



**STATEMENT BY  
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**FOR**

**THE DEFENSE SUBCOMMITTEE OF  
THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS**

**FY2010 Priorities**

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**\*\* A participating organization in The Military Coalition \*\***



Mr. Chairman and distinguished committee members, on behalf of the 125,000 members of the Air Force Sergeants Association, (AFSA), I thank you for your continued support of Airmen and their families. I appreciate this opportunity to present our perspective on priorities for the FY2010 defense appropriations.

The Air Force Sergeants Association (AFSA) represents Air Force Active Duty, Air National Guard, Air Force Reserve Command, including active, retired and veteran enlisted Airmen and their families. We are grateful for this subcommittee's efforts, and I cannot overstate the importance your work is to those serving this nation.

You certainly have a daunting task before you and shoulder the tremendous responsibility as you wisely appropriate limited resources based on many factors. The degree of difficulty deciding what is funded isn't lost on us. It is significant!!

### **Air Force Manpower**

AFSA strongly believes the aging fleet of legacy Air Force systems, facilities, and equipment needs to be modernized. However, we also know the truly most valuable weapon America has are those serving this great nation, especially the men and women wearing chevrons of the enlisted grades.

We are deeply concerned about the recent Air Force drawdown of manpower in order to facilitate funding of system modernization and recapitalization but we greatly appreciate Congressional support that has reinstated some of that lost resource. The impact on Air Force ability to maintain the highest level of readiness was felt throughout the smaller force and it placed even more stress on our maintainers and security forces. Although well-intended, that drawdown did not appear to have yielded the results envisioned. Some efficiency was gained as Airmen exercised innovation and continuous process improvement in order to accomplish more. The ole adage "do more with less" certainly and quickly became a reality.

Operational demands including deployments have increased over this same time – increased intelligence activity, reconnaissance and surveillance (ISR) resources, supporting the newest combatant command in Africa, the new Air Force Cyber Command based in Louisiana, increased activity in Afghanistan, and elsewhere overseas. The Air Force has increased its capabilities to ward off threats from the cyber domain and accomplishing the expanding workload associated with more inspections and maintenance to keep aging airframes mission ready.

With the appropriate recommendations from the Armed Service committees, we need to continue offering enlistment bonuses for those career fields that are physically demanding and highly skilled hard to fill jobs since 2001. With Congressional assistance, coupled with the hard work of our Air Force recruiters, we can continue to meet the required annual needs of new Combat Controllers, Para-rescue; Tactical Air Control Party; Explosive Ordnance Disposal; Security Forces; Linguist and Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape Instructors. The amount offered at the initial enlistment ranges from \$2,000.00 to \$13,000.00, depending on the career specialty and terms of enlistment. These are currently the only fields offering enlistment bonuses for FY09. Congress authorized hazardous duty allowance for all DoD firefighters, still today the services have not funded this program. The Air Force has over 3000 firefighters who have been authorized this allowance by Congress but not funded.

AFSA believes a course correction is needed to avert severe adverse, long-term consequences that have already begun to affect morale, retention and combat readiness. We strongly support increasing and fully funding Air Force end strength to 332,800.

### **Quality of Life**

Our nation's military should not be considered a financial burden but considered a national treasure as they preserve our national security for all that live here. If we expect to retain this precious resource, we must provide them and their families, with decent and safe work centers, family housing and dormitories, health care, child care and physical fitness centers, and recreational programs and facilities. These areas are a prime recruitment and retention incentive for our Airmen and their families. This directly impacts their desire to continue serving through multiple deployments and extended separations from family and friends.

This Nation devotes considerable resources to train and equip America's sons and daughters – a long term investment – and that same level of commitment should be reflected in the facilities and equipment they use and in where they live, work, and play.

We urge extreme caution in deferring these costs, especially at installations impacted by base realignment and closure (BRAC) decisions and mission-related shifts.

We applaud congressional support for military housing privatization initiatives. This has provided housing at a much faster pace than would have been possible through military construction alone.

AFSA urges Congress to fully fund appropriate accounts to ensure our installations eliminate substandard housing and work centers as quickly as possible. Those devoted to serving this nation deserve better.

Tremendous strides have been made to improve access to quality child care and fitness centers on military installations, and we are grateful to the Department of Defense and Congress for these collective efforts. However, there is still much more work to be done. I have personally visited over 125 Air Force installations in the states and overseas these past three years and I can assure you that the demand for adequate child care is a top priority among our Airmen and their families. The importance of this is directly reflected in the military members' family decision to remain in the service or exit .

### **Veterans Affairs Healthcare Funding**

AFSA believes that the healthcare portion of Veterans Affairs (VA) funding should be moved to mandatory annual spending. One of this nation's highest obligations is the willingness to fully fund VA health care, facilities, and other programs for those who have served in the past, are serving today and will serve in the future.

There are many challenges facing veterans and we are encouraged by the initiatives centered on improving access for all veterans regardless of their VA designated category. Much more emphasis has to be focused on continuity of care and addressing the scars of war, some obvious and others not so, such as traumatic brain injuries and post traumatic stress disorders. We are particularly pleased by the tremendous support of Congress and this Committee to implement and fund Wounded Warrior programs across America. The outpouring of support from civilian communities and volunteer support has been truly amazing and very much appreciated.

### **Women Veterans Healthcare Issues**

The Air Force Sergeants Association applauds the actions of this committee, other committees and sub-committees to directly address the issue of the unique health challenges faced by women veterans. Between 1990 and 2000, the women veteran population increased by over 33% from 1.2 million to 1.6 million, and women now represent approximately 9 percent of the total veteran population. By next year, the VA estimates women veterans will comprise well over 10 percent of the veteran population. Currently women make up more than 20 percent of the active duty Air Force, Air National Guard 19 percent, and approximately 26 percent of the Air Force Reserves with thousands serving, or having already returned from serving, in Iraq, Afghanistan and other places a long way from our shores. AFSA urges an increase to the VA budget so they can appropriately care for these veterans now and in the future.

## **Impact Aid**

Military leaders often use the phrase, “we recruit the member, but we retain the family” when talking about quality of life and retention. Impact Aid is a program at the very core of this premise, because it directly affects the quality of educational programs provided to the children of military service members. In the Department of Defense Dependent Schools, there are over 79,000 children of our active duty force scattered all over the globe.

These children lead unique lives, fraught with challenges associated with frequent changes in schools, repeatedly being uprooted and having to readjust to new communities and friends. Many of these school children are in other countries in either the DODDS system or host nation schools that are not affected by Impact Aid funding. Worrying about what resources might or might not be available to school administrators should not be yet another concern heaped upon them and their parents.

The Impact Aid program provides federal funding to public school districts in the U.S. with enrollment of students that have a parent who is a member of the Armed Forces, living on and/or assigned to a military installation.

The budget proposed by the administration is identical to the approved funding in 2009 in spite of increased financial obligations by the servicing local school districts. It has a completely detrimental effect on the military member and their decision to take that next assignment or opt to get out for the good of his or her family. The implicit statement in this action is military children are a lower priority than others in our nation. We ask this committee to take the steps necessary to show our military men and women that the education of their children is as important at the next child..

AFSA is grateful that Congress funded Impact Aid with 1.265.7 million this past FY. We strongly urge increased funding of this important family quality of life area that has a direct bearing on reenlistment rates and military families quality of life. We urge Congress restore this program to its rightful full funding.

## **Basic Military Pay**

Tremendous progress has been made over the last 15+ years to close the gap between civilian sector and military compensation. AFSA appreciates these steady efforts and we encourage further steps. We believe linking pay raises to the employment cost index (ECI) is essential to recruiting and retaining the very best and brightest volunteers. AFSA urges the formula for determining annual pay increases to be ECI + 0.5% until the gap is completely eliminated. If we want to continue having an all volunteer force then we must continue on the path to close the aforementioned pay gap. Enrollment in food stamps rose 25% in the military last year. Our junior enlisted are all volunteers serving our nation, yet they remain on monthly use of food stamps.

## **Transition Assistance Programs**

The all-volunteer military force repeatedly answers this nation's call to duty and at the end of their tours of duty, whether a few years or after decades of service, all transition to civilian life.

Section 502 of the National Defense Authorization Act of FY 1991 codified in sections 1141-1143 and 1144-1150 of title 10, United States Code, authorized comprehensive assistance benefits and services for separating service members and their spouses.

From that legislation, grew a valuable partnership between the Department of Labor and the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs and Homeland Security to provide Transition Assistance Program (TAP) employment workshops, VA Benefits Briefings and the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP). These programs and briefings provide service members valuable job placement assistance, training opportunities, and education on veteran benefits so they make informed choices about post-service opportunities.

We urge the committee to continue fully funding transition assistance programs at a level that serves our deserving volunteer veterans.

In addition, we ask you to support the initiatives in this Congress to pass legislation and fund a program that would create hiring preferences across the federal government for military spouses. Under current law, veterans of America's Armed Forces are entitled to preferences over others in *competitive* hiring positions in Federal Government. We believe the sacrifice of family members warrant this consideration as well.

## **Veterans Education Benefits**

There's no escaping the fact that college costs are rising. As the gap between the cost of an education and value of the MGIB widens, the significance of the benefit becomes less apparent. For that reason, the Post 9-11 GI Bill was a giant step forward. However, we must make sure that the new post 9-11 stays current at all times, so that this benefit will not lose its effectiveness when it comes to recruiting this nation's finest young men and women into service. As a member of The Military Coalition and the Partnership for Veterans' Education, we strongly recommend you make the technical corrections to the Post 9-11 Veterans GI Bill that need to be done prior to its implementation this August 1<sup>st</sup>.

When young enlisted men and women opt for military service, they should know that this nation will provide them with a no-cost, complete education, as do numerous companies in the private industry. We, as a government, give them a one-time chance to enroll in the MGIB during basic training. The Department of Defense charges them \$1,200 to enroll at a time when they can least afford it. Service-members are even offered an opportunity to increase their education benefit by paying an additional \$600.00.

Now that the new Post 9-11 GI bill is coming on board for free, those who already paid for but who have not yet utilized the Montgomery GI Bill, will now have to wait until their chapter 33 entitlements are exhausted before they will be allowed to receive a refund on their Montgomery GI bill contributions. Under current law, those who have contributed the additional \$600.00, will not have that money returned to them at all!

This is unacceptable!

In good faith and trusting their government-funded education will be provided in their best interest, service-members now find a program that does not require further investment in their education. However the government will withhold the service-member's Montgomery GI Bill initial investment and not refund it. Our recommendation is that the service-members who chose to enroll in the chapter 33 benefit, and who bought the additional benefit for \$600.00, should be given their investment back or granted an additional 2 years of chapter 30 benefits to roll their \$600.00 education investment into the new education bill.. The latest shortfall with the new bill is that all active duty will **not** receive the \$1,000.00 book allowance. We urge the appropriate committees to make the necessary corrections to ensure those on active duty receive this allowance.

Mr. Chairman, we appreciate your efforts and thank you for this opportunity to share our perspective. AFSA realizes the many difficult decisions this committee must make and hope the information presented today proves helpful. As always, the Air Force Sergeants Association remains ready to support you in matters of mutual concern.