



Andrew Erby, Jr., Andrew Erby, Sr., U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Deon Harper and Alex Erby reminisce about winning the 2022 Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association Class A State Championship at the Steelton-Highspire High School football field in Steelton, Pennsylvania, March 31, 2023. Harper, a recruiting noncommissioned officer in Harrisburg, has been an assistant coach for the team for two years and serves as a role model for the players. The Army must look at solutions to the problems endangering their ability to maintain an all-volunteer force without just lowering the qualifications for enlistment. (U.S. Army photo by Sarah Zaler)

# Joint Recruiting Stations

*By Master Sgt. Nick Chalos III*

## Sergeants Major Academy

**T**he former Chief of Staff said “people are the lifeblood of the Army and of the Joint Force” (Department of the Army, 2021, p. ii). The statement raises concerns for the Army and the joint force as the people eligible and willing to be the lifeblood are harder to find and recruit. “Recruiting is the foundation of the all-volunteer force in the United States” (Asch, 2019, p. 1). As military branches fail to meet recruiting goals, the risk to the Army’s ability to maintain an all-volunteer force rises.

Current recruiting models and operations need to meet recruiting challenges. Aligning recruiting operations with military operations to meet today’s demand

requires drastic changes. A joint recruiting force with the Army as the executive agent can meet the recruiting goals required to supply the people needed to maintain both the Army and the joint force.

## Background

The armed forces are finding it increasingly difficult to meet their yearly recruiting goals. Only the Marine Corps and the Space Force met their fiscal year recruiting goals in 2023 (Garamone, 2023). The Army, Air Force, Navy, and Coast Guard were at historic levels behind their goals during the 2022 fiscal year. The Army



and Coast Guard had the largest shortfalls at approximately 40 and 55 percent of their goals accomplished (Kube & Boigon, 2022). Challenges to military recruiting indicate systemic problems Department of Defense (DOD) leaders must address.

Until recently, the Army failed to achieve its recruiting goal only three times since 1980. The three failures were closely related to dropping unemployment rates and the Army's reluctance to expediently adjust qualification requirements to affect the fiscal year's mission (Knapp et al., 2018).

Waivers and Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) score requirements have traditionally been how the Army tried to regulate enlistment requirements to meet the recruiting mission; however, these adjustments were not enough in recent years.

Recruiting effort shortfalls caused the Pentagon's senior leaders, including the Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense, to review how the armed forces can continue to meet requirements while sustaining the country's all-volunteer force (Kube & Boigon, 2022). Recent shortfalls brought forward questions on the propensity of today's youth to serve and whether there are enough willing and qualified individuals to support an all-volunteer force.

## Problem

As the country's global challenges continue to increase, the military's inability to meet end strengths forced it to undertake more new and extended missions with an undermanned force. That led to a less specialized and a more unrested military (Eaglen, 2022).

Eaglen noted the Secretary and Chief of Staff of the Army stated, "our readiness depends on a quality all-volunteer force" (2022, para. 13). The Army must look at solutions to the problems compromising their ability to maintain an all-volunteer force without just lowering the qualifications for enlistment.

The number of eligible civilians available to fill the military's ranks continue to decline. Two of the biggest reasons are the dwindling quantity of qualified civilians eligible for enlistment and the falling propensity of youth leaning towards military service. Additionally, competition between military branches causes negative competition and an overall loss of enlistment contracts for the DOD.

## Qualified Prospects

A number categories decide individuals' qualifications for enlistment. The categories include education level, medical conditions, aptitude testing, moral character, and certain demographics, such as age, citizenship status, and dependents (Sackett & Mavor, 2003).



High school students talk with a recruiter to learn what the Army and Army ROTC have to offer during an Army Career Exploration Event at the Pete Mathews Coliseum in Jacksonville, Alabama, April 29, 2022. Finding a qualified person to join the military is the first hurdle in the recruiting mission. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Michael Gresso)

While there are about 32 million eligible civilians, the qualified number drops to 10% since the majority are disqualified because they do not meet educational and other requirements (Eaglen, 2022). The number drops even more due to medical factors such as obesity and moral factors such as drug use are on the increase across the country.

## Propensity for Enlistment

Finding qualified persons to join the military is the first hurdle in the recruiting mission. First, they must have a desire to join the military. Survey data shows that only about nine percent of those who meet age requirements have the propensity to serve in the military (Eaglen, 2022).

Current enlistee metrics show low propensity levels in the population. A 2003 study showed that two-thirds of enlistees were from negatively inclined groups (Asch, 2019). The lack of propensity in recent enlistments is a direct measure of the difficulties and challenges the recruiting force must overcome to convince young men and women to join.

## DOD Internal Competition

Combining qualifications and propensity only leaves about one percent of the 32 million young people, or roughly 321,000 qualified individuals, who favorably consider military service, and for whom all military branches compete (Eaglen, 2022). That limited pool of available individuals causes negative competition within all branches of the military.

U.S. Army Recruiting Command (2022a) lists other service competition as metrics to judge a brigade's performance. Additionally, Recruiting Command (2022c) states that commanders can use their performance in specific markets against other services to

measure their achievements.

While the Army published guidance stating applicants should have the option of service in other DOD components (U.S. Army Recruiting Command, 2021), recruiters may not prioritize this because of unit performance metrics. Army Recruiting Command (2019) even provides guidance on redirecting an applicant's interest to other services. Enlistment in other branches of service negatively affects the recruiters, commanders, and unit performance without considering the benefit to the DOD.

## Solution

As the U.S. Army transforms into a multi-domain Army, it enables a joint force that dominates a complex multi-domain operating environment (Department of the Army, 2021). Despite this, the Army executes recruiting operations as if its joint partners are the enemy. To succeed in the long-term fight to maintain an all-volunteer force, the Army must bring recruiting operations in line with the Army's direction. As it positions itself to enable the joint force, it should also position itself to enable joint recruiting efforts.

### Consolidated and Combined Stations

Consolidating forces into a single-branch recruiting office to provide one location for military recruiting in the area is the first of the two major initiatives needed to align the recruiting force with the military's direction. A joint recruiting office would increase efficiency, end negative competition, and provide an improved experience that better meets the applicants' and the military's needs.

**Increased Efficiencies.** An enlistment study showed that increases in one branch's incentives did not increase the total enlistment pool. Instead, the incentives drew enlistments from other branches, resulting in little over-

all increase for the DOD. For it to gain a net increase of about 8%, every branch would need to increase incentives with a 10% increase (Warner et al., 2001). Joint recruiting stations would potentially produce positive results with fewer resources and funding.

**Healthy Competition.** Currently, branch competition decreasing each branch's production results is a base factor used in recruiting models (Warner et al., 2001). A joint recruiting station could solve the unhealthy competition problem. While there will inevitably be competition between branches, it would focus on a common goal. The change would result in an environment where each branch's success benefits all branches.

**Capitalizing on the Targeted Market.** In the pool of qualified applicants not likely to enlist, a joint recruiting station would provide a single location where they can learn about all the military services. Additionally, applicants can gain information on their qualifications for each branch and be eligible to continue processing (even if they are disqualified from certain branches).

Currently, no process, system, or policy prevents the loss of applicants between branches because they do not cooperate. In a joint recruiting station branches would keep their individual enlistment qualifications and the DOD would not lose enlistees because applicants who do not meet the qualifications for a specific branch could process for a branch they qualify for.

### Joint Counselors

The second major initiative needed to align the recruiting force with the military's direction is using joint counselors in the enlistment process. With joint recruiting stations, counselors writing enlistment contracts must be able to accommodate an applicant's needs in any branch.

U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command (USMEPCOM) services all branches; however, Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS) guidance counselors are branch-specific. USMEPCOM facilitates enlistment efforts across the branches (U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command, 2008).

If a single counselor could sit with applicants and show them all eligible options regardless of branch, it would drastically increase decision-making and applicant satisfaction. Additionally, it would allow the military to target shortfalls or priorities across all branches more effectively.

### Possible Concerns

While the benefits look positive on paper, the overall gain in the recruiting mission is not guaranteed. The Army and the Air Force have both tried consolidated recruiting of all components within their respective branches with lackluster results (Krueger et al., 2022; Orvis et al., 2022). Rand reports on these results



Senior high school students stand in formation as they wait to take the Oath of Enlistment during Operation Recruit Enlistment Dinner (RED) at Saint Martin's University in Lacey, Washington, May 12, 2015. Operation RED honored senior high school students in Pierce and Thurston County who volunteered to join the armed services. All military branches compete for the approximately 321,000 favorable candidates for service. (Photo by, Sgt. Christopher Prows, 5th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

showed no statistical improvement in overall production; however, recruiter-level interviews claimed the recruiting methods resulted in better options for applicants.

The reports also showed internal competition between service components may have negatively affected the attempted change (Krueger et al., 2022; Orvis et al., 2022). Combining all branches into joint recruiting offices under a single mission would minimize the risk.

## Conclusion

Adopting joint recruiting operations would provide

benefits allowing the DOD and individual branches to capitalize on continually shrinking applicant pools. They would also supply the most options to individuals while allowing the military better talent management control from initial enlistment through branch placement.

A joint recruiting force would save money through consolidation and increase the effectiveness of targeted spending. Most importantly, joint recruiting operations would align with increasing joint force operations and the Army's and the joint force's future vision. ■

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