



May 8, 2020

The Honorable Mark Esper
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1400 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Esper:

We write to emphasize the importance of mental health care for servicemembers – including National Guard and Reserve personnel – and their family members throughout and following the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. While we acknowledge the Department of Defense (DoD) response to COVID-19 is multifaceted and the challenges unprecedented, mental health services are critical to preserving military readiness. We urge you to develop a plan to protect and promote mental health and wellbeing, assess and reform current policies, and conduct outreach to the military community to identify resources and TRICARE-covered services that are available to them during this stressful time.

While it may take years to fully understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health, early research paints a deeply concerning picture. According to a recent poll by the American Psychiatric Association, more than one third of Americans say the pandemic is seriously impacting their mental health.¹ Servicemembers and military family members are already exposed to noted risk and socio-demographic factors for suicide, including reluctance to seek help, perceived stigma around treatment, and access to lethal means.² Further, strong interpersonal connections—a protective factor against suicide—are being strained by essential social distancing measures necessary to combat the outbreak.

The social isolation and travel restrictions required to confront this pandemic disproportionately impact servicemembers and military families, and could quickly exacerbate the demands of military service and the symptoms of any underlying mental health conditions. Necessary travel restrictions and changing mission requirements have extended deployments and family separations. Some military families were caught in limbo between permanent changes of

¹ American Psychiatric Association. “New Poll: COVID-19 Impacting Mental Well-Being: Americans Feeling Anxious, Especially for Loved Ones; Older Adults are Less Anxious.” American Psychiatric Association press release, March 25, 2020.

² Department of Defense, *Annual Suicide Report CY 2018* (Washington, D.C. 2019), https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/2018%20DoD%20Annual%20Suicide%20Report_FINAL_25%20SEP%2019_508c.pdf (accessed April 17, 2020).

station and face continued uncertainty. These restrictions, as well as the potential loss of civilian spouse employment, have created financial hardships for some military families, which can significantly impact mental and behavioral health. All the while, servicemembers—including National Guard and Reserve personnel—are on the frontlines of fighting the outbreak, providing medical care and building much-needed infrastructure, among other critical roles. Military families also face significant stress when their servicemember is serving on a ship, at a base overseas, or in a unit with confirmed COVID-19 cases and the subsequent possibility of exposure. These stresses and challenges require increased and focused support from DoD.

The military community deserves a coordinated, comprehensive plan to ensure access to high-quality mental health care and continuity of care. We urge you to include in this plan a strategy to combat servicemembers' existing stigma surrounding mental health conditions that deter individuals from seeking care, guidance on the mental health ramifications of this crisis to commanding officers at all levels, and additional training and support for mental health care professionals on supporting individuals concerned for the health of family members or grieving the loss of loved ones due to COVID-19. Within this plan, we encourage you to leverage telemedicine to the greatest extent possible. To this end, we request an assessment of existing TRICARE policies pertaining to the use of telemedicine for behavioral and mental health services to determine if updates are necessary to ensure that these policies meet military family needs and are on par with, or exceed, options and quality available in civilian health care. We also encourage the use of innovative family services policies and frequent communication with military families to highlight available services and to assess their needs.

The COVID-19 impact on mental health will be long-term, and immediate action as well as a long-term response plan are necessary to combat the mental health implications of this crisis. We look forward to your response and to working with you to ensure you have all the necessary authorities and resources to provide augmented mental health services for servicemembers and their families.

Sincerely,

/s/ RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senate

/s/ ELIZABETH WARREN
United States Senate

/s/ ROBERT P. CASEY, JR.
United States Senate

/s/ KAMALA D. HARRIS
United States Senate

/s/ SHERROD BROWN
United States Senate

/s/ CATHERINE CORTEZ MASTO
United States Senate

/s/ TINA SMITH
United States Senate

/s/ CHARLES E. SCHUMER
United States Senate

/s/ KIRSTEN GILLIBRAND
United States Senate

/s/ DEBBIE STABENOW
United States Senate

/s/ JACKY ROSEN
United States Senate

/s/ DOUG JONES
United States Senate

/s/ CHRIS VAN HOLLEN
United States Senate

/s/ CHRISTOPHER S. MURPHY
United States Senate

/s/ BRIAN SCHATZ
United States Senate

/s/ AMY KLOBUCHAR
United States Senate

/s/ RICHARD J. DURBIN
United States Senate

/s/ MAZIE K. HIRONO
United States Senate