



The ALLIANCE



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VA Chief: Time to Rethink Disability System



David Shulkin
Veterans Affairs Secretary

It's time to rethink a veteran disability system that "incentivizes disability," Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin said recently during a forum in Washington.

"Our current disability system that is designed from 50, 60 or 70 years ago . . . I would suggest it's not sustainable and it may not be achieving the results of well-being for our veterans," Shulkin said at an event organized by the Bush

Institute's Military Service Initiative.

"Our system incentivizes disability, when our system should be incentivizing health and well-being."

"That doesn't mean pulling back disability compensation benefits," he said.

"Everybody recognizes we have a responsibility as a country to provide and be able to supplement resources for

veterans that were harmed or injured during their time of duty. I don't think anybody's suggesting that we take away our commitment to that," he said.

"But to suggest that there's not a better way to do things is also wrong."

Shulkin made the comments in response to a question about whether the system should be re-evaluated. Potential new offerings could include wellness programs, rather than simply monthly compensation payments. Disability compensation is a monthly tax-free benefit paid to veterans who are determined to be at least 10 percent disabled because of injuries or diseases that happened during or were aggravated by military service.

"I do believe we need to begin to start having a discussion and a dialogue. Not so much about withdrawing our commitment," Shulkin said, but about how to make the system better to improve outcomes for veterans.

"I think that rethinking how we could approach disability is a key topic that's going to be very important in future years," he said.

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REPORT from the HILL

Congress is substantially behind where they should be if they are to complete their work by the end of the federal government's fiscal year on September 30. Much of this delay is because the Trump Administration was so slow in sending its budget proposals to Congress. The proposal was supposed to be sent in March or April but instead didn't go to Congress until late May.

Here are highlights of the President's proposals:

New TRICARE fees will be added and the money from those fees will, according to DoD officials, be "plowed back into readiness."

Congressional intent in last year's 2017 NDAA legislation was to pave the way for sweeping changes to the Military Health System and the TRICARE program. The reforms focused on improving the beneficiary experience ranging from access to care, to streamlining TRICARE benefit options.

Central to this package of sweeping TRICARE reforms last year was that all currently serving, as well as those retiring prior to Jan. 1, 2018, would

be grandfathered into the existing fee structures. New entrants into the services after Jan. 1, 2018, would be subject to much higher fees. The President's proposed budget now seeks to eliminate the grandfathering and places almost all beneficiary categories in line for these much higher fee hikes.

The proposed budget would keep all program requirements in the newly formed TRICARE benefit option structures of TRICARE Prime and TRICARE Select. That includes the establishment of open season for enrollment as currently exists in many civilian health plans.

The parts of President's proposed

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Bernd Dela Cruz

President Trump's first budget request embraces many Obama administration ideas to dampen military compensation growth. It would cap the next military pay raise; hike healthcare fees for working-age military retirees; increase co-payments on pharmacy drugs for ALL TRICARE beneficiaries; and roll-back disability benefits for disabled veterans unable to work.

Increasing TRICARE fees for retirees under age 62 is a battle that AFTEA successfully fought to prevent during the 114th session of Congress. President Trump's budget proposal seeks to undo the compromise that was struck last year by removing the "grandfathering" of TRICARE fee increases for currently serving and retired military personnel.

If this proposal passes, upon retirement, all current servicemembers will become subject to these fee increases. Those who are currently retired will be immediately subject to them.

The President's budget request also proposes eliminating the Individual Unemployability (IU) benefit for disabled, unemployed veterans and retirees at age 62. Stripping this benefit will cost each veteran and/or retiree, on average, \$1,300.00 per month. And, due to their disability, these disabled men and women will be unable to make up this financial shortage.

And, it proposes reducing cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs) to all veterans who receive disability compensation as offsets to expand the Veterans Choice Program, which allows veterans to seek health care in the private sector.

Reducing veterans' disability compensation by rounding down the COLA will have a cumulative effect of taking \$2.7 billion away from injured and ill veterans and the survivors of those who die because of military service. Simply one more example of asking veterans and military retirees to shoulder a financial burden in order to balance the budget.

Finally, when the House version of the health care bill to replace Obamacare passed there was a controversy concerning the effect it could have on some veterans. One of the major features of both the House and Senate health care bills is to make significant cuts in Medicaid.

While there are more than 21 million veterans in the U.S., only about 8 million receive health care from the VA. The others rely on Medicaid, purchase insurance on state or federal exchanges, have employer-provided insurance or have no coverage at all.

The concern is that hundreds of thousands of veterans who rely on Medicaid for their health care could be in jeopardy.

AFTEA realizes the health care debate is highly controversial and political and we do not intend to get into political partisanship. But we are keeping a close eye on this issue to make sure all veterans get the health care they were promised and that they earned.

Enlisted RPA Pilots Soar to New Heights

The Air Force's first three Enlisted Pilot Initial Class (EPIC) graduates are slated to complete their final phase of training at Beale Air Force Base, California.

The graduates are now assigned to the 12th Reconnaissance Squadron where they will receive their basic qualification training, which is designed to equip them with the skills and knowledge they need to operate in the RQ-4 Global Hawk field.

"The training here is the culmination of their year-long EPIC program. They have learned all of the basic skills they need to be pilots. Now we will be

teaching them how to be Global Hawk pilots," said Major Mason, the 1st Reconnaissance Squadron director of operations.

"We have two different phases: basic qualification training and mission qualification training. Basic qualification training occurs in the simulator. Once they complete that, they move on to mission qualification training, where they will fly a jet in operational scenarios to complete their training."

The graduates are also the first Airmen to become enlisted pilots since former President John F. Kennedy took office in 1961. Due to a shortage of

pilots and an increased demand for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, the Air Force has turned to its enlisted Airmen to fly the service's remotely piloted aircraft.

Master Sgt. Alex, a 12th Reconnaissance Squadron student pilot, initially saw this as an opportunity he couldn't pass up and jumped at the chance to fly the RQ-4, which he had previously been a sensor operator on. He applied to the program and was eventually selected as a member of the first class in the EPIC program. "Someone gave me the opportunity

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Report from the Hill

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budget that AFTEA likes are as follows:

- ✓ No fee changes for active duty.
- ✓ Medically retired members and their families and survivors of those who died on active duty would be treated the same as active duty family members with no participation fee and lower cost shares.
- ✓ To ensure equity among active duty family members who might not live near a military treatment facility, there would be a no-cost care option available regardless of their assignment location.

In contrast, the budget includes the following fee changes and increases:

A rollback in the grandfathering of large TRICARE fee increases. All categories of beneficiaries, except active duty, active duty family members in TRICARE Prime, and TRICARE for Life, would see even larger fees across the board. There are no changes for TRICARE for Life beneficiaries. Retired TRICARE beneficiaries under age 65 would be hit the hardest.

\$350/\$700 (single/family) for TRICARE Prime (retiree) enrollment.

\$450/\$900 (single/family) for TRICARE Select enrollment.

Various copayments and deductibles would also rise. For instance, with family coverage under TRICARE Select, deductibles would be reset at \$300 to access network providers and \$600 for non-network providers. The deductible for single coverage would be \$150 for network coverage and \$300 for out-of-network providers.

Raises TRICARE pharmacy fees, tripling them over a ten-year period. This includes generic medications obtained through the TRICARE home delivery program.

Increases the catastrophic caps for retirees from \$3,000 to \$3,500.

All new increases in premiums, copayments and deductibles and catastrophic caps would increase

annually based upon a previously unused National Health Expenditures (NHE) index instead of the currently used index of annual COLA rates. The NHE is projected to be 5.9 percent by 2019.

AFTEA opposes the disproportional fee hikes that would occur through the repeal of the grandfathering clause. Furthermore, we believe the proposals:

Break faith and precedent with the troops, who are traditionally grandfathered into the current cost and benefit structure.

Focus on driving more care into the Military Treatment Facilities through higher cost incentives before most access to care initiatives have been implemented and tested.

Tie all health care fees, including premiums and copays, to a medical inflation index that is projected to grow at close to 6 percent per year. Instead, we believe fee adjustments should be capped at the annual COLA percentage.

Continue to escalate pharmacy copays, which have already been doubled and tripled over the past 5 years.

Meanwhile, the House and Senate have been working on their own versions of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which they must pass each year. The House of Representatives passed its version of the NDAA on July 14 and the Senate Armed Services Committee released its version a few days later.

The House NDAA authorizes increases in the size of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Army Guard and Reserve, Naval and Air Reserve, and Air Guard. These increases include the Chief of Staff of the Army's unfunded requirement to grow the active Army by 10,000, the Army National Guard by 4,000, and the Army Reserve by 3,000.

The bill fully funds the 2.4% pay raise for active duty personnel while blocking the President's ability to

reduce troop pay. It also extends special pay and bonuses for servicemembers.

The bill prohibits the reduction of inpatient care for military Medical Treatment facilities located outside the United States by blocking the attempt to close military medical facilities which deployed troops and their families rely on.

It also permits the Services to reimburse a servicemember up to \$500 for a spouse's expenses related to obtaining licensing or certification in another state because of a military move.

The Senate's version of the NDAA increases TRICARE pharmacy co-payments and uses part of that money to fund permanent survivor allowances and to extend TRICARE Reserve Select.

If the Senate gets its way, co-pays will rise from 2018 through 2026 for prescriptions filled at TRICARE retail outlets or through its mail order program. Your cost for a 30-day supply of a brand drug at retail would climb to \$28 in 2018 and \$45 in 2026. Your cost for a 90-day supply by mail order or 30 days of a brand drug on the DoD formulary would climb to \$28 in 2018 and \$45 by 2026. Costs for a generic drug at retail would climb from \$10 to \$14 by 2026. And while generic drugs ordered through the mail currently are free, the Senate wants to add a \$10 co-pay for mail order generic, which would increase to \$14 by 2026.

Obviously, this continues the trend of Congress wanting military personnel to pay more for their health care. Now Congress wants to start charging co-pays for generic drugs ordered through the mail and also take away the grandfathering of fee increases for working-age retirees they voted for just last year and now force them to start paying several higher TRICARE fees.

AFTEA opposes these changes and will be working together with our allies to try and stop them. 🐼

VA Chief: Time to Rethink Disability System

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According to the VA budget documents, there are about 5.5 million veterans and survivors who will receive disability compensation or pension benefits in 2018 -- about 180,000 more than there were in 2017. The budget proposal includes a request for nearly \$87 billion for disability compensation and pension benefits -- \$86 billion was budgeted for fiscal 2017.

He acknowledged that the discussion will be a difficult

one, "because this is one that I worry, if not done well, could become politicized."

"VA has really done a great job in keeping itself in a bipartisan dialogue," he added, "and I am committed to making sure that VA and veterans don't become part of the political discussion, but more part of, 'How do we do what we do better? How do we accomplish our mission better?'" 

Enlisted RPA Pilots Soar to New Heights

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and I don't turn down great opportunities," Alex said. "It was a challenge, which I wanted to accept, because I wanted to be a part of something bigger, and have a bigger impact."

Alex left his home station at Beale and went to several installations around the country to receive his training and become flight certified. He began the EPIC program in October 2016, where he trained alongside 20 commissioned officers and two other enlisted students.

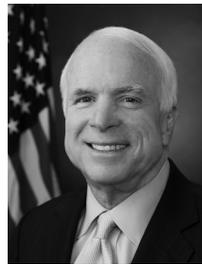
"I started Initial Flight Training in Pueblo, Colorado. I was there for four weeks and I learned the basic fundamentals of aviation by flying a Diamond DA20," Alex said. "Then I went to Joint Base San Antonio-Randolph, Texas for Undergraduate RPA Training. There I trained on a simulator and learned aircraft controls and instrument flying."

Alex hopes his efforts prove the Air Force made the right decision in calling upon enlisted Airmen to fly RPAs. "I want to prove that enlisted personnel can perform the job as a pilot," he said. "Hopefully, I can open doors to other jobs for enlisted personnel as well."

Alex has enjoyed flying and the process of becoming a pilot. As he reaches the final stage of the training, he appreciates how far he has come in his career.

"When I first joined the Air Force, I was a maintainer, and I would always watch the pilots take off, wishing I could fly," he said. "Then, I became a sensor operator, and I thought that was the closest I'd get to flying. So, when I'm up there flying, I think, 'who would have thought A1C Alex would be flying in pilot training.'"

Widow's Program (SSIA) to be Funded by Higher Prescription Costs



Sen. John McCain

For the past few years, Sen. John McCain's Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) has sought to significantly increase the cost military beneficiaries must pay for their medical prescriptions. Each year, that SASC effort has been mitigated or stopped entirely. Now this year, the SASC is pursuing a new angle to achieve the prescription cost increase: a "modest" cost increase for prescriptions in order to pay for the Special Survivor's Indemnity Allowance (SSIA), a program that benefits military widows by partially compensating for the unfair Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) - Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) Offset.

Current law requires the benefits paid out under the two programs [SBP and DIC] to offset each other so that the government isn't paying the full amounts to a spouse who's entitled to both. In a hypothetical example, if a survivor is entitled to \$1,200 under DIC, that payment would cancel out the first \$1,200 of any SBP annuity he or she would normally be entitled to, an issue opponents refer to as the 'widow's tax.'

SSIA was meant to partially fill the gap created by that 'offset,'

but only covers about 25 percent of the SBP annuity that a spouse who's covered by both programs would otherwise receive.

The SSIA program currently pays \$310 per month to about 63,000 military widows whose spouses died either on active duty or during retirement after having paid into DoD's Survivor Benefits Plan. The fund that pays the SSIA benefits is due to expire next May, and at the moment, there's no plan to replenish it.

In recent years, Congress has patched over the problem with short-term workarounds, but in its version of the National Defense Authorization Act, the Senate Armed Services Committee voted last week to create a long-term funding stream for SSIA, paid by higher pharmacy copays in DoD's TRICARE program.

It is important to keep in mind that the SSIA program, as written, is a "band-aid program" that is funded through mandatory spending. This SASC approach to increase the cost of one benefit program to fund a mandatorily funded program appears unprecedented. AFTEA has long held that the "widow's tax" is absolutely wrong. It breaks the faith with military members, retirees, and their survivors, and the SBP-DIC Offset should be entirely eliminated. 

Senators Push to End 'Discrepancies' in Enlisted Pay

Two senators have introduced a bill aimed at boosting pay rates for enlisted personnel by requiring presidents to go by the Employment Cost Index in recommending raises.

The bill proposed by Sens. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, and Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., both members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, would also correct what they called "discrepancies" resulting in different pay rates for senior enlisted personnel of the same rank and equal responsibilities.

"Except for seven senior enlisted positions, enlisted personnel do not receive a pay increase as their responsibility levels grow, creating great discrepancies," the two senators said in a joint statement.

"For example, the senior enlisted adviser to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, [Gen. Joseph Dunford] gets paid more than the senior enlisted adviser to the commander of Pacific Command [Adm. Harry Harris], even though they both are of the same rank

with equivalent levels of responsibility," the two senators said.

In addition, the senators said that presidents of both parties for years have skirted the mandate that pay for enlisted personnel should match the Employment Cost Index -- "unless the president cites economic concerns or a national emergency."

"Unfortunately, previous presidents have cited economic concerns to deny troops their pay raise while simultaneously claiming a growing economy publicly," the two senators said.

They said that the current 2.1 percent proposed pay raise for service members in President Donald Trump's fiscal 2018 budget "does not match the Employment Cost Index," which would call for a 2.4 percent increase.

The senators said that their bill, called The Leadership Recognition Act, "addresses these discrepancies by ensuring fair compensation among senior enlisted advisers and removes the president's ability to block pay raises by

citing economic concerns."

The language of the bill on senior enlisted personnel, if enacted, states that "the rate of monthly basic pay for senior enlisted adviser to the commanders of the combatant commands shall be equivalent to the rate of monthly basic pay for the senior enlisted adviser to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff."

Ernst and Warren said their proposal has received support from military and veteran associations.

"Senior enlisted service members carry a great responsibility leading our men and women on and off the battlefield, and we must ensure they receive appropriate compensation as we seek to retain them and strengthen our military," Ernst said in a statement.

Warren said that enlisted personnel "know they won't get rich in the military, but they serve with skill and dedication, and they are entitled to basic pay increases that will give them a chance to build some economic security." 

'Trying to Grow Everywhere':

Air Force Revamps Recruiting in Push to Add Airmen

After the steepest drawdown in two decades, the Air Force is trying to pull out of its manning nosedive. And to do that, it's changing the way it recruits.

The Air Force is now in the middle of a massive overhaul of how it finds young Americans to be the next generation of airmen, convinces them to sign up, and brings them on board.

Maj. Gen. Garrett Harencak, commander of Air Force Recruiting Service, summed up the overhaul in simple terms: "Stop doing stupid stuff" that wastes recruiters' time.

And at this point, the service can't afford to do stupid, inefficient things. Not only are Air Force recruiters undermanned and stretched thinner than any other branch of the military, but recruiting is more important than ever as the service tries to rebuild its end strength.

The Air Force fell from 330,700 active-duty airmen at the end of fiscal 2013 to about 311,000 at the end of 2015.

That's a roughly 6 percent drop -- the biggest two-year cut since the post-Cold War drawdown of the early 1990s, when the service shrank by 10 percent.

That's all changed. The Air Force grew from 317,800 at the beginning of fiscal 2017 to nearly 319,900 at the end

of April. By the end of the year, the service expects to blow through its end strength goal of 321,000 and reach about 322,500.

And according to the fiscal 2018 budget request, it hopes to add roughly 2,600 airmen next year, bringing the active force up to 325,100.

"Across the board, we've been trying to grow everywhere," Brig. Gen. Brian Kelly, director of military force management policy, said in an interview.

This includes offering retention bonuses worth up to \$35,000 a year to pilots and selective re-enlistment bonuses for enlisted airmen worth up to \$90,000.

And the Air Force still has crucial and undermanned areas it is particularly focused on -- maintenance; cyber; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; and nuclear. When combined, the growth in those four areas will likely account for about 3,315 of the overall 4,700-airman growth expected this year.

Kelly said retention has improved recently, which is helping those longstanding trouble spots become healthier.

But another major factor is a renewed push to recruit more airmen. And the Air Force knows that it can't do that

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Air Force Revamps Recruiting in Push to Add Airmen

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without making the lives of its recruiters better.

“Everything we do needs to be focused on that recruiter in Kenosha, Wisconsin, to make sure that that recruiter’s job is as easy as possible,” Harencak said.

Overworked, undermanned

Across the military, Air Force recruiters are by far the most overworked. Harencak said his recruiters bring in more than 2.5 new recruits per month, on average -- “historically high for us in the Air Force.”

Army recruiters, on the other hand, typically bring in 0.8 new recruits a month -- Marine and Navy recruiters have a monthly average of 0.9 -- and Coast Guard recruiters bring in 1 recruit each month.

An Air Force Manpower Agency study last year found that the average recruiter works about 38 hours more per month than the average 200-hour work month, he said, though some recruiters in 2014 reported even longer work weeks.

“If you go to any strip mall around the country, where all our recruiters are, you’ll notice one thing: We may have one or two recruiters, the Army’s going to have nine or 10 in the same office,” Harencak said. “And that allows them to cover a whole lot more high schools than we do. It allows them to be out there, doing events, where our one or two recruiters in that zone could only do so much.”

To fix that, Air Force recruiting is working hard to reverse its own downsizing and under-manning, growing by 24 percent over the past two years to get to 1,191 recruiters.

Harencak said the Air Force needs to add another 200 to 300 recruiters in the coming years to get it where it needs to be, including the roughly 120 recruiters expected to be added this year.

Adding 300 more recruiters should get the average per-recruiter monthly production down to about 1.5, he said. That would be a better average than it is now, but still higher than any other service.

It also would allow the Air Force to bring in about 33,000 enlisted airmen per year, he said. Last year, in the best recruitment year since the Vietnam era, the Air Force brought in 31,732 enlisted, including 225 prior-service airmen.

But even that might not be enough. If the Air Force gets aggressive with its growth and decides it wants to get to 350,000 airmen in the next few years, that could require bringing in 35,000 enlisted each year, said Mike Romero, director of staff at AFRS.

“That will take a lot more recruiting manpower,” he said, about 1,500 to 1,600 recruiters at a bare minimum -- but it might require up to 1,900 recruiters.

The Air Force said in December it hoped to get up to 350,000 airmen by about 2024 to help fill critical manning

gaps. However, Heather Wilson, the new Air Force secretary, said on June 5 that she wants to wait until a review of the nation’s national security strategy is completed before making any decisions on the service’s force structure and manning levels in future years.

Revamping the system

The Air Force is also dropping outdated policies that tangled recruiters in red tape and kept out people who could have become good airmen.

When the Air Force was downsizing, the pressures to recruit weren’t as bad, and the Air Force could instead focus on reducing or eliminating the risk of admitting the wrong people. The Air Force doesn’t have that luxury anymore, Harencak said, and its recruiting mentality has to change.

“We have a system where all we do is build barriers and obstacles for great young Americans to join our Air Force,” Harencak said. “We want to change the focus, to build bridges and pathways to get deserving young Americans.”

Going paperless

“Air Force recruiting is also trying to go as paperless as possible,” Harencak said. Almost every week, 800 young people show up at basic training with a large manila envelope containing 36 pieces of paper.

After they arrive, those documents are checked, uploaded to various systems, and shredded within two weeks. That’s unacceptable, Harencak said.

The Air Force eventually wants applicants to digitally enter their own information on their home computer or on a tablet in the recruiting station, instead of recruiters having to spend time manually inputting information.

Harencak envisions a future where all a new recruit has to bring to basic training is a picture identification and, perhaps, a single paper copy of his orders. This, he said, would free up two to four hours per applicant for recruiters.

“We’ve been using self-correcting software to buy our airline tickets -- to be on Amazon.com -- on all these things ... for years,” Harencak said. “We need it in recruiting, to allow us to have a totally paperless experience. Not only will it save a lot of time, but we count ourselves as the most technologically advanced service, and yet we’re probably the one who’s the furthest behind in using technology in our recruiting process. All that’s going to change.”

Harencak also said the Air Force’s marketing budget has been too low, which hurt its ability to push its brand and promote itself to potential recruits. That’s being fixed, he said, and recruiting is getting the additional funds necessary to get its message out.

Spreading out

The Air Force also is starting to re-open recruiting

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offices that it closed in recent years because money was tight and they weren't seen as cost-efficient. From 2015 to 2016, the number of Air Force recruiting offices dropped from 725 to 703.

During that contraction, the Air Force even pulled out of some major cities, such as Detroit, but it's now moving back. It is also opening new offices in the Northeast, expanding in the Southeast, and re-opening an old office in northern New Jersey.

Harencak said all recruiting squadrons have been challenged to reopen an old office or open a new one this year.

"When we consolidated, we saw a drop-off in production," Harencak said. "That drop-off was expected when we closed it, and we felt like that was an acceptable loss that we'd be able to make up in other ways. Now that we're producing high, we cannot afford to leave zones uncovered."

The service is also opening offices in Germany and Italy, he said. Air Force recruiting has been gone so long there that they are essentially brand new offices.

And it's looking to open or re-open offices in territories like the Virgin Islands, Guam and Puerto Rico. He said recruiters tend to do well abroad, recruiting expats,

children of Defense Department civilians and service members, and dual-citizens in places like the Philippines and American Samoa.

"If we're going to have these consistently higher goals, we have to get back into Detroit," Harencak said. "We have to open and revitalize our overseas locations. Just a few years ago, it made perfect sense to consolidate and bring people into what we call hubs, and we left zones. Now it's totally different, so we're going back."

When offices were consolidated into hubs, some recruiters -- especially those in rural areas -- objected because suddenly they had a massive area to cover.

These recruiters regularly spent hours upon hours on the road, trying to reach a high school in hopes of convincing just one kid to sign up. Hopefully, Harencak said, the new offices will help.

"Right now, they are spread too thin," he said. "There's just no escaping it. When you see recruiters that have hundreds of thousands of square miles [to cover], and a high school that's nine hours away in good traveling weather, that's not acceptable to me. We're asking too much of them. They're working too hard." 🇺🇸

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