



AMERICAN  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION

March 30, 2021

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin:

On behalf of the American Psychological Association (APA), I would like to extend our congratulations on your confirmation to lead the Department of Defense (DoD). APA is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States with 122,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants, and students. We have a division devoted to Military Psychology whose members play a critical role in providing behavioral health care to our Servicemembers and their Families, conducting psychological research, and offering psychology training programs in support of the DoD. APA has an abiding respect and appreciation for the thousands of military personnel, including psychologists, who serve our Nation.

We applaud President Biden's campaign pledges to build a robust mental health workforce, increase funding for mental health research, and "expand access to mental health care." As you know, the public health and economic impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to worsen the mental health of our nation and exacerbate pre-existing gaps in care. APA members are on the frontlines addressing the mental and behavioral health of Servicemembers and others affected by this crisis.

We would like to take this opportunity to offer the following recommendations to the DoD in the areas of service delivery, prevention, and research for your consideration:

- **Improve Access to Direct and Purchased Care Systems to Ensure Access to Mental Health Care for our Servicemembers and their Families.** The mental health of our Servicemembers and their Families is a critical readiness issue. Last year, DoD's Inspector General (IG) released a report<sup>1</sup> that found that DoD did not consistently meet outpatient mental health access to care standards for active-duty Servicemembers and their Families. APA has expressed its concerns several times<sup>2,3</sup> in the past few years about network adequacy and cuts to reimbursement rates for psychologists. The IG report showed that the TRICARE network is inadequate to meet the mental health needs of our Servicemembers and their Families. APA encourages you to improve access to care across both direct and purchased care systems to include holding TRICARE contractors accountable when they fail to meet the needs of Servicemembers and their Families.
- **Maintain efforts to improve DoD's culture and climate.** APA applauds your efforts to end sexual harassment and assault, root out extremism, and make the DoD a safe place to work for all Servicemembers, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ethnicity, or

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General. (2020). Evaluation of Access to Mental Health Care in the Department of Defense. Retrieved from [https://media.defense.gov/2020/Aug/12/2002475605/-1/-1/1/DODIG-2020-112\\_REDACTED.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2020/Aug/12/2002475605/-1/-1/1/DODIG-2020-112_REDACTED.PDF)

<sup>2</sup> APA Practice Organization. (2017). Letter to Admiral Bono, Defense Health Agency. Retrieved from <https://www.apaservices.org/practice/advocacy/humana-reimbursement-tricare.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> American Psychological Association. (2020). Letter to Secretary Esper, Department of Defense. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2020/10/letter-mental-health-access-tricare.pdf>

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religion. These quick-reaction efforts – from Task Forces to Stand Downs – must be accompanied by long-term policy changes. Members of the military must be able to rely on and trust their fellow Servicemembers. Any actions that undermine that trust, such as fearing sexual assault, racism, retaliation, or extremism, must be addressed directly at all levels of command. This is a critical readiness issue for the DoD, and we urge you to maintain these efforts.

- **Continue to Focus on Suicide Prevention and Lethal Means Safety.** Data from previous annual suicide reports<sup>4</sup> and ongoing surveillance<sup>5</sup> indicate that the DoD's continued emphasis on suicide prevention among Servicemembers is greatly needed. DoD's Annual Suicide Report for Calendar Year 2019 found that the primary method of suicide was by firearm for Servicemembers and their Families, with rates ranging from 59.6% to 78.7% across military populations. Lethal means safety is critical to reducing suicide rates among these populations.
- **Increase Continuity for Separating Servicemembers as they Transition out of Service.** Studies have shown that transitioning out of the military to civilian life increases risk for suicide, especially in certain populations.<sup>6</sup> The DoD's *inTransition* program, the Transition Assistance Program, and Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program must be fully funded and continuously improved to meet the needs of Servicemembers across active and reserve components. It is also critical that Servicemembers are aware of, and have access to, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) services. We encourage the DoD to devote more resources to data-sharing with VA and other agencies to ensure a smooth transition to civilian life.
- **Support Basic and Applied Research.** The basic and applied behavioral science research conducted by civilian and uniformed psychologists in the DoD is essential to modernize military personnel and talent management systems and to improve readiness, capacity, performance, and effectiveness at the individual and organizational levels. Such research is also needed to understand and address the stigma associated with mental health care and ways to ensure fairness toward, and the full integration of, women and minority groups. Moreover, psychologists should be involved in data analytics and research on human factors and artificial intelligence. Continued support for the Minerva Research Initiative and Minority-Serving Institutions is also critical.

We appreciate your consideration of these recommendations and would welcome an opportunity to work with your staff on their implementation and provide a briefing on psychologists' contributions to the DoD. If you or your staff have any questions, please contact me or Sophie Friedl, Director of Congressional and Federal Affairs, Military and Veterans Health Policy, at [sfriedl@apa.org](mailto:sfriedl@apa.org).

Sincerely,



Arthur C. Evans, Jr., PhD  
Chief Executive Officer

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Defense, Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. (2020). Annual Suicide Report: Calendar Year 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/Documents/CY2019%20Suicide%20Report/DoD%20Calendar%20Year%20CY%202019%20Annual%20Suicide%20Report.pdf?ver=YOA4IZVcVA9mzwtsfdO5Ew%3d%3d>

<sup>5</sup> Department of Defense, Defense Suicide Prevention Office. (2020). Department of Defense (DoD) Quarterly Suicide Report (QSR) 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter, CY2020. Retrieved from [https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/TAB%20A\\_2020112\\_OFR\\_Rpt\\_Q3%20CY%202020%20QSR\\_final\\_1.pdf](https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/TAB%20A_2020112_OFR_Rpt_Q3%20CY%202020%20QSR_final_1.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Ravindran, C, Morley, S. W., Stephens, B. M., Stanley, I. H., & Reger, M. A. (2020). Association of suicide risk with transition to civilian life among US military service members. *JAMA Network Open*, 3(9). e2016261. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.16261