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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
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COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
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COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
WILDLIFE, WATER & FISHERIES, VICE-CHAIR
FEDERAL LANDS

November 21, 2023

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

Dear Secretary Austin,

I write to you today regarding the status of the implementation of the Brandon Act within the branches of the Armed Services.

As you know, the Brandon Act was passed as part of the 2022 NDAA in the wake of the tragic suicide of Petty Officer 3rd Class Brandon Caserta in 2018 while assigned to Norfolk Naval Station. Sadly, our Armed Forces are experiencing the highest suicide rate since before World War II¹, with military suicides nearly four times higher than deaths that occurred during military operations between 2001 and 2021.

To help prevent suicides among our men and women in uniform, the Brandon Act created new avenues for support of our servicemembers within DoD, allowing them to confidentially self-report suicidal ideations and to seek help from superior officers. Proper and thorough enactment of this legislation and its goals is vital for current and future servicemembers who are attempting to overcome mental health challenges.

As a good first step, the Department released their implementation plan on May 5, 2023, setting concrete procedures in place that will have a meaningful impact. All military branches were given 45 days from May 5, 2023, to create a system by which servicemembers can request a mental health evaluation through their command, and, importantly, remain anonymous.

While I am heartened to see the progress the Department of Defense is making, the rate of suicide among our servicemembers remains at a historic high and more must be done to curb this troubling trend. Therefore, I request answers to the following questions:

1. Was every branch of the armed forces able to comply with your May 5th order? If not, are they compliant at this point?
2. Have servicemembers used these new services at the expected rate? If not, why?

¹ <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2021/Suicides>

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3. How are the service branches increasing awareness of Brandon Act policies amongst servicemembers? Specifically, are service branches producing and distributing posters, brochures, or trainings?
4. Have you solicited feedback from servicemembers about the implementation of the Brandon Act? If so, what suggestions for improvement have you heard?

We are in nothing short of a mental health crisis among current and former members of our military. Having met with the Caserta family and others who have experienced the same loss, I can tell you that for military families, whose active duty loved one already sacrificed so much to protect our freedom, the rise in military suicides is extremely troubling.

Thank you for your continuing efforts to support our servicemembers. As a former Navy helicopter pilot and primary care provider, I strongly believe that thorough implementation of the Brandon Act is of the highest importance and look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "J.A. Kiggans".

Rep. Jen Kiggans