

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 22, 2020

The Honorable Mark Esper
Secretary of Defense
United States Department of Defense
The Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20318

Dear Secretary Esper,

I write to request additional information regarding the Department of Defense's efforts to resume normal operations as a growing number of governors reopen the economy and Americans look to return to work. The Department has a critical role in maintaining our nation's security and, while I appreciate your efforts to engage in an evidence-based approach to resuming normal operations, I also urge you to continue developing clear, comprehensive plans that incorporate appropriate standards and guidance to ensure that workers are protected and to communicate that guidance to your employees.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a great challenge to our nation's workforce, and the Department of Defense has not been immune to these new challenges. With approximately 2.9 million employees, including 1.3 million active-duty troops, the Department faces a unique set of challenges, as it works to meet our security needs and requirements while minimizing exposure risks to personnel. Toward that end, I appreciate your continued efforts to adjust to COVID-19. For example, U.S. troops have been under stop movement orders since March, and more than 80 percent of the Pentagon's 23,000 personnel are working remotely to adhere to social distancing practices.

However, the Department needs to develop a strategic plan for returning to regular operations both at home and abroad. As part of this plan, the Department should consider and pursue continued social distancing best practices and other strategies to maintain employee health. I was encouraged by news of an early draft of the Department's plan for resuming regular operations at the Pentagon,¹ which reportedly will lay out important considerations, such as achieving three two-week periods of declining infection rates before the full workforce may return, but I would like to know how you intend to implement similar plans across all installations.

All installations, facilities, and personnel should be given proper guidance to protect their health as well as to provide them with a level of certainty as new phases of operations arrive. That guidance must be disseminated to all personnel in a timely manner. Employees who reside with high-risk individuals should receive particular attention as you work to resume normal operations, because they and their loved ones will continue to face heightened risk if they

¹ Travis J. Tritten, "Pentagon Weighs Shift Work, Performance Metrics as Virus Eases," Bloomberg Government, May 18, 2020, available at <https://www.bgov.com/core/news/#!/articles/QAJOVZT0AFBD>.

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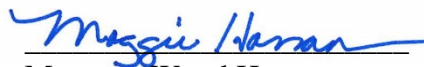
contract the virus. Additionally, the Department must continue to bolster its screening processes through continued COVID-19 testing and contact tracing measures. These planning efforts by the Department, if done effectively, could serve as an important resource to other federal agencies and businesses who are developing their own procedures for how to return to work safely.

As such, I request additional information on the Department's plan to resume normal operations:

1. Will the Department implement health-screening measures, such as fever screening before entering the workplace, to minimize employees' exposure?
2. What special considerations will be available to employees with at-risk family members who face greater danger from exposure to the virus?
3. How will the Department adjust its performance metrics and goals to meet the reality of working from home while also maintaining our critical national security efforts?
4. How will the Department apply the lessons learned in developing its plan for the Pentagon to other installations and facilities?
5. Will the Department release similar plans to address the current uncertainty for U.S. troops serving in locations abroad?

Again, thank you for your continued dedication to respond to the needs of our service members and civilian personnel alike. It is clear that more work remains to be done as we grapple with the latest challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, but I remain committed to continuing to work with you and the rest of the Department of Defense to facilitate continued planning efforts.

With every good wish,



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator