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House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel Holds Hearing on Military Personnel Legislative Priorities

[LIST OF PANEL MEMBERS AND WITNESSES](#)

DAVIS:

Good afternoon. The meeting will come to order. Today the subcommittee will turn its attention to the important issue of maintaining an all-volunteer force during a protracted war with a focus on end strength, recruiting and retention and families.

Prior to fiscal year 2008, the services experienced a stressed recruiting environment due predominantly to relatively low unemployment, a protracted war, a reduced propensity for youth to serve and a reluctance for influencers to recommend military careers.

The services responded with an increase in spending in order to maintain an all-volunteer force, but not without a reduction in the quality of the force.

It's an unfortunate reality today that the economic hardship that has impacted so many families in America has reversed those trends and caused both recruits and currently serving members to view career opportunities in the military more favorably.

As the service continues to enjoy record recruiting and retention performance, budget managers have sought to reduce resources for those programs.

The committee is extremely concerned about the future of these critical programs and whether the services are postured to react rapidly to an improving economy with the resources that will be necessary to be competitive with a reenergized private sector job market.

Other issues of interest to the subcommittee today include spouse education and employment programs; family readiness before, during and after deployment; the status of "don't ask, don't tell" study group; reliance of the services on supplemental appropriations; and pay raise and retiree compensation budget proposals.

We have an excellent panel consisting of the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness and the four personnel chiefs of the military services to help us explore these issues.

I request that you all keep your remarks, to the extent that you can, oral comments, to three minutes, and we'll certainly have time for questions.

Without objection, all written statements will be entered into the record.

Mr. Wilson, would you like to add some remarks?

WILSON:

Ms. Davis, thank you for welcoming our witnesses, two of whom, General Bostick and General Zilmer, appear before us for the first time in their current capacities.

I want to thank all of you for your service to our nation. Also, I'm so grateful to see Secretary Stanley here. He is a graduate of South Carolina State University, which -- from my home state -- we're very grateful provides the largest number of officers of any historically black college in the United States.

And so we're -- we're so proud of the heritage, Secretary, and -- and you also graduated in an excellent year, 1969. I identify with that, so -- and -- and you're from my home town -- our home town, Charleston.

We've been at war for nine years, and it's a remarkable testament to the efforts of these men and women and their predecessors that the all-volunteer force has weathered the severe wartime trials.

The effort to recruit, retain and in some cases grow the armed forces is never easy in the best of times. During most of the last nine years of conflict, a bad economy and the reality of war made the effort even more difficult.

Nevertheless, each of the military services succeeded to such a degree that in 2009, for the first time since the beginning of the all-volunteer military, every recruiting goal both in quantity and quality was met or exceeded in both the active and Reserve components. That's a remarkable achievement, and you and your predecessors deserve a lot of credit.

I personally identify. I represent Parris Island and I represent Fort Jackson, and so I know as the young people come to serve it is so extraordinary to go to graduations and see their family members not recognize the graduates. These young people look like a million dollars.

So thank you for what you do, and I know how fulfilling military service is, with four sons currently serving in the military, and I had the privilege and opportunity to serve 31 years. And the people you get to meet -- it's such a wonderful, fulfilling experience of life.

Today's hearing is principally focused on recruiting, retention and end strength, as well as the department's legislative priorities.

In that context, I would ask Dr. Stanley in his opening oral comment to comment on three legislative issues. First, why it's important for Congress to pass the president's proposal to provide concurrent receipt of military retired pay and V.A. disabilities pay for Chapter 61 military disability retirees.

Second, whether the department supports legislation to repeal the widow's tax, which is the required offset between annuities received from the survivor benefit plan and the Veterans Administration payments for dependency and indemnity compensation.

And third, whether the department supports legislation for -- for a retroactive early retirement credit for certain wartime Reserve components prior to January the 28th, 2008.

Ms. Davis, I thank you for holding this hearing and I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses.

DAVIS:

Thank you, Mr. Wilson.

It's now my pleasure to introduce our outstanding panel. First is the Honorable Dr. Clifford L. Stanley, undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness.

Thank you for being here.

Lieutenant General Thomas P. Bostick, deputy chief of staff, U.S. Army.

Vice Admiral Mark Ferguson III, U.S. Navy, chief of naval personnel, deputy chief of naval operations, total force.

Lieutenant Richard -- Lieutenant General Richard C. Zilmer, deputy commandant for manpower and Reserve affairs, headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps.

And Lieutenant General Richard Y. Newton III, U.S. Air Force, deputy chief staff manpower and personnel, headquarters, U.S. Air Force.

Thank you all very much.

I want to welcome General Bostick and General Zilmer because this is the first time that you're here in these new roles, and we appreciate your being here. Thank you so much.

And please begin, Secretary Stanley.

STANLEY:

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Davis, Mr. Wilson and Mr. Kline, distinguished members of the panel. We're here today at a military subcommittee -- personnel subcommittee. It's an honor to appear before you to speak with you concerning the Department of Defense's personnel programs and readiness.

For the past four weeks now, as the undersecretary of defense, I've had the honor of working with and interacting with some of our greatest men and women in uniform, Department of Defense civilians and contractors and families. It is truly a privilege to serve them in this position.

I first want to thank you for your strong support of these men and women over the years. They have fought our wars and protected our interests and our allies around the globe. I look forward to working closely with this committee to improve support for those in uniform, the civilian employees of the department and their families.

In terms of military personnel, the services are experiencing historic successes in recruiting and retention. It is a tribute to both the dedication of our military personnel and the patriotism of our nation's citizens that we continue to maintain an all-volunteer force of unprecedented quality for more than -- after more than eight years of active combat operations.

I'm happy to report that we have improved overall entitlements to the point that all of our personnel are paid at or above the 70th percentile of their civilian counterparts.

Our challenge today is -- as you've alluded to already, is to maintain this position without imposing greater long-term bills and offsets while using targetable tools such as special pay and bonuses to shape and manage our force.

Similar to our efforts to target and define the impacts of each pay with our active personnel, we must continue to ensure that we support those we have already -- already are serving. But again, we must do so in an equitable manner and one that is consistent with the overall demands of the department.

As an example, the department continues to oppose efforts to eliminate the offset between the survivor benefit plan and dependency indemnity compensation programs.

Allowing concurrent receipt of the survivor benefit plan and the dependency indemnity compensation without offset would create an inequity with one select group receiving two survivor annuities while survivors of most military retirees and survivors of veterans who died of service-connected cause but were not retired would actively -- would receive only one or the other.

At the same time, in seeking that broader equity and department-wide impact, we see a win-win opportunity in expanding the concurrent receipt program to include military disability retirees with less than 20 years of service, regardless of disability rating.

This expansion would cover our most challenged retirees by allowing them to receive retired pay for their years of service performed and V.A. disability compensation for their future reduced earning capability.

Our military forces maintain an exceptionally high level of readiness, but multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan have certainly increased the stress on our services and their families.

And we have a number of initiatives under way to address the stress and have set clear limits and goals for deployment lengths, the amount of time or dwell between deployments.

We have also committed to the further improving of support of our military families. For fiscal year '11, we have requested a 41 percent increase in the family assistance baseline funding across the department.

Unfortunately, we have had some stumbles in this area, and I'm sure you're aware of My Career Advancement Account, where the program had some unforeseen, unprecedented but welcome demand in the enrollment. It overwhelmed the infrastructure of the system.

Over the past few weeks, the Department of Defense mapped out solutions for both the short and long term that honors our commitment to our military spouses while accounting for our fiscal realities.

This past Saturday the MyCAA program restarted for over 136,000 spouses currently in the program to continue their career training plans, and we're preparing options for the long-term management of the program, and we intend to seek input from our program stakeholders before making a final decision on a long-term plan.

With this plan and other programs we oversee, we know we must make a concerted effort to restore our faith and our credibility and confidence in the military spouses, servicemembers and the American public.

The department also is proactively working on child custody issues that our servicemembers may face as a result of their service to our nation, and I appreciate the efforts of the subcommittee in this regard.

Secretary Gates sent letters urging action to each of the governors of the states that have not passed any military-specific child custody legislation. Also, child custody has been listed in the department's 10 quality-of-life issues presented to the governors and other officials.

I want to stop there and look forward to the questions and get to more -- maybe some specifics that Mr. Wilson asked later on. I thank you.

DAVIS:

General Bostick?

BOSTICK:

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Davis, Representative Wilson, Representative Kline and Representative Snyder. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

On behalf of our secretary, the Honorable John McHugh, and our chief of staff, General George Casey, I would like to thank you for your unwavering support and demonstrated commitment to our soldiers, our civilians and our great family members.

Our all-volunteer Army is now in its ninth year of continuous combat operations. And despite the challenges such an incredible demand poses, America's Army remains resilient, professional and combat-seasoned.

Our senior leadership, however, recognizes the strain this operational tempo has placed on the force and the vital need to restore balance. Consequently, we have set two key objectives in this area. First, to sustain our all-volunteer force in an era of persistent conflict. And second, to provide the best possible care, support and services for our soldiers, civilians and family members.

Our first mission is sustaining the force, and that has been to recruit and retain the highest possible quality civilians and soldiers for service in our Army. With the support of Congress and the nation, we are very proud to report that America's Army achieved 104 percent of our recruiting goals for 2009, while also achieving all benchmarks with regard to recruiting highly qualified soldiers.

Moreover, all components of the Army exceeded 105 percent of their reenlistment goals. Your

support of incentives have been key to this success. As the pace of economic recovery increases, we will carefully review incentives and seek your support to ensure we remain highly competitive in the evolving job market.

In a related effort, the active Army is implementing a temporary increase to our end strength of up to additional 22,000 soldiers. This measure was approved by the secretary of defense in July of 2009 and it addresses the increased number of non-deployables in our formation and helps to ensure the readiness of those deploying. It also improves the dwell time between deployments for our soldiers and families.

Our second mission has been to increase the quality of care, support and services to the Army team. To this end, we have aggressively pursued a number of programs to better care for and increase the resiliency of our soldiers, civilians and family members.

From increasing behavioral health counselors to address post-traumatic stress syndrome, to pilot programs to improve the delivery of substance abuse counseling and treatment, and a holistic approach to suicide prevention, we are moving on a broad front to address what some have termed the invisible cost of our current conflict.

Consistent with the spirit of our Army values and warrior ethos, we have also pursued the OSD-led effort to execute our Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention Program in order to educate our force on this critical issue; de-stigmatize reporting of incidents, whether in garrison or during contingency deployments; and to ensure that allegations are properly and promptly investigated and resolved.

Together with the other programs such as Comprehensive Soldier Fitness, the Strong Bonds Program, the Army Family Covenant, and expanded survivor outreach services to assist the families of our fallen brothers and sisters, we're putting into place a network of programs to promote resiliency and well-being.

To conclude, I wish to thank all of you for your continued support which has been vital in sustaining an all-volunteer Army through an unprecedented period of continuous combat operations.

With your support, we will continue to work towards restoring balance and sustaining the high quality of our Army for the duration of the current fight and for the foreseeable future.

Chairwoman Davis and members of the subcommittee, I thank you for your generous and unwavering support for our outstanding soldiers, civilians and their families, and I look forward to answering your questions.

DAVIS:

Thank you.

Admiral Ferguson?

FERGUSON:

Chairwoman Davis, Representative Wilson and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to review our fiscal year 2011 budget request.

The extraordinary people of our Navy are serving around the globe with over 40 percent of our ships currently underway or deployed. Sailors remain engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan, with more than 21,000 active and Reserve sailors serving afloat and ashore in the region.

Demonstrating our operational flexibility, more than 4,000 active and Reserve sailors and Navy civilians responded quickly in January to the devastating earthquake in Haiti with our hospital ship Comfort and other naval units.

Current operational demands and a high operating tempo have placed added stress on the force.

Providing a comprehensive continuum of care for our sailors and their families, therefore, remains a constant priority. Navy Safe Harbor, the Associated Anchor Program, and our Operational Stress Control Program are critical elements of this continuum of care.

Our leadership remains focused on providing support to our sailors and their families to foster resilience as well as family readiness.

We believe that family readiness and personal readiness supports warfighting capability and directly impacts job performance, satisfaction and retention. We continue to adapt our personal and family readiness programs to meet the needs of our sailors and their families.

We monitor the health of the force through surveys and retention data which indicate that sailors overall are satisfied with their leadership, their benefits and their compensation. Your support of our people has made this possible.

We continue to focus our efforts on sustaining this balanced force in terms of seniority, experience and skill sets. Our fiscal year 2011 end strength request of 328,700 represents a stabilized end strength level to meet our operational commitments.

Like the other services, we continue to be successful in recruiting and retaining high-quality sailors. Targeted investments in special and incentive pays and bonuses are fundamental to the success as we sustain this extraordinary force.

While we must continue to apply targeted bonus programs to selected critical skills, we have been able to make reductions in recruiting and retention bonuses over the last year. We continue to adjust them on a dynamic basis as we respond to changes in the broader economy.

We also continue to benchmark our programs against those in industry and government to ensure we reward our people's service with the very best our nation has to offer.

Your Navy has received 20 national awards over the last 20 months, recognizing accomplishments across the areas of workforce planning, life-work integration, diversity and training. Our strategic imperative remains to sustain the world's finest naval force.

On behalf of the men and women of the United States Navy and their families who faithfully support them, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to the committee and the Congress for your unwavering support. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

DAVIS:

Thank you.

General Zilmer?

ZILMER:

Chairwoman Davis, Ranking Member Wilson, distinguished members of the subcommittee, it is my privilege to appear before you today. I'd like to make a few brief points.

First, the Marine Corps achieved unprecedented success in fiscal year 2009, completing our end strength growth to 202,000 two years early. Our challenge now is to shape our force to make sure we have the right grades, experience, and skills necessary to fulfill the operational requirements.

Even with the current economic conditions, we will need to increase retention in targeted and specialized occupational specialties so that we may maintain the vital Marine Corps leadership in critical skills that are necessary.

To accomplish this, we must rely on enlistment and reenlistment incentives, and we appreciate your continued support for these programs.

Second, I want to reiterate that taking care of our Marines and their families remains one of our corps' highest priorities. With your support, we initiated many personnel and family readiness program improvements during fiscal year 2009 and have built these programs in to our baseline budget.

We have hired 400 family readiness officers. We have established school liaison officers at all of our major installations. We are increasing child care spaces. We are improving our already well-regarded exceptional family member program. We are integrating our behavioral health programs to provide a holistic solution to suicide, sexual assault and combat stress prevention.

Lastly, I know our nation's wounded warriors are a top priority for you, and I can assure you that they are for the Marine Corps as well. Despite the challenges they face as they recover, our wounded, ill and injured Marines are highly motivated to contribute to our warfighting mission and to our society.

From our recovery care coordinators and other wounded warrior care staff to our Department of Defense best practice Sergeant Merlin German Call Center, we will be there for our wounded warriors through all phases of their recovery.

As we continue to deploy and fight in Afghanistan and other parts of the world, we must always remember that our individual Marines are our most precious asset. Marines are proud of the eagle, globe and anchor and what it represents to our country. With your support, a vibrant Marine Corps will continue to meet our nation's call.

I look forward to answering your questions. Thank you.

DAVIS:

Thank you.

General Newton?

NEWTON:

Madam Chairwoman and Ranking Member Wilson and distinguished members of the subcommittee, let me add my thanks also for this opportunity to discuss the Air Force efforts related to the fiscal year 2011 budget to ensure we attract and recruit and develop and retain a high-quality and diverse fighting force.

Airmen are the focal point for providing the critical capabilities that the Air Force contributes for winning today's fight, and while the Air Force has innovated technologies and equipment, it's the hard work of our dedicated men and women in uniform and our civilians and the support of our families who underscore our success.

Without a doubt, the tremendous talent of our total force airmen and civilians is the backbone of the United States Air Force. As such, I am focused on ensuring our airmen possess the necessary skills so they can deliver the best possible support to our combatant commanders.

We must ensure we have the proper end strength to meet current, new and emerging missions. And for fiscal year 2011, our active duty end strength will be 332,200 airmen, with 71,200 airmen in the Air Force Reserve, and 106,700 airmen in the Air National Guard. This is a slight increase for active duty and Air Force Reserve from fiscal year 2010.

Simultaneously, we will continue to strive for balance in our workforce, with particular emphasis on stressed career fields and mission areas that need our attention, such as intelligence and surveillance and reconnaissance, contracting, security forces, to name a few.

For instance, we've added contracting officers to the Air Force list of low retained career fields, and these officers will begin receiving critical skills retention bonuses this year.

The growth in authorized end strength goes hand in hand with an increase in our recruiting efforts,

and it goes beyond finding just the right numbers. We must also ensure the right quality and the right skills are present in potential candidates. And in short, we need to be a leading competitor in the search for America's talent.

Despite the weak economy, we expect F.Y. 2011 to be a critical retention environment for several reasons: an increased need to retain specific skill sets in certain specialties, previous end strength decreases and corresponding decreases in (inaudible), increased operational demands, and new and emerging missions.

Our commitment includes continued support for special pay and allowances to address recruiting and retention concerns in our health professional skills and our most critical warfighting skills such as pair (ph) rescue imagery analysis, tactical air control party, explosive ordinance disposal.

Finally, we are committed to taking care of airmen and their families, including our wounded warriors, to whom we have a never-ending obligation. During this Year of the Air Force Family, we tackled a host of issues critically important to our families, such as expanding child care capacity, developing more robust programs for special needs families, and invigorating the support we provide for developed (ph) members' spouses and children.

We've focused these efforts in our Airman and Family Readiness Centers at each of our installations, which serve as a central hub for airmen and family support issues.

The Air Force is fully committed to providing for the nation's defense wherever the mission leads us. Your continued support of our initiatives to attract, develop and sustain talented and diverse airmen and to care for their families is mission essential, and it's most appreciated.

Our efforts to effectively manage end strength, recruit and retain, develop and care for airmen and their families will ensure we continue to provide the world's finest air, space and cyberspace power in the world.

Thank you for your unfailing support to the men and women in the United States Air Force, and I also look forward to your questions.

DAVIS:

Thank you very much. We certainly appreciate all of your accomplishments and the incredible men and women who you continue to lead. Thank you very much for that.

You've all, I think, mentioned the need for some flexibility, I think, in recruitment and retention, and certainly there's changing economic conditions. I wonder if you could expand on that further, particularly Secretary Stanley, whether -- do you believe that you have all the authorities that you need to really respond to all of these challenges as they occur?

There -- there is some concern, of course, that we sometimes cut back at a time that it's obvious we can do that, but then you need to be able to gear up again. Are there some authorities that you could speak to and -- and that you think could -- that we -- that we could work with a little closer?

STANLEY:

Chairwoman Davis, if I understand the question correctly, I -- I'm not aware of any authorities that we don't have to be able to work together not only with the services but also with Congress to be able to accomplish, I believe, our end strength goals, balancing our force, as we look to the future.

But I will tell you that we look forward to working very closely with the Congress and the services to achieve our end strength balances.

DAVIS:

Are there any initiatives -- and I guess everybody on the panel could speak to this -- are there any initiatives that would be even more helpful as you respond to those needs to -- to flex in -- in recruiting and retention?

I -- I might add, General Zilmer, it's my understanding that in -- in terms of bonuses that you actually are looking at a cut in F.Y. '11 budget of about \$300 million. Is that going to be problematic as you look to special career fields where you need that additional support?

ZILMER:

Madam Chairwoman, thank you. We are concerned as -- and we are, in fact, bringing down SRBs from fiscal year 2009 through 2011.

Where we're projected right now, we think we can sustain the force, but the importance of -- of still maintaining those SRBs for the critical MOSs -- the intelligence, the linguists, the EOD -- those will still be necessary, as well as the -- the enlistment bonuses on the front end, to bring in those qualified people.

So we are shaving it down, but we think that's probably about as low as we're going to be able to go and still sustain the quality of the force that we have today.

DAVIS:

Are there any other comments in terms of specialties that you're looking for?

BOSTICK:

Chairwoman Davis...

DAVIS:

General Bostick?

BOSTICK:

... I was going to comment from a recruiting end and -- and, really, the -- the opportunities you gave us in National Defense Authorization Act 2006 where we had pilot program authorities. And those -- those pilots were unnamed, but we could -- we could go out and develop four different pilots, and we tried different ones.

One, you'll remember, was the recruiter incentive pay, where we made the decision that we would pay recruiters based on achieving over the mission that they were required to do. We -- we no longer need that, but I think it's important to have the -- the opportunity to have those pilots on the shelf so that if we want to pursue them that we can.

You also remember the home ownership program that we had. We currently have the military assistance to the national defense, the MABNI (ph) program -- military accessions that are important to the national defense. I think those types of programs -- they may narrow an aperture, but it's important to have them available to us.

We have decreased bonuses as well, but we are focusing the bonuses on those critical specialties where we need to recruit significantly.

DAVIS:

OK.

Anybody else want to comment? You don't have to, but...

NEWTON:

If I may, ma'am, also we're -- this year we have 27 stressed career fields, 11 in our officer ranks and 16 in our enlisted ranks, and so the -- but we believe we have the authorities in -- in our -- our selective enlistment bonus, particularly for our enlisted remains about steady for this year.

But it's -- it's -- as we look at it in -- in a broad sense, we've met our recruiting goals writ large and our retention goals, but the challenge is -- is -- is within those specialties, those high demands, those stressed career fields -- those enablers, if you will, that are required downrange in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.

I -- I would make one comment also of a very select group, and that's our health professionals, and I think all of us are -- are dealing with challenges in the health professional -- not only the recruiting but the retention.

But it's also based on a -- you know, a limited supply with a great demand, you know, out in -- out in the United States as well.

FERGUSON:

I would just say we feel we have the authorities and then we'll adjust amounts in response to what happens in the broader economy. Our focus areas are also in those critical skills -- our nuclear operators, the medical personnel, the SEALs and Special Forces operators, where the -- the training and initial accession criteria are so high that we have to continue to compete for those in the broader economy.

DAVIS:

Thank you.

I might just quickly -- we didn't go on the clock right away, and I'm on the clock as well as my colleagues, but if we -- I could just wrap up quickly, because, Secretary Stanley, you mentioned My Career Advancement program. We know that that ran into some difficulties.

What -- what do you actually envision in terms of how we move forward with that? Clearly, the need is far greater than we anticipated, so where really should those budget -- what should the numbers be?

And I think -- are there some other programs that are helping to focus the -- the spousal population to really -- to really take a look at some options that they may have that they may not have even thought about and might be in some -- some career fields that we would actually like to have them engage in, but perhaps they haven't had the kind of support to do that?

STANLEY:

Chairwoman Davis, you're absolutely right. First of all, we -- we ran into what I would call the unexpected good thing about a program that became wildly successful and popular.

They are looking at a whole range of options that, first of all, include the use of other programs that can -- you know, that can complement MyCAA, still helping out, also looking, though, at how we would fund even what we have if we continue along the same line, which would be up to \$4 billion. And so there are offsets to that as we go forward.

But everything is on the table right now. We made a commitment to bring the rest of it online -- I'm talking about phase two -- by the 1st of April. So within this next week plus, we are actually looking at coming forward with some recommendations to the secretary and, of course, working with Congress as

we work together.

In fact, I will be over here next week talking and working, you know, sort of behind the scene to work this, but you're absolutely right, there's more to this than just the MyCAA in taking care of our families in particular as we move forward.

DAVIS:

Thank you. I think we might be, you know, happy to look at some authorization language -- and maybe there are a few pilots that we might think about in terms of that transition period and really preparing for the next step in -- in a few select areas, so...

STANLEY:

Absolutely.

DAVIS:

... thank you for that.

Mr. Wilson?

WILSON:

Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.

And thank all of you for your testimony, and it really impressed me how sincere you are in your service and, again, the opportunities that you're providing young people to have the privilege and opportunity to serve in the military.

Dr. Stanley, you mentioned the department and military services' concern -- and it was referenced by others, too -- of the situation of suicides in active and Reserve forces. And you indicate that there's a personnel gap analysis by military service.

I'm concerned that there's a connection between the access to military health services and the incidence of suicide. How is the department assisting the military services in providing mental health care to our troops and their families?

Why does the Army have such a significant gap in the number of mental health providers needed and the number assigned?

STANLEY:

Mr. Wilson, what I'll -- I'll do is I'll -- first of all, I'll defer the part of the Army question to our Army representative, but let me just address in macro our concerns dealing with health, the stress that are on our forces, and although suicide happens to be part of the issue, there's a much larger issue here dealing with how we take care of our troops from -- everything from dwell time to the stress on the forces and the commitment, pay and compensation.

All these things have some impact on this, and so we're looking at this holistically. We have a quadrennial review that's actually starting here very shortly that will take in part of this.

And the first thing that I did -- I mentioned -- I hope I mentioned this the last time I was here -- was that we brought on someone immediately in the medical profession to help take over the health affairs part temporarily till the candidate got through to make sure that we addressed the issues of health affairs, taking care of our troops and their families primarily.

Those are macro statements as I work my way into learning more about what we can do in working with Congress. This is part of my agenda for coming over next week also to work with you.

WILSON:

All right.

And, General Bostick?

BOSTICK:

Yes. Suicides is a tragic situation in any unit, in any family, and one suicide is too many. Our vice chief of staff of the Army has taken the leadership on this in developing the campaign plan for health promotion, risk reduction and suicide prevention and has laid out an aggressive strategy on -- on the way ahead.

Part of that is counselors. Also, we are looking at alcohol and substance abuse and the counselors that are required there.

Some of the challenge in -- in hiring is due to location and some of the challenge in hiring is this is a small select group that's out there and -- and it's a very competitive environment. But we're working it very hard.

In the area of suicides, we have about 250 counselors in that area. We expect to get up to about 290 in the May time frame. The -- the challenge for us really is -- is that the right requirement, and we're -- we're studying with the medical professionals to determine whether the requirement is correct.

And it could be much higher than that. So we're working that closely with the medical professionals and -- and the hiring in my office.

WILSON:

And I want to thank whatever you do, and I -- I wanted to bring to your attention that there's an organization in our community in the Midlands of South Carolina called Hidden Wounds, and they are volunteers.

It was developed by Anna Bigham in memory of her brother, Lance Corporal Mills Palmer Bigham. And yesterday their director, Chris Johnson -- Dan Ramsey came by, and they're providing mental health assistance and also suicide prevention assistance, and I -- I thank them for what they're doing as a safety net and backing up DOD, the services and -- and V.A. And -- but I'm just grateful for what they've done.

Another interest I have, Secretary Stanley, is the widows tax, and -- and I've -- I've run into it where I have met families, the widow and the children, and it affects them substantially, like \$1,000 a month. And so what is the department proposing to help on this?

STANLEY:

And just for -- question for clarity, are we talking about the survivors' benefits...

WILSON:

Absolutely.

(CROSSTALK)

STANLEY:

... and the indemnity compensation?

WILSON:

That's right, yes. Offset.

STANLEY:

Offset. In my time there -- now, I have -- I know I represent the department's position, and as I've said already, I know that the department's position now is opposed to addressing any repeal or change in where we're looking at this, because there's a 10 percent over -- you know, overlay or gap in terms of what's going on at SRB as well as -- the survivors benefit plan as well as what's going on in the indemnity compensation.

I have not personally had an opportunity to look at the numbers, to look at where that -- what that really means. And because, as I shared with you offline, I guess -- because I've lived this life before, and if I left this world today, I know there might be some impact on my family.

So, I mean, I can -- I can own that personally, but I also represent the department right now, and so I'm -- I have to state -- say that right now. But I am actually committed to working closely with you to move forward.

WILSON:

Well, thank you very much, and of course, Congressman Solomon Ortiz has also been very interested in this issue. Thank you very much.

DAVIS:

Thank you.

While we're on that, I think one of the perhaps inconsistencies -- and you might want to just, for your information -- I think we see concurrent receipt being discussed without an offset, and yet we see the SepDIC not being supported in terms of trying to actually, you know, deal with the situation before us.

And so is that an inconsistency or is that -- how would you -- is that -- is it not confusing that one would see it as an inconsistency actually?

STANLEY:

Well, I'll -- I'll be up front with you. In my time here, I see some of that in my studies and am committed to saying, "OK, here's what I want to say right now," as where the department is.

I haven't been there long enough to say how rigid things are going to be where I'm working, but we're going to give this a good, hard look and work with you as we move forward.

The department's position right now is we don't want to repeal that. But the bottom line is we're going to give it -- we're going to continue to work with you. I hope that's not confusing.

DAVIS:

Yeah. Thank you. I think it's really, certainly, a challenge from where we sit, because we are

looking at some offsets. It's not -- I think everybody feels strongly that this is an important thing to address. And we'd like to move forward, and yet we're -- we have some constraints now.

STANLEY:

I agree.

DAVIS:

Thank you.

Dr. Snyder?

SNYDER:

I'll just add onto what Mr. Wilson and the chairman said. I mean, we're hearing from military families who had people die overseas, and it's impacting on young parents with young children, and it's a program that they have paid at least part of the premium on. They all recognize they haven't paid all of it, so I think that's why it's got our attention so much of late.

I appreciate you all -- all being here. I have known most of you, I guess, for some time now, and for the last eight and a half years you have been in a military that has been at war. You're all's careers will end still being serving a nation at war. And that's really unprecedented in our history, and -- and we -- we appreciate your service and -- and of all the folks that work for you.

I wanted to ask -- as you know, our -- one of our subcommittees has been looking at the professional military education issues.

Secretary Stanley, if you were trying to judge which of the services are doing the most efficient job of providing professional military education, do you have the ability -- do you have numbers that you could look and say, "General Newton, General Zilmer, Admiral Ferguson, General Bostick, I've got your numbers here, it's costing you this much for a 10-month course, or this much for a 12-month course for an individual," or, "The master's degree program that you're offering at an in-residence military PME school is this much, and it's" -- I mean, do you have the ability to actually compare apples to apples to apples, or are those numbers non-existent?

STANLEY:

Dr. Snyder, I'm smiling because I don't have those numbers right now. Those numbers may be resident in the staff. But I know enough about the different branches of the service to know that we're sort of comparing some apples and oranges when it comes to mission, how we approach the mission and doing it.

So it's -- it's not one of those -- even if I had the numbers, I know from my experience that I'd have to do some extrapolation in terms of how I would interpret those numbers, and I would obviously ask the services to maybe comment on that.

I hope you understand what I'm trying to...

SNYDER:

No, I understand what you're saying, and I understand that it's different learning to fly a C-130 than it is learning to -- to...

STANLEY:

Yeah.

SNYDER:

... do an infantry operation in the -- in the Marine Corps. On the other hand, we have been visiting these schools. A classroom's a classroom. A study group's a study group. A book is a book.

And yet we don't seem to be able to get the numbers to compare -- that's what I'm talking about comparing, not comparing what are clearly dramatically...

STANLEY:

I understand.

SNYDER:

... different activities, and those numbers might be helpful to have...

STANLEY:

I agree.

SNYDER:

... in -- in terms of helping the services understand whether some of their sister services are being more efficient or less efficient.

For -- for the -- the uniformed personnel, one of the issues that we have spent a lot of time talking about in our study -- and we're actually about to release the report here in the next two or three weeks, I hope -- is the issue of personnel policies and how that impacts on PME.

And -- and so if you all would discuss given that we're a nation at war, how do your personnel policies impact on your professional military education? How do you select the people to go into a -- an in-residence PME course, based on where they're at in their career and what job comes off -- comes after, and how good a job do you think you're doing at meeting the combatant commander's request for the level of education that they want for the folks they're getting?

I mean that to be more general than maybe it sounds, but the issue is we've heard some complaints from both students going in that it didn't hit it right in their career, from the folks on the receiving end that maybe they didn't have the educational level that they would have liked to have had when they got to their -- their billet.

General Newton, want to start with you?

NEWTON:

Yes, sir. It's a -- we have -- for the longest of time have selected generally to go to intermediate development education about the top 25 percent, roughly, of our -- of our field grade officers at the major level to attend those schools, also giving them the opportunity -- a number to -- when they graduate from an in- residence -- mention Air Command and Staff College -- to go on to the School of Applied Aerospace Studies course, the SAAS course, which we found to be very beneficial not only to the individual in their -- developing their own potential, but also their ability to go out and serve, as you mentioned, the combatant commanders in a -- in a very -- more -- at the operational art level and above.

And so we have begun over the past 12 months, however, to be more diligent in tracking those

individuals, for instance, at the SAAS course, who receive those degrees to follow them not only on their -- their post assignment from -- from the School of Applied Aerospace Studies but throughout a career now.

That said, to go to those who have -- are just -- they graduate and they get from intermediate development education to those who do senior development education -- we closely track them as well.

And as you go from the intermediate school -- then you go out to a staff assignment or to a command, and then you have an opportunity, by and large -- the IDE graduates then have the opportunity to go to the senior development education program. Those are about our top 15 percent. And those we clearly earmark for command at the colonel level and beyond.

From our view, in terms of how we develop our future leaders, we look to those who have attended an in-residence program either through the Air Force or the other service in-resident programs starting at the major, and then we track them.

And we generally like to have our -- our senior leaders to have both an intermediate development education opportunity as well as a senior development education opportunity.

All that said, there -- there's a small window of time, as -- as I'm sure you've earmarked, in terms of giving our -- our men and women and officers an opportunity to serve not only in those schools but also then perhaps if they wanted to do follow-on scholastic -- or scholastic opportunities, say, at a Harvard or to get an MBA at an MIT and so forth.

And so we're wrestling with how to fit all those in, because we greatly value that education development opportunity.

DAVIS:

Go ahead. That's fine. Anybody else want to...

BOSTICK:

One of the -- the challenges and one of the focus areas for the Army and the chief and the secretary is to restore balance in the force. And when we talk about balance, we've been very focused, rightly so, on -- on the fight.

In -- in restoring balance, we -- we need to bring the force back to a -- a deployment of one year and redeployment at home station for two years. We'd like that to be three years for the active force, but our near-term goal is two years. We think we can do that in 2011.

For the Reserve component, back home for four years as the near-term goal, long-term five years. Without that, we're having a tough time on the professional military education.

And the chief, as one of his objectives, has gone out to TRADOC and General Dempsey and asked him to look at leader development and to look at professional military education and see, within the Army Force Generation model that we have to deploy forces, when can we bring soldiers and -- and leaders into the schools that they need to -- to participate in.

But this is one of the major areas that we're looking at. To answer your question, Senior Service College for the military, for the Army, is a centrally selected board that determines that. For our intermediate level education, all of our -- our captains and majors go through there.

But we're looking at all of that to make sure we're doing the right thing and -- and growing the right leaders for the future assignments that they'll have.

FERGUSON:

I would offer that within the Navy unrestricted line communities, which are aviation, submarine and surface, is that there's a balance between the demands of fleet operational requirements as well as the numbers of individual augmentees and staff officers who we're -- who we're providing forward in the fight today, combined with JPME.

Probably the most limiting case would be our nuclear-trained aviators, who spend 15 to 18 years flying in the cockpit, and then we transition them through the entire nuclear power pipeline, and then grow them to be our aircraft carrier C.O.s.

There's a restriction on time that's available for those officers, and so we have to manage it very carefully, and we generally require that any officer prior to going to command in those communities has to complete JPME I, and then under the current policy that in order to be selected for flag they'll have to complete an in- residence JPME II.

And we manage it within the time constraints, and what ends up happening, by community, there are greater opportunities in some and lesser in others, but balanced with the war fighting and the education that we can do.

ZILMER:

Congressman Snyder, to the first point, I think, again, the metrics that we need to compare about the efficiencies is something that we'd be happy to -- to look into and try to find some perspective there that is helpful.

The -- there are a number of factors -- whether it's career level, intermediate level or top level school throughout a -- an officer's career, we look at the timing, and there are a variety of issues, in order to make sure that we get the officer at the right time to prepare he or she for the future challenges they're going to see in their next expected rank or position they're going to.

The opportunity to go to school is -- we can't get everybody into a resident school, although we would like to. But the importance of the education itself -- sometimes it is difficult to pull a warrior out of an expectation that he or she will be forward deployed to the -- to the theater of operations and then bring them into a school environment.

But it's so important that what we accomplish in that year, if that's the -- the time in the school, that we prepare them for those -- those future challenges that they're going to see.

We perhaps have less control over that as we get to the -- the more senior ranks, the senior majors, the lieutenant colonels, who are now trying to fight those other requirements to also perform a joint tour, also to perform a command opportunity, so our window gets more difficult, so the timing, perhaps, in some cases would appear not to be optimum in some individual cases.

But the education itself and what we're doing to prepare our warriors for the future -- arguably, there's not much more -- that's more important than that.

DAVIS:

Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. -- Dr. Snyder. I know that that's been a -- a concern and part of the working group in looking at oversight and investigations, and I think it's -- it's rare to have this kind of concentration on the education of our -- of our services and the professional military education, so I'm -- I'm really glad that he's taken that on. It's been a challenge, I know.

I wanted to turn -- there are always a few issues that are of concern. One is the role of the women in the military. And we're seeing -- we're seeing that change. Women recently have been called on to serve on select types of submarines, and we're working through some of those issues.

We know that there's going to be a different role for women perhaps even in Afghanistan. A group

has been training in Pendleton. I'm wondering what kinds of changes you're generally seeing.

Secretary Stanley, if you could respond, and also personnel chiefs, whether you anticipate any changes concerning the role of women in the military that's being proposed by your respective services.

STANLEY:

Well, I'll -- I'll speak generally, Chairwoman Davis, and then ask the services to be more specific.

I've watched over the years as the role of women has expanded, and I'm encouraged by it. I know we -- Congress already has a combat exclusionary law in place, so there are things that women are not allowed to do by law right now.

But having said that, warfare is changing. What used to be a forward edge of the battle area and things like that -- that's not the same anymore. So that evolving right there will tell you that there's going to be some big changes.

But there's also been, I would say, some growth in our services with regard to the role of women and where they are, because ultimately, you know, I can foresee women being at the top of our services, and I will say that very openly in the sense that they're fully engaged. They're a part of our armed forces. And I think that's very important for our total force and our all-volunteer force.

And I'll let the services talk.

BOSTICK:

I was a cadet at West Point when women were first allowed to come to the academy, and I have stood in great amazement as we have seen -- amazement and -- and pride and joy to see women come through the academy and then the recruits that we brought in, the females, and to see that they are serving in positions of great responsibility, from private to General Dunwoody, a four-star general.

I think it's a great tribute to the services and -- and to women and to our men who support them in their -- their roles. They're doing a terrific job. And our chief and our secretary have directed that we take a -- a look at women in the military and their positions and -- and what could be opened up.

We're looking at our three-year cyclic review. That's going to start in April. And we think that would take anywhere from 90 to 120 days. And we'll come back to the secretary and the chief with recommendations on what could change.

But I would fully expect that their positions that they're serving in now that -- that are closely related to other positions that they're -- they're not allowed to serve in but could serve admirably in, and we look forward to...

DAVIS:

Could -- could you share -- how do you get that information? Do you go to individuals? Are there focus groups, surveying? How do you -- how do you bring in the services, the men and women, to -- to really assess that -- that issue?

BOSTICK:

The way -- I -- I can tell you, I -- I did a manning review for the chief, and I -- I went all across the Army and -- and in some of our deployed locations and -- and talked to our senior commanders, and -- and they would like to see in some positions -- they -- they feel clearly that there are positions that women could serve in that are -- are not -- they're not able to now.

So -- so one is talking to the commanders. The other is we have to go out to our Training and

Doctrine Command, General Dempsey, and he will work with all of the different branch proponents, whether it's engineers, M.P., military intelligence.

And they will take a hard look at the positions that are opened or closed and make recommendations based on what we're seeing operationally now, because there is no front line, as you know, and we have women serving admirably all across the battlefield.

So they'll look at that, make a recommendation and it'll come back to the chief and the secretary.

DAVIS:

Thank you.

Anybody else want to add to that?

Admiral Ferguson?

FERGUSON:

Certainly. The -- we think what we see in the demography of the nation and what's happening with women earning 57 percent of the college degrees, nearly half the advanced degrees, and in our own application process at ROTC and at the Naval Academy, applicants that are women are extraordinarily well qualified, committed to serve. It's 28 percent of the entering ROTC class this year, 20 percent at Annapolis.

We see that it's a talent pool that we cannot ignore in the future to serve the nation. You know, we've made the announcement and notification pending the time for women in submarines on our SSBNs and SSGNs in the officer force.

We announced this year that the first woman admiral will command a carrier strike group. Admiral Nora Tyson will take command this summer. And we see, as the other services, that women are rising to the challenge to serve with great ability and great performance.

DAVIS:

Thank you.

General Zilmer?

ZILMER:

Madam Chairwoman, while we remain in compliance with the law, if we look back over the -- the recent years and -- and the roles that women have increasingly played in our forces, and we look at the decorations that our women are wearing in combat -- Bronze Stars, combat action ribbons, Purple Hearts -- we've had women killed in combat.

So clearly, the face of war has changed. The role of women in those war zones has to change by -- by definition. So there is -- there is great promise to what our women are going to do today and in the future, and we're willing to be part of any efforts to look at that further. Thank you.

NEWTON:

Madam Chairwoman, I'd -- I'd echo that. We, too, have women who've earned the Purple Heart and been killed in action as well. As we look at the opportunities for a long period of time, opportunities have opened up and remain very -- very wide for -- for women serving in a variety of capacities.

I, too, went to the Air Force Academy when women were -- first had the opportunity to go there, and just a few months ago we promoted our first woman lieutenant general from the Class of '80, Lieutenant General Janet Wolfenbarger.

And you talk about assessment. I -- I lead a -- the officer development panel for -- for our chief, and -- and we have -- in fact, General Wolfenbarger sits on that panel to help us assess not only from her core acquisition logistics background but also to give us the broad perspective that we need. It's very helpful.

DAVIS:

Thank you very much.

Mr. Wilson?

WILSON:

Thank you very much, Madam Chairwoman.

The -- an issue -- and, Secretary Stanley, you -- you've got so many interesting issues on your plate as you come into your position. An issue that's always been of interest to me -- it -- it's so uplifting as I see Guard members, reservists, active duty serving together. Particularly in theater, you cannot tell -- I cannot tell who is what.

But there is a difference on -- in their retirement benefits. For Guard and Reserve, it begins at age 60. We did have a -- a little chink which provided that persons who serve 90-day increments after January the 28th, 2008 that those 90 days could be subtracted from age 60, so that -- that's a start.

And I've got legislation that would make it retroactive to 9/11, and -- and I've previously introduced much more extensive a -- a flat 55, a provision for 55 to be earned one year for every two years over 20. I've -- I've tried everything I can, Mr. Secretary.

So that's why just this modest little change -- can you comment what your view is about that?

STANLEY:

Yes, Mr. Wilson. The equity -- first of all, our all-volunteer force, of which the Reserve and Guard are part of -- and this war brings it home probably better than any other time. And then we look at equity and pay and the seriousness that goes into the deliberations regarding that pay equity. That's very significant.

The Quadrennial Review is literally starting almost as we speak, within the next day or so. This is a very top-line, front -- it's a priority. It's an issue that we're looking at, because this issue's going to require study, not a delayed study, not something that's saying we're going to kick the can down the road.

But this is not a new issue. This is an issue that's been around for quite some time. And we're going to address it. We're going to work with Congress. I don't know what the answer is right now. But the issue of pay and equity is one that we take very seriously and one that we're going to wrestle with.

And this is one of, as you have already alluded to, many on the plate, but a very significant issue in an all-volunteer force.

WILSON:

And I appreciate you looking into it, because Guard and Reserve members are very proud to be serving and it just -- but that would be very helpful.

Additionally, I believe the department is, Secretary, committed to providing world-class health care

to our returning wounded while adopting the new world-class facility standards incorporated in the fiscal year 2010 National Defense Authorization Act.

Will the new Walter Reed National Military Medical Center at Bethesda meet the world-class standards when it opens September 2011?

STANLEY:

Mr. Wilson, I've -- since I've been on board in my month, I've actually been trying to add some granularity to the word "world class." I know it's going to be a good facility. I know the commitment is there for it to be a solid, you know, facility.

But I've actually -- that's been an issue I've been wrestling with, of finding the definition for "world class." I don't know what that answer is right now as I sit here, but I know that the commitment, the resources, the intent of the department is for it to be, as I've read, world class. I'm just personally trying to define that, that understanding.

WILSON:

Well, I have faith in you, and I -- I -- and I do believe that military medicine is world class. And so -- and I know what it means to servicemembers, so thank you so much.

And I yield the balance of my time.

DAVIS:

Thank you, Mr. Wilson.

And since Mr. Wilson mentioned Guard and Reserve and pay equity issues, I wonder if we could just for a second focus on the -- the -- the raises or basically the -- the pay grades of 0.5 percent above the employment cost index which we've been working at for the last 11 years to try and, you know, bring the private and -- and the military together.

And this year I know we're not hearing a recommendation that we bump that -- that up a half a percentage point, and I wonder if -- if you could -- could speak to that, whether you think this is a good time to discontinue that practice, and how you think, essentially, that's going to impact the services.

STANLEY:

Well, I -- I'd be interested -- since I have not talked to the service chiefs about the impact on the services, I -- when I joined the staff, the recommendations were already there. I believe I understand them and understand that what has been recommended by the president will be, in fact, equitable and very supportive of our committed troops as they serve.

I have still a lot to learn about what that impact really is, so I'm not answering the question as much as it is understanding that this whole issue of pay and equity is a very serious issue.

Personal opinion, you can't pay people enough. But I'm now trying to balance that with all of the -- the things that deal with what we pay, because we're wrestling with how much we can pay. That becomes part of -- one of the challenges that we have right now.

But I'm going to allow or ask the services maybe to weigh in.

DAVIS:

OK. I mean, you can -- you can approach it either way. I mean, what -- what impact will it have to --

to increase it by that percentage? Because that obviously has an impact on other services, health care, et cetera.

I think that there -- there's always a push to do that, and because we're looking to do very much what you say -- I mean, we -- we agree that we -- we want to make certain that it's fair and that the issues that you face over recruitment and retention are not necessarily based on question of pay alone but other benefits that -- that people have to, you know, look at as they -- as they look at their futures.

Would any of you like to comment on that? I mean, what -- because it may be that -- that we're looking to try and do that this year, or that's the recommendation.

But I -- I think the Congress is -- I can -- I can assure there's probably going to be some pushback from the Congress on it. We'd like to know what you think.

General Bostick, do you have...

BOSTICK:

Well, just in terms of the impact, if -- if we were to raise it another half a percent, it would be about \$200 million for the Army in F.Y. '11 and -- and about \$1.3 billion over the POM '12 to '17.

We'd first like to thank the Congress and the nation for closing the gap in relation to civilian pay. When you look at from '99 until now, we've gone from about a 13 percent gap down to 2.5 percent.

And -- and the way we're looking at it, like Dr. Stanley said, I think no one would turn down a -- an increase in pay, but -- but understanding the fiscal realities, when you look at how we've closed the gap, where we stand today, and you consider the -- the benefits that we provide in housing and in commissary and P.X. privileges and -- and wrap that all together, we actually think we have a surplus when looking at our pay for our soldiers in comparison to the civilians.

Where -- where we would like to focus and keep a lot of energy and resources focused on is in the quality-of-life programs, and we've received a lot of help there as well.

And -- and if you talk to our soldiers and families, the things that are making a difference when they come back from deployment are -- are the quality housing, the quality health care, the access to that health care, education, the schools, counselors. Those sorts of things are -- are very important, especially at this time, for our -- our military.

FERGUSON:

I would agree that in our surveys of our servicemembers and their families, they're very satisfied with their levels of compensation compared to the broader economy at the present time, and that the bill for Navy of -- of the 0.5 percent increase would be about 71 to \$72 million and then, you know, that's just in F.Y. '11.

I agree with General Bostick that the quality-of-life programs, child care, health care, access to it, education, continue to rank at the very top of the concerns that we hear from our servicemembers for their desire to stay with us for a career.

ZILMER:

Likewise, I believe the -- the indications in our first term reenlistments and our subsequent term reenlistments would suggest that our -- that our servicemembers and families are -- are very happy with the pay and compensation.

While we haven't advocated for that 0.5 increase above the ECI, just the same we thank you for your interest to -- to ensure that the compensation is appropriate for -- for the great work that they do for us and our nation.

NEWTON:

From the Air Force standpoint, I believe the 0.55 would equate to approximately \$90 million for F.Y. '11. But I -- again, I go back -- I think echo all the -- all the service personnel chiefs here -- is our -- our men and women feel that they're adequately paid and compensated for, but at the same time, the -- the people account does continue to rise with regard to follow-on costs with regard to TRICARE and so forth.

And so what we've focused on in the Year of the Air Force Family is not only the member in uniform but their family members as well. That's where you get a lot of the -- of the opportunity to -- you know, you recruit the member, you retain the family.

And -- and it's really enabled us to focus on our -- our families who we find that are -- that are under a lot of stress as well as the members serving, particularly in high operations tempo environments. So it -- I would -- I would ask that -- it's -- it's a holistic approach that we need to focus on as well.

DAVIS:

Thank you.

You -- you mentioned families, and we did meet with the Military Family Association earlier this week, and one of the issues that they raised is the extent to which you assess family readiness, not just the -- the servicemember. And I'm wondering whether you've been thinking about that within your services, and is there a way to do that, especially for those in pre- and post-deployment.

The family -- the Military Family Association was suggesting that they could help the services more by actually, you know, being asked and being helped, I think, as they are preparing and certainly when -- in the post-deployment as well, that they're -- what we know from some of the studies that are being done with young people is the extent and the -- the -- the health of -- of -- the mental health, really, of the non-deployed parent and how important that is.

Are there some ways that you would really like to try and get at those issues in a way that haven't -- hasn't been done before?

NEWTON:

If I may, I'll...

DAVIS:

General Newton?

NEWTON:

... I'll start off. We conducted our -- really, it was groundbreaking -- our first active duty spouse survey back in 2009. We had RAND go out and -- and do a -- a very thorough review and study. We're going to also do a -- we're going to continue that.

We have our second annual Caring for People forum that's going to be occurring here in April. We're actually doing a Caring for People study to understand the challenges that our -- our family members have not only from our spouses' standpoint, not only those on active duty but Guard and Reserve as well, as well as youth.

And so as we carry forward -- and -- and, really, this is what this Year of the Air Force Family has helped us do, is to focus on not only those -- those broad things we do, but where can we close some of those small gaps that have a big impact on -- on individual family members.

The second point I would raise is that this focus has created this sense of community in the Air Force that is so very important, particularly in the high operations tempo environment that we find our men and women serving in. Again, it's not just in active duty. There's -- there's Guard and Reserve as well.

And so we -- the last point I would make, and the point of your question, really, is it's very important that we -- we do the deep data dives and that we continue to analyze and survey our men and women who are serving and find out where are those things that we can -- we can close with regard to school liaisons at our base installations, Exceptional Family Member programs.

We're going to hold the -- we had been dormant for a while. There is going to be a -- a youth rally that we're going to have. We're going to take -- from 81 of our installations the Youth of the Year at those installations are coming to Washington, D.C.

We're going to put on -- they don't know this yet, but on the second day of the conference in June, we're going to ask them how they can help their fellow youth out there in the United States Air Force to be more resilient. What are the stresses they're facing and then how can we go ahead and help solve those for them?

DAVIS:

Thank you.

ZILMER:

Thank you. I believe the -- while we've been amazed by the resilience of the -- the servicemembers themselves, we've been even more amazed by the resilience of the families throughout this -- throughout these last eight years.

And many of our -- our -- our children, servicemembers' children, the spouses, have gone three, four, five, six times with their spouse deployed. That is not done without an impact left at home.

So to the degree that we're looking at a number of new initiatives in terms of counselors at our -- at our community services, counselors in the schools where military children are going, attending those schools, programs that in the past have just focused on spouses now allowing children to come in and talk about the deployment stress is certainly recognition that -- that it is something that we've got to put more effort and more understanding into.

The commandant -- one of his initiatives when he came -- became commandant was we need to get our -- all of our family services on a wartime footing, and -- and -- and invest the effort, invest the resources, which we've done.

So we certainly do not take it for granted. So to the degree that we have surveys that provide -- inform what we're doing, we are absolutely committed to doing that, to make sure that our families remain as strong and resilient as they have throughout this last eight years.

DAVIS:

Thank you.

FERGUSON:

We also survey spouses. We did that in 2009. And -- and -- and for some period of time we've been using a report for senior leadership, the three- and four-star level headed by the vice chief of naval operations, what we call the Tone of the Force Report.

And we look at family readiness indicators, but they're not the standard readiness. I mean, are we

seeing things such as use of payday loans, bounced checks, use of financial counseling services, domestic abuse or reporting incidents, spousal abuse -- those types of parameters.

And we have about 30 of them that we look at to see when we start to see stress levels appear in certain areas, what's the child care waiting list at various bases and facilities, and what we find is the use of those types of metrics elevated to very senior levels allows you to quickly put resources and to focus leadership attention to address those issues before they get severe.

And -- and I -- and I think that type of approach we'd be welcome to work with the military families group and discuss that with them.

DAVIS:

All right, thank you.

BOSTICK:

When we look at the Army team, its soldiers' families and civilians and their families, and while some of the initial parts of our programs will focus on soldiers, the intent is really, in all applicable areas, to extend that to our civilians and to all of our family members.

We -- as we look at the stress on the force, we have talked about suicides. We've talked about substance abuse and -- and the need for counselors, and -- and a lot of that is on the reaction end, and -- and where a lot of our focus is today is on the preventive side, to -- to look at the -- the strength of our soldiers and families to assess that, physically, emotionally, socially, spiritually, and with their family.

We start that off with a global assessment tool. You go online. We've had about 390,000 soldiers take it and 1,800 families, so while it has taken off with the soldiers, the families have worked in parallel. They're able to assess their -- their psychological fitness.

And we have risen the -- the psychological fitness of a soldier and a family and a civilian to the same level as physical fitness, and -- which has always been strong for the Army, so we're heavily engaged with our families. They're an important part of our team, as are our civilians.

DAVIS:

Thank you very much. I appreciate that, because I think, you know, there's -- there's obviously a lot more focus on these issues today, and I think that the committee obviously is very concerned, but we hear from so many people out in our districts as well.

And while there are just the most incredible resilience that's being demonstrated out there, the reality is that we have put unbelievable stress on our families, and I think that we need to do everything that we can.

And we certainly hope that you will work with us as well to be certain that -- that we're putting the appropriate resources into that, because it's -- it's worth it. Our families are worth it, and we need to continue to do that.

Mr. Wilson, did you have any other questions? OK.

Thank you so much. We appreciate your all being here. And if we have any additional questions, we'll continue to follow up. Thank you very much.

CQ Transcriptions, March 17, 2010

List of Panel Members and Witnesses

PANEL MEMBERS:

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REP. LORETTA SANCHEZ, D-CALIF.

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REP. JOE WILSON, R-S.C. RANKING MEMBER

REP. WALTER B. JONES, R-N.C.

REP. JOHN KLINE, R-MINN.

REP. TOM ROONEY, R-FLA.

REP. ROB WITTMAN, R-VA.

REP. MARY FALLIN, R-OKLA.

REP. JOHN FLEMING, R-LA.

REP. HOWARD P. "BUCK" MCKEON, R-CALIF. EX OFFICIO

WITNESSES:

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