VETERANS STRENGTHENING AMERICA

NATIONAL SECURITY DIVISION'S WEEKLY REPORT

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STAFF ACTIVITY

- NS Staff participated in an MSO/VSO roundtable hosted by the Acting Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, where we engaged in comprehensive discussions on enhancing the safety and economic well-being of servicemembers and their families. These discussions spanned topics from improving safety protocols and healthcare services to bolstering financial stability and support systems for military families.

Force Safety and Occupational Health Policy

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs is pivotal in enhancing service members' and veterans' safety and well-being. This is achieved by overseeing the Department of Defense's safety and occupational health policies, governance, and strategies. Key initiatives include implementing the first-ever DoD safety and occupational health strategic plan and monitoring department-wide injuries, illnesses, and mishaps, such as aviation accidents. The office also advises the Secretary of Defense, focusing on strengthening the DoD's safety culture. This involves prioritizing critical issues like blast overpressure, integrating safety leading indicators into policy, and proactive analysis to maintain adequate safety programs. Additionally, collaboration with agencies like the FAA, OSHA, and EPA is integral to their strategy, with new campaigns highlighting safety and health advancements beginning with a visit to Fort Liberty.

DoD Warfighter Brain Health Strategy and Action Plan

Over two years ago, discussions began on the DoD Warfighter Brain Health Strategy and Action Plan, which has now evolved into a comprehensive roadmap addressing various brain health threats. These include blast overpressure, anomalous health incidents like Havana Syndrome, and head impacts from activities such as parachute jumps. The plan emphasizes enhancing the training environment safety, especially concerning blast exposure. It is part of a broader initiative focusing on traumatic brain injury (TBI), a field where the department is a global leader. Formalized in 2022, the plan, strategy, and action approved by the deputy secretary have garnered congressional attention, leading to significant advancements in cognitive monitoring. In the summer of 2024, recruit training will initiate this monitoring to improve brain health in the short and long term.

Military Personnel Policy, Servicemembers Economic Well-Being

In recent years, the Congress/Department of Defense has significantly improved the economic security of service members. This includes a 10% increase in basic pay, a 17.5% rise in the Basic Allowance for Housing, and a 13% increase in the Basic Allowance for Subsistence. On average, service members now receive an additional $10,000 annually. A new service member in 2024 earns about $50,000 annually, reaching $57,000 by the end of the first year. By the third year, earnings are approximately $64,000, and an E5 earns

about $77,000 by the fourth year, surpassing U.S. median incomes. These figures don't account for compensation/benefits like healthcare, dental, the post-911 GI Bill, and paid vacation time/leave. The DoD is also reviewing the entire compensation system to ensure fairness and effectiveness, considering aspects like dual earners in military families and outdated housing profiles for BAH.

Food Security Initiatives for Service Members

The DoD's strategic roadmap launched in July 2022 prioritizes addressing food insecurity among service members. Recognizing the complexity of this issue, the DoD is focusing on junior unaccompanied service members and single-income households. Efforts include modernizing food accessibility with online resources, updating military leader toolkits, and extending commissary hours. The reinforcement of federal nutrition assistance programs ensures members know their eligibility. A comprehensive review of service member pay and benefits, including impacts of military spouse unemployment and childcare costs, is underway. Initiatives like the military spouse accelerator pilot and the military spouse employment partnership are being implemented to improve employment outcomes for spouses.

Defense State Liaison for Military Families

The Defense State Liaisons Office operates across eight U.S. regions, representing the DoD in state-level policy discussions for the well-being of military families. Collaborating with stakeholders like MSO/VSO, the office establishes nonpartisan policy priorities that respect state sovereignty and minimize fiscal demands. Over 18 years, the DSL has addressed nearly 70 issues, constantly adjusting its agenda based on stakeholder consensus and analysis. The office's flexibility allows it to evolve and set priorities that support the changing needs of military families. It maintains a focused top-ten list of policy priorities and ensures that issues not currently on the agenda are still recognized for their importance.

- NS Staff spoke with a Legionnaire representing minority veterans who focuses on advocating for the deported veterans of color. The veteran works to force the Department of Defense to enhance its efforts in educating non-citizen servicemembers about obtaining citizenship through military service. The conversation highlighted the need for systemic changes to support those who have served the nation but face challenges in gaining citizenship.

- NS Staff actively continues the planning process for the annual Washington Conference. This ongoing effort focuses on detailing and organizing various aspects of the conference.

- NS Staff is finalizing the After-Action Report detailing the Commander's recent travel to the Pacific. This document is essential for reviewing the outcomes and insights gained from the trip.

- NS Staff continues planning for the Annual ANAVICUS Breakfast, focusing on finalizing arrangements and details.

POW/MIA

As of January 12th, 2024, no new servicemembers have been identified/repatriated.

PROGRAMS (The American Legion Military Surplus Equipment)

- Processed request: Ammo – 3,720; Rifles – 21; Clips – 50; Static Displays – 0

- Participants: Posts – 5; Departments – 4

TIP OF THE WEEK

Director's update and remarks:

Happy New year from the National Security Division Staff. I'd first like to welcome our new administrative assistant, Ms. Ikea Witcher who joined the team prior to the holidays, and we look forward to her support and engagement in support of the Commission. We have welcomed two new Chairman to the Commission: Chairman Guillen to the National Guard and Reserve Forces Committee and Chairman Landcamer for the Foreign Relations Committee that we are supporting.

The Division Staff is busy closing out a few tasks from the end of the year last year while simultaneously working on the written inputs for the year's legislative agenda and upcoming National Commander's testimony. Our legislative priorities include Military quality of life (QOL), Ensuring the Coast Guard is paid, and Access to medical and mental healthcare for our oversea active-duty servicemembers and their families. Members of Congress have increased their focus on military quality of life issues and this year will prove to be an important period for our advocacy and awareness as we plan to conduct four quality of life assessment visits across the United States.

For those who may not be aware, National Security Staff accompanies the National Commander on foreign travel to the Pacific and Europe and multiple recent visits have revealed the need for our advocacy efforts on behalf of our overseas military population. We will continue to include overseas visit findings in our quality-of-life lessons learned/portfolio. I do want to state that the unique aspect of National Staff running the QOL program is much more than producing a report upon completion. Your staff has direct access to Congressional policy makers, other government decision makers and DoD officials in Washington D.C. who we meet regularly. As a result, your Staff engages those officials immediately after a QOL visit, meeting to rectify issues even before a report is published, so we have access and outputs that bring relevance and immediate impacts to each visit. I look forward to the Team's work in 2024.

Our work and engagement with DoD involving the national recruiting crisis is going to be a game changer for us during 2024. As America's largest veterans organization, we have taken the lead on recruiting crisis efforts and have already met with senior military officials from various branches to discuss our work, recommendations and upcoming tactics which will be revealed in the near future. Our Foreign Relations and National Guard/Reserve Forces portfolio is being updated under the new Chairman and we will have their plans and priorities within a few weeks.

Be looking out for increased engagement on border security, foreign policy and other key areas during 2024!

Sincerely,

Mario A. Marquez
Director, National Security Division