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Prepared Statement

of

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Recruiting Shortfalls and Growing Mistrust: Perceptions of the US Military

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Chairman Banks, Ranking Member Kim, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you this morning, along with my colleagues, to discuss the Department's efforts—and the need for whole-of-government and indeed whole-of-nation approaches—to increase the propensity of young Americans to pursue service to the Nation, particularly through military service.

Recruiting: Challenges and Strengths

In July of this year, the Department commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the All-Volunteer Force. The end of conscription and the successful transition to a professionalized military is a significant milestone and worthy of celebration. Over the last 50 years, the All-Volunteer Force has proven itself the best model in the world for maintaining a strong, agile, and lethal force capable of defending our Nation and reinforcing the security of our allies and partners in times of conflict and in time of peace. Our people are the cornerstone of this success. The strength of our military is grounded in the Military Services' ability to recruit exceptional young women and men from across our nation. Their diverse backgrounds aid immeasurably in finding solutions to the many complex national security issues the Department contends with around the globe.

At the same time, we are here today because the All-Volunteer Force faces the greatest challenge since its inception. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2023, the Military Services collectively missed our recruiting goals by approximately 41,000 recruits, and that number understates the challenge before us as the Services lowered end-strength goals in recent years in part because of the difficult recruiting environment.

We often appear before the subcommittee to address problems. But to solve this problem, we must first understand the military's strengths and how those relate to the challenges. Thanks

to the support of this subcommittee, the U.S. military offers an unparalleled value proposition for military service. That value of service comes in many forms. The compensation package is comprehensive and generous. A new active-duty Service member earns about \$47,200 per year, which rises quickly to \$53,550 within the first year and \$61,000 by year three. This compensation package includes either government-provided housing or a housing allowance that is updated annually to reflect costs in the local community. (Please see the attached infographic, which illustrates the military's robust total compensation package.) The last Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation found that junior enlisted Service members earn more than 90% of comparably educated and experienced workers in the private sector. In addition, Service members receive generous retirement benefits, including a defined benefit pension and Service contributions to the Thrift Savings Plan, as well as health care with few out-of-pocket costs compared to typical employer-sponsored health plans.

But the benefits of military service are not limited to compensation. We offer a compelling mission, a sense of camaraderie, the ability to be part of something bigger than oneself. We offer training and experience in cutting-edge and high-demand career fields, including cyber, space, aeronautics, supply chain, robotics, and more. In addition to GI Bill educational benefits, the Services spend more than half a billion dollars per year on tuition assistance for current Service members. We offer 12 weeks of parental leave for Service members, high quality and affordable child care, and job training fellowship programs for military spouses and separating Service members. The Department operates a K-12 school system that is the highest performing in the nation—based on reading and math results of the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress—for children of Service members at

overseas and some U.S. installations. We prepare our Service members for success in life and careers and beyond the military starting on Day 1 of their military service.

And furthermore, members of Generation Z tell us that they prioritize finding purpose and meaning in life and making a contribution to society. Military service offers both these and much more. And once Service members join the military, thanks to all these strengths—including the tangible and intangible value of service—they want to stay. Today, the Military Services are meeting or exceeding their retention goals, closing out FY 2023 with 100% or better of their mission retention goals.

So, with all these strengths, why do we face recruiting challenges?

Certainly, military recruiting is more difficult when the economy is strong—and particularly when unemployment is low and wage gains are high—because young adults have many more competitive options. And the impact of the pandemic on our recruiting model—which relies heavily on in-person recruiter access to high schools and community engagements was significant. Additionally, 77% of youth do not qualify for military service without some form of a waiver, including 11% of youth who do not qualify because they are overweight. But while these factors explain part of our deficit in recruiting, they do not explain all of it. We believe that our recruiting challenge is more profound, more structural, and longer term than any of us would like.

First, the military is not the only institution that is struggling to attract people or is under scrutiny. Members of Generation Z—and especially young adults aged 18 to 26—have low trust in many institutions, ranging from government to the media to large companies. Interestingly, while only 30% of young adults aged 18 to 26 who have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in

the military, that is the third-highest result of the institutions polled.¹ Young people are decreasingly following traditional paths, with undergraduate enrollment declining by 15% between 2010 and 2021, with most of the decline happening before the pandemic.² Participation in national service programs like AmeriCorps and Peace Corps have also not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. In 2023, Peace Corps had more than 2,600 volunteers, down from more than 7,300 in 2018.³

While the military is not alone in navigating these difficult trends, we have some unique considerations. The creation of the All-Volunteer Force 50 years ago may have shaped today's challenge. While the end of conscription ended a divisive era in America and fostered the most capable military the world has known, it also set in motion a decades-long shift in who serves in the U.S. military. For example, in 1995, 40% of U.S. youth ages 16 to 24 had a parent who served in the military. But by 2022, only 12% had a parent who served.

And that has led to a disconnect between the military and a large share of society. Today, only 8% of youth believe that people in the U.S. military share a lot in common with them. Self-reported knowledge of the military is low, but even so, 51% of youth believe it is likely or very likely that someone getting out of the military will have some form of physical injury, and even more believe that psychological and emotional problems are likely. About 20 years ago, just over a quarter of youth had never thought about serving in the military. In recent years, more than half of youth (54%) have *never* thought about serving in the military. Young people today are not

¹ "Gen Z voices lackluster trust in major U.S. institutions," *The Gallup Organization*, Sept. 14, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/510395/gen-voices-lackluster-trust-major-institutions.aspx>.

² "The case for college: Promising solutions to reverse college enrollment declines," *Brookings*, Jun. 5, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-case-for-college-promising-solutions-to-reverse-college-enrollment-declines/>.

³ Peace Corps, *Agency Financial Report Fiscal Year 2023*, https://files.peacecorps.gov/documents/open-government/FY2023.PeaceCorps.AFR_Final.pdf; and Peace Corps, *Agency Financial Report Fiscal Year 2018*, <https://files.peacecorps.gov/documents/open-government/agency-financial-report-fy18.pdf>.

rejecting military service; the challenge is that they are not even thinking about it. They are not looking at what we have to offer and telling us “no.” They simply don’t K-N-O-W much about military service, and what they do know is probably not accurate or complete.

And why would they be thinking about it? I was raised by a stepfather who served honorably in the military, was blinded in Vietnam, and spent his post-military life helping veterans. I knew about military service—the tremendous benefits as well as the risks—and I chose to serve as well; so has my son. But it’s hard to aspire to something that you don’t know about. And when so few youth in the United States have a parent, a brother, a sister, a friend who has served, when we have closed military bases in large swaths of the county, and when the U.S. military and its broad variety of missions and careers are no longer visible in many communities, we shouldn’t be surprised that we have a recruiting challenge.

The Department and the military Services are doing a lot to address this challenge, and later in my testimony I provide details about those promising efforts. We are working to improve the speed of the accessions process while maintaining necessary standards for readiness. The Services are investing more in marketing and expanding their recruiting workforces, and they are using innovative programs to prepare candidates who in the past were overlooked to meet our physical and aptitude standards, enlist, and serve successfully.

I committed to be candid with you. These efforts are helping and will continue to help, but they won’t be enough to solve this problem for the long term. We, as a nation, must find better ways to engage with youth about service, service to the Nation in any form – first responders, educators, state and local government, national service programs like AmeriCorps and Peace Corps, and particularly military service. Military service offers profound opportunities to people from all geographic parts of the nation; from all socio-economic backgrounds; with

varying career interests, talents, and intellectual and physical strengths. It is something that young women and men of every background could contribute to and benefit from. We need a national call to service—especially for military service, but also for national and public service. We need national leaders, such as government leaders, community leaders, business leaders, teachers and other influencers, and especially leaders like the members of this subcommittee, to talk about military service with youth in their communities and ask them to learn about and consider serving in the military. Not everyone needs to or is able to serve in the military. More than 2 million people serve in the active and reserve components of the U.S. military, which is less than 1% of the U.S. population. But to get to that 2 million takes the engagement and support of all of America, and we cannot get there, we will not meet our end-strength goals in a scenario where we have no meaningful engagement with 80-90% of youth.

This is a bigger problem than the Department or the Services can solve on our own. We're doing a lot, and we will continue to prioritize all of our efforts to meet end-strength targets. But we will need help and leadership from across the government and across the nation.

In addition to conveying the recruiting challenges the Department and Military Services face, I would like to highlight the Department's efforts to improve accessions processes and respond to the current recruiting market challenges.

Electronic Health Records and Medical Accessions Standards

The introduction of MHS GENESIS, the military's electronic health record system has had a significant impact on our recruiting enterprise. This system, which replaced paper medical records with digital records, provides more complete medical information about each recruit and enables more reliable and informed medical qualification decisions across the Department.

While MHS GENESIS has been the system of record since March 2022, the Department is still working to improve and streamline processes. We recognize the Military Services have voiced concerns that MHS GENESIS has resulted in process deficiencies that are impacting the accessions pipeline, including increased workloads on recruiters as well as Military Entrance Processing Station staff due to the increased volume of medical records requiring review. We are actively working with the Military Services to address these process challenges and staffing shortages. For example, the Services are hiring individuals who can identify and locate additional medical records on behalf of the applicant to facilitate expedited medical processing. And, we recently introduced a new natural language processing capability that, during the pilot phase, greatly reduced the time it takes for our medical providers to review health histories. As we transition from the pilot to full implementation, we believe the new capability is poised to improve processing timelines overall.

Even with these growing pains, we believe MHS GENESIS is working as intended and positively contributing to the long-term readiness of our military forces by giving us access to data and increasing our insight about the health of those we recruit. The Department will continue to refine workforce and electronic processes to increase the capacity of the new system in conjunction with our federal agency and commercial partners.

Additionally, the Department and the Military Services continue to explore new initiatives and pilots to improve medical processing outcomes. In June 2022, the Department introduced the Medical Accession Review Pilot (MARF). Under this pilot program 49 conditions that previously would have been disqualifying for any history of the condition now only require a waiver if the diagnosis was within 3, 5, or 7 years, depending on the condition. Through September 2023, MARF supported processing of about 3,000 applicants. For example, more than

2,000 diagnosed with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder have been accessed without a waiver under the pilot program.

Responding to Market Challenges: Traditional and New Approaches

While the picture of the current recruiting environment is acutely difficult, the Department and the Military Services are working together to resolve issues, improve processes and expand awareness of the many opportunities military service offers. Senior leaders throughout the Department are actively engaged and continue to develop appropriate courses of action to address the current recruiting challenges—both short-term and long-term solutions have been considered. While we remain focused on bolstering the traditional levers of enlistment bonuses, recruit marketing and advertising, and recruiter manning, additional expenditures in these areas by themselves are not sufficient to meet the challenge. Enlistment bonuses have been vital to filling critical occupations, and each Service has reviewed and adjusted its bonus offerings to address recruiting or skill shortfalls, but today's young adults are looking for more than just money. Our messaging must convey the value proposition of military service—beyond tangible benefits—that aligns with the career values of the recruiting market. We also seek new, innovative strategies and initiatives to support our recruiting mission, because these traditional approaches are not as effective anymore.

Today's marketing campaigns are more complex than in the past, requiring the Department and Services to consistently navigate the ever-changing digital landscape by targeting marketing and advertising campaigns across different media and social media platforms. The Department is developing a Joint Marketing Campaign to assist the Service Recruiting Commands by building awareness and increasing favorability and consideration for

military service among youth and influencers. The Military Services have increased their marketing budgets to create integrated campaigns that target the appropriate audience through both broad-based and niche-targeted marketing efforts while capitalizing on a range of media channels to maximize efficiency and create long-lasting awareness. While our messaging is present on all platforms, consumers can—and often do—ignore unwanted messages, making it more difficult to reach our target audience.

The Department is examining opportunities to increase insights about potential recruits and how to better reach them. Our messages must reach today's youth where they are with a message that resonates with them and motivates them to act.

Recruiter manning remains critical to generating accessions. The Military Services continue to review and adjust their recruiter manning given its importance despite manning challenges across the broader force. With the recent recruiting mission shortfalls, the Military Services are making difficult decisions regarding how to balance recruiter manning demands with operational requirements. The Military Services are also evaluating their recruiter training and staffing models to improve recruiting outcomes.

Over the last year, the Department and Military Services have introduced several new initiatives that are having a direct and measurable impact on recruiting outcomes. For example, the Army and Navy's Future Soldier/Future Sailor Prep Course allows applicants not meeting weight or aptitude (ASVAB) requirements an opportunity to train and achieve, or exceed, the accession standard. This program has proven highly successful for both Services with ~13,000 applicants qualifying for service. The Services' Conditional Delayed Entry Program (DEP) program has enabled the same-day enlistment of over 4,500 total applicants across the Services who otherwise would have had to wait for a waiver to enlist. Additionally, the Services have

experimented with expanding the enlistment of Category (CAT) IV recruits (applicants that scored between 11 and 30 on the ASVAB) beyond the DoD standard benchmark of 4%. This has expanded the eligible youth pool and resulted in approximately 9,800 CAT IV enlistments (Active and Reserve) in Fiscal Year 2023; importantly, all of these recruits already had high enough line scores to qualify for a military occupation. Moving into Fiscal Year 2024, we continue to expand on these initiatives while exploring new strategies and initiatives that will increase military accessions.

The Department is also evaluating our programs and policies that help take care of our people. We are committed to this tenet and are taking decisive action to better support members and their families, including steps related to food security, housing costs, sexual assault, child care, health care, spouse employment, and other quality of life programs that impact our service members ability to effectively serve. We must strive to cultivate an environment that advances the well-being of service members to ensure we can retain a military force that meets our Nation's needs, today and in the future.

As the Department continues to explore strategies and initiatives to address recruiting challenges, it is important to emphasize that recruiting shortfalls are not merely a DoD issue but a societal challenge. Overcoming our recruiting challenges requires a national response with contributions from across government agencies and the private sector. We need government and community leaders, educators, and business leaders to reach youth and their influencers and amplify a consistent message that shows the opportunities and benefits of Service. In support of this, the Department has developed and shared recruiting "toolkits" that provide a foundation of talking points for these key individuals to convey the benefits of military services to their

constituents, neighbors, co-workers, and colleagues. We need an all-hands-on-deck approach to change recruiting outcomes.

The Path Ahead

I believe that people and readiness are the foundation of our national defense. Even the best aircraft, ships, artillery, tanks, satellites, logistics, information systems, weapons systems, and operational plans are meaningless without sufficient numbers of personnel who are trained and ready to accomplish the mission. We must solve this problem – our National Defense Strategy is quite clear: “People execute the strategy.”⁴ It further states, “The Department will attract, train, and promote a workforce with the skills and abilities we need to creatively solve national security challenges in a complex global environment.” Quite simply, the success of the National Defense Strategy depends on our people.

It is a hard problem with many causes, some temporary, but many long-term and systemic. Our recruiting challenges have a scope that extends beyond the Department of Defense. We are working to advance effective approaches to meet the Department’s end-strength goals amid recruiting challenges of uncertain severity and duration through strong collaboration with the Services, innovative thought, and reexamination of processes and resources by all recruiting stakeholders.

Beyond that, we need the help of leaders across the nation to cultivate a national spirit of service and reach and engage with a broader share of youth with a positive message about the opportunity and benefits of military service, as well as national service and public service, as America needs the contributions of all forms of service to the Nation. We must fulfill our

⁴ Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy*, 20, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

collective responsibility to maintain the combat-credible military force needed to deter war and protect the security of our Nation. The Department must be better at communicating these intrinsic benefits of military service and how those benefits can help today's youth achieve their personal and professional goals.

I believe we can meet this challenge by leveraging the military's many strengths. The nation's Armed Forces, staffed by military professionals who choose to enlist or commission, is the greatest fighting force the world has known and is the bedrock of our national security. We provide our Service members with competitive pay and benefits, prepare them for career success in the military and beyond, and offer a meaningful and motivating mission. All together, these strengths underlie today's high retention of military personnel even in the context of strong economic conditions and the many career alternatives provided by a strong labor market, which I believe validates the Department's efforts to take care of our people and provide exceptional value to Service members. These strengths position us well to meet the recruiting challenge by finding new and better ways to engage with youth and influencers about the opportunity of military service.

Finally, I want to thank you and the members of this Subcommittee for providing the opportunity to address this critical issue. I also want to thank you for your continued advocacy on behalf of the men and women of the Department of Defense and their families. I look forward to your questions and to working with the Subcommittee to advance our shared goals.