

WASHINGTON -- Hundreds of new jobs could be landing at Offutt Air Force Base.

The Air Force has announced that the base near Bellevue is a finalist for two different units: a new 900-job Air Force command to handle nuclear weapons and a new 400-job cyberspace defense and attack unit.

Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., said Thursday that it is too early in the selection process to assess Offutt's chances of landing either or both missions.

But he said Offutt's role as home of the U.S. Strategic Command -- the Defense Department's premier strategic nuclear agency -- and Offutt's broad community support should make it a strong contender.

The Air Force's announcement "speaks to the prestige of Offutt and the surrounding community, and its role in the nation's defense," Nelson said.

Six bases were named as finalists for each of the new missions. Air Force teams will be evaluating all the competing bases, with final decisions scheduled by July.

Megan Lucas, chief executive of the Bellevue Chamber of Commerce, said Offutt has the available space and other support functions needed to support one or both new missions.

"What we have to offer here is heads and shoulders above every other base on these lists," she said.

Either new mission would mark a significant expansion of the base. Offutt currently employs about 10,000 military and civilian personnel.

The new Air Force Global Strike Command, believed to be the bigger plum of the two new units, is being created because of two blunders the Air Force committed involving nuclear weapons.

In one incident, a bomber out of North Dakota that was mistakenly armed with nuclear warheads flew across the country. In another, four fusing devices for ballistic missile warheads were mistakenly shipped to Taiwan.

A task force determined that the Air Force had neglected its nuclear mission, with no senior leader in the service taking responsibility for it.

As a result, Defense Secretary Robert Gates in September called on Air Force leadership to establish clear, unified control over its nuclear mission. The creation of Air Force Global Strike Command is the Air Force's answer to that call.

In a letter to Nelson, Air Force Secretary Michael B. Donley described Air Force Global Strike as "a major new command to ensure clear lines of authority and responsibility and to provide an even greater internal focus on our nuclear mission." It will be headed by a three-star general.

While the new command would represent a change in the way the Air Force carries out its component of the nuclear mission, it would not change StratCom's role as the nation's chief nuclear strategist. In that role, StratCom has oversight over both Navy and Air Force nuclear arsenals.

The interim Air Force strike command is housed at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C., and is responsible for helping set up the permanent command.

In addition to Offutt, other bases under consideration for the Global Strike Command are: Barksdale Air Force Base, La.; F.E. Warren Air Force Base, Wyo.; Malmstrom Air Force Base, Mont.; Minot Air Force Base, N.D.; and Whiteman Air Force Base, Mo.

Each of the other contenders has a significant operational function related to nuclear weapons. Malmstrom and F.E. Warren house Minuteman missiles. Minot has both Minuteman

missiles and B-52 bombers. Barksdale houses B-52s. And Whiteman is home to a fleet of B-2 Stealth bombers.

Omaha-area leaders and the state's congressional delegation have tried for years to lure the Air Force's new cyber operations to Offutt.

Originally, the Air Force intended to create a formal Cyber Command, but it decided last year to simply create a numbered unit, the 24th Air Force, under Air Force Space Command.

In addition to Offutt, the bases under consideration for the cyber command are: Barksdale; Lackland Air Force Base, Texas; Langley Air Force Base, Va.; Peterson Air Force Base, Colo.; and Scott Air Force Base, Ill.

"I'm very pleased we made the final list -- not surprised, though," said Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb. "Offutt has the best communications infrastructure and support talent."

