
Before examining the specific responsibilities assigned to these Assistant Secretaries, a brief historical overview of the structure of the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness is instructive, given that organizational structure naturally influences organizational behavior. This overview establishes the context within which the current organizational elements interact to manage the DES.

An Assistant Secretary of Defense\(^1\) has been assigned to the manpower function since 1950.\(^2\) The position is currently titled the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Force Management Policy).\(^3\) Before the FY 1984 Defense Authorization Act mandated establishment of an additional Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, the reserve affairs function was sometimes combined with the manpower function, which was also sometimes combined with other functions under the original Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower position. Likewise, an Assistant Secretary of Defense has been assigned to the health affairs function since 1953, except from 1961 to 1970, when a presidential appointee with Senate confirmation was not authorized for the function.

These three Assistant Secretaries—for Force Management Policy (formerly known as Manpower), Health Affairs, and Reserve Affairs—operated with relative autonomy until the National Defense Authorization Act of 1994 created the new Under

\(^1\)Assistant Secretary of Defense is a presidential appointee position that requires Senate confirmation.  
\(^2\)The DoD was established in 1947, making the Assistant Secretary of Defense one of the longest tenured positions in the DoD.  
\(^3\)See Marcum et al. (2001) for a full discussion of the lineage of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower position.

Department of Defense Directive 1332.18 and Department of Defense Instruction 1332.38 assign to the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, the Assistant Secretaries of Defense, and the Secretaries of the military departments the following responsibilities.

The Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness), under DoD Instruction 1332.38

- exercises cognizance and oversight of the DoD DES
- makes the final decision on requests from the military departments for exceptions to the standards in [DoDI 1332.38].

The Assistant Secretary of Defense (Force Management Policy), under DoDD 1332.18

- develops and maintains, in coordination with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, a program of instruction for the DES
- monitors changes and proposed changes to military personnel and compensation statutes and DoD policy, and other pertinent authorities, to assess their impact on physical disability evaluation, Reserve component medical disqualification, and related benefits; and issues timely guidance to the military services, as appropriate
- coordinates with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs in developing policy for referral of members into the DES
- issues and maintains DoD Instruction 1332.38.

The Assistant Secretary of Defense (Force Management Policy), under DoD Instruction 1332.38

- exercises cognizance of laws, policies, and regulations that affect the DES
- issues guidance, as required, to further interpret, implement, and govern the policy and procedures for the four elements of the DES
- establishes necessary reporting requirements to monitor and assess the performance of the DES and compliance of the Military Departments with [DoDI 1332.38] and DoDD 1332.18
- coordinates with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs concerning the impact of laws and DoD policy on Reserve members who have conditions that are cause for medical disqualification
• coordinates with the Assistant Secretary of Health Affairs in developing procedures for medical issues pertaining to physical disability evaluation

• reviews substantive changes proposed by the military departments to departmental policies and procedures for physical disability evaluation that affect the uniformity of standards for separation or retirement for unfitness because of physical disability or separation of Ready Reserve members for medical disqualification

• develops quality-assurance procedures to ensure that policies are applied in a fair and consistent manner.

The Assistant Secretary of Defense (Health Affairs), under DoD Directive 1332.18

• monitors changes to the statutes, laws, and regulations of the Department of Veterans Affairs to assess their impact on the Department of Defense’s application of the Veterans Administration Schedule for Rating Disabilities (VASRD) to service members determined unfit because of physical disability, and issues timely guidance to the Military Services, as appropriate, upon coordination with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Force Management Policy

• develops and periodically reviews medical standards for referral of service members into the DES

• recommends changes to and maintains DoD Instruction 1332.39

• monitors the medical element of the DES and proposes corrective actions as required

• develops policies for the medical component of the DES, to include the establishment of minimum standards for Medical Evaluation Boards, Reserve component medical examinations forwarded to Physical Evaluation Boards, and TDRL periodic examinations

• develops and maintains a program of instruction for use by MTFs on the preparation of Medical Evaluation Boards for physical disability cases

• develops a program of instruction for use by PEB adjudicators and appellate review authorities on the medical aspects of physical disability adjudication, to include the application of the VASRD

• monitors the timeliness of the medical component of the DES

• develops policy for conduct of maximum interval physical examinations and certification of physical condition for members of the Reserve components.

The Assistant Secretary of Defense (Health Affairs), under DoD Instruction 1332.38

• makes recommendations for a final decision by the Secretary of Defense on the unfit findings on all officers in pay grade O-7 or higher and medical officers in any grade who are pending nondisability retirement for age or length of service at the time of their referral into the DES
• reviews substantive changes proposed by the military departments in their supplemental medical standards to enclosure 4 of [DoDI 1332.38] concerning medical conditions that are cause for referral of a member into the DES.

The Assistant Secretary of Defense (Reserve Affairs), under DoD Directive 1332.18

• ensures the policies for the DES are applicable to members of the Ready Reserve and those policies for the Ready Reserve are consistent with the policies established for active component personnel.

The Assistant Secretary of Defense (Reserve Affairs), under DoD Instruction 1332.38

• Coordinates as necessary to ensure that procedures for the DES apply consistently and uniformly to members of the Reserve components.

The Secretaries of the military departments, under DoD Instruction 1332.18

• ensure compliance with Chapter 61 of 10 U.S.C., [DoD Directive 1332.18], and instructions and guidance issued under [its] authority

• establish the service-specific DES to consist of the four components: medical evaluation; physical disability evaluation, to include appellate review; counseling; and final disposition

• manage the service-specific DES to ensure physical disability evaluation is accomplished in a timely manner with uniform application of the governing laws and DoD policy

• ensure that physicians who serve on Medical Evaluation Boards are trained in the preparation of medical boards for physical disability evaluation

• ensure that PEB members and applicable review authorities are trained and certified in physical disability evaluation

• ensure all matters raising issues of fraud within the DES are investigated and resolved as appropriate

• defer a determination of disability retirement of any officer who is being processed for, is scheduled for, or has received nondisability retirement for age or length of service until such determination is approved by the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness on the recommendation of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs under Section 1216(b) of Title 10, U.S.C.

The Secretaries of the Military Departments, under DoD Instruction 1332.38

• ensure that members with conditions that may be cause for referral into the DES are counseled at appropriate stages on the DES process and the member’s rights, entitlements, and benefits

• establish a quality-assurance process to ensure that policies and procedures established by DoDD 1332.18 and [DoDI 1332.38] are interpreted uniformly
• make determinations on unfitness because of medical disqualification or physical disability; entitlement to assignment of percentage of disability at the time of retirement or separation because of physical disability; and except as limited by 10 U.S.C. 1216(d), entitlement to and payment of disability retired and severance pay
• ensure that the record of proceedings for physical disability cases supports the findings and recommendations made
• ensure the Temporary Disability Retired List is managed to meet the requirements of 10 U.S.C. 1210 for timely periodic physical examinations, suspension of retired pay, and removal from the TDRL
• designate a military department representative to serve as the department representative for the Disability Evaluation System
• ensure all matters raising issues of fraud on the DES by members are investigated and resolved as appropriate.