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AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 41

Volunteering for the Air Force Barrier Analysis Working Group with Maj Alea Nadeem and Maj Sam Sliney

HOST: MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN

GUESTS: MAJ ALEA NADEEM AND MAJ SAM SLINEY

In today's interview, we speak with Maj Alea Nadeem and Maj Sam Sliney. We discuss a unique volunteer opportunity through the Air Force Barrier Analysis Working Group and discuss the Women's Initiative Team.

MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN:

In today's interview, we discuss a unique volunteer opportunity through the Air Force Barrier Analysis Working Group and discuss the Women's Initiative Team with two guests Major Alea Nadeem and Major Sam Sliney. They offer some great ways to get involved as a volunteer and grow in your personal and professional development through this unique program and impact policy change in a meaningful way.

For all our female Airmen out there, Major Nadeem and her team of volunteers were also instrumental in the updates to the new 2021 Air Force female hair standards. Here are a few clips from the interview.

[short intro background music]

SHOW EXCERPT, MAJ ALEA NADEEM:

As a volunteer you're going to, you're going to say, "You know what? The buck stops with me. I'm going to address this issue."

SHOW EXCERPT, MAJ SAM SLINEY:

For every ten no's, I get that one person that's super excited and they're like, you know, "thank you for doing this. Because you're going to make my life easier" or "you're going to make my troop life easier." That really makes it all worth it.

ANNOUNCER:

Welcome to The Air Force Judge Advocate General's Reporter Podcast, where we interview leaders, innovators, and influencers on the law, leadership, and best practices of the day. And now to your host from [The Air Force Judge Advocate General's School](https://www.jagreporter.af.mil/).

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Welcome to another episode from The Air Force Judge Advocate General's School at Maxwell Air Force Base. I'm your host, Major Rick Hanrahan. Remember, if you like the show, please consider subscribing on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite podcast platform and leaving a review. This helps us to grow in outreach to the JAG Corps and beyond. In today's show, we have two guests to discuss a unique volunteer opportunity within the Air Force that many may not be aware of, called the Air Force Barrier Analysis Working Group.

And we plan to take a closer look at one of the main action teams within this group called the Women's Initiative Team [WIT]. This is also the first interview where we specifically address the aspect of volunteering. I think it goes without saying that volunteering of one's time talent and or treasure is not only good from a spiritual, religious or emotional standpoint, but also from a leadership development perspective. In fact, volunteering is often the only way you may be able to get involved with certain activities, like our two guests will be discussing today.

I'd like to welcome our two guests, Major Alea Nadeem and Major Sam Sliney to the show. Ladies, thank you for speaking with us today.

MAJ SLINEY:

Thank you for having us.

MAJ NADEEM:

Thanks, Rick.

GUEST INTRODUCTIONS

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Major Alea Nadeem, is a Department of Defense Legislative Fellow assigned to the Secretary of the Air Force Legislative Liaison at the Pentagon. She's assigned to Alaskan Senator Lisa Murkowski. She also chairs the Air Force Women's Initiative Team, or WIT for short as part of the Air Force Barrier Analysis Working Group, which she'll be talking about today.

And our other guest is Major Sam Sliney. She's currently the Air Defense Counsel at Pope Army Airfield, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where she is responsible for providing defense services to 2600 Airmen assigned to the installation. She previously was the Deputy Staff Judge Advocate at the same installation. And prior to that position, she was assigned as Assistant Staff Judge Advocate at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in North Carolina.

So ladies, to get started, could you provide a little more background on your current duty positions and what you do?

MAJ SLINEY:

Sure. This is Sam. So as an Area Defense Counsel, you know, I represent Airmen that are pending adverse action. So, I think if you are, if you're a JAG, you know what that means if you're not—so any time an adverse action is taken against the military member or so and anything as small as like a verbal counseling all the way up to court-martial, even something where a member is maybe just confused. I get a lot of clients that just don't, they have a problem, but they don't know who to go to. And maybe I'm not the solution, but I can direct them in the right direction.

And so that's what I do. And I provide legal advice to those people going through those various processes. I don't work for any command. I'm actually assigned what used to be AFLOA, which is now the Military Justice and Discipline Directorate. And I represent Airmen. That's what I do day in and day out. And in my past two jobs, I was basically a prosecutor. So, I tried cases. I was on the other side.

MAJ NADEEM:

Hey, this is Alea. So as you said from my bio, I'm currently out of my intelligence right now, actually. And so I'm doing this assignment as a Legislative Fellow. And by trade, I'm an intelligence professional and I'm prior enlisted as well, security forces. And then I actually commissioned into the Office of Special Investigation,

OSI. So I did work with JAGs a lot when I was in OSI. And now just kind of taking a break from Intel. And I'll be going back to Intel, very shortly.

BARRIER ANALYSIS WORKING GROUP

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Great. Thank you, ladies. So to get started what is the Air Force Barrier Analysis Working Group and how did it get started?

MAJ NADEEM:

So what this is, is it was actually mandated by Congress and it came out of sort of equal opportunity. What Congress was noticing is that, you know, we were having sort of all these equal opportunity issues within the Department of Defense. But nobody was actually, you know, peeking behind the curtain, if you will, to look and see what were those problems. And so they kind of, they actually put in legislation to do analysis on some of these barriers. So that's really how the Barrier Analysis Working Group was started as it was mandated by law.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

And if I could ask, how did you both get involved with this group?

MAJ SLINEY:

This is Sam. So how I got involved, I became, I became involved in the fall of 2019 yes. Gosh, that seems like such a long time ago. When, not really, it's not really that long ago. But the first sergeant here at Pope was involved and she said, "Hey, I attend these monthly meetings. I think you would really enjoy it." She sent me the calendar invite and I started calling into our quarterly meetings. I was really intrigued. I do not have a policy background, but at the time I was pregnant with my first child and listening to the meetings, a lot of the information described are barriers that are faced by women relating to childcare or how to balance family and work.

So it is just very, very timely for me. My first big involvement was I helped to organize the first off-site

that we had in Washington, in Washington, D.C., where a bunch of women came together and we basically brainstormed and planned for the upcoming year's lines of effort that we were going to take on as the WIT. I personally lead an effort for a breast milk shipment reimbursement for military members and we'll get into that, I think, a little bit later.

But ever since I joined that first meeting, I absolutely loved it. It's amazing group of people, and I say people because it's not just women. We have men involved as well. And it's just really amazing to see a group of people volunteer their time and make such impactful change. The things that I have seen happen just over the last year, the WIT has made happen is absolutely phenomenal.

MAJ NADEEM:

So, Rick, I actually got involved in 2015. At the time, the Women's Initiative Team was led by a civilian and someone had told me that I should consider joining this team. And so I actually joined the team just as a member, and I attended a first meeting and just like Sam said, I was fascinated by it. And I got involved in working some initiatives, specifically when women transition outside of the military, whether they retire or separate, they actually have a lot of different challenges, higher rates of suicide, homelessness. And so I actually worked with the VA to create some programs specifically for women.

So that was kind of how I cut my teeth into the Women's Initiative Team and just started working different initiatives. And then in 2018 I was formally asked to take over as the Women's Initiative Team Lead. And so I took over in 2018, and I want to emphasize as a volunteer and, and this is where I would just say that, you know, when you get involved in something like this, you don't walk past problems anymore, right?

So a lot of times, you know, we all have grumbles about the Air Force and this, this organization is, really as a volunteer you're going to, you're going to say, "You know

what, the buck stops with me. I'm going to address this issue." And most of our issues focus on women, right? So for example, you know it's 2021 and you know, we didn't have lactation rooms up until a year ago because of the Women's Initiative Team. So we kind of look at those things and try to get the DoD and the Air Force up to speed on how to better inclusive of women.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Well, thank you both for that. So the Women's Initiative Team, it sounds as it's one of the teams within this group, this Analysis Working Group. Can you discuss maybe just the group as a whole a little bit more?

MAJ NADEEM:

Yeah, yeah. No problem. Yeah. So the Women's Initiative Team is one of six teams within the Barrier Analysis Working Group. And I know that's a mouthful, so I apologize up front. But within this group, there's the Women's Initiative Team, there's the Hispanic Team, there is the Asian Pacific Islander Team, there's the Disability Team, there's the Senior Leadership Development Team, and then there's the Black African-American Team as well. And I hope I didn't forget anybody. These are all the teams and each team sort of works these different problem sets for each group. But, you know, for example, let's say that the teams that I've just described doesn't fit right your issue. You can still bring this issue up to the whole, to the group as a whole. It doesn't necessarily have to fit one of those teams, but it's just easier for us to bin, bin these things specifically. And then it also helps us to work that specific issue.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

So there's approximately five working teams within the group. What's the general make up of each of these teams or how many volunteers roughly are we looking at here within these teams?

MAJ NADEEM:

Right. Good question. So the, by far the Women's Initiative Team is the biggest. So we were about 700

folks total who are on the team. Now, it doesn't mean everybody is working something. Sometimes people are just consumers of information. And so sometimes you have people like, you know, Sam who's, who's on the line right now, you know, she actually works a specific initiative.

The rest of the teams are much smaller, so they're between 20 and 30 folks. So you can, you can see the difference of the teams and we're probably the loudest team. But I also think it's because there's a lot more specific challenges and readiness issues with women than there are with some of the other teams.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

And maybe just to be clear for the listeners, this is a completely a voluntary group.

MAJ NADEEM:

Yes. This is completely voluntary. The only thing that we ask is that if you do decide to volunteer with the team that your, you know, supervisor and your leadership support and approve you to do this, because this could take, you know, duty time. I know a lot of us, we do this, you know, outside of duty time just because we have, you know, full-time jobs in itself.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

So this question now, it's a little bit of a loaded question because I'm sure you can answer this in a lot of different ways, depending on who the volunteers are. But what is the typical time commitment you see from volunteers within a team like WIT?

MAJ NADEEM:

You know, I see everything from, you know, just coming to the monthly meetings. So we have monthly meetings once a month. They never change. It's the same time, the first Tuesday of the month, 10 a.m. Eastern Standard Time. So sometimes people just come an hour. They hear what we're doing and they spread the good word. And then there's people like Sam who probably, you know, probably at least during the week, she's giving

an additional four to five hours, right? It kind of all adds up. So I've seen, I've seen everything. I've seen from one hour all the way to maybe 20 hours a week. And this is all kind of after hours.

And I'll specifically say, you know, when we're working some initiatives that are going to the Secretary of the Air Force or the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, which we have been working specifically for hair policy, that team was probably working 40 hours in addition to their full-time jobs. Now, it's slowed down now that it's at the Chief's office, but for probably, you know, a month, everyone was kind of doubling down just to get this over the line. So it fluctuates. I guess that's maybe a better way to say it.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Copy. Thank you. What are some of the biggest issues that you have on your plate right now?

HAIR POLICY

MAJ NADEEM:

Well, actually, you know, I kind of want to turn over to Sam to talk about because she's, she's actually tracking one of our bigger issues. But the one that I'm really tracking big is, is the hair policy one. For example, you know, we didn't look, we have never revisited hair policy since the inception of DoD. If you can believe that or not. And where this policy came, it's actually kind of horrific.

So, you know, think of the thirties and forties when women were first joining the military. There was a big debate in our country of whether women could join. And it was it was a hot topic. And one of the things that was decided, if women join or that people were scared of, is if women joined the military, they were worried that they could take married men away or that they would become lesbians. And yes, these are these are real things that were discussed.

So when women joined the military, one of the jobs of the Women's Auxiliary Corps was to ensure women didn't look too much like lesbians, but they didn't look

too sexy. And so they, they designed hair policies around that balance. Again, not looking like a lesbian or not stealing somebody's husband. [Maj Hanrahan laughing].

It's, I know it's, it's laughable now, right? [Maj Hanrahan and Maj Nadeem both laughing] So, and I could do a whole episode on that, but, [both laughing] but I, so anyways we did a lot of research on this. And so no one ever actually looked and said, "Is a bun operationally good for women?" You know, so ironically enough, women who fly when they wear their helmets, they had to take their hair down.

When you put your gas mask on, for a woman, the first thing they tell you when you put your gas mask on is take your bun out. So there's so many certain career fields. You know, I was prior enlisted security forces. Well guess what, my bun when I was wearing my cavalier helmet, they don't, it's not designed for a bun. I'd have to, you know, take my hair down or get in trouble.

And we've never we looked at that. And so the Women's Initiative Team, you know, we came together and said, "You know, we need to relook at this." The standard we have was in 1940, and it was about not becoming a lesbian and not stealing somebody. We need to look at this. There's operational needs for this. And so we made the argument of operational needs, readiness needs, and then also inclusivity.

You know, there's, there's different hair types. A lot of times, you know, African-Americans and black women and ethnic women, they've had to straighten their hair to look more like Western women's hair, because that's, that's kind of where we were, you know, sort of birthed out of this is looking, you know, having that fine hair.

So anyways this is probably one of the biggest things for the WIT right now. And it's, it's literally going to the Chief's desk on Friday. And so this is the big thing for us, because this will be a monumental moment when this changes. So we do expect changes will happen with the Chief and they're going to be announced. So that's

the biggest one. But I do want to turn it over to Sam to kind of talk about what she's working, because this is another very important issue.

SHIPMENT OF BREAST MILK

MAJ SLINEY:

Thanks, Alea. So I'm actually working on a change to the Joint Travel Regulation to allow for the reimbursement of the shipment of breast milk. Or we recently, as of today, did some research and found out we should really be using the term "transport" of breast milk. So this is near and dear to my heart. I have two children, both I have nursed, and I will never forget I was out at training soon after I had my son, and was at the JAG school. There was a, at the time, a senior defense counsel there, a female who had also just had a baby. And I remember talking to her about the struggles that she faced being a circuit defense counsel or senior defense counsel, traveling, having to try cases, and then also being able to manage that with her desires to feed her infant breast milk.

There are plenty of AFSCs, ours included, where we do have a one year TDY deferment, but that's not really an option for me as an ADC, right? So if I'm not traveling, all my cases are not here at Pope. So if I'm not traveling for courts-martial and things like that, you know, it makes me wonder what's going to go on my OPR because I'm not able to do my job.

So in order to do my job, I have no problem traveling. But to have that support from the Air Force or Department of Defense or the government to allow for the reimbursement of the costs that it would take to ship breast milk home to my child would be amazing. And in our opinion, it is essential. So we've looked at a couple of different avenues. First, obviously the change to the Joint Travel Regulation for those that have not perused the JTR lately. It's not an easy [laughing], it's not an easy thing. You have to basically have all the services on board. So we have been liaising on trying to find the correct POCs in all the various services. You know, Coast Guard included, Space Force included, Navy, Marine and Army.

They all have, I believe, an equivalent of like a Barrier Analysis Working Group because it is mandated by law. But it's not always easy. There's not like a listing you can go to, to find out who you should be talking to, right? And there has been a lot of debate on whether this is an issue for medical to handle.

So I've briefed DHA and the SG community because it is a, it is a health impact, right? So if, if you're a woman and you need to express breast milk, if you don't do it, you can get things like mastitis, which is a pretty significant infection and different things. And then also there's health benefits for both mother and baby for extended breastfeeding. So looking at the health impacts and will it lower TRICARE costs, like if, if you know, if there are studies that show that babies that are given breast milk for the first year of life, do they have less occurrences of sickness or are they sick less. Different things like that. So that's where the SG and the DHA community have been involved.

We have briefed the SAF level. We have a couple WIT champions who are senior leaders that basically help us push our initiatives forward. They are awesome! So we briefed them. I talked to them. I can tell you the amount of knowledge I've learned about policy, and we've and we went down a bunch of different avenues. We originally went down a contracting avenue trying to use the Air Force Works program to partner with a company called Milk Stork, which is the leading company on breast milk shipment to partner with them to kind of do a pilot program for the Air Force.

Unfortunately, we've recently found out that that may not work out how we would like. So we're back to the JTR revision, but even as early as this morning, I was working on this and we've been partnered with putting in contact Major Tahina Montoya, who is the partner that's working me on this. She's a reservist, was actually able to get us a POC at the State Department and found out, we found out that the Federal Travel Regulation, so like the big document that's above the JTR, actually allows for breast milk shipment. And the

State Department actually has a policy, a written policy that allows for it.

Essentially what they need is, what you need is, is a memo from your doctor basically indicating that it's a special need. And then they're, they are actually, and they are actively reimbursing their employees for transport of breast milk. And whether that be shipping at home via a carrier or paying for—any nursing mommies that are listening, if you ever carry that huge thing of luggage with breast milk packed in it home with you and had to pay that extra baggage fee to have that extra bag, you know, this would cover all that. So even as early as this morning, we found out a new way that we might be able to make this happen.

So learned a ton about policy, but that's, that's really what we have going on, just finding out how we can push this across, across the finish line because we do believe that it would be extremely impactful and we believe that and that's supported by data, a RAND study that was done in the Air Force based on retention of women, women actually said this work-life balance and the ability to have a breastfeeding relationship with their child was a reason that they separated.

I know Major Montoya, the partner on my line of effort with me, that was one of her big reasons for going into the reserves. So we believe that it will help retention. We believe that it is a readiness issue, and it's an easy fix. So we're knocking on every door. We're sounding, you know, talking to anybody that will listen about why, why this needs to happen. Hopefully we will see some movement. I've been working on this since I became involved. So over a year now, been kind of pushing this along. So, yeah, that's kind of what I have going on, just figuring out the policy, figuring out how we need to make this happen.

INCLUSIVITY

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Well, both fascinating insights. There are just two issues, right, that you're looking into with the hair policy and

breastfeeding within WIT. And ladies, if you could correct me if I'm wrong here, but it seems that the impetus of WIT in all these other teams is more or less the recruitment and retention of different types of groups within the military. Is that a fair statement?

MAJ NADEEM:

I would say so. And, you know, I don't even know if it's necessarily—there's obviously retention and right. And the reason I say—right now, retention is at the highest it's ever been. So we don't necessarily have a retention problem, but we do have an inclusivity problem, right? And so if you ever want the minority to become even close to the majority, you have to relook at policies like this.

And so that's really our goal is to keep some of the minority that we have. We actually don't have, we actually can recruit minorities in pretty well. Like for, if you look at the makeup of the U.S., what we bring in is actually pretty decent. We just can't retain minorities. So that, that is a key indicator that there's something that's making people get out.

We can recruit them, but we can't keep them. And so that's what we're really trying to dig deep and change and institutionalize some things like that Sam's working on. So that women will stay in because we've created, we've created an inclusive environment for them.

THE PROCESS—IDENTIFYING AN ISSUE

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Great. Thank you. And I know in prep for this interview, we discussed kind of the, the model or the process about how you even go through identifying what issues or triggers there are within your team's purview, right? Could you kind of walk our listeners through that? Like how do you even identify what an issue is and kind of go through the steps of, of that.

MAJ SLINEY:

So I'll tell you how I came up with mine, right? It was a very selfish reason, right? I was having to do it and it

was—it's a lot. It's very stressful. And so I just brought it up to Alea. I was like, "Hey, I want to do this." And we e-mailed about it. And that's generally how I've seen it play out at the level that I'm at is, you know, various Facebook groups. We know that there's various Facebook groups and pages out there where Air Force members, both enlisted and officers are posting. And people will post about their struggles and they will vent about the issues that they're seeing. And the WIT, the way I characterize it, they have a very open door like if there's something you want to change and we will help make that happen. And so the WIT allows you that platform to make it happen. And you're also surrounded with a group of diverse people who are there to back you and help you, help you get to the finish line. So that's how I got my initiative brought up, is that I identified it and I was like, "Hey, I want to change this."

MAJ NADEEM:

Anytime somebody has a problem, you know, we take it very serious. But the second thing that we do is, you know, not only do we listen sort of at the tactical level to what Airmen are saying, as we say, "Okay, great. You got this problem. Is it just you? Is this an isolated incident or is it multiple people?"

So the first thing we'll do is do some research. And that may be just be, you know, we put something on the Facebook forum to say, "Hey, is anybody else having this issue?" So we go into data gathering—then we do data gathering, see if this is just, you know, if this affects other Airmen and then we start putting together a proposal of how we can fix this.

And usually, you know, all I say, all roads lead back to the Pentagon, Headquarters Air Force, and we look to see, okay, is there a policy that needs to be changed to help Airmen or do we need to create a policy, right? Sometimes there wasn't—there was no lactation policy for women. So we had to create, we had to create something brand new. Sometimes we just need to change something. But we can't just take every idea. It has to be flushed out, and there has to be ownership.

And this is where, how to be a volunteer—you know, I wish everybody came like Sam. You know, not only did she identify the problem, but then she you know, she did the research on it, and then she worked the policy on it. And so that takes a lot of work to do that. But that's usually how we first start out is identifying the problem, see who else it affects, researching it, and then identifying who owns the policy.

SENIOR CHAMPIONS

MAJ HANRAHAN:

You also had mentioned that you have senior, quote unquote, "senior champions" that assist when you need to, I don't know, deal with policy or reach out to senior leaders. Could you describe that process and who these senior champions are comprised of?

MAJ NADEEM:

Yes, we're very lucky. We actually have three senior champions. We have [Lieutenant General O'Brien](#). She is the A26 at Headquarters Air Force. We have Ms. [Christie Nolta](#). She's a Senior Executive Service, or civilian excuse me, she's a GO equivalent. And she's in charge of the Secretary of the Air Force MRR. And then our third one is Ms. [Theresa Sanchez](#), also an SES, GO equivalent. And she's also in charge of A26 human resources, talent management. And they really push things for us.

So for example, you know, sometimes when I reach out to an AO they blow me off. They say, "Nope." This goes back to that frozen middle. They'll say, "Nope, we, you know, we can't change this. This is too, too big." But if General O'Brien or a SES happens to e-mail their boss, it's a little bit harder to ignore us. So they really help us move these things forward on actually getting the change done.

SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

MAJ HANRAHAN:

And if I could also ask, what have been, in your opinion, some of your team's biggest successes and also biggest challenges?

MAJ NADEEM:

One of the biggest successes we've had is we actually changed the anthropometrics of aircraft. And what I mean by that is, you know, back in the 1950s and sixties, nobody thought women would fly. And so we actually designed aircraft only to fit the measurements of men. And the measurements of men and women are very different. And so we've actually change policy now that if, you know, if the Air Force is going to design a new aircraft, it has to take in the anthropometric and the measurements of women. They have to be included in that. You know, you cannot exclude 50% of the population from what you're going to recruit from. So I'm very proud, actually it was Lieutenant Colonel [Jessica Ruttenber](#). She led this effort. And that's one of the, you know, I'm very proud that we've been able to change that.

Some of our challenges is one, getting volunteers and then getting, you know, senior leaders in the frozen middle to change. You know, a lot of times when we go to people, they don't think they're the frozen middle [laughing], but they are the frozen middle. And I always say, you know, how do we get to yes? And so that's the biggest challenge I have.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

And I know you mentioned the quote unquote, "frozen middle". Can you maybe elaborate a little bit more on what you mean by that.

MAJ NADEEM:

Yeah. So you know, I do, I just want to be very blunt about the frozen middle. There's a lot of people who want to say no. And a lot of people who don't want to change the institution. A lot of people who don't see the things that we see from, you know, for example, like a women's perspective. And so it's very hard to convince people there's a problem when they've never ever experienced it.

And so I would just, I guess what I would call to everybody is just because you haven't experience something doesn't mean it's not a problem for somebody else. And, and that's what I mean by the frozen middle is just everybody is so quick to say, no. If I could, you know, if I was queen for a day, I would just have everybody say yes—yes, but.... You know, maybe there's some limitations. And I totally understand that, but how can we change so that we can beat China, beat Russia, still be the superpower that we are? Because this all really goes back to readiness and winning against our adversaries.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

And Major Sliney from your perspective, what would be your biggest successes and challenges that you've seen?

MAJ SLINEY:

I've witnessed a lot of successes from the WIT you know, small things such as it was identified on the Facebook group that you know, women's exams, some ROTC Dets at colleges were requiring that females pay for additional women's exams, some were not, and apparently there was some breach in policy. Well, somebody said this is a problem. People got involved and it was fixed.

So there's those quick fixes for me personally with my initiative outside of just education—I feel like we have educated a lot of people and we have a lot, a lot more people on our side now. There hasn't actually been a change yet, but I hope that it is coming. But on that front, I would echo the sentiments about the frozen middle. I felt—since I came into the Air Force, right, I've always heard this thing ,about innovation, right? Where the Air Force we need to innovate, you know, in the CGO's at the time when I was a captain, lieutenant, right? You are the workhorses of the Air Force. Give us your ideas, give us these bright ideas. But I never felt like, I felt like that's what people were asking us for.

But when we would give ideas, it would always be shut down. And at the time I didn't know, I hadn't been in long enough to really know why. It was kind of confusing to me coming in and being like, people are asking us for ideas and innovate, but then they just get shut down. Now that I've gotten a little bit more involved with the WIT, it's kind of been more cemented in my mind that yeah, there is that frozen middle where there's just this.

It's like above where I'm at, right? Like I'm the action officer, I'm the change maker or trying to make change. And then there's like this group of people there in the middle, because when I've brief like DHA leaders, when I brief Ms. Nolta or one of our champions or our General O'Brien one of our champions, they're all on board. They're "How do we need to make this happen?"

There's this group right in the middle where it just feels like their initial reaction is no. And I still haven't identified whether it's because they get flooded with information so much, that that is their initial reaction is "No, we're going to say no." And then we're just going to see who's the most persistent, and then we'll take the most persistent seriously. Or whether it's that it's a generational thing to where these people are later on in their careers so they're comfortable and that's just how they like things to be. Or maybe they were once like me wanting to make change, and they just got told no so much that they're jaded at this point. I don't really know the answer to that, but it is a real thing and that's huge. That is the—that is the most frustrating part of it.

And it's very frustrating also, I think the Air Force is much better about it than some of the other services because I talked to some of the other—represented other people in other services. And even with breast milk shipment I've had them straight up tell me like "This isn't a need, our women don't need this. Our women don't go TDY within the first year because everybody uses the TDY deferment." I've asked for data. I mean, I've done things as far as like "Can you give me the data and I will evaluate it for you to see if this is a need?"

Because for my specific initiatives I have to be able to, you know, it's the JTR so all services have to be on board. But it is that initial like "We don't need this; it's not a problem"; but it's usually people at that level and especially for my initiative, they are not childbearing years. Usually their children are much older and maybe you know for breastfeeding, maybe that is a group where breastfeeding wasn't as popular or as pushed as it is for, you know, people currently having children. You know I'm not, I'm not sure but it is, it is a definite real thing that you have to get, you have to get beyond—you got to break through that glass ceiling to get to where you need to go.

LEADERSHIP

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Well, great insights there. Thank you for elaborating on that. As you ladies know, this podcast focuses on leadership and innovation. And I'm just curious to see if you might be able to offer any insights on how joining a volunteer organization such as WIT has helped you grow in your personal development and or leadership.

MAJ SLINEY:

This is Sam. So I think I have learned so much about policy change, and I'm legal also. I know the law stuff behind it, which has helped me tremendously and doing this, but I've never—I didn't know what A6 was or A2 was. And I'm not even going to try to act like I did. Like, I knew there were letters out there with numbers, but I didn't know what they did.

And I didn't always know who to contact to make these changes. So I've learned so much, which is also equipped me for when I'm leading others, I can direct them to who they might need to engage with. The networking aspect; I have met so many people outside of my AFSC as a JAG that I can now lean on to get mentorship, to ask for their advice on when I'm facing issues or just when I'm trying to solve a problem.

So as a JAG, I feel like that has grown me from a leadership role and equipped me to, to lead others, because I just know more about the Air Force and how it operates on that front. And as far as innovation goes, it's so inspiring just to see what has been accomplished. And I'm just looking forward to seeing what is going to be accomplished, especially given the diversity, inclusion pushes that we're seeing across the DoD.

It's just awe inspiring to see that happen. And that's really what motivates me to get—every time I get those no's right, for every ten no's, I get that one person that's super excited and they're like, you know, "Thank you for doing this, because you're going to make my life easier" or "You're going to make my troop's lives easier." And that really makes it all worth it. And especially seeing it when your colleagues accomplish, accomplish major things as well.

MAJ NADEEM:

So I think for me, the biggest thing is how do you lead a group of volunteers, right? So it's a whole, I think a whole different skillset. You know, I've had the privilege of being a flight commander, director of operations. Things are much easier, right? Because there's a chain of command and there's authority. So—and also try leading people who outrank you, right? So you have everybody from an airman to a colonel on your team. And so I've had to use every kind of different skill you can think of. And I have zero authority. All I have is, "Hey, you want to make a change, do this." So I've definitely, had to use different skills and different approaches, but I'm also able to be, I think more, you know, more of who I am personally. Right? Because I don't have any authority. So you can kind of be yourself a little bit more, I think. And that's been really rewarding for me.

RESOURCES

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Well, thank you ladies so much. I think this has been a great overview on the program. I just have two concluding questions. The first is, are there any additional resources where listeners can learn more about either

getting involved with WIT or any of these other teams, or any other resources on today's topic?

MAJ NADEEM:

Yeah, so we actually we're on the Air Force Portal [limited access site]. If you go in the Air Force Portal and put in "[Air Force Women's Initiative](#)", we should pop up. There's also a [Facebook](#) page called the Air Force Women's Initiative, anybody can join. Or you can send me an e-mail and I can add you to our e-mail distro and our monthly calendar invites. And if you want to attend, great. If not, you can pass them off to somebody else as well.

FINAL THOUGHTS

MAJ HANRAHAN:

And for both ladies, final question, any final tips or parting words that you'd like to leave with our listeners that either maybe we didn't get a chance to address or you just like to focus on, on today's topic?

MAJ SLINEY:

I really encourage everyone to, like, not walk past a problem. That's probably one of the biggest things I've learned. If you see a problem, even if you know it's going to be hard to address it, and I know in the JAG Corps, right, we always teach this, "How do we get to yes?" One of the vivid things I remember from JSOC, it really rings true in this arena. Like there is a way, almost always a way to get to, yes. And you may encounter a lot of no's. But you can get there with enough time and persistence. And most often I think if you've identified the problem, somebody else has faced it or will face it as well. So it's really just about making this a better Air Force for everyone—a more diverse, more inclusive Air Force for everyone. So if you see that problem, don't just walk past it. I challenge you to just take it on and try to make, try to make the Air Force better for everybody.

MAJ NADEEM:

I couldn't have said it any better. I think Sam nailed it. I just, you know Rick, I do want to say thanks to you because what you're doing is also innovative and you're

giving us a platform to share what we're doing. And so it really takes everybody coming together to help. So thank you for being part of our team and helping us out.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Well, thank you so much, ladies. I know I've learned a lot here and hopefully our listeners did as well. And again, if you all want to get involved with WIT or any of these programs, we'll make sure to make that stuff available on our website once that is redesigned. So, ladies, thank you so much again for coming on to the show. And that'll be it for today's interview.

MAJ SLINEY:

Thank you for having us. Have a good day.

MAJ NADEEM:

Thanks, Rick.

TAKEAWAYS

MAJ HANRAHAN:

That concludes our interview with Major Nadeem and Major Sliney. I would first like to publicly thank Major Nadeem and Major Sliney for their patience in the publication of this episode. It took a few months from the original recording to final publication due to multiple factors, but I'm happy to announce that post recording, as most now know, [AFI 36-2903](#) on *Dress and Personal Appearance of Air Force Personnel* was updated in early 2021 with many of WIT's recommendations on female hair standards, accessories and styles. So for all those grateful female Airmen, you can thank WIT and Major Nadeem's team for all their efforts.

Here are my top three takeaways from the interview.

NUMBER ONE, volunteering is a great way to grow as a leader. Volunteering is a key action verb behind one of the three Air Force core values, "service before self". Volunteering puts others ahead of self. It's giving of one's time and talent to assist in a bigger cause. And while this can be a sacrifice, the old adage of the more you give, the greater you receive also typically

holds true. This concept is sometimes called the reciprocity principle, and that what you give comes back to you like a boomerang. Often at levels much greater than your original effort. And as discussed by both our guests, their volunteer work through the Women's Initiative Team, opened them up to new skillsets, meaningful relationships, and genuine experiences that they otherwise would have likely never been able to do.

Major Nadeem said volunteering for WIT forced her to learn new and valuable skillsets, including how to lead a group of volunteers, how to lead others that outrank her, and how to communicate on a more personal basis.

And Major Sliney highlighted how much she's learned about DoD Air Force policy change through WIT. She also has found it very inspiring to see what others have accomplished through the program, which in turn has built greater motivation for her to make a lasting difference and persevere through resistance in her team's initiatives for greater common good.

NUMBER TWO, you don't walk past the problem anymore. Both Major Nadeem and Major Sliney mentioned this. Volunteering with an organization like WIT allowed them to take action on issues and not just sit on the sidelines complaining about those issues. Major Sliney went on to say It's about how to get to yes. She's found there's usually a way to get to yes with enough time and persistence. If you've identified the problem, others likely have a problem like that too. And if you can fix that issue, you're effectively making the entire organization better for all.

AND NUMBER THREE, implementing change is a systematic process. Often when we face challenges or issues that seem unfair, we immediately throw up our proverbial hands in the air. We may complain, vent to friends and colleagues and the like. And this is likely just human nature, but as one Supreme Court Justice said, "If you want to effectuate change, quit complaining and start thinking."

It takes a lot of work to develop sound ideas to ignite positive change. And once you internalize this fundamental principle, it's time to implement the process of systematic change. At its core, it comes down to about six steps. Number one, identify the problem. Number two, conduct research and analysis to clearly delineate the problem and not just the consequences of the problem. Number three, identify the stakeholders or policyholders. Number four, work to get buy-in and feedback. Number five, execute the change. Number six, analyze the results to loop back into the process for improvement. And when you get that initial resistance from the frozen middle, just know that it's part of the process. Continue on, remain professional, and work until a natural resolution is found.

[background music]

And remember, it's tough many times to convince folks of a problem if they've never personally experienced that problem before. So look, for new and innovative ways to demonstrate this.

Thank you for listening to another episode. If you like this episode, please let us know by leaving a review on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or your favorite podcast platform and consider subscribing to the show.

We'll see you on the next episode.

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[music ends]

GLOSSARY

- **ADC:** Area Defense Counsel
- **AFLOA:** Air Force Legal Operations Agency
- **AFJAGS:** Air Force Judge Advocate General's School
- **AFSC:** Air Force Specialty Code
- **AO:** action officer
- **CGO:** company grade officer
- **DHA:** Defense Health Agency
- **GO:** general officer
- **JAG:** judge advocate general
- **JSOC:** Judge Advocate Staff Officer Course
- **JTR:** Joint Travel Regulation
- **OPR:** officer performance report
- **OSI:** Office of Special Investigations
- **POC:** point of contact
- **SAF:** Secretary of the Air Force
- **SES:** Senior Executive Service
- **SG:** Surgeon General
- **TDY:** temporary duty
- **VA:** Veterans Affairs
- **WIT:** Women's Initiative Team