

HB 4993 TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY, PUBLIC SAFETY, & VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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Chairman Hefner, Vice Chairman Lopez, and distinguished members of the committee,

My name is Ammon Blair, and I am a Senior Fellow at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. I am honored to appear before you today in strong support of House Bill 4993.

I bring 22 years of military experience, including service in the United States Army and the Texas Army National Guard. Throughout my enlisted military career, I served in a variety of leadership roles, including Drill Sergeant, Air Assault Instructor, Infantry Platoon Sergeant, Battalion S3 NCOIC, and Homeland Response Force J1. I was commissioned as an Officer on March 29, 2019, and was subsequently assigned as the Executive Officer for B Company, 1-141 Infantry Battalion. I later served as a Rear Detachment Commander during the unit's deployment and then as an Infantry Platoon Leader upon their return.

These experiences—both enlisted and commissioned—provide me with a comprehensive operational perspective that underscores the urgent need for the reforms proposed in House Bill 4993.

The Texas Military Forces are facing a deteriorating readiness environment that threatens both state and national security imperatives. Although the Army and Air National Guard operate under dual federal and state authority, it is the State of Texas that holds the statutory responsibility to train, and equip these forces to meet the readiness standards set by the federal government ([Perpich v. Department of Defense, 1990](#)).

The Texas governor's authority over state military forces represents a critical aspect of Texas's security and emergency response infrastructure. Rooted in detailed constitutional and statutory provisions, this authority reflects a carefully crafted balance between state and federal powers. As commander-in-chief of state military forces, the governor plays a pivotal role in ensuring Texas's readiness to address a wide range of potential crises, from natural disasters to civil disturbances.

The Texas Constitution, specifically Article IV, Section 7, establishes the governor as the commander-in-chief of the state's military forces, except when they are called into actual service of the United States ([Texas Constitution, 1876](#)). This provision closely mirrors Article II, Section 2, Clause 1 of the U.S. Constitution, which designates the President as commander-in-chief of federal forces ([U.S. Const. art. II, § 2, cl. 1](#)).

A significant distinction lies in Article IV, Section 7, Clause 2 of the Texas Constitution, which empowers the governor to call forth the militia to execute state laws, suppress insurrections, and repel invasions ([Tex. Gov't Code, §§ 431.071\(a\), 431.111](#)). This authority parallels that granted to Congress in Article I, Section 8, Clause 15 of the U.S. Constitution but places it directly in the hands of the state executive ([U.S. Const. art. I, § 8, cl. 15](#)).

In the case *Abbott v. Biden*, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals addressed the dual nature of the National Guard ([Abbott v. Biden, 2023](#)). The court emphasized that the National Guard operates under state control unless called into federal service, highlighting the balance of power between state and federal authorities. The ruling reaffirmed that the National Guard is considered the modern militia reserved to the states by the First and Second Militia Clauses of the Constitution. This decision underscores the importance of the National Guard in both state and federal contexts, maintaining its dual role and the respective authorities of state governors and the federal government ([Abbott v. Biden, 2023](#)).

The Department of Defense establishes mission parameters and operational requirements that align with national defense strategies, while Congress is tasked with organizing, arming, and setting standards for educating and instructing the militia, which includes the Texas Army and Air National Guard ([32 U.S.C. § 104; 32 U.S.C. § 105](#)). This means the federal government provides the framework for how National Guard units are structured, equipped, trained and funded, ensuring they meet national defense standards. This is particularly highlighted by the case *Abbott v. Biden*, where the court discusses the federal role in ensuring readiness for federal missions ([Abbott v. Biden, 2023, pp. 2-3, 14-25](#)).

Under Chapter 437 of the Texas Government Code and Title 32 of the U.S. Code, Texas carries the direct responsibility for implementing federally established readiness standards for their National Guard forces ([Tex. Gov't Code Ch. 431; 32 U.S.C. § 501](#)). During non-federalized periods, this responsibility encompasses the comprehensive management of training, readiness metrics, and unit maintenance. The Texas National Guard's diverse force structure (including Infantry Brigade Combat Teams, Engineer companies, and Airlift wings) is specifically designed to provide combat capabilities that address current and emerging threats.

Under this framework, Texas maintains responsibility for ensuring each unit and service member achieves and sustains the readiness levels required for their assigned combat missions ([Abbott v. Biden, 2023, pp. 17-23](#)). This obligation requires precise alignment between federal standards and state-level execution to maintain combat effectiveness across all units.

This symbiotic relationship is to ensure that the National Guard remains an effective component of both national military and defense strategies and state disaster response, with clear lines of responsibility and authority delineated by constitutional and legal frameworks. If a state fails to comply with federal requirements or regulations under Title 32, the National Guard of that state may be barred from receiving federal funds or other benefits ([32 U.S.C. § 108](#)).

Meanwhile, for the Texas State Guard—a purely state force—the state maintains full responsibility for both mission definition and readiness enforcement. This distinction between federally integrated forces like the Texas National Guard and wholly state-controlled forces like the Texas State Guard highlights the critical importance of clearly defined standards and readiness enforcement at both levels. While the National Guard must align with federally mandated requirements to maintain access to critical funding and operational integration, the Texas State Guard relies entirely upon the state to establish, uphold, and, if necessary, reform its own readiness standards.

This broader context of force readiness and standardization has come under renewed national scrutiny. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth issued a department-wide directive initiating a comprehensive review of military standards across all branches, with a particular emphasis on physical fitness, body composition, and grooming. In his memo, Hegseth emphasized:

- “We must remain vigilant in maintaining the standards that enable the men and women of our military to protect the American people and our homeland as the world’s most lethal and effective fighting force,” and that “our adversaries are not growing weaker, and our tasks are not growing less challenging. This review will illuminate how the Department has maintained the level of standards required over the recent past and the trajectory of any change in those standards” ([U.S. Department of Defense, 2025b](#)).

Pentagon Press Secretary John Ullyot reinforced this point, stating:

- “Unfortunately, the U.S. military’s high standards on body composition and other metrics eroded in recent years, particularly during the tenure of former Joint Chiefs Chairman Mark Milley, who set a bad example from the top through his own personal corpulence. Secretary Hegseth is committed to restoring high standards, and this review is the first step in doing so” ([Phillips, 2025](#)).

In a video message recorded during his recent trip to the Indo-Pacific region, Secretary Hegseth further emphasized:

- “For too long, we’ve allowed standards to slip within the ranks for men/women serving in combat MOS’s. This is unacceptable and over. For those willing to serve, the standards must be high and elite! This is vital to maintain the greatest fighting force the world has ever known” ([Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, 2025](#)).

On March 30, 2025, Defense Secretary Hegseth issued a memo ordering men and women to meet the same physical fitness requirements if they want to serve in combat roles. In his memo, Hegseth wrote,

- “The United States military’s strength is rooted in its unwavering commitment to high standards that foster discipline, unity, and purpose. It is these principles that have made our fighting force the most formidable in the world. As the nature of warfare evolves and the demands on our Service members grow more complex, it is imperative that we assess and refine the physical fitness standards that enable our readiness and lethality...”
- “All entry-level and sustained physical fitness requirements within combat arms positions must be sex-neutral, based solely on the operational demands of the occupation and the readiness needed to confront any adversary...”

A handwritten note with the asterisk under his signature noted that “no existing standard will be lowered as part of this process” ([U.S. Department of Defense, 2025c](#)).

Then on April 2, 2025, Secretary Hegseth welcomed Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., to the Pentagon, pledging, “Together, we will ensure our warfighters are healthy and fit to fight!” These moves reflect a growing recognition of the military’s readiness crisis—and that rebuilding a warrior culture requires action, not speeches ([Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, 2025](#)).

Secretary Hegseth’s statements and actions mark more than a rhetorical shift; they signal a strategic course correction toward restoring combat readiness and physical excellence across the force. For the National Guard—particularly the Texas National Guard—this renewed emphasis on readiness comes at a time when the character of war is evolving at an unprecedented pace, and the gap between federal expectations and state-level capabilities is becoming increasingly untenable.

As threats grow more complex and immediate, the Guard must prepare to “fight tonight”—not in theory, but in practice—across both homeland defense and combat missions ([Commission on the National Defense Strategy, 2024, pp. 64-65](#)). This evolving threat environment demands more than inspirational leadership ([U.S. Department of Defense, 2025a](#)); it requires structural reforms that eliminate readiness disparities and empower Guard units to meet the same rigorous standards expected of their active-duty counterparts.

Persistent disparities in funding, training resources, and support services between the Guard and Regular Army continue to pose substantial risks to both individual and unit readiness, undermining current physical fitness and health initiative's broader objectives.

Texas maintains responsibility for ensuring each unit and service member achieves and sustains the readiness levels required for their assigned combat missions. However, the Texas National Guard faces a fundamental challenge in managing training requirements within severely constrained time resources. This challenge directly impacts unit readiness, training effectiveness, and the Guard's ability to maintain combat capabilities.

The United States military currently faces an unprecedented health crisis that directly impacts force readiness and national security. Recent studies reveal that 68% of U.S. service members fall within overweight or obese ranges on the body mass index, representing a dramatic increase in recent years ([American Security Project, 2024](#)). Military obesity rates across active-duty components have more than doubled over ten years, rising from 10.4% in 2012 to 21.6% in 2022. This trend is compounded by a significant increase in eating disorders, which rose by approximately 79% between 2017 and 2021. Annual active-duty separations from the service for not meeting standards increased by 65% from 2019 to 2023 ([CDC, 2024](#)).

The financial burden of this health crisis is substantial. The estimated cost burden is \$1.35 billion annually which includes direct care costs and lost productivity ([American Security Project, 2024](#)). The impact on operational readiness is equally concerning, with 658,000 workdays lost annually due to overweight and obesity among active-duty personnel, resulting in \$103 million in annual productivity losses ([CDC, 2024](#)).

As previously mentioned, a new April 2025 study released by the American Security Project found that more than two-thirds—approximately 68%—of Guard and Reserve members are now classified as overweight or obese. This compromises not only their ability to deploy but also their day-to-day operational readiness.

The study, titled “Ready the Reserve: Obesity’s Impacts on National Guard and Reserve Readiness,” warns that the Guard’s ability to respond rapidly to national security threats and domestic emergencies is in serious jeopardy unless urgent reforms are implemented. As the researchers emphasized:

- “Most National Guard and reserve personnel serve part-time, there are a number of unique logistical and lifestyle challenges to consider when crafting policy to prevent and treat obesity in the reserve component” ([American Security Project, 2025](#)).

These challenges—geographic dispersion, limited access to fitness facilities, civilian job constraints, and uneven training schedules—create systemic barriers that cannot be addressed through federal policy alone. It falls to the states, and particularly to Texas, to lead the way.

Secretary Hegseth sounded the alarm over these findings, stating: “Completely unacceptable. This is what happens when standards are IGNORED – and this is what we are changing. REAL fitness & weight standards are here... We will be FIT, not FAT.” ([Timotija, 2025](#)).

He further emphasized:

- “To be lethal, you have to trust that the warrior alongside you in battle or the troops fighting in the unit that many of you will lead are capable, truly physically capable of doing what is necessary under fire. You need to be fit not fat, sharp not shabby. Especially our leaders.” ([Timotija, 2025](#)).

Given the strategic importance of the Texas National Guard—and Texas’s sovereign responsibility for ensuring its forces meet federal and state mission requirements—this crisis demands decisive action.

House Bill 4993, the Texas Military Forces Health and Readiness Act, establishes a statutory framework to improve the health, physical fitness, and operational readiness of the Texas Military Forces. While the Army National Guard and Air National Guard are subject to fitness standards set by the federal government through Department of Defense and service-specific regulations, it is the State of Texas that bears the statutory responsibility to train and sustain these forces to meet those federal standards. Additionally, Texas has exclusive authority to set readiness requirements for the Texas State Guard.

This legislation directs the Texas Military Department to post clear baseline fitness standards that reflect both federal compliance and Texas’s unique operational needs. It addresses longstanding barriers to readiness—particularly for part-time and geographically dispersed Guardsmen—by expanding access to certified training professionals, statewide fitness gyms, mental health support, and real-time digital health platforms.

It also establishes family-based wellness programs, performance-based advancement pathways, and a system of quarterly legislative reporting to ensure measurable outcomes and continuous accountability. Through this comprehensive, enforceable model, HB 4993 ensures that Texas fulfills its legal duty to train its military forces to standard and sustains a capable, resilient, and mission-ready force for both state and national service.

Reinforcing National Readiness Priorities

For too long, the physical and mental health of our service members has been allowed to rot—not because of funding shortages, but because of cowardice, complacency, and a lack of standards. HB 4993 rejects that failure. It embodies the resolve to act decisively and reforge a professional force worthy of the missions it's expected to carry out.

This is Texas's moment to lead. HB 4993 supports the national call to "Make America Healthy Again" and hands other states a clear, scalable playbook. The health, fitness, and discipline of our military are not internal HR concerns; they are national security imperatives.

Readiness isn't negotiable. It's the prerequisite for effective deterrence, mission success, and survival in a world of growing threats. Texas is doing its part. Now the Texas Legislature must rise to the occasion and show the nation what readiness, resolve, and responsibility really look like.



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