

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3205

April 6, 2022

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

Dear Secretary Austin,

For two decades, the Department of Defense (DoD) has struggled to address the mental health needs of our men and women in uniform throughout the Global War on Terror. Despite recognition of this epidemic, the number of those who have taken their own lives has increased. In 2021, 30,177 active duty personnel and veterans who served in the military after 9/11 died by suicide compared to the 7,057 service members killed in combat in those same 20 years. U.S. Army Alaska alone experienced 17 suicides in 2021—more suicide deaths than in the previous two years combined.

Many service members and their families across the DoD experience long waits to see mental health counselors and there is a lack of resources available to treat those in crisis. Delays in care are unacceptable for our young men and women that have pledged their lives to serve our country. While I agree with your decision to include Alaska in the DoD's Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee (SPRIRC), service members experiencing mental health crises require timely assistance and should not have to wait for access to mental health resources. I ask that you immediately assess the access service members have to timely mental health care. I fear that these suicides could have been prevented if there were adequate resources to help those struggling.

I intend to require DoD have licensed behavioral health providers available to conduct yearly in-person mental health exams and pre-separation exams for all service members. Too often the DoD has delegated this requirement to untrained personnel allowing those struggling with mental health issues to potentially slip through the cracks.

Service members contemplating suicide need urgent help and should never have to experience lengthy delays to see a mental health counselor. These situations are matters of life or death for those seeking help. As chair of the Armed Services Personnel Subcommittee, today I held a hearing on mental health and suicide in the Armed Forces in order to determine what resources and actions are needed to prevent suicide and address mental health among our service members. I ask that you put forth all resources required to address this critical issue for our military personnel and their families.

Sincerely,



Kirsten Gillibrand
Chairwoman, Subcommittee on Personnel
Senate Armed Services Committee