



A recruiter with the New Jersey Army National Guard greets attendees during a military appreciation football game Tuesday at Rutgers University in New Jersey. (ARMY NATIONAL GUARD/SPC. SETH COHEN)

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DoD eases medical waiver restrictions

The Pentagon has lifted its restrictions on more than 50 medical conditions that used to disqualify a potential recruit from joining the military.

The effort has helped thousands of previously disqualified young people join the military as the services, including the Army, contend with a tough recruiting environment.

Established in 2022, the Medical Accession Records Pilot aims to address changes in the health landscape among young people by shortening the “any history of” timeframes for several conditions that required waivers, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD.

With nearly 77% of 17- to 24-year-olds disqualified for military service

without some type of waiver, the pilot “has been helpful to expand” the recruiting market, Katie Helland, DoD director of military accession policy, said in a news conference with reporters.

The Medical Accession Records Pilot, which earlier this year listed 38 medical conditions that no longer require a waiver, now has been expanded to include 51 conditions. “We’re testing the feasibility of reducing the timeframe for those conditions,” Helland said.

Between July 2022 and August 2024, more than 9,900 applicants were medically qualified using the program, with 57% of them successfully enlisting, according to DoD spokesperson Jade Fulce.

As an example, one recent addition to the pilot eased the requirement for young people with a learning disorder such as dyslexia, from having a history of the disorder any time after their 14th birthday to just within the past year, Fulce said.

Another addition related to young people with conditions such as asthma, reactive airway disease or exercise-induced bronchospasm. Instead of disqualifying or requiring a waiver for someone who has had one of these conditions after their 13th birthday, that history timeline was shortened to the past four years.

Expectations for the success of this program are high, but officials remain cautious, Helland said. She

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Pentagon makes headway on quality-of-life improvements

Just a couple months after Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced seven initiatives to enhance service member and family well-being, the department is making steady progress, defense leaders said.

“We have done a great number of things over the last four years,” Ronald Keohane, assistant secretary of defense for manpower and reserve affairs, said during a recent event at the Center for a New American Security. These initiatives include increasing compensation for service members, working with spouses on additional employment opportunities and training and expanding access to child care, he said. “We understand the financial security element of a family is critically important,” he said.

The new initiatives include offering health care flexible spending accounts for service members, increasing spouse employment and career development opportunities and improving conditions at remote and isolated installations, among others.

Military operational tempo is increasing and will continue to increase, Keohane said, so leaders must remain flexible. “Our ability to think outside the box is critically important,” he said.

Service members and families largely live within the department’s ecosystem, so getting the fundamentals down is essential, said Brendan Owens, assistant secretary of defense for energy, installations and environment.



Soldiers receive information about available installation programs during a community resource fair Oct. 22 at Camp Casey, South Korea. (U.S. ARMY/PFC. JUNG MIN LEE)

“People go to sleep in housing that’s on a military installation. ... They go to work in a building the DoD owns. They drop their kids off at DoD schools or in child development centers. ... They go shop at a commissary ... and then they go home, right?” he said. “Their entire lived existence is inbuilt in natural environments that DoD is responsible for.”

In lock step with the department’s efforts, the Army has invested in quality-of-life initiatives for soldiers and their families, including prioritizing \$3 billion for family and privatized housing across 50 Army installations, streamlining hiring at child care development centers and increasing enlistment bonuses, among others.

Some of the initiatives, including increasing free internet access in barracks, were inspired by DoD’s interactions with young, unmarried service members.

“Every time ... we’d go and visit barracks, one of the questions that I asked our [troops] ... is, ‘If you could have 10 more square feet in your barracks room or free Wi-Fi, what would it be?’” Owens said. “No one is going to be surprised that a 19-year-old wants free Wi-Fi.”

Each of military services has been pilot-testing different initiatives and gathering feedback from troops and families, Owens said. “It’s extraordinarily helpful for us to build on that [feedback] and iterate on it.”

Quality of life strategies remain essential to readiness, Owens said. “When we put people in spaces that enable them to sleep well, to have privacy, to have security, the version of themselves that they bring to work is the best version of the warfighter that we need,” he said. “If we lose a talented service member and their family because standards are not sufficiently high, that is a direct impact” creating a “ripple effect across the force.”

Medical waivers

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pointed out that while the recruiting landscape has been a huge challenge for all the services, it is improving.

“At the end of September, the services enlisted just shy of 225,000 new recruits in fiscal year 2024. That’s over 25,000 more than fiscal year 2023,” Helland said.

Nevertheless, she said, the military must remain “cautiously optimistic about the future recruiting operations as we continue to recruit in a market that has low youth propensity to serve, limited familiarity with military opportunities, a competitive labor market and a declining eligibility among young adults,” she said.

Experts tout importance of physical, spiritual health for soldiers



Retired Lt. Gen. Leslie Smith, left, AUSA's vice president for Leadership and Education, greets, from left to right, renowned chef Daniel Thomas, retired Maj. Gen. Tom Solhjem, the former Army chief of chaplains, and Marshall Williams, founder and president of West Point Resources, before an AUSA Noon Report webinar. (AUSA PHOTO)

The Army needs soldiers who are physically and spiritually healthy to perform the demanding missions required of them, said retired Maj. Gen. Tom Solhjem, the former Army chief of chaplains.

In a Noon Report webinar hosted by the Association of the U.S. Army on Wednesday, Solhjem said readiness has “both a very deeply spiritual component ... and a very physical component. We’ve got to have people to do what the nation needs them to do.”

Solhjem invoked evidence-based research showing that spirituality is present in every human being at birth. “Science shows that spiritual life is really like a hub, and the other things are the spokes that go to the wheel which makes our life go around, ... so spiritual development in children is extremely important,” he said.

On nutrition, Solhjem noted that during the pre-World War II days of the Great Depression, Army leaders saw a culture of malnutrition around the nation in the gaunt, unhealthy faces of the young people who would

one day become soldiers. The answer was to institute school lunch programs, he said.

Today, citing obesity, he said the opposite is true, explaining that “readiness begins in the nation.”

“We see it coming into the Army, we have a real concern that we have a population now that’s not gaunt, but now eating the wrong things,” Solhjem said.

Renowned chef, author and philanthropist Daniel Thomas, who participated in the webinar along with Solhjem, pointed out that eating healthfully is critical to a soldier’s ability to meet the challenges of combat.

Soldiers, he said, need to understand nutritional health. “Boots on the ground is just as important as the general, everybody has a place, it is a machine,” Thomas said. “It’s one of the main things I try to focus on whether I’m talking to military individuals or just the average person or celebrity, I want to make sure they learn to eat healthy.”

AUSAExtra

*Voice for the Army –
Support For the Soldier*

Gen. Bob Brown, USA Ret.
President and CEO, AUSA

Lt. Gen. Leslie Smith, USA Ret.
Vice President, Leadership and Education,
AUSA

Luc Dunn
Editor

Desiree Hurlocker
Advertising Manager

Advertising Information Contact:
Fox Associates Inc.
116 W. Kinzie St. • Chicago, IL 60654
Phone: 800-440-0231
Email: adinfo.rmy@foxrep.com

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Spotlight on AUSA Association Partner: KDVA

Formed in 2017, the Korea Defense Veterans Association's mission is to enhance the Republic of Korea-U.S. alliance by advocating for the partnership and supporting the people who built and serve the alliance.

The alliance between the U.S. and the Republic of Korea "remains the linchpin of peace and security not only on the Korean Peninsula but also in the Indo-Pacific region," according to an Oct. 30 news release from the Department of Defense. "Our two nations share fundamentally common interests and values that underpin regional security efforts, such as respect for democratic governance, the rule of law, territorial integrity, and sovereignty."

Millions of U.S. troops have served in Korea, and the association aims to tell their stories through its "From My Service in Korea, I Learned" ini-



tiative and its "I Know a Korean War Veteran Campaign."

"Sharing your experiences from serving in Korea can be a powerful way to connect with others who have had similar experiences. By sharing your story, you may be able to help others who are currently serving in Korea or who are preparing to do so," the association's website says.

The stories can also help to shed light on the sacrifices made by service members and their families, the website says. "Your contribution may be just what someone needs to hear in order to feel connected and supported."

The association also sponsors an Impact Scholarship Program to help veterans and their spouses, children and grandchildren attain their educational goals. Scholarships are only available to association members.

For more information, please visit <https://kdva.vet/>.

If your association is interested in partnering with AUSA, contact Susan Rubel at srubel@ausa.org.

Association Partnership with AUSA is an opportunity for like-minded military service organizations to join AUSA in support of the Total Army—soldiers, DoD civilians and their families.

Gilland: West Point develops future leaders of character

Service-eligible Americans are "looking for purpose," and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, is ready to mold them into leaders of character, its superintendent said.

"Our younger generation today is looking for purpose," Lt. Gen. Steven Gilland said during an Oct. 29 *Washington Post* event focused on veterans and lessons in leadership, resilience and service. At the academy, cadets are "surrounded by different people, which is our staff, our faculty, our coaches. ... Everybody is committed to ... developing young people into being leaders of character."

To prepare cadets to lead the next generation of soldiers, the academy remains focused on the future, Gilland said. "We're expecting them to ... graduate and lead ... other young men and women in your Army ... and to be able to accomplish missions and objectives that the Army lays out for

them," he said. "From the academy perspective, are we setting those conditions for the new people that are coming into the academy today to be leaders in the 2040s and the 2050s?"

To prepare for the future fight,



Cadets at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, march in formation Nov. 2 prior to the Army-Air Force football game. (U.S. ARMY/SGT. DAVID RESNICK)

cadets are learning from ongoing global conflicts. Looking to the fighting in Ukraine and the Middle East, the academy is taking lessons and adapting them into the curriculum "in near real time," Gilland said.

Future conflicts also will demand novel perspectives to enable the Army to outpace its adversaries, he said. "We have to adapt and look at our adversaries through different lenses," Gilland said. "What our adversaries were 20 years ago, 11 years ago, may not be what they need to be in the future, and we have got to understand that, and we've got to be able to go forward with that mindset."

The academy is working hard to foster trust, even as American trust in public institutions wanes, he said.

"We are all in this together as citizens of our nation, and ... trust is foundational to everything that we do," he said.

Best Squad from Army Pacific represents service's best

Each year, the Army conducts the Best Squad Competition, one of the most grueling tests of leadership, physical endurance and team cohesion in the military.

Over 15 intense days, 60 soldiers put their skills to the test in a series of events designed to push them to their limits. This year's competition was held at Fort Liberty, North Carolina, where squads from across the Total Army showcased their grit and determination with the goal of being crowned the Army's 2024 Best Squad.

The final leg of the competition brought new challenges in the nation's capital, including a formal board at the Pentagon, a community CrossFit event on the National Mall and the Army Ten-Miler.

NCO & Soldier Programs

When the results were revealed Oct. 14 during the Association of the U.S. Army's Annual Meeting and Exposition, it was the 25th Infantry Division's squad from U.S. Army Pacific that stood victorious. The team's performance exemplified the soldiers' strong teamwork, leadership and physical fitness.

'Immense pride'

As the squad members made their way to the stage, the sheer joy and shock of winning such a challenging competition were evident in their faces.

"Winning meant that all of our hard work came to fruition. I was happy to represent the 25th ID and be the first winners of the competition from the conventional Army," said Staff Sgt. Ethan Hays, the squad leader.

Sgt. Luke Burton, another member of the squad, echoed Hays' sentiments. "Participating in and winning the Army's competition has been a privilege and humbling experience and brings immense pride," Burton said.



Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Weimer, left, and Army Chief of Staff Gen. Randy George, right, congratulate and promote the winners of the 2024 Best Squad Competition during the AUSA Annual Meeting and Exposition. (AUSA PHOTO)

The victory was made even sweeter as some of the squad members received special recognition, including Spc. Mason Breunig, who was named Soldier of the Year. "Winning showed me that all the training and preparation paid off, and that in order to succeed you need to trust your team," Breunig said.

Sgt. 1st Class Alexander Haynes of U.S. Army Medical Command, who was named the Army's NCO of the Year, called the honor the highlight of his career. It also fuels him "to keep striving for excellence," he said.

Well-earned promotions

During the Annual Meeting's Eisenhower Luncheon on Oct. 15, squad members Breunig and Spcs. Collin Burrows and Gage Buck were promoted to sergeant in front of the Army's senior leaders. The moment was made even more poignant when Breunig's parents were invited to the stage by Army Chief of Staff Gen. Randy George and Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Weimer, and the proud parents were able to witness their son's promotion and the entire squad's moment of glory.

The squad's success is a testament to the spirit of the 25th Infantry Division, also known as "Tropic Lightning," which embodies the speed and precision with which the division's soldiers accomplish their missions. The squad's victory in this competition is just the latest accomplishment in the division's long history of excellence.

"The winning squad that represented USARPAC is indicative of the physical, mental and emotional grit that it takes to operate within this region. They are a mirror image of countless other squads operating from the coldest regions on our planet, out to our hottest," said Command Sgt. Maj. Jason Schmidt, the division's senior enlisted leader. "We are very proud of them, and their win is indicative of our motto of 'One Team!'"

The "Tropic Lightning" of the 25th Infantry Division has struck once again, and the entire Army is better for it.

Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Julie Guerra is AUSA's director of NCO and Soldier Programs.

Chapter honors 2024 New York State Veteran of the Year

The Association of the U.S. Army's Capital District of New York chapter, in partnership with the Friends of the New York State Military Museum, recently recognized retired Col. Chester "Chet" Edwards as the 2024 New York State Veteran of the Year.

Retired Master Sgt. Don Roy, the chapter president, presented the award alongside retired Brig. Gen.

Capital District of New York

Barry Hartman, Assemblywoman Carrie Woerner of Round Lake and

Roy McDonald, president of the New York State Military Museum, during a ceremony at the Saratoga-Wilton Elks Lodge in Saratoga Springs.

"One of the things that I love about this event every year is that you highlight someone whose service in the military has led them to a lifetime of service. And as I've gotten to know Chet's background and all that he has done, I can't think of a more deserving representative of the veterans community than you, Chet," Woerner said, as reported by *The Saratogian*.

Edwards served on active duty in the Navy from 1966–1972 and deployed to Vietnam as an assault support patrol boat coxswain with the Mobile Riverine Force. After leaving the military, he worked for three decades in the financial industry before becoming a middle and high school teacher.

In his remarks, Edwards noted that veterans in the past did not get the same support as they do today.

"I know when we came back [from] Vietnam, as many of you will remember, we were not honored. We were actually given the opposite. We were treated very bad. And over the years, it's slowly gotten better," he said, according to *The Saratogian*.

After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Edwards reenlisted as a sergeant in the New York National Guard, retiring as a colonel in 2018.



Retired Master Sgt. Don Roy, right, president of AUSA's Capital District of New York chapter, presents retired Col. Chester Edwards, left, with an official citation honoring Edwards as the 2024 New York State Veteran of the Year. (THE SARATOGIAN/ELENA TITTEL)

During his service, he assisted civil authorities during national disasters, including Hurricane Irene in 2011 and Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

Fellowship and camaraderie are

critical aspects of military service, Edwards said.

"It seems that no one is concerned about race while they're in the military. At least I didn't experience any. They were just brothers," he said. "You cared about who was next to you because your life was in their hands. And they cared about you for the same reason, without reservation."

In retirement, Edwards has been a proud advocate for veterans, assisting local officials in establishing Korean Veterans Recognition Day and consistently helping veterans sign up to receive benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"It's important for me to know that veterans can have a community to come into after the military that understands where they have been and what they've done in their lives. It's a different world," Edwards said, as reported by *The Saratogian*. "And once you're in the military, in combat, you never really go back to what you were before. It's a whole different mindset, and we need to take care of our guys and ladies."



Retired Col. Chester Edwards, left, is recognized as the 2024 New York State Veteran of the Year by Assemblywoman Carrie Woerner of Round Lake. (COURTESY PHOTO)



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