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Reps. Don Bacon, left, and Chrissy Houlihan will be the chair and ranking member, respectively, of the new House Armed Services Committee quality of life panel. U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Eliezer Meléndez and U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Brian Bolin Jr.

New House Armed Services Panel Will Focus on Quality of Life

June 14, 2023 | By Greg Hadley

Two Air Force veterans from opposite sides of the political aisle will chair a new House Armed Services Committee panel on quality of life issues affecting military families and service members.

Rep. Don Bacon (R-Neb.), a retired USAF brigadier general and RC-135 pilot, chairs the panel, while Rep. Chrissy Houlahan (D-Penn.) a former engineer and program manager in the missile defense field, will be the ranking member.

Four issues will draw their focus to start, the two said June 14 at a Capitol Hill briefing:

- Pay, especially for junior enlisted
- Housing
- Health care
- Spouse employment and child care

Transition issues after military service could be a future area of inquiry, Houlahan said.

“I don’t think coming up with a short list of what it is that we should be talking about when we’re talking about quality of life takes a whole lot of muscle or brainpower to figure that out,” she said.

Bacon promised a methodical approach to issues and concerns. “We want to identify problems and verify they’re problems,” Bacon said. “And then we want to look at courses of action to fix them, and through getting expert opinion, select the best course of action and recommend it to the Armed Services Committee as ways forward to solve these problems.”

Starting in July, the panel will hold at least two hearings per month, calling on Pentagon officials and outside experts, Bacon and Houlahan said. The panel’s work will culminate in a written report to the HASC’s personnel subcommittee and recommendations for the committee to consider as part of the 2025 National Defense Authorization Act.

Bacon said the effort will be a multiyear endeavor. That process has already begun in the 2024 NDAA—the personnel subcommittee included in its markup a 5.2 percent pay raise for troops, plus an added “inflation bonus” targeted at service members for all grades below E-6. It has also proposed changing the baseline for receiving the [Basic Needs Allowance, funds that are](#)

[meant for the neediest service members](#), by removing housing allowances from the equation.

Houlahan said the two have already started considering improvements.

“We went through the history of ideas, the landscape of all the things that have happened in these particular [areas], and I have reviewed most of those,” Houlahan said. “And so I think it’s not dissimilar from a lot of the things that are happening in Congress—there aren’t a whole lot of new ideas out there, but it is important to try to identify what those ideas are that could actually move the needle and expand upon them or elevate them and actually make them happen.”

The two Air Force vets agree on many issues, but each is more focused on different matters. Houlahan said she is “passionate” about childcare. “It’s personally one of the reasons I separated from the military,” she said. “My oldest child is now 30. She’s the one that I had when I was in uniform. And as near as I can tell, the waiting list has not abated and maybe they’re even longer, and the affordability issues are just as pressing and the paucity of daycare is just as scarce. I think we’ve not made any progress. And I have ideas on that for sure.”

Bacon calls housing “the No. 1 issue for the military right now when I talk to [service members].”

During [a visit to Offutt Air Force Base](#), where Bacon once commanded the 55th Wing, he said, “[The housing issue was very loud and clear](#). ... I was actually a bit surprised at the amount of feedback on housing. Frankly, it was a little more than I suspected.”

Houlahan was bothered by the different standards for officers and enlisted members during a recent visit to bases in Texas.

“I can attest to the fact that we have a different level of quality that we give to our enlisted personnel than we do to our officers, and that’s unacceptable and untenable,” she said. “And we need to make sure that the housing we’re

providing is something where you would like your child or your family to live in.”

Noting that the Basic Allowance for Housing is only supposed to cover about 95 percent of housing costs, Bacon said the “cost-sharing” element is contributing to problems both on- and off-base.

“Those who live off base, obviously that digs into their basic pay for utilities and things like that,” Bacon said. “But if you’re on base, all those privatized owners are getting 5 percent less [for upkeep], and I think it’s having an impact. It has taken a toll over time on modernization and repairs and things that they should be doing to [maintain] base housing.”

Bacon also questioned whether pay rates need to be reconsidered, suggesting it may be time for “right-sizing” enlisted compensation.

Tackling compensation and housing will be expensive, the lawmakers acknowledged. But not fixing them may be even more costly. With military recruiting in crisis, and the services struggling to retain talent even in the midst of a business downturn, Houlihan said, these are “the pressing issues of our time.”

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