



STATEMENT OF

THE MILITARY COALITION (TMC)

for the

**SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PERSONNEL**

Concerning

Uniformed Services Personnel, Healthcare, and Compensation Matters

April 1, 2024

MADAM CHAIRWOMAN, MR. RANKING MEMBER, AND DISTINGUISHED MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE, The Military Coalition (TMC), a consortium of nationally prominent uniformed services and veterans' organizations, is grateful to the committee for this opportunity to express our views concerning personnel and compensation issues affecting the uniformed services community. This statement provides the collective views of the Coalition, which is made up of the following military and veterans' organizations, representing approximately 5.5 million current and former members of the eight uniformed services, their families, and survivors.

The Military Coalition:

Air Force Sergeants Association (AFSA)
AMVETS (American Veterans)
AMSUS, the Society of Federal Health Professionals
Association of the United States Navy (AUSN)
Blinded Veterans Association (BVA)
Blue Star Families
Commissioned Officers Association of the US Public Health Service (COA)
Chief Warrant Officers Association of the US Coast Guard (CWOA)
Gold Star Wives (GSW)
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA)
Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America (JWV)
K9s for Warriors
Marine Corps League (MCL)
Marine Corps Reserve Association (MCRA)
Military Chaplains Association of the United States of America (MCA)
Military Officers Association of America (MOAA)
Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH)
Military Order of the World Wars (MOWW)
National Military Family Association (NMFA)
Naval Enlisted Reserve Association (NERA)
Non-Commissioned Officers Association (NCOA)
Reserve Organization of America (ROA)
Service Women's Action Network (SWAN)
The Independence Fund (TIF)
The Retired Enlisted Association (TREA)
Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)
United States Army Warrant Officers Association (USAWOA)
USCG Chief Petty Officers Association (CPOA)
Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA)
Wounded Warrior Project (WWP)

The Military Coalition, Inc. does not receive any grants or contracts from the federal government.

Continuing Resolutions

TMC thanks Congress and the Personnel Subcommittee for your efforts to overcome arbitrary budget caps – the product of sequestration legislation – in favor of a more responsible approach to funding national defense, to include the requirements for our military personnel, their families, Defense Department civilians, and other critical programs. Nonetheless, we have seen a return to the use of continuing resolutions (CRs), which cause budget instability and degrade readiness for the uniformed services. Thus, we begin our recommendations for the Subcommittees with an overarching request for a return to an on-time National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), together with on-time appropriations, for Defense, Military Construction, and Veterans Affairs.

Concurrent Receipt

TMC supports legislation to support our combat injured with concurrent receipt of DoD retired pay and veterans' disability compensation. Specifically, TMC is seeking the enactment of the Major Richard Star Act (H.R. 1282/S. 344) that authorizes earned payment of retired pay and VA disability compensation, without decrementing offsets, for combat injured who are forced to medically retire with less than 20 years of service. This legislation has strong support, with 327 cosponsors in the House and 72 cosponsors in the Senate. Reduced retirement pay, for those who have already sacrificed so much, communicates an awful message as we face a recruiting crisis and reduced trust in service. Correcting this injustice is important strategic communication for the all-volunteer force. Please include the Star Act language in the Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) NDAA base text.

Currently-Serving Issues

Military Force Levels

TMC urges the Subcommittee to take steps to protect the all-volunteer force. Reduced end-strength and declining propensity to serve directly threaten our all-volunteer force. Undermanned units often result in morale problems and stressors, affect the quality of life and contribute to rising suicide rates. The Coalition requests the Subcommittee continue to address quality of life problems facing the uniformed community and sustain needed personnel strengths in both active and reserve components to meet mission requirements.

Uniformed Services Pay Raise

TMC appreciates the Subcommittee's dedication to keeping uniformed services pay increases in line with private sector wages. The projected Employee Cost Index for FY25, forecasts a 4.5 percent pay increase that is vital for our troops (as reported in October 2023). We request the Subcommittee's support for this military pay raise. We seek full restoration of previously capped pay raises. This has resulted in a cumulative gap of 2.6 percent between 2014 and 2016

Basic Allowance for Housing

Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) is an essential component of regular military compensation and like pay, BAH is applicable to all eight of the uniformed services. TMC applauds Congress' action to protect BAH in recent years. The Coalition urges the Subcommittee to continue sustaining current applicable BAH calculations for all service members and endeavor to restore BAH rates to match 100 percent of

housing costs, thus eliminating the 5 percent out-of-pocket costs to service members and their families. This is especially important with rising housing costs and inflation since the pandemic.

Sexual Harassment and Assault Prevention

We want to thank Congress for continuing to ensure the measures in FY22 and FY23 NDAA on Sexual Harassment and Assault are implemented. The Department of Defense (DoD) took a step forward with the establishment of Special Trial Counsels. Now, we must ensure that Congress and DoD continue to build on this by maintaining effective oversight. TMC requests DoD establish a 90-day time standard for investigations of sexual harassment and assault and that Congress provide sufficient resourcing (and oversight) to accomplish this.

Housing and Barracks Standards

A recent GAO report on barracks conditions showcases the need for aggressive action. We ask lawmakers to sufficiently fund barracks and family housing and ensure commanders are empowered with the authority and resources to correct problems that impact the health and welfare of our troops and their families. Scandals from privatized housing have proven detrimental to good order and discipline and undermined the military chain of command. Young servicemembers must be able to trust that their chains of command have the ability to correct housing problems, and privatization undermined that trust. Privatized housing was not a contract and was not subject to DoD contract oversight regulations. Moreover, we urge congress to not repeat the same mistake with barracks/unaccompanied housing. Funding housing is a readiness issue and impacts our recruiting crisis. Our service members deserve quality housing free of health and safety hazards so they can focus on the mission.

Childcare

We ask the Subcommittee to ensure that momentum on childcare be kept on track. Specifically, we appreciate the added transparency about usage rates and wait times and ask for Congress' continued oversight on implementation. We see the need to prioritize improved access to safe, high-quality, and affordable childcare. This involves expanded funding, staffing, and renovations, as well as new construction of child development centers.

Pay All Uniformed Services During a Government Shutdown

Ensure continuation of pay to Coast Guard, and the Commissioned Corps of the USPHS, and NOAA personnel, to align with the other uniformed services, to guarantee no disruption in pay for service members, retirees, and survivors during a government shutdown. We understand the challenges these three services face, given they are part of varying departments with their own secretaries. This can be solved by Congress with agreed support from the relevant committees and subcommittees. The DoD Compensation Office has regular meetings with representatives from all eight services – we ask this subcommittee to intervene with the support of DoD to legislate the alignment we seek and these service members deserve.

Other Retirement Issues

Repeal 180-Day Delay for Retirees

The Coalition supports H.R. 939 and S. 334 authorizing repeal of the requirement for those retiring from military service to wait 180 days before entering the DoD civil service General Schedule (GS) positions for GS13 and below. In 2023, the bipartisan Retain Skilled Veterans Act was supported in the House, overcame cross committee jurisdiction challenges, and was supported by the AFGE union. The current scope of the 180-day rule severely restricts the ability of DoD hiring officials to attract quality talent for GS13 and below positions that require military experience and a current security clearance. Taxpayers often pay for the same security clearance twice as talented service members who would be willing to continue national service as a civilian enter contracting positions after frustration with USA Jobs. TMC will work to include this legislation in the FY25 NDAA to permanently authorize military retirees to transition to DoD GS13 and below positions for all DoD facilities.

Expanding America's National Cemetery Act H.R.1413

A proposal for eligibility reduction at Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) is approaching the final steps of the federal rule making process. Congressional action is required to protect the burial benefit with full military honors. The FY19 NDAA required the DoD to develop a plan for ANC to continue operations "well into the future." This resulted in the DoD proposal for a reduction in eligibility to extend ANC operations 150 years. The proposed reduction would render countless veterans, retirees, and nearly all female veteran's ineligible. The bipartisan Expanding America's National Cemetery Act would authorize the transformation of an existing VA-run national cemetery into the "next ANC" that can afford equivalent honors as ANC reaches capacity. ANC will not run out of room for another 42 years, affording time to develop a longer-term solution. A gradual transition to the "next ANC" over the next 40 years will allow our nation to continue to honor families for lifetimes of service and sacrifice.

Retired Pay Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA)

TMC applauds the appropriate 3.2 percent COLA increase in 2023 and continues to strongly oppose any initiatives which would further reduce the value of the military retirement benefit earned after 20 years of service. The retirement benefit is the primary offset provided uniformed service members for enduring a career of unique and extraordinary sacrifices that few Americans are willing to do for one year, let alone 20 or 30 years. After two decades of extraordinary challenges in the all-volunteer force, the group that joined after September 11, 2001, will have served their entire careers during wartime, and should not see their retirement decremented as a bill-payer.

Guard and Reserve Issues

Since Operation Desert Shield, the Reserve Components have shifted from an exclusively Strategic Reserve to a role encompassing operational reserve. The Reserve Components are essential to the effectiveness of the Total Force and routinely participate in contingency operations worldwide.

Operational reserve battle rhythm: fast facts

- Since Sept. 11, 2001, more than one million Reserve Component members have been involuntarily activated in support of overseas contingency operations.
- Over 50 percent of Reserve Component members have been mobilized for active-duty more than once.
- As of 2019, 89 percent of Reserve Component mobilizations have resulted in deployments to combat zones.

Today, the National Guard has an estimated 22,000 service members deployed overseas.

To meet the increases in operational demands and tempo, the Reserve Components must maintain a rapidly deployable force, requiring an enterprise-wide focus on premobilization training and unit readiness. This necessitates a Reserve Component personnel and equipment capability that achieves interoperability with the Active Component. In turn, this also requires a thorough investigation into the disparities that exist between components in receiving service-earned benefits and careful consideration of how an increased operational tempo impacts employers of reserve component service.

To this end, TMC firmly believes Congress should ensure the Reserve Components are adequately manned, trained, and equipped as a vital partner of the Total Force and urges the members of this Subcommittee to support:

- Providing premium-free, zero cost-sharing medical and dental coverage for Selected Reserve service members eligible for TRICARE Reserve Select (TRS), regardless of duty status, because medical readiness is a requirement for service -- not a benefit. (10 USC 1076d)
- Ensuring that the time during which members of the National Guard and Reserve serve on active duty for training qualifies for educational assistance under the Post-9/11 G. I. Bill. (38 USC 3301/3311(b))
- Amending USERRA to bar binding arbitration agreements on USERRA issues.

Survivor Issues

Recognizing the sacrifices survivors have endured, TMC works to improve and protect existing survivor benefits issued by the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and to eliminate benefit inequities. We ask Congress to consider improvement in the following areas:

Authorization for survivors of retirees to draw full month's retired pay for the month in which retirees die.

Retain Survivor Benefits Upon Remarriage

- Seek legislation to allow surviving spouses to remarry at any age and retain benefits, to include Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) and medical military ID cards.
- Consistent with the Federal Employee Health Benefit Plan (FEHBP) and CHAMPVA, allow surviving spouses to retain TRICARE with remarriage at age 55.
- Seek legislation to reinstate TRICARE benefits for remarried survivors when the second marriage ends.

- Ensure surviving spouses' access to electronic medical records and referrals for their children.

Improve Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC).

We recognize that the DIC is not in the purview of the Armed Services Committee, but we would be remiss if we didn't go on the record for an increase in DIC. Since 1993, surviving spouses are falling further and further behind in meeting their financial obligations from month-to-month. Many surviving spouses of WWII, Korea and Vietnam are receiving only DIC. These DIC recipients struggle monthly with their budget of \$1,612.74 juggling bills to meet the rising costs in health and dental insurance, housing, utilities, food, clothing and other living expenses. Some receive DIC and minimum Social Security benefits. The struggle to meet financial obligations leads too often to homelessness. Congress must take action to rectify this inequity by increasing the current amount of DIC to a level comparable to other federal employees. Widows from WWII, Korea, and the Vietnam are now in their 60's through 90's. These surviving spouses are in dire need for an increase in DIC. We support S. 414 and H.R. 1083 to increase DIC from 43 percent to 55 percent.

Military Health Care

TMC is concerned the DoD has acknowledged the military health system (MHS) is destabilized and, at times, cannot deliver timely care to beneficiaries. DoD has established a task force to address chronic staffing shortfalls within military treatment facilities (MTFs) and has set a goal to reattract 7 percent of available care from the private sector back to MTFs. Due to a challenging health care economy, capacity constraints in both MTFs and the civilian sector are likely to persist with continued pockets of access to care challenges for TRICARE beneficiaries in both the direct and purchased care components of the MHS. To ensure MHS patients can access needed medical care, we urge Congress to:

- Establish a digital Access Assistance system allowing patients to submit and track the status of an access to care barrier, similar to the system mandated for the Veterans Health Administration by the Patient Advocate Tracker Act. A single, well-publicized system would consolidate patient feedback to assist with identifying systemic access issues and direct assistance to beneficiaries who need help navigating the MHS.
- Create a five-year pilot program to evaluate expanded TRICARE qualifying life events (QLEs) to include "pregnancy" and self-attested "dissatisfaction with access to care" to allow beneficiaries to switch TRICARE plans outside of open season to access medical care where it is available.
- Both solutions should include congressional reporting requirements to encourage MHS access to care improvements through transparency accountability.

Purchased care spending increases have raised concerns regarding growing MHS budgets – growth that does not reflect TRICARE benefit expansions but rather the natural consequence of MTF appointment shortages and a deliberate shift of beneficiaries to the private sector.

Civilian medical care costs are subject to inflation and attempts to flatten MHS budgets are unrealistic barring TRICARE fee increases that shift costs to beneficiaries or reductions in the benefit that reduce access to care. Such benefit cuts are unacceptable – our nation has an obligation to provide the TRICARE benefit servicemembers and retirees have earned. To remain a quality benefit, TRICARE policy must also

evolve to cover new technology and evolving treatment protocols as well as benchmarks established by commercial plans. We urge Congress to:

- Protect the value of the TRICARE health benefit by opposing any legislation or policy change that would create new TRICARE fees or disproportionately increase existing enrollment fees, deductibles, copays/cost shares or the catastrophic cap at a rate that exceeds military retired pay COLA.
- Seek roll back of excessive copays for mental health and physical/speech/occupational therapy by designating these low-cost interventions as primary care and without increasing any other TRICARE out-of-pocket costs as an offset.

Defense Resale

Commissary and Exchanges provide a vital non-pay compensation benefit to service members, retirees, their families, and survivors. The military community consistently ranks them as a top compensation benefit, yielding returns to military families and the DoD that far outweigh taxpayer support.

TMC thanks Congress and DoD for their continued vigilance over commissary and broader defense resale reforms, particularly during these inflationary times, and we support reforms that protect the commissary benefit, the longevity of the defense resale system, its dividends for MWR, savings for patrons, customer satisfaction, and product quality. We ask Congress to:

- Preserve the Commissary benefit as part of the overall pay and compensation package, including high quality products, maintained savings, access, and customer satisfaction.
- We are pleased to see the President's Budget for FY25 includes \$1.4 billion to sustain commissaries – we seek the same for the FY25 NDAA to ensure access to a balanced portfolio of family assistance programs.
- Offset the impact of \$15 per hour minimum wage mandate on non-appropriated fund instrumentalities.
- Ensure any modernization efforts of the Commissary and Exchange systems in no way degrades the earned benefit.

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