

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

September 13, 2022

The Honorable Carlos Del Toro
Secretary of the Navy
U.S. Department of the Navy
1000 Navy Pentagon
Washington, DC 20350

Dear Secretary Del Toro,

We are writing to urge you to expeditiously appoint a Director of Psychological Health at each Navy and Marine Corps installation, in accordance with Department of Defense (DoD) Instruction 6490.09. This will ensure that the Navy is properly responding to the complex and sensitive needs of servicemembers looking towards command for help as they deal with suicidal ideation and the distress that comes with acute mental health crises.

Present rates of suicide for military personnel across all branches are staggering: a 2021 report published by Brown University found that “at least four times as many active-duty personnel and war veterans of post-9/11 conflicts have died of suicide than in combat.”¹ There have been over 30,000 estimated deaths by suicide since 2001. Each death is a tragedy and together they represent a widespread failing to properly treat, manage, and understand the mental health needs of America’s military personnel. This crisis requires decisive and immediate action, and few incidents demonstrate that urgency more than the recent string of suicides among sailors serving on *USS George Washington* in Newport News, Virginia.

Navy officials have been vocal about the need to better support their personnel through times of personal crisis. During various tours of *USS George Washington* by members of Congress in May and June, Captain Brent Gaut and other members of command spoke extensively about their commitment to suicide prevention and supporting sailors’ mental and behavioral health needs. It was reiterated that this was a priority not just on *USS George Washington* but across the entire Navy. However, it is our belief that the Navy specifically could be doing more to ensure that our sailors are accessing the mental health services that they deserve.

As per DOD Instruction 6490.09, “it is DoD policy that a psychological health and readiness leadership and advocacy structure, focused on operational readiness and integration of health promotion and clinical services, shall be established throughout the DoD, and Directors of Psychological Health (DPHs) shall be designated in key positions across the Military Services[.]”² Among this instruction is the requirement that a Director of Psychological Health

¹Thomas Howard Suitt III, [High Suicide Rates among United States Service Members and Veterans of the Post-9/11 Wars](https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Suitt_Suicides_Costs%20of%20War_June%202021.pdf), Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs Costs of War Project, June 21, 2021, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Suitt_Suicides_Costs%20of%20War_June%202021.pdf

² DoD Instruction 6490.09, “DoD Directors of Psychological Health,” February 27, 2012, as amended

be appointed at every military installation, across all departments. These regulations are already being implemented much more widely by the Army and Air Force³, but for the last decade the Navy has remained noncompliant by not appointing a Director of Psychological Health to all Navy and Marine Corps installations. This continuing issue was reiterated in a Government Accountability Office report published April 2022, titled, “*Suicide Prevention: DOD Should Enhance Oversight, Staffing, Guidance, and Training Affecting Certain Remote Installations.*”

Directors of Psychological Health perform a critical role in their units that cannot continue to be left vacant. The chief coordinator for suicide prevention services and resources ensures that those who may be struggling are quickly connected to appropriate resources to divert a potentially tragic decision and that the psychological wellbeing of their crew is the best it can be. A Director of Psychological Health is a servicemember’s primary mental wellness advocate, and servicemembers stationed at an installation without one are simply not receiving the same quality of care than those stationed at a DOD Instruction 6490.09-compliant installation.

As recent tragedies connected to *USS George Washington* have highlighted, we cannot afford to wait when it comes to the mental health and stability of our men and women in uniform. We urge your full attention on this matter and ask that the Navy bolster its efforts to comply with DOD Instruction 6490.09 and provide detail on actions taken to date and planned future steps on the Navy’s efforts.

Sincerely,



ROBERT C. “BOBBY” SCOTT
Member of Congress



ELAINE G. LURIA
Member of Congress

³ *Suicide Prevention: DOD Should Enhance Oversight, Staffing, Guidance, and Training Affecting Certain Remote Installations.* GAO-22-105108. Washington D.C: April 28, 2022