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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3205

May 1, 2023

The Honorable Lloyd Austin
Secretary of Defense
United States Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Austin:

I was deeply saddened to hear that nine soldiers lost their lives on March 29 when their Black Hawk helicopters crashed in Kentucky and that three soldiers were killed on April 27 in an Apache collision in Alaska. Though we understand that military service is inherently dangerous, it remains a shock when we lose service members during training exercises. We owe our service members and military families every effort to avoid these accidents.

Just over two years ago we lost three officers from the New York Army National Guard when their Black Hawk went down during a training mission. I called then for the Department of Defense to ground all Black Hawk flights until you could conduct a thorough investigation to determine if there are systemic issues with the aircraft. Since then, we have only lost more service members to catastrophic incidents involving rotary wing aircraft. I appreciate that you have grounded all Army aviation units until they complete additional training but I remain concerned about the frequency of these accidents.

I request that you conduct a review of all rotary-wing aviation accidents that resulted in a loss of life and/or the loss of an aircraft. Please respond to this letter by August 1, 2023, with a response addressing the following questions, with the type/model/series for each incident indicated in the response:

1. How many rotary wing accidents or incidents have occurred within the Department of Defense in the last five years that resulted in either loss of life or loss of an aircraft?
2. How many deaths are associated with these incidents?
3. What are the assessed causes of each of these incidents?
4. What is the Department's assessment of commonalities or trends among these incidents across all type/model/series and within each type/model/series?
5. Do these commonalities or trends vary between the services? If yes, how?
6. Where you see commonalities or trends, what action has the Department taken, or does it intend to take, to prevent future accidents or incidents of this kind?
7. What coordination has been conducted between the services to prevent future incidents? Are the services sharing best practices among themselves? How is the Department facilitating the exchange of best practices to avoid incidents?

8. Does the Department assess that any particular aircraft are more likely to fail during flight? If yes, are those aircraft still utilized? If yes, why, and what mitigation efforts are you implementing?

I take the responsibility we bear our service members very seriously. Each year, we authorize funds for military budgets that prioritize certain aircraft over others. If we have known issues with certain helicopters we need to know so we can resource your Department in a manner that protects the lives of our brave women and men in uniform. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kirsten Gillibrand". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator