

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 10, 2021

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

Dear Secretary McDonough:

Thank you for your work to support veterans experiencing distress related to the recent events in Afghanistan. While the Department's efforts to raise awareness of resources and encourage veterans to seek help are important steps, more must be done to reach those in need. Accordingly, we urge the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to quickly develop a comprehensive post-9/11 veteran outreach plan.

This plan must proactively contact veterans in the coming months through means including digital correspondence, social media, phone calls, and text messages. VA's outreach should consist of providing information on – and warm handoffs to – each veteran's local VA mental health services, community support systems, and other resources. Such efforts could be structured similarly to the Solid Start program, which has made great strides in proactively connecting with veterans since its inception in 2019, but should not be limited to newly-separated servicemembers.

Even before these triggering events, data from 2019 showed that veterans between ages 18 and 34 die from suicide at much higher rates than veterans in other age groups.¹ The ongoing media coverage and disturbing images coming out of Afghanistan are likely increasing these risks, illustrating the urgency of personalized support for post-9/11 veterans. Even as public attention on Afghanistan wanes, we must keep a laser focus on the physical and mental wellbeing of our veterans.

Again, we ask you to promptly develop and implement a comprehensive outreach plan for our post-9/11 veterans. We look forward to working with you to fulfill our obligation to care for those who have borne the battle.

Sincerely,

¹ Department of Veterans Affairs, <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2021/2021-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-9-8-21.pdf>



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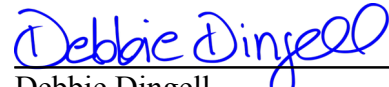
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