



**SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
1000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1000**

MAY - 7 2020

The Honorable James M. Inhofe
Chairman
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

The Department of Defense (DoD) is committed to providing accurate and timely information in support of Congressional oversight. This is why we are providing weekly updates by senior DoD officials to Congress. Recently, however, some Members have leveled false or misleading assertions regarding the Department's response to the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, despite these briefings. I want to ensure you have the facts.

As you know from our multiple conversations, my priorities for the U.S. military have been clear and consistent from the early days of this global pandemic: protect our Service members, DoD civilians, and their families; safeguard our national security mission capabilities; and provide full support to the President's whole-of-government/whole-of-nation response to COVID-19. As a result, I can confidently state, informed by my Service leaders and Combatant Commanders, the U.S. military is maintaining a high state of readiness and the morale of the force remains strong.

Moreover, I am proud to report more than 62,000 DoD personnel are helping our civilian state and local partners – including over 45,000 National Guardsmen, 4,000 healthcare professionals, and 5,000 reservists. We have deployed 2 hospital ships, 14 Army Urban Augmentation Task Forces, 2 Navy Expeditionary Medical Facility Detachments, embedded military doctors and nurses in civilian hospitals, and constructed 17 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers hospitals in 11 states. We have provided 20 million N95 masks, 7 million test swabs, and hundreds of ventilators to states in need. And we have been at the forefront of research into the virus, working on potential vaccines and therapeutics. In short, we have been ahead of need at every step, and we have met or exceeded every request for assistance we have received.

That said, on behalf of America's 2.9 million Service members and DoD civilians, I am disappointed that some, especially committee members, would argue that the Defense Department has demonstrated a "failure to adequately respond to the ongoing coronavirus disease." Such a statement does not respect the 62,000 Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines currently deployed across the Nation in support of their fellow Americans, typically operating away from their families and usually at risk of their own lives.

One false assertion is that commanders are not allowed to make any decisions "that might surprise the White House" or contradict the President. This does not reflect reality; "commanders have been given and used often all the authority they need to act." These fabricated claims have been discredited on the record, under oath by myself and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, before your committee, as well as by Secretary of the Army, Ryan McCarthy. Instead of relying on Congressional testimony by three of the most senior Pentagon leaders, some continue to use one inaccurate media report as the premise for their allegation, embracing a false statement pushed by an anonymous source who admittedly was not a part of the meeting in question.

Another criticism is that health guidance for the force has been late and insufficient. We at DoD are proud of the work we have done leading the fight against COVID-19. We have been ahead of the curve and fighting the coronavirus since late January, just days after the first patient was identified in the United States. I have taken the advice of our health professionals and provided clear, detailed, and consistent guidance to

senior civilian and military leaders – each of whom have extensive medical staffs and resources – on how to confront the crisis. In fact, we issued our first Force Health Protection (FHP) guidance on January 30th – and activated our global pandemic campaign plan on February 1st – weeks before the first American succumbed to the virus. Since then, we have issued updated guidance eight times, providing direction for our commanders around the world. Each of these FHP guidance memos have been provided to congressional offices.

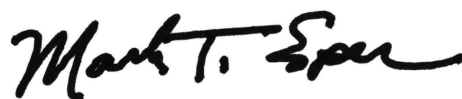
As you know, the Pentagon is responsible for nearly 3 million people at over a thousand locations and 400 bases in 150 countries and every U.S. state doing hundreds of incredibly different jobs. Therefore, the longstanding military practice is to provide guidance and allow commanders down to the lowest level capable to apply that direction – aided by the advice of medical professionals in their commands – in accordance with their varied missions. This type of guidance has been necessary as the outbreak has affected different locations differently – South Korea is not Connecticut, and Baghdad is not Boston. Similarly, diverse missions have diverse levels of flexibility – a submarine at sea is not a DoD office building in D.C., and a rifle platoon in Afghanistan is not a classroom at the War College. Throughout, I have repeatedly asked Service leaders and Combatant Commanders if they have sufficient guidance and flexibility, and all have responded affirmatively.

This guidance, and its astute implementation by Service leaders, has ensured our recruiting and basic training pipelines – keys to our future readiness – remain open, with minimal risk to the newest members of the military. Similarly, implementation of this guidance by Combatant Commanders has ensured our deployed Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps units retain a high state of readiness and are capably conducting their national security missions abroad, all around the globe. Indeed, clear direction from the Pentagon ensured the Department was ahead of the curve on restricting travel, implementing social distancing, requiring face coverings, and conducting aggressive testing, and we remain ahead to this day. The hard data reflects the success of our approach: of the 2 million plus Service members in our ranks, as of May 3rd fewer than 4,900 have contracted COVID-19, less than 100 have been hospitalized, and only two have tragically succumbed to the virus.

But our military has not just hunkered down to protect personnel until the storm passed – we have been on the frontlines, often at far greater risk than most Americans. I have spoken with over three dozen governors and mayors in the past couple months to offer DoD’s assistance, and all of them – contrary to the views of members from their states – have praised DoD’s performance and thanked us for our assistance.

Throughout this crisis the Department has been open, receptive, and responsive to the American people and their elected representatives. In addition to weekly briefings to Congress, I know of no other organization in the world that has shared more information about COVID-19 cases within its ranks than DoD. The Department provides daily numbers of infections, hospitalizations, recoveries, and deaths for uniformed members, their dependents, DoD contractors, and civilian employees. From the beginning, we announced new outbreaks at every installation and continue to do so. And counter to the false claims by some, we also have, and will continue to, share information about every single infection with state, local, and federal health officials. We do this all while balancing a well-acknowledged need to protect information regarding our force readiness from adversaries.

We look forward to continue to discussing DoD’s operations and our path forward regarding COVID-19 with Congress. This also gives us the opportunity to debunk other false claims and to clarify issues in a responsible, apolitical way. In the meantime, we stand ready, willing, able, and proud to keep supporting and defending our fellow Americans from this invisible enemy, while protecting our great Nation from foreign adversaries. As always, I thank you for your support of the Department of Defense.



cc:
The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member