

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

April 16, 2020

The Honorable James E. McPherson
Acting Secretary of the Navy
1000 Navy Pentagon
Washington, DC 20350

Dear Acting Secretary McPherson:

We appreciate your leadership as Acting Secretary of the Navy during this unparalleled moment for our military, and we look forward to working with you to protect our Sailors, Marines, and civilians from the threat of the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). Unavoidably close quarters of surface ships, submarines, and shipyards make the naval fleet particularly vulnerable, and recent data confirm that the Navy has been disproportionately impacted by the virus relative to other services.¹ COVID-19 cases among the crews of four aircraft carriers as well as infections among Navy recruits and trainees underscore the urgency of this threat. We encourage you to identify lessons from the outbreak on the USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT and implement appropriate safety precautions, procedures, and contingency plans to protect health and safety across the Navy.

Although we recognize that these challenging circumstances are unprecedented, we remain concerned that the Navy is not sufficiently responding to the needs of military and civilian personnel. At the time of writing, over 600 Sailors on the USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT tested positive for COVID-19, six Sailors have been hospitalized, and a member of the crew was the first active duty servicemember to pass away after contracting the virus. Challenges with quarantining and coordinating short-notice medical treatment on Guam have highlighted pandemic vulnerabilities. We are additionally concerned by reports of poor conditions for Sailors in isolation, including mass billeting in gymnasiums or hotel rooms infested with mold, inadequate food options, limited access to toiletries and over-the-counter medication to treat symptoms of COVID-19, and high Wi-Fi fees for Sailors to communicate with their chain of command as well as family members.

We urge you to immediately address these deficiencies in the Navy's response to the COVID-19 outbreak on the USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT. The 2 April 2020 guidance on the COVID-19 Quarantine Plan is an important first step, but must be updated with guidance regarding the collective health of the crew and relevant readiness factors that will determine when the USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT is prepared to safely return to sea. The Navy should also identify and distribute guidance to Commanding Officers that is mission-specific and tailored to the training and deployment circumstances of each ship and submarine.

¹ Department of Defense COVID-19 Update, Department of Defense Totals, 0500, April 15, 2020.

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It is also concerning that the Navy did not adjust recruit movement into Naval Station Great Lakes' Recruit Training Command (RTC) until the last week of March. Although we were pleased that the Navy belatedly instituted a base lockdown and implemented a 14-day restriction of movement for all recruits, we remain concerned about the number of future Sailors who may have been exposed to COVID-19 and the Navy's piecemeal approach to suspending various training courses. We urge the Navy to continue to take appropriate and comprehensive measures to protect all Navy recruits and trainees, and to carefully evaluate when such training can resume without compromising health and safety.

Additionally, the Navy must reconsider its current assumption that servicemembers are at low-risk for serious COVID-19 cases after alarming statements by multiple Pentagon leaders downplayed health hazards. It is increasingly apparent that young and otherwise healthy people are not immune from serious complications after contracting COVID-19, and such assumptions could dangerously dissuade DoD personnel from seeking medical assistance, prevent medical professionals from responding appropriately to deteriorating health conditions, or compromise health outcomes for any servicemembers or civilians who contract COVID-19.

We were pleased to see that the Navy released "U.S. Navy COVID-19 Mitigation Framework: Protect the Force and Preserve War Fighting Readiness" and "U.S. Navy COVID-19 Prevention Framework," but seek answers to the following oversight questions in an appropriate format:

1. What standard operating procedures to quarantine or evacuate servicemembers and sanitize ships has the Navy implemented in response to lessons from the USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT, Navy hospital ships, and commercial cruise ships?
2. Has the Navy identified an infection threshold that would require that a ship return to port for medical treatment and sanitation rather than continue its current mission?
3. Has the Navy developed procedures to deploy a healthy crew to replace a sick crew in case of an outbreak, or identified military occupational specialties where such a replacement might not be possible given prerequisite experience and training?
4. What additional guidance or training has been provided to Medical Officers to equip them to assess the severity of COVID-19 symptoms and determine a treatment plan?
5. How will the Navy compensate for any impact on timelines for training, sea trial certifications, or deployments due to the 14-day quarantine requirement?
6. How many COVID-19 tests has the Navy performed, and how quickly are test results being received and released to Sailors, on average? What procedures have been implemented for ships without testing capabilities aboard?
7. Has the Navy considered implementing procedures for individual rapid screening for symptoms like high temperatures at specified check points on ships and at bases and shipyards?
8. Does the Navy have adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies, including masks and face shields, available where needed?
9. How does the response to an infection on underway submarines differ from underway surface ships given the differences in crew size, communication capabilities, and deployment nature?

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10. What feedback channels are available to allow Navy personnel to report concerns about safety precautions, living conditions, or access to food, water, and necessary services?
11. How is the Navy communicating with family members of personnel experiencing a COVID-19 outbreak, and what support is being provided to these families?
12. Are future Sailors at RTC Great Lakes—as well as other recruits and trainees—included in the Navy’s public reporting of servicemembers who have contracted COVID-19, and what measures have you implemented at RTC and other training facilities to slow the spread of the virus and protect the safety of recruits, trainees, and staff?

We request a member-level briefing to discuss these and other relevant questions at your earliest convenience. We look forward to your response on how the Navy will overcome the challenges posed by this pandemic, and stand ready to work with you to ensure the Navy has all appropriate resources and authorities to protect the safety of our fleet.

Sincerely,



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senate



TAMMY BALDWIN
United States Senate

/s/ CHRIS VAN HOLLEN
United States Senate



EDWARD J. MARKEY
United States Senate



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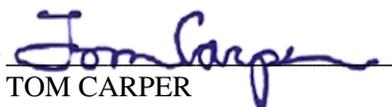
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