

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 21, 2025

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Hegseth:

We write to you to express our concerns with your recent memorandum (“Grooming Standards for Facial Hair Implementation”, dated 30 September 2025; henceforth “the memorandum”) addressing the issue of religious accommodations for servicemembers across the U.S. military.

By our reading, the memorandum calls on each branch of the Armed Forces to “revert back to pre-2010 standards” where facial hair waivers were “generally not authorized.” Revering to pre-2010 standards ensure servicemembers were only granted religious accommodations under extraordinary circumstances. The memorandum also states that moving forward, “approvals will be limited to non-deployable roles with low risk of chemical attack or firefighting requirement.” Finally, the memorandum directs the Secretaries of the Military Departments (henceforth “the Secretaries”) to each provide an “implementation plan” for these policies within 60 days.

Given the deep and profound importance of religious accommodation to certain Sikh, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Rastafarians, and other servicemembers currently serving our nation, we urge you to pause the memo’s 60-day implementation timeline to gather more information and issue further clarifications. We further request that you clarify the below points in writing and use the answers to provide further guidance to the Secretaries.

New Process for Accommodations: As mentioned above, the memorandum references a reversion to “pre-2010 standards”—but before 2010, religious accommodations were exceedingly rare. For example, in the U.S. Army, a pre-accession soldier had to formally join the Army and sacrifice his religiously mandated beard *before* applying for an accommodation to grow and maintain it again. This presents a severe barrier to religious expression for members of many faiths. However, in the context of individualized review of religious convictions, the memorandum also references using DoD Instruction 1300.17, “Religious Liberty in the Military Services,”¹ which was issued in 2020.

- Should the Secretaries use: pre-2010 standards, or post-2010 policies that comply with DODI 1300.17 and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA)?

Existing Accommodations:

- Will religious accommodations for facial hair for servicemembers issued between 2010 and 2025 be honored?

- If these accommodations will not be honored, what is the process and timeline by which servicemembers can reapply for accommodations?
- And what is a servicemember's recourse if their previously approved (and RFRA and DODI 1300.17-complaint) accommodation is denied?

Pending Accommodations:

- Will religious accommodations requests for facial hair currently pending be evaluated under the new standard?
- And if so, what is the timeline for processing those requests?

Deployability Requirement: Servicemembers who have religious accommodations for facial hair are currently deployed, serving honorably and capably in multiple branches. In fact, the vast majority of U.S. servicemembers can be considered “deployable” based on the needs of the nation.

- For this new policy, what is the specific definition of “deployable”?
- How will this definition be interpreted to not violate the opportunity for servicemembers who wish to serve on the front lines with their religious beards intact? (As you may be aware, soldiers in the U.S. Army already do so.)

We wholeheartedly agree that a servicemember's religious beliefs must be sincerely held to warrant a religious accommodation. However, we cannot afford to disregard the current contributions of Sikh, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Rastafarians, and other members of our military. Disregarding their efforts through an overbroad and unclarified policy will deprive us of current and future talent. This will happen either by forcing out servicemembers with accommodations earned through carefully following their branch's established processes or signaling to members of these religious communities that their contributions are not needed in the world's greatest fighting force. At a time when readiness and retention remain urgent concerns, such a move would be ill-advised.

Finally, we wish to stress that we believe, as we know you do, that religious freedom is an essential American value. It is obviously and forcefully inscribed in our Bill of Rights and our laws and harkens back even further to the very founding of our country. It is also one of many freedoms that members of the armed forces are willing to fight to defend. Thank you in advance for your clarifying responses to these concerns, and efforts to maintain the U.S. military's high standards of professionalism while also respecting the people who serve it and the values it is pledged to protect.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Gary C. Peters
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator