

Army struggles with soldier shortage as recruiters miss goals

- By: [Tom Roeder](#)
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All the Army wants for Christmas is a few more troops.

The service fell more than 6,500 short of its recruiting goals for the fiscal year that ended Oct. 1. That's tough news for a service that's trying to grow its forces at home while maintaining commitments in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Europe.

Meanwhile, the other armed services hit their recruiting goals, even as a tight economy continues to draw away workers who would otherwise opt for the armed forces.

The military has traditionally had a tough time filling billets when the economy is hot. Now, with unemployment below 4 percent nationally and below 3 percent in Colorado, the Army is offering bundles of cash to recruits who can head to basic training quickly.

"You could earn \$16,000 just for shipping to training within 30 days of enlistment," the Army says on its recruiting website.

Combined with other bonus programs, a new recruit could pocket more than \$40,000 in addition to their pay with recruiting deals.

The Army had a goal for 2018 to add 76,500 soldiers to its ranks, and came up with just 69,972.

The last time the Army had this much trouble drawing recruits, the service faced a similar economic climate. In 2005, at the height of the Iraq war, low unemployment and a hot economy combined with wartime risks left the Army thousands short on its recruiting goals.

The service then notoriously offered waivers for troops who would otherwise be ineligible for service, allowing felons and academically challenged troops to join up.

Army Secretary Mark Esper, though, has said he won't recruit troubled troops, called category four in Army lingo, to make up the numbers.

"We've raised standards, such as limiting Category IV accessions from the DoD higher end of 4 percent to the Army higher end of 2 percent, putting more stringent requirements on issuing waivers and making sure we truly take into account the holistic person to ensure persons who receive waivers are high-quality recruits," Esper said in September, according to the Army's website.

The Army's recruiting woes aren't limited to the active duty.

The Defense Department said this month that the National Guard saw a recruiting shortfall of more than 9,700 troops and the Army Reserve fell short of its recruiting goals by more than 4,200 troops.

The Army is desperate for new blood because of two factors. First is the plan to grow the force to 500,000 troops, an increase of 20,000. Second is the Army's push to toss out troops who can't meet the service's physical requirements.

The Army in the past year has pushed a new standard that gives unfit troops a year to be prepared for battle or get out of the service.

"We need soldiers who are deployable, lethal and ready," Esper said during a stop at Fort Carson this fall.

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Tom Roeder is the Gazette's senior military editor. In Colorado Springs since 2003, Tom covers seven military installations in Colorado, including five in the Pikes Peak region. His main job, though, is being dad to two great kids.