



Testimony from the Wisconsin Department of Military Affairs

Major General Paul Knapp, The Adjutant General

Speaker's Task Force on Childhood Obesity

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The Wisconsin Department of Military Affairs (DMA) is providing the following information to the Speaker's Task Force on Childhood Obesity, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

Military recruiting is at a near crisis level. The ability to maintain an all-volunteer force is key to maintaining the defense of our nation. And as the nation grapples with a wide range of public health concerns, it is imperative that we recognize the significant impact of obesity on our military readiness and national security. This issue is of profound importance to our armed forces, as it directly affects the pool of eligible recruits, threatens our long-term military readiness, and imposes substantial economic burdens on our healthcare system.

Childhood obesity in the United States has reached epidemic proportions. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately one in three American children and adolescents is overweight or obese. This alarming trend has persisted for decades and has far-reaching consequences, including a massive impact on military recruitment.

One of the most direct consequences of obesity is a reduction in the pool of eligible military recruits. Obesity often leads to significant health issues, such as diabetes, hypertension, and orthopedic problems, which can disqualify young individuals from military service. The Department of Defense estimates that nearly 77% of young Americans aged 17 to 24 are ineligible to serve due to factors such as obesity and other related health conditions, which has increased from 70% just five years ago. Of all the disqualifying factors, obesity alone is the highest at 11%, just ahead of drug abuse at 8% followed by mental and physical health conditions at 7%. However, up to 50% of disqualified youth have multiple disqualifying factors of which being overweight is just one.

In response to these challenges, the Air Force increased the maximum allowable bodyfat percentage this year. Previously 20% for males under age 30, and 30% for females under 30. The new standards are now 26% for males 30 and under, and 36% for females under 30.

Even for those who do meet enlistment standards, obesity can impair physical fitness and overall performance. Overweight recruits are more likely to struggle with basic training and may require

additional resources and time to reach the required fitness levels, straining the military's training infrastructure. Even with the new bodyfat percentage limits, it has been proven that physical fitness is more difficult for those who are overweight than those who are not.

Childhood obesity contributes to a host of long-term health problems, including heart disease, joint issues, and mental health challenges. Childhood obesity significantly increases the likelihood that an individual will remain obese throughout adulthood. Numerous studies have shown that children who are obese are at a higher risk of carrying excess weight into their adult years. This is often due to the development of unhealthy eating habits, sedentary lifestyles, and metabolic changes during childhood that can persist into adulthood. While it is not inevitable, childhood obesity creates a challenging foundation that can be difficult to overcome without proper intervention and lifestyle changes.

Obesity poses a significant challenge to the readiness and effectiveness of current military members. The excess weight carried by obese service personnel can hinder physical fitness, agility, and endurance, making it difficult to meet the rigorous demands of military training and operations. Obesity-related health conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease, and sleep apnea, can further compromise an individual's ability to perform optimally in high-stress and physically demanding situations. Additionally, overweight service members may require more medical attention and resources, diverting valuable resources away from other critical military priorities. Addressing obesity is crucial not only for the well-being of individual service members but also for the overall readiness and preparedness of the armed forces to effectively respond to national security challenges.

Childhood obesity is a threat to our military readiness and national security. To quote retired Army Lt. Gen. Mark Hertling, *"The military has experienced increasing difficulty in recruiting soldiers as a result of physical inactivity, obesity and malnutrition among our nation's youth. Not addressing these issues now will impact our future national security."*

The Department of Military Affairs is invested in the success of this council. We support all endeavors to increase the health and wellness of our state's youth. The success of this council is beneficial to everyone across the state. Certainly, our vested interest is to have a large pool of qualified people to recruit from, but we are also Wisconsinites and achieving healthy communities across the state hinges on our collective efforts for shared success.

Thank you for your time, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.