



**MISSION: READINESS**  
MILITARY LEADERS FOR KIDS

**United States Senate  
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry**

**A National Priority: The Importance of Child Nutrition Programs to our Nation's  
Health, Economy and National Security  
June 12, 2014**

**Written Testimony of:  
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**On behalf of:  
MISSION: READINESS**

Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Cochran, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me here today and for calling attention to this critical issue of childhood nutrition. The Senate Agriculture Committee has a long history of bipartisanship and working together to make our country stronger, so I commend you on beginning this process of reauthorizing child nutrition programs with a hearing that focuses on why this issue really matters to our nation and why we must take action.

Some may wonder what a retired four-star Air Force General is doing at a hearing that is focused on childhood nutrition, but the reality is that the healthy habits we teach our youngest children have a profound impact on our national security.

However, the interest of military leaders in school nutrition is not a new phenomenon. Following World War II, military leaders reported to Congress that, during the war, at least 40 percent of rejected recruits were turned away for reasons related to poor nutrition—mainly being undernourished. This inspired Congress to establish the National School Lunch Program in 1946. Nearly 70 years later, school nutrition remains a national security concern—unfortunately, the pendulum has swung in the other direction.

The alarming fact is that an estimated 75 percent of all young Americans between the ages of 17 and 24 cannot qualify for military service. People are shocked when they hear that number – and they should be. It means that the vast majority of our young people are losing out on the opportunity to serve their country.

It also means our nation could be in jeopardy when it comes to military readiness. We tend to think about our military today in terms fast jets, powerful ships, smart weapons and tanks, but the most powerful tool for our armed forces is still our people--our women and men in uniform. The more than 450 retired admirals and generals of the national security organization Mission: Readiness are focused on how to grow the pool of eligible recruits.

There are three key barriers to enlistment that comprise that 75% figure: Our young adults are either unprepared academically – because they lack a high school degree or can't pass the military's entrance exam; they are too overweight to handle the physical tasks that military service demands; or they have a serious criminal record. Today, I will focus on those that are overweight and obese—which is the leading medical disqualifier.

Between 2006 and 2011, the U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command reported that over 62,000 people were turned away because of their weight. That is the equivalent of 30 combat wings in the Air Force.

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But it isn't just a problem for our recruits. Every year, we discharge 1,200 first-term enlistees because of weight problems. We then have to recruit and train their replacements at a cost of \$75,000 per person. That amounts to a \$90 million price tag in one year.

You should also know that every year the Department of Defense spends 1.1 billion dollars on obesity-related expenses through TRICARE, the healthcare program that serves service members, retirees, and their families. Particularly during a time of declining budgets, we shouldn't be spending that kind of money on a problem that we know is preventable.

The Department of Defense is responding to obesity and other health issues with efforts like the Healthy Base Initiative, which is testing a number of innovative approaches to promote healthier living among service members and their families. They have also been working on making the food in our mess halls much healthier. Unfortunately the DOD can't win this battle alone. We must embrace changes in all sectors of society.

We know that the key is to start early. About 80 percent of children ages 10 to 15 who are overweight become obese by age 25. That means that the critical period for preventing obesity starts long before most children ever even consider military service.

While schools obviously aren't single-handedly responsible for the nation's obesity epidemic – parents also have a responsibility to provide healthy choices in the home—the fact is, kids consume up to half of their daily calories in school. Therefore, the school nutrition environment is one of the best places where we can begin to change habits.

In April 2010 we released the report "Too Fat to Fight" and we followed that up two years later with "Still Too Fat to Fight." These reports examined how obesity is impacting the military and the need for updated standards for our school meal program as well as the junk food sold in schools.

That's why the retired admirals and generals of Mission: Readiness supported the most recent Child Nutrition Reauthorization in 2010. This was a bipartisan and pragmatic way to ensure kids are eating right in school. The first step was to ensure the school lunch line put kids on track for healthy futures by offering fresh, wholesome meals.

The second step was equally important because it cracked down on the tremendous amount of soda, candy, chips, and other unhealthy items kids were consuming at school. In fact you might be shocked to know that kids were consuming enough junk food calories in school to account for nearly two billion candy bars – which would weigh more than the USS Midway Aircraft Carrier.

We have been encouraged by the progress that has been made since the last reauthorization bill, and we want to ensure that as a nation, we continue to move forward on this issue and not retreat. We are even beginning to see the first declines in

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childhood obesity rates. While we still have a long way to go, we know that if we continue to make progress on reducing obesity among our nation's children, we will have healthier adults who are more likely to succeed in life.

The decisions we make today have a profound impact on our ability to continue to staff our all-volunteer military down the road. That's why military leaders are standing beside policymakers who are acting in a bipartisan manner to ensure that every child has a fair chance to grow up healthy and to be able to serve their nation, should they choose to do so.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak here today. I, along with my fellow retired admirals and generals of Mission: Readiness, look forward to working with all of the members of the Committee on this critical issue because our national security depends on it.