

United States Senate

November 22, 2019

The Honorable Mark T. Esper
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Esper:

I write today because I am concerned about the length of time it takes for active duty servicemembers to receive care after identifying mental health concerns to providers. A servicemember recently contacted my office with concerns about the Defense Health Agency (DHA) and its contractors' abilities to refer servicemembers for behavioral health care in a timely manner while also protecting confidentiality.

According to this servicemember, he self-identified mental health concerns and indicated a need for treatment to a provider. He was told that a referral for mental health counseling would be made and that his chain of command would be notified. More than a month later, he still had not been contacted about an appointment for mental health services. To add insult to this servicemember's attempt to get assistance, he identified to another provider several weeks later that he was still in need of a mental health appointment. Although he was promised that someone would contact him that day to schedule an appointment, no such contact was made. Only after reaching out on three separate occasions did this servicemember finally get a behavioral health appointment scheduled – a month and a half after first reaching out for assistance.

Not only was this servicemember's request for a mental health referral ignored, a digital profile was made, which could have jeopardized his privacy within his unit, rather than a direct communication between his provider and his command. This digital profile modification was overlooked and no one in the servicemember's chain of command was tracking his mental health concerns. When mental health concerns and suicidal ideation are not handled properly, whether through a servicemember's chain of command or behavioral health team, that individual can fall through the cracks, have privacy compromised, or have a career negatively affected.

While this servicemember continued to persist and advocate for himself, not all servicemembers struggling with mental health issues are equipped to wait so long for care or to advocate so staunchly for themselves. In 2018, 325 active duty servicemembers, along with 81 Reservists and 135 members of the National Guard, died by suicide. While we do not know if they suffered similar delays in receiving potentially life-saving mental health care, six weeks is too long for a servicemember to wait after reaching out for help. This servicemember's situation is cautionary as the results could have been far worse, even as he was actively seeking

help. All servicemembers need to be taken seriously and know that they can rely on the Department and its contractors to provide the health care they need and deserve.

In order to ensure all servicemembers are getting the mental health care they need, I am requesting the Department of Defense and DHA review their process for mental health referrals, including when a contractor is involved. Please provide my office with the results of this review, including the current referral process, accountability requirements for contractors, quality assurance, and timeliness standards for referrals to care. I would also appreciate information on how long it is currently taking for servicemembers to receive behavioral health appointments once it is identified that they are in need of such care.

The mental health and wellbeing of our servicemembers and veterans is of utmost importance, and I look forward to your prompt response on this issue. I appreciate your partnership in ensuring all servicemembers have timely access to the highest quality of care.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Tester", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jon Tester
United States Senator