

SECDEF Memos: WiSCI Executive Summary and Recommendations

November 17, 2025

This is a living document and updates will be published as policies evolve.

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The [Women in the Service Coalition, Inc.](#) (WiSCI) is dedicated to advocating for women and men in military service. We believe, and the data shows, that a diverse force is a smarter, stronger, better force. Including smart and capable women in a unit enhances readiness. Developing women leaders and creating the conditions for their success will benefit the Armed Forces now and in the future. Learn more: www.wiscimil.org



This document is intended to review eleven memorandums referenced by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth during his speech at Marine Corps Base Quantico on Tuesday, September 30, to assess potential impact on military effectiveness. These memos reflect the priorities and directives Secretary Hegseth outlined in his remarks, and they [can be found here](#).

The list is as follows:

1. Reduction of Mandatory Training Requirements to Restore Mission Focus

2. Implementation of Military Equal Opportunity and Equal Employment Opportunity Reform Plan
3. Military Fitness Standards
4. Department of War Military Education and Training Standards 60-Day Review
5. Review of Hazing, Bullying, and Harassment Definitions
6. Modern Workforce Management
7. IG Oversight and Reform: Enhancing Timeliness, Transparency, and Due Process in Administrative Investigations
8. Policy Memorandum Revision
9. Requirement to Formally Present Purple Heart Medals and Valor Decorations
10. Adverse Information Policy
11. Grooming Standards for Facial Hair Implementation

Background

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has terminated **the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS)**, an advisory group established in 1951 to provide independent analysis and recommendations on issues affecting women in the Armed Forces. The committee historically advised DoD on matters such as body armor design, sexual assault prevention, pregnancy and postpartum policy, healthcare access, and anthropometric and equipment standards.

This decision effectively dismantled the **last institutional body dedicated to formal gender-based analysis within the Department of Defense** ([Reuters, September 23, 2025](#)), particularly on current issues such as combat fitness standards, maternity and postpartum readiness, and occupational integration. DACOWITS had conducted extensive research in these areas over the past decade, often serving as a bridge between service-level working groups, Congress, and policy reform efforts.

With its dissolution, decades of publicly available research and institutional knowledge have been erased from government websites, silencing one of the few independent, data-driven voices advocating for women in uniform. This action leaves a profound void in transparency, accountability, and evidence-based policymaking, effectively removing the Department's only standing mechanism to analyze gender-specific impacts of policy and ensure that women's readiness, retention, and safety remain part of the national defense conversation.

In April, Secretary Hegseth also announced plans to wind down the **Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) program**, which had been signed into law during the Trump administration to enhance women's participation in conflict prevention and post-conflict recovery. Since 2017, WPS in the military has focused on integrating women's participation to improve military effectiveness and stability. In a post on X, he described WPS as "yet another woke, divisive, social justice initiative that overburdens commanders and distracts from our core task: warfighting," calling it a "United Nations program pushed by feminists and left-wing activists" ([PBS NewsHour, October 2, 2025](#)).

Compounding these concerns, several new memorandums—such as the review of education and training standards that calls for a "return" to **1990-era baselines**—signal

a broader ideological shift toward pre-integration norms. The 1990s marked a turning point in women's military service, including the repeal of bans on combat aviation and greater accountability following the Tailhook scandal. Framing this period as a standard to "restore" threatens to reverse decades of progress and reintroduce the very barriers those reforms were designed to remove.

In 1990, women made up just 10.9% of the active-duty force; today, that number stands at nearly 18%—a reflection of more than three decades of integration reforms now at risk of reversal.

Scope

For brevity and prioritization, this document will focus on those memorandums that may most negatively impact women; the remaining analysis and supporting data are included in the **appendix**. The most concerning memorandums are:

- EO #2: Implementation of the Military Equal Opportunity (MEO) and Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Reform Plan
- EO #3: Military Fitness Standards
- EO #5: Review of Hazing, Bullying, and Harassment Definitions
- EO #7: Inspector General (IG) Oversight and Reform: Enhancing Timeliness, Transparency, and Due Process in Administrative Investigations

These four memorandums merit particular attention and are reviewed and summarized below, noting potential risks of each.

2. Implementation of Military Equal Opportunity (MEO) and Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Reform Plan

Summary: Orders major MEO and EEO changes, including the use of AI to review complaints.

For MEO:

- Replaces anonymous reporting with confidential reporting.
- Identifies mediation as a first-line alternative before a formal complaint.
- Dismisses complaints lacking "credible evidence" at intake.
- Requires unsubstantiated complaints to be resolved within 7 business days.
- Imposes potential Article 107, UCMJ violations for false complaints.

For EEO:

- Directs dismissal of complaints "lacking credible evidence" within 30 days.
- Launches a pilot program to consolidate EEO operations and centralize investigations under one directorate.
- Dismisses complaints if the complainant fails to respond within 15 days.

Promotions, awards, and retirements will not be withheld based solely on complaints.

Establishes accountability measures for false or frivolous complaints.

Background

MEO and EEO policies are the cornerstone of equity and accountability within the Department of Defense, providing the legal and institutional framework that protects service members and civilians from discrimination and bias.

Risks:

It is *critical* that the protected classes under both the MEO and EEO frameworks **remain intact** in all future policy revisions.

Military Equal Opportunity (MEO) – Protected Classes

- Race
- Color
- National Origin
- Religion
- Sex (includes pregnancy*, gender identity*, and sexual orientation)

DoDI 1350.02 (September 4, 2020 Change 1, December 20, 2022)

Civilian Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) – Protected Classes

- Race
- Color
- National Origin
- Religion
- Sex (includes pregnancy, gender identity, and sexual orientation)
- Age (40 and over)
- Disability (physical/mental)
- Genetic Information
- Reprisal/Retaliation

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act & DoDD 1440.1

Note 1: Forty-five years after women were no longer involuntarily separated from service due to pregnancy, in 2020, the DoD recognized pregnancy as a protected class for military members (DoDI 1350.02), allowing EO pregnancy discrimination complaints.

Note 2: In 2025, an Executive Order and the DoD released implementation guidance, which included separating transgender service members. The ban remains in effect while various legal challenges continue in the court system.

It is important to emphasize that the integrity of both the Military Equal Opportunity (MEO) and Civilian Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) systems depends fundamentally on the preservation of their recognized protected classes.

The **MEO program**, as outlined in [**DoDI 1350.02**](#) (September 4, 2020 Change 1, December 20, 2022), currently protects service members from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, national origin, religion, and sex (which includes pregnancy, gender identity, and sexual orientation).

The EEO program, grounded in [Title VII of the Civil Rights Act](#) and related federal laws, extends those protections to civilian employees while also including age, disability, genetic information, and reprisal ([Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2025](#)).

Without formal recognition of these classes:

Complaints could not be accepted, investigated, or resolved under current frameworks. Data collection and trend analysis on discrimination or harassment would become unreliable. Leadership accountability and command climate assessments would lose legitimacy. Trust in reporting mechanisms would erode among service members and civilian employees, discouraging participation and increasing the risk of retaliation claims.

If future policy revisions were to alter, narrow, or omit any of these protected categories—particularly those related to sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation—the entire complaint process and accountability structure would be rendered ineffective, regardless of how well the process is written or managed.

Therefore, maintaining consistency and inclusivity in protected classes across MEO and EEO programs is not just a legal or policy imperative—it is a readiness issue. A system cannot protect what it no longer recognizes.

Process Risks:

The proposed MEO and EEO reforms, though ostensibly aimed at improving efficiency, present significant risks to fairness, trust, and compliance. Shorter deadlines, higher evidentiary thresholds, and the loss of anonymous reporting may discourage victims—especially women and people of color—from filing or sustaining discrimination and harassment claims. This puts unnecessary pressure on victims, to the advantage of perpetrators.

Replacing anonymous with confidential reporting could further suppress reporting in hierarchical environments where fear of retaliation is strong. These changes risk undermining DoD Directive 1020.02E (2020) and other policies that emphasize safety and access. In fact, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission states, “**most complaints are not frivolous** and EEO resources pay dividends.”

Emphasizing accountability for “[false complaints](#)” and prioritizing resolving cases quickly makes it easier to dismiss a case than pursue it, and may create a perception that leadership values efficiency over fairness, eroding morale and trust. The reforms could also be viewed publicly as weakening victim protections, inviting criticism and reputational damage. Finally, commanders may misinterpret “expedited resolution” as pressure to close cases quickly, leading to overlooked valid claims and harm to unit cohesion.

3. Military Fitness Standards

Summary: Active-duty personnel must complete two annual tests: both the Service Fitness Test and a new combat-oriented evaluation (Combat Field Test for combat arms; Combat Readiness Test or Service Fitness Test for others). Daily PT becomes

mandatory. National Guard and Reserve members must maintain fitness year-round and test once annually, based on combat/non-combat arms designation.

Standards for combat arms will be sex-neutral, age-normed, male standard, 70% average minimum score. For non-combat arms, standards will be sex-normed and age-normed. Body composition moves to height/waist circumference standards with consistent enforcement and limited exemptions for top performers. Body composition will be evaluated twice annually, with new standards published within 60 days. High fitness scores do not excuse body composition failures.

Non-compliance will lead to remedial programs and potential separations. Scores will be tracked electronically and reflected in fitness reports and evaluations. Failures will impact promotions and separation decisions.

Body Composition and Physiological Risks: These proposals in particular are based on scientifically inaccurate methods, biased and against women and some racial groups regardless of their actual level of fitness and combat job performance.

While combat specialties have had gender-neutral standards since they were opened to women in 2015–2016, this policy could intensify adverse impacts by applying those standards to a broader force without safeguards. There is also little data that the proposed “male standards” correlate with combat success..

Research shows that women and members of some racial groups fail military fitness and body composition tests more often. This is because the standards were originally built and validated on unrepresentative, homogenous groups. Further, these groups were often overlooked or not included in effective sample sizes when tests are designed. ([RAND, 2022](#)). Body composition research has found that current tape and waist circumference methods don’t accurately reflect fitness for different body types, particularly in women and certain racial groups ([Military.com, December 31, 2020](#)). Women perform more effectively and with fewer injuries at **higher levels of body composition**, not lower, so a high performer could easily fail tape tests, and this has proved true for a number of successful Ranger-qualified women. Furthermore, research consistently shows that injuries and failures decline when women are given proper training time and conditioning programs. █

Requiring a stricter, “thinner” body composition standard while simultaneously demanding more rigorous physical performance increases the risk of **injuries, overtraining, and eating disorders** among all Service members—particularly women and underrepresented demographic groups.

A key risk to women in this directive is the potential removal of body composition assessment exemptions for high physical fitness performers. In recent years, the Services have taken steps to allow those who achieve high scores on fitness tests to be exempt from or held to expanded body composition standards, recognizing that high fitness and physical performance is prioritized over strict body composition standards ([Army.mil, September 10, 2025](#)). While it remains unclear how the Secretary’s statement that there will be “limited exemptions for top performers” will be implemented in practice, if existing exemptions are removed or decreased, this will impact incredibly

fit women and men across the services. **Removing these exemptions prioritizes appearance over actual fitness.**

Experience has shown that women in physically demanding specialties, including combat career fields, **require additional muscle mass** to perform occupational tasks effectively. The push for a leaner body composition standard directly conflicts with these physiological needs and could disproportionately penalize women for maintaining the mass necessary to execute mission-critical duties safely and efficiently.

Furthermore, linking body composition and fitness results directly to promotions and evaluations risks **disproportionate attrition of women and minorities**, compounding historical inequities.

Pregnancy and Postpartum: military members can be exempted or deferred from fitness testing after pregnancy or childbirth, typically 12 months postpartum (though specific policies vary by service branch). Will postpartum fitness exemptions remain for the length of time, and could changes negatively impact the member's career?

Implication:

Stricter body composition metrics, removing exemptions for high performers, and biased fitness expectations could drive higher injury rates, lower retention, and reduced promotion outcomes for women—especially those in operational or physically intensive career fields. Without modernization and flexibility, these measures may inadvertently undermine readiness by forcing out strong, capable personnel based on outdated or biased assessment methods.

Administrative and Promotion Consequences

The memorandum explicitly authorizes the use of fitness test failures to withhold favorable personnel actions, including promotions, or to initiate administrative separation. Because women statistically score lower on upper-body strength and anaerobic events, strict enforcement of these measures could create a **systemic bottleneck**, slowing female advancement into senior leadership ranks and reducing long-term representation at higher grades.

Because women, on average, score lower on upper-body strength and anaerobic events, this policy could create a systemic bottleneck that disproportionately hinders female advancement. **Women currently serving in combat and physically demanding career fields are meeting their fitness requirements and are fully capable of performing the duties of their positions.** However, over time, strict enforcement of these measures may nonetheless reduce the pool of experienced women eligible for senior leadership positions, resulting in decreased diversity, reduced retention of high-performing service members, and long-term impacts on overall force readiness and representation.

Furthermore, the directive requires that: “Performance outcomes, including scores—not just pass/fail—are recorded and reflected in fitness reports and evaluations.”

This language significantly broadens the visibility and influence of fitness scores. By embedding individual performance data directly into official evaluations, the policy

ensures that even marginal differences in scores will be visible during promotion and selection boards—**magnifying small disparities into career-impacting outcomes**.

Currently, the Army's Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) promotion system already incorporates physical fitness scores into promotion point calculations. If the new directive expands or standardizes this approach across all Services—and potentially to officer evaluation systems—the **risk increases that physical fitness will weigh more heavily in promotion decisions**. This could widen existing gender gaps, particularly if male-standard scoring systems are applied without accounting for physiological and occupational differences.

The casual observer might say, that's only fair. However, because the number of pull-ups or the two-mile-run time is more easily quantified than leadership qualities, field performance, and job-related skills, the effect is that PT scores take on an outsized importance in evaluation and promotion. This is of special concern because higher fitness standards have shown no correlation with combat performance. Combat after-action reports from OIF and OEF overwhelmingly cite leadership and judgment as key factors in mission success or failure. Making fitness test scores the make-or-break criteria for promotion and command selection could greatly weaken the force.

Implication:

Even minor scoring gaps could translate into long-term underrepresentation of women at the field-grade and senior-officer levels. The inclusion of raw performance scores in evaluation systems and promotion boards may disproportionately disadvantage women, reinforcing barriers to advancement and narrowing the pipeline for future military leaders, selecting “gym rats” over competent and respected leaders

5. Review of Hazing, Bullying, and Harassment Definitions

Summary: Launches a 30-day reassessment of the Department's definitions for hazing, bullying, and harassment, calling current language “overly broad” and hindering mission execution and leadership authority. Desire is for narrow definitions to “empower leaders” and reduce “administrative burdens.”

Risks: Narrower definitions could invalidate lived experiences of women and minorities and reduce protection against subtle harassment/bias, historically underreported but harmful to retention. Weakens DoDI 1020.03 (2018, updated 2020) which broadened definitions to capture non-physical harassment and bias.

Per his September 2025 speech, Secretary Hegseth endorsed “laying hands on trainees,” which will lead to abuse of servicemembers too new to the service to understand this behavior is wrong. Further, they will learn this as a means of “discipline or correction” and carry this habit out into the force as future leaders. It should also be noted that while a higher percentage of women are assaulted, more assaults are committed against men (who often categorize even sexual assault/sodomy as “hazing or bullying”).

7. IG Oversight and Reform: Enhancing Timeliness, Transparency, and Due Process in Administrative Investigations

Summary: Directs faster complaint screening (requires credibility assessments within 7 duty days; only credible complaints advance to investigation). Formal investigations must close within 30 days, with AI-assisted intake encouraged. Mandates 14-day status updates to involved parties, limits personnel actions based solely on pending investigations, and sets strict standards for tracking repeat or frivolous complainants.

Risks: Rapid “credibility” screens and labeling complainants as frivolous risk invalidating discrimination/harassment reports from women and people of color, who already face skepticism and retaliation. Contradicts DoD IG Diversity & Inclusion Strategic Plan 2020-2022 and Whistleblower Protections (DoDD 7050.06) which warn against early-dismissal bias and retaliation.

Summary and Recommendations

Proposals to weaken safeguards against misconduct, sexual harassment and assault, hazing, and discrimination risk the trust and confidence that military leaders have carefully built to ensure that they can effectively command American troops. At the same time, increasing physical requirements in a way that privileges one group over another with *no correlation to combat capability* also threatens to make our military weaker and less capable.

To ensure military effectiveness, fair treatment, trust, and readiness across the force:

- Preserve all existing protected classes under DoDI 1350.02 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.
- Reinstate or preserve anonymous reporting mechanisms and include third-party or ombudsman channels to encourage reporting without fear of reprisal. Conduct impact assessments on marginalized demographics prior to the implementation of “confidential-only” reporting.
- Maintain inclusive definitions of *hazing, bullying, and harassment* consistent with DoDI 1020.03 (2018, updated 2020) to ensure non-physical, subtle, and bias-based behaviors remain actionable. Require legal and diversity reviews before narrowing definitions to avoid weakening protections or legitimizing discriminatory behavior.
- Implement safeguards for credibility screening and AI-assisted intake. Require human oversight for all “credible evidence” determinations and prohibit labeling individuals as “frivolous” without formal review. Extend investigation timelines when needed to ensure fairness, and align reforms with DoDD 7050.06 (Whistleblower Protections) and the DoD IG Diversity & Inclusion Strategic Plan (2020–2022) to prevent retaliation and early-dismissal bias.
- Safeguard exceptions for body composition and fitness standards, allowing individualized review and preventing punitive use of body composition or performance scores beyond a simple pass/fail.
- Prohibit including detailed fitness or body composition/BMI data in performance or promotion evaluations.
- Maintain transparent oversight and independent review to uphold confidence in EO systems and equal treatment across the force.

Bottom Line: Protect people, preserve trust, and prevent bias. Reform should strengthen equity, not restrict it.

Appendix

The remaining seven memorandums are reviewed below. A summary and risks are included for each.

1. Reduction of Mandatory Training Requirements to Restore Mission Focus

Summary: Orders a department-wide rollback of what is identified as non-essential mandatory training so warfighters can focus on combat readiness. Non-warfighting training (cybersecurity, Privacy Act, CUI, combating trafficking in persons, prevention modules) is reduced or automated; Services must allow “test-out” options and combine prevention topics.

Risks: Cutting or consolidating harassment, bias, and prevention training risks reducing awareness and reporting support for women and people of color. Fewer touchpoints may erode climate improvements documented during the Biden Administration and remove positive steps directed through recent DoD plans and strategies. Moves away from the DoD Integrated Primary Prevention Policy and Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) training expansion, which emphasized recurring education.

Further, Congress and the Defense Advisory Committee on Investigation, Prosecution, and Defense of Sexual Assault (DAC-IPAD), as well as the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military (IRC-SAM, 2021), have repeatedly emphasized that prevention training must be continuous, standardized, and leadership-driven. Failure to maintain recurring education could be viewed as noncompliance with statutory intent and prior NDAA directives.

4. Department of War Military Education and Training Standards 60-Day Review

Summary: Orders a comprehensive review of all service academies, professional military education, and training schools to identify any changes since 1990. Requires recommendations to “restore” standards *perceived as being lowered* since 1990. Each Military Department and the Joint Chiefs must examine standards, identify any lowered since 1990, and recommend restoring them where appropriate.

Risks: Combat arms have been gender-neutral since the 2015–2016 Women in Service Review; framing this as “restoring rigor” can still be used to justify new barriers or informal gatekeeping that disproportionately affects women and minorities. If changes don’t include validated, job-related metrics, they could unintentionally reintroduce bias. Could lead to re-segregation or gatekeeping.

The 1990s marked a pivotal shift in military integration, including the **lifting of restrictions that prevented women from flying in combat aircraft and serving in combat roles**, beginning with the 1991 repeal of the law barring women from combat aviation. Additionally, the response to the 1991 Tailhook scandal helped bring attention to sexual harassment and assault in the military. Policy changes intending to address these problems after 1991 could be threatened by this review and potential “restoration.”

Additionally, returning to a 1990 standard – reflecting a vision of war and warfighting that precedes the technological revolution of the past 35 years – may lead to a retrenched, far less capable fighting force that can be out-maneuvered and out-thought by our adversaries in 2025 and beyond. This policy proposal runs counter to 2015–2016 DoD Women in Service Review integration orders and the 2020 Inclusive PME Guidance encouraging diverse participation and barrier analysis.

6. Modern Workforce Management

Summary: Pushes cultural reform for the civilian workforce, claiming to reward top performers and simplify removal of chronic underperformers. Calls for immediate guidance to modernize performance recognition (including meaningful monetary awards) and to clarify, simplify, and accelerate off-boarding for those not meeting expectations.

Risks: “Streamlined removal” can enable subjective bias if performance criteria aren’t equity-checked. Civilian women and POC have historically been under-recognized in awards/ratings (GAO 2021 on DoD SES diversity). Undercuts 2016–2020 DoD Civilian Equal Employment Opportunity Strategic Plan that called for structured performance metrics and barrier analysis to avoid bias in removals.

8. Policy Memorandum Revision

Summary: Rescinds prior 2021 policy requiring special selection review boards (SSRBs) in certain promotion cases. Allows Military Departments to use their own internal review processes when an SSRB isn’t legally required.

Risks: Internal processes often lack transparency, which can disadvantage women and people of color who rely on formal, standardized reviews to counteract bias. Reverses 2021 DoD Promotion Equity Memorandum that expanded SSRBs to ensure fair review when adverse info may be tainted by discrimination.

Creates a potential loophole for toxic leaders to manipulate internal processes or selectively promote individuals who reinforce existing biases or power structures, undermining trust in the promotion system.

9. Requirement to Formally Present Purple Heart Medals and Valor Decorations

Summary: Mandates that Purple Hearts and valor decorations be awarded in formal ceremonies (unless declined by recipient or next of kin). Directs updates to DoD awards policy to codify this standard.

Risks: Narrows 2019 awards flexibility guidance, which allowed low-profile presentations to protect recipients’ privacy.

10. Adverse Information Policy

Summary: Orders a 45-day overhaul of how adverse information is considered in promotions. Establishes preponderance of evidence as the threshold, limits

consideration to the past 10 years (with narrow exceptions), bans repetitive penalties for the same event, and validates service-level review processes as alternatives to extra boards.

Risks: Narrowing look-back may hide systemic bias patterns (e.g., harassment substantiations older than 10 yrs).

11. Grooming Standards for Facial Hair Implementation

Summary: Provides detailed rules for enforcing strict clean-shaven grooming across the force for equipment safety and readiness, making a clean-shaven face mandatory (except for mustaches). Allows exceptions for special operations. Covers accession standards, in-service compliance, limited medical and religious waivers, annual mask-fit training, deployment tracking of noncompliance, and timelines for services to submit implementation plans and publish directives. It only allows medical accommodations for temporary profiles (12 months maximum), which must include a treatment plan.

Permanent conditions will be evaluated for admin separation. Religious accommodations will generally not be authorized.

Risks: Although this policy reinforces that grooming standards are not about appearance but survivability, there is **no credible evidence** indicating that the facial hair length authorized under approved medical waivers compromises the proper fit of protective gear, deployment readiness, or mission execution across operational domains. Without supporting evidence, this policy appears to reflect a subjective preference for what is considered “professional,” a standard that disproportionately impacts the African American community. According to Drs. Tshudy and Cho, roughly 45% of African American service members and 3% of Caucasian service members are affected by pseudofolliculitis barbae.

This reverses 2014 and 2020 DoD grooming and religious accommodation policy changes that eased standards to accommodate health and faith needs.