

United States Senate

November 21, 2023

The Honorable Christine Wormuth
Secretary of the Army
U.S. Department of Defense
The Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Wormuth,

I understand that nearly 2,000 former members of the Army recently received correspondence from the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1 related to COVID-19 and their military record. As you well know, over 8,300 men and women across the entire military were discharged solely due to COVID-19 mandates. The Army discharged 1,881 soldiers, and only granted 191 exemptions out of 10,699 requests.¹

These mandates certainly harmed our military's readiness and tragically destroyed the careers of thousands of brave volunteers. These members have faced negative implications for veterans benefits and employment outside of the military. It is likely that most of those former members will never return to the military and serve our nation.

Mandates imposed during COVID-19 came as the Army faced a struggle to recruit and retain members. Instead of focusing on the lethality of our Army, political leaders forced COVID-19 mandates onto our service members. In 2022, the Army missed its recruitment goals by approximately 15,000 soldiers, or nearly 25%.² You have referenced a declining trust in the military,³ and I am convinced that mandates during COVID-19 for vaccinations and masks may have made possible recruits refrain from serving our nation.

In the abovementioned letter, the Army Director of Personnel Management writes, "former Soldiers who were involuntary separated for refusal to receive the COVID-19 vaccination may request a correction of their military records." Further, the letter states that "individuals who

¹ Meghan Myers, *The fallout of the military's COVID-19 vaccine mandate*, Military Times (Mar. 27, 2023), <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2023/03/27/the-fallout-of-the-militarys-covid-19-vaccine-mandate/>.

² Lolita C. Baldor, *Army misses recruiting goal by 15,000 soldiers*, Associated Press (Oct. 2, 2022), <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2022/10/02/army-misses-recruiting-goal-by-15000-soldiers/>.

³ Manuela Lopez Restrepo, *The U.S. Army is falling short of its recruitment goals. She has a plan for that*, NPR (Oct. 5, 2023), <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/05/1203766333/us-army-military-recruit-pentagon-air-force-navy>.

desire to apply to return to service should contact their local Army, US Army Reserve (USAR), or Army National Guard (ARNG) recruiter for more information.”

This letter is a welcome development, but the letter does lend itself to further questions. I respectfully request that you respond to the following by December 13, 2023:

- The U.S. Department of Defense has previously stated it was exploring providing back pay to former service members.⁴ The Department later stated it did not intend to pursue that policy at that time.⁵ Given these conflicting public positions, does this recent letter demonstrate that the Army intends to provide back pay and benefits to members who were separated from the Army solely due to COVID-19 mandates?
- If a former member who was involuntary separated due to COVID-19 mandates returns to service, will the Army restore the member’s rank?
- The U.S. Department of Defense stated it will remove any “adverse actions,’ including letters of reprimand” stemming from COVID-19 vaccination decisions.⁶ Has the Army finished its process to expunge current service member’s records of any adverse actions based solely on COVID-19 vaccination status?
- How many former service members have responded to this letter already?
- Has the Army reviewed its current process for evaluating and granting religious exemption for vaccination requirements, and are there any legislative changes necessary to ensure religious freedom for members is protected?
- Does the Army intend to proactively ask members who were involuntarily separated to rejoin the Army?

I look forward to your response and to continue to work together to ensure our military remains ready to meet the global challenges that America faces.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Eric S. Schmitt", is written over a horizontal line.

Eric S. Schmitt
United States Senator

⁴ Lara Seligman, *Pentagon mulls back pay for troops kicked out over Covid vaccine mandate*, POLITICO (Jan. 13, 2023), <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/01/13/pentagon-back-pay-troops-covid-vaccine-mandate-00077902>.

⁵ Paul D. Shinkman, *Pentagon: No Back Pay to Troops Discharged for Refusing COVID-19 Vaccine*, US News & World Report (Jan. 17, 2023), <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2023-01-17/pentagon-no-back-pay-to-troops-discharged-for-refusing-covid-19-vaccine>.

⁶ Seligman, *supra* note 4.