

STATEMENT  
OF

HONORABLE FRANKLIN R. PARKER,  
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE NAVY  
FOR MANPOWER & RESERVE AFFAIRS

REGARDING  
RECRUITING SHORTFALLS AND GROWING MISTRUST: PERCEPTIONS  
OF THE U.S. MILITARY

BEFORE THE  
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL

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Chairman Banks, Ranking Member Kim, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, I appreciate this opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the Department of the Navy to discuss Recruiting Shortfalls and Growing Mistrust: Perceptions of the U.S. Military.

This past July, we celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the All-Volunteer Force. To maintain that All-Volunteer Force, we rely on informing, attracting, influencing, recruiting, and retaining young men and women from the entirety of America's talent pool. These efforts focus on providing the American people with a high quality and motivated Navy and Marine Corps that can meet all our critical national security missions.

Yet today we face our biggest challenge to recruit Sailors and Marines in a generation. COVID protocols and closures kept our recruiters out of schools for the better part of two years, denying access to our most productive recruiting venue. Low unemployment, a historically competitive labor market, and a shrinking pool of eligible candidates has made it increasingly difficult to rebuild recruiting momentum. In addition, a fragmented marketing environment presents challenges to reaching our target audience, sharing our story, and positively influencing public knowledge and perceptions of military service.

Our Navy and Marine Corps recruiters strive to recruit from every zip code to attract a force that is geographically, demographically, and socioeconomically representative of the nation it defends. In doing so, the Navy and Marine Corps continue to perform best in converting leads to recruits across the Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, and Southwest, largely aligned to our primary fleet concentration areas, where exposure to military opportunities has a positive impact on recruiting. In others, we are renewing our engagement through a number of strategies. Just as there is no one challenge to recruiting, there is no single solution.

## Perceptions of Military Service

Our understanding of public perception of the military is informed by data obtained from our recruiting commands, the Department of Defense, and external organizations. Today, I would like to focus on what we know about perceptions of military service among the young people we strive to recruit, and how we are responding.

Market research indicates that today's youth seek careers that provide purpose and opportunity; a work environment that is comfortable and respectful; and benefits such as work-life balance, job security, and high income.

We know many of these aspirations align well with military service. Among the most powerful reasons for joining the military are the intangible benefits: a feeling of patriotism, sense of duty, honor, selfless service, camaraderie, purpose, character development, and a real contribution to our nation. Our tangible benefits remain highly competitive in today's marketplace as well, including stable employment in any economy; compensation higher than 90 percent of civilian peers of similar age and education; a competitive benefits package, including a portable retirement program; housing; full medical coverage; access to quality, affordable childcare; Morale, Welfare, and Recreation programs; full- or part-time opportunities; extensive travel opportunities; education benefits, both during and after service; loan repayment programs; college credit for completed training; transferable skillsets; and leadership experiences.

In general, we find the greatest deterrents to military service among young people revolve around concerns about deployment, service commitment, and perceived negative impacts on physical and mental health.

Many of these concerns reflect the inherent characteristics of military service, and maritime service in particular. We ask our Sailors and Marines to carry out difficult, stressful, and potentially dangerous missions and deploy with

their units and command around the world for months at a time; sometimes with little notice. Our ability to project power relies on seaborne operations and a global network of bases far from our shores. We ask them to do what their nation needs, when and where it is needed.

Despite these immutable factors, we are working hard to provide an environment that is responsive to the needs and expectations of our Service members and their families, and attractive to those we seek to recruit. We honor their commitment to our country through our commitment to them: from the moment they step foot at Marine Corps Recruit Depots San Diego or Parris Island or Naval Station Great Lakes, through their time in service, and beyond as they receive well-earned benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs and across the Federal government.

### Talent Management

Our market research data shows young people are increasingly unfamiliar with military service and do not recognize it as a building block to a future career, or a potential career in itself. We must reverse this trend, by communicating the value of military service and how we equip our Service members with the tools for future success. The Navy and Marine Corps provide the full spectrum of talent management, aimed at empowering our members to become the most successful version of themselves and returning them to the civilian environment with technical, professional, and leadership skills. We are advancing talent management initiatives to develop and retain our talented Sailors and Marines. These initiatives, *MyNavy HR Transformation* and the Marine Corps' *Talent Management 2030*, span the full military lifecycle, from recruiting individuals with the right talents, matching those talents to organizational needs, and incentivizing the most talented and high-performing individuals to remain with the organization.

Through these and other initiatives, we are focused on improving service delivery, increasing career flexibilities, and transforming our digital platforms to improve the user experience with career decisions and milestones.

We continue to identify, develop, and implement strategies to maximize retention of high-quality Sailors and Marines. These include monetary retention policies and programs such as retention bonuses, special duty assignment pays, and early promotion opportunities; especially to attract and retain personnel in difficult-to-fill positions and career communities. Non-monetary strategies include targeted suspension of high-year tenure to keep talented individuals on active duty, career intermission programs, lateral transfer opportunities, and educational benefits.

Many people join the Navy and Marine Corps to see the world. Sea duty and deployments away from home and family are inherent to the Department of the Navy mission. To ease this burden wherever possible, we endeavor to provide geographic stability, limit Permanent Change of Station moves, and offer dual military co-location to the maximum extent feasible, while incentivizing and rewarding those who take our most challenging assignments.

### Education and Training

Research shows much of today's eligible population is focused on building a career foundation early-- obtaining higher education, gaining job experience, and cultivating a solid professional network, and becoming financially stable. Although military service is well positioned to meet many of these needs, our target population often does not view the military's offerings as uniquely competitive compared to the civilian sector.

Many are unaware of the investment in world-class training, education and career advancement opportunities offered to those who choose to serve. Our

enlisted and officer forces receive considerable substantive training and experience, including on-the-job and advanced skill training; many in occupations with direct civilian equivalency. For these reasons, employers value hiring veterans to benefit from not only their training and experience, but their leadership, interpersonal skills, and tested resilience.

In addition to training, we have made great strides to enhance and modernize the educational opportunities and objectives we provide to our Sailors and Marines. The Department of the Navy already offers generous education benefits via the 9/11 GI Bill, Tuition Assistance, and loan repayment programs. We have also established the United States Naval Community College to bring accessible naval focused education to Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard enlisted personnel, enabling our enlisted Service members to earn associate degrees and stackable professional certificates. Additionally, our naval education enterprise is working to develop leaders with warfighting knowledge, intellectual dynamism, and creativity that serves the dual purpose of allowing us to maintain strategic advantage against our adversaries and equipping them with knowledge and skills for lifelong success.

### Taking Care of Our People and Quality of Life

Taking care of our people remains a core priority of the Departments of Defense and the Navy. We are committed to supporting the physical and mental health, safety, and well-being of our Sailors and Marines. We are investing significantly to fuel needed changes that will foster healthy climates for Our Sailors and Marines to thrive in and provide the necessary resources for those who need help when they are not.

Quality of life issues are critical to our Service members and their families. Responsive personnel policies help the military remain relevant in the minds of today's young employees, who expect flexibilities such as parental leave to be the norm. While we understand the inherent challenges of service, we are working closely with our counterparts across the Department of Defense to implement high-impact, cross-cutting initiatives. Over the past year, we are collectively addressing economic security and housing costs, Permanent Change of Station challenges, childcare, and spouse employment, among other issues.

With your support, we are helping support the financial wellbeing of our Sailors and Marines with significant pay raises last year and proposed again by President Biden this year, additional commissary funding to offset price increases, Basic Allowance for Housing increases, and implementation of the Basic Needs Allowance.

To support our families with children, we have expanded parental leave across the Department of Defense and are implementing targeted initiatives to improve access to both installation and community-based childcare. In addition, over the past month, our military personnel have had the opportunity to enroll in Dependent Care Flexible Spending Accounts for the first time, providing another opportunity to ease childcare expenses.

All of these efforts support the needs of our Service members and preview our commitment to future recruits, by providing a supportive environment that is as flexible as possible while continuing to meet our national security mission.

### Telling Our Story

None of these efforts matter in a recruiting context if we do not effectively tell our story by communicating not only the value and benefits of military service but also our unwavering commitment to our people.

The most sustainable market for recruiters is the high school setting. Within the school setting, we know teachers, counselors, and leaders play critical roles in helping students explore and identify career and educational aspirations. However, many lack familiarity with the military and the breadth of educational and career options available to Service members. Earlier this year, Secretary Del Toro sent more than 2,000 letters to high school principals to encourage recruiter collaboration and promote a positive view of military service. Our recruiting commands also invite education leaders to witness how military training prepares Sailors and Marines to be successful, quality citizens. Equipped with this knowledge, education leaders can better understand and communicate the educational and career opportunities of military service.

Youth programs such as our Navy and Marine Corps Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps and community-based organizations such as the Navy League Cadet Corps, U.S. Naval Sea Cadets, and Young Marines, expose young people to military culture and instill the values of citizenship, leadership, and service. Coupled with immersive military training and experiences, programs such as these provide young Americans a venue to explore the diversity of opportunities available with the Navy, Marine Corps, and our partners at the Coast Guard.

More broadly, the Navy and Marine Corps have significantly increased investments in marketing and advertising to expand brand awareness, reclaim our story, and create positive perceptions of military service through more impressions and connections with potential recruits and influencers. We know young people are heavily influenced by family and friends, and by extension their community. So we must also reach these influencers to convey how military service can open doors for their loved ones, while providing an incomparable opportunity to serve a greater purpose. In addition, our recruiters use all available media, including



digital media, connected TV, and broadcast media, to generate actionable leads by placing our messaging in front of our target audience and others who influence their career decisions. The Navy and Marine Corps also execute aggressive community outreach programs across the country, including over 1,000 embarks, 42 tactical air demonstrations, 6 air shows, 15 Navy Weeks, 6 Fleet Weeks, 36 ship namesake visits, and 18 port visits in Fiscal Year 2023 alone.

Our current Sailors and Marines play a role, too. Our retention success speaks to the value of military service and positive experiences of those currently serving. We encourage them to share their personal stories, what made them join, and what makes them stay. There is no better source of information than the experience of somebody who has lived it.

### Conclusion

We face a significant challenge, but are tackling it head on as we do with any mission. I remain inspired by the exceptional and exhaustive work of our Navy and Marine Corps recruiters, but they cannot do it alone.

While their in-person interactions are paramount to re-engaging communities and combating an increasingly disinterested youth market, sharing a positive and accurate narrative that offsets inaccurate and negative perceptions of military service requires involvement from our senior leaders, Members of Congress, Veterans, teachers, coaches, family members, and other influencers, to reclaim our story, highlight our significant investments in our people, and create positive associations of military service.

The Department of the Navy needs your support, both in Congress and your districts. Please communicate the value of military service as an unmatched opportunity for life skills, leadership development, and a well-earned sense of pride and accomplishment that positions our members for successful lives, both

professionally and personally. Nominate as many of your constituents as possible for appointment to the United States Naval Academy, and encourage alternative paths to enlisted and commissioned service for those you do not. Encourage your local school systems to welcome recruiters. Host military service recognition events, such as for enlistment or commissioning, boot camp graduation, and other career milestones.

On behalf of Secretary Del Toro and the senior leadership of the Department of the Navy, United States Navy, and United States Marine Corps, thank you for helping us address these challenges. I look forward to working with you to meaningfully support our Service members and their families, to communicate the value of military service, and to foster an environment where young Americans see a future for themselves through service.