

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-1304

July 16, 2020

The Honorable Mark T. Esper
Secretary
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

General Mark Milley
Chairman
Joint Chiefs of Staff
999 Joint Staff Pentagon, #2D932
Washington DC, 20318

Dear Secretary Esper and Chairman Milley:

I write to you as Vice Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, to request an immediate, comprehensive review of the treatment of women and persons of color in the military in light of the deeply disturbing murder of Army Specialist Vanessa Guillén at Fort Hood. At this moment, our country is again reflecting on the injustices and systemic discrimination that has led to generations of unfair treatment of so many Americans. In too many cases, this legacy of intolerance has led to violence against and death of those same Americans who are the subject of overt and hidden discrimination.

The Armed Forces have often been represented as an institution that is immune to questions of justice that impact our society as a whole, as the merit-based system of performance and promotions seeks to be blind to the identity of service members. There are ample reasons to question whether this claim stands up to scrutiny. Sexual assault and harassment remains a significant problem for service members, from officers to enlisted, and even at service academies. General and flag officer billets continue to be unrepresentative of not only the United States, but also the composition of service members as a whole. We also continue to learn about service members with ties to extremist groups that promote hate, intolerance, and even violence.

During my time as Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, I have sought to support equality and justice for all service members. I have increased funding for sexual assault prevention and Special Victims Counsels, directed a comprehensive study on the infiltration of the Armed Services by hate groups, provided funding for increased education and outreach to prevent abuse of service members, allotted funding for gender advisers at Combatant Commands to reflect the importance of justice during the course of military operations, created a program that treats victims of military sexual trauma, and much more. Many times, these issues of discrimination and injustice have hit home, as did the Army's recent investigation, at my request, into the mishandling of sexual assault claims at 416th Theater Engineer Command, which is headquartered in Illinois.

While these individual efforts are each making a difference, only the leadership of the Department of Defense can initiate a serious, top-to-bottom review of how the Armed Forces can reach the ideals of equality, fairness, and justice, which we owe to all Americans who take the oath of service to our military. I urge you to seize this opportunity to initiate a broad review of the treatment of all women service members and service members of color, and recommend reforms to ensure the well-being and growth of all Americans in our Nation's uniform.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dick Durbin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Richard J. Durbin
Vice Chairman
Subcommittee on Defense