

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

February 11, 2020

The Honorable Mark T. Esper
Secretary of Defense
United States Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C., 20301

Dear Secretary Esper:

We write to request an update on the Department of Defense's (DoD) inclusion of blast exposure history in servicemembers' medical records as mandated by the FY2020 *National Defense Authorization Act* (NDAA). Earlier this month, over one hundred American servicemembers were diagnosed with traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) after the Iranian missile strike on Al Asad airbase.¹ The incremental increase in reported TBIs highlights the varying degree of severity of TBIs and the potential for the late onset of symptoms. Given the potential for serious long-term effects of TBIs, DoD must continue to take steps to protect and treat servicemembers who have been exposed to significant blast exposure.

TBIs are a significant health issue that can have serious long- and short-term effects. These include disruptions in the normal function of the brain caused by a bump, blow, or sudden trauma to the head, or by repeated exposure to blast pressure.² While the symptoms may be minor, if left untreated, a TBI can have significant effects on one's cognitive ability or leave one with permanent physical disability.³

Members of the armed forces face a significantly higher risk of suffering a TBI due to near constant exposure to blast pressure as a result of improvised explosive devices, or smaller concussive events such as firing artillery and other heavy-caliber weapons, which military personnel may do tens or hundreds of times a day, over multiple days at a time, while training to use these weapons.⁴ Given this increased and repeated exposure to blast and concussive forces, TBIs are "the signature wound" suffered by servicemembers in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁵ Since

¹ Reuters, "More than 100 U.S. troops diagnosed with brain injuries from Iran attack – officials," Idrees Ali, Phil Stewart, February 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pentagon-tbi-exclusive/exclusive-more-than-100-u-s-troops-diagnosed-with-brain-injuries-from-iran-attack-officials-idUSKBN2041ZK>

² National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, "Traumatic Brain Injury Information Page," <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/All-Disorders/Traumatic-Brain-Injury-Information-Page>.

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Symptoms of Traumatic Brain Injury," <https://www.cdc.gov/traumaticbraininjury/symptoms.html>.

⁴ Defense And Veterans Brain Injury Center, "TBI & the Military," <https://dvbic.dcoe.mil/tbi-military>.

⁵ National Center for Biotechnology Information, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5580369/>.

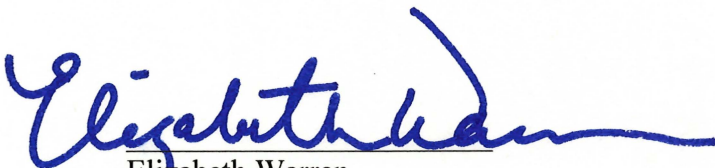
2000, more than 400,000 servicemembers sustained a TBI with likely many more going unreported.⁶

In an effort to better track these occurrences, the FY2020 NDAA included a provision that directs DoD to “document blast exposure history in the medical record of [servicemembers].”⁷ This will allow DoD to better track and potentially prevent blast pressure exposure and treat servicemembers who have suffered TBIs in combat or during training to mitigate any potential long-term effects. This will also help doctors and scientists track the effects of TBIs and better understand the variation in health outcomes after exposure to blast force.

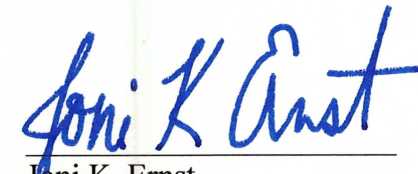
In light of recent reports detailing the injuries suffered by servicemembers and the need for improved treatment and understanding of TBIs, we respectfully request that you provide us with an update on DoD’s inclusion of blast exposure in medical records.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator



Bill Pascrell, Jr.
Member of Congress



Don Bacon
Member of Congress

⁶ Defense And Veterans Brain Injury Center, “DoD Worldwide Numbers for TBI,” <https://dvbic.dcoe.mil/dod-worldwide-numbers-tbi>.

⁷ 2020 National Defense Authorization Act, Section 717, <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/s1790/BILLS-116s1790enr.pdf>.