

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 26, 2020

The Honorable Mark T. Esper
Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1000 Pentagon Defense
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Esper:

We are writing regarding the Department of Defense's (DoD, or the Department) response to the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and concerning reports of a rise in infections among servicemembers.

We previously raised concerns related to DoD's response to the outbreak and, in a letter dated April 27, 2020,¹ urged the Department to do more to protect the health, morale, and readiness of servicemembers. We were disappointed that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs who responded to this letter chose not to answer any of the questions we posed about the DoD's preparation for and response to the ongoing coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

We were also surprised that you would attempt to deflect our concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on readiness and morale by claiming that those concerns do "not respect the 62,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines currently deployed across the nation in support of their fellow Americans."² To be clear: our motivation is to protect the health and well-being of servicemembers and their families, and our concerns are with you and the civilian leadership at DoD who are responsible for keeping American servicemembers and their families safe and ready to accomplish their missions.

While we understand the desire to write off the series of ongoing COVID-19-related problems in the DoD as a byproduct of "inaccurate media reports,"³ and that DoD cannot prevent all cases of COVID-19, the fact remains that cases within the Department are rising at an alarming rate. The number of cases among DoD personnel and contractors increased by more than 33% in the first ten days of July, which was more than twice the nationwide rate of growth

¹ Letter from Senators Warren, Hirono, Harris, Murray, et. al. to Defense Secretary Mark Esper, April 27, 2020, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2020.04.27%20Letter%20to%20Sec%20Esper%20re%20COVID%2019%20response%20FINAL.pdf>.

² Letter from Defense Secretary Mark Esper to Senators Inhofe and Reed, May 7, 2020, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/496821-esper-escalates-war-of-words-with-warren-democratic-senators>.

³ Letter from Assistant Secretary of Defense Rob Hood to Senator Warren, May 12, 2020.

during the same time period.⁴ During the month of July, confirmed cases across the Department rose by approximately 21,000, more than a 100% increase.⁵ The recent outbreak on two bases in Okinawa has led the Japanese Minister of Defense to accuse “the U.S. military of lax coronavirus controls” and state that there were “several problems with the U.S. military’s preventive measures.”⁶

Also in July at least 40 servicemembers and dependents have tested positive for COVID-19 upon arrival in South Korea.⁷ Given that DoD personnel are required to restrict their movements for 14 days before commencing official travel,⁸ reports that servicemembers and dependents are testing positive for the virus upon arrival at their duty station suggest that more must be done to prevent further spread of the virus. Ensuring American servicemembers and dependents do not have COVID-19 before traveling abroad must be of paramount concern to DoD leadership to maintain trust with partners and allies.

We are pleased to see that the Department is taking some precautionary measures to address the spread of the virus, but are concerned that the Department is still not properly prioritizing the health and well-being of our servicemembers. Congress stands ready to support the Department, but we cannot do so if basic questions are not answered regarding DoD’s response. In order to determine whether or not you are planning appropriately to limit further case growth and to maintain readiness and morale amidst the pandemic, we therefore ask – again – that you provide factual answers to the following questions sent in our April 27, 2020 letter:

1. What is the Department’s current plan to address the coronavirus pandemic while meeting operational requirements, while ensuring servicemembers’ health and safety?
2. As of August 26, 2020, the Department had confirmed 36,600 cumulative cases among servicemembers.⁹ You have expressed confidence in the readiness of the force

⁴ Newsweek, “Rate of COVID-19 Cases in Military Double That of U.S. Civilian Population,” Daniel Villareal, July 10, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/rate-covid-19-cases-military-double-that-us-civilian-population-1517103>

⁵ Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Covid-19 Response Update: June 12-June 19,” Mark Cancian, Adam Saxton, Nidal Morrison, August 14, 2020, <https://defense360.csis.org/covid-19-response-update-august-7-august-14/>

⁶ The Japan Times, “Kono draws attention to ‘problems’ with U.S. military response to Okinawa base outbreaks,” Jesse Johnson, July 14, 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/07/14/national/okinawa-military-bases-coronavirus/>.

⁷ USFK Twitter, <https://twitter.com/USForcesKorea>, <https://twitter.com/USForcesKorea/status/1281510674229686272?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/USForcesKorea/status/1282560295483789313?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/USForcesKorea/status/1283672718101995521?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/USForcesKorea/status/1285078429960790017?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/USForcesKorea/status/1285854479472943104?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/USForcesKorea/status/1287650629897211905?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/USForcesKorea/status/1288743342663065600?s=20>.

⁸ Force Health Protection Guidance (Supplement 12) – Department of Defense Guidance for Personnel Traveling During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic, August 6, 2020, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Aug/06/2002472408/-1/-1/1/FHP-GUIDANCE-SUPPLEMENT-12.PDF>

⁹ Department of Defense, “DoD COVID-19 Update,” August 26, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/Spotlight/Coronavirus/>.

because of the extremely low rate of infection among servicemembers.¹⁰ However, since the Department has not tested the vast majority of servicemembers,¹¹ and many people are asymptomatic, do you know how many servicemembers actually have the virus?

3. What is the Department's plan to give military commanders the ability to test and screen their personnel?
4. What metrics do you use to decide how to allocate testing resources and medical equipment in the event of shortages?
5. What is your plan to conduct surveillance testing to determine the extent of the outbreak among the force, and what additional steps are you considering to mitigate further spread?
6. Many servicemembers and their dependents are likely being tested outside of the military laboratory system. Is there a plan to obtain that data to better understand the actual rate of infection?
7. DoD reportedly ran a pandemic wargame scenario in 2019, modeling the effects of an outbreak similar in scope and type to the current coronavirus outbreak.¹² What lessons were learned from this wargame and how were they incorporated into current planning?
8. Has the Department conducted any other analyses of a pandemic scenario, and did they take into consideration the Department's preparedness to not only sustain its many missions, but also protect the force from the infection?
9. What is the Department's plan to implement long term mitigation tools, to protect servicemembers when there is inevitably another global outbreak?
10. What steps is the Department taking to ensure military families' needs are addressed during the pandemic, particularly when it comes to access to mental health care?

We know you share our desire to protect U.S. servicemembers, DoD civilians, and their families while maintaining the highest possible readiness. We look forward to working with you to achieve that end.

Sincerely,

¹⁰ Military.com, "Terrible, Tragic Mistake: Top General Warns Enemies Not to Test US Military Readiness," Patricia Kime, April 9, 2020, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/04/09/terrible-tragic-mistake-top-general-warns-enemies-not-test-us-military-readiness.html>

¹¹ Department of Defense response to Request for Information, August 3, 2020

¹² Military.com, "The Naval War College Ran a Pandemic War Game in 2019. The Conclusions Were Eerie," Hope Hodge Seck, April 1, 2020, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/04/01/naval-war-college-ran-pandemic-war-game-2019-conclusions-were-eerie.html>

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Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

_____/s/_____
Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator

_____/s/_____
Patty Murray
United States Senator

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Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

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Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

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Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

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Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

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Ron Wyden
United States Senator

_____/s/_____
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator