

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 31, 2021

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

We write in light of the recent events in Afghanistan to encourage the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to quickly develop a comprehensive outreach plan to connect Afghanistan and Global War on Terrorism veterans to VA benefits and services. More than two million veterans served during the Global War on Terrorism, including more than 800,000 in Afghanistan, and these service members deserve and earned the support that they need. We appreciate the VA's commitment to providing mental health services to all veterans and ask, in light of the current situation, that the Department accelerate its efforts to provide resources – to veterans of these recent conflicts.

The VA recently sent out correspondence with digital links to veterans encouraging them to seek help if they are experiencing distress related to their service in Afghanistan or if they need any mental health services. This is a first step, but the VA should go beyond this initial outreach. As you know, veterans aged 18 to 34 have the highest suicide rate among former service members.¹ Beyond that, the VA's National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report repeatedly indicates that veterans, including those who served in Afghanistan, do not use Veterans Health Administration services aimed at decreasing suicidal ideation and suicide attempts.²

For this reason, we ask that the VA develop a comprehensive outreach plan to connect Afghanistan and Global War on Terrorism veterans to VA benefits and services. This plan must proactively contact veterans in the coming months through means including, but not be limited to: digital correspondence, social media, phone calls, and text messages. Furthermore, VA's outreach should consist of detailed information on mental health services, including clinical services, and community-based support systems, such as Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) and VA Vet Centers. Emphasis should also be placed on pairing veterans with localized support and resources.

As a country, we must keep the physical and mental wellbeing of our veterans at the forefront of our minds and efforts. Especially given the constant media coverage and disturbing images

¹ Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Suicide Prevention. 2020 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report. November 2020. https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2020/FAQ_2020_National_Veteran_Suicide_Prevention_Annual_Report.pdf

² Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Suicide Prevention. 2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report. September 2019. https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019_National_Veteran_Suicide_Prevention_Annual_Report_508.pdf

coming out of Afghanistan, we ask for your commitment to developing a comprehensive outreach plan for our Global War on Terrorism, and specifically our Afghanistan veterans. We must fulfill our obligation to those who served and never forget their sacrifices.

Sincerely,



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator



Reverend Raphael Warnock
United States Senator



Bill Cassidy, M.D.
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



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United States Senator




John Hickenlooper
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James E. Risch
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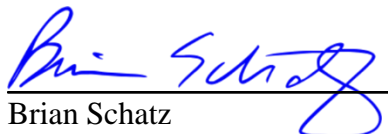
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United States Senator



John Hoeven
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Brian Schatz
United States Senator



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United States Senator



Jack Reed
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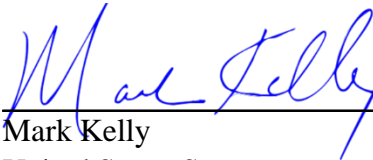
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United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Roger W. Marshall, MD
United States Senator



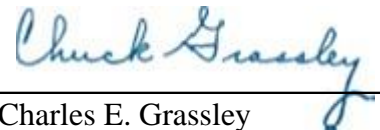
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Mike Braun
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Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



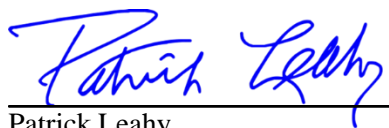
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