



American Security Project

March 31, 2024

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin, III

United States Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin,

The obesity epidemic poses an existential threat to our national defense. As our Armed Forces face their largest recruitment crisis in history, failure to meet body composition standards has been the leading disqualifier of military applicants since 2014. Despite loosening fitness standards, the pool of eligible military recruits is shrinking rapidly as overweight and obesity rates surpass 57% of adults under 25.

This crisis has far-reaching impacts on readiness and retention. Overweight and obesity within the active and reserve components have reached unprecedented levels: among active-duty service members, 21% have obesity and two-thirds are clinically overweight. Musculoskeletal injuries, heart disease, type II diabetes, and other comorbid conditions are rising in tandem with body composition trends.

Despite incredible leaps in medical and nutrition science, obesity and its comorbid conditions in the U.S. Armed Forces remain heavily stigmatized and underprioritized. The Department of Defense must take decisive action to rectify systemic issues preventing individuals with obesity from accessing evidence-based treatments including behavioral therapy, anti-obesity medications, and bariatric surgery.

The American Security Project and the following signatories are advocating for the following:

- A full review of obesity identification and treatment guidelines within the Department of Defense, including statistics on treatment approvals, denials, and appeals for existing treatment options.
- System-wide recognition of obesity as a chronic disease that can be treated while in service, provided the performance standards required within their role are met.
- Cost-effective, comprehensive policies for obesity prevention that preserve service members' long-term health and, within combat arms occupational specialties, maximize combat effectiveness.
- Effective early interventions for overweight and obesity for all other service members, including those in the reserve and national guard components.
- Greater access to obesity specialists and the full continuum of evidence-based obesity treatments in consultation with trained medical professionals.

U.S. military personnel are our most critical national security asset and deserve our utmost care and respect. We must act decisively and unwaveringly to safeguard their health and restore the readiness of our military.

Respectfully,

American Security Project

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