

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

April 8, 2022

The Honorable Christine E. Wormuth
Secretary of the Army
101 Army Pentagon
Washington, DC 20310-0101

Dear Secretary Wormuth,

Thank you for your attention to the growing problem of suicide among military personnel, and particularly service members stationed in Alaska. As you are aware, twice as many soldiers in Alaska died by suicide in 2021 as compared to 2020. While we appreciate the engagement by senior Army leaders, including the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, in addressing the crisis in Alaska, we believe that the Army must take more comprehensive actions than what has been taken so far in order to change the trajectory.

Over the last several months, we have spoken extensively with service members and civilians in Alaska, including senior leaders, junior enlisted, and health care providers. Our inquiries and conversations have made several things clear: service members stationed in Alaska are under an outsized level of stress from several angles, including behavioral health specialist shortages, financial challenges, infrastructure and transportation limitations, and the adjustment to living in a remote location with extreme cold weather. The problem is especially acute at Fort Wainwright, a duty station for which many are not adequately screened or prepared. When soldiers need help dealing with these stressors, they face exorbitant wait times before being able to meet with a clinician for one-on-one behavioral or mental health treatment. As it stands, we are failing our service members.

We understand that mental and behavioral health issues are endemic to society, and the Army is not alone in the challenges it faces. However, we believe the Army is uniquely equipped to provide support for its soldiers and that the Army can address many of the issues that contribute to the high incidence of service member death by suicide in Alaska. We respectfully share the following observations and recommendations and would request your reactions and plans to address these challenges.

Behavioral Health

Soldiers who need behavioral health support should have access to timely treatment—ideally within two weeks, not two months. In response to an inquiry submitted by the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel to U.S. Army Alaska, we discovered that as of last September, the average wait time for a first appointment was 15.5 days for “specialty care.” While the standard for this type of care is 28 days, this first appointment is often just an intake

session to gather background information for follow-on treatment, potentially occurring months later. A behavioral health technician who cannot offer treatment or a group educational session should not be considered satisfactory, and it's clear that our service members need access to treatment sooner. The behavioral health capacity at Fort Wainwright and Fort Richardson is insufficient because there are insufficient numbers of providers. As it stands right now, there are 11 unfilled civilian mental health provider positions at Fort Wainwright. This has put unbearable pressure on the uniformed and civilian providers who *are* filling those billets, increasing the likelihood that they quit and further exacerbate the problem.

Furthermore, we are concerned that the Army has not made sufficient use of tele-behavioral health to address the needs of service members stationed in Alaska. We understand that tele-behavioral health appointments for service members stationed at Fort Wainwright and Fort Richardson are limited to providers in the Pacific region, primarily Tripler Medical Center in Hawaii. It seems like any military behavioral health provider with appropriate appointment availability, regardless of location, should be able to serve our military personnel in Alaska via tele-behavioral health.

While we are encouraged that the Army plans to establish an automatic annual visit to a Military Family Life Counselor (MFLC) for each soldier stationed in Alaska, we do not believe that this is a substitute for adequate staffing of behavioral health clinicians. This will also strain behavioral health care providers at the Medical Treatment Facilities.

Request: Please provide a plan, with specific milestones and timelines, for allocating additional Army behavioral health resources to Fort Wainwright and Fort Richardson, and for expanding access to tele-behavioral health for soldiers stationed in Alaska. Additionally, please specify what the Army needs from the Defense Health Agency (DHA) to support this plan and adequately serve the behavioral health needs of soldiers in Alaska. More specifically, how has the failure of DHA to complete a behavioral health care workforce plan, as required by Sec. 721 of the FY17 NDAA and as reinforced and expanded upon by Recommendation 2.a of the DoD Inspector General's August 10, 2020, report, "Evaluation of Access to Mental Health Care in the Department of Defense," affected the Army's ability to meet the behavioral health needs of soldiers?

Financial Challenges

While Remote and Austere Conditions Assignment Incentive Pay (RAC-AIP), a one-time, \$1,000–\$2,000 adjustment allowance for service members (and double for those with dependents) is an improvement, we believe that existing compensation policies do not adequately offset the high costs of living in Alaska for junior enlisted. With limited internet service provider options, service members must pay nearly \$200 per month for adequate internet without onerous data caps. Additionally, most junior enlisted soldiers cannot afford flights to visit their families outside of Alaska, which can cost upwards of \$2,000 for airfare during the summer and Christmas block leave periods. Furthermore, soldiers told us that they cannot always get leave approved for trips outside of block leave periods which usually only occur around the major holidays.

Many options should be considered to better address the high cost of living in Alaska, target relief to junior enlisted personnel, and incentivize service in Alaska as a priority location that develops skills critical to the National Defense Strategy. These options include establishing a monthly special “Arctic Pay” of \$300 per month for all soldiers permanently stationed in Alaska, establishing a special monthly allowance to offset the difference between the cost of an uncapped internet plan in Alaska and the average monthly internet cost in CONUS, and reimbursing soldiers and their dependents for airfare for at least one trip home per tour in Alaska.

Request: Please provide the Army’s plan to address the financial pressure on junior enlisted soldiers and incentivize service in Alaska.

Assignments

Alaska duty stations cannot be viewed the same as other duty stations in the service member assignment process. While we believe the new option to allow soldiers to volunteer for service in Alaska is a good start, we believe additional actions should be taken to ensure that the Army is assigning soldiers who are likely to succeed at Fort Wainwright and Fort Richardson.

Request: Please provide a plan on how the Army could further incentivize service in Alaska, specifically assessing the feasibility of additional promotion points for being stationed in the Arctic, follow-on assignment preference, limiting some or all tour lengths to two years at Fort Wainwright (as opposed to the current three-year assignments), and permanent display of an Arctic tab.

Request: Please provide a plan on how the Army will ensure that soldiers are appropriately assigned to Alaska, such as by screening and verifying that soldiers assigned to Alaska do not have ongoing or recent behavioral health treatment, and by excluding first-term soldiers from warm-weather locales from assignment in Alaska unless they request the assignment.

Request: Please provide a plan on how the Army could monitor and evaluate the success of efforts to adjust assignments to Alaska.

Preparation

The Army should implement much more robust programs to prepare soldiers and their families for service in Alaska.

Request: Please provide a plan on how the Army will improve programs to prepare soldiers and their dependents for living in Alaska before moving to Alaska, upon arrival, and with follow up engagement as the first winter approaches.

Absence of Sunlight

We are concerned that the Army has still not adequately addressed relatively simple problems like widespread Vitamin D deficiency, as identified in the 2019 EPICON study, and that many UV lights are in storage rather than distributed to soldiers.

Request: Please indicate what the Army will do to better screen soldiers for Vitamin D deficiency, increase access to Vitamin D supplements, and ensure that every soldier stationed in Alaska is issued a UV light.

Housing and Quality of Life Facilities

While we appreciate that the Army has extensive military construction projects underway in Alaska, including barracks and child development centers, it has come to our attention that there is often insufficient housing for new arrivals at Fort Wainwright. We heard multiple, detailed accounts of service members living in bunkbeds in the Fort Wainwright welcome center for over three months with little to no storage space for gear or personal items.

Request: Please provide a plan to ensure that appropriate housing is available for all soldiers when they arrive in Alaska.

Transportation

Our findings have indicated that a general lack of reliable transportation has exacerbated the problem of isolation felt by our service members in Alaska. From inconsistent shuttle times and high car prices, to low availability of ride-share services, creative solutions are required to ensure better transportation options for our service members in Alaska.

Request: Please provide a plan for the Army to improve existing transportation mechanisms, such as shuttle scheduling, and what new transportation options, such as car-sharing and leveraging unit-assigned vans for personal transportation, the Army may consider to address these longstanding transportation issues for soldiers in Alaska.

Conclusion

Death by suicide of military personnel is a challenging problem, but we believe that solutions are within reach. Your leadership is essential to change the trajectory. We look forward to your response and continued engagement on this critical issue. The staff contacts for this request are Brian Collins (Brian.Collins@mail.house.gov) for Rep. Speier, Chadd Montgomery (Chadd.Montgomery@sullivan.senate.gov) for Sen. Sullivan, and Matthew Hickey (Matthew.Hickey@murkowski.senate.gov) for Sen. Murkowski.

Sincerely,



Jackie Speier
Member of Congress



Dan Sullivan
U.S. Senator



Lisa Murkowski
U.S. Senator

Cc: Chief of Staff of the Army
Vice Chief of Staff of the Army
Commander, USARPAC
Commander, USARAK