U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Dustin Wells, a recruiter with the Greenfield Recruiting Center, Milwaukee Company, leads future Soldiers in physical exercise, Aug. 6, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Joshua P. Morris)

Pre-Basic Training Fitness:

Improving Recruitment and Retention

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NCO Leadership Center of Excellence

The U.S. Army is the world's premier land combat force, a status maintained by employing the brightest and fittest Soldiers to help defend the American people. As the operational environment and technology rapidly evolve, recruiting and retaining talented individuals becomes increasingly difficult. According to U.S. Army Recruiting Command, "71% of youth do not qualify for military service because of obesity, drugs, physical and mental health problems, misconduct, and aptitude" (U.S. Army Recruiting Command, para. 3). This article focuses on recruiting and retaining individuals who possess advanced intellectual abilities the U.S. Army needs for current and future operations but are obese and/or do not meet fitness requirements.

Assessing the Situation

To keep pace with multi-domain operations (MDO), the U.S. Army needs recruits — primarily young adults — with expertise in robotics, artificial intelligence, and cyber networking. In developing these savvy individuals; however, society has put less emphasis on healthy eating and physical activity, resulting in increased obesity. Obesity has become a leading health issue facing America, transcending all socioeconomic boundaries. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 73.6% of adults age 20 and older were overweight in 2017–2018; 42.5% were obese (n.d., para 1, 2). Many of these individuals — particularly those who are obese — are unable to pass expanded new recruit fitness tests and

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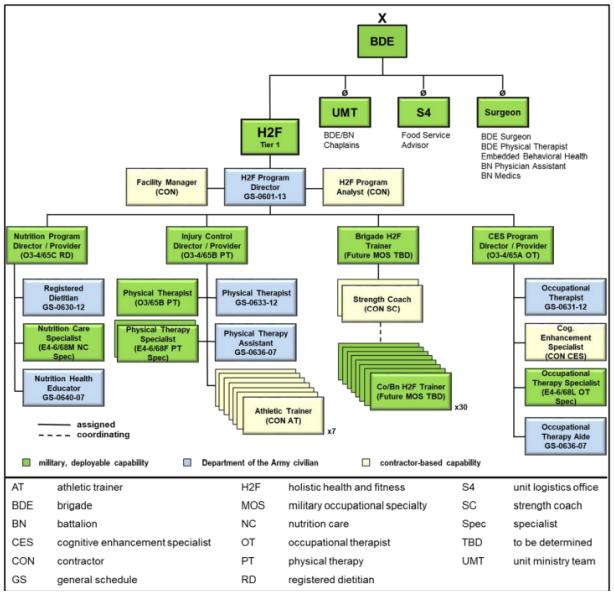

Figure 1

H2F performance team structure (Department of the Army, 2020, p. 1-7)

body composition screenings the U.S. Army adopted in 2020 (Moore, 2019). The Army's enlistment policies and criteria are impairing its ability to recruit talent.

Overweight individuals who make it through initial fitness and body composition standards can still face long-term challenges remaining in the U.S. Army. These Soldiers have a higher risk of back and leg injuries and are more prone to release for non-medical reasons, such as conduct or poor performance (Niebuhr et al., 2013). These issues compromise readiness and increase costs when replacements must be recruited.

Retaining Soldiers is significantly more cost-effective than recruiting new ones. The U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command determined that the Army pays between $11,000 and $44,000 to recruit each soldier, with initial entry training costs estimated at $36,000 (Niebuhr et al., 2013). Obesity and lack of fitness significantly impact both Soldier recruiting and retention.

Additionally, the Army has shifted responsibility for Soldier health monitoring to junior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) who do not have a complex understanding of health and fitness, yet are required to lead and educate Soldiers. They lack knowledge about proper exercise form, nutrition, and sleep health — factors leading to increased injuries and lost work time across the force. A 2007 report noted that TRICARE, the military health insurance program, spent $1.1 billion annually treating obesity-related illness among U.S. active-duty military, and the Army lost the equivalent of $105.6 million per year in missed work days and lower productivity because of weight-related issues (Dall et al., 2007). According to Sanyaolu et al., national obesity levels have steadily risen throughout the last two decades, meaning these costs have most likely risen for the U.S. Army since the initial 2007 study (2019). But the silver lining is the U.S. Army can alter its course and minimize costs while encouraging broader talent to join its ranks.

The Solution

Although the U.S. Army cannot influence weight-related challenges in society as a whole, it can adapt to manage its internal population. Potential recruits who fail body fat or fitness tests could be placed in a special 'reception battalion' for up to 60 days prior to Basic Combat Training (BCT). The U.S. Army tested a similar concept with some success in the early 2000s focusing primarily on physical fitness training (Niebuhr et al., 2013). This new reception battalion would closely resemble the Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) performance team structure, with direct support from certified health and holistic trainers (See Figure 1). The fitness experts would provide fitness instruction, oversight, and expertise. They would provide daily physical training, just like in regular training organizations, but with subject matter experts to also educate and provide nutritional support.

During the duty day, recruits would receive comprehensive training on the Performance Triad and managing physical and overall health. After completing these instruction blocks, recruits would focus on basic Soldier skills such as military drill and discipline, similar to BCT training. To support individual progress and help build the fitness culture, embedded nutritionists from the H2F team would tailor meal plans for each recruit. To graduate and process forward to BCT, the individuals would have to satisfy Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) and body fat requirements. Any trainees who still fail to qualify would separate from service — a much smaller cost than if the Army had already fully trained these recruits. Furthermore, individuals who qualify after additional training will have gained foundational health, fitness, and injury prevention knowledge they could share with the force, perpetuating a culture of health and fitness. In addition to avoiding attrition costs, the Army would also save money on injury rehabilitation and recovery while enhancing performance and lethality.

Conclusion: Building for the Future

To maintain its status as the premier land combat force, the U.S. Army must adjust its enlistment criteria to accept talented new recruits who are overweight and may not meet fitness standards, improving their fitness and overall health through programmed instruction and direction. Implementing this program will not only help the Army attract top-level talent, but will also make newly educated recruits less prone to injury and weight-related issues while also sharing the lessons they've learned to help ensure future mission success and improve overall Army readiness. While the U.S. Army cannot solve weight-re-

lated issues for the entire population, it can address this national trend within its ranks and recruiting standards while building a culture of fitness and overall health. ■

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