

NACDD Efforts to Promote National Security by Ensuring the Readiness and Retention of Our Service Men, Women, and Their Families

April 2021



Introduction

NACDD is working with State Health Departments (SHD), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Defense Health Agency (DHA) to improve strategic communication and collaboration between state and local public health, community development efforts, and the Department of Defense (DoD) to address factors that impact chronic disease chronic disease such as tobacco use, physical activity, and nutrition for our nation's 1.38 million military Service members and their families.

Background

A fit and healthy fighting force is the foundation of a strong national defense. In the United States, poor health, obesity, lack of physical fitness, and tobacco use pose a growing threat to the DoD's four "Rs": Recruitment, Retention, Readiness, and Resilience. A few observations underscore the scale of the challenge:

- **Recruitment** – Seventy-one percent of young people in the U.S. would not be able to join the military if they wanted to. The three most common causes are overweight or obesity, educational deficits, and criminal or drug abuse records.ⁱ
- **Retention** – Failure to meet weight standards is a leading cause of involuntary separation from the military. Additionally, obesity in the civilian community is limiting DoD's ability to recruit qualified personnel.ⁱⁱ
- **Readiness and Resilience** – More Service members were evacuated from Iraq and Afghanistan for serious sprains and fractures than for combat injuries; overweight or less-fit young men and women are at a higher risk for these injuries.ⁱⁱ
- **Fiscal Impact** – Treating the effects of obesity and tobacco-related illnesses costs DoD more than \$3 billion annually.ⁱⁱ

The DoD and the various uniformed services (Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, etc.) tend to build their own programs, often under the assumption that outside organizations do not understand

the military or offer programs that meet the military's needs. However, most of the challenges that the DoD and its Service members face also are present in the civilian (i.e., community) sector and are addressed by chronic disease units within state public health agencies.

NACDD Action

Since 2017, NACDD has collaborated with the CDC and DHA to increase strategic communication and partnerships between state and local public health, community development efforts, and the DoD to create healthy communities that support Service member recruitment, readiness, and retention.

NACDD's two primary lines of effort include:

- **Providing Public Health Support to DoD's Total Force Fitness (TFF) Program.** TFF supports the first goal in the [National Defense Strategy](#) – to restore readiness. The TFF concept focuses on a Service Member's health throughout their career, connecting eight dimensions of fitness to optimize health, performance, and readiness holistically. NACDD is providing subject matter expert guidance and on-the-ground support to the Building Healthy Military Communities (BHMC) Pilot Project. BHMC pilot is a Congressionally mandated, seven-state pilot aimed at better understanding and mitigating the unique challenges faced by geographically dispersed Service members, recruits, and their families, many of whom live off the installation. Additionally, NACDD is participating in DHA workgroups to address communications gaps and needs.
- **Educating and Providing Technical Assistance to State Chronic Disease Staff.** NACDD provides support to state health department (SHD) chronic disease staff as they seek to better understand how to connect with and better serve Service personnel and families residing in their jurisdictions. Specifically, NACDD is working with SHDs to:
 - Increase knowledge of military demographics, culture, and priorities in their respective jurisdictions;
 - Increase knowledge of military needs and their overlap with public health efforts;
 - Foster connections with military entities and organizations serving military communities;
 - Create opportunities to provide these groups with information related to physical activity, nutrition, and tobacco control strategies, and other chronic disease topics; and
 - Add to the body of knowledge to support collaborative efforts between public health and the military community.

The Building Healthy Military Communities pilot is a Congressionally mandated, seven-state pilot aimed at better understanding and mitigating the unique challenges faced by geographically dispersed Service members, recruits, and their families, many of whom live off the installation.

NACDD provides support to SHD chronic disease staff as they seek to better understand how to connect with and better serve Service personnel and families residing in their jurisdictions.

ⁱ Unfit to Serve: Obesity is Impacting National Security (2019). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/downloads/unfit-to-serve.pdf>

ⁱⁱ The Healthy Base Initiative (2017). Bi-Partisan Policy Center. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/healthy-base-initiative/>