

Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing Summary
Military and civilian personnel programs in the Department of Defense in review on the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2022 and the Future Years Defense Program

Hearing Date: Wednesday, May 12, 2021 | 2:30 PM EST

Key Take-Aways:

Discussion primarily focused on a few main topics: sexual assault prevention and response in the military, military recruitment, and servicemember and military family access to healthcare.

- Chair Gillibrand pressed witnesses on servicemember/family lack of access to medical, behavioral, and mental health care, as well as the stigmas within the military around accessing behavioral health care.
- Chair Gillibrand, ranking member Tillis, and Sen. Hawley all inquired about suicide, violence, and sexual assault/harassment prevention programs and what could be done to improve them.
- Chair Gillibrand pursued a line of questioning about unfair recruit testing standards that discriminate against women servicemembers. In doing so, she got LG Ottignon to disavow BMI as an appropriate standard or metric of strength [video clip attached].

Snapshot of Member Issues:

Servicemember/family mental/behavioral healthcare: Gillibrand (D-NY)

Mental health stigma: Gillibrand (D-NY), Tillis (R-NC)

Suicide prevention: Gillibrand (D-NY), Tillis (R-NC), Hawley (R-MO)

Sexual assault prevention: Gillibrand (D-NY), Tillis (R-NC), Tuberville (R-AL)

Domestic violence prevention: Gillibrand (D-NY), Tillis (R-NC)

Special needs military families: Gillibrand (D-NY)

COVID-19 impact on military: Tillis (R-NC)

Military health system reform: Tillis (R-NC), Hawley (R-MO)

Rural military medical facilities: Hawley (R-MO)

Military vaccination: Tillis (R-NC)

PT testing and gender discrimination: Gillibrand (D-NY)

Extremism in the military: Tuberville (R-AL), Gillibrand (D-NY)

Military recruitment: Tuberville (R-AL), Tillis (R-NC)

Military preparation for China conflict: Hawley (R-MO)

Impact of Space Force recruitment on other Armed Forces: Gillibrand (D-NY)

Servicemember and civilian pay and benefits: Gillibrand (D-NY)

Witnesses:

- Ms. Patricia Mulcahy, **Chief Human Capital Officer, United States Space Force**
- Lieutenant General David Ottignon, **Deputy Commandment for Manpower and Reserve Affairs**

- Lieutenant General Brian Kelly, **Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel and Services**
- Vice Admiral John Nowell, **Deputy Chief of Naval Operations, N-1 and Chief of Naval Personnel**
- Lieutenant General Gary Brito, **Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1**
- Dr. Elizabeth Van Winkle, **Executive Director, Office of Force Resiliency**
- Dr. Terry Adirim, **Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs**
- Mr. Lernes Herbert, **Performing the Duties of Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs**

Topics of Focus:

Mental and behavioral health

- Gillibrand discussed mental health and shared statistics that showed that servicemembers are at increased risk – a particularly acute issue during the pandemic. She was disappointed in the significant barriers to accessing mental health care and shared a recent study where 7 facilities failed to meet access to care standards. Additionally, she shared that 50% of those referred for care never received care. She asked if DoD has access to adequate number of providers and what can be done to increase access to behavioral health.
 - o Adirim responded that there was a 96% fill rate for behavioral health providers, except for psychiatrists which have a lower fill rate. She said that DoD uses whatever they can to recruit and retain behavioral health providers. She said that access to care within military treatment facilities is a priority and that they work hard especially for active duty.
- Gillibrand asked what is being done to reduce the stigma of accessing behavioral health care.
 - o Van Winkle said that they are always looking for different avenues and working to ensure expanded scope. They are doing a pilot program on recognizing warning signs and working to offer confidential avenues.
- Tillis emphasized that the military needs a show of strength from top down; that seeking assistance for behavioral health is show of strength.

Suicide among servicemembers

- Hawley shared that the DoD has struggled to reduce suicide rates among servicemembers. He asked what weaknesses exist and how we address them.
 - o Van Winkel responded that resources are focused on the population of highest concern which is younger members. Programs are focused on teaching problem solving skills and providing access to care. They are implementing an integrated approach to violence on the ground by redesigning the climate survey, specifically targeting servicemembers that don't feel connected or valued so that they can get an early signal of the problem. She asserted that suicide prevention is a key part of that integrated violence prevention strategy.

Body mass index [see video clip]

- In a line of questioning highlighting discrimination against women servicemembers in PT testing, Gillibrand asked if body composition standards and the metrics used by the military to judge recruits actually have any relationship to ability to perform military duties.
 - o Ottignon concurred with Gillibrand's assessment. He said that body composition standards and testing were originally tied to body mass index but that the military now knows BMI is not a good measure of someone's strength. He said that the military is close to finding a good standard to use instead.