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HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
MILITARY CONSTRUCTION, VETERAN AFFAIRS, AND RELATED AGENCIES
OVERSIGHT HEARING: QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE MILITARY
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Chairman Carter, Ranking Member Wasserman Shultz, and distinguished members of the panel and committee, I am honored to speak to you today on behalf of your United States Marines. From where I stand as the Marine Corps' most senior enlisted Marine, I am – without a doubt – confident our Marine Corps is ready to fight and win today or whenever called upon.

The Commandant directed me responsible for representing all Marines, enlisted and officer, with respect to ensuring quality of life matters and institutional imperatives including leadership, professional development, and future development of the force. This included advising the Commandant on all matters relating to morale, welfare, discipline, mission success, and overall readiness of the Marine Corps.

We currently have more than 30,000 Marines forward deployed and forward stationed in support of ongoing operations and exercises overseas. Two of our Marine Expeditionary Units are underway in support of real-world contingencies, with one more ready to deploy soon. Many of our forward stationed Marines have their families at their side overseas.

Your Marines are where they need to be right now, doing exactly what is expected of them, and we are ready to respond to any mission. We are fortunate to have young Americans choose the Marine Corps when they volunteer to serve their nation. Your Marines are doing exactly what we promised to this nation that they will do – to stand ready to fight, win and take care of one another. This is who we are down to our core. Our Marines are our greatest strategic advantage, and their quality of life is of the utmost importance.

In each of the last five years, we have exceeded retention goals with record numbers of Marines deciding that they want to remain in uniform. Once an individual becomes a Marine, they want to stay Marine. They are our best ambassadors, and they are doing well keeping faith with America.

We will continue building on the hard work and progress seen in previous years, by further developing a retention culture, incorporating lessons learned, and creating an environment where

a Marine with proven performance and skills is offered the opportunity to reenlist when they are ready.

Retention

In December 2023, through our Early Reenlistment Program, we announced more than 3,000 first-term Marines were eligible for front-of-the-line reenlistment for Fiscal Year 2025. Our manpower management system, coupled with the expert evaluations from our leaders, determined that these enlisted Marines were the top performers we want to retain. This has been a huge success for the past two fiscal years for both the active and reserve components. We also expanded non-monetary incentives, like duty station preferences, to not only take care of Marines and their families, but to also ensure that Marines are in the right place to best support the service and the mission at hand. We recently published a MARADMIN to crowdsource more ideas on non-monetary incentives.

We continue to create reenlistment incentives for our Marines to ensure we are offering not only a path to a successful career, but also a high quality of life. We appreciate the support of Congress for the flexible monetary incentives and special pays you have provided. The current and future environment requires warfighters with the skillsets and non-traditional initiatives that will enable the Marine Corps to fight and win against our adversaries. This, in the face of a competing civilian industry, is a challenge we face together in support of our national defense.

I am proud to report that we've exceeded our retention goal for first-term Marines, and we're approaching our goal for subsequent-term Marines, well before the end of the fiscal year. The goals are only the floor and we're continuing to encourage Marines to reenlist. I am grateful for the support Congress has provided in these efforts.

On these matters, we can never rest. More than 50 years into the All-Volunteer Force, we must not lose momentum addressing the issues that affect what is more accurately referred to as the All-Recruited Force.

Recruiting

As you know, our Marine Corps Recruiting Command achieved its Fiscal Year 2023 recruiting mission – all while sustaining our high standards and bringing in quality people. Last fiscal year, 99 percent of our recruiting accessions were high school graduates, exceeding the Department of Defense’s standard of 90 percent. Sixty-six percent scored in the top three tiers of the Armed Forces Qualification Test, exceeding the DoD standard of 60 percent. This could not be accomplished without the tireless efforts of our Marine Recruiters, who are often the first Marine a young person ever meets. Recruiter quality of life is something we are studying, to see where we might be able to improve. Incentives like monetary bonuses help, and we welcome any other ideas the panel might offer to make life better for our recruiting force.

Despite our success in Fiscal Year 2023, the Marine Corps continues to face similar recruiting challenges as the other Services. There are historic lows in qualification rates, lack of inspiration to serve, labor market challenges and a fragmented media landscape. These have all had a compounding effect on the recruiting environment. Yet, we are successful because Marines attack recruiting like we attack every other mission – with determination, perseverance, and fidelity.

The Marine Corps Recruiting Command has successfully made our shipping and contracting missions every month this fiscal year. Of note, we have also surpassed the Fiscal Year 2023 total number of Prior Service Enlistment Program re-accessions back into the Active Component. So far in Fiscal Year 2024, we have already attained 126 PSEP’s in comparison to the 121 total in Fiscal Year 2023.

For our Officer mission, we’ve accessed 639 officers so far this fiscal year, which is on-pace to meet or exceed the mission by category and component.

We vow to stay ready to fight at any time or place. That is what you expect from your Marines, and your Marines do not expect much in return. Nonetheless, here is what I expect for our Marines:

1. Competitive Pay and Compensation
2. Quality Housing
3. Quality Health Care
4. Family Support
5. Transition Assistance

Pay & Compensation

Competitive compensation is a foundation of the All-Volunteer Force with impacts to both recruiting and retention. We are thankful for this year's military pay raise. Competitive pay is an expectation of Marines and their families, and they are keenly aware of the impact of things like inflation on their household budgets. The Department is looking into compensation holistically as part of the Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation. We are participating in this study and look forward to its results.

We continue to use both monetary and non-monetary incentives to retain, match, and assign Marines to billets that are appropriate for their grade and skill and necessary in support of the Marine Corps' mission. Incentive and assignment pay remains critical to this effort. Special incentive pays allow us to shape our career force by targeting critical Military Occupational Specialties and supporting lateral movement of Marines to these billets. Non-monetary benefits are also important and should be linked with monetary incentives whenever possible. Equally important is the on-time passage of appropriations bills which enable us to maintain momentum in our retention efforts.

Thank you for authorizing the incentives and special pays we use to target hard-to-fill Military Occupational Specialties, skills, and assignments, including those aimed at retaining Marines with high-demand skills. Marines are responding to our efforts to recognize their talents, and I ask for your continued support of our efforts related to Talent Management.

Housing

There is certainly a correlation between the quality of our Marines' lives and the quality of their barracks. Other contributing factors include access to mess halls, gyms, recreational facilities, quality work environments, strong teams, off-duty recreation, and quality leadership.

The Commandant of the Marine Corps directed the force to develop recommendations to improve barracks management, improve quality of life, and provide better-maintained living quarters. Many of these same issues and recommendations were also addressed by the 2023 Government Accountability Office report on barracks. I want to thank Congress for including provisions in the year's National Defense Authorization Act that specifically address the quality, standards, and management of unaccompanied housing for our service members.

Over the last six years, the Marine Corps has averaged over \$200 million per year in sustainment and restoration projects for barracks exclusively. In Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023, we renovated 30 barracks, improving the quality of life of 8,116 Marines. In Fiscal Year 2024, we approach Congress with a funding request to renovate 13 more barracks and improve the quality of life of 3,517 Marines.

Like our family of force design documents, the Marine Corps Barracks 2030 Strategy will take an aggressive approach in tailoring the barracks portfolio to the needs of the future force while improving our Marines quality of life through specific near, mid-, and long-term investments. Our three-pronged approach to improving housing for our Marines will span across Management procedures, Modernization initiatives, and Material considerations.

As an example of our Management efforts, and as directed by the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act, we plan to implement civilian management of our Military Housing Offices by October of this year, followed by civilian and contractor management of each of our barracks in the next two years. This will ultimately return the more than 500 Marine noncommissioned officer barracks managers to their primary military occupational specialties and improve responsiveness to maintenance requests. We further intend to consolidate family

housing and barracks oversight within the Military Housing Offices, which will streamline leadership and management of all Marine Corps housing.

Our Modernization plans extend beyond new structures and include modernizing systems to enable right-size inventory and deliberate, proactive maintenance. We are leveraging a tier-based readiness approach to lifecycle management and allows us to prioritize investments for the most critical facilities. This means every dollar spent will be targeted where it has the greatest impact. Future modernization efforts include installing new air conditioning systems for barracks in the warmest of climates and targeted demolition to remove buildings not suitable for our Marines.

With regard to Material considerations, in the nearest of terms, Marines can expect to see common space furniture replaced three times faster than in years past, and replacement of lock systems across the entire barracks portfolio within the next two years.

Health Care

Quality health care for our Marines is the minimum standard for readiness and is vital to the All-Volunteer Force. Furthermore, caring for our families and civilians adjacent to our ranks is imperative to ensuring quality of life for our force.

Overseas, and primarily in Japan, network care in the civilian community is not as readily accessible at the standard set by the Department of Defense for our Marines and their families. In response to the growth of delayed access to care, the Marine Corps conducted an area assessment. Guided by the results of this assessment, the Marine Corps is working with Navy Medicine and the Defense Health Agency to identify the location and need of particular specialties and a plan to address them.

With the support of this Congress, we will prioritize access to quality health care services in overseas locations. The United States Indo-Pacific Command is of heightened strategic importance and access to quality health care must be a priority.

We are thankful for Congress' oversight of the Defense Health Agency and its support to address the gap between DoD contract health care labor rates and the civilian market. The Military Health System must have contract rates that can compete in a highly competitive market for finite resources.

Family Support

Family readiness is a crucial component of combat readiness. High-quality childcare is a priority for the Marine Corps and is one of the many important Child and Youth Programs we maintain. It is also an important part of a Marine family's quality of life, which is why we put so much effort into it.

Child and Youth Programs

Our Child and Youth Programs provide high-quality, accessible, and affordable care aboard 16 Marine Corps installations and through contractual partnerships. Some of the benefits CYP offers include Child Development Programs, the community-based Child Care Fee Assistance Program, and Youth Programming.

Installation Child Development Programs are nationally accredited childcare services for eligible six-week to 12-year-old children of DOD personnel, which include Child Development Centers, School Age Care, Youth, and Family Child Care Programs.

At the end of last year there were 993 children on the Marine Corps CDC unmet needs list. This is the first time we have been under 1,000 in a few years, so we are making progress. Some 87 percent of these children are dependents of active-duty military members. Notably, waitlists at Camp Pendleton, Camp Lejeune, Marine Corps Base Quantico, MCB Hawaii and the Parris Island-Beaufort area make up 90 percent of the unmet need.

Staffing directly affects the childcare waitlist. In Fiscal Year 2022, 753 childcare employees departed the workforce, while we hired only 541. Departing employees listed relocation as the

primary reason they resigned in about a third of cases, which makes sense because many CDC employees are spouses who move alongside their servicemember.

More than half of classrooms in Marine Corps CDCs are closed due to low staffing. Childcare employee turnover is a national challenge, so we have implemented many initiatives and policies to address it. Currently, our turnover rate is 20 percent, which is significantly less than the 34 percent rate last year.

We are addressing childcare waitlist issues through emphasis on hiring efforts and a non-competitive childcare employee transfer program. We added over \$100 million to the Child and Youth Program portfolio beginning Fiscal Year 2023 through 2027 to hire more employees at increased wages to help retain a professional workforce. Our average CDC employee salary is now higher than those outside the gate at most installations. We have also increased salaries of direct care employees, who were also offered priority placement and a childcare fee discount. Many of our CDC employees are Marine spouses, so to address the challenge of PCS, we have implemented a CDC employee non-competitive transfer program that allows employees to more seamlessly transfer from their current position to another one at a different installation. This has provided great dividends, allowing us to retain more than 180 spouse employees we may have otherwise lost.

To mitigate waitlists, we also offer childcare fee assistance for eligible Marines who are assigned to an installation that has a significant waitlist. In Fiscal Year 2023, nearly 1,400 children were enrolled in the fee assistance program at a total cost of over \$6.1 million. We recently increased the maximum amount of fee assistance, which will undoubtedly help our Marine families, especially those in high-cost areas. We appreciate the funding and support Congress has provided to improve childcare delivery in all its forms and request your continued support.

Spousal Employment

The Marine Corps Family Member Employment Assistance Program (FMEAP) provides employment-related referral services, career and skill assessments, career coaching, job search

guidance, portable career opportunities, and education center referrals and guidance. These services emphasize a proactive approach for military spouses and other dependent family members to make informed career and education choices. The FMEAP is the central point of contact for the Spouse Relicensing Reimbursement Program. More than 450 spouses have been reimbursed more than \$185,000 since the program began.

Transition Assistance

The Marine Corps runs a comprehensive program that helps Marines and their families plan and pursue effective post-transition goals. The program complies with the DOD-directed Career Readiness Standards and allows Marines to proactively gain awareness of career readiness through nine career action points. In two of the nine action points, Marines devote significant time to transition readiness in the Personal Readiness Seminar and the Transition Readiness Seminar requirements.

We are remaining agile with the Blended Retirement System implementation. We have taken action to increase the BRS continuation pay multipliers to support broader retention objectives. In January 2023, the Marine Corps increased the continuation pay multiplier from 2.5 times to five times monthly basic pay for active and full-time reserve Marines, and from 0.5 times to 1 times for part-time reservists. Continuation pay is offered to Marines upon reaching 12 years of service, and the multiplier increase signals to them that their continued service is valued.

Our veterans and retirees know we must continue our service by highlighting the promises we keep to our nation. One of our most effective recruiting tools is the positive recommendations and endorsements from active and former service members, and sharing the benefits and growth we gain as a result of our time in uniform helps communicate the aspirational nature of service. All Marines, whether they served four years or 30, have a deep pool of experience and anecdote from which they can draw. Transitioning from the Marine Corps and enjoying the benefits they earned should be a positive story. All Marines enter and exit the Marine Corps as quality citizens and are the greatest ambassadors to the nation.

Independent Auditor's Report

Following a rigorous two-year audit, the Marine Corps achieved an unmodified audit opinion, the best possible outcome – and the first time in the Department of Defense's history that any service has received an unmodified audit opinion. These results demonstrate how serious the Marine Corps takes its stewardship of taxpayer funds and our ability to leverage every dollar trusted to the service. This audit proves what we have believed for a long time – when Congress provides the Marine Corps a dollar – we invest it wisely, and we can tell you exactly where and how it was spent in furtherance of our national security objectives. Nonetheless, we won't rest on our laurels. The audit report pointed out some areas of improvement, and we will use this information to continuously improve our operations. The Marine Corps worked with Independent Public Accountants to validate budgetary balances and records, and to audit physical assets at installations and bases across the globe. This included counting military equipment, buildings, structures, supplies and ammunition held by the Marine Corps and our DoD partners. This was only possible through the support and hard work of numerous dedicated Marines, civilian Marines, and many other partners across the department.

Closing

We are committed to maintaining our warfighting prowess throughout the continuum of service. Those who may confront us, our friends, or the global rule of law, need to understand what I have addressed about the quality of our Marines: we are smarter, stronger, faster, healthier, and trusted. Because of that, the Marine Corps' legacy will carry on, and your Marines will remain Always Faithful.

Our Marines, their families, and our civilian employees, are the driving force behind our success on and off the battlefield, and the legacy of our American values. My priority is our people. Quality of life affects the mind, body and spirit of a Marine, which impacts our national defense. We appreciate this panel's interest and I look forward to working with you.

Semper Fidelis.