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U.S. Military Works to Enlist Recruits Who Have Faced Behavioral Challenges

The Defense Department has for the first time allowed 700 recruits who had been diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder to join the military without a waiver under revamped rules that could be a pathway for those who have confronted mental-health or other developmental conditions.

In June, the military, which has been facing major recruiting challenges, said that those who had suffered from [38 different medical conditions](#) could serve as long as they hadn't demonstrated symptoms nor required medication for treatment for three, five and seven years, depending on the condition.

Among the most notable changes is one for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, allowing those previously diagnosed with the condition, but who haven't suffered from or been treated with medication for it over the previous three years, to join without a medical waiver. The decision to put the equivalent of an expiration date on a previous developmental condition could be a model for similar changes around those treated for mental-health conditions, defense officials said.

The Pentagon said it plans to assess the effectiveness of its new program in six months' time so that it has a year of data to study. In addition to department-wide policies, each service sets its own specific standards.

"We want to be cautious," Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said about how the service admits those with mental-health challenges. "I think we have to constantly be refreshing our approach and looking at conditions in this society."

ADHD is one of only two developmental conditions listed. The other is oppositional defiant disorder. Those who have been diagnosed with that condition but symptom free for seven years can join the military without a waiver.

These changes come amid one of the Army's worst years for recruiting and as military officials are debating ways to enlist qualified recruits who have been treated for mental-health conditions. The service fell 15,000 recruits short of its fiscal 2022 goal and it cut its goal for total number of soldiers in fiscal year 2023 by an additional 15,000, suggesting that it sees a longer-term problem.

Only 23% of young Americans meet the fitness, health and other standards required to join the military, according to Army statistics, and less than 10% are interested in joining.



‘We want to be cautious,’ Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said about how the service admits those with mental-health challenges. Photo: Rod Lamkey – Cnp/Zuma Press

The military is also having to recruit from a population that is increasingly taking medication for behavioral, mental-health and developmental challenges. And public-health officials worry that mental-health issues [have increased among young people](#) during the pandemic.

Under the new rules, a potential recruit who has completed high school or college or successfully held a job without counseling or medication for three years for ADHD would be able to enlist. That symptom-free period “is reassuring that they would make it through their initial entry training and hopefully have a successful military career,” said Army Lt. Col. Kim Helgemoe, a member of Pentagon’s Accession Policy, an office that sets medical admissions standards across the force.

A potential recruit who has in the past been treated for depression or other mental-health ailments, or has taken any medication for such conditions, can join the military only with a waiver. Those waivers can be difficult to obtain as they factor in the recruit’s health, the potential job and the requirements of the service. A recruit also may not be taking medication upon entering basic training, according to military guidelines.

Changes to the recruiting system have in the past sparked concerns about lowering standards, endangering the force in the long term. During the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the military granted more waivers to recruits for a variety of reasons, including not having a high-school degree and having drug convictions. For years afterward, the military battled a growing number of suicides and mental-health issues.

Among the most notable public cases was that of Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, who [walked off his base](#) in Afghanistan and was held in Taliban captivity for five years. A psychiatrist testified during Sgt. Bergdahl's trial for desertion that he [suffered from mental-health conditions](#) that factored into his decision to walk off base.

While shifting the current requirements for waivers may come with risk, supporters said that the services will increasingly struggle to meet their needs if adjustments aren't made. And once in the military, service members are allowed to take the very medications they are banned from taking before they join, usually prescribed to them by military doctors.

The medical standards are intended to ensure that a recruit completes basic training, which can last anywhere from 10 weeks to 2½ years, depending on the job.



After Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl was released from Taliban captivity, a psychiatrist testified that mental-health conditions had contributed to his decision to walk off base. Photo: Gerry Broome/Associated Press

“My metric of success doesn’t stop when the contract is signed. It’s more whether the trainee gets all the way through basic training successfully,” Ms. Wormuth, the Army secretary, said. “I’m spending money on people who are going to stay in the Army.”

One recent change making recruitment difficult is an internal data-collection system called MHS Genesis. Earlier this year, the military adopted the system, which allowed services to collect a recruit’s entire medical history.

Previously recruits voluntarily submitted their medical history, often leading to omissions, including about mental-health and developmental conditions.

The expanded data collection of MHS Genesis has enabled the military to learn more about a candidate’s medical history than it had before, leading to far more requests for waivers. Often recruits have to collect documents showing why they are qualified, a process that can take months.

Rather than wait, some candidates decide to find other jobs instead.

MHS Genesis “has definitely extended the time from when you walk into the recruiting office, or I meet you, to run through all of your 18 years of medical history. It’s a lot longer process right now,” said Gen. David Berger, the Marine Corps commandant. “That will shrink over time.”

Since October 2021, the U.S. Army has provided waivers for 505 recruits for antidepressant medication use, many of those since the military adopted MHS Genesis. Of the 505 waivers, the Army issued 438 of them from March 11 to Dec. 21, 2022, according to Army statistics.

Military officials conceded that the services often have been slow to adopt changes to the admissions process. The Pentagon has, for example, oscillated on how many and whether service members could have visible tattoos. The Army approved women [putting highlights in their hair](#)—if it is a “natural” color—only in 2021.

Pearl earrings with battle fatigues, even outside of combat, remain forbidden.

Lin St. Clair, deputy director of the Accession Policy directorate, said the military reviews the rules around waivers, in part, to respond to societal changes.

“Services have made adjustments, maybe not as fast as society changes,” he said. “But they work to catch up.”

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