fully committed to building advanced sexual assault prevention and response capabilities via evidence-based strategies, establishing a prevention workforce, and fostering partnerships with other agencies and community partners. Sexual assault is a crime that undermines force lethality, readiness, and mission success. We are finalizing a co-location pilot program at seven bases to simplify access and the advocacy processes for Airmen, to include the Sexual Assault Response Coordinator, Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Victim Advocate, Domestic Abuse Victim Advocate, Victims' Counsel, and religious support team. While we are on track or ahead of schedule in implementing the Secretary of Defense-directed reforms to address sexual assault and sexual harassment, as informed by the work of the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military (IRC), there is still much work to be done. We remain committed to combatting sexual assault, harassment, and retaliation in the ranks using evidence-based practices, hiring a civilian prevention workforce to address these concerns head-on, and ensuring comprehensive care and support to sexual assault victims.

Compensation

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The Military Leaders Economic Security Toolkit, located on the Military OneSource website, offers financial information and support for service members and their families. The site is updated regularly to reflect challenges and policy changes related to economic security. Additionally, in 2023, Department of Defense Military Base Pay increased by 4.6%, basic housing allowance by 12.1% on average and basic subsistence allowance by 11.2%. These increases are essential for Airmen to maintain their standard of living. I'm excited that the White House has directed the 14th Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation (QRMC) which will include consideration of factors such as the challenge of military spouse unemployment, frequent military moves, periods of geographic separation between service members and their spouses (including dual military couples), and childcare access and cost as they relate to military compensation. However, we are looking into the issue of the pay disparity between our officer and enlisted ranks. As the scope of responsibility continues to grow for our enlisted force, we need a holistic review of the pay scale and look forward to the results from the QRMC. In the meantime, DOD continues to assess and adjust monetary and non-monetary benefits by which enlisted members are compensated for their job responsibilities.

Food Insecurity

These past few years have been economically challenging for many of our Airmen. The financial strain due to inflation can create undue stresses on our people and their loved ones. Leaders at all levels must continue to advocate on their behalf and do everything they can to link these Airmen and their families to programs and resources that provide relief when and where they are needed. We are working with OSD and will continue to work with Congressional leaders to address any challenges that exist.

Personal Financial Readiness

Complimentary to all these programs and resources is a sustained focus on personal financial readiness, financial literacy, and readiness by offering information, education, training, and free personal financial counseling to Airmen, and their families. The Air Force has also increased the number of Personal Financial Managers available to assist and enhance financial readiness and money management skills for members and their families and implemented mandatory touchpoints for Airmen to receive this guidance, including Basic Military Training (BMT), within the training pipeline, and throughout their careers.

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Furthermore, the Air Force Aid Society continues to support emergent needs such as basic living expenses, vehicles, and childcare costs. Airmen and Guardians can submit requests for assistance through their local Military & Family Readiness Centers.

Conclusion

Chairman Banks, Ranking Member Kim, and members of this Subcommittee, thank you again for this opportunity to represent our incredible service members and their families, caregivers, and survivors. Your Airmen, supported by some of the strongest families our Nation will ever know, stand ready. They fully understand the role they play in employing and enabling Airpower around the world.

My fellow senior enlisted advisors and I are honored for the opportunity to provide insight into the quality of service and quality of life of our service members, which directly affects our force. For 50 years, our all-volunteer force has proudly answered the call to serve. And in an era of contested domains, that service matters more than ever. Our service members are the key to securing a future where American dominance remains uncontested. It is our job to ensure that we remain an all-volunteer force for the next 100 years. The decisions we make now will have implications on American generations to come.