

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 13, 2020

The Honorable Mark Esper
Secretary of Defense
1000 Pentagon Defense
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Esper,

Your actions and efforts in support of the domestic response to the COVID-19 public health emergency have provided tremendous relief during our nation's time of need. The execution by the Department of Defense (DoD) to suppress and control this infectious disease, and provide supportive services to the Department of Health and Human Services and other federal agencies, is commendable. The Department's response has drawn comparison to an all-out-war, and therefore we must fight this infectious disease with every tool at our disposal – but not at the expense of our service member's health and welfare. With consideration for this massive undertaking, we write today to encourage you to also reflect on the unintended consequences that social distancing measures of isolation and quarantine may have on our service members' mental, spiritual, and emotional health.

The risk of suicide within the Department is not a new issue. The most recent Quarterly Suicide Report (QSR) released by the DoD shows an increase in suicides among the Active Component, which totaled 95 deaths during the 4th Quarter, Calendar Year 2019 (Q4 CY19). This is an increase of 12 deaths from the previous quarter (Q3 CY19), and an increase in 6 deaths from the same time period as measured in the previous year (Q4 CY18). We recognize DoD's existing efforts to reduce these tragic incidents, and are encouraged by the decrease in Reserve and National Guard component suicides that the QSR presents. The Department must continue to be dedicated and deliberate in its approach to suicide prevention.

The causes of suicide include a range complex factors from social, psychological, environmental, and biological influences. Just last month, two Air Force Academy cadets set to graduate this summer took their lives within days of one another. While the circumstances of each of these unfortunate deaths are unique and distinct in condition, we must not overlook the fact that the stress of a public health emergency and social distancing emboldens a perfect storm that breeds the symptoms of suicide. Anxiety, isolation, lack of purpose, financial hardship, prolonged loneliness, depression and personal loss are some of the many indicators that increase one's risk for suicide.

Taking care of service members and their families was added by you as a personal priority as the fourth line of effort to the United States' National Defense Strategy. We have confidence that you will continue to aggressively ensure our nation is protected, and that the health – physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional – of our service members is not overlooked. During non-combat operations, force readiness and the well-being of our brave Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines

should remain a top priority. Equally, commanders should feel empowered to request resources in order to meet the minimum safety guidelines outlined by the Administration and senior health officials.

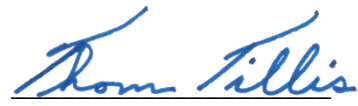
Our service members are resourceful, agile, and the most resilient when operating as a team. A comprehensive plan of action by DoD to address symptoms of suicide, depression, and other mental health related illnesses under the current environment of isolation would provide a framework for these leaders to build on the team dynamic and remain virtually connected. While still participating in necessary social distancing, the Defense Suicide Prevention Office should leverage its network and programs across the military services and other governmental and non-governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, and community partners to reduce the risk for suicide in this unprecedented time.

Thank you for your commitment to this nation and the welfare of those who protect it.

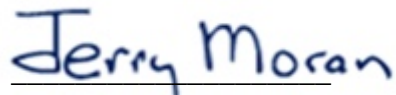
Sincerely,



Marsha Blackburn
United States Senator



Thom Tillis
United States Senator



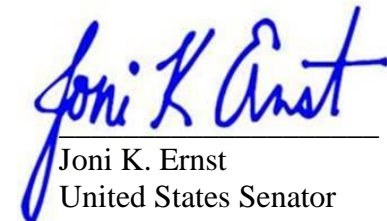
Jerry Moran
United States Senator



Dan Sullivan
United States Senator



Kelly Loeffler
United States Senator



Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator



Mike Crapo
United States Senator