



American Security Project

April 24, 2024

**The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin, III**

United States Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin,

The obesity epidemic poses an existential threat to our national defense. Our Armed Forces face their largest recruitment crisis since the initiation of the all-volunteer force, and failure to meet body composition standards has led to disqualifications of military applicants since 2014. Despite loosening fitness standards, the pool of eligible military recruits is shrinking rapidly as overweight and obesity rates surpass 57% of adults under 25.

This crisis has far-reaching impacts on readiness and retention. Overweight and obesity within the active and reserve components have reached unprecedented levels: among active-duty service members, 21% have obesity and two-thirds are clinically overweight. Musculoskeletal injuries, heart disease, type II diabetes, liver disease, and other comorbid conditions are rising in tandem with body composition trends.

Despite incredible leaps in medical and nutrition science, obesity and its comorbid conditions in the U.S. Armed Forces remain heavily stigmatized and underprioritized. The Department of Defense must take decisive action to rectify systemic issues preventing individuals with obesity from accessing evidence-based treatments including behavioral therapy, anti-obesity medications, and bariatric surgery.

The American Security Project and the following signatories are advocating for the following:

- A full review of obesity identification and treatment guidelines within the Department of Defense, including statistics on treatment approvals, denials, and appeals for existing treatment options.
- System-wide recognition of obesity as a chronic disease that can be treated while in service, provided the performance standards required within their role are met.
- Cost-effective, comprehensive policies for obesity prevention that preserve service members' long-term health and, within combat arms occupational specialties, maximize combat effectiveness.
- Effective early interventions for overweight and obesity for all other service members, including those in the reserve and national guard components.
- Greater access to credentialed food and nutrition practitioners and the full continuum of evidence-based obesity treatments in consultation with medical professionals.

U.S. military personnel are our most critical national security asset and deserve our utmost care and respect. We must act decisively and unwaveringly to safeguard their health and restore the readiness of our military.

Respectfully,

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Washington, DC 20004

**American Veterans**  
4647 Forbes Boulevard,  
Lanham, MD 20706

**The Obesity Society**  
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**Obesity Action Coalition**  
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**The American College of National Security Leaders**  
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(202) 957-3200

**African American Wellness Project**  
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**Alliance for Patient Access**  
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**Partnership to Advance Cardiovascular Health**  
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**Gerontological Society of America**  
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**Obesity Care Advocacy Network**  
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**Global Liver Institute**  
info@globalliver.org  
(800) 845-5910

**Redstone Global Center for Prevention and Wellness**  
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Washington, DC 20037

**YMCA of the USA**  
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**Choose Healthy Life**  
choosehealthylife.org  
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**National Hispanic Medical Association**  
1920 L St NW #200,  
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**WomenHeart: The National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease**  
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**The Endocrine Society**  
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**Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics**  
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**American Society for Nutrition**  
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Rockville, MD 20850

**HealthyWomen**  
P.O. Box 336  
Middletown, NJ 07748

**American Diabetes Association**  
2451 Crystal Drive, Suite 900  
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**The Mended Hearts, Inc.**  
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**National Hispanic Health Foundation**  
1216 5th Ave,  
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**Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A.**  
1811 R Street NW  
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**WeightWatchers**  
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**And the Following Individual Signatories,**

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