

PROJECT AIR FORCE

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Closing the Combat Readiness Gap in Force Support

From Garrison to Contingency

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About This Report

Force Support (FS) squadrons sustain installation life-support and quality-of-life services while also generating combat-support capability for contingency and wartime operations. These missions draw on the same workforce but differ substantially in scale, equipment, operating conditions, command relationships, and skill demands. Because many FS functions carry the same names in garrison and deployed environments, successful garrison performance can be mistaken for evidence of wartime readiness even when Airmen have had little opportunity to practice under contingency conditions. This research also occurred during a period of substantial change to Department of the Air Force (DAF) force-generation concepts and constructs, including the evolution of the Air Force Force Generation model and associated expeditionary constructs such as Air Expeditionary Wings (AEWs) and AEW 2.0. Although we sought to capture these developments as they occurred, our findings and recommendations represent a point-in-time snapshot and might not reflect the latest versions of these DAF concepts. As the Air Force pursues greater combat agility and continues to refine how it organizes, trains, and presents forces, the structural gap between garrison and deployed FS work presents an ongoing readiness concern that cannot be fully assessed or resolved at the installation or functional level alone.

This project provides an integrated, enterprise-wide assessment of that gap. Individual challenges examined in this report are familiar in parts of the FS community, and the Air Force has taken steps to address some of them. The significance of these challenges lies not only in whether they also occur elsewhere in the Air Force, but in how they interact within FS's distinctive garrison-and-deployment mission structure. Similarly, the existence of an initiative does not by itself demonstrate that an underlying readiness gap has been resolved. Local awareness and action do not establish whether an initiative has reached the Airmen who need it, been implemented consistently, improved proficiency, or addressed related constraints across installations and major commands (MAJCOMs). This report assesses those conditions through a structured analysis of DAF policy governing FS deployment and contingency requirements; interviews with 26 Force Support Squadron commanders across 10 MAJCOMs and 29 FS subject-matter experts; workshops with FS personnel; and personnel data on deployment experience and formal training completion across the active-component FS population. Drawing on this evidence, it presents targeted options in three areas: policy and organizational clarity, training and readiness, and personnel and manpower.

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Summary

Issue

Force Support (FS) must sustain essential installation services while generating combat-support capability for contingency and wartime operations. Because these missions draw on the same workforce but require different skills, equipment, operating conditions, and command relationships, successful home-station performance can mask gaps in wartime readiness, particularly when functions such as food service, lodging, personnel accountability, and mortuary affairs carry the same names in garrison and deployed settings. Local workarounds and individual programs do not necessarily address how service-delivery demands, limited practice opportunities, fragmented policy, and personnel management constraints compound each other. To better understand and address these challenges, Headquarters Air Force Manpower, Personnel and Services (HAF/A1X) asked RAND Project AIR FORCE to assess potential gaps between peacetime (in garrison) and wartime (deployed) FS readiness and develop options to strengthen Airmen's preparation, experience, and demonstrated proficiency for contingency and wartime operations.

Approach

We used a mixed-method approach. First, we conducted an artificial intelligence (AI)-supported analysis of DAF policy, classifying mandatory requirements by function, operational context, procedural direction, execution responsibility, and decision authority. Second, we interviewed 26 Force Support Squadron (FSS) commanders representing 10 major commands (MAJCOMs) to identify unit-level challenges in preparing FS Airmen for contingency and deployment contexts. Third, we interviewed 29 FS subject-matter experts (SMEs) on readiness requirements, deployment workflows, and personnel management practices. Next, we held five virtual workshops with representatives from FSS and FS organizations to identify FS readiness gaps and to develop and prioritize actions to address those gaps. Finally, we analyzed personnel data on deployment experience and formal course-completion records.

Key Findings

Many of the pressures we identified, including personnel shortages, deployment-related workload, fragmented readiness information, and dispersed policy, also affect other Air Force communities. What distinguishes FS from other communities is how these pressures interact with FS's dual garrison-and-deployment mission structure.

- The similarity between garrison and deployed FS functions can conceal materially different readiness requirements.
- FS readiness training competes directly with essential, customer-facing services.
- The breadth of the FS portfolio creates readiness demands that are difficult to sustain through routine garrison experience.
- Policy, readiness reporting, manpower models, and personnel practices do not consistently account for the FS garrison-deployment gap.
- Mortuary affairs illustrates the consequences of this structural mismatch: personnel assigned to a no-fail mission with limited prior hands-on training.

Recommendations

We developed 13 actions to help HAF/A1 address FS readiness challenges across three categories: policy and organizational clarity; training and readiness; and personnel, manpower, and organization. We suggest implementing these actions in four phases (see Table S.1).

Table S.1. Phased Approach to Implement Actions to Strengthen Force Support Readiness

Phase	Challenge Category	Action
Establish the Foundation	*Policy and Organizational Clarity*	• Consolidate or formally cross-reference policy for highly dispersed functions • Clarify decision authority for unit-level execution requirements • Provide guidance for prioritizing reporting requirements during contingency operations
	Training and Readiness	• Establish an authoritative enterprise view of readiness training and currency
	Personnel, Manpower, and Organization	• Assess alignment among Unit Manpower Documents (UMDs), Unit Type Codes (UTCs), and force-generation requirements
Build Capacity	*Training and Readiness*	• Provide service-delivery baselines to protect readiness training • Shift readiness standards from task completion toward demonstrated proficiency
	Personnel, Manpower, and Organization	• Strengthen noncommissioned officer (NCO) development and assignment stability for more consistent readiness capacity across installations • Assess and align FSS manpower models with wartime capability requirements, including where military proficiency must be preserved • Establish an enterprise approach for talent management of mortuary affairs personnel
Sustain and Expand	*Training and Readiness*	• Expand access to realistic, hands-on training opportunities • Establish an enterprise mechanism for sharing validated readiness-training practices
Evaluate Structural Change	*Personnel, Manpower, and Organization*	• Pilot test alternative organizational constructs at selected large installations [a]

[a] This option is exploratory; we did not assess its manpower, cost, command, or readiness effects.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

As the Department of the Air Force (DAF) adapts its force-generation and deployment models for joint warfighting, its combat support capabilities must keep pace. Force Support (FS) is central to that effort. In addition to sustaining essential services at home station, FS Airmen must be prepared to enable distributed operations and support combatant commanders in contested environments. Yet many FS functions are performed in both garrison and deployed settings under substantially different conditions, creating a risk that successful home-station performance could be treated as evidence of wartime readiness even when Airmen have had limited opportunities to practice under contingency conditions. This risk raises the question of whether FS capabilities for wartime execution are being defined and developed, or whether garrison performance is being treated as a proxy. To address this concern, the Headquarters Air Force Manpower, Personnel, and Services, Directorate of Plans and Integration (HAF/A1X) asked RAND Project AIR FORCE to identify, assess, and recommend improvements to the organization, training, and utilization of FS elements.

What is Force Support?

Air Force Doctrine Publication 4-0, *Sustainment*, describes FS as a combat service support capability, stating:

> Enables warfighting capability by providing manpower and personnel programs, life-sustaining and essential services, and quality-of-life programs to support AFFOR [Air Force forces]. Provides total force accountability and personnel management to integrate regular, Guard, Reserve, and civilians to meet personnel resource requirements. Provides casualty reporting capability to ensure timely and humane notification to next of kin. Provides food service, mortuary affairs, lodging, fitness, retail sales and services, laundry services, and recreational opportunities. Responsible for manpower management, organization designations, and performance management. Provides mail services around the world in partnership with USTRANSCOM [U.S. Transportation Command] and the US Postal Service.
>
> Force Support also provides administrative support to commanders at all levels. Provides education and training, alternative dispute resolution, complaint processing, unit climate assessments, pre-commissioning programs, professional military education, professional continuing education, higher education, transition, and career assistance. Supports the commander's sexual assault awareness and prevention training, education, advocacy, response, reporting, and accountability. Provides military and family support capability through programs

for deployed members and families that support Airman resiliency and reintegration.[1]

As this description reveals, the FS portfolio encompasses a wide range of functions and capabilities such as personnel accountability, mortuary affairs, manpower requirements, education and training (E&T), food services, postal services, fitness, and Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) programs. Table 1.1 lists these functions alongside the enlisted Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSCs) responsible for them.

Table 1.1. Force Support Functions Mapped to Enlisted Force Support Specialties

AFSC	Number of personnel in AFSC	Representative Functions and Capabilities[a]
Human Resources and Administration (HRA; 3F0X1)[b]	8,279	• Personnel program management and oversight (e.g., assignments, awards, casualty reporting) • Personnel data management and analysis • Personnel actions and accountability • Compliance, inspection, and counseling • Commander support staff • Personnel support for contingency operations (PERSCO)[c] • Administrative support to senior leaders (e.g., travel coordination) • Postal and official mail operations
Services (3F1X1)	3,340	• Manages Force Support sustainment operations (e.g., customer service support, contractor performance oversight, retail pricing and inventory) • Operates food services activities • Executes fitness and sports programs • Performs recreation programming and community support functions • Maintains unit readiness and plans program • Establishes and manages contingency quarter's operations[c] • Performs mortuary affairs administration functions
Education and Training (3F2X2)	1,309	• Develops, delivers, and evaluates E&T programs • Administers E&T programs • Oversees E&T activities
Manpower (3F3X1)	415	• Quantifies manpower requirements • Collect, store, process, and distribute findings • Identifies, develops, and maintains organizational capabilities and aligns to mission requirements • Plans and executes manpower projects • Performs advisory services for leaders (planning) • Exercises and validates organizational capabilities for contingency and emergency operations[c]

[1] Air Force Doctrine Publication 4-0, *Sustainment*, U.S. Air Force, May 1, 2026.

AFSC	Number of personnel in AFSC	Representative Functions and Capabilities[a]
Equal Opportunity (3F4X1)	171	• Serves as subject-matter expert and advisor on equal opportunity (EO) policies and programs • Manages resources for installation EO offices • Manages and oversees EO complaints processes • Complies with data calls and requests for information related to EO requirements • Conducts EO outreach • Acts as EO liaison on community action teams, and in working groups, advisory councils, and forums • Conducts EO training

SOURCES: Number of personnel in AFSC are based on counts of active component personnel in Air Force administrative data as of May 2026. Representative Functions and Capabilities are based on AFSC duty descriptions from this source: Air Force Personnel Center, U.S. Department of the Air Force, *Department of the Air Force Enlisted Classification Directory (DAFECD)*, October 31, 2025.
NOTES: [a]Because of variation in how AFSC duties are described in the DAFECD, we present these as representative (not comprehensive) sets of functions and capabilities. [b]This AFSC was previously called *Personnel* and merged with Administration (formerly 3F5X1) in 2025. [c] Specific to contingency/deployment environments.

FS officers (38F) lead the FS community.[2] These officers "define, develop, shape, sustain, and deliver" FS Airmen, plans, and programs.[3] Air Force documentation of FS officer duties and responsibilities rarely mentions deployment or contingency operations explicitly. This gap in documentation mirrors a broader pattern explored throughout this report: FS functions share names across garrison and deployed environments while their underlying requirements differ substantially.[4]

Force Support Structure

Most of the FS community is located at the wing or base level (79 percent of 3F enlisted, 65 percent of 38F officers). The Force Support Squadron (FSS) represents the most common unit for these personnel to occupy at base level, with 56 percent of 3F enlisted and 56 percent of 38F officers. As its name implies, an FSS oversees Force Support services at an installation, which cover a broad population of Airmen and their families, DAF civilians, retirees, and people associated with other organizational tenants (e.g., USTRANSCOM at Scott Air Force Base). FSSs vary in structure and size because of variations in installation tenants and populations.[5]

[2] Based on May 2026 data, there are 1,278 active component 38F officers.

[3] See Air Force Personnel Center, U.S. Department of the Air Force, *Department of the Air Force Officer Classification Directory (DAFOCD)*, October 31, 2025, p. 131.

[4] The DAFOCD (October 2025, p. 130) describes Force Support officer expeditionary requirements this way: "Officers in this field establish, train, equip, and maintain ready status specialized mobility teams that deploy to support wartime or other contingencies. Force Support Officers may be deployed and employed in sensitive or hostile environments created by terrorism, sabotage, nuclear, chemical, biological, and conventional warfare." This implies that the primary way these officers execute expeditionary duties is by readying mobility teams to deploy.

[5] For example, although most bases only have a single FSS, Ramstein Air Base has two FSSs, the 786th and 86th. The 86th FSS bills itself as the "fun squadron," providing MWR and community services (e.g., childcare). See 86th

FSSs also vary in workforce composition, using a mix of military and civilian personnel as well as contract services – such as food preparation in dining facilities (DFACs) and base lodging operations. Because FSSs have a wide scope of functions to execute at installations (i.e., "in garrison"), they focus on serving the installations' needs and less on preparing FS Airmen for wartime operations.

Garrison-Deployment Gap

FS differs from many other capabilities that enable and sustain combat operations because its garrison and deployed functions often share the same names.[6] Food service, personnel accountability, mortuary affairs, fitness, and lodging exist in both environments. This surface similarity obscures a deeper mismatch: the scale, conditions, equipment, command relationships, and skill demands of those functions change substantially when the context shifts from in garrison to contingency environments. A dining facility manager in garrison oversees a staffed kitchen with a supply chain, a contractor workforce, and a fixed customer base. The same Airman deployed may be field-feeding a dispersed force with meals ready-to-eat (MREs), a Single Pallet Expeditionary Kitchen (SPEK) they have rarely touched, and no contractor in sight. That gap creates a structural readiness challenge that is specific to FS. The similarity between these functions can encourage leaders and readiness systems to treat garrison experience as evidence of deployment readiness, even when the conditions and skills required for wartime execution differ.

Most training is expected to be completed at home station, but training time competes directly with service delivery because closing a dining facility or fitness center to train has immediate, visible consequences, while the readiness cost of not training is deferred and less visible.[7] These conditions create a risk that Airmen will be well practiced in the garrison mission but have fewer opportunities to prepare for contingency execution. The chapters that follow examine how this gap is expressed in policy, training, and personnel management.

Force Support Squadron, "Homepage," webpage, 2025. The 786th has three flights (Military Personnel Support, Force Support Operations, and Sustainment Services) and covers functions such as military dining, lodging, fitness, postal services, and military personnel services. See U.S. Air Force, "786th Force Support Squadron," webpage, undated.

[6] Air Force doctrine uses several terms to describe functions that enable and sustain combat operations, including *combat support* and *combat service support*. AFDP 4-0 characterizes Force Support and several other sustainment functions as combat service support. For readability and consistency with the project's framing, this report uses *combat support* as a broad umbrella term for capabilities that enable or sustain combat operations. This usage is not intended to alter the formal doctrinal classification of individual functions.

[7] Readiness training administered by local units to their Airmen is called Home Station Readiness Training (HSRT). FS Airmen also take other types of local training not tied to readiness (e.g., on the job training to learn garrison functions) or not administered by their units.

Our Approach

The garrison-deployment gap described above involves training, how policy is written, how personnel are managed, and how the community understands its own purpose. Closing it requires understanding whether the current policy and training landscape is organized in a way that prepares Force Support Airmen for the contingency environment as well as their daily installation duties. To examine how policy, training, and personnel systems shape the FS garrison-deployment gap, we used a mix of methods.

To understand the policy environment shaping Force Support readiness, we conducted a structured analysis of DAF policy documents relevant to FS wartime functions. We identified mandatory requirements by systematically searching the policy documents for directive language such as shall, must, and required. Then, we classified each according to features relevant to contingency execution: the level of procedural guidance provided, named responsible actors, and alignment of decision authority with execution responsibility (see Appendix A).

We also conducted interviews with several groups of stakeholders. We spoke with subject-matter experts (SMEs) from three FS Centers (Air Force Services Center [AFSVC], Air Force Personnel Center [AFPC], and Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations [AFMAO]) to obtain background context on FS enterprise operations, personnel management, and mortuary affairs. We spoke with additional SMEs to gain understanding of training and readiness gaps and potential innovations to address them. We also spoke with career field managers (CFMs) from the FS community for context on career-field health and readiness needs. To gain perspectives from the field and to better understand issues related to Force Support readiness, we held discussions with 26 FSS commanders across the Continental United States (CONUS) and Outside the Continental United States (OCONUS) locations, representing 10 major commands (MAJCOMs). See Appendix B for details on our interview methodology.

We held five virtual workshops to build upon findings from our FSS commander interviews. In May 2026, we held two virtual workshops with representatives from FSSs. The first workshop included 18 FSS flight chiefs, section chiefs, and senior noncommissioned officers (SNCOs) who provide training and supervision. The second workshop included seven FSS commanders, independent of the commanders who participated in interviews.[8] During these workshops, we asked participants to identify and prioritize readiness challenges, respond to emerging findings, and describe efforts to address them. In July 2026, we hosted three virtual workshops at the next organizational level of the FS community: FS Centers, Component Numbered Air Forces (C-NAFs) A1s, and MAJCOM A1s. These workshops included a total of 15 participants and focused on clarifying readiness challenges and outlining implementation factors for potential actions to address challenges. Appendix C offers details about workshop methods.

[8] Two participants were civilian FSS directors and one officer was a deputy for the FSS commander.

Finally, we analyzed personnel data on FS Airmen and officers to capture FS population information (e.g., number of Airmen in a 3F AFSC) and to analyze trends in deployment and formal training history. Using the most recent fiscal year (FY) data, we analyzed who in the active component FS population had any deployments between FYs 2020 and 2025 by AFSC, pay grade, and home station location. We also analyzed formal training and education courses on record for the FY 2025 population, broken out by AFSC. See Appendix D for more details.[9]

Structure of this Report

The chapters that follow provide an integrated assessment of how policy, training, personnel, and manpower systems shape the FS garrison-deployment gap. Individual elements of this problem are familiar to FS leaders, and the community has undertaken initiatives to address them. But the existence of an initiative does not demonstrate that it has reached the relevant population, been implemented consistently, produced measurable improvements in proficiency, or addressed related constraints elsewhere in the enterprise. Nor does familiarity with individual challenges at one organizational level provide an integrated view of how those challenges interact across units, command levels, policy, training, and personnel systems. This project supplies that cross-level assessment: it distinguishes actions already underway from gaps that remain unresolved. Many of these challenges may be shared by other Air Force communities; however, there remains a need to understand how they operate specifically within FS. Their consequences are shaped by the combination of a broad service-delivery portfolio, a dual garrison-and-deployment mission, and systems that must support both simultaneously. Likewise, recognizing a problem or initiating a response should not be treated as evidence that the underlying enterprise-level constraint has been resolved.

This integrated perspective matters most for FS. Many FS functions retain the same names across operating environments even though their scale, equipment, support arrangements, and execution requirements change substantially. Essential installation services must also continue while FS Airmen train or deploy. The report therefore examines how policy, training, personnel, and manpower systems operate together, not as separate problems with separate fixes.

Chapter 2 assesses how contingency requirements are organized and expressed in policy, including the visibility of decision authority. Chapter 3 examines the time, resources, training opportunities, capability gaps, and assessment systems that affect readiness preparation. Chapter 4 considers how workforce experience, continuity, utilization, and manpower arrangements shape the community's ability to sustain garrison services while generating deployable

[9] For both the deployment and formal course-completion analyses, we used personnel data files sent by AFPC. For deployment analyses, we only had records going back to FY 2020 and did not have details on each type of deployment other than the theater where it occurred. For training course completion analysis, we were able to view dates for when courses were completed, meaning that course completion dates span several years.

capability. Chapter 5 brings these findings together and presents 13 options spanning near-term policy clarification, training system changes, and longer-term organizational reforms.

The appendixes provide supporting methodological detail. Appendix A describes the policy analysis, Appendix B documents the interview methodology, Appendix C describes workshop methods, and Appendix D explains the personnel-data analysis.

Chapter 2. Requirements in Policy

Policy establishes a wide range of requirements for FS personnel and organizations during in-garrison and contingency operations. Many FS functions span both home-station and contingency environments, but the way they are performed can change substantially across contexts. Personnel accountability, readiness reporting, food service, lodging, casualty support, mortuary affairs, and related functions may continue during deployment, but often at a different scale, through different delivery mechanisms, and under different command relationships. The policy question is whether guidance for these functions provides usable direction for carrying them out under contingency conditions.

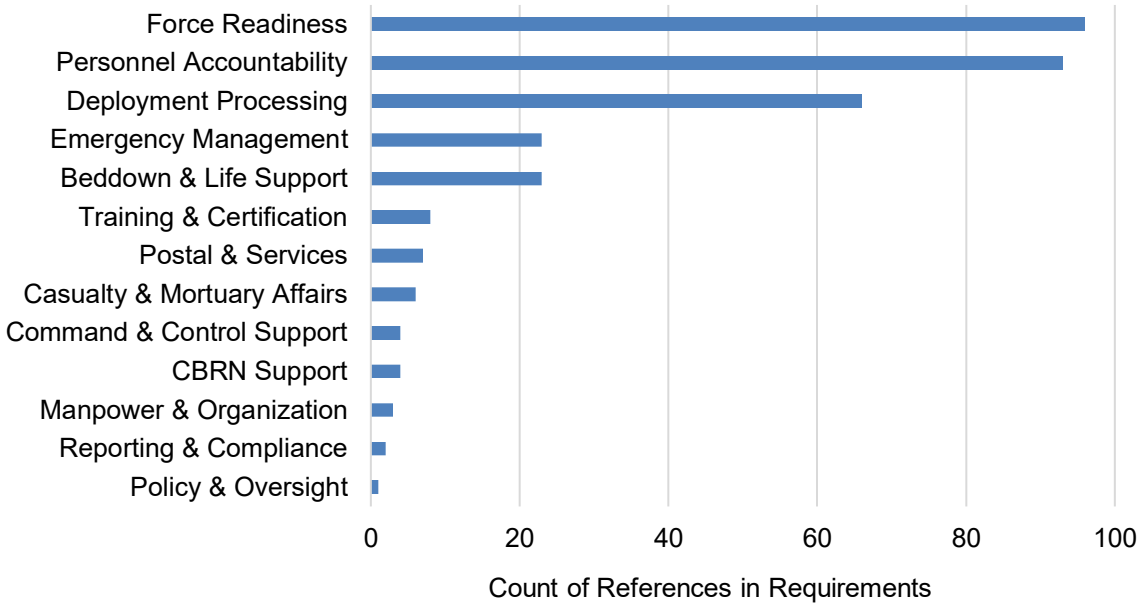
To address this, this chapter describes analyses in which we first determined the FS functions most emphasized in deployment and contingency policy and then examined the extent to which policy provides procedural execution guidance, names responsible actors, and aligns decision authority with execution responsibility. We derived the findings from a structured analysis of DAF policy documents relevant to FS and functions related to Headquarters Air Force, Deputy Chief of Staff, Manpower, Personnel, and Services, Directorate of Plans and Integration, Force Support Career Field Management and Readiness Division (HAF/A1XO). We treated each mandatory policy requirement as the unit of analysis. We extracted requirements containing directive language, such as "shall," "must," "required," and equivalent mandatory constructions, and then retained them with their original source text. We then classified each requirement according to several features relevant to contingency execution.

The findings in this chapter are therefore structural rather than evaluative. We identified patterns in how policy distributes obligations, execution guidance, responsibility, and decision authority. We did not assess whether units comply with policy. Appendix A provides the full methodology, including the policy corpus, coding rules, validation procedures, and limitations.

Policy Emphasizes a Core Set of Force Support Functions

We begin by identifying which functions policy emphasizes most frequently, because that baseline shapes how the subsequent dispersion and authority findings should be interpreted. Our coding suggests that deployment processing, force readiness, and personnel accountability are among the functions most consistently emphasized in deployment- and contingency-related policy. Because validation of the function classification showed relatively low accuracy, these results should be interpreted as indicative of broad patterns rather than precise differences in frequency. The pattern nevertheless suggests that policy frequently addresses preparation and movement of personnel, readiness, and personnel accountability during contingency operations. Training and certification also appeared in this subset, albeit infrequently (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. Functions Emphasized in Force Support Deployment/Contingency Policy



NOTE: a CBRN = chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear.

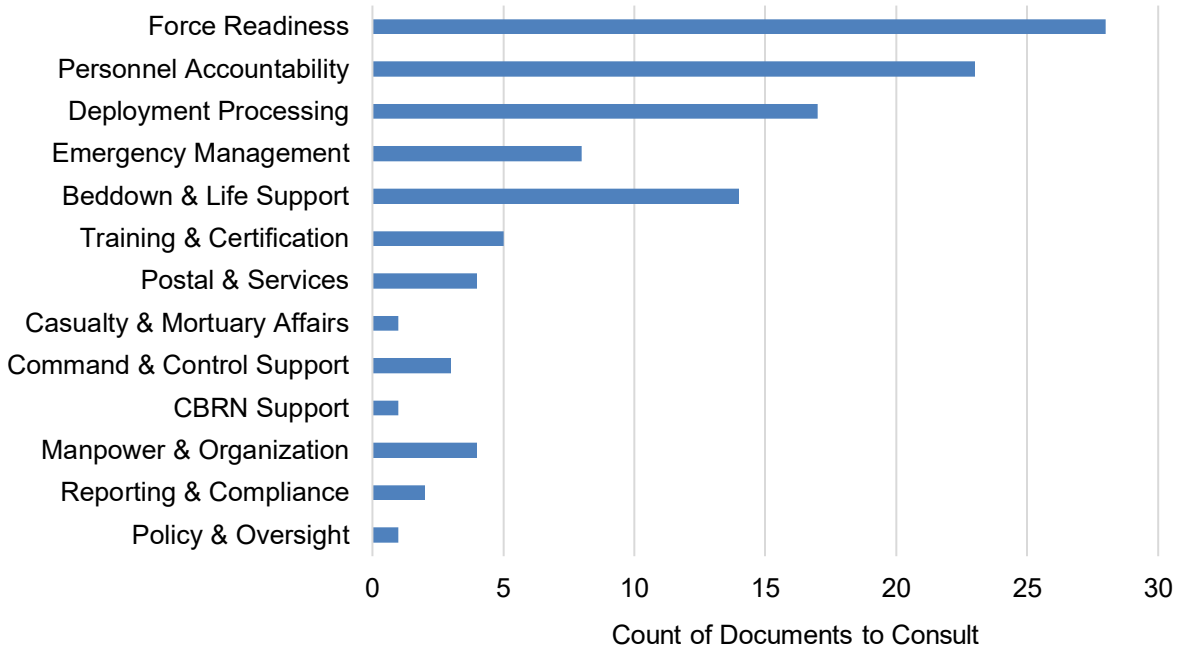
These findings suggest that HAF/A1XO contingency policy emphasizes processing the force, sustaining readiness, and maintaining accountability. This core provides a useful starting point for assessing whether policy gives personnel the execution guidance and decision authority needed to carry out these functions under operational constraints.

Deployment-Related Force Support Policy Is Dispersed Across Multiple Documents

We also examined how widely deployment- and contingency-related requirements are distributed across policy documents. Rather than counting the total number of requirements, this measure counts the number of distinct documents containing at least one mandatory, unit-level requirement associated with each FS function. It therefore provides an indicator of policy dispersion: the extent to which relevant direction is distributed across multiple sources rather than concentrated in a smaller set of documents.

Policy dispersion varied substantially across functions. Force readiness appeared in the largest number of documents, followed by personnel accountability and deployment processing. In contrast, several functions appeared in comparatively few documents (see Figure 2.2). This pattern indicates that readiness and accountability are governed through a more distributed policy structure than other deployment-related functions.

Figure 2.2. Number of Deployment/Contingency Policy Documents Containing Requirement Language by Force Support Function



A high document count does not necessarily mean that a function is more important, more difficult to perform, or governed by poor policy. Nor does it establish that every unit must consult every identified document during every contingency. Individual units may rely on local procedures, automated systems, training, or the institutional knowledge of experienced personnel. Instead, the measure identifies functions for which mandatory unit-level direction is spread across a larger number of policy sources.

This dispersion may matter most when personnel must identify applicable requirements quickly, reconcile guidance developed for different purposes, or address conditions not covered by routine local procedures, although tools that help locate and compare requirements could reduce these difficulties. In such cases, the burden lies in determining which source applies, how requirements relate, and whether a separate authority governs exceptions.

The finding is particularly relevant to force readiness and personnel accountability because these functions are central to contingency execution and appear across multiple policy lanes, including readiness, deployment, personnel, emergency management, and FS guidance. Deployment processing also spans a relatively large number of sources, although fewer than readiness and accountability. Together, these results suggest that the policy environment for key HAF/A1XO contingency functions is not organized around a single, easily identifiable execution pathway.

This finding does not establish that the current policy structure impedes performance. It does, however, identify functions for which requirements are distributed across many sources and

where a more integrated presentation may warrant consideration. Targeted consolidation, cross-referencing, or deployment-specific execution guides could make relevant requirements easier to identify and synthesize during contingency operations, although we did not assess whether policy dispersion currently creates execution difficulties in practice.

Deployment-Related Force Support Requirements Place Greater Emphasis on Procedural Direction

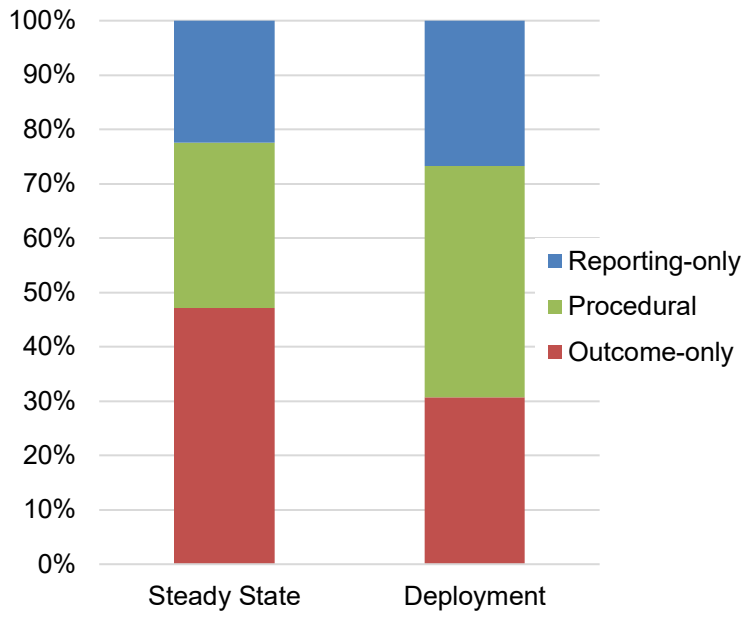
We also analyzed how policy requirements direct units to act. For each mandatory requirement, we classified the language as outcome-only, procedural, or reporting-only. Outcome-only requirements state what units must achieve (i.e., the end state) without specifying the means of execution (i.e., how to achieve the outcome). Procedural requirements identify an action, process, system, or other mechanism for carrying out the requirement. Reporting-only requirements direct units to submit, validate, notify, or otherwise provide information without describing the underlying execution process. We then compared the distribution of these requirement types across steady-state and deployment or contingency contexts.

The results show a clear shift in the form of policy direction. In steady-state contexts, outcome-only requirements made up the largest share of coded requirements. In deployment contexts, outcome-only requirements declined substantially, while procedural requirements became the most common form of direction (see Figure 2.3).

This pattern suggests that deployment-related policy places greater emphasis on specifying how units should carry out required tasks. That shift is consistent with the need for more standardized execution when units operate under compressed timelines, changing conditions, and reduced tolerance for inconsistent practices. Procedural guidance can help establish common expectations across organizations that must coordinate quickly or execute unfamiliar tasks.

Reporting requirements remained a substantial component of policy direction in both contexts. Their share increased modestly in deployment-related requirements rather than declining as procedural guidance increased. As a result, deployment-related policy often combines two demands: units must follow more specified procedures while continuing to provide information on status, readiness, accountability, and compliance.

Figure 2.3. Distribution of Outcome-Only, Procedural, and Reporting-Only Requirements in Steady State and Deployment/Contingency Contexts



The pattern also differed by function. Deployment processing, force readiness, and emergency management more often provided step-by-step or process-based direction. Personnel accountability, training and certification, and beddown and life support more often focused on reporting status or confirming completion.

These findings do not establish that procedural or reporting requirements are inherently burdensome or inappropriate. They identify a structural feature of the policy environment: during deployment, policy places more emphasis on how units execute work without proportionally reducing the information and reporting obligations that accompany that work. The next step is to assess whether the resulting combination provides units with sufficient flexibility, authority, and practical support to manage changing conditions.

Policy Often Assigns Execution Locally Without Making Decision Authority Visible

Deployment policy must do two things at once: tell personnel what they are responsible for doing and make clear who can make decisions when conditions change, resources are limited, or requirements conflict. When policy assigns work to one level but does not clearly identify who can approve exceptions, set priorities, or accept risk, units may need to resolve those questions while they are already trying to execute the requirement. Thus, we next examined decision authority and execution responsibility.

For each deployment- and contingency-related requirement, we identified the level expected to carry out the action and the level, if any, that the policy text identified as having decision authority. We treated approval, validation, and exception authority as indicators of decision authority. We classified both decision and execution levels as Headquarters Air Force, MAJCOM, installation, unit, functional staff, or unspecified (see Figure 2.4).

This analysis shows whether the policy requirement itself makes the relationship between decisionmaking and execution clear; it does not establish where authority exists in practice.

Figure 2.4. Decision Authority and Execution Level for Deployment- and Contingency-Related Policy Requirements

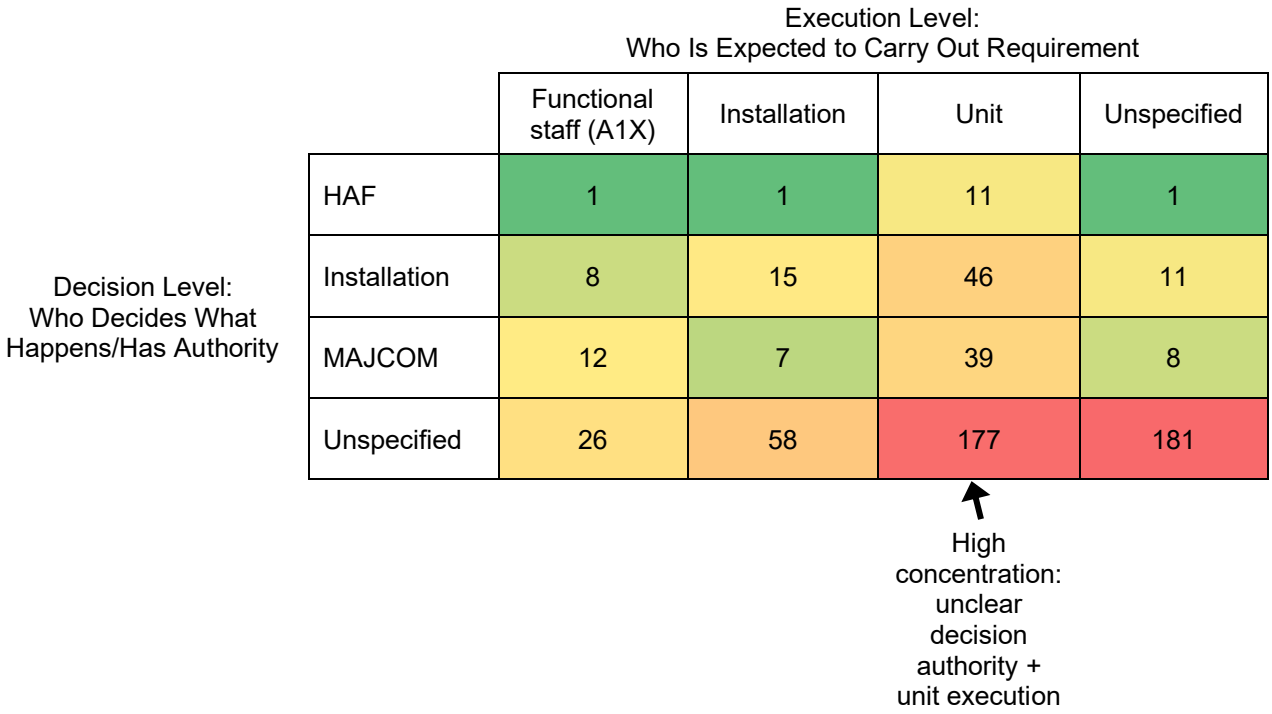


Figure 2.4 shows that units carry out a large share of deployment-related requirements across nearly every decision level. Units execute requirements when policy identifies decision authority at Headquarters Air Force, MAJCOM, or installation level. Units also execute the largest share (177 of 442, or 40 percent) of requirements for which the policy text does not identify a decision authority. The largest concentration of unit requirements appears where decision authority is unspecified. In these cases, the policy directs units to act but does not identify, within the requirement itself, who can set priorities, approve an exception, resolve a conflict, or accept risk when conditions prevent full compliance.

This pattern does not mean that no decision authority exists elsewhere. Command relationships, related instructions, local procedures, or established practice may provide that direction. However, when policy does not make decision rights visible, units may need to identify the relevant authority while carrying out the requirement.

This distinction matters most when requirements involve competing demands, limited personnel, or time-sensitive exceptions. In such cases, policy may specify what units must do without indicating which requirement takes priority, what local changes are permitted, or when a decision must be elevated. The resulting structure can leave local personnel responsible for resolving tradeoffs that are not explicit in the requirement itself.

Summary

Policy consistently emphasizes a core set of functions, particularly force readiness, personnel accountability, and deployment processing. Further, policy governing these functions is distributed unevenly across the broader policy environment. For some high-priority functions, mandatory unit-level requirements appear across a large number of distinct policy documents. Force readiness and personnel accountability showed the greatest policy dispersion, followed by deployment processing. This does not mean that units consult every identified document during every contingency, nor does it establish that the current policy structure prevents effective execution. However, it does show that the governing requirements for these functions are spread across multiple sources rather than organized around a single, readily identifiable execution pathway.

We also found that deployment-related requirements more often provide procedural direction than steady-state requirements. Policy therefore becomes more specific about how units should carry out certain tasks in deployment contexts. At the same time, reporting requirements remain a substantial part of the deployment-policy environment. As a result, units may need to follow more detailed execution procedures while continuing to meet significant reporting and status-tracking obligations. This combination makes it important for policy to clarify which reporting requirements are essential, how reporting connects to execution, and where units have flexibility when time or personnel are limited.

Finally, we found that policy frequently assigns execution at the unit level without always making decision authority visible in the requirement text. Units are expected to carry out requirements regardless of whether policy locates decision authority at Headquarters Air Force, MAJCOM, installation, or no specified level. The largest concentration of unit-executed requirements occurred where policy directs units to execute but did not identify a decision authority within the requirement itself. This does not mean that decision authority is absent in practice. Related policy, command relationships, local procedures, and established practice may provide that direction. Our analysis did not, however, establish whether personnel can readily identify the applicable authority when exceptions, competing priorities, or resource constraints arise.

These findings suggest that the way policy is organized and expressed may contribute to execution risk. Policy may establish the required outcome, assign work to units, and provide direction in multiple sources without always identifying a common execution pathway or making

decision rights explicit. These structural features are most consequential in the functions that policy itself treats as central to deployment and contingency operations.

Chapter 3. Training and Readiness

Training is the principal institutional mechanism for preparing FS Airmen to perform in deployed and contingency environments. Across our interviews and workshops, members of the FS community consistently described a training system in which readiness preparation competes with immediate garrison demands, access to realistic and hands-on practice is uneven, and training does not always cover the capabilities Airmen will need downrange.[10]

This chapter covers five topics. We begin with a brief summary of FS readiness training requirements. The rest of the chapter examines four dimensions of the FS training and readiness challenge. First, we assess whether units have sufficient time, resources, and organizational support to conduct readiness training and can provide FS Airmen access to training opportunities. Second, we identify capability and competency areas in which FS leaders and personnel reported that current training does not adequately prepare Airmen for deployed responsibilities. Third, we examine whether readiness assessment and reporting systems measure demonstrated proficiency and provide an authoritative view of Airmen's current qualifications. Finally, we describe enterprise-level reforms, exercises, and local initiatives intended to address these gaps.

The challenge concerns not only how much training Airmen receive but also whether that training addresses operationally relevant capabilities, provides realistic opportunities to practice them, and produces proficiency that the FS enterprise can reliably assess and track.

Force Support Readiness Training Requirements

FS readiness training falls into three categories: 1) home station readiness training (HSRT); 2) Silver Flag; and 3) advanced or mission-specific training.[11] The first of these, HSRT, occurs at home station, overseen by local units (FSSs). Specific HSRT requirements vary by AFSC. Table 3.1 lists HSRT capability requirements by primary AFSC, sorted so that capabilities with the most reporting requirements are listed first, followed by capabilities with fewer reporting requirements.[12]

[10] Findings and quotations are based on perceptions of participants at the time we spoke with them and represent qualitative insights rather than quantifiable, statistically representative results. Quotations are intended as illustrative examples of broader themes we heard across interviews and workshops.

[11] Headquarters Air Force, Deputy Chief of Staff, Manpower, Personnel, and Services, Directorate of Plans and Integration, Force Support Career Field Management and Readiness Division (HAF/A1XO), *A1 Readiness Training Smart Card*, undated.

[12] FS AFSCs also have cross-utilization training requirements, as well as ready Airman training requirements for deployment. For more on this program, see Department of the Air Force Instruction 10-405, *Ready Airman Training*, U.S. Department of the Air Force, August 28, 2023.

Table 3.1. Force Support Home Station Readiness Training Requirements by Specialty

Capability	AFSC					
	FS Officer (38F)	HRA (3F0)	Services (3F1)	E&T (3F2)	Manpower (3F3)	EO (3F4)
Command and Control	X	X	X	a	a	a
Contingency Shelters	X	X	X	a	a	a
Force Beddown Planning	X	X	X	a	a	a
Search and Recovery	X	X	X	a	a	a
Total Force Personnel Accountability	X	X	b	a	a	a
Casualty Reporting	X	X				
Personnel Readiness Ops, HRA Program Management	X	X				
Beddown of Forces	X		X			
Contingency Feeding Operations	X		X			
Contingency Mortuary Operations	X		X			
Operational Contracting Support	X		X			
Morale, Welfare, and Recreation	X		X			
GFM, Deployment Planning/execution and PERSCO Mission/CONOPS	b	X				
DCAPES PERSCO Functions	b	X				
Postal Operations	b	X				
Expeditionary Manpower	b				X	
Education and Training	b			X		
DCAPES SEI 295 Proficiency		X				
Equal Opportunity						X
Military and Family Readiness	b					

SOURCE: HAF/A1XO, Force Support Readiness Training Matrix, March 31, 2026. Table does not include two special duty identifiers, nor specialized training. For example, HRA (3F0) Airmen earn special experience identifiers for DCAPES, Postal services, and Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System. Services (3F1) Airmen have Expeditionary Electric Kitchen and Portable Electric Kitchen Computer Based Training, as well as a series of forklift trainings as secondary reporting requirements. Airmen in these enlisted AFSCs, as well as 38F officers, also have a requirement for a course on Force Support readiness operational capabilities.
NOTES: We use the following to indicate FS HSRT requirements: X = primary reporting requirement, a = secondary reporting requirement, and b = recommended training. HRA = Human Resources and Administration. E&T = Education and Training. EO = Equal Opportunity. GFM = Global Force Management. PERSCO = Personnel Support for Contingency Operations; CONOPS = concept of operations; DCAPES = Deliberate and Crisis Action Planning and Execution Segments; SEI = special experience identifier.

The second category of FS readiness training is Silver Flag, which "provides training on core functions to prepare warfighters to deliver Force Support mission essential readiness capabilities." At Silver Flag sites, FS Airmen receive hands-on training, working together as teams to perform mission essential tasks. Specifically, FS Airmen perform "bare base beddown, sustainment, and recovery operations using basic expeditionary airfield resource assets in a

realistic environment."[13] Silver Flag has four approved locations: Ramstein Air Base, Germany; Andersen Air Force Base, Guam; Dobbins Air Reserve Base, Georgia; and Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida.[14] Per FS readiness policy, FS units are expected to ensure FS Airmen complete Silver Flag during the Reset Phase or the Prepare Phase of the Air Force Force Generation (AFFORGEN) cycle.[15]

The third and final category of FS readiness training is advanced or mission-specific training. Examples of advanced or mission-specific training include Rapid Engineer Deployable Heavy Operations Repair Squadron Engineers (RED HORSE), Nonappropriated Fund (NAF) accounting, contracting officer representative, Contingency Wartime Planners Course, and Expeditionary Manpower Management Course.[16] Because this category of training is AFSC or mission-specific, training delivery comes from different sources (e.g., from the career field) and in different formats (e.g., formal courses, computer-based training).

Several DAF A1 offices and organizations are involved in FS readiness training. HAF/A1XO is the functional office of primary responsibility for FS readiness training curriculum and works with FS Centers (e.g., AFSVC) to develop and manage the curricula. Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center (AFIMSC) oversees Silver Flag sites. MAJCOM A1s provide oversight of readiness training for their units, to include Silver Flag program oversight. FSS leaders ensure training program compliance and are responsible for ensuring that FS Airmen are trained for contingency and deployment environments.[17] Specifically, FSSs are responsible for providing instructors and resources (e.g., training equipment) to deliver HSRT and finding opportunities for FS Airmen to attend Silver Flag events and other trainings.[18]

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[13] Department of the Air Force Instruction 36-3802, *Force Support Readiness Programs*, U.S. Department of the Air Force, January 14, 2026, p. 27.

[14] Across its four sites, Silver Flag uses scenarios and associated mission-essential capabilities tailored to requirements in different areas of responsibility. Based on SME discussions, we learned that Tyndall Air Force Base exercises emergency contingency operations. Ramstein Air Base addresses theater facility support. Pacific Air Forces addresses hub and spoke operations. Dobbins Air Reserve Base exercises humanitarian and emergency-disaster response scenarios.

[15] For the FS community, Silver Flag is referred to as *Force Support Contingency Training* in the Automated Readiness Management System (ARIS). Note, however, that Silver Flag as a training program is not limited to the FS community; it is used by other combat support/combat service support communities in the DAF (e.g., civil engineering).

[16] Department of the Air Force Instruction 36-3802, 2026, pp. 30-31.

[17] For the full list of roles and responsibilities for FS readiness training, see Department of the Air Force Instruction 36-3802, *Force Support Readiness Programs*, U.S. Department of the Air Force, January 14, 2026.

[18] HAF/A1XO provides units with HSRT plans of instruction, instructor and student guides, and PowerPoint slide decks for HSRT modules.

Time, Resources, and Access for Readiness Training

Insufficient time, limited access to training resources, unclear organizational roles on readiness support, and constrained opportunities to attend exercises and formal courses were recurring themes across our interviews and workshops. Units reported that readiness training competes with immediate garrison-service demands, while realistic practice is limited by access to relevant equipment, operational systems, experienced instructors, and enterprise training capacity. This section examines these constraints in turn.

Garrison Demands Limit Time for Training

In interviews, FSS commanders described how they face challenges balancing time for readiness training with ongoing in-garrison demands. Our workshop participants agreed, rating the statement "Not enough protected time for training due to customer-support demands" as a top challenge for FS readiness.[19] Workshop participants expanded on this concern, describing how daily customer service demands, constant garrison mission taskings, and a lack of "protected" readiness time mean that training is routinely postponed, cut short, or never scheduled. One noncommissioned officer (NCO) put it plainly: "If training comes up against the daily mission, training always loses." Several participants in the workshop noted that even "monthly readiness days," where they exist, are rarely sufficient and often do not include all critical sections (e.g., DFAC staff rarely get coverage to participate).

Time constraints also affect other types of training. FSS commanders noted that in-garrison staffing shortages precluded sending FS Airmen to Silver Flag and other training exercises and courses.[20]

Customer expectations for base services can make it difficult for FSS commanders to protect time for readiness training because no enterprise standard defines how much service an installation is expected to provide. Where that level is set locally and informally, it can expand—a fitness center or ID card facility staying open into the evening, for example—and the manpower hours it consumes come from the same pool the squadron needs for readiness training. In our discussions, SMEs identified a draft DAF capability-leveling effort and existing service-delivery guidance as potential sources of enterprise baselines that define service levels per function, including hours of operation and minimum staffing. The value of a baseline of this kind is that it establishes not only what an installation must provide, but also that service beyond

[19] Our FSS workshop participants were asked to rate 20 statements in terms of importance as a challenge to FS readiness. The rating scale was from 1 (not important) to 5 (extremely important). Based on 21 responses, this statement was rated as "very important" (average rating of 4.19). See Appendix C for details on the workshop methodology.

[20] At least one Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) location found a solution: pay for a Silver Flag instructor to come to them. SMEs who described this arrangement stated that their location had the requisite equipment for realistic, hands-on training and had enough Airmen who would need the training. CONUS-based units might not have the equipment or Airmen to make this option feasible.

that level is discretionary. An FSS commander could then propose a temporary, bounded reduction in the discretionary portion in order to conduct readiness training, and wing and installation leadership would have a common reference point for accepting it — rather than weighing the request against expectations that have no documented limit.[21]

Units Have Limited Resources to Deliver Realistic Readiness Training

Units also face constraints in delivering realistic, hands-on HSRT. Although the materials provided to units include plans of instruction, instructional guides, and presentation slides, effective local training requires units to adapt those materials to anticipated operating conditions and provide opportunities to practice with relevant equipment and systems. Interview and workshop participants identified limitations in both areas.

FS Airmen's deployed experiences can vary widely based on theater and mission requirements, which presents a challenge for addressing the contextual variations across theaters and mission sets. HSRT instructional material now includes a range of scenarios across the Competition Continuum (e.g., Large Scale Combat Operations, Humanitarian Assistance, Bare Base).[22] However, units are expected to select among these scenarios with limited guidance on which conditions to prioritize. Local delivery also depends on FS Airmen with prior deployment experience serving as instructors. Although that experience can strengthen training, the backgrounds of available instructors may shape which scenarios and lessons receive the most attention. Consequently, locally delivered HSRT may reflect the experience available within a unit more closely than the conditions its Airmen are most likely to encounter.

The content refresh completed in early 2026 addressed some of these scenario gaps, but it did not resolve the delivery problem.[23] Participants reported that HSRT received mixed reviews: while updated content was generally seen as an improvement, the quality of local instruction drew consistent criticism. Instructors without recent deployment experience tend to revert to slide-based policy recitation, reproducing the classroom dynamic the revised content was designed to move beyond. The result is that two units receiving nominally identical HSRT may receive training of substantially different quality depending on how much operational experience their available instructors hold. Participants pointed to mobile training teams and formal instructor preparation programs as potential corrective actions that have not yet been adopted at scale.

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[21] We did not independently assess the content or authority of the draft playbook or related guidance, and it remains unclear whether the proposed baselines would be sufficiently authoritative, widely understood, or feasible to apply under current staffing conditions.

[22] FSS leaders described HSRT as focusing on generic bare-base scenarios rather than including AOR-specific details. However, the timing of the FSS commander interviews occurred right around when updated HSRT content was released so many FSS commanders might not have seen the updated HSRT materials when speaking with us.

[23] We reviewed the updated FS HSRT training content to confirm scenario-based content is in the new HSRT material. Concerns about training delivery came from our interview and workshop participants.

Units also reported limited access to equipment needed for hands-on training. For example, FS Airmen may be expected to operate forklifts, build pallets, and handle materiel in deployed environments, but the necessary equipment is not typically available to FSSs at home station. Some FSS commanders also reported training with outdated Single Pallet Expeditionary Kitchens (SPEKs) that differ from the equipment Airmen are likely to encounter downrange. These limitations can leave Airmen familiar with required tasks in principle but without sufficient opportunities to practice them under realistic conditions. For example, an FSS leader said,

> Not only are they providing meals and cooking, but they're building palettes, dropping forklifts. They're being called to do a number of things. That's where our home station readiness training is failing.

Interview and workshop participants identified similar constraints on training that require access to the Deliberate and Crisis Action Planning and Execution System (DCAPES). DCAPES is a classified system used for personnel accountability during deployments and contingency operations. Human Resources and Administration (HRA) Airmen receive instruction on DCAPES as part of their preparation for Personnel Support for Contingency Operations (PERSCO), but the system is not generally available at the unit level. As a result, FS personnel have limited opportunities to practice using DCAPES before deployment. Although a formal DCAPES course is available and SMEs reported that HAF/A1 was working to provide an unclassified training capability, many FS Airmen continue to learn about the system indirectly through classroom materials rather than hands-on use.[24]

Organization Roles for Readiness Support Are Unclear

Workshop participants also described uncertainty about organizational responsibility for supporting unit-level readiness training. They reported that installations frequently seek readiness guidance from FS centers, although those centers lack formal authority to direct unit activity or resolve policy questions. Participants also perceived that direct engagement between HAF and units could bypass or supersede center involvement, limiting the centers' ability to provide consistent support. They called for DAF guidance to define more clearly the readiness-related roles and responsibilities of HAF, centers, MAJCOMs, installations, and units.

A related but distinct gap concerns the timing of policy communication. FSS commanders reported that HAF or MAJCOM guidance frequently reaches them at the same time as, or after, it is released to the field, leaving FSS commanders unable to prepare before Airmen begin asking questions. Because FSSs are the first point of contact for manpower and personnel policy

[24] The DAF has a DCAPES training course but attendance is limited and focuses on those who require DCAPES use, which includes personnel in Manpower offices, Installation Personnel Readiness (IPR) offices, assigned to UTCs that require a 295 Special Experience Identifier, or preparing to deploy on a UTC requiring DCAPES access. See Department of the Air Force Instruction 36-3802, *Force Support Readiness Programs*, U.S. Department of the Air Force, January 14, 2026, p. 31.

questions, arriving behind the information curve creates a credibility problem that compounds the authority gap described above: commanders are expected to explain and implement policy they have not yet had time to digest. As one FSS commander described the experience,

> A lot of things get out before I've had a chance to digest the thing. Airmen and NCOs get so much information before I've been able to digest and pick up the phone... I'm always way behind the curve trying to figure out the lefts and rights of what just happened.

The organizational clarity participants called for therefore extends beyond defining readiness roles. It also includes ensuring that policy guidance reaches FSS leaders with sufficient lead time to be useful.

Few Opportunities to Attend Training Exercises, Events, and Courses

FS Airmen's access to exercises and formal courses is constrained at both the unit and enterprise levels. As noted above, continuing garrison workloads can make it difficult for FSSs to release Airmen for training. Even when units can make personnel available, capacity at enterprise training venues limits the number of Airmen who can participate.

Silver Flag is a principal source of training for FS Airmen preparing to operate in contingency environments. According to SMEs, the DAF plans to vary scenarios at each site so that personnel who attend more than once can encounter different operating conditions.

FSSs reported difficulty releasing Airmen to attend Silver Flag because of their garrison workloads. Silver Flag also has limited throughput across its four sites. Because the program cannot accommodate the entire eligible population, the DAF prioritizes attendance for personnel preparing to deploy during their current force-generation cycle. As one FS SME we interviewed explained, describing the effect of capacity limits on how the requirement is applied,

> Silver Flag is not mandatory for readiness reporting because of throughput. This is because of capacity at the Silver Flag sites. There are only four sites and so many classes. So, [the Air Force] had to take a targeted approach. It used to be that you went every two or three years, or three if you're in the Guard. Under AFFORGEN, it changed…if it is your current AFFORGEN cycle, you go to Silver Flag."

Other training venues can also provide FS Airmen with realistic, hands-on experience. Combat Support Training Ranges (CSTRs), operated by AFIMSC, offer training aligned with Air Force deployment requirements and evolving force-presentation models.[25] However, participants reported that FS Airmen also have limited opportunities to train at CSTRs.

Together, these findings show that access to realistic training depends both on units' ability to release Airmen and on the capacity of enterprise training venues. Consequently, participation

[25] Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, "USAF to Introduce Air Expeditionary Wing 2.0," January 23, 2026. As of May 29, 2026: https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/4387429/usaf-to-introduce-air-expeditionary-wing-20/.

may be concentrated among personnel approaching deployment rather than distributed broadly enough to build and sustain readiness across the FS community.

Training Gaps in Selected Capabilities and Competencies

Interviews and workshops identified gaps in preparation for several capabilities and competencies needed in deployed and contingency environments.[26] We organize these findings into two groups. The first consists of FS capabilities addressed by dedicated HSRT modules, suggesting limitations in the content, delivery, or practical application of existing training. The second consists of cross-cutting competencies that FS Airmen need both in garrison and in contingency and deployment settings but are especially important in the latter context. FSS commanders we interviewed described these competencies as important for FS Airmen to have, especially while deployed: flexibility and adaptability; critical thinking and problem-solving; and communication and customer service. Collectively, FS Airmen need these competencies to deliver services and manage expectations of those being served. FSS commanders also cited the ability to communicate effectively with joint and multinational partners as a need for FS Airmen who deploy.[27]

The capability and competency gaps discussed below are illustrative of recurring or consequential concerns raised by participants; they are not intended to represent a comprehensive or ranked assessment of FS training requirements.

Capability Gaps

Participants identified gaps in three capabilities for which HSRT includes dedicated training modules: mortuary affairs, contracting and acquisition, and beddown and bare-base operations. The existence of these modules indicates that the capabilities are recognized in the formal training program; the concerns below relate principally to the depth, realism, and practical application of that training.

Mortuary Affairs

FSS commanders identified mortuary affairs as a significant training gap and described it as a high-consequence, no-fail mission. Several viewed the capability as an outlier within the broader

[26] For purposes of this discussion, we define *competencies* as Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, and Other Characteristics that produce behaviors aligned to mission success. *Capabilities* are defined as abilities to achieve desired operational effects under specified conditions. Competencies are at the individual Airman's level, whereas capabilities are at the unit/element level and go beyond competencies to include other considerations (e.g., equipment needed to execute the mission). In our discussion of competency gaps, we note that competency development is part of HSRT but are not the sole focus of particular HSRT modules; the competencies are needed across a range of mission sets and AORs.

[27] In our FSS commander interviews, we asked participants to describe competencies needed in garrison, deployed, or both contexts. We later asked them to identify any training gaps, which is when they discussed the need for FS Airmen to be able to communicate with joint and multinational partners while deployed.

FS portfolio because some mortuary affairs responsibilities involve technical, medical-adjacent, and emotionally demanding work that FS Airmen do not routinely perform in garrison. Participants reported that Airmen may receive limited preparation for providing interpersonal support and may have little prior experience handling human remains. One FSS leader described the perceived mismatch between assigned responsibilities and available preparation:

> The mortuary gap…It's an additional duty for our Airmen. I want to talk to who made that decision. It's extremely technical…We're not credentialed for it. We do a training and look at some slides, but I'm tasked with being able to oversee a doctor. I'm supposed to counsel people, and I'm given no counseling background... I'm supposed to be able to do the PPE [personal protective equipment] for these tasks. And it's a no fail mission. It's our biggest gap, because we ask our Airmen with no credentialing. I'm not certified to review the work of a medical doctor...The other services are recruiting former funeral directors, PhDs in Chemistry.

Our discussions with FS personnel serving in mortuary affairs roles also indicated that opportunities for hands-on contingency training are limited. SMEs described responsibilities spanning home-station and contingency environments. Home-station personnel may support cases originating downrange after a service member's remains are returned to the member's home station, while also coordinating with civilian funeral homes and navigating differences between military requirements and civilian laws or procedures governing the handling and disposition of remains. The breadth of these duties, together with the substantial emotional demands placed on personnel performing them, complicates efforts to develop effective training and incorporate realistic mortuary affairs and search-and-recovery activities into HSRT.

Contracting and Acquisition

FSS leaders also identified gaps in contracting and acquisition. Depending on the mission, deployed Airmen may shift from directly providing a service to monitoring contractors who perform that work. Participants reported that current training does not adequately prepare Airmen to interpret contract requirements, understand applicable contingency procedures, or perform associated quality-assurance responsibilities. For instance, one FSS commander commented:

> We need to get our Airmen more knowledgeable on engaging with and reading contracts. We need them to be able to be the QA Airmen we need. So, services troops, we need to learn the paper side before heading over there...

These concerns suggest a need for role-specific preparation that enables deployed FS Airmen to understand performance requirements, coordinate effectively with contracting specialists, and carry out any contractor-oversight responsibilities assigned to them.

Beddown and Bare Base Operations

FSS leaders identified gaps in preparing Airmen to establish and sustain expeditionary food, lodging, and related support functions in austere environments. Participants reported that current

training does not consistently provide Airmen with the practical experience needed to set up these functions, operate associated equipment, or adapt service delivery when standard equipment or resources are unavailable. One participant used expeditionary feeding to illustrate this concern:

> We don't do a great job with knowing how to build a SPEK kitchen and then knowing what to do and how to feed people when the SPEK kitchen is gone. Like, how do you go about getting money to buy a bunch of pizzas?

As discussed earlier, limited access to equipment such as SPEKs further constrain opportunities for hands-on practice. Participants in the C-NAF A1 workshop also reported instances in which FS Airmen experienced difficulty establishing bare-base support at coalition locations, including in support of partner-nation missions. These observations suggest that training should prepare Airmen both to operate standard expeditionary systems and to sustain essential services when expected equipment, infrastructure, or supply arrangements are unavailable.

These capability gaps also reflect the operational conditions emphasized in training. Enterprise readiness training has historically been calibrated to the logistics-rich, contractor-supported environments characteristic of sustained Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT) operations, which came to be seen as the expectation. Participants in our FS organization workshops observed that this implicit calibration leaves FS Airmen underprepared for the austere, dispersed, and logistically thin conditions a Pacific-theater or large-scale peer conflict would present. More than one FS leader described having trained for conditions that bore little resemblance to what they encountered when deployed. Recommended actions from these workshops identified area of responsibility (AOR) and mission-reality tailoring as a way to orient priorities toward the most demanding and most probable operational environments.

Competency Gaps

FSS commanders also identified gaps in cross-cutting competencies that FS Airmen need across a range of deployed and contingency environments. These included coordinating and communicating with joint and multinational partners and delivering services to personnel operating under stressful, resource-constrained conditions. Unlike the capability gaps discussed above, these competencies apply across multiple FS functions and mission settings.

Joint / Multinational Communication

FSS commander interviewees noted that skills for engaging and working in a joint or multinational environment were typically not part of readiness training back at home station. Skills for operating alongside Army, coalition partners, and in joint environments are largely learned only after arriving downrange. For example, an FSS leader described these related challenges:

> As they monitor food supplies, how do you communicate to logistics planners that 'I need a palette position on a jet now. I need to get MREs and food supplies to this location.' We're working on the cross-cutting lingo and cross-service language differences. In the theatre now, it's something that they've never trained for. They've never trained on how to speak Army.

Workshop participants also discussed gaps in preparing FS Airmen for communicating in joint environments.[28] Like FSS commanders, they shared that FS Airmen are not trained on how to communicate with Army and other sister service partners until they deploy. Although some formal courses address joint environments (e.g., a planner's course at Maxwell), access to those courses is limited. As one participant put it, "We're not living and breathing it, and we're not giving it to younger Airmen."

Service Delivery and Expectation Management in Contingency Environments

While FS Airmen may have opportunities to develop customer service skills in garrison,[29] the requirements in this area look different during deployments. Interpersonal skills and service delivery in high-stress, unfamiliar environments differ significantly from garrison experience, and FSS leaders report that current training is not preparing FS Airmen appropriately. For example, one stated:

> We learned recently that some of our Airmen weren't prepared to take on the roles and responsibilities of what they were going to do... everyone comes to us then they're stressed, so customer service will go a long way in reducing stress.

Some of the SMEs we interviewed noted that customers in theater (e.g., DAF commanders, other Airmen) might expect a level of service that is not available but has been in other theaters, notably AFCENT. An FS SME explained,

> Since 2001, the Air Force has been using the AFCENT model for everything. There's always an argument. We'll open up small bases in Africa, the mindset is that if you are going to Africa, you are going to get the same level of service that you would get at AFCENT and that did not happen... For the customers – you are not getting the same service you are getting at AFCENT because we don't have that capability. But you have the same expectations.

FS Airmen have to learn how to navigate these expectations while trying to learn their own roles and responsibilities.

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[28] Before the workshop, we asked participants to complete a 20-question poll about the importance of specific types of challenges or gaps for FS readiness. Questions were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important). Participants rated the statement "Under-preparation of Force Support Airmen for joint, multinational, or interagency environments common in wartime operations" as a very important challenge for FS readiness (average rating of 4.00 out of 5-point importance scale). See Appendix C for details about the poll.

[29] Despite their concerns about FS Airmen's customer service skills while deployed, FSS commanders noted that FS Airmen exhibit great adaptability and flexibility in garrison: they get the job done despite constrained resources and shifting requirements.

The two competency gaps above, namely joint communication and customer service under stress, relate to another gap identified by participants in our FS organization workshops: FS Airmen are rarely trained to apply what they know when conditions are ambiguous, procedures do not fit, or the situation is changing. Scenario-based decision-making, mission planning under incomplete information, and problem-solving outside established checklists must be developed through deliberate practice. That practice is reported to be largely absent from the FS training environment. Recommended actions from the FS organization workshops identified adaptability and mission-planning judgment as a distinct and fundamental training objective. This is an objective that task-based HSRT modules are not, by themselves, structured to develop.

Training and Readiness Assessment and Reporting

Across our interviews and workshops, we identified three related limitations in how the FS community assesses and reports training and readiness. We discuss each limitation below and then use formal course-completion records to illustrate the broader data problem.

Training Completion, Rather than Demonstrated Proficiency, Is Measured and Tracked

Participants expressed widespread concern that current readiness training does not always give FS Airmen opportunities to demonstrate competencies in realistic, operationally relevant training, and that demonstrated competencies are not measured and tracked in readiness reporting systems. Instead, workshop participants emphasized that existing systems generally record training attendance or on-the-job task completion.[30] As one attendee at an FS organization workshop observed, "It's possible to be green on the dashboard and still have a force that can't do what's needed downrange." This quote highlights two distinct issues. The first is what readiness standards measure: completion rather than demonstrated performance. The second is how much practice they require. Workshop participants described a single quarterly training event as sufficient to report readiness, but insufficient to build or sustain skill. This suggests that the form of measurement and the frequency and recency of training shape whether reported readiness reflects operational capability.

In general, workshop participants identified a need for more frequent hands-on, scenario-based training where demonstrated proficiency can be assessed.[31] Some participants also called

[30] Like other DAF communities, the FS community uses job qualification standards (JQSs) to assess on-the-job task proficiency. JQSs require someone (usually a supervisor) to certify that the Airman can complete the task. Local units are expected to maintain records of JQS completion using approved DAF forms, per policy. A majority of the tasks on a draft of a combined FS JQS form are focused on the garrison mission. For more on JQS policy, see Department of the Air Force Manual 36-2689, *Training Program*, U.S. Department of the Air Force, March 31, 2023, change 1, January 22, 2024.

[31] Participants did not describe how proficiency could be measured, just that there is a need for hands-on training where FS Airmen could demonstrate proficiency (e.g., show that they know how to use DCAPES to perform PERSCO tasks). Hands-on proficiency measures are not new to the DAF but are also not widely used for a variety of reasons, to include resource constraints. For a discussion of these types of challenges in the DAF aviation

for stronger quality-assurance mechanisms to determine whether reported readiness reflects demonstrated capability.[32]

Readiness Requirements Do Not Consistently Connect Training to Deployment Qualifications

Silver Flag illustrates this limitation. Its scenarios are designed to develop capabilities relevant to contingency operations, and policy ties attendance to the Reset or Prepare phase of the AFFORGEN cycle. But the requirement is AFSC- and assignment-dependent rather than universal, and it carries documented exceptions.[33] Silver Flag completion therefore does not function as a common qualification for FS Airmen who could deploy, limiting the enterprise's ability to use it as a formal indicator of preparation for contingency roles or as a basis for matching trained personnel to those roles.[34] Whether it should serve that function is a separate question, bearing on training capacity as much as on policy; we discuss this in Chapter 5.

Training and Readiness Data Are Fragmented

Workshop participants reported that Mission Essential Tasks and the Defense Readiness Reporting System (DRRS) could serve as forcing functions for FS readiness, but only if they are supported by sufficient training capacity and clear guidance. Participants described relevant information as distributed across systems supporting training, readiness, deployment, and accountability. These include (but are not limited to) MyTraining, the Automated Readiness Information System (ARIS), AFFORGEN Connect, DRRS, DCAPES, and local unit spreadsheets, and they perceived that there is no integrated view of the training and operational

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community, see Mark Toukan and David Schulker, *Improving U.S. Air Force Training Investments: Putting Proficiency First*, RAND Corporation, PE-A992-3, December 2022. Our evidence does not support a claim that proficiency thresholds are set too low, because for most tasks explicit performance thresholds do not exist. Assessment in the current plans of instruction relies largely on knowledge-based checks rather than evaluated task performance.

[32] Views from workshop participants diverged on the need for inspections. Some called for a quality assurance (QA) or standards and evaluation function while others argued that exercises produce more genuine readiness than compliance-focused inspections. For broader context, in 2026, DAF leaders announced annual readiness inspections and surprise combat-readiness inspections for DAF units. See Cox, Matthew, "Air Force Orders No-Notice Readiness Inspections to Hold Commanders to Account," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, January 29, 2026.

[33] FS readiness policy (DAFI 36-3802) states that "[u]nits will ensure members complete Silver Flag in the Reset or Prepare Phase of their AFFORGEN cycle." However, this same policy indicates that attendance requirements are outlined by AFSC in a training matrix that AF/A1XO manages and specific reporting requirements are in DRRS. There are also exceptions for Silver Flag attendance. For example, FS Airmen not assigned to FSSs are exempt from attending Silver Flag. Taken together, the requirement for Silver Flag appears to be AFSC and assignment-dependent, not a universal deployment requirement for all FS Airmen who might deploy. For more details on Silver Flag requirements and exceptions, see Department of the Air Force Instruction 36-3802, 2026, pp. 27-28.

[34] Although scheduling a course does not equate completing a course, Silver Flag is scheduled as *Force Support Contingency Training* in the Automated Readiness Management System (ARIS). That means it does show up in a readiness system as a scheduled course. If it is completed, it should also appear in an Airman's training record.

experience individual Airmen have completed. They identified DCAPES as a recurring concern because it is rarely used at home station and can be difficult to access in dispersed environments. In their view, these limitations can make accountability dependent on local practices and individual initiative rather than consistently enforced enterprise processes.

Formal Course Records Illustrate Data Limitations

Our analysis of training course-completion records for FS personnel illustrates potential gaps in readiness-relevant training courses maintained in FS Airmen's records. Table 3.2 shows counts of FS officer and enlisted personnel with records of completing formal training courses related to core FS capabilities needed in contingency and deployment environments. [35] Beyond the *Law of War (Basic)* course, both officer and enlisted populations show thin coverage and modest annual throughput. Two differences stand out. First, the DCAPES Wing Level course reaches roughly 20 percent of enlisted — nearly double the officer rate, as expected given DCAPES is primarily an enlisted personnel-accounting function. Second, the *FS Advanced Contingency Course* reaches only about 2 percent of enlisted versus 25 percent of officers, suggesting it has not yet penetrated the enlisted community. Overall, these findings might suggest that most of the FS community has limited formal training on FS readiness topics.

Table 3.2. Recommended Core-Readiness Training Course Completions

Course Group	Officer		Enlisted	
	Trained (ever)	% of Force	Trained (ever)	% of Force
A-14 Combat Skills[a]	--	--	151	1%
Basic Contingency Course	179	14%	911	7%
Combat Advisor[b]	6	<1%	--	--
Combat Airman Skills Training	40	3%	112	<1%
Contingency/Wartime Planning	98	8%	262	2%
DCAPES (Wing Level)	135	11%	2,674	20%
Evasion / Conduct After Capture	124	10%	923	7%
Expeditionary Manpower Management[c]	--	--	104	<1%
FS Advanced Contingency	319	25%	260	2%

[35] We examined formal course-completion records for two populations: 38F officers (FY 2025 force of 1,271) and enlisted Force Support personnel across 3F AFSCs (FY 2025 force of 13,452). Two RAND researchers with FS subject-matter expertise grouped courses into Recommended (core deployment-readiness), Theater/Duty-Specific, and Expected Basic Career categories; the officer and enlisted Recommended lists overlap but differ for AFSC-specific courses.

Course Group	Officer		Enlisted	
	Trained (ever)	% of Force	Trained (ever)	% of Force
FS Operational Leadership	159	13%	--	--
Law of War (Basic)[d]	1,137	89%	14,093	~105%
Mortuary Affairs (all variants)	415	33%	395	3%
PERSCO (all variants)	32	3%	132	1%
Silver Flag	25	2%	85	<1%

NOTE: Coverage counts distinct FS officer and enlisted personnel serving as of the FY 2025 count whose most recent 24 courses on record include the listed course. Unless otherwise indicated, officer population was 1,271 and enlisted population was 13,452.
[a] This course is nascent so counts remain small. [b] Niche officer billet. [c] Primarily a function for the Manpower (3F3) enlisted AFSC. [d] Near universal coverage for both populations; cumulative count for enlisted exceeds end-strength, resulting in 105%. This result indicates that some members completed the course more than once.

We also noticed gaps in records for certain courses in Table 3.2, particularly for PERSCO and Silver Flag. Neither population has recorded new Silver Flag completions in recent years (enlisted since FY 2018, officers since at least FY 2017), and no PERSCO-coded completions appear in either community since FY 2012. PERSCO competency is developed through an integrated pathway rather than a single course, and most PERSCO completions predate FY 2014 for officers and FY 2013 for enlisted. Silver Flag is a unit-level, multi-career-field event whose FS Contingency Training pipeline was suspended for most of the observation window. The implication is that formal course completion records are likely incomplete and might not be authoritative.

The lack of an authoritative enterprise system for tracking readiness-related training matters under phased force generation. Department of the Air Force Instruction (DAFI) 36-3802 ties specific training, such as Silver Flag, to defined phases of the force-generation cycle.[36] That construct works only if the enterprise can see, at any time, how much of the force holds the required training at the required recency, and can forecast when currency will lapse. A static count of courses on record cannot support phase-based force generation; records must show when training currency expires. This gap limits the information available to assess force-generation risk.

Efforts to Address Readiness Training Gaps

The FS community has undertaken several efforts to improve readiness training, including revisions to enterprise training programs, participation in large-scale exercises, and locally developed approaches to increasing realism and hands-on practice. These initiatives address several of the gaps identified above, but the A1 community has not systematically assessed their

[36] Department of the Air Force Instruction 36-3802, 2026.

reach, scalability, or effects on proficiency. This section describes enterprise-level efforts, local initiatives, and potential applications of simulation technology.

Enterprise-Level Efforts

In 2024, the Air Force reintroduced Silver Flag training for the Force Support community after a pause "to better align training requirements and curriculum with the needs of the AFFORGEN model."[37] According to a SME involved in the curriculum redesign, the changes transformed Silver Flag from a cumulative evaluation-focused event to a training event that "brought back instruction-based training and scenario-based learning." This redesign also aligned with a refresh of HSRT, completed in early 2026, so that mission essential capabilities are aligned between HSRT (a mandated element of readiness reporting) and Silver Flag (with targeted attendance for soon-to-be-deployers aligned with their force-generation cycle).

The Air Force also conducts exercises that provide opportunities for FS personnel to practice contingency tasks under more realistic conditions. In the Montauk Lightning series, for example, active-component and Air National Guard units train in a geographically dispersed, hub-and-spoke operating environment led by the 106th Rescue Wing FSS.[38] Exercise activities have included field feeding, personnel accountability, casualty and mortuary affairs, tent construction, and search-and-recovery operations under degraded communications.[39] Montauk Lightning II incorporated simulated human remains to increase the realism of search-and-recovery training.[40] These exercises demonstrate ways to integrate multiple FS capabilities into realistic scenarios, although the extent to which similar opportunities are available across the enterprise remains unclear.

Local FSS Efforts

FSS commanders also described local efforts to provide Airmen with realistic training despite limitations in time, equipment, and access to formal courses. Some units sent Airmen to participate in exercises with other military services, providing joint exposure that otherwise might not occur until deployment. One FSS commander described a search-and-recovery exercise conducted with the Army:

> [We] did a combined search and recovery training with the Army. I think working with our joint partners is really important…We used them a lot for

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[37] Debbie Aragon, "Force Support Contingency Training returns to Silver Flag," Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center Public Affairs, July 1, 2024. As of May 26, 2026: https://www.jbsa.mil/News/News/Article/3823699/force-support-contingency-training-returns-to-silver-flag/.

[38] Daniel Farrell, "Montauk Lightning II Exercise Puts 200 Force Support Airmen Through Realistic Combat Support Training," August 8, 2025. As of May 26, 2026: https://www.dvidshub.net/news/548485/montauk-lightning-ii-exercise-puts-200-force-support-airmen-through-realistic-combat-support-training.

[39] Farrell, 2025.

[40] Farrell, 2025.

> mortuary because they were the regional mortuary…The Airmen got to see what the soldiers do and how they do it, and I think it went really well.

FSS commanders also described adapting local facilities, equipment, and partnerships to create hands-on training opportunities. One commander described using life-size training aids and simulated remains to make a search-and-recovery exercise more realistic:

> One of the missions the FSS would be tasked with in a contingency environment is searching for human remains… Back in December, we wanted to get as many folks as possible through a super realistic search and recovery training. The team …acquired several life size dummies…and…meat, and had our team conduct search and recovery from one end of the contingency to the other.

Other locally developed approaches included:

- coordinating with a local Security Forces Squadron to provide basic field-security training;
- repurposing a former restaurant as a training kitchen; and
- implementing an automated scanning process to improve personnel-accountability procedures.

Some units have also conducted HSRT away from home station to increase exposure to unfamiliar conditions and gain access to equipment. In 2023, for example, the 140th Wing FSS traveled to Italy to conduct HSRT with active-component and Air National Guard FSS teams.[41] This approach provided opportunities to train with new partners and use resources not available at the unit's home station.

These examples show that units can develop creative responses to local training constraints. However, the study did not identify an enterprise mechanism for systematically capturing, assessing, and disseminating these practices across FSSs, FS centers, and other relevant organizations. Participants from our FS organization workshops likewise expressed interest in a shared mechanism for distributing training materials, videos, and lessons learned. Without such a mechanism, promising practices could remain dependent on local leadership and informal professional networks.

Potential Applications of Simulation and Virtual Reality

We did not identify an FS-specific application of virtual reality (VR) or simulation technology currently used for readiness training. However, based on discussions with AFIMSC

[41] We conducted a limited search for public-facing news stories about FSSs engaging in readiness training activities. Our search focused on articles written by DAF public affairs units made publicly available through the Google search engine and that included information on USAF force support training conducted between 2010 and 2025; search parameters included the terms "force support," "HSRT," "readiness," "exercise," and "training." The story about the 140th Wing FSS is from this source: 140th Wing Public Affairs, "140th Wing Force Support Squadron Deploys to Italy for Home Station Readiness Training," July 18, 2023. As of May 29, 2026: https://co.ng.mil/News/Archives/Article/3461709/140th-wing-force-support-squadron-deploys-to-italy-for-home-station-readiness-t/.

representatives, we learned that AFIMSC is exploring a virtual Combat Support Training Range, or "vCSTR," for other combat-support capabilities. Using VR headsets, software, and compatible equipment, the system is intended to support training in such areas as integrated base defense, postattack reconnaissance, command and control, and rapid airfield damage recovery.[42]

A few participants raised the potential of VR for FS readiness, though it was not a common theme. During an FSS workshop discussion about scenario-based training at home station, one participant suggested: "We sit them [FS Airmen] in front of a computer and there's a real person on the other side with scenario-based training, but maybe we could expose them to scenario-based training with VR." An FS training and readiness SME we interviewed also mentioned the potential of VR for FS readiness, citing the Army as having used VR to develop search and recovery training for mortuary affairs. This SME also mentioned VR could be useful for FS readiness training when physical equipment is not readily available for training (e.g., expeditionary kitchens). Although simulated environment in VR would not completely eliminate the need for hands-on practice with physical equipment, particularly when FS Airmen need to demonstrate the ability to safely operate equipment like forklifts, it might provide opportunities for practice that are not readily available at home station. Additional implementation considerations for VR use in readiness training would include development and procurement costs, facilities, instructor preparation, technical support, and evidence that the training transfers effectively to operational tasks.

Summary

FS readiness training is constrained by several mutually reinforcing challenges. Continuing garrison-service demands limit the time and personnel units can devote to readiness training and can prevent Airmen from attending exercises and formal courses. At the same time, limited access to relevant equipment, operational systems, experienced instructors, and enterprise training capacity restricts opportunities for realistic, hands-on practice. As a result, the training Airmen receive can vary according to local resources, leadership priorities, and available experience.

Participants identified gaps in preparation for several capabilities and cross-cutting competencies needed in deployed and contingency environments. These included mortuary affairs, contract and contractor oversight, beddown and bare-base operations, coordination with joint and multinational partners, and service delivery under stressful and resource-constrained conditions. Although these findings do not constitute a comprehensive assessment of all FS training requirements, they illustrate areas in which classroom instruction or task completion might not provide sufficient preparation for operational performance.

[42] Shannon Carabajal, "AFIMSC explores virtual training to enhance combat support readiness," webpage, AFIMSC Public Affairs, U.S. Air Force, November 18, 2025.

The FS community also lacks an authoritative, integrated view of current readiness. Existing systems more readily record attendance and task completion than demonstrated proficiency, while relevant information is distributed across multiple training, readiness, deployment, and accountability systems. The limitations of formal course-completion records further complicate efforts to determine who has received relevant training, whether that training remains current, and whether personnel can perform required tasks under contingency conditions.

Recent revisions to HSRT and Silver Flag, enterprise exercises, and locally developed training initiatives address portions of these challenges. However, their reach, scalability, and effects on proficiency have not been systematically assessed, and effective local practices are not consistently captured and shared across the enterprise. Because time, resource, proficiency, and data constraints reinforce each other, addressing any one alone will not close the readiness gap. Improving readiness requires protected training capacity, realistic practice, clear proficiency standards, and integrated readiness information, which are changes that must be pursued together. It will also require sufficient workforce experience and continuity to deliver and sustain training. Chapter 4 examines those personnel and manpower conditions.

Chapter 4. Personnel, Manpower, and Organization

Readiness training is the primary mechanism for preparing FS Airmen for deployment and contingency environments. But, as described in Chapter 3, that mechanism faces hard constraints such as too little protected time at home station, too little access to the equipment that makes training realistic, and too little visibility into who is truly proficient at wartime tasks. This chapter examines personnel constraints. Specifically, we describe the mismatch between how the FS force is manned, managed, and structured and what that means for FS wartime readiness. We organize this discussion around four interrelated topics:

- **Workforce experience and continuity** challenges relate to insufficient local access to experienced midgrade NCOs and deployment experience that is unevenly distributed across specialties and installations.
- **Manpower models and workforce requirements** produce conditions for mismatches between workforce mix and wartime readiness needs. These mismatches can manifest as FSS portfolio overload when FS Airmen deploy.
- **Utilization of mortuary affairs personnel** is a distinct but important area for how FS assignment and organizational structure (not just training) limit wartime readiness.
- **Organization and mission identity** of the FS community has implications for how the community sees itself, how others view it, and what that means for FS wartime readiness.

Each topic reflects the same underlying condition: an FS force organized, sized, and managed for peacetime service delivery.

Workforce Experience and Continuity

Workshop participants consistently identified insufficient local access to experienced midgrade NCOs, coupled with high turnover among junior Airmen, as a critical readiness challenge.[43] In the pre-workshop poll, participants rated the availability of qualified NCOs as the top challenge. Participants in the first FSS workshop described a self-perpetuating situation in which "inexperienced Airmen are being trained by other inexperienced Airmen." NCOs are critical for on-the-job learning and home station readiness training (HSRT), which is why one participant noted, "Without mid-tier NCOs, we're just treading water." As one flight chief explained, "When we lack the proper rank structure to support training, that's when we see a decline. It's not about the training method or the time allotted; it's about having qualified members to provide the training."

Limited local access to experienced NCOs has direct implications for FS wartime readiness. NCOs are needed to deploy, and those with deployment experience also serve as HSRT

[43] Based on a discussion with a FS SME, HRA (3F0) is only manned at 77 percent for E-5 (Staff Sergeant rank).

instructors. However, deployment experience was limited and unevenly distributed. Only 33 percent of active component enlisted FS Airmen had at least one deployment between FY 2020 and FY 2025.[44] And, who has deployed varies by AFSC, pay grade, skill level, and installation.

- **AFSC:** Services (3F1) Airmen had the highest overall deployment rates among enlisted 3F AFSCs at 49 percent. Other 3F AFSCs had notably lower rates, with Education and Training (3F2) lowest at 6 percent.[45]
- **Grade and Skill Level:** Among FS Airmen who deployed, Senior Airmen (E-4) and Staff Sergeants (E-5) represented the highest percentages (29 percent each), followed by Technical Sergeants (E-6, 20 percent).[46] Airmen at the five skill level (journeyman) represented almost half (49 percent) of all enlisted FS deployers.[47]
- **Installation:** Among installations with sizable active-duty 3F populations, 21 percent had low 3F deployment percentages (i.e., fewer than 25 percent of assigned 3F Airmen with deployment experience).[48] Of MAJCOMs with at least five installations that have sizable 3F populations, Air Force Global Strike Command (AFGSC) had the highest percentage of such bases (71 percent) and Air Mobility Command (AMC) had the lowest (0 percent).[49]

A complementary base-level analysis of FY 2025 active-duty enlisted 3FX personnel reinforces the uneven-distribution finding and sharpens it geographically. Deployment experience, measured as the share of a base's FS enlisted population that had deployed at any point during FY 2020–2025, varies widely both across and within MAJCOMs (Table 4.1). ACC and AMC bases cluster relatively high (roughly 34–45 and 32–46 percent, respectively), while USAFE (28–36 percent) and PACAF (25–39 percent) sit lower. The widest internal spreads appear at Air Education and Training Command (AETC) (19–36 percent) and AFGSC (19–42 percent). An AFGSC base's FS Airmen might be more than twice as likely to have deployment experience as their counterparts at another AFGSC base. Because prior deployment experience

[44] In comparison, only 39 percent of 38F officers had at least one deployment in the same time frame.

[45] Deployment rates of the other 3F AFSCs between FY 2020–2025: HRA (3F0) = 31 percent, Manpower (3F3) = 24 percent, and Equal Opportunity (3F4) = 33 percent.

[46] Master Sergeants (E-7s) represented the next highest percentage of FS Airmen who deployed at 20 percent. Less than 10 percent of enlisted Airmen who had deployed were junior Airmen (E-1 through E-3) or senior NCOs (E-8s and E-9s).

[47] The next highest percentage of deployers by skill level were those at seven level (38 percent), meaning less than 15 percent of FS enlisted deployers came from one, three, and nine levels.

[48] We counted an installation as having a sizable 3F population if there were at least 30 active-duty 3F Airmen assigned to that base in FY 2025.

[49] For example, AFGSC had seven bases with sizable active-duty 3F populations. Out of those seven bases, five bases (i.e., 71 percent) had 3F populations in which fewer than 25 percent of the 3F Airmen had prior deployment experience. Trends for other MAJCOMs are as follows: Air Combat Command (ACC; 9 percent), U.S. Air Forces in Europe (USAFE; 20 percent), and PACAF (44 percent). Note that these percentages reflect the number of MAJCOM installations with low 3F deployment percentages out of the MAJCOM's installations with sizable active-duty 3F populations.

can inform HSRT delivery, this variation means that some bases could have fewer locally available Airmen with deployment experience to draw on as potential instructors.

Table 4.1. Variation in FS Enlisted Deployment Experience Across a MAJCOM's Top-Five FS-Population Bases (FY 2025)

MAJCOM	Lowest base	Highest base	Spread (pp)
Air Combat Command (ACC)	34%	45%	11
Air Mobility Command (AMC)	32%	46%	14
U.S. Air Forces in Europe (USAFE)	28%	36%	8
Pacific Air Forces (PACAF)	25%	39%	14
Air Force Global Strike Command (AFGSC)	19%	42%	23
Air Education and Training Command (AETC)	19%	36%	17

SOURCE: DAF deployment files from AFPC, FY 2020–2025.
NOTE: This metric is the percentage of a base's FY 2025 active-duty enlisted FS (3FX) Airmen who deployed at any point during FY 2020–2025. Deployment history is an imperfect indicator of readiness expertise. The personnel data identify whether an Airman deployed but do not show whether the deployment involved particular FS duties, operating conditions, or experience relevant to HSRT instruction. The analysis therefore demonstrates variation in the local availability of deployment experience, not variation in instructor quality or proficiency. The column *Spread (pp)* provides the difference in percentage points (pp) between the lowest base and highest base percentages in that row.

The deployment-experience trends among FS Airmen point to an uneven distribution across specialties, skill levels, and locations. The implication is that locations with few deployment-experienced FS Airmen might need to rely on others to provide HSRT instruction, reduce HSRT frequency, or increase trainer-to-trainee ratios, each of which could reduce the frequency or individual attention available in HSRT. The post-Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) lull compounds the problem, as a generation of mid-tier NCOs has simply not had the opportunity to deploy. As one squadron commander observed, "we have so many staff sergeants and tech sergeants who have never deployed, simply because we have not been at war for a while…So, passing that nonexistent experience along is difficult." Rank alone may not indicate deployment experience. As one C-NAF readiness superintendent captured in a FS organization workshop: "You used to be able to look at my stripes and say that I had certain experiences. Not anymore. It leads to home station training lacking."

An added complication is that several FS AFSCs face structural challenges in developing and retaining experienced midgrade personnel. The Manpower (3F3) and Education and Training (3F2) AFSCs are retrainee-only, meaning their NCOs come from other, non-FS career fields. Participants reported that reliance on retrainees can constrain local experience and continuity in two ways. First, it delays proficiency: as one CFM explained, converting an Airman into a manpower specialist costs roughly $20,000 and "a minimum two year investment before they're really effective," yet the same skills that make an Airman a strong retraining candidate also make them highly competitive for commissioning, so "we have folks who retrain over and immediately apply for commissioning." Second, it thins the training bench in the smaller fields, where, as one

CFM put it, “we’re one deep…We throw you to the wolves.” An attendee from an FS organization workshop tied these threads together directly:

> And a lot of the mid-level NCOs are retrainees and don't have the experience to train the Airmen, and the senior NCOs don't have the time to train the trainer. So, years of complicated lack of focus. No hammer, no mandate, no hammer to actually focus on that home station.

Assignment patterns and rotation policy erode continuity further. An attendee from one of our FS organization workshops indicated that PACAF short tours produce rapid turnover and leave inexperienced FS personnel working readiness; at some forward locations, participants reported, personnel “change out every 30-40 days.” Even at units moving toward longer tours, the churn between functions within an FSS might undo hard-won expertise. As one mortuary affairs SME described the broader FS experience, “as soon as you get your feet under you, you get thrown into something new … Once you get it, you’re gone.” Another attendee at an FS organization workshop framed the cumulative effect as a perpetual deficit: “With reach back and frequent deployments, the frequent rotations are not just shortages but they're moving to different jobs on base or PCSing. They're [the local units] playing a catch-up game.”[50]

Taken together, FS personnel rotation, retrainee policy, and the uneven distribution of deployment experience limit local units’ ability to sustain a continuity of experience. Indicators of continuity gaps do not appear on manning documents, meaning that billets can be nominally filled while local units struggle to maintain capacity to train.

Manpower Models and Workforce Requirements

Participants described the experience and continuity problems discussed above as connected to how FS manpower requirements are determined. An AFSVC SME summarized the concern by stating that FS is “manned for a peacetime organization,” while the Army, Marine Corps, and Navy are manned for wartime missions. Across interviews and workshops, participants consistently perceived that FSS manpower requirements emphasize recurring garrison-service demand and do not fully account for the capacity needed to generate deployable capability while sustaining essential home-station functions.

One SME described a proposed capability-based alternative that would derive requirements from both the personnel needed to source deployable capability, *and* the personnel needed to sustain essential home-station services while those members are deployed. Under that construct, commanders would have latitude to develop the necessary skills. The proposal was not advanced or formally assessed. This concern is longstanding: a 2014 Project AIR FORCE (PAF) analysis of agile combat support manpower found that most of the non-maintenance agile-combat-support

[50] One of the attendees at an FS organization workshop shared how the rotation of FS personnel affects continuity of engagement with FS centers: “But there are people who have no idea who we are or what we do. As much as we try to educate them, we get into that turnover again and are re-educating new people all the time.”

career fields, including Services, derived requirements from home-station workload drivers rather than from operational plans or deployment scenarios.[51] When a RAND facilitator asked workshop participants whether the manpower drivers and authorization calculations familiar to them accounted for wartime functions, participants reported that deployable capability was not fully reflected. These observations suggest that current requirements might not make the capacity needed for wartime force generation visible.

Mismatches Between Civilian and Contracting Use and Wartime Needs

Civilianization and contracting sit at the center of this mismatch, and they cut both ways. Participants broadly supported the strategic use of civilians and contractors for select garrison functions. One flight chief noted that "contracting out helps, but only if we protect the time for real training with what's left." But participants consistently warned that it could erode the very skills FS Airmen must exercise downrange. When the functions that are civilianized or contracted in garrison are precisely the functions Airmen must perform when deployed, the daily repetitions that build proficiency never happen. An AFCENT A1 representative from the C-NAF A1 workshop drew the contrast sharply:

> If you deploy a vehicle mechanic, that person is going to fix vehicles. If you deploy a firefighter, they fight fires. If you deploy a pilot, they fly. If you deploy a personnelist, he will do something totally different than in his FSS role. Same with services. Lodging in garrison at home station is all NAF or contracted. The Airmen don't work in lodging at home station, but they do when they deploy … those jobs don't exist as they would for 99.9% of the other career fields from at home today to tomorrow deployed.

A MAJCOM A1 representative in a FS organization workshop made the operational stakes concrete, framing the gap as one of Airmen who no longer know how to begin or sustain the functions civilians normally run:

> We want to make sure our Airmen understand their roles when civilians aren't there. What are their roles and how do you execute?… feeding, lodging, mortuary, they have been taken out of our squadrons and taken out. So, Airmen don't know how to sustain, and don't know how to start operations.

Even where contractors nominally free military members to train, commanders reported the opposite in practice: at contracted dining facilities, as an AMC A1 representative from a FS organization workshop put it, "most of what the contractor does is the back shop stuff. The Airmen are assigned to actually serving … Anyone can serve, but the prep in the back is what

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[51] The 2014 report authors' analysis proposed rebalancing manpower toward expeditionary demands while holding home-station manning constant, partly by substituting civilian for military positions in garrison — an approach that assumed civilians could perform home-station base support at comparable productivity. The FS functions discussed below complicate that assumption, because the garrison repetitions civilians absorb are the same ones military personnel need to stay proficient for wartime execution. See Mills, Patrick, John G. Drew, John A. Ausink, Daniel M. Romano, and Rachel Costello, *Balancing Agile Combat Support Manpower to Better Meet the Future Security Environment*, RAND Corporation, RR-337-AF, 2014.

matters." A squadron commander made the same point about proficiency erosion from the other direction, noting that civilian cooks in the dining facility mean "the number of times we are pulled out to do training or whatever other base or wing priority there is, we are no longer getting the daily proficiency we need." Participants emphasized that civilianization should preserve protected training time and regular hands-on practice so military personnel maintain their skills.

The workforce-mix problem carries a strategic risk that garrison metrics do not capture: the civilian workforce that keeps garrison operations afloat is fragile in exactly the scenarios wartime readiness is meant for. Recent hiring freezes, workforce reductions, and furlough exposure already stripped capability from FS units—one commander described having to remove 23 civilian roles, taking with them "things I can't provide anymore." In wartime, participants warned, reliance on civilians could prove even more brittle: as a manpower SME observed, some civilians "may not want their family in a hostile environment," so "we need to be prepared to backfill all those with military manpower enlisted folks." A workforce mix optimized for peacetime cost efficiency is therefore not automatically a workforce mix that holds up under mobilization.

Disconnects Between Unit Manning Documents and Unit Type Codes

These mismatches surface concretely in the machinery of force generation—the Unit Manpower Documents (UMDs), Unit Type Code (UTC) posture, and force-generation phasing through which units are tasked. Participants described several disconnects. The 80/20 posturing model, in which roughly 80 percent of a unit is postured for tasking and no more than that share is tasked at once, breaks down in practice because of uneven career-field health: as a PACAF A1 representative explained, when some bases have "a lot of broken people, the other units with greater ready percentages get screwed taking over for them." UTC mission-capability statements can outrun the capability actually resident in the unit—"their mission capability statements say what they should be able to do but they don't have capabilities or knowledge," one C-NAF workshop participant noted. And the Air Force's "deployment of one" model, in which individuals rather than whole units flow to a deployed wing, differs fundamentally from the unit-based UTCs of the sister services, complicating any attempt to align FS posture to a unit-capability standard. Where new organizations have stood up, billets have moved without corresponding backfill: one commander recounted that when a combat air base construct stood up, "they took 15 of my Airmen from a full-time job, and they didn't backfill." Functional area managers already have responsibilities for reviewing and adjusting deployment posture. However, the recurring concerns raised by participants indicate a need for a more deliberate assessment of whether UMD authorizations, UTC posture, mission-capability statements, and force-generation tasking are aligned with the capabilities resident in FS units. Such an assessment could determine whether the reported problems reflect local implementation, uneven career-field health, or limitations in the underlying models. These questions also connect to the

broader issue of how FS is organized and how the community defines its wartime mission, which we discuss later in this chapter.

FSS Capacity While Members Deploy

We also sought to understand what happens to FS Airmen's home station duties when they deploy. The consistent answer from FSS commanders was that almost nothing stops. In-garrison FS functions cannot pause when Airmen deploy and attempts to shed them meet resistance from installation leadership. As one commander stated,

> I'd love to say we could stop doing things. But then you tell leadership what you're going to stop, and they say: 'don't do that.'

Another was equally categorical,

> It doesn't stop. That's the nature of what you're doing … The job's going to get done. I can't think of a single thing that we could just say, 'I'm not going to do that.'

With little that can be turned off, the deployed Airman's duties are absorbed by those who remain, including civilians, who wear multiple hats and work longer hours to cover the deployed FS Airmen's home station duties. Even with non-deployed Airmen picking up a lot of the slack, in-garrison deployment-related personnel shortages can result in slower response times and reduced hours for certain facilities. Participants shared that they addressed these shortages in areas they could and in creative ways.

The coping mechanisms can be creative but can come at a cost to customer service: commanders described shifting Airmen across functions, converting staffed fitness centers to 24-hour CAC access rather than manning them, and accepting slower response times and reduced hours. Where a function has no redundancy, it simply breaks. One commander recounted that when a civilian tester deployed, base testing "had to stop for 3–4 weeks … It impacted about 185 Airmen base wide," and the loss of a passport agent forced families to drive several hours to an embassy. Lower-priority functions are the first to go: records management, process improvement, and, in one case, a base library.

Backfill exists but is neither automatic nor complete. At the enterprise level, when military members deploy from contracted ("2.0") dining facilities, the Services Center funds contractors to fill in—but, as a Center representative explained, only to a degraded level: "It's degrading, actually to 95%." At the unit level, commanders reported they might obtain a reservist or an Individual Mobilization Augmentee, but "it's dependent on funding" and adequate lead time, which short-notice taskings rarely allow. Recent civilian personnel shortages have compounded the burden, thinning the very workforce that FS commanders rely on to cover deployed Airmen's duties. The net effect is that FS leaders must sustain garrison operations and generate readiness while simultaneously covering the gaps their own deployments create—a demand the manpower model, sized to peacetime, does not account for.

This capacity problem is amplified by what commanders repeatedly described as portfolio overload. The FS mission set has expanded (absorbing postal, additional finance functions, expanded fitness requirements, mortuary and casualty duties, and morale, welfare, and recreation) faster than the community's capacity to manage it. Many felt that the mission set also expanded faster than either FS community's manpower or its sense of professional identity has evolved to keep pace.[52] A broad portfolio builds versatile officers, but participants argued it has tipped into a liability. As one commander described it:

> "We have so much in our portfolio that it has gotten difficult to manage. There are some ways it's great and others where we've lost who we are. It has become a beast that's a challenge to manage. We're not evolving fast enough to keep up with all the challenges we manage."

Training is often reduced to cover other duties. As a SNCO explained, "One of the first things to be cut is always training—we reduce training so that other home station duties can get done." The overload also corrodes the professional identity discussed above; one commander tied the two together explicitly, wishing to repair "the pride our community used to have. I remember when being a 38F used to mean something. Now, we've kind of lost that sense of identity." Portfolio overload also affects readiness and identity, because the tasks that get deferred when the community is stretched are reported to be disproportionately the wartime ones.

Mortuary Affairs: A No-Fail Mission Without a Dedicated Workforce

The mortuary affairs mission illustrates how personnel utilization, as well as training, can limit FS wartime readiness. As Chapter 3 described, participants viewed mortuary affairs as a high-consequence, no-fail mission for which Airmen receive limited hands-on preparation. We examine it in more depth than other FS functions for two related reasons. Most FS functions can absorb degraded performance; this one cannot, and the consequences of getting it wrong fall on families and cannot be recovered. It is also work that not everyone is suited to perform: technical, medical-adjacent, and emotionally demanding. Participants consistently described current preparation as inadequate for the Airmen who must do it. Together, those conditions make utilization, rather than training alone, the operative constraint.

Mortuary affairs SMEs also reported that the current assignment and utilization model contributes to a recurring loss of expertise. Officers generally rotate through mortuary affairs duties for two to three years as part of career development, while enlisted Services (3F1) personnel may volunteer for mortuary technician roles.[53] Because personnel rotate and experience is not consistently retained or tracked, units must repeatedly rebuild local expertise.

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[52] By professional identity we mean what FS Airmen understand their work to be for and the standing they attach to it. Mission identity, which we take up later in this chapter, is a separate question: how the FS community and the organizations it supports understand what FS exists to do.

[53] Similar to the Army's HR community, the DAF's HRA Airmen are responsible for casualty accounting.

Commanders describe the resulting gap in urgent terms. One called mortuary preparedness "one of our greatest challenges ahead of us" and put it at the top of what he would fix: "the thing that keeps me up at night is that we are not ready for the mortuary requirement that we will have to sustain." He also explained why rotating non-specialists cannot be readied at home station in the way other functions can: legal and practical constraints in the United States mean "I can't take them to a funeral home and show them bodies," yet a wartime deployment can confront them with the aftermath of "IED [improvised explosive device] explosions" and mass-casualty events. The utilization model thus leaves Airmen to acquire their first real exposure in the setting where stakes are highest.

SMEs reported that, in the organizations familiar to them, the mortuary officer role was tied to the squadron Director of Operations billet rather than filled through a separate voluntary selection process. As one SME explained, "if you fill the DO position, you fill the mortuary role. Those hats are one in one … To take command is to accept that you may become a mortuary officer." According to these SMEs, officers filling the associated billet did not have a separate mechanism to decline the mortuary role. The rotation is also not stabilized: another SME noted that mortuary officers are not coded to remain in place, and asked why, "if we can code the dorm leads to stay in place for two years, why can't we code mortuary officers?" One SME described the broader pattern for officers: "take the two years to just get their feet under them and then they leave." Meanwhile, the enlisted technicians who hold the institutional knowledge behind the scenes are subject to the same turnover.

This utilization model carries a retention cost that further drains expertise. Several SMEs perceived that the prospect of mortuary assignment influenced some officers' decisions to cross-train, avoid particular leadership positions, or leave the service.[54] One described knowing "young officers who already know they don't want to be a mortuary officer … but now they want to cross train or get out so they don't become a mortuary officer," and others—potential future squadron directors—who "won't" pursue those roles "because of this job." The community thus loses talent at both ends: the experienced leave, and some of the most capable decline to enter. Compounding the strain are the acute psychological demands of the role, which participants felt are not adequately addressed. A commander who had watched Airmen return from the duty described that the toll of this duty is "not because people do not have the training, but because of the mental effects of it…the folks who have had exposure to it here, I can just tell they are struggling." As another put it, mortuary affairs is "a no fail mission" for which Airmen are neither credentialed nor counseled.

SMEs also identified the absence of a dedicated specialization as a concern. Mortuary affairs administration falls under the broad Services (3F1) AFSC, so many Services Airmen and officers are not exposed to it until they are about to deploy. As an AFMAO SME explained:

[54] We did not independently assess the prevalence of this effect.

> "Something we see often especially when we receive our deployed forces here at AFMAO is by the nature of our FS career fields, whether it's the FS officers or services troops, you are getting Airmen that are having their first real experience with any sort of mortuary operation in their deployed environment when they may have only had a little bit of readiness or fitness, lodging that sort of thing."

Selection also presents a problem. Because the DAF lacks a comparable dedicated AFSC, as one SME noted, "the wrong people are sometimes selected and the severe mental health demands of the job are not adequately managed." The Army, by contrast, maintains a dedicated military occupational specialty for mortuary affairs—the 92M Fatality Management Specialist—whose soldiers complete formal Advanced Individual Training in the Mortuary Affairs Course, [55] and whose officers, SMEs observed, do mortuary work and only mortuary work. Without a dedicated specialty, the DAF has neither the same dedicated training pipeline nor the ability to select and retain the people best suited to the work.

The FS community is actively debating remedies. Within the past year, SMEs and workshop participants noted that the community has discussed making mortuary affairs its own specialty—perhaps as a shred-out of the Services AFSC or as a warrant officer career field. A joint schoolhouse training mortuary personnel across the services has also been proposed. Views differ on how far to go: some favor a hard specialization so that the role is all a person does, while others prefer preserving an opt-in path so that an officer's operations career is not foreclosed. These discussions focused on giving the DAF a deliberate way to select, train, develop, and retain mortuary affairs personnel that the current additional-duty construct does not allow.

Two unresolved organizational questions will shape whatever emerges. First, within the DAF, ownership of contingency mortuary affairs is unsettled: AFMAO and AFSVC are working to deconflict roles, and as an AFMAO SME described it, the community is "in a holding pattern … on who owns contingency mortuary," with courses of action proposed to HAF/A1X and no decision yet. An AFSVC representative described the same limbo from the field, with the question bouncing between offices: "we send them to AFMAO, and they send them right back to us." Until that ownership is settled, contingency mortuary training and organization cannot fully move forward. Second, change may come from above the DAF. AF/A1 participates in a joint Global Fatality Management working group, and revised Department of War (DOW) mortuary affairs policy—including an anticipated update to the governing DOW instruction—is expected; SMEs cautioned that existing policy and law were "a lot of times problematic when it comes to large scale operations." Changes from these efforts could reshape how mortuary affairs personnel are organized, trained, and utilized.

The utilization challenge in mortuary affairs reflects broader personnel-and-manpower patterns examined in this chapter. A high-consequence wartime capability is generated by

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[55] Department of the Army, "Chapter 10C – Enlisted MOS Specifications," in *Military Occupational Classification and Structure*, Department of the Army Pamphlet 611-21 (Smartbook), September 2025.

rotating non-specialists through an additional duty, with no dedicated way to select for aptitude, build sustained expertise, or retain the people who develop it, and with organizational ownership still unresolved. Mortuary affairs also illustrates how wartime readiness depends on personnel assignments and organizational arrangements.

Organization and Mission Identity

The personnel and manpower strains described above have an organizational counterpart. FS is organized as a single squadron, but it is asked to perform two different missions: the daily customer-service and quality-of-life delivery that defines garrison life, and the expeditionary combat support that the joint fight demands. A single commander, manpower document, and professional identity span functions as different as running a golf course and standing up a contingency mortuary. The question that participants raised is whether a structure built to deliver garrison services can also generate and protect wartime capability, or whether the two missions have grown different enough to be organized apart.

The most consistent evidence for an organizational problem is an identity one. Participants repeatedly described FS not as one integrated community but as separate services, personnel, manpower, and readiness functions operating under different chains of command and priorities. As a Services Center representative put it, "we talk about FS like we're this one, giant, integrated functional community … we're not … In Services, we answer a lot to the [A]4 and Personnel talks a lot to the [A]1." FSS leaders used sharper language: one likened the portfolio to a "junk drawer," and one commander described flights that answer to "four different bosses" and operate as an "island," observing that "you have 11 flights and almost none connect to the other." Another commander was blunt: "We have an identity crisis. We keep shifting the way we posture our forces … We can't adjust our training model to what the Air Force wants us to do if we are constantly changing what we do." Others described the same condition as distance from the warfight—an FSS director of operations at a PACAF installation noted that "FSS officers can feel disconnected from the mission … that's a struggle we have in FSS as a whole, because we are so community-focused." The consequence for readiness is that it becomes an afterthought to the customer-service mission that defines the community's daily identity; as one AFIMSC representative observed, readiness is "oh, by the way," and the readiness function is "very divorced" from the rest of the squadron.

The FSS's dual mission can also make it difficult for joint partners to understand how and where FS support comes from. A commander who had deployed as a joint-task-force J1 recounted that it was "difficult to articulate to our joint partners what I do as a FSS officer"—a joint A3 "had no concept that FS A1 did food, lodging, fitness," insisting instead that "the A4 does that." The same commander traced the problem to doctrine: unlike the Army and Navy, Air Force doctrine "doesn't distinguish between FS and Combat FS," so the community has no doctrinal basis for separating its expeditionary core from its garrison-services tail. Several

participants tied this confusion to the broader concern that FS is managed and understood primarily as a home-station customer-service provider rather than as a warfighting enabler. One commander attributed part of the problem to the way Air Force doctrine describes FS roles, but participants did not consistently identify doctrinal or professional military education changes as a priority response.

The identity problem was reported broadly across interviews and workshops. A small number of commanders proposed structural separation as one possible response, suggesting that expeditionary combat-support functions could be distinguished organizationally from business and quality-of-life functions rather than continuing to operate under a single squadron and professional identity. For example, one commander argued that "FSS squadrons need to be broken out—[an] MWR squadron run by civilians and combat support run by military," and had already implemented a de facto version internally, telling his deputy to serve as "the garrison commander for MWR" while he ran "the combat side": "you can have one squadron, but it operates more like two." Another commander framed the same move in doctrinal terms:

> I'd split the squadron. I'd look at the portfolio and take it back to doctrine—what is combat support and what is combat service support? … [Then] a combat support squadron with professional requirements, sustainment services—that core footprint of what makes Airmen ready from a combat support standpoint. The FS portfolio, some needs to be civilianized or outsourced, and the inherently military functions need to break away.

This was not a proposal to scatter FS functions back to other groups. The same commander cautioned against putting "MWR back under [Services] and food under [Civil Engineering]"; the point was that "at installation level, it doesn't all need to be in one squadron." He questioned more broadly "why we insist on functional alignment in garrison as opposed to operational alignment," and floated a companion idea—consolidating the inherently-military footprint across major commands so that Services Airmen are not spread too thin to sustain either the garrison mission or readiness training.

The proposal already exists in limited form within the DAF: several installations already operate a split or de facto split structure, and they offer the closest thing to a natural experiment. Ramstein runs two FS squadrons; the commander of one described the division in exactly the terms the reformers propose: "We have two FSSs. We're the 'not fun' one. I have all the admin stuff: food, fitness, lodging, postal, readiness, and traditional personnel," with the morale and quality-of-life functions in the other squadron. Joint Base San Antonio and Joint Base Elmendorf–Richardson were cited as other two-squadron cases. Where no formal split exists, commanders improvised one under contingency pressure: one commander recounted that during a recent surge "we kind of split the squadron in half"—military members to the launch and expeditionary mission, the remainder to garrison functions. These examples indicate that some commanders have found an internal division of responsibilities useful under operational pressure.

Proponents argued that structural separation could give the expeditionary mission a more protected organizational home. In their view, a dedicated combat-support squadron could maintain a clearer readiness focus and a professional identity more legible to Airmen and joint partners, while a quality-of-life squadron could rely more heavily on civilian or contracted support. The study did not assess the manpower, cost, command, or readiness effects of such a structure, so these potential benefits remain hypotheses to evaluate rather than established outcomes.

Three considerations suggest caution before this is finalized as a recommendation. First, the identity problem was described by nearly every participant, but an explicit structural split was proposed by only a few, and at least one commander pushed back on the premise that FSSs can shed anything at all, insisting "there's nothing we can stop doing." Second, the manpower consequences are untested and could cut against the intent. A squadron relieved of some readiness requirements might earn fewer authorizations under current manpower standards, so a split pursued without a capability-based manpower model could shrink the very force it aims to protect. A second squadron might also require its own overhead (a command section, superintendent, and administrative and resource-management support), which, absent additional authorizations, would be paid out of operational positions. Third, the form of a split requires care: one commander recalled an earlier decentralization of services functions to operational groups that did not succeed, reinforcing the point that the reform participants favor keeps FS functions consolidated at installation level in two squadrons, not dispersed across the wing. The option is also scale-dependent: it presumes a base large enough to field two squadrons, which the smallest and human-resources-only installations are not.

No interviewee proposed pulling commander support staff (CSS) personnelists back into a consolidated Military Personnel Flight as a reform; commanders discussed the CSS–Military Personnel Flight (MPF) manning relationship in operational terms—where to hold personnel when the MPF is under-manned—not as a structure to be undone. Nor did anyone call for deactivating or realigning the FS Centers; criticism there centered on excessive command echelons and dated processes, a governance concern distinct from the squadron-level reorganization at issue here. Instead, the focus was squarely on whether a single or dual-FSS model could exist, at least for some locations.

FSS commanders highlighted how their Airmen work hard to meet the daily mission. Their concern is whether the structure these Airmen work within lets them be a warfighting enabler or keeps them a garrison service provider by default. The evidence supports treating that as an open question warranting limited testing rather than a settled conclusion; Chapter 5 describes what such a test would require.

Summary

The personnel, manpower, and organizational challenges in this chapter are closely related. Participants reported insufficient local access to experienced midgrade NCOs, while personnel data showed that deployment experience was unevenly distributed across specialties and installations. Together, these conditions limit the pool of locally available personnel who can provide home station readiness training. Retraining and assignment rotation can keep that local pool from stabilizing. A manpower model sized to peacetime service delivery—and a workforce mix increasingly reliant on civilians and contractors—both undercounts the deployable capability lost when Airmen deploy and can erode the hands-on proficiency wartime tasks require. When Airmen do deploy, commanders reported that garrison work does not stop; it is absorbed by a force already stretched thin by an ever-expanding portfolio, and participants described training as among the first activities reduced. Mortuary affairs shows the pattern at its sharpest: a no-fail wartime mission staffed by rotating non-specialists with no dedicated way to select, develop, or retain expertise. These findings also raise an organizational question: whether a single squadron and a single identity can hold both a garrison service-delivery mission and an expeditionary combat-support one, or whether the two have grown different enough to organize apart. The common thread is that an FS force organized, sized, and managed for peacetime service delivery is not positioned to reliably generate and sustain the readiness that joint warfighting now demands.

Chapter 5. Actions to Strengthen Force Support Readiness

The previous chapters identified several reinforcing challenges specific to the FS community. Unlike career fields whose garrison and deployed functions are closely aligned, FS Airmen must transition between two meaningfully different operating environments. Yet the policy, training, and personnel systems and organizational structures that support them are built primarily around the garrison mission. This chapter presents 13 targeted actions for closing that gap (see Table 5.1). For HAF/A1XO, this distinction is consequential: enterprise action requires recognizing not only which FS challenges are shared with other Air Force communities, but also how the structure of the FS mission shapes their consequences and causes them to reinforce one another. Treating a challenge as resolved because it is already recognized or because an initiative is underway risks preserving the very gaps those efforts are intended to address. As we describe, implementation of most actions requires coordination across multiple functional organizations; the discussion of each action identifies the key organizations.

The three policy and organizational clarity actions derive from the policy analysis in Chapter 2. Participants shaped the remaining ten directly. In the FSS workshops, we asked participants to identify options for addressing the readiness challenges they had prioritized. In the FS organization workshops, we presented candidate actions in five categories and asked participants to react to them, add or modify actions, identify which mattered most, and describe implementation considerations, including which organizations would be responsible. The actions below therefore reflect substantial participant input on both content and feasibility. The final set, its categorization, and its sequence are ours. We synthesized interviews, workshops, policy analysis, and personnel data, and we did not put the actions to a vote or seek formal endorsement. The policy analysis and personnel data were used to describe structural conditions, while interviews and workshops supplied accounts of how those conditions play out and what might address them. Appendix C describes the workshop methodology.

Table 5.1. Summary of Targeted Actions to Strengthen Force Support Readiness

Category	Targeted Action
Policy and organizational clarity	Consolidate or formally cross-reference policy for highly dispersed functions
	Clarify decision authority for unit-level execution requirements
	Provide guidance for prioritizing reporting requirements during contingency operations
Training and readiness	Provide service-delivery baselines that support protected readiness training
	Expand access to realistic, hands-on training opportunities
	Establish an enterprise mechanism for sharing validated readiness-training practices
	Shift readiness standards from task completion toward demonstrated proficiency

Category	Targeted Action
	Establish an authoritative enterprise view of readiness training and currency
Personnel, manpower, and organization	Strengthen midgrade NCO development, assignment stability, and local instructor capacity
	Assess and align FSS manpower requirements with deployable capability and essential home-station services, including where military proficiency must be preserved
	Assess alignment among UMDs, UTCs, and force-generation requirements
	Establish an enterprise approach for talent management of mortuary affairs personnel
	Pilot test alternative organizational constructs at selected large installations[a]

NOTE: [a] This option is exploratory because we did not assess its manpower, cost, command, or readiness effects.

Policy and Organizational Clarity Actions

The policy analysis identified concerns with how requirements are organized and expressed. Requirements for the most deployment-critical functions are dispersed across multiple documents; execution is frequently assigned to units without making decision authority explicit; and deployment-related policy layers procedural obligations on top of substantial reporting demands. The actions below are designed to address these structural features.

Consolidate or Cross-Reference Policy for High-Dispersion Functions

In our coding, functions such as force readiness, personnel accountability, and deployment processing carry mandatory requirements spread across numerous policy documents. For these functions, HAF/A1 should consider the following: (1) targeted consolidation of requirements into fewer authoritative sources, (2) the development of deployment-specific execution guides that synthesize requirements across sources, or (3) at a minimum, formal, easily accessible, and well-known cross-referencing so that personnel can identify applicable requirements without independently reconciling multiple documents under time pressure.

Clarify Decision Authority for Unit-Level Execution Requirements

Our analysis found that a large concentration of deployment requirements occurs where policy expects units to execute but does not identify a decision authority within the requirement itself. This matters most when requirements involve competing demands, limited personnel, or time-sensitive exceptions. For the highest-priority contingency functions, HAF/A1 should update policy or supplemental guidance to specify who holds approval authority, what local changes are permitted, and when decisions must be elevated.

Provide Guidance on Prioritizing Reporting Requirements During Contingency Operations

Deployment-related policy places procedural specificity on units while maintaining substantial reporting obligations, but it rarely tells units what to do when time, personnel, or connectivity limit their ability to meet all requirements at once. HAF/A1 should develop explicit

prioritization guidance that identifies which reporting requirements are time-sensitive and operationally consequential during contingency execution, which can be deferred or consolidated without affecting mission command, and what authority units have to make those determinations locally when conditions change rapidly.

Training and Readiness Actions

FS readiness training is constrained at nearly every level: units lack protected time, equipment, and access to realistic training opportunities, and the systems used to measure readiness neither capture whether Airmen can perform contingency tasks nor provide an authoritative enterprise view of who holds current training. The actions below address each of these constraints in turn.

Provide Service-Delivery Baselines to Support Protected Readiness Training

FSS commanders and workshop participants identified the garrison mission as the primary competitor for training time and described a command environment in which training routinely loses that competition. Without an enterprise-level standard defining minimum acceptable service-delivery levels, installation commanders have no authoritative basis for protecting training time against daily mission demands. HAF/A1 should assess existing and proposed service-delivery guidance and, where feasible, establish enterprise baselines defining which garrison functions must be sustained during protected readiness-training periods and at what level. Such baselines could give FSS commanders a documented basis for proposing temporary service reductions to installation leadership. Implementation should account for differences in installation mission, population, staffing, and statutory or policy requirements.

Expand Access to Realistic, Hands-On Training Opportunities

Silver Flag, Combat Support Training Ranges, joint exercises, and cross-functional training events provide the scenario-based experience that FSS commanders and FS Airmen identified as valuable preparation for deployment, but access to all of them is constrained by capacity, cost, and in-garrison staffing demands. A recurring and related gap is the absence at home station of the physical equipment FS Airmen will use downrange: forklifts, SPEK kitchens, tents, war reserve materiel (WRM) assets, and in the case of personnel accountability tasks, DCAPES. Together, these constraints limit the hands-on practice that distinguishes proficiency from familiarity.

HAF/A1 should pursue a coordinated approach to expand access to realistic training. This would involve increasing Silver Flag throughput, improving unit-level awareness of CSTR opportunities in coordination with AFIMSC, formalizing joint and cross-functional training, and using virtual reality platforms already at AFIMSC. The approach should include a sequenced training pathway tied to force-generation cycles, deliberate slot allocation for Silver Flag and

CSTR access, and unified tracking of training completion and capability gaps across the enterprise. It should also explicitly address the specific capability and competency training gaps highlighted in Chapter 3, such as contingency contracting, service delivery and expectation management, and joint and multinational communication skills, the last of which FSS commanders reported is learned only after arriving downrange. HAF/A1X is the natural integrating authority for this effort.

HAF/A1 should assess the throughput, cost, and operational effects of making Silver Flag completion a readiness requirement for selected roles or force-generation phases. Any such requirement should be implemented only where training capacity is sufficient to avoid creating deployment bottlenecks.

HAF/A1 should also fund and field a pilot involving dedicated training equipment sets at installations with the highest deployment frequency; where full equipment sets are not feasible, installation asset data systems should be used to identify accessible equipment across the installation that FS units can draw on for training purposes.

Establish an Enterprise Mechanism for Sharing Readiness-Training Practices

The FS enterprise lacks a systematic mechanism for capturing, evaluating, and sharing effective readiness-training practices. Units have developed local approaches to address equipment shortfalls, limited access to formal training, and other readiness constraints, but these practices often remain isolated. As a result, units may duplicate effort, depend on informal professional networks, or miss approaches that have worked elsewhere. The enterprise also lacks a consistent process for determining which local practices are suitable for broader use.

HAF/A1 should designate an enterprise mechanism for collecting, reviewing, and disseminating readiness-training materials and lessons learned. These resources could include lesson plans, instructional videos, exercise designs, equipment-sharing arrangements, after-action reports, and examples of partnerships with other units or services. The mechanism should identify an organization responsible for reviewing submissions, validating practices before wider dissemination, maintaining current materials, and helping units adapt them to different missions and operating environments.

The FS community should first assess whether an existing DAF system can support this function before developing or acquiring a new platform. Regardless of the technical solution, the mechanism should be easy for units to access and use, include a process for retiring outdated material, and assign clear responsibility for long-term management—AFSVC is a natural candidate given its enterprise role supporting FS units. This approach would reduce dependence on individual initiative and informal networks while allowing effective local innovations to benefit the broader FS community.

Shift Readiness Standards from Training Completion to Demonstrated Proficiency

FS Airmen described a readiness reporting environment in which units can be rated green while fielding a force that cannot perform contingency tasks downrange. The underlying problem is that current standards measure training completion and, if applicable, on-the-job task completion rather than whether FS Airmen can execute tasks under deployment conditions. HAF/A1 should reorient standards for key FSS wartime tasks around demonstrated proficiency (e.g., HSRT includes hands-on demonstration of tasks that instructors evaluate using a detailed rubric). Standards should specify what Airmen must demonstrate and how often demonstrated proficiency must be renewed, so that readiness reflects current capability rather than a one-time completion. HAF/A1 should also establish a formal quality assurance mechanism—potentially implemented through the MAJCOMs—to validate standards across installations. Combat support orientation should be explicitly incorporated into both HSRT assessment criteria and professional development frameworks.

Establish an Authoritative Enterprise View of Readiness Training and Currency

Chapter 3 showed that readiness-relevant training information is distributed across MyTraining, ARIS, DRRS, DCAPES, and local unit spreadsheets, and that formal course-completion records are incomplete and may not be authoritative. This matters under phased force generation. DAFI 36-3802 ties specific training to defined phases of the AFFORGEN cycle, a construct that requires the enterprise to know at any time what share of the force holds required training at required recency, and to forecast when that currency will lapse. A static count of courses on record cannot support that construct.

HAF/A1X, in coordination with AFPC, AFIMSC, and MAJCOM A1s, should designate an authoritative system of record for FS readiness training and specify the fields it must carry. The DAF should first determine whether an existing system can serve this function before pursuing a new capability; we did not assess the current systems and take no position on which should serve. The objective is to provide current readiness information and forecast when qualifications will expire to support force-generation risk management.

Personnel, Manpower, and Organization Actions

Personnel, manpower, and organization challenges for FS readiness reflect a community that is organized, sized, and managed for peacetime service delivery. As outlined in Chapter 4, personnel challenges include insufficient local access to experienced midgrade NCOs, as reported by participants; unevenly distributed deployment experience; manpower arrangements that participants viewed as emphasizing peacetime service delivery; misalignment between unit manning documents and unit type codes; and difficulty preserving mortuary affairs expertise. These challenges point to a fundamental question about the identity of FS as combat support

versus garrison customer service support. We describe five actions to address each of these challenges.

Strengthen NCO Development and Assignment Stability to Build More Consistent Readiness Capacity Across Installations

Insufficient local access to experienced midgrade NCOs, particularly Staff Sergeants and Technical Sergeants, was among the most prominent personnel challenges identified in workshops and interviews. These NCOs provide much of the training, supervision, and continuity needed to turn readiness requirements into effective local programs. The challenge is especially acute at overseas installations, where short assignment cycles limit productive time in position. Career-field changes have also broadened required knowledge without extending development timelines, while one-deep staffing can leave personnel without experienced instructors or formal support. Commanders therefore often rely on personal relationships and individual initiative, with those arrangements dissolving when personnel rotate.

HAF/A1 should establish structured development pathways for midgrade NCOs in readiness and training roles, including structured proficiency milestones, formal mentorship, and greater assignment stability for selected positions. A formal train-the-trainer course could improve the consistency of HSRT delivery, while mobile training teams or regional support could assist installations that lack sufficient instructor depth.

Because the instructor bench depends on locally available deployment experience, which is unevenly distributed across AFSCs, skill levels, and bases, HAF/A1, AFPC, and CFMs should also differentiate deployment experience in development and assignment decisions. These decisions should involve recognition of high-demand and bare-base experience rather than treating all deployments as equivalent. HAF/A1 should also coordinate with MAJCOMs to expand deployment-building opportunities, such as exercises and Silver Flag–type events, so that experience is distributed more evenly and the HSRT instructor bench deepens at bases that currently lack it. (This action complements the training-access option in the Training and Readiness category.)

Align FSS Manpower Models with Wartime Capability Requirements, Including Where Military Proficiency Must Be Preserved

FS manpower is structured primarily around peacetime garrison service delivery rather than the combined demands of generating deployable capability and sustaining essential home-station functions. When Airmen deploy, remaining personnel absorb continuing garrison workload, while billet reductions are often assessed against peacetime demand without accounting for the deployable capability lost. Participants also described a proposed capability-based model that would derive billet requirements from deployment demands and include additional capacity, but reported that it was not advanced or formally assessed.

Civilian personnel also perform a substantial share of garrison FS functions but may be unavailable in high-threat environments, and garrison functions such as food service and lodging are mostly contracted out, limiting opportunities for FS Airmen to practice tasks they may need in a contingency (e.g., food preparation). HAF/A1 should assess whether current manpower models account for both deployable wartime capability and essential home-station requirements and work through its Directorate of Manpower, Organization and Resources (A1M) to update those models where gaps are identified.

HAF/A1, working through HAF/A1M and with MAJCOM and installation input, should identify garrison FS positions currently performed by civilians or contractors that meet either of two conditions: the function must be performed by military personnel in a contingency, or the position must continue during a contingency but the incumbent may be unavailable in a hostile environment. For the latter, the DAF should first determine whether the existing emergency-essential designation adequately captures the requirement, and where it does, ensure that FS positions meeting the criteria are so designated. Where the designation does not apply or is insufficient, backfill requirements should be identified in advance and made visible in manpower planning rather than discovered during execution.

For positions in the first category, the DAF should establish a deliberate mechanism for preserving military proficiency, such as scheduled military rotations through contracted food preparation, lodging operations, or comparable functions, so that Airmen retain hands-on currency in tasks they will perform when deployed. Where the function is contracted rather than civilian-staffed, preserving military proficiency would require adjustment to contract requirements rather than to manpower authorizations, and should be coordinated accordingly. Together, these steps would clarify the military capacity needed under contested operating conditions.

Assess Alignment among Unit Manpower Documents, Unit Type Codes, and Force-Generation Requirements

Chapter 4 found recurring disconnects among UMDs, UTC posture, force-generation phasing, and actual deployable capability. The 80/20 posturing model breaks down when career-field health is uneven, so that healthier units repeatedly absorb the taskings of units with many non-deployable members; UTC mission-capability statements can claim capability the unit does not actually possess; and the Air Force's individual "deployment of one" model complicates alignment to the unit-based UTC standard used by the sister services. Where new organizations have stood up, billets have in some cases moved without corresponding backfill.

HAF/A1, in coordination with functional area managers and MAJCOMs, should assess whether UMD authorizations, UTC posture, mission-capability statements, and force-generation requirements align with the capabilities resident in FS units. The assessment should distinguish problems arising from local implementation or career-field health from limitations in the underlying models and identify where adjustment is warranted.

Establish an Enterprise Approach for Talent Management of Mortuary Affairs Personnel

The mortuary affairs capability was identified as a critical FS readiness gap: a high-consequence, no-fail mission with weaknesses in training, workforce continuity, organizational ownership, and policy. Officers typically serve in mortuary affairs roles for two to three years, while enlisted personnel opt into technician positions. Neither pathway reliably preserves institutional expertise, much of the execution focuses on case management in garrison (not on contingency mortuary affairs), and recurring turnover erodes knowledge and readiness capacity. Limited staffing across PACAF and USAFE further constrains opportunities to build contingency mortuary affairs experience, while SMEs reported that the demands of the assignment lead some to pursue cross-training or leave the career field or service.

HAF/A1 should establish an enterprise approach to developing, tracking, assigning, and retaining mortuary affairs expertise. Near-term actions should include clarifying organizational and policy ownership for contingency mortuary affairs — an assessment HAF/A1 should conduct in coordination with AFMAO and AFSVC — creating a standardized onboarding package and first-24-hours playbook, and establishing formal mentorship for personnel entering these roles. Training, certification, and experience should also be coded and tracked through deployment sourcing and UTC management so qualified personnel can be assigned deliberately—actions HAF/A1 should direct through AFPC and the relevant career field managers. HAF/A1 should also assess the feasibility of a voluntary specialization or shred-out, as well as working with DOW and joint partners on expanding joint training arrangements.[56] Further, HAF/A1 should ensure that the psychological demands of the mission are addressed through improved pre-exposure preparation and post-exposure support, which links directly to retention in the role.

Pilot Test Alternative Organizational Constructs at Selected Large Installations

Our analysis surfaced an organizational question: whether a single squadron and a single professional identity can hold both a garrison service-delivery mission and an expeditionary combat-support mission, or whether the two have grown different enough to organize apart. The identity problem—FS described as separate functions with different chains of command, and readiness treated as "oh, by the way"—was near-universal among participants.

The structural remedy of splitting the FSS, however, was proposed explicitly by only a few commanders, even as several installations (for example, Ramstein and Joint Base San Antonio) already operate two-squadron or de facto split structures, and others improvise a split under

[56] AF/A1 participates in a joint Global Fatality Management working group, and revised Department of War mortuary affairs policy, including an anticipated update to the governing DOW instruction, is expected. SMEs cautioned that existing policy and statute are often problematic for large-scale operations. See the discussion of mortuary affairs in Chapter 4. Because these changes could reshape how mortuary affairs personnel are organized, trained, and utilized, HAF/A1 should sequence any enterprise approach to remain adaptable to their outcome.

contingency pressure. Because the support is genuine but limited, and because the manpower consequences are untested—a squadron relieved of some readiness requirements might earn fewer authorizations under current standards, and a second squadron would carry its own overhead bill—this is best framed as an exploratory option, not a full recommendation. HAF/A1-level decisionmakers, with MAJCOMs, could pilot and evaluate a split-squadron construct at a limited number of large installations—learning from the models already in place—separating expeditionary-readiness functions from installation business and quality-of-life functions, and pairing the pilot with a manpower-feasibility analysis, conducted through HAF/A1M, to confirm the wartime mission can be given its own organizational home without losing the authorizations that make it viable.

A Phased Approach to Implementation

The 13 actions differ in urgency and interdependence—some must precede others, while some can launch immediately. To help HAF/A1 and partner organizations implement these actions, we propose organizing implementation around four phases (Table 5.2 maps each action to its phase):

- Phase 1: Establish the policy and manpower foundation that downstream actions require.
- Phase 2: Build readiness capacity through personnel development, manpower alignment, and standards reform.
- Phase 3: Sustain and expand gains through broader training access and knowledge sharing.
- Phase 4: Evaluate structural organizational changes that the evidence raises but does not yet resolve.

While several Phase 2 actions can begin during Phase 1, the phases reflect the underlying logic of dependencies. HAF/A1 should use this framework to guide resource allocation and attention across the near and mid-term horizon, adapting the framework as implementation realities arise.[57]

[57] DAF and joint planning outline three decision horizons: force employment (0–3 years); force development (2–7 years), which directs resources within the Future Years Defense Program; and force design (roughly 5–15 years), which shapes the force through new capabilities and force-structure change. Our phases sequence by dependency rather than by planning horizon, but the two are compatible because most actions fall within force employment and force development, while the organizational question in Phase 4 begins to raise force-design considerations that would require analysis beyond our project scope. See Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 3030.01A, *Implementing Joint Force Development and Design*, October 3, 2022; and Leftwich, James A., and Robert S. Tripp, *Enhancing Department of the Air Force Combat Support Analytic Capabilities: Approaches to Better Inform Force Employment, Development, and Design Decisions*, RAND Corporation, PE-A3238-1, September 2024.

Table 5.2. Phased Approach to Implement Actions to Strengthen Force Support Readiness

Phase	Challenge Category	Action
Establish the Foundation	*Policy and Organizational Clarity*	• Consolidate or formally cross-reference policy for highly dispersed functions • Clarify decision authority for unit-level execution requirements • Provide guidance for prioritizing reporting requirements during contingency operations
	Training and Readiness	• Establish an authoritative enterprise view of readiness training and currency[a]
	Personnel, Manpower, and Organization	• Assess alignment among UMDs, UTCs, and force-generation requirements
Build Capacity	*Training and Readiness*	• Provide service-delivery baselines to help protect readiness training • Shift readiness standards from task completion toward demonstrated proficiency
	Personnel, Manpower, and Organization	• Strengthen NCO development and assignment stability for more consistent readiness capacity across installations • Assess and align FSS manpower models with wartime capability requirements, including where military proficiency must be preserved • Establish an enterprise approach for talent management of mortuary affairs personnel
Sustain and Expand	*Training and Readiness*	• Expand access to realistic, hands-on training opportunities • Establish an enterprise mechanism for sharing validated readiness-training practices
Evaluate Structural Change	*Personnel, Manpower, and Organization*	• Pilot test alternative organizational constructs at selected large installations[b]

[a] Designating the authoritative system of record and establishing currency tracking can begin in Phase 1; the proficiency fields depend on the standards work in Phase 2 and should be added as that action matures.
[b] This option is exploratory; we did not assess its manpower, cost, command, or readiness effects.

Summary

FS's readiness gap reflects systems designed primarily for garrison operations that do not consistently prepare, develop, or resource FS Airmen for contingency execution. Although deployments strain personnel across many DAF career fields, the challenge is especially pronounced in the FS community because many deployed functions retain the same names as their garrison counterparts while changing substantially in scale, equipment, operating conditions, command relationships, and skill demands. Yet, essential and highly visible home-station services need FS support, requiring FSSs to sustain garrison delivery while generating deployable capability from the same workforce.

Recent updates to HSRT are an important step, but revised training content alone cannot resolve constraints involving protected training time, instructor capacity, access to equipment and systems, realistic practice, proficiency assessment, personnel continuity, manpower, and decision authority. By examining how requirements are structured, training is delivered and readiness assessed, and personnel and manpower systems shape capability, we identified

execution risks that persist even when individual programs improve. The actions we propose translate those findings into practical phases. Implementation will require sustained leadership attention, coordination across functional organizations, and willingness to accept short-term service-delivery adjustments in exchange for longer-term readiness gains. These actions give HAF/A1 a framework for improving FS preparation for wartime operations across the DAF.

Appendix A. Policy Analysis Methodology

Chapter 2 used a structured, AI-supported policy analysis to examine whether DAF Combat Support policy provides clear and executable direction for contingency operations. The focus was the structure of policy requirements: the functions they address, whether they identify a responsible actor, whether they specify how work is to be performed, and whether they distinguish between those who execute work and those who make or approve consequential decisions. The analysis did not assess unit compliance, commander effectiveness, or actual operational performance. Rather, it identified structural features of policy that may make execution more difficult when personnel must act under time pressure, with limited staff, or in unfamiliar operating conditions.

Policy Corpus and Analytic Scope

The policy corpus included Air Force and joint documents relevant to force generation, deployment, readiness, personnel accountability, emergency management, and FS operations. Because these documents serve different purposes and carry different levels of authority, they were grouped into three analytic tiers based on their relevance to the project. The primary analytic corpus consisted of Tier 1 and Tier 2 documents. Tier 3 documents were reviewed as contextual sources but excluded from the requirement-level coding dataset and primary analyses. The tier labels are project-specific categories used to distinguish core FS policy from adjacent operational policy and contextual reference material. They are analytical categories, not official Air Force designations.[58]

Tier 1 Documents

Tier 1 documents were the core FS policy documents. These documents establish direct requirements for HAF/A1XO-related functions or assign primary responsibility for FS activities. They formed the center of the analysis because they are most likely to define what FS personnel are expected to do.

51st Force Support Squadron. *Force Support Squadron Kneeboard*. Osan Air Base, Republic of Korea: 51st Force Support Squadron, 2025.

[58] † Documents with this designation were classified as adjacent administrative policy and excluded from the primary analysis.

Department of the Air Force. *Appropriated Fund Food Service Program Management*. DAFMAN 34-131. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, October 10, 2023.

Department of the Air Force. *Career Field Education and Training Plan: Force Support Officer*. CFETP 38FX. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, July 6, 2022.

Department of the Air Force. *Career Field Education and Training Plan: Manpower Specialty, Parts I and II*. CFETP 3F3X1. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, March 27, 2025.

Department of the Air Force. *Career Field Education and Training Plan: Personnel Specialty*. CFETP 3F0X1. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, March 22, 2023.

Department of the Air Force. *Career Field Education and Training Plan: Services Specialty, Parts I and II*. CFETP 3F1X1. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, May 13, 2022.

Department of the Air Force. *Casualty Services*. DAFI 36-3002. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, July 15, 2025.

Department of the Air Force. *Civilian Personnel Management and Administration*. DAFI 36-129. Incorporating Change 1. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, April 6, 2023.†

Department of the Air Force. *Department of the Air Force Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) Programs and Use Eligibility*. DAFI 34-101. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, March 7, 2022. Certified current November 19, 2025.

Department of the Air Force. *Department of the Air Force Services*. DAFPD 34-1. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, June 20, 2023.

Department of the Air Force. *Deputy Chief of Staff of the Air Force Manpower, Personnel, and Services*. HAFMD 1-32. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, September 13, 2019.

Department of the Air Force. *Expeditionary Force Support Operations*. AFTTP 3-4.34. Incorporating Interim Change 1. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, November 16, 2022.

Department of the Air Force. *Manpower and Organization Standard Work Processes and Procedures*. AFMAN 38-102. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, July 5, 2024.

Department of the Air Force. *Military and Family Readiness Centers*. DAFI 36-3009, DAF Guidance Memorandum DAFGM2026-01. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, January 15, 2026.

Department of the Air Force. *Mortuary Affairs Program*. DAFI 34-160. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, March 3, 2022. Certified current November 18, 2025.

Department of the Air Force. *Protocol*. AFI 34-1201. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, June 9, 2017.

U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Navy, and U.S. Air Force. *Multi-Service Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Mortuary Affairs in Theaters of Operations*. ATP 4-46 / MCRP 3-40G.3 / NTTP 4-06 / AFTTP 3-2.51. Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, August 3, 2022.

Tier 2 Documents

Tier 2 documents were operationally consequential documents that do not necessarily belong solely to A1XO, but they shape how Force Support functions are carried out during deployment, readiness, force generation, or contingency operations. These documents were included because they establish requirements that A1XO personnel must execute, support, report on, or coordinate with other organizations. A subset of Tier 2 documents included 13 sources addressing evaluation systems, promotions, force development, appearance, leave, fitness, and awards. The team classified these as adjacent administrative policy because they address A1 enterprise functions rather than A1X operational execution. These documents were excluded from the primary analysis and retained for a sensitivity analysis, which confirmed that their inclusion modestly shifted function and phase distributions but did not materially change the primary findings.

Department of the Air Force. *Active Duty Operational Support–Active Component Man-Day Program*. DAFI 36-2619. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, January 15, 2025.†

Department of the Air Force. *Air Force Job Qualification Standard: Force Support Airmen (3FX)*. AFJQS 3FX. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, 2026. Draft.

Department of the Air Force. *Alcoholic Beverage Program*. AFI 34-219, with HQ United States Air Force Academy Supplement. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, April 30, 2019. USAFA Supplement, March 15, 2021. Certified current December 21, 2022.†

Department of the Air Force. *Career Field Education and Training Plan: Administration, Parts I and II*. CFETP 3F5X1. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, December 15, 2022.

Department of the Air Force. *Child and Youth Programs*. DAFI 34-144. Incorporating Change 1. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, October 2, 2024.

Department of the Air Force. *Deployment Planning and Execution*. AFI 10-403. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, April 17, 2020.

Department of the Air Force. *Department of the Air Force Physical Fitness Program*. DAFMAN 36-2905. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, April 21, 2022.†

Department of the Air Force. *Dress and Personal Appearance of Department of the Air Force Personnel*. DAFI 36-2903, DAF Guidance Memorandum DAFGM2026-01. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, January 9, 2026.†

Department of the Air Force. *Emergency Management Program*. DAFI 10-2501. Incorporating Change 1. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, October 16, 2023.

Department of the Air Force. *Enlisted Airman Promotion and Demotion Programs*. AFI 36-2502, Air Force Guidance Memorandum AFI36-2502_AFGM2025_01. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, January 8, 2026.†

Department of the Air Force. *Force Readiness Reporting*. AFI 10-201. Incorporating Air Force Guidance Memorandum AFI10-201_AFGM2025-01. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, June 5, 2024.

Department of the Air Force. *Force Support Readiness Programs*. DAFI 36-3802. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, January 14, 2026.

Department of the Air Force. *Individual Medical Readiness*. AFI 10-250. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, July 22, 2020.

Department of the Air Force. *Lodging Program*. DAFMAN 34-135. Incorporating Change 1. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, July 23, 2024.

Department of the Air Force. *Military Awards Criteria and Procedures*. DAFMAN 36-2806. Incorporating Change 3. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, October 27, 2022.†

Department of the Air Force. *Military Leave Program*. DAFI 36-3003, DAF Guidance Memorandum DAFGM2025-01. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, May 5, 2025.†

Department of the Air Force. *Officer and Enlisted Evaluation Systems*. AFI 36-2406. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, August 22, 2025.†

Department of the Air Force. *Officer Promotions and Selective Continuation*. DAFI 36-2501. Incorporating Change 2. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, January 12, 2024.†

Department of the Air Force. *Operations Planning and Execution*. AFI 10-401. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, July 19, 2024.

Department of the Air Force. *Personal Financial Responsibility*. DAFI 36-2906. Incorporating Change 1. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, August 23, 2023.†

Department of the Air Force. *Personnel Accountability Program Management*. DAFMAN 36-3805. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, January 14, 2026.

Department of the Air Force. *Ready Airman Training*. AFI 10-405. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, August 28, 2023.

Department of the Air Force. *Total Force Assignments*. DAFI 36-2110. Incorporating Change 1. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, August 9, 2024.†

Department of the Air Force. *Total Force Development*. DAFI 36-2670. Incorporating Change 10. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, June 25, 2020.†

Department of the Air Force. *Use of Nonappropriated Funds*. AFMAN 34-201, with Air National Guard Supplement. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, September 28, 2018. ANG Supplement, September 30, 2020.

Department of the Air Force. *Warrior and Survivor Care*. DAFI 34-1101. Incorporating Change 2. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, April 30, 2019. Certified current February 12, 2025.

Headquarters United States Air Force, Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel, and Services. *AF/A1 Warfighter Requirements Review (WFRR) Minutes, 5–8 May 2025*. Washington, D.C.: HAF/A1XO, May 23, 2025.

Headquarters United States Air Force, Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel, and Services. *Readiness Training and Certification Standards*. Washington, D.C.: HAF/A1, n.d.

Tier 3 Documents

Tier 3 documents included doctrine, concepts, joint publications, technical references, and other contextual materials. These sources were reviewed to understand the broader operational environment and to inform interpretation of Combat Support roles and relationships. They were not included in the primary requirement-level analysis or in the quantitative findings reported in Chapter 2 because they do not consistently establish binding execution requirements for Air Force units.

Department of the Air Force. *Base Support and Expeditionary (BAS&E) Site Planning*. AFI 10-404. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, July 24, 2019. Certified current February 22, 2023.

Department of the Air Force. *Career Field Education and Training Plan: Education and Training Specialty, Parts I and II*. CFETP 3F2X1. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, February 5, 2025.

Department of the Air Force. *Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Survivability*. AFI 10-2607. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, August 9, 2018.

Department of the Air Force. *Combat Support*. AFDP 4-0. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, January 5, 2020.

Department of the Air Force. *Unit Type Code Management*. DAFMAN 10-406. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, October 6, 2021.

Department of the Air Force. *USAF Honor Guard*. AFMAN 34-515. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, August 11, 2015.

Headquarters United States Air Force, War Planning and Policy Division. *Air Force Force Generation Support Plan*. Washington, D.C.: HAF/A3OD, September 16, 2024.

Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Contingency Basing*. JP 4-04. Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, January 4, 2019.

Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Campaigns and Operations*. JP 3-0, Revision 1. Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 10, 2024.

Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Logistics*. JP 4-0. Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, October 16, 2013.

Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Personnel Support*. JP 1-0. Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2024.

Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Mortuary Affairs*. JP 4-06. Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, October 12, 2011.

United States Air Force. *USAF Enabling Concept for Collective Lethality*. Version 0.7. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force, November 20, 2025. Draft.

Unit of Analysis and Requirement Extraction

The unit of analysis was the individual mandatory policy requirement. Requirements containing directive language, including “shall,” “must,” “required,” and equivalent mandatory constructions, were extracted from each document and retained in a structured dataset. Each

requirement remained linked to its source document and original text so that classifications and findings could be traced back to the underlying policy language.

Using individual requirements rather than whole documents allowed the analysis to distinguish between policy that provides detailed procedural direction and policy that states broad expectations. A single document could therefore contain both clear execution guidance and outcome-oriented language.

Requirement Classification

Each requirement was classified using predefined rules. The analysis first assessed whether the requirement explicitly named a responsible role, organization, or echelon. A requirement was coded as having an explicit owner only when responsibility was stated in the requirement text itself, rather than inferred from the document title, surrounding context, or local practice.

Requirements were also classified according to execution specificity.

- Procedural requirements identified an action, process, system, or other mechanism for carrying out the requirement.
- Outcome-only requirements stated a desired condition or result without identifying how personnel should achieve it.
- Reporting-only requirements directed personnel to provide information, submit documentation, validate status, or notify another organization without providing the corresponding execution process.

These classifications were used to develop a structural indicator of execution risk. Requirements that lacked both a named responsible actor and an identified execution mechanism were treated as higher-risk requirements for purposes of review. This indicator identifies requirements with limited direction on both responsibility and execution; it does not measure actual operational failure or predict performance outcomes.

The analysis also classified requirements by operational context. Requirements were coded as deployment or contingency related when their language referred to deployment, contingency, expeditionary operations, mobilization, force generation, or comparable operational conditions. Requirements were separately coded as steady-state, applicable to both contexts, or context unspecified.

Finally, requirements were classified by Force Support function, including deployment processing, force readiness, personnel accountability, training and certification, emergency management, beddown and life support, casualty and mortuary affairs, and related areas. These classifications were used to identify the functions most frequently addressed in deployment and contingency policy. Each requirement was assigned a single primary function.

Decision Rights and Execution Responsibility

The analysis separately examined the relationship between decision authority and execution responsibility. Requirements were reviewed for indications that a higher echelon retained approval, validation, or exception authority while lower-level organizations were responsible for carrying out the associated work. Such cases were treated as potential decision–execution seams — gaps where policy assigns local execution without making higher-level decision authority visible. A decision execution seam is not inherently a flaw. Many decisions appropriately require higher-level authority. The analytic concern arises when policy directs local personnel to execute a task but does not clearly identify the limits of local discretion, the authority for approving exceptions, or the process for elevating unresolved tradeoffs.

Analytic Approach

We used AI-assisted tools to support the extraction and initial classification of policy requirements according to predefined coding rules. Researchers developed the classification framework and decision rules, reviewed the resulting dataset, resolved ambiguous classifications, and retained responsibility for analytic judgments and interpretation. To assess the reliability of the AI-assisted classifications, a researcher independently reviewed a sample of requirements and compared those judgments with the classifications in the analytic dataset. Validation results are reported in the limitations section below.

The structured dataset was analyzed through descriptive counts and cross-tabulations. The analysis examined which functions appeared most frequently in deployment and contingency requirements; whether those requirements were more likely to be procedural, outcome-oriented, or reporting-oriented; whether they named a responsible actor; and whether particular documents contained concentrations of structurally higher-risk requirements or potential decision–execution seams. The resulting findings are descriptive. They identify patterns in the way policy distributes obligations, execution guidance, responsibility, and decision authority. They do not establish causal relationships between policy structure and operational outcomes.

Limitations

Several limitations should guide interpretation of the Chapter 2 results. The analysis did not capture local standard operating procedures, classified plans, informal practices, training quality, or the practical knowledge that experienced personnel may use to compensate for incomplete policy guidance. Outcome-oriented language may also be intentional in some cases, particularly where policy is designed to preserve local flexibility or support mission command. In addition, the function and operational-context classifications were based on structured coding rules and should be interpreted as an evidence-based representation of policy emphasis rather than a complete inventory of every task. The results identify where policy may warrant closer review;

they do not establish that a particular requirement is ineffective or that units cannot execute it successfully.

A structured validation sample was used to assess the reliability of the AI-supported coding variables. Validation estimated classification agreement with coding at approximately 76 percent for requirement type, 75 percent for owner type, and 71 percent for operational phase. Agreement for function classification was estimated at approximately 52 percent. The lower function-classification estimate most directly affects the precision of function-level proportions; function-level results should therefore be interpreted as indicative of broad areas of emphasis rather than as a precise ranking. This lower estimate reflects the difficulty of assigning a single primary function to policy requirements that often span multiple Force Support activities or use generic policy language without function-specific terms. These percentages reflect classification agreement for specific coded fields, not the overall accuracy of the extraction process or the validity of the policy analysis as a whole.

Appendix B. Interview Methodology

For this project, we conducted interviews with two broad categories of FS community representatives: SMEs and FSS commanders. We conducted interviews to learn about FS policies, processes, and practices, particularly as they relate to FS Airman readiness. We conducted semi-structured interviews with FSS commanders to learn about challenges for FS Airman readiness at the unit level and local efforts to address those challenges. Because these two categories of interviews served different purposes, we analyzed them separately. Themes from both interview categories were integrated with workshop findings to inform the findings described in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

SME Interviews

Throughout the project, we conducted interviews with three categories of SMEs from the FS community. Table B.1 outlines the types, timeframe, and numbers of participants and interviews.

Table B.1. Force Support Expert Interview Participants

Interview Category	Timeframe	Numbers	
		Interviews	Participants
FS Centers (AFSVC, AFPC, and AFMAO)	February 2026	3	9
FS training and readiness SMEs	March-April 2026	6	14
CFMs and other SMEs	June 2026	5	6
Total		14	29

Note: The “other” refers to an interview with a unit training manager (UTM) and unit deployment manager (UDM). This interview occurred during the same timeframe as the four CFM interviews so we include it in this category.

FS Centers. These discussions focused on learning about the role of these FS centers in FS HSRT development and guidance. Discussions also covered readiness and personnel needs for the FS community.

FS training and readiness SMEs. We sought to understand training and readiness gaps and potential innovations to close these gaps. SMEs represented perspectives from mortuary affairs officers; unit-level personnel who completed the contingency wartime planning course and temporary duty supporting agile combat employment operations; AFIMSC staff working on Silver Flag and Combat Support Training Range updates; and contractors providing virtual reality training resources to the DAF. SME discussions were used primarily to obtain institutional context, clarify processes, identify emerging concerns, and assess whether themes

recurred across stakeholder groups; they were not subjected to the same formal coding procedure as the FSS commander interviews, described below.

CFMs and other SMEs. Following our FSS workshops, we wanted to gain a broader context for career field needs and how units track readiness. To learn about career field needs, we reached out to the enlisted CFMs to learn about FS readiness from their perspectives and to gain more context on the health of their career fields. To learn about readiness training delivery and readiness reporting at a local level, we spoke with a UTM and UDM from one base.

All of the SME interviews were conducted virtually (via Teams). One team member facilitated while another took notes. Lead facilitators reviewed notes for their SME discussions to extract relevant information. Another team member combined notes from these discussions, using internal RAND AI tools to extract key themes aligned with the FSS workshop structure. All team members involved in conducting SME interviews reviewed the AI-assisted summaries and, where needed, adjusted themes to ensure they accurately reflected the source information.

FSS Commander Interviews

We conducted interviews with 26 FSS commanders across 15 CONUS and 11 OCONUS locations. FSS commanders were located across 10 MAJCOMs (see Table B.2). Locations also included joint bases and one participant was currently deployed in support of AFCENT operations.

Table B.2. Number of Commander Interviews by MAJCOM

MAJCOM	Number of Interviews
Air Combat Command (ACC)	2
Air Education and Training Command (AETC)	2
Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT)	2
Air Force District of Washington (AFDW)	1
Air Force Global Strike Command (AFGSC)	2
Air Force Materiel Command (AFMC)	3
Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC)	1
Air Mobility Command (AMC)	4
Pacific Air Forces (PACAF)	6
U.S. Air Forces in Europe (USAFE)	3

We reached out to potential interviewees via email to invite them to participate. We began outreach with FSS commanders known to our RAND Air Force fellow, a former FSS commander, to encourage participation. For those FSS commanders who responded and expressed interest in participating in an interview, we asked each of them to recommend additional FSS commanders we should reach out to (i.e., used snowball sampling). Then, we used an available roster of current FSS commanders to identify and reach out to additional FSS

commanders to ensure participation was balanced across MAJCOMs. Overall, our FSS commander interviews reflect a wide range of experiences but do not necessarily reflect a statistically representative sample of current FSS commanders.

Interviews were voluntary, conducted virtually, and roughly 60 minutes in length. One RAND facilitator and one notetaker participated in each interview with the FSS commanders. Interview notes were uploaded into Dedoose qualitative coding software and coded to identify key themes and trends.

FSS Leader Interview Protocol

Introduction

1. Please briefly describe your current role and responsibilities.
2. How long have you been in this role?

Competencies and Capabilities (In-Garrison/Peacetime and Deployment)
We are interested in learning more about the competencies and capabilities that are required for force support elements. **Competencies** include the knowledge, skills, and abilities of individual Airmen – basically, the things you need to know to do this job. **Capabilities** are the abilities of a unit, which can include personnel, equipment, and other resources that enable functions of a unit – such as food services, fitness, readiness planning.

3. What force support competencies and capabilities are most critical for *in-garrison, peacetime support*? Why?

4. What force support competencies and capabilities are most critical for *deployment or contingency environments*? Why?
    a. *Probe, if needed*: How do the competencies and capabilities needed for a deployment differ from those needed in-garrison / peacetime?

5. How would you describe your FSS's primary mission, customer service or combat support organization? Why?
    a. Do you contract some services? If so, please describe.

6. When force support Airmen deploy for the first time, what do you think they expect their role and tasks will look like during deployment, based on their training and in-garrison experience?
    a. How does that compare to what they actually end up doing during deployment?

7. When force support Airmen deploy, what happens to their home station duties? What gets delayed or stopped?

8. If you could add force support personnel anywhere, where would you add them and what problems would that solve?

Policy Structure

9. Can you walk me through how decisions get made when force support is navigating requirements across multiple organizations — Wing, MAJCOM, Combatant Command?

10. Have there been situations where it wasn't immediately clear how to proceed on a decision due to a policy issue (e.g., lacking or unclear policy)? What did that look like? How was that resolved?

Training and Preparation

11. How are force support elements trained for providing:
    a. In-garrison support?
    b. Support during deployments or contingency operations?

12. How, if at all, does training address the different needs across Areas of Responsibility (AOR)?

13. What, if any, gaps are there in the training provided to force support personnel?

14. New policy guidance for Home Station Readiness Training – or HSRT – has been developed.
    a. What would you like to be in this new guidance that isn't in the current version?

15. How, if at all, do force support elements train beyond standard HSRT?
    a. *Probe, if needed*: What additional training initiatives or opportunities are there?

Challenges and Innovations

16. What, if any, workarounds or innovations for force support have you implemented or are you aware of that work better than standard processes?

17. What, if any, other challenges arise with how force support objectives and mission align to:
    a. Organizational structure?
    b. Training?
    c. Equipment?
    d. Resources?
    e. Competencies and capabilities?

Conclusion

18. Overall, what is working well regarding force support in the Air Force?

19. Overall, what most needs improvement regarding force support in the Air Force?

20. If you had a magic wand and time and resources were not an issue, what would you implement to improve force support in the Air Force?

Appendix C. Workshop Methodology

This appendix describes the methodology for our five virtual workshops. Two workshops were held in May 2026 with FSS representatives ("the field") and three workshops were held in July 2026 with three types of FS organizations: Centers, C-NAF A1 offices, and MAJCOM A1 offices. We describe the two types of workshops in turn.

Workshops with Force Support Squadron Representatives

Participants

In May 2026, we held two workshops with a total of 25 participants from FSSs. We held the first workshop on May 12 with 18 participants: flight chiefs, section chiefs, and SNCOs from FSSs. To identify participants for this workshop, we reached out to FSS commanders we previously interviewed and had offered to provide contacts for their flight chiefs, section chiefs, and SNCOs. They provided 29 points of contact. Of these 29 individuals, 19 agreed to participate in the workshop and 18 attended. MAJCOMs represented by the first workshop included AMC, AFGSC, AETC, AFSOC, and USAFE.

We held the second workshop on May 14 with seven FSS commanders. We invited FSS commanders who were not part of our FSS commander interview sample. Overall, we invited 22 FSS commanders to attend; eight agreed to participate and seven attended. The FSS commander workshop represented many of the same commands (i.e., AMC, AFGSC, AETC, USAFE) as well as AFMC and U.S. Space Forces (USSF).

Design and Execution

We designed each workshop to follow a process of Evidence → Reaction → Options. First, we shared findings on FS readiness challenges (Evidence). Next, we asked participants to identify what we missed based on their experiences (Reaction). Finally, we asked participants to describe ways that the DAF could address the challenges (Options). To identify readiness challenges (Evidence), a senior researcher on the team worked with a RAND-supported AI tool to iterate on themes of FS readiness challenges based on content from the FSS commander interviews. Other core team members reviewed the list of challenges and provided feedback to refine the list. We identified 20 challenges across five thematic categories (see Table C.1).

Table C.1. Force Support Readiness Challenges by Category (for Workshops)

Category	Challenge
Training Content, Delivery, and Readiness Preparation	1. Gaps between Force Support training content and the specific tasks and job roles Airmen may be expected to perform in wartime or deployed environments 2. An overemphasis in Force Support training on compliance and checklists at the expense of problem-solving, judgment, and operating under uncertainty 3. Limited access to hands-on equipment for realistic training (e.g., forklifts, field kitchens, tents, WRM assets) 4. Not enough opportunities for realistic, scenario-based training that integrates multiple Force Support functions together 5. Training that does not adequately reflect the wartime scenarios, theaters, or mission environments Force Support Airmen are most likely to face 6. Variation in instructor skill and training delivery quality across formal courses and home-station training (e.g., HSRT), leading to inconsistent readiness outcomes across units
Experience, Leadership, and Workforce Mix	7. Shortages of experienced mid-tier NCOs (SSgt–TSgt) that limit effective training, supervision, and readiness development 8. High turnover and inexperience among junior Airmen (E1-E4) that reduce readiness for wartime demands 9. Reliance on civilians and contractors in ways that create readiness gaps for wartime preparation or execution 10. Insufficient continuity and knowledge retention resulting from permanent changes of station (PCSs), deployments, and civilian hiring delays
High-Risk / Low-Tolerance Mission Areas	11. Insufficient training on mortuary affairs and casualty operations for Force Support Airmen to perform successfully in wartime 12. Under-preparation of Force Support Airmen for joint, multinational, or interagency environments common in wartime operations 13. Limited preparation for Force Support Airmen to operate under degraded systems, communications outages, or unavailable enterprise IT tools
Policy, Guidance, and Enterprise-Field Alignment	14. Rapid or unclear policy changes that undermine readiness preparation and confidence in wartime execution 15. Insufficient advance notice or clarity for Force Support leaders and trainers before new requirements take effect 16. Inconsistent readiness tracking, certification, and enforcement result in reliance on readiness training attendance rather than demonstrated proficiency 17. Unclear ownership of contingency and cross-functional training, resulting in gaps being pushed to units without adequate support
Scope, Prioritization, and Time to Train	18. Broad scope of the Force Support portfolio, making it difficult to train deeply for core wartime missions 19. Insufficient protected time for training because of continuous customer-support demands 20. Lack of clear, resourced service baselines (e.g., “how much is enough”), forcing Force Support leaders to make tradeoffs that can reduce readiness

We used the 20 challenges in Table C.1 as part of a pre-workshop poll that we sent to participants a few days prior to their workshop. We asked them to evaluate each of the 20 challenges in terms of how important it is as meaningfully limiting wartime readiness preparation, affecting a high-risk or high-consequence mission area, or substantially improving readiness if addressed. We provided a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important). The poll also included an open-ended question at the end

to allow participants to share what they considered to be the "single most important gap in preparing Force Support Airmen for wartime missions." We analyzed responses to these polls before the workshops so we could focus workshop discussion on challenges that participants considered important.

Because we expected a large participation level for the first FSS workshop, we used a small-group breakout approach for discussing potential options for the DAF to take to address challenges. For each of the three small-group sessions, a team member with experience in group facilitation led the discussion and was supported by a notetaker. Small-group discussion outputs were shared with the entire group to complete the first FSS workshop. The second FSS workshop followed a similar flow but did not use small-group breakouts; discussion proceeded with the full group throughout.

Each of the FSS workshops lasted about two hours and was held on Zoom.gov.

Analysis

For the poll, we calculated the mean rating for each of the 20 challenges across respondents, ranked them from highest to lowest, and identified challenges with a mean rating of 4.0 or higher as very important; those challenges anchored the workshop discussion. Poll results were shared with participants at the start of each workshop. For the open-ended question, the sample was small enough that we summarized responses by reading through them and identifying recurring themes rather than applying a formal coding procedure.

Workshops were not recorded. Analysis of the workshop discussions drew on notes taken by facilitators and team members, including notes from each of the three breakout rooms in Session 1. After the workshops, a researcher with subject-matter expertise used an AI-assisted tool to combine and summarize the notes and then reviewed and validated the resulting summary. At least two researchers who had been present at the workshops confirmed the summary before it was finalized. The two FSS workshops were analyzed separately in this manner, and their summaries were then combined into a single integrated summary.

We shared the integrated summary with FSS workshop participants, inviting them to flag anything that was missing or inaccurately represented. Participants did not flag any significant concerns. The confirmed summary informed the thematic analysis reported in Chapters 3 and 4.

Workshops with Force Support Organization Representatives

Participants

In July 2026, we held three virtual workshops with representatives from FS Centers (July 10), C-NAF A1 offices (July 16), and MAJCOM A1 offices (July 23). To identify participants, we asked our sponsor office for a list of POCs. The POC list topped 80 individuals. We sorted POCs into organizational categories and identified the subset of POCs at Centers, C-NAFs, and

MAJCOMs. To keep each workshop's attendance low enough so we could have deep conversations (akin to focus groups), we did not invite everyone in each of the three categories. Instead, we identified up to three individuals per organization to invite. We ultimately invited 15 individuals for the workshop with FS Centers, 14 individuals for the C-NAF A1 workshop, and seven individuals for the MAJCOM A1 workshop. Overall, 15 attended the FS organization workshops: three for the Center workshop, 10 for the C-NAF A1 workshop, and two for the MAJCOM A1 workshop.[59] Participation levels varied by workshop session: three of 15 invited Centers representatives attended, 10 of 14 invited C-NAF A1 representatives attended, and two of seven invited MAJCOM A1 representatives attended. Because of the small participation numbers for the FS Center and MAJCOM A1 workshops, we do not list participants' commands and centers. Participants at the C-NAF A1 workshop represented AFCENT, Air Force Southern (AFSOUTH), and Air Forces Northern (AFNORTH).

Design, Execution, and Analysis

Unlike the FSS workshops, the FS organization workshops emphasized options for addressing readiness challenges, though the general flow (evidence, reactions, options) remained the same. However, we still followed the same general flow as we did with the FSS workshops: present a set of FS readiness challenges, get reactions, and then discuss potential options to address challenges. To capture their inputs prior to the workshop, we sent participants three open-ended questions to complete in advance:

1. What are the most significant challenges affecting Force Support readiness or training that your organization has the ability to influence or address? For each challenge you identify, please briefly describe it and explain why it persists.
2. Where do you see the largest gaps or disconnects between installation-level needs (e.g., squadrons and wings) and enterprise-level policy, guidance, resourcing, or support? What factors contribute to those gaps?
3. Looking across the Force Support enterprise, what two or three priorities should receive the most attention at the enterprise level to improve readiness? Please briefly explain why these priorities matter.

We reviewed and summarized responses to these questions, which we presented in a synthesized form so that individuals could not be identified by inference. We also shared a summary of the key challenges from the FSS workshops near the beginning of the workshop. The bulk of the workshop, however, focused on what we called *potential actions* to address FS readiness challenges. We first presented a list of five categories for these actions, along with working definitions to aid in the discussion. We derived the categories by mapping themes across interviews and workshop outputs. These categories and definitions include:

[59] Several individuals could not attend our workshops because they or their leadership had recently changed assignments or were in the process of doing so. A few individuals indicated that they no longer belonged to the organizations so they would not be appropriate as participants.

- **Training:** Improvements to FS readiness training content, delivery, and access—including realistic and deployed-conditions training.
- **Readiness and Standards:** Changes to how individual and unit readiness is assessed, tracked, and reported.
- **Personnel:** Changes to FS manning and talent management rules and processes to improve FS readiness.
- **Mission Identity and Culture:** Changes to how FS defines, communicates, and positions its combat support mission—within the FS community and across the broader DAF.
- **Resources:** Needed investments in equipment, systems, and capacity to support FS readiness.

We walked through each of the five categories, presenting at least one potential action for participants to evaluate and build on.[60] We invited them to add to our list or modify what we presented. We also asked them to share what they considered as most important for the DAF to address and to identify implementation considerations (e.g., who would be responsible for implementing the action). A team member with facilitation experience led this discussion and another team member took notes to capture the discussion.

Each workshop lasted about two hours and was hosted on Microsoft Teams. After each workshop concluded, we analyzed the notes to identify key themes, using the same analytic approach as for the FSS workshops: a researcher with subject-matter expertise used an AI-assisted tool to summarize the notes, validated the summary, and then at least two researchers who had attended the workshops confirmed it. The summaries from the three FS organization workshops were then combined into a single integrated summary. We shared the integrated summary with those who attended the FS organization workshops, inviting attendees to flag anything missing or inaccurately represented. No one reached out to flag anything. The confirmed summary informed the thematic analysis reported in Chapters 3 and 4.

The potential actions discussed in these workshops, together with the options generated in the FSS workshops, also informed the targeted actions presented in Chapter 5. The five categories used to structure the workshop discussions differ from the three challenge categories used in Chapter 5. Training and the Readiness and Standards both map to the training and readiness category. Personnel, Mission Identity and Culture, and Resources map to personnel, manpower, and organization, with resource implications carried within individual actions rather than treated as a separate category. The policy and organizational clarity actions derive from the policy analysis described in Appendix A rather than from workshop discussion.

[60] We made slight adjustments with each successive FS organization workshop. For the first workshop, we found that providing more than a few actions per category took too long to cover in the allotted time. For the second workshop, we only shared one potential action per category to invite more participant engagement. However, this approach did not invite as much discussion as we would have hoped. For the third and final workshop, we shared 2-3 actions per topic. This "goldilocks" approach seemed to work well for the last workshop.

Appendix D. Methodology for Personnel Data Analysis

This appendix outlines the data sources and decision rules we used to analyze personnel data, including the deployment experience analysis and training course-completion analysis.

Data Sources

For all personnel data analyses, we used data supplied to RAND PAF by AFPC from the Military Personnel Data System (MilPDS). However, depending on the analysis, we supplemented with other data sources.

Basic population characteristics came from MilPDS and unit identifier files. To describe basic population characteristics (e.g., number of personnel in an AFSC), we used the most recent monthly MilPDS snapshot (May 2026). Specifically, we used the Active Officer Master Personnel Extract and the Active Enlisted Master Personnel Extract files. To identify attributes of the units and organizations where the FS population is located, we mapped these personnel records to unit attributes. For example, Personnel Accounting Symbol hierarchies, as represented in Personnel Accounting Symbol hierarchy files, from FY 2020–2025 were used to identify Force Support Squadrons.

Data for formal training courses also came from MilPDS. We also used the personnel extract files for the training course completion analyses. For this analysis, we benchmarked findings for the FY 2025 population so we could examine records on a FY-by-FY basis. We extracted training course completion records for FY 2019–2025 to ensure we did not miss any important courses that were not in the records of the FY 2025 population.

Deployment data analysis combined MilPDS data with unclassified deployment records. Monthly enlisted and officer MilPDS snapshots from January 2020 to May 2026 were used in conjunction with deployment experiences to describe the deployment population the month before deployment. To complete this analysis, we requested unclassified deployment records from FY 2020–2025. We did not request earlier deployment records because we expect deployment conditions before FY 2020 to differ substantially from the current environment and not be as relevant to the current population's experiences.

Decision Rules

Below are key decision rules about who we included in our FS populations and how we accounted for deployment experience and training course records.

- **Active Component FS population (as of May 2026):** We defined the enlisted FS population as anyone with a Duty AFSC of 3FXX1 and the officer FS population as

anyone with a Duty AFSC of 38F. All shreds, skill levels, suffixes, and prefixes are included.

- **Deployment experience (for FY 2025 population):** An individual was counted as having deployed if deployment records showed a deployment during FY 2020–2025 and their Duty AFSC was 3FXX1 or 38F in the month before the deployment began. The range of deployment experiences is from FY 2020–2025.
- **Formal training course records (for FY 2025 population):** We counted completed courses in the FY 2025 population's records (1,271 officers, 13,452 enlisted). Because MilPDS keeps a historical record of the most recent 24 courses for every person, one year of a person's record can have courses going back many years. This file does not capture all courses a person has taken — only the 24 most recent. Note that a vast majority of the FY 2025 population had fewer than 20 courses in their records, indicating that the 24-course cap should not unduly restrict the range of records we could see.

Categorizing the Types of Training Courses

Formal training courses include the entire gamut of basic courses that almost everyone has to take to specialty courses that only a select few would take. To ensure our analysis focused on the courses most relevant to core FS wartime capabilities, two RAND researchers with FS subject-matter expertise grouped courses into three categories. Categories were: (1) core readiness courses for the FS community, (2) FS readiness courses specific to theaters or duty positions, and (3) basic courses for large segments of the FS enlisted and officer populations. Table D.1 provides examples of courses by category and for officer and enlisted populations.

Table D.1. Examples of Formal Training Courses by Category and Population

Category	Courses taken by 38F Officers	Courses taken by 3F Airmen
Recommended (core deployment-readiness)	• Mortuary Affairs Officer Course • PERSCO Readiness Course • Basic Contingency Course • Silver Flag Exercise • DCAPES – Wing Level Operations	• Mortuary Technicians Course • PERSCO Readiness Course • A-14 Generic Combat Skills Training • Silver Flag Exercise • DCAPES – Wing Level Operations
Theater/Duty-Specific	• DCAPES MAJCOM Planner • Advanced Ready Training Core • Postal Operations • Expeditionary Mission Support Group Senior Leaders Course • Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape Training	• DCAPES Strategic Planning Course • DCAPES Installation Planner Course • Postal Operations • Combat Advisor • Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape Training
Expected Basic Career	• Initial Force Support Officer Course • Military Personnel Flight Leadership • FSS Familiarization Course • Force Support Squadron Leadership Course • Commanders Readiness Reporting	• Personnel Apprentice Course • Services Apprentice Course • Manpower Apprentice Course • Food Service Shift Leader Course • Air Force Readiness Reporting

Note: Officer and enlisted lists have a lot of overlap; key differences occur where courses are AFSC-specific.

Abbreviations

ACC	Air Combat Command
AETC	Air Education and Training Command
AF/A1	Deputy Chief of Staff, Manpower, Personnel and Services
AFCENT	Air Forces Central Command
AFDP	Air Force Doctrine Publication
AFDW	Air Force District of Washington
AFFORGEN	Air Force Force Generation
AFGSC	Air Force Global Strike Command
AFI	Air Force Instruction
AFIMSC	Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center
AFMAN	Air Force Manual
AFMAO	Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations
AFMC	Air Force Materiel Command
AFNORTH	Air Forces Northern
AFPC	Air Force Personnel Center
AFSC	Air Force Specialty Code
AFSOC	Air Force Special Operations Command
AFSOUTH	Air Forces Southern
AFSVC	Air Force Services Center
AI	artificial intelligence
AMC	Air Mobility Command
ANG	Air National Guard
AOR	area of responsibility
ARIS	Automated Readiness Information System
C-NAF	component numbered air force
CAC	Common Access Card
CFM	career field manager
CONUS	continental United States
CSS	commander support staff
CSTR	Combat Support Training Range
DAF	Department of the Air Force
DAFECD	Department of the Air Force Enlisted Classification Directory
DAFI	Department of the Air Force Instruction
DAFMAN	Department of the Air Force Manual
DAFOCD	Department of the Air Force Officer Classification Directory

DCAPES	Deliberate and Crisis Action Planning and Execution Segments
DFAC	dining facility
DO	Director of Operations
DOW	Department of War
DRRS	Defense Readiness Reporting System
E&T	education and training
EO	equal opportunity
FS	Force Support
FSS	Force Support Squadron
FY	fiscal year
GWOT	Global War on Terrorism
HAF	Headquarters Air Force
HAF/A1	Headquarters Air Force, Deputy Chief of Staff, Manpower, Personnel and Services
HAF/A1M	Headquarters Air Force, Deputy Chief of Staff, Manpower, Personnel and Services, Directorate of Manpower, Organization and Resources
HAF/A1X	Headquarters Air Force, Deputy Chief of Staff, Manpower, Personnel, and Services, Directorate of Plans and Integration
HAF/A1XO	Headquarters Air Force, Deputy Chief of Staff, Manpower, Personnel, and Services, Directorate of Plans and Integration, Force Support Career Field Management and Readiness Division
HSRT	Home Station Readiness Training
IED	improvised explosive device
MAJCOM	major command
MilPDS	military personnel data system
MWR	morale, welfare, and recreation
NCO	noncommissioned officer
OCONUS	outside the continental United States
PACAF	Pacific Air Forces
PAF	Project AIR FORCE
PERSCO	Personnel Support for Contingency Operations
PME	professional military education
QA	quality assurance
SME	subject-matter expert
SNCO	senior noncommissioned officer
SPEK	single pallet expeditionary kitchen
UDM	unit deployment manager
UTC	unit type code

UTM	unit training manager
USAFE	United States Air Forces in Europe
USSF	United States Space Force
USTRANSCOM	United States Transportation Command
WRM	war reserve materiel

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