

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 29, 2023

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Austin:

We write to express our profound concern and disappointment regarding the conditions that thousands of junior enlisted Service members are experiencing in barracks across the country. A recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) report demonstrated that the Department of Defense (DOD) is failing to provide the most basic oversight and care of barracks facilities located at ten installations. As Secretary, you are responsible for the welfare of these Service members. This is a failure of leadership that cannot be ignored.

The GAO report provided an embarrassing list of failures they found when inspecting these buildings. The findings, which include a comprehensive analysis of housing satisfaction data dating back to 2019, make clear that some military barracks do not meet the minimum standards set by the DOD for assignment or occupancy. Service members are living in rooms overrun with mold, doors that fail to lock, no air conditioning or heat, contaminated water, and a lack of functioning plumbing. These are not trivial deficiencies.

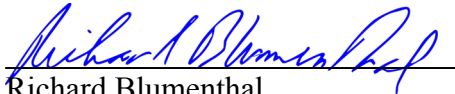
The report also found that squatters moved into the barracks in one instance, raising serious questions about the security of the facilities under your purview. Another example notes that base officials told investigators that “Servicemembers are responsible for cleaning biological waste that may remain in a barracks room after a suicide.” This is reprehensible, and we expect you to take expeditious and appropriate action to hold those personnel accountable and ensure Service members are receiving the support they might require after that experience.

It is clear that there are failures at all levels. Across the enterprise, personnel are shirking their responsibilities to provide Service members with safe, habitable living spaces. When GAO investigators asked why base officials did not conduct tests on water supplies at each of the barracks buildings, those officials simply replied they were not required to. The report also notes that the service branches are failing to meet the DOD living standards themselves. The metrics for habitability are disjointed and largely ignored. More importantly, the DOD standards are dreadfully outdated and we insist that you update those guidelines before you submit your FY25 budget request.


The report concluded that the Department simply chooses not to make barracks management a priority. Modernization and investing in next-generation equipment cannot come at the cost of your most important charter: to provide for the most junior Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen, and Guardians in the force. The report makes 31 recommendations to rectify this situation. We expect you to adopt them without delay.

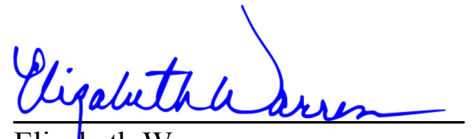
The people who choose to serve in the enlisted ranks do so selflessly with little expectation of reward. They are the soul of the military and of the Nation, and they deserve better. We know your quality as a former commander and leader, which is why this report is so troubling. We trust that you will move decisively to ensure each junior enlisted member of the Armed Forces has a safe, habitable room to return to when the duty day ends.

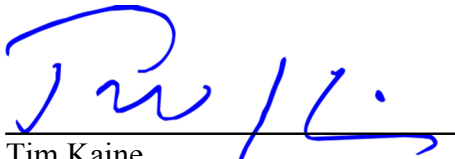
Sincerely,

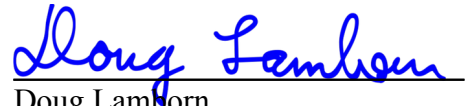
  
Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator

  
Jen A. Kiggans  
Member of Congress

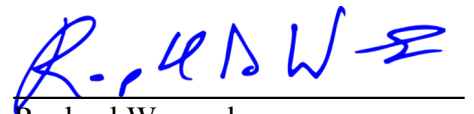
  
Jimmy Panetta  
Member of Congress


  
Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator

  
Tim Kaine  
United States Senator

  
Doug Lamborn  
Member of Congress

  
Nick LaLota  
Member of Congress

  
Raphael Warnock  
United States Senator

  
Kirsten Gillibrand  
United States Senator

  
Robert J. Wittman  
Member of Congress



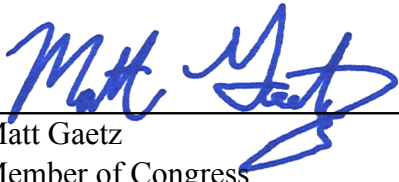
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Elise M. Stefanik  
Member of Congress



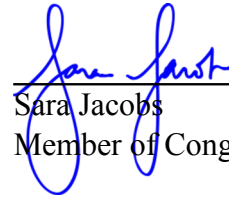
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Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator



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Matt Gaetz  
Member of Congress



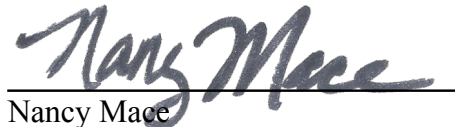
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Sara Jacobs  
Member of Congress



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Derrick Van Orden  
Member of Congress



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Nancy Mace  
Member of Congress



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Mark Alford  
Member of Congress