

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

October 11, 2022

The Honorable Adam Smith
Chairman
House Armed Services Committee
2216 Rayburn Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mike Rogers
Ranking Member
House Armed Services Committee
2216 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
Senate Armed Services Committee
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jim Inhofe
Ranking Member
Senate Armed Services Committee
205 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Smith, Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Rogers, and Ranking Member Inhofe:

As the House and Senate conferees negotiate the final fiscal year (FY) 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), we strongly urge you to retain provisions to improve quality of life and address financial challenges for service members stationed in Alaska, improve behavioral health capacity, and prevent suicide across the military. Both the Senate and House versions of the NDAA include similar provisions addressing these challenges, and we believe the case for bold action is strong.

We have met extensively with service members, military spouses, and behavioral health providers based in Alaska in the wake of a doubling of deaths by suicide by soldiers stationed in Alaska in 2021 as compared to 2020. The suicide rate for active-duty service members has increased by 40 percent over the past 5 years, and many risk factors that contribute to suicide are more intense in Alaska, such as financial pressures from the high cost of living and isolation due to extreme weather and darkness during the winter. The following provisions are intended to address these risk factors and support the services' ongoing efforts to improve quality of life for service members in Alaska, while also addressing the military-wide need for additional behavioral health providers. A January 12, 2022, report to Congress from the Defense Health Agency estimated that DoD is short 1,050 behavioral health providers to meet demand for care in clinics and missions related to readiness. These shortfalls are exacerbated at remote military installations where hiring and retaining civilian support is more challenging, yet DoD has not developed a plan to resolve this shortfall.

Arctic Pay, Broadband Allowance, and Travel Allowance (Sec. 613, H.R.7900; Secs. 524 and 613, S.4543)

Please include in the final conference agreement: \$300 per month in Arctic Pay for qualified service members engaged in cold weather training and operations; a pilot allowance to reduce the outsized cost of broadband internet for those stationed in Alaska (ranks E-5 and below); and a one-time travel reimbursement to home-of-record for those stationed in Alaska (ranks E-5 and below) and their dependents. Many goods and services are significantly more expensive in Alaska compared with the continental United States or even Hawaii. These costs are not fully covered by the overseas cost-of-living allowance (COLA) and housing allowance and are especially burdensome for junior enlisted servicemembers. For example, a typical broadband internet plan that is not subject to onerous limits can cost \$180 per month, over three times the average cost of an equivalent broadband plan in the lower 48. Airfare to visit home can exceed \$2,000 per person during the summer and winter block leave periods, making it cost prohibitive for many junior enlisted to visit their families and friends during their 3-year assignment. Furthermore, the ability to effectively train and operate in Arctic conditions is a specialized skillset in and of itself. Service members who comprise a lethal fighting force in such extreme conditions have a specialized skill that is essential to the National Defense Strategy and should be incentivized with special pay. Similar to how the military services offer jump pay, dive pay, sea pay, and other such pays, Arctic pay will reinforce and reward the importance of these challenging and essential activities and capabilities.

Policies to Address the Shortfall of DoD Behavioral Health Providers (Secs. 729, 767, and 769, H.R.7900; Secs. 746 and 752, S.4543)

These sections include several policies that would build a more robust behavioral health workforce pipeline to address DoD's estimated 1,050 provider shortfall. Please include in the final conference agreement language to:

- Establish graduate programs in counseling and social work and expand the clinical psychology program at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS), while adding a service obligation for civilian USUHS students;
- Establish a scholarship-for-service program to cover the cost of attendance for civilians enrolled at graduate programs in clinical psychology, social work, counseling, or a related field, in exchange for a commitment to work as a behavioral health provider at a military medical treatment facility;
- Establish paid pre- and post-doctoral internship programs to train clinical psychologists to work as civilian behavioral health providers at military medical treatment facilities, with a service commitment once the provider is fully licensed to practice independently;
- Require DoD to increase the use of retention bonuses for civilian behavioral health providers, prioritizing remote installations; and
- Require DoD to conduct a workforce analysis and report to Congress its plan to address any shortfall in its behavioral health workforce—encompassing uniformed and civilian providers and providers assigned to operational units and military medical treatment facilities—and including an analysis of compensation necessary to attract and retain

providers, a plan to ensure that remote installations are prioritized for the assignment of military behavioral health providers, updated access standards for behavioral health care under the Military Health System, an assessment of the feasibility of hiring civilian behavioral health providers at remote installations, and a plan to expand access to behavioral health care under the Military Health System using telehealth.

Licensure Portability for Non-Medical Counseling Services (Sec. 763, H.R.7900)

Behavioral health providers delivering clinical services are covered by the existing Title 10 licensure portability provision. Please include in the conference agreement this provision, which would extend the same licensure portability to providers offering non-medical counseling, such as through the Military and Family Life Counseling (MFLC) Program, increasing the flexibility of the MFLC workforce and enhancing the ability of MFLCs to serve remote installations. This will directly support U.S. Army Alaska's "Mission 100" initiative to connect MFLCs with 100 percent of soldiers annually with non-medical counseling to increase awareness of resources available to soldiers and decrease the stigma of seeking support.

Pilot Program on Car Sharing on Military Installations in Alaska (Sec. 595, H.R.7900)

Many service members in Alaska do not own cars due to the especially high cost of buying and maintaining vehicles in Alaska, limiting the ability to do activities off base. Please include this provision to pilot a car-sharing program on Alaska military installations that would allow service members without cars to purchase temporary access to a vehicle and enable service members with cars to earn additional income by making their vehicle available for use in the pilot program.

Voluntary Pilot Program for Safe Storage of Personally Owned Firearms (Sec. 599E, H.R.7900; Sec. 1075, S.4543)

Behavioral health experts indicate that safe storage is the most effective non-health-care-related way to prevent suicide, because deaths by suicide tend to be the result of impulsive acts, and suicidal ideations often pass quickly, so even a few extra seconds to unlock a firearm may be enough for the person to reconsider. Please include in the conference agreement this voluntary, 6-year pilot program, which would offer subsidized secure gun storage and safety devices, such as firearm locks and gun safes, to service members who choose to participate and securely store their personally owned firearms when not in use. This pilot program would be entirely voluntary for service members, and DoD would be required to report to Congress on the program's impact.

We commend you on your leadership and commitment to our servicemembers, and we urge you to preserve these bipartisan provisions in the final FY 2023 NDAA conference agreement.

Sincerely,



Jackie Speier
Member of Congress



Mary Sattler Peltola
Member of Congress



Lisa Murkowski
Member of Congress



Dan Sullivan
Member of Congress