



LEGISLATIVE
AFFAIRS

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1300

12 May 2020

The Honorable Elizabeth Warren
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510-2103

Senator Warren:

I am responding on behalf of the Secretary to your letter dated April 27, 2020 regarding actions taken by the Department of Defense in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Let me state upfront, how proud the Department of Defense is of the work we have done leading the fight against COVID-19.

As you know the Department has been providing a daily electronic updates to Congress and weekly telebriefs to the Members of the SASC for the last seven weeks, sharing our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I encourage you join us on those calls, where we have already addressed many of the concerns raised by you and your colleagues.

To recap those discussions, we have been ahead of the curve in battling the coronavirus since late January -- just days after the first patient was identified in the United States. Soon thereafter, the Department activated its global pandemic campaign plan on February 1, weeks before the first American succumbed to the virus. From the onset of this global pandemic, the Department's priorities for the U.S. military have been clear and consistent, and we have followed them diligently:

- Protect our Service members, DOD civilians, and their families
- Safeguard our national security mission capabilities
- Provide full support to the president's whole of government/whole of nation response to COVID-19

The Department has taken the advice of our health professionals and provided clear, unambiguous, and consistent guidance to senior civilian and military leaders on how to confront the crisis. The first Force Health Protection (FHP) guidance memorandum was issued on 30 January and since then, the Department has issued updated that guidance nine times, providing direction for our commanders around the world. Each of these FHP guidance memos have been provided to Congress, including your office, as part of our daily update.

As you know, the Department of Defense is responsible for nearly three million people, serving worldwide, in every U.S. state, and accomplishing thousands of diverse mission sets. The longstanding military practice of providing guidance and allowing commanders down to the lowest level to apply that guidance – enables success across the various missions – and COVID-19 has been no different. Throughout, the pandemic the Secretary and/or the Deputy Secretary have meet almost every day with the Service leaders and Combatant Commanders to ensure this guidance has been well understood, coordinated, and disseminated to the lowest levels.

Additionally, the Pentagon ensured the Department has been out front in protecting our people by restricting travel, implementing social distancing, requiring face coverings, and conducting aggressive testing, and we remain ahead to this day. We are reassured this approach is the proper one when outside experts such as Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution, and several of his colleagues, wrote on April 22, 2020 that "Part of the success to date in keeping COVID-19 out of the ranks is due to the prudence of commanders around the country and the world, who have been given flexibility by Secretary of Defense Mark Esper to take measures they deem appropriate."

It is unfortunate your letter used inaccurate media reports that have been discredited, to unfairly portray the Department while we are in the middle of the COVID19 fight. Please allow me to help set the record straight:

- The claim that the Secretary's guidance had been usurped for political reasons is false and was based on a media narrative that has since been debunked on the record, under oath, by the Secretary and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 4, 2020.
- Your letter also surreptitiously left out the Secretary's entire comment regarding asymptomatic transmission of the coronavirus, which one might conclude was done to create a false narrative. Of course the Secretary knew that asymptomatic transmission was happening. The new knowledge wasn't that there are asymptomatic cases, it was that the percentage of asymptomatic cases, at least on the Teddy Roosevelt at that time, were dramatically higher than the numbers initially suspected by public health officials, indicating a far greater chance of spread without warning.
- Further, your letter mischaracterizes the facts about our recruiting guidance. The Services have been given leeway to take prudent measures to address challenges in continuing to recruit and train future service members, consistent with their unique circumstances. This included social distancing, screening of recruits, quarantining, use of face coverings, reduced training schedule, smaller classes, or restrictions on the acceptance of recruits from certain "hot spots." A recent news story by *60 Minutes* may be a better source to help understand what the Department is doing on this topic.
- Finally, your letter alleges that DOD is not sharing installation-specific COVID data. This simply is not the case, and troubles me that you would make such a false statement to inflame public mistrust. In fact, we announce new outbreaks at every installation – knowing the importance of sharing that information with state, local and federal health officials. In over thirty phone calls, the Secretary has had with governors and mayors, including those represented by those on your letter, this issue has never been raised. The Department provides Congress a daily report that includes numbers of infections, hospitalizations, recoveries and deaths for uniformed members, their dependents, DOD contractors and civilian employees. Again, this information has been provided to your office every day since mid-March as part of our daily Congressional update.

To be clear, what we have done is work with some of the leading health care experts in the military and throughout government to find the right balance of protecting our people and protecting America. The multiple directives and guidance the Department has issued is consistent with what Dr. Anthony Fauci has recommended, by issuing clear guidelines and giving people the room to adapt them to their situation. While we can always do better and will do better, we are proud of the work of our men in women in uniform are doing – and the way they are doing it in these daunting times and although we are still in the midst of fighting COVID, we should take a moment to look at what the Department accomplished while much of the country has been shut down. In short, we have been ahead of need at every step, and we have met or exceeded every request for assistance we have received.

- More than 60,000 DOD personnel are helping our civilian state and local partners - including 45,000 National Guardsmen, 4,000 healthcare professionals, and 5,000 reservists which includes putting themselves in harm's way.
- We have deployed two hospital ships, fourteen Army Urban Augmentation Medical Task Forces, two Navy Expeditionary Medical Facility Detachments, and constructed seventeen US Army Corps of Engineer hospitals in 11 states.
- We have provided twenty million N95 masks, seven million test swabs, and hundreds of ventilators to states in need.
- We have been at the forefront of research, working on potential vaccines and therapeutics.

At the same time we have been assisting our fellow Americans at home, we have maintained military operations around the world. We continue to sail, fly, fight and win wherever we are needed to protect our nation's interest and citizens.

The Department of Defense cannot stand down in the face of COVID as some have suggested. If we did shutdown we wouldn't be able to send doctors and nurses into hot spots like Massachusetts, California, and Connecticut; we wouldn't be able to fly abroad to pick up and deliver millions of testing swabs; we wouldn't be able to deploy hospital ships to New York and California; we wouldn't be able to build hospitals in cities like Detroit and Seattle. But most importantly, we wouldn't be able to stand up to our adversaries abroad today, or prepare to confront them tomorrow.

The Department stands ready, willing, and able to keep supporting and defending our fellow Americans from this invisible enemy, while protecting our great nation from foreign adversaries.

Thanks again for allowing me to clear up any misunderstandings about the Department's efforts to combat the coronavirus, as I am sure you would agree we are all in this fight together.



Robert R. Hood
Assistant Secretary of Defense
for Legislative Affairs