

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 12, 2016

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

Dear Secretary Carter,

On behalf of the citizen soldiers in our states, we write to express our continued concern with the alarmingly high rate of suicides in the National Guard and request additional information on the Defense Department's efforts to reduce this unacceptable trend.

As you know, the Army National Guard (ARNG) has consistently had one of the highest rates of suicide among all components of the military. According to a recent and unsettling article in USA Today, one expert who reviewed military mental health programs stated that these rates of suicide "may well be the new normal." We refuse to accept this as anything normal or acceptable. Today, we urge you to take immediate action, and request greater accountability of the funding for mental health and suicide prevention programs under your direction.

The Director of Psychological Health (DPH) in the National Guard Bureau has recently reported that over 60 percent of Army Guard suicides are from Guard members who have never deployed and thereby did not have access to behavioral or mental care provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). As a result, many of our nation's drilling members of the Guard are left without adequate health insurance and often have to rely upon available pro bono services from mental health providers in their communities.

In many states, the DPH program provides the capability for screening behavioral issues among Guardsmen but does not provide funding for the subsequently required community-based treatment. The Defense Suicide Prevention Office (DSPO) has also been established to develop and coordinate the DOD's suicide prevention and intervention efforts but there continues to be uncertainty about the specific programs and initiatives it funds and supports and whether those investments have been effective. To provide more clarity on these efforts, we request that you specifically address each of the following questions:

- How is the DSPO addressing mental health issues in the National Guard?
- Is the DSPO currently training community-based mental health providers in better understanding military culture?
- Is DSPO currently funding access to community-based confidential treatment for drilling National Guard members and their families?

- Is DSPO currently tracking and reporting suicides among National Guard members and their families?
- What actions are the DSPO and the DoD taking to implement the behavioral health support programs for the reserve components as mandated by Section 703(b) of the FY2012 National Defense Authorization Act (Public Law 112-81)?
- Is DSPO tracking the amount of operation and maintenance funds required to fund behavioral health support programs for the reserve components as also mandated in the FY2012 NDAA?

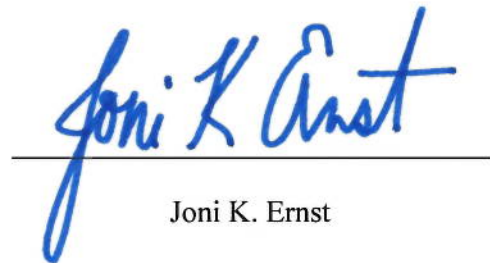
We appreciate your attention to this urgent matter and hope that you are able to provide a better understanding of both the steps we are currently taking as well as the additional steps we need to take to better address the behavioral health needs of the National Guard.

Thank you for your continued leadership and your service to our country.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester



Joni K. Ernst