

WRITTEN STATEMENT BY

GENERAL DANIEL R. HOKANSON

CHIEF, NATIONAL GUARD BUREAU

BEFORE THE

HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEFENSE

SECOND SESSION, 118TH CONGRESS

ON

A REVIEW OF THE PRESIDENT'S

FY2025 FUNDING REQUEST AND

BUDGET JUSTIFICATION FOR THE

NATIONAL GUARD AND RESERVE

April 30th, 2024

NOT FOR PUBLIC DISSEMINATION

UNTIL RELEASED BY

HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member McCollum, and esteemed members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Soldiers, Airmen, civilian teammates, and families of the National Guard.

As this is my final testimony before this Subcommittee as the 29th Chief of the National Guard Bureau, I want to thank you for your enduring support of our National Guard. Your investment in the National Guard has built a capable and professional operational force that is vital to the Joint Force and our American communities in times of crisis. Every day we advance the Department of Defense's (DoD) priorities and support the National Defense Strategy with ready, trained, and interoperable units. I would also like to acknowledge the support of our National Guard families and our National Guard employers; they are a critical component of our success.

During my tenure as Chief, National Guardsmen have been continuously engaged around the world. Their missions included COVID; multiple disasters; civil unrest; election integrity; the southwest border; combat operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria; support to our Combatant Commanders around the globe; and security cooperation support to more than 100 partner nations, including Ukraine. Support from this Subcommittee and your Congressional colleagues has helped make this possible. Thanks to your efforts, the National Guard has seen marked improvements in the quality of life of our Soldiers, Airmen, and families, greater visibility of our role in the Joint Force, and a stronger position to face the challenges ahead.

The 2025 Department of Defense budget request makes responsible choices to prioritize operational readiness and take care of people, continuing to build a Joint Force that is lethal, resilient, survivable, agile, and responsive. However, we still face hurdles that require your leadership. Unpredictable and inconsistent funding—particularly continuing resolutions—reduce our buying power and negatively impact our strategic readiness and modernization. If we fail to modernize our equipment and force design adequately, we increase the risk of sending America's sons and daughters into large-scale combat operations with equipment and formations that may not be fully interoperable with the active duty forces we serve alongside.

These are not insurmountable challenges, but they represent risks and vulnerabilities at a time when our strategic competitors are looking to exploit any vulnerability. I look forward to working with this Subcommittee to address these challenges and create a better environment for our National Guardsmen and, as a result, a stronger Joint Force.

My final objective in my term as Chief is to leave the next leadership team with an empowered, professionalized force that is manned, trained, and equipped to keep our promise to America—a promise to be “Always Ready, Always There.” With this Subcommittee's continued support, we will keep that promise.

A Promise of Readiness

The primary purpose of the National Guard is fighting and winning our Nation's wars. As the combat reserve of the Army and the Air Force, and a community-based force that also supports our Nation's communities in times of need, we are tasked with a great responsibility.

In 2023 alone, the National Guard served the equivalent of nearly 16 million days. This included more than nine million days overseas supporting Combatant Commanders, conducting peacekeeping missions, and deterring strategic competitors and adversaries. Meanwhile, our Guardsmen, in both Federal and state duty statuses, conducted homeland defense operations,

held training exercises, and responded to disaster events in the 50 states, three territories, and the District of Columbia. National Guardsmen saved 476 lives, distributed hundreds of thousands of meals and bottles of water, and cleared more than 1,500 miles of roadway in response to disasters. Whether it's at the request of the Combatant Commanders or our Nation's governors, we have never missed a mission.

I would like to thank the Subcommittee for recognizing the National Guard's vital role in our national security, as evidenced by the elevation of the Vice Chief of the National Guard Bureau to a four-star position in the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). This is not only a symbol of the National Guard's integral role in the Joint Force, but an act of empowerment and advocacy for the National Guard at the highest levels of the defense enterprise.

We must continue to build on that Joint Force integration for our strategic readiness. Considering the reemergence of strategic competition and increasing frequency of severe weather across our Nation, we must ensure the National Guard's combat and response capabilities reflect the challenges of the future. We cannot be fully operationally ready for the fight of tomorrow with equipment, training, and formations that are not deployable, sustainable, interoperable, and ready. Manpower is a critical enabler of operational readiness and our ability to deliver capability against our strategic competitors. In the current strategic environment, it is imperative to fully fund National Guard personnel, training, exercises, equipment, and recruiting to be strategically ready for potential large-scale combat operations. Congress's support of the FY 2025 President's Budget is necessary.

Mission readiness takes on many forms. For example, the Air National Guard has a 28-year history of delivering important space capabilities overseas and here at home through seventeen unit-equipped space squadrons—including many critical, no-fail missions for the U.S. Space Force. As both my predecessor and I have advocated, I believe keeping these formations in the National Guard will have the least impact to strategic and operational readiness, lowest risk to mission, and is the most cost-effective solution.

Our National Guard must be fully modernized, integrated, and resourced to fulfill our role as the combat reserve of the Army and the Air Force. That includes maintaining all twenty-five existing Air Guard fighter squadrons. Every one of our squadrons is essential to keep pace with global demands, deter our adversaries, and—if necessary—prevail in conflict. A 2024 RAND study, *Active and Reserve Component Force Mix Considerations for the Air Force*, found that aircraft in the reserve component cost significantly less to operate and support than in the active component, and shifting F-35 aircraft to the reserve component earlier would be a way to avoid losing large numbers of experienced active component pilots from the total force while saving hundreds of millions of dollars in training costs. The study also acknowledged reserve component personnel provide the force with nearly double the experience and qualifications of their active component counterparts, and that a force mix of 60 percent active component and 40 percent reserve component would minimize training costs while maximizing institutional knowledge and experience.

Divesting Air Guard fighter squadrons without a recapitalization plan exacerbates a national shortage of fighter squadrons, trained and experienced pilots and maintainers, and adds risk to the National Defense Strategy. We must seek to balance existing fleets and plan new aircraft

purchases to ensure that the Guard can continue to contribute to the Total Force in support of the NDS.

Modernization is not exclusively an issue of equipment; it also pertains to our formations and our facilities. In terms of our formations, we must be deployable, sustainable, interoperable, and operationally ready. Like our counterparts in the active duty Army, the Army National Guard also intends to restructure our forces to better support divisions as the primary combat formation, and provide greater agility, endurance and depth. Force structure design in National Guard divisions should reflect their Active Duty counterparts as closely as possible. This enhances our operational readiness to respond wherever and whenever the National Guard may be needed.

In terms of our facilities, modernized installations support better training scenarios and emergency response missions, while concurrently serving as a primary tool to increase recruiting, retention, and quality of life for our service members. However, many National Guard facilities are aging and some lack the space necessary to conduct modern training exercises. To support the National Guard's facilities, the budget supports preventative maintenance and timely response to work orders. Modernizing National Guard facilities is essential to our overall operational readiness and a critical quality of life consideration for our Soldiers and Airmen.

A Promise to our Partners

The National Guard is a local force with a global reach, and this is most evident in our State Partnership Program (SPP). This program pairs a state's National Guard with a partner nation, allowing members of each military's organization to train together and build enduring relationships. The overall cost of the program—less than one percent of the overall security cooperation budget—pales in comparison to the relationships garnered through training exercises, subject matter expert exchanges, and other military-to-military engagements. Today, there are 89 partnerships with 106 nations; every Combatant Command is represented. Last year, we celebrated the SPP's thirtieth anniversary, and we have plans to continue growing the program in the years ahead.

With the assistance of Congress, the SPP has proven to be a valuable security cooperation program and continues to grow in support of the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and Combatant Commanders' theater security objectives. Thanks to this program, Soldiers and Airmen experience the global operating environment, develop military-to-military relationships, improve strategic and operational readiness, enhance access and influence, and ensure our Nation has trusted, capable, interoperable Allies and partners at our side. Fully funding the SPP through the services will ensure continued access to timely, consistent, and adequate resources to maximize the program's potential and historically robust return on investment. In addition, fully funding the President's budget request for the SPP would increase opportunities for mutual cooperation with the states' partner nations.

A Promise to our People

The National Guard's highest priority is our people. It is our people who volunteer, train, deploy, and serve, and they are the most critical element of our success.

That is why we continue to assess and take measures to improve our aviation safety standards in both the Army and Air National Guards. The tragic aviation accidents in recent years highlight

the need for the highest levels of training and maintenance; a continued commitment to fully fund flying hour requirements, full-time aircrew requirements, and maintenance manpower requirements; and the importance of modernized equipment. Safety is not only essential to our continued operational readiness, it is essential to our Soldiers, Airmen, and National Guard families. As we prepare for the challenges of the future, we always prioritize the safety of our team.

We remain grateful for Congress' support of the Soldiers, Airmen, and families of the National Guard. NDAA provisions, including dual basic allowance for housing for training, and pay and benefits parity, such as the creation and expansion of maternity, parental, and bereavement leave to the reserve component, demonstrates both investment and recognition of the importance and value of our National Guardsmen. In addition, Congress' pay increase for military personnel helps our military families keep pace with inflation. The FY 2022 NDAA, as amended by the FY 2024 NDAA, provides the Department with flexibility to address paying Reserve Component members the same monthly amount of special and incentive pay as paid to regular Component members. Each of these actions recognizes the contributions of our Guardsmen and Reservists, demonstrates the value of their service, and are important tools for recruiting and retention.

The National Guard faces the same recruiting and retention headwinds we have seen throughout the Armed Forces. While the Army National Guard was able to meet its end-strength goals last year, the Air National Guard fell short. This can be attributed to a fiercely competitive recruiting environment, a strong national economy, and generational shifts in the propensity to serve, among other factors.

To remain a competitive option for those looking to serve, we need to invest in our recruiters and our recruiting efforts and continue to find ways to reach the diverse populations that represent the communities where we live and serve.

I believe the National Guard is a unique and powerful opportunity. It provides the chance to serve one's Nation, have a civilian career, live where one chooses, and earn benefits associated with military service. It is also a tremendous value to the American taxpayer. As personnel costs continue to increase across the DoD, capacity exists within the unique National Guard model to grow future capability as a strategically ready, responsive, and operational force at a fraction of the cost of active duty forces.

Medical readiness is critical to the activation of our Soldiers and Airmen; disasters and world events are dynamic and unpredictable, and we must be ready to respond. But historically, many Guardsmen are not medically ready for activation due to challenges like insurance coverage and long wait times for health care access when not in a duty status. If they are unable to seek treatment for a physical ailment or a dental issue or obtain follow-on care due to a lack of insurance, they fail to meet medical readiness requirements.

Our service members must be ready at a moment's notice—and addressing the unique medical challenges we see with the National Guard is critical to force readiness.

There are other areas to improve health care delivery for our service members. We must continue to focus on building capacity in DoD hospitals and clinics—capacity to ensure timely and quality access to care for the 9.6 million Military Health System beneficiaries depending on us to get this right. Our focus must remain on improving civilian health care staff hiring in select

locations, recognizing the increasing risks of nationwide health care provider shortages. Our focus must also include enhancing easy, convenient access to care through new digital health technologies, such as the Defense Health Agency's new Digital Health Strategy. Implementing new digital health tools will enable real-time and flexible virtual care, and upgraded direct patient care experiences so our health care system can better meet the needs of our beneficiaries, and expand capacity in the long-term. These efforts and more will ensure we can meet the demands of today and tomorrow.

A Promise for the Future

It has been the honor of my life to serve our Nation and the Soldiers and Airmen of the National Guard, and it is my highest objective to posture this organization for the demands of the future. I am thankful for the Subcommittee's personal friendships, and continued support and commitment to helping the National Guard keep our promise to America and remain "Always Ready, Always There."