

# INFORMATION PAPER

ATMT

15 July 2024

SUBJECT: Cohesion Assistance Team Report – Fiscal Years 2023-2024

## 1. Introduction

a. Background. The US Army Center for Initial Military Training – Training and Doctrine Command (USACIMT-TRADOC) maintains oversight of the Cohesion Assistance Team (CAT) to pursue Army Senior Leader objectives focused on command climate, reducing harmful behaviors, and retaining talent for an all-volunteer force.

b. CAT mission statement. The CAT conducts on-site missions to assist tactical commanders in identifying root causes to challenges affecting cohesive team building. The CAT then provides commanders assistance with building tailored solutions focused on improving unit climate, strengthening cohesion, and building trust.

c. Completed CAT missions. Since October 2022, when the People First Task Force transferred the capability to USACIMT-TRADOC, the CAT has conducted nine (9) visits supporting a total of three (3) armored brigade combat teams, three (3) infantry brigade combat teams, one (1) combat aviation brigade, and two (2) training brigades, all active component units.

d. Objective. This report seeks to highlight the general trends observed by the CAT and to offer recommendations to share across the force.

## 2. Critical findings and recommendations

### a. Best practices.

1) Female morale and mentorship programs. Female inclusion and integration are still challenges, particularly in units where female populations are smallest. Still, female initiatives groups and female morale and mentorship groups are successful practices to reduce feelings of exclusion. The Army should encourage wide-scale adoption of these programs and units should encourage participation by males. The CAT further recommends the addition of parenthood, pregnancy, and postpartum education in accordance with Army Directive 2022-06. Parental leave education is necessary to improve awareness, as well as gender-standards education to address male Soldier concerns about correcting their female subordinates.

2) Battalion LPD programs. Battalion resourced and executed leader academies help to ensure development and training of junior commissioned and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs). The CAT observed programs that feature consolidated courses over a set number of days, or that provide direction and guidance for continuous and mandatory LPD seminars. Successful leader academy programs reinforce institutional training, fill gaps in required knowledge, and expose new and junior leaders to vignettes and practical exercises to grow their skills and improve performance. The strongest programs are those ones that commanders integrate into unit training management and protect on Long-Range Training Calendars.

3) Reception and onboarding. Inprocessing alone does not integrate personnel into a unit. New personnel require orientation to the unit, the installation, and the local community. Integration should feature messaging and an orientation program that positively informs newcomer perceptions about the mission, the location, available activities, and support programs. Leveraging sponsorship programs will support these integration requirements.

4) Health and Holistic Fitness (H2F) and Ready and Resilient (R2). H2F fills a resource gap, supporting Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) improvement, suicide prevention, wellness, and basic medical readiness among other priorities. R2 is critical to Army prevention efforts, providing training and resources to enhance resilience and optimize performance. The most successful H2F and R2 programs are those ones that commanders embed at the brigade level to provide dedicated resources and support to improve Soldier readiness. Embedded programs reinforce the importance of building connections to sustain cohesion and prioritize health and fitness. H2F and R2 are critical to building prevention-mindedness into the Army culture. CAT observations suggest that the most successful units emphasize use of the full range of H2F and R2 capabilities.

5) Innovative training to reduce harmful behaviors. Mandatory Army training programs like Ask, Care, Escort–Suicide Intervention (ACE-SI) and Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) lose effectiveness after multiple iterations unless they are either led by, or at least attended by, command teams to ensure proper emphasis. The CAT also found that Soldiers better appreciated and retained training if reinforced with innovative and interactive tools. SHARP escape rooms, for instance, effectively augment training to maintain Soldier attention and promote action. Likewise, alcohol impairment glasses simulate the effects of alcohol consumption on the body and reinforce Army Substance Abuse Program (ASAP) training.

6) Commander's Ready and Resilient Council (CR2C). Installation level CR2C functions best when it synchronizes prevention-oriented working groups with a messaging strategy that communicates command priorities and emphasizes intervention at the lowest level. The CAT recommends inclusion of a working group specifically to support a messaging line of effort. A messaging working group would amplify Integrated Prevention Advisory Group (IPAG) community-needs assessments to inform leaders on opportunities and risks in the environment. It could also support Prevention and Wellness Symposiums to achieve larger CR2C objectives. The CR2C should also oversee a system to select the right leaders or subject matter experts for each program and include participation from brigade and battalion level stakeholders to echo messaging across the lower tactical echelons. Effective working groups not only inform the decision-making cycle but also assess integration of prevention priorities and programs (i.e. Wellness Checks, high-risk Soldier meetings, mandatory training) into the training management process.

b. Challenges.

1) Gender integration and inclusion. CAT missions consistently found that perceptions and experiences of female discrimination persist at brigade and below. Female Soldiers regularly report experiencing disregard for their knowledge, skills and training levels, and express a need to prove themselves to earn their place in the formation. Tolerance for inappropriate conversation and inappropriate behavior undermine inclusion efforts and make female Soldiers feel unsafe and/or undervalued. The lack of field facilities appropriate to support female hygiene, and the lack of leader awareness regarding regulations pertaining to female health and well-being reinforce these negative perceptions. Likewise, female Soldiers informed

the CAT that sexual harassment is common and leader action to correct and prevent violations is inadequate. Leaders should emphasize strong messages of support for female inclusion and zero tolerance for discriminatory behaviors and inappropriate/sexualized conversation to change the culture. The CAT further found that observation of female discrimination occurs most in those units where respect and values are not consistently reinforced. Commanders must continually emphasize the Army Values and demand leader presence to ensure accountability in the ranks.

2) Equal Opportunity (EO) and SHARP programs. Soldiers widely perceive that EO and SHARP programs are weaponized. Likely related, the CAT also found that individuals who intervene to stop EO and SHARP violations become ostracized by other Soldiers in their formations. The perception of weaponization does not reflect reality. Abuse of these programs is, in fact, identified during the investigative process and the CAT did not find evidence of unjust punishment. Leaders should communicate this reality to build trust in the system and ensure Soldiers have proper knowledge of the programs and understand the focus and intent behind investigations. Improved inclusion and integration at all levels will assist in alleviating concerns of weaponization, but the Army may also consider adjustments to the investigation process and/or changes to flagging protocols. Leaders must also emphasize privacy and professionalism. The CAT found that Soldiers interviewed by an Investigating Officer regarding EO and SHARP violations lack respect for the process and gossip with other Soldiers when they should hold the details of their discussion in confidence. By gossiping, these Soldiers reveal specific details of an alleged misconduct, to include the identities of those involved, placing a cost on reporting and undermining commanders and their EO and SHARP programs.

3) Training management. Units do not adhere to unit training management standards detailed in Field Manual (FM) 7-0 due to poor prioritization and poor risk assessment and mitigation practices. Indicative of poor planning, last-minute, after hours, and knee-jerk text messaging are routine. Units frequently sacrifice Leaders Time Training due to competing priorities, unintentionally communicating that junior leader development is of little concern. The lack of predictability also adds stress and harms work-life balance. Battalion and brigade commanders must stress FM 7-0. Their staffs should clearly articulate a reclama process and manage in accordance with command priorities and assessment of risk. Leader education and unit LPD programs must continually stress training management and FM 7-0.

4) Communication. Suggestive of poor communication, the CAT frequently found that unit mission and purpose are not well-understood at the junior level. Soldiers have difficulty understanding the relationship of the unit mission to continuous transformation and the tasks assigned to them to accomplish. Poor communication undermines training management because effective communication supports predictability and promotes cohesion. Effective communication is necessary to ensure understanding of the big picture and commander's intent. Leaders should emphasize face-to-face communication over technological methods. Leader presence alone will further increase the opportunity for communication while also emphasizing leader priorities.

5) Work-related stress and suicidal ideation. While relationships and financial stress often lead explanations of suicidal ideation in the Army, the CAT consistently identified work-related stress as the primary driver (reference paragraph 5.e. below for WRAIR survey data). Manning shortfalls and failure to adhere to training management standards exacerbate perceived stressors. Soldiers also report that frequent last-minute training schedule changes and long hours add to the stress by disrupting work-life balance. Observed mitigating strategies to ensure combat readiness adds further to the stress. For instance, the assignment of

infantrymen to tank and self-propelled artillery crews due to lack of 19K and 13B Soldiers disrupts normal career progression. Assignment of junior leaders to roles and responsibilities more appropriate to one or two grades higher challenges experience and skill levels. The CAT also found that manning shortfalls in one unit required waiving dwell for hundreds of Soldiers to ensure it could deploy at full strength. The merits of these decisions are not in question; commanders must weigh tradeoffs and make difficult choices to manage challenging conditions and mitigate risk that induces a stress all its own. Unit CR2C programs and leader risk-assessment tools can assist in the decision-making process to better identify high-risk Soldiers and mitigate against suicidal ideation. Likewise, leaders should continue to combat stigma associated with seeking behavioral health and medical care, which remains a challenge. Lastly, the Army should consider changes to standard suicide prevention training and improve leader education on postvention techniques and programs. ACE training is not having the desired impact, and while not always conducted to standard, is often not memorable even when conducted properly.

6) Medical facilities, programs and resources. Availability of local medical resources and Behavioral Health programs is robust and plentiful but use tends to be low. Leadership support for behavioral health is trending in a positive direction, but messaging of available resources is unsatisfactory. An unpredictable operational tempo (OPTEMPO) also hinders use, but Soldiers also prioritize unit mission and training tasks over their general health. Soldiers perceive pressure to prioritize self-care below mission and training, which negatively impacts both readiness and mental well-being. Staffing shortages in behavioral health clinics impacts access to care despite their availability. Additionally, prevention programs and services tend to be siloed at joint bases, duplicating rather than integrating efforts. Leveraging CR2C at these joint installations will improve awareness of resources to all Service Members.

**3. Unit blind spots.** CAT missions highlight blind spots for commander action, to include the following notable challenges.

a. Division and installation level Soldier care programs lose emphasis over time. The CAT observed several positive division and installation prevention initiatives, but also found that brigade and below units did not always implement well. Without proper commander and leader emphasis, programs such as mandatory annual Soldier wellness checks, monthly “Foundation Days,” and similar initiatives, became a “check the block” in some units.

b. Party drugs. In at least one case, the CAT found that leadership was unaware of the use of party or club drugs (i.e., LSD and MDMA) amongst their Soldiers. Reportedly, use of party drugs was more common in E6/E7 populations due to the belief that these drugs left their system within 24-72 hours, or were not regularly tested, reducing the chances of detection.

c. Barracks safety issues. Despite barracks improvement initiatives, the CAT frequently found that leaders were unaware of several safety issues to include poor lighting and inoperable cameras. Damaged and unlockable doors and windows tended also to be a problem, complicated by slow barracks maintenance response times. Even where door locks function properly, the CAT found that poor key control management added to safety concerns in the barracks.

d. Divisions between groups. Cohesion at the tactical level often struggles from a lack of inclusivity. Low-density Military Occupational Specialties (MOS), and female Soldiers in particular, often indicated not feeling included or valued. These Soldiers perceive a lack of equal opportunity to compete for positions, promotions, and recognition. As discussed above, this

problem is most prominent among women. Both CAT listening sessions and the WRAIR survey revealed that sexism, sexual harassment, and sexual assault, are more prevalent than many command teams realize is the case in their organizations. Further, leaders were also unaware that Soldiers felt hesitant to report SHARP and EO violations due to fears of later being ostracized.

e. Collateral duty selection. CAT observations indicated that leaders are often unaware that their Sexual Assault Response Coordinators (SARC), Victim Advocates (VA), and Equal Opportunity Leaders (EOL) lack in quality, diversity, commitment, and motivation. Volunteers do not always fill these collateral duty positions, and doing so for promotion points may not translate to the degree of commitment required of the positions. Further, collateral duty positions tend not to adequately represent the populations they support in that the CAT found few female and minority collateral duty leaders. This fact may pose a barrier to communication and reporting.

f. Weak LPD programs. Despite command policies and emphasis in annual training guidance, leaders put little effort into developing LPDs given that they are the first events to fall off the calendar due to task oversaturation and poor training management.

#### **4. Unit planning and follow-up.**

a. Battalion Action Planning. CAT missions concluded with battalion level assisted planning sessions that produced plans of action to reinforce unit strengths and redress challenges. The best planning sessions were those ones led by the battalion command team. They included representation from across the battalion and from every rank, focused on priorities and resources, and featured robust discussion of the challenges identified by the CAT. While each battalion engaged with the trends detailed above, their planning and proposed solutions reflected the unique circumstances and characteristics of the unit. Leaders are central to building and maintaining a positive command climate. Company command teams expressed that one of the most helpful parts of the CAT mission was the CAT-facilitated battalion outbriefs and discussion on climate issues. These productive discussions resulted in increased trust and communication in their units.

b. CAT Follow Up. The CAT received positive feedback and impact from units during post-mission follow up. In one case, a brigade commander shared that he started up a Female Morale and Mentorship Program after the CAT mission. This program improved communication between the brigade commander and female senior leaders in the unit. As a result, the commander became more accessible, allowing a Soldier to share a gender inclusion issue. This commander subsequently and positively addressed the issue, improving cohesion and trust in his brigade.

**5. Walter Reed Army Institute of Research (WRAIR) survey trends.** In coordination with WRAIR, the CAT administered a quantitative survey to assisted units approximately 60 days prior to each mission. These surveys provided background information that proved critical to mission preparation, but in aggregate may provide useful atmospheric information on brigade and below units across the Army. The following summary reflects key findings from FY24 survey participants.

a. Readiness and retention. A high number of Soldiers had confidence in their personal readiness for a combat deployment (78%), with fewer agreeing they have the equipment they need to accomplish the mission (64%) or having confidence in their platoon/section's ability to

perform its mission (59%). As a result of their experiences in their current battalion, 53% are more likely to leave the Army, and 26% are more likely to stay in the Army. A minority agree that Soldiers in their company have a problem with excessive alcohol use (34%) and with illegal drug use (15%). Sixty (60) percent of Soldiers knew where the long-range training calendar was posted.

b. Leadership at echelon. Relationships are strongest at squad and team levels. Positive perceptions of how leadership approaches mission accomplishment and taking care of Soldiers is high, 65% at battalion, 70% at company, and 87% for immediate supervisors. Some agree that: company leadership tends to blame other people to save themselves embarrassment (36%); make decisions based on how it would make them look to superiors (45%); and perceive Soldiers weak for asking for help in front of their peers (28%). Survey participants report that their immediate supervisors treat them with respect (89%), provide written counseling monthly (junior enlisted) or quarterly (all others) (75%), advocate for Soldiers to get time back after staying late or working weekends (77%), would correct Soldiers making sexual comments (91%) and/or racist comments (91%), and can be trusted to handle sexual harassment/assault concerns fairly (92%).

c. Sponsorship. Forty percent of Soldiers had a sponsor when they arrived at their battalion. Of those who communicated with a sponsor, 74% felt better prepared for the transition as a result.

d. Finances and issues with pay. In total, 21% are worried about their financial situation, and 11% took out a loan in the past year to cover basic living expenses not including mortgage or vehicle loans. During the past year, 28% received at least one incorrect pay statement, and 17% received at least one incorrect BAH/BAS payment.

e. Suicide. Within the previous month, 11% of Soldiers had wished they were dead or could go to sleep and not wake up, and 7% had had thoughts of actually killing themselves. The most common reasons cited for suicidal thoughts were work-related: disliking their job (52%), feeling like a failure in their career (51%), feeling like they don't fit in at work (46%), and lack of support from leaders (37%). Within the previous 6 months, 21% of Soldiers had encountered a Soldier in their company who they thought might be considering suicide. Of these, 77% asked the Soldier if they were okay, 53% escorted them to additional resources, and 49% asked them if they were suicidal.

f. Sexual harassment/assault. Within the previous month, Soldiers experienced: comments of a sexual nature made about them or another Soldier (15%); someone asking unwanted questions about their sex life or sexual interests (8%); and unwanted touching (5%).

g. Drug and alcohol use. Thirty-four (34) percent agreed that Soldiers in their company have a problem with excessive alcohol use, and 15% agree that Soldiers in their company have a problem with illegal drug use.

h. Reporting problem behaviors. Roughly a third (37%) agree that Soldiers in their squad/section who *correct* sexist and/or racist behavior are excluded or ostracized. However, 84-87% feel able to *report* issues of SHARP, racism, extremism, and bullying without fear of retaliation. Most Soldiers reported knowing the identity of their: Equal Opportunity representative (82%); Sexual Assault Response Coordinator / Victim Advocate (76%); and chaplain (89%). Of those Soldiers, almost all would feel comfortable going to the EO representative, the SARC/VA, and the chaplain with a concern (92%, 95%, and 91%, respectively).

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**6. Continued support to prevention.** The CAT will complete a data sharing agreement with the Center for Army Leadership (CAL) and WRAIR to enable increased analysis of issues and trends. CIMT Research and Analysis Directorate is independently conducting similar analysis. The CAT will handoff critical points of contact to the Prevention Force Modernization Proponent (PFMP) to facilitate their mission. Application of multiple perspectives and methodologies to the data will better inform updates to Doctrine, Training and Leader Education and Development. The CAT invested time into growing a relationship with IPAGs at Army Service Component Command (ASCC) and installation levels and will likewise share these contacts with the PFMP.

**7. Points of Contact.**

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b. SGM Jeff Vincent (jeffrey.m.vincent10.mil@army.mil); CAT Sergeant Major; brigade level climate, cohesion, and trust; NCO leadership

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d. LTC Donna Terrell (donna.j.terrell.mil@army.mil); CAT Behavioral Health Office; holistic health; female mentorship and inclusion

e. MSG Jayna Bryant (jayna.n.bryant.mil@army.mil); Military Equal Opportunity

f. Dr. Toby Elliman (toby.d.elliman.ctr@health.mil); WRAIR Lead Research Scientist; CAT survey implementation and data analysis

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