

Stories of Prevention Across Commands

PREVENTION IN ACTION

U.S. SPACE FORCE

Space Force Transforms Health and Prevention Strategies

Christine Heit is a trailblazer in the Department of Defense (DoD) primary prevention space. With a master's in psychology, Heit began her DoD career as the Prevention, Outreach, and Education Section Head for Headquarters Marine Corps Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) program. She was later selected to launch an integrated primary prevention capacity for the service. In that role, Heit contributed to the pilot of DoD SPARX Knowledge - the online training for primary prevention workforce onboarding - and development of the Prevention Plan of Action and DoD Instruction 6400.09, "Policy on Integrated Primary Prevention of Self-Directed Harm and Prohibited Abuse or Harm."

After nearly a decade with the Marine Corps, Heit joined the Space Force as the HHA program lead. Heit outlines how the Space Force has shifted focus in its approach by implementing "universal primary prevention, then incorporating physical fitness and limited-scope medical intervention." She explains that the HHA program strives "to be more preventive, strategic and solution-focused."

According to Heit, HHA is often misunderstood across the DoD prevention space, which is something she and her staff at headquarters have taken strides to address over the last year.

"Educating our collaborators on what HHA does and doesn't do in the prevention space has been helpful," she said.



Holistic Health Approach (HHA) Defined

HHA is an innovative approach focusing on overall fitness and wellness. It focuses on the whole person and their individual goals, emphasizing physical fitness, health, nutrition and life skill-building to promote positive behaviors. “HHA is about telling someone what to do, not just what not to do or what to know. It’s focused on being proactive and solution-focused and intended to create a healthy person in mind, body and spirit.” **HHA is comprised of three key components: the voluntary continuous fitness assessment study, performance health optimization and capacity.**



Continuous Fitness Assessment Study

The Space Force set out to develop an evidence-based approach to fitness and health outcomes that promotes consistent physical activity, rather than episodic preparation for physical assessments. As a result of this objective, the Space Force partnered with the Air Force Research Laboratory (AFRL) to conduct a two-year research study, starting in June 2023, of data collected from portable wearable fitness devices. Guardians can voluntarily opt-in to the study and become exempt from the Air Force physical fitness assessment by meeting the study criteria of 600 exercise minutes a month, monthly cardiorespiratory fitness readings and engagement with the AFRL study team.

Performance Health Optimization

Holistic Health Approach infuses lifestyle medicine principles to increase positive behaviors and human performance across the Space Force. This includes applying the following six pillars of lifestyle medicine through education and skill-building: nutrition, physical activity, stress management, avoidance of risky substances, restorative sleep, and social connections.

Capacity

The primary prevention and public health component focuses on strengthening connections within the installation and surrounding communities, while building skills to promote protective factors and increase positive behaviors across the total force.



LEADERSHIP BUY-IN & LESSONS LEARNED

KEY TAKEAWAY



“The resounding message I get from our leaders is to keep going!”

- Christine Heit

Securing leadership backing and support from the service members themselves has been a smooth road for the HHA program. “Space Force is a highly-cognitive service,” she said. They understand the “why.” As for leadership buy-in of HHA, Heit said, “We have it. When we want to do something innovative or edgy, we are met with support from the top down. Our service chief trusts our expertise to build a program to increase the health and resilience of our Guardians. The resounding message I get from our leaders is to keep going!”

To gain further momentum on prevention efforts, Heit expresses a need for more collaborators, highlighting the importance of working together toward shared primary prevention goals. “I’m not here for mission creep,” she shares, “but the more universal understanding we have amongst ourselves, the more we can help others.

Heit also emphasizes the importance of having an evaluation plan established at a program’s inception, citing the ability to demonstrate positive change. “A lot is focused on the negative and not the positive,” she said. “Understand what success looks like and the data points needed to measure it.” She goes further to note how regular and transparent communication with Guardians is a “big win” because “feedback from the ‘customer’ is very important” to the evaluation process.

Heit understands that prevention work is challenging, and while it may take many years to see a difference in behaviors and attitudes, the Space Force culture is a ripe environment for progress.