

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 2, 2024

Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin,

When American men and women sign up to defend our nation, we promise them the highest levels of preparation as they enter a dangerous career. Training, military preparation and readiness, equipment, and careful strategic thinking are core priorities as we deploy them around the world to protect our freedoms and interests.

We must also protect them at home, ensuring they are capable to return to their families, communities, and day-to-day activities – and this must begin on Day One when they enter the Armed Forces.

I am frustrated by continued reports of the Department's lack of urgency and coordination in addressing brain injuries and their effects on mental health. The personal stories we are hearing of lives lost and families and communities traumatized are as infuriating as they are heartbreaking.

We must do better. Specifically, I urge you to take immediate actions to conduct baseline screening of servicemembers for brain injuries, including traumatic brain injuries, beginning with higher risk populations. Not only is this a policy issue I've been working to confront through work with the Pentagon and VA through my committee assignments, this is a personal priority for me and the people I represent. I have worked on mental health for servicemembers and veterans for 11 years; yet tragically, we learned that the person who committed the Lewiston shooting last year had suffered from brain damage. The more we focus our energies and efforts on blast effects and brain injuries, the more we learn about the direct link. We need to act now.

While the Department and Congress have worked to fund billions of dollars in medical research including brain injuries, from mild concussions to traumatic brain injuries, those dollars are not adequately delivering safety and protection for our men and women in uniform. Under the leadership of Senator Elizabeth Warren and Senator Rick Scott, the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Personnel conducted a hearing earlier this year on traumatic brain injury and blast exposure. During the Army Posture hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Secretary Wormuth testified that the Army will begin with cognitive assessments for every new soldier at basic training this summer. I'll tell you what I told her, we have been conducting baselines for high school athletes for years, but somehow the Army and all the Services writ large appear to not be taking this matter seriously. In fact, it has taken a grassroots effort from military widows to truly begin connecting the dots and elevating this threat.

Congress has spoken with clear intent about the need to address brain injuries through authorizations, appropriations, and oversight. In April, I joined Senator Warren and Senator Ernst in introducing the Overpressure Safety Act. And last month, many of the provisions from this bill were included in the

Armed Services Committee markup of the Fiscal Year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act, including amendments I led that addressed oversight and funding for traumatic brain injuries and blast exposure.

The Department has recently submitted requests to reprogram appropriated funds impacting weapons and platforms. The Department knows that if reallocation of funding is required, we are here to work with them, making adjustments in the current budget year to see results and save lives. If this is a matter of funding, I urge you to take action to take care of our servicemembers with the same urgency you have for the defense industrial base.

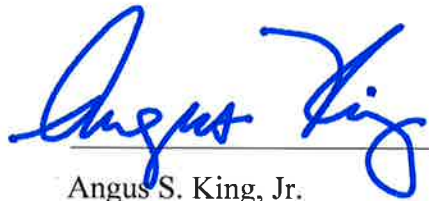
Therefore, I urge you to take the following actions:

1. Start administering tests to establish baseline brain health for servicemembers;
2. Develop a risk framework and begin with those who are highest risk;
3. Address the links between blast exposure, brain injuries, and mental health;
4. Mobilize the hundreds indeed thousands of staff officers to address this issue, and develop proper reporting structures and tracking mechanisms so that the data can help us protect service members better; and
5. Act on the data collected by modifying the weapons creating the blast issues where possible, adjusting training protocols to minimize this risk, and following up on indicators of brain injury identified in annual troop assessment.

While studies and programs will be helpful, I exhort you to start screening, track the results, and follow-up on the results. I look forward to hearing from you and request a briefing on the actions the Department is taking.

Cc
Secretary Wormuth
Secretary Del Toro
Secretary Kendall

Sincerely,

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

Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator