

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4704

COMMITTEES:
APPROPRIATIONS
BUDGET
HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR,
AND PENSIONS
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

July 12, 2018

The Honorable James Mattis
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Mattis:

We write to you today with concerns about rates of suicide among military dependents. We ask that the Department of Defense (DoD) release any data on military dependent suicide, and we urge you to work with Congress to take action to address these concerns.

The FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) included a provision requiring DoD to develop a standardized method of collecting, reporting, and assessing data regarding servicemember suicide. The provision also required DoD to develop a similar policy for any dependent death that is reported as a suicide. The law required that this policy go into effect no later than 180 days after December 19, 2014. While the Department made significant progress in the intervening years to address servicemember suicide, it appears there is still no reliable system across all services for collecting data on dependent suicide. For example, the 2016 Department of Defense Suicide Report (DODSER) was released on July 2, 2018. The report included no information or reference to dependent suicide.

There is a critical need to understand the scope of this problem. We know these suicides occur, but there is presently a lack of information necessary to understand, prevent, and respond to these tragedies. We understand that collecting suicide data on military dependents can be especially challenging compared to collecting similar data on servicemembers, but in absence of clear data, this problem cannot be effectively understood or treated. Consistent data collection across all services is essential to understanding suicide risk factors and to targeting solutions to address the problem. The Department uses the DODSER to implement programs and policies designed to prevent future suicides among servicemembers. DoD should do the same for the military dependent population.

The past 16 years of war have taken a toll on our military families. They have had to bear the brunt of long deployments, frequent moves, and other stressors of military life. We owe it to military families to support them through these challenges and ensure they have access to the care and services they need.

Therefore, we ask that you provide an update on the status of implementation of FY2015 NDAA, Sec. 567 (a)(1)(B). The update should include a timeline for implementation, any limitations or barriers the Department anticipates towards full implementation, and additional resources or congressional assistance the Department may require to fulfill this mandate.

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Thank you for your prompt attention to this important matter. We look forward to hearing from you and working together on this critical issue.

Sincerely,


Patty Murray
United States Senator


Tim Kaine
United States Senator