



**TESTIMONY
OF
SEAN F. COUNIHAN
DIRECTOR
NATIONAL SECURITY DIVISION
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
SENATE ARMED SERVICES SUBCOMMITTEE
ON PERSONNEL
“TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY ON DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE
PERSONNEL POLICIES AND PROGRAMS IN REVIEW OF THE NDAA
REQUEST FOR FISCAL YEAR 2027 AND THE FUTURE YEARS
DEFENSE PROGRAM”**

May 20, 2026

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Chairman Cramer, Ranking Member Kelly, and distinguished members of this Subcommittee, on behalf of National Commander Dan K. Wiley and more than 1.5 million dues-paying members of The American Legion, we thank you for the opportunity to offer our testimony for the record.

The American Legion is guided by active Legionnaires who dedicate their time and resources to serve veterans, servicemembers, their families, survivors, and caregivers. As a resolutions-based organization, our positions are guided by more than 107 years of advocacy and resolutions originating at the post level. Every time The American Legion testifies, we offer a direct voice from the veteran community to Congress.

I want to thank the members of this Subcommittee for supporting our nation’s uniformed service members, veterans, and their families. The American Legion believes the national security of the United States of America is upheld by maintaining a well-funded Department of Defense (DoD) that addresses quality of life issues of the All-Volunteer Force. Compensation, housing, healthcare, childcare, and military construction (MILCON) are all critical readiness factors that can either strengthen or degrade the readiness of the Armed Forces if not resourced properly.

We believe that the DoD’s FY 2027 Budget request emphasizes the growing need to fully fund programs that address quality-of-life issues for the betterment of our servicemembers and their families.

Background and The American Legion’s Work

One of The American Legion’s four pillars is National Security, and we maintain resolutions specifically focused on ensuring a lethal fighting force and protecting national security. Addressing military quality-of-life issues is central to our advocacy. Without dedicated servicemembers, who are not distracted by quality-of-life concerns, even the most sophisticated weaponry cannot provide the deterrent force necessary to protect our nation.

To best assess the needs of servicemembers and military families, The American Legion operates the Base Assessment and Servicemember Experience (BASE) Program. Through this effort, The Legion visits military installations to interact with base leadership, service members, and spouses to assess their quality-of-life. BASE visits conducted this year further highlighted the urgent need for sustained investments in childcare, housing, and healthcare programs that directly impact the quality of life, readiness, and overall well-being of servicemembers and their families. We are currently finalizing reports from the various installations visited and will provide them to the Committee upon completion. These reports will offer detailed observations, findings, and recommendations to assist the committee in addressing issues related to servicemember quality of life and military readiness.

Resolution No. 85: Support for Military Quality of Life Standards outlines The American Legion's support for funding quality of life initiatives including, but not limited to, regular increases in the Basic Allowances for Housing (BAH), the renovation and construction of military housing, increased funding for childcare centers and childcare workforce pay, as well as adequate medical, mental, and dental health services.¹

Areas of Support: DOD Budget Request FY 2027

The American Legion supports the Department of Defense's FY 2027 budget request investments in quality-of-life areas, including housing, childcare, and healthcare. Through legislative advocacy, Statements for the Record, and direct engagement with senior Department of Defense leadership, we have consistently emphasized the importance of adequately funding military housing, childcare programs, and healthcare that support servicemembers, retirees, and military families.

Housing Investments

DoD FY 2027 Budget Request: Investments in Housing

The American Legion believes that military readiness begins at home. The health, morale, and retention of our All-Volunteer Force are tied to the quality of the environment in which our servicemembers live and raise their families. Allowing military housing to deteriorate has eroded the quality of life that our servicemembers deserve. The American Legion supports robust investment in Facility Sustainment, Restoration, and Modernization (FSRM) accounts to ensure servicemembers and their families have access to safe, healthy, and modern housing. As Congress considers the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2027, we urge the Subcommittee to support the President's FY budget request regarding FSRM matters.²

¹ The American Legion, "Resolution 85: Support for Military Quality of Life Standards." August 30, 2016. <https://archive.legion.org/node/330>

² Department of War, *Family Housing, Defense-Wide: Fiscal Year (FY) 2027 Budget Estimates* (Washington, DC: Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), 2026), FH-33, accessed May 14, 2026.

We firmly support the findings of the GAO’s report, “MILITARY BARRACKS: Poor Living Conditions Undermine Quality of Life and Readiness.”³ Substandard housing directly threatens the well-being of our servicemembers and military operational readiness. We call for the rapid implementation of the GAO’s recommendations alongside the critical updates identified by the DoD’s Barracks Task Force. Our troops deserve nothing less than a safe, healthy place to call home. While recent funding increases are a step in the right direction, consistent and protected FSRM appropriations are required to fully eliminate inadequate housing across the service branches.

Our recent BASE visits have highlighted that inadequate housing can pose significant health and safety risks. We urge Congress to authorize adequate funding so the DoD can prioritize the renovation and construction of unaccompanied housing, while significantly strengthening contract oversight and accountability for privatized family housing under the Military Housing Privatization Initiative (MHPI). We firmly believe that servicemembers and their families should never be forced to endure inadequate, hazardous living conditions while serving our nation. Private contractors must be held accountable to high standards of safety and maintenance, and the DoD must aggressively exercise its oversight authority to protect military families.

Housing Assessments during The American Legion’s BASE Visits

The need to expand FSRM investment is supported by observations during routine installation site visits where housing remains a key concern. Recent BASE visits conducted by The American Legion highlighted urgent requirements for infrastructure upgrades, housing policy reforms, and a revision of local housing stipends. At one installation, the delegation discovered a significant disconnect between local housing costs, neighborhood security, and how military housing allowances are calculated. While on-base privatized family housing provides well-maintained options, limited capacity often forces personnel to seek housing in the local community. Although housing near some installations may technically fall within local allowance calculations, concerns regarding crime, safety, and overall community conditions can drive military families to seek housing farther away at greater personal expense.⁴ This means paying more for out-of-pocket expenses, enduring longer commutes, higher fuel costs, and increased family stress.

During a recent installation visit, observations included a notably stagnant military construction timeline and a significant funding deficit. While recently opened unaccompanied housing met modern standards with private bedrooms and shared kitchenettes, planning for the project began more than a decade ago. An eleven-year pipeline from concept to completion is unacceptable when servicemembers are residing in deteriorating legacy barracks. A recurring challenge noted by leadership at one installation was a shortfall in annual baseline funding, resulting in an annual facility sustainment gap of \$50 million to \$70 million, and a barracks FSRM backlog estimated at approximately \$4 billion.

³ U.S. Government Accountability Office. Military Barracks: Poor Living Conditions Undermine Quality of Life and Readiness. GAO-23-105797. Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 2023. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105797.pdf>.

⁴ Asch, B. J. (2025). Reassessing the Basic Allowance for Housing for Army personnel in a rapidly changing housing market. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2412-1.html

Beyond physical capacity, the delegation identified a silent but systemic threat to health and readiness: the failure of life-safety and ventilation systems in aging training barracks. During a visit to a training installation, our visit revealed that legacy "A" School barracks, built in the 1970s, operate with sealed transoms and lack modern HVAC systems capable of introducing fresh air. This causes excessive recirculation of stagnant air and elevated CO₂ levels, creating a dormitory environment that can negatively affect the physiological recovery of servicemembers. Although modern, gold-standard facilities have been successfully piloted at this location. To provide the remaining student population with safe, breathable quarters, an estimated investment of over \$130 million was identified - reflecting the high cost of decades of deferred modernization. Additionally, The American Legion remains concerned about hazardous environmental conditions, particularly the prevalence of mold in high-occupancy quarters. Our BASE visits frequently identify legacy barracks prone to flooding and persistent moisture, conditions that can lead to mold growth that is often downplayed as a maintenance backlog.

Supporting Legislation

The American Legion supports H.R. 7188, the *Military Occupancy Living Defense (MOLD) Act*. The intent of this bill is to improve housing for military families by addressing hazardous environmental conditions, including mold. We urge its inclusion in the 2027 NDAA. We must move beyond reactive spot cleaning and mandate rigorous environmental standards, transparent testing, and contractor accountability to ensure servicemembers are living in safe and healthy conditions.

Investments in Childcare

DoD FY 2027 Budget Request: Investments in Childcare

The American Legion firmly supports the Department of Defense's requested FY 2027 budget increase for Child Development Programs (CDP).⁵ This increased investment continues the DoD's momentum in addressing childcare capacity issues on military installations. Resolution No. 85: Support for Military Quality of Life Standards, explicitly outlines The Legion's support for increased funding for childcare centers and higher pay for the childcare workforce. Childcare is a necessary facet of military quality of life and directly supports our military's overall mission readiness.

The Child Development Program is the largest employer-sponsored childcare system operated by the United States. Since 2024, community childcare partnerships and childcare fee assistance programs have played a pivotal role in reducing the unmet need for quality childcare by 30 percent.⁶ Under the CDP, Child Development Centers (CDCs), the Military Child Care in Your

⁵ Department of War, "Fiscal Year (FY) 2027 Budget Estimates," Volume II - Defense Wide Data Book, 2026. https://comptroller.war.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2027/budget_justification/pdfs/01_Operation_and_Maintenance/O_M_VOL_2/OP-34.pdf.

⁶ Office of the Under Secretary of War (Comptroller), "FY 2027 Department of War Budget Overview Book," *Department of War*, April 2026, https://comptroller.war.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2027/FY2027_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf.

Neighborhood (MCCYN) program, and the Child Care in Your Home fee assistance program are all critical components of the military childcare system. The DoD's Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood program operates as a community-based initiative that provides fee assistance when childcare is unavailable or at capacity on an installation. The DoD's Child Care in Your Home fee assistance pilot program reimburses military families for 30 to 60 hours of in-home childcare provided by a babysitter or nanny. Continued funding for these programs is crucial to addressing the childcare needs of military families.

Childcare Assessment during TAL's BASE Visits

BASE visits have identified the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood Program, which expands childcare access in communities surrounding military installations, as a crucial lifeline for military families. Programs like these provide high-quality childcare options for military families who are unable to secure a CDC slot after relocating to a new duty station. GAO report GAO-23-105518, highlighted the positive role of community-based childcare assistance programs, including the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN) Program, in improving access to affordable childcare, reducing waitlist pressures, supporting spouse employment, and enhancing overall military family readiness.⁷

The American Legion acknowledges ongoing CDC construction across the force to renovate or expand childcare facilities. Although improved infrastructure and childcare facilities are important investments, the childcare workforce responsible for caring for military children must not be neglected. There remains a need for more specialized childcare personnel, such as child behavioral therapists and counselors, to provide high-quality care for children with special needs. Investments in the CDC workforce should expand access to specialty childcare services.

Healthcare

DoD FY 2027 Budget Request: Investments in Healthcare

We are encouraged by the Department of Defense's FY 2027 budget request of \$45.7 billion in investments for the Military Health System (MHS). This represents an estimated 5% increase over the FY 2026 funding level and includes approximately \$20.3 billion for Combat and Operational Medicine Programs (COMP), \$22.2 billion for Private Sector Care Program (PSCP), \$491.4 million for medical construction and infrastructure modernization, \$3.1 billion for facility sustainment, restoration and modernization, approximately \$2.05 billion for service medical readiness, \$231 million for replacements and modernization of medical systems and infrastructure, and \$78.6 million for MHS information technology modernization.⁸

While these investments represent an important step forward, Congressional oversight and external assessments continue to highlight ongoing concerns regarding access to care, understaffing, long

⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office. *Military Child Care: DOD Efforts to Provide Affordable, Quality Care for Families*. GAO-23-105518. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Accountability Office, February 2, 2023.

⁸ Department of War. "Fiscal Year 2027 Budget Estimates," 2026.

https://comptroller.war.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2027/budget_justification/pdfs/09_Military_Health_System/MHS_PB27_J-Book-Vol1-COMP_PSCP.pdf

wait times, and implementation challenges throughout the Military Health System. These concerns align with observations made during recent BASE visits.

We firmly believe that healthcare delivery within the MHS is inseparable from military readiness, lethality, and the overall effectiveness of our Armed Forces, and we support continued investment in and Congressional oversight of military healthcare programs that directly contribute to operational medicine, force resiliency, and the well-being of servicemembers and their families.

Support for the Defense Health Agency (DHA) and DHA Analysis of Budget and Manning

The American Legion has historically supported the DHA and continued investment in the Military Health System as essential components of national defense and military readiness. We remain concerned that reductions in manning, delayed hiring, and insufficient funding across the MHS continue to negatively impact patient care, provider workload, and access to timely medical services.⁹ External assessments have identified persistent staffing shortages and deficiencies in DHA workforce monitoring that strain Military Treatment Facilities and healthcare personnel across the system.

These concerns have become increasingly evident during recent BASE visits, where servicemembers and medical professionals routinely identify staff shortfalls, delayed appointments, and infrastructure challenges as barriers to readiness and quality care. We strongly support maintaining adequate end-strength and civilian staffing levels within DHA to ensure healthcare delivery systems remain operationally effective and capable of supporting the Total Force.

Healthcare Assessment during BASE Visits

One of the most persistent issues observed during BASE visits was the shortage of healthcare professionals across multiple disciplines, including primary care, nursing, specialty medicine, behavioral health, and dental services. These shortages have contributed to extended wait times for appointments, delays in specialty referrals, reduced continuity of care, and increased reliance on civilian healthcare networks. Servicemembers expressed concerns that these limitations negatively affect their ability to receive timely treatment and maintain medical readiness standards.

Behavioral healthcare access remains a critical concern across multiple installations visited during the BASE program. Servicemembers reported prolonged wait times for mental health appointments and limited provider availability, while leadership cited ongoing challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified behavioral health professionals. Dental healthcare services also continue to face staffing shortages, reducing access to routine and specialty care, ultimately impacting readiness.

⁹ Defense Health Care: *Information Needed to Improve Monitoring of Military Personnel Staffing at Medical Facilities*. GAO-25-106988. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Accountability Office, July 21, 2025.

Installation visits also identified concerns regarding aging medical infrastructure and increased demand placed on Military Treatment Facilities. Installation leadership continues to emphasize the need for sustained investment. At one installation, the Military Treatment Facility lacked sufficient EKG monitors, forcing equipment to be shared among hospital units and the Emergency Department, and negatively affecting operational efficiency and patient care.

Failure to adequately staff, modernize, and sustain the Military Health System directly degrades force readiness, resiliency, retention, and the long-term health of servicemembers and their families. Sustained investment in military healthcare infrastructure, personnel, and behavioral health capabilities remains essential to maintaining an effective and medically ready force.

Supporting Legislation

The American Legion strongly advocates for military healthcare through longstanding resolutions focused on improving the quality of life of servicemembers and their families. Resolution No. 85: Support for Military Quality of Life Standards calls on Congress and the Department of Defense to fund essential medical, mental, and dental healthcare services. Support also remains strong for investments in behavioral healthcare, telehealth expansion, workforce stabilization, and facility modernization, while continuing to address issues such as sexual harassment, sexual assault, and suicide ideation.

We strongly advocated passage of H.R. 4768, *the Health Care Fairness for Military Families Act*, which seeks to align TRICARE dependent coverage with the *Affordable Care Act* standards by extending military dependent coverage to age 26 without additional costs. H.R. 4768 would help reduce financial burdens on military families while ensuring continuity of care for nearly 40,000 young adults. Continued investment in military healthcare remains essential to readiness, retention, and the long-term strength of the Armed Forces.

Conclusion

Chairman Cramer, Ranking Member Kelly, and distinguished members of this Subcommittee, The American Legion thanks you for your leadership on these important issues and for the opportunity to present our position and recommendations.

The American Legion believes that taking care of military families is a critical part of preserving the world's finest military. Investing in quality-of-life programs signals respect for our warfighters and their families. This will ensure that the all-volunteer nature of the force is a viable and attractive path for future generations of Americans.

As outlined in Resolution No. 85, America's military strength depends on the individual warfighter. We urge this Subcommittee to include these quality-of-life funding recommendations in the NDAA.

Observations made during recent installation visits continue to demonstrate that military readiness is directly tied to the quality of life, infrastructure, and healthcare support provided to servicemembers and their families. Prioritizing these investments in the NDAA for Fiscal Year

2027 will help ensure the force remains ready, resilient, and capable of meeting defense requirements.

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