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United States Senate

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August 29, 2022

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin
Secretary of Defense
United States Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Secretary Austin,

Once again, I am writing to you with time-sensitive requests and grave concerns over the treatment of service members who have religious objections to receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. Just when I thought the Department of Defense's mistreatment of service members with religious objections to the vaccine could not get worse, it has. Although many of my previous letters appear to have been ignored, recent reports necessitate that I write again, as the living and employment conditions have worsened for service members being unfairly treated by the stringent and uneven vaccine mandate policies forced upon them by this Administration.

The news reports that surfaced on August 24 detailing the horrific living conditions of sailors with religious objections to the vaccine warrant immediate attention. At best, these reports demonstrate your lack of care for the service members you lead. At worst, it demonstrates an active disdain for and hostility toward them.

While I can only hope that these reports are incorrect and that you have in fact not mistreated or discriminated against service members with religious objections to receiving the COVID-19 vaccination by moving them to deplorable living conditions, and holding them there while the litigation surrounding their challenge to the COVID-19 accommodation process continues, I am extremely troubled by photos and reports detailing such actions.

Sailors recount being transferred to living quarters covered in mold, sewage, and with no access to clean or running water. One sailor testified to organisms living in the stagnant water that surrounds her bathroom. Photo evidence revealed unlivable conditions that no person should be subjected to, let alone our men and women in uniform. These conditions render that of an authoritarian and abusive government, which falls far below the standard of the military of the greatest nation on earth.

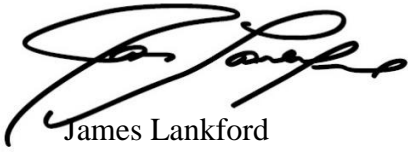
I urge you in the strongest possible terms to immediately take action to ensure that no service member is subjected to deplorable, illegal retribution for exercising their sincerely held religious beliefs. I demand your swift action in auditing and remedying the working and living conditions of these sailors. Specifically, I insist you verify all service members with pending religious accommodation requests are in appropriate living conditions and relocate those who are not. Sailors who have bravely given years of service and sacrifice to our country do not deserve to be treated as if they are worthless just because they hold a religious belief with which the Commander in Chief may disagree.

As I wrote to you in my last unanswered letter, the Navy's treatment of religious service members is unconscionable, especially in light of their sacrifice in protecting our Constitution and the religious freedoms guaranteed by it. Rather than honoring their sacrifices and respecting their freedoms, your Department has time and again trampled on their rights with no respect to the oath, laws, and documents that govern its mandate.

As each day passes, the COVID-19 vaccine is more irrelevant and the mandate is more oppressive. The mandate is clearly not about readiness, it is about compliance, even if it violates a service member's sincerely held faith.

I expect and look forward to your quick resolution of this matter.

In God We Trust,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James Lankford". The signature is stylized with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

James Lankford
United States Senator

Cc: Secretary Carlos Del Toro