

# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON  
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

July 29, 2025

The Honorable Peter B. Hegseth  
Secretary  
Department of Defense

Dear Secretary Hegseth:

I write regarding a recent article about former service members who are reportedly still waiting to be made whole following the Biden administration's disastrous COVID-19 vaccine mandate.

As you know, former Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's August 2021 COVID-19 vaccine mandate resulted in the termination of approximately 8,700 active duty service members who refused the injection.<sup>1</sup> This dismissal of thousands of brave men and women from the military was a despicable act that damaged our armed forces.<sup>2</sup>

In late 2023, I wrote to then-Secretary Austin about reports that discharged service members could "request a correction to military personnel records, including records regarding the characterization of discharge" and potentially apply to return to service.<sup>3</sup> It was clear to me in the Department of Defense's ("DoD") May 2024 response to my letter that the Biden administration did not take seriously their responsibility to rectify the harm they caused service members by wrongfully discharging individuals due to their refusal to get the COVID-19 injection.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Memorandum from Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to Senior Pentagon Leadership, et al., Aug. 24, 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Aug/25/2002838826/-1/-1/0/MEMORANDUM-FORMANDATORYCORONAVIRUS-DISEASE-2019-VACCINATION-OF-DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSESERVICEMEMBERS.PDF>; Wallace White, Four Years Later, Veterans Still Fighting To Get Justice For COVID Vaccine Crackdowns, Daily Caller, July 24, 2025, <https://dailycaller.com/2025/07/24/four-years-later-veterans-still-fighting-to-get-justice-for-covid-vaccine-crackdowns/>; Army Maj. Wes Shinego, DOD Welcomes Back Service Members Impacted by COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate, Department of Defense, April 9, 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/article/4150566/dod-welcomes-back-service-members-impacted-by-covid-19-vaccine-mandate/>.

<sup>2</sup> Congress required the Secretary to rescind the COVID-19 vaccine mandate under the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023. See Memorandum for Senior Pentagon Leadership Commanders of the Combatant Command Defense Agency and DOD Field Activity Directors, Dep't of Defense, Jan. 10, 2023, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Jan/10/2003143118/-1/-1/1/SECRETARY-OF-DEFENSE-MEMO-ON-RESCISSON-OF-CORONAVIRUS-DISEASE-2019-VACCINATION-REQUIREMENTS-FOR-MEMBERS-OF-THE-ARMED-FORCES.PDF>.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Sen. Ron Johnson, Ranking Member, Permanent Subcomm. on Investigations, to Lloyd Austin, Secretary, Dep't of Defense, Dec. 1, 2023, <https://www.ronjohnson.senate.gov/services/files/5AD27C21-1693-430A-AE8A-C7DE19807549>.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Ashish Vazirani, Acting Under Secretary, Dep't of Defense, to Sen. Ron Johnson, Ranking Member, Permanent Subcomm. on Investigations, May 21, 2024 (on file with Subcomm.).

During your confirmation hearing earlier this year, I was encouraged by your commitment to finally address the Biden administration's injustice against our service members who were involuntarily discharged because of the COVID-19 vaccine mandate. You asserted, "not only will they be reinstated, they will receive an apology, back pay, and rank that they lost because they were forced out due to an experimental vaccination."<sup>5</sup> Likewise, in the first few days of his second term, President Trump issued an Executive Order to "enable those service members reinstated under this section to revert to their former rank and receive full back pay, benefits, bonus payments, or compensation."<sup>6</sup>

In February 2025, you announced a process through which service members who had been wrongfully discharged under the Biden administration could seek reinstatement and back pay.<sup>7</sup> In April 2025, DoD announced that the reinstatement and back pay process would be open for one year and provided additional guidance on what that process would entail.<sup>8</sup>

Based on these actions, I have no doubt that you are committed to assisting our service members, which is why I want to bring to your attention a July 24, 2025 *Daily Caller* article that featured several former military personnel who have still not received back pay after being terminated for refusing the injection.<sup>9</sup> According to the article, even though "President Donald Trump is offering back pay and reinstatement for active duty service members, some troops who fell through the cracks are still fighting for their rights."<sup>10</sup>

I respectfully request that you carefully review this article and provide a briefing to my office by August 19, 2025, regarding DoD's efforts to apologize, reinstate, and provide back pay to the service members who were terminated after refusing to take the COVID-19 injection.

Sincerely,



Ron Johnson  
Chairman  
Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations

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<sup>5</sup> *To conduct a confirmation hearing on the expected nomination of Mr. Peter B. Hegseth to be Secretary of Defense, Nomination Hearing before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, 119<sup>th</sup> Congress (Jan. 14, 2025).*

<sup>6</sup> Executive Order No. 14,184, 90 FR 8761, Jan. 27, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/reinstating-service-members-discharged-under-the-militarys-covid-19-vaccination-mandate/>.

<sup>7</sup> C. Todd Lopez, DOD Prepares Invitation to Bring Back Troops Separated for Refusing COVID Vaccine, DOD News, Feb. 14, 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/article/4067895/dod-prepares-invitation-to-bring-back-troops-separated-for-refusing-covid-vacci/>.

<sup>8</sup> Army Maj. Wes Shinego, DOD Welcomes Back Service Members Impacted by COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate, Department of Defense, April 9, 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/article/4150566/dod-welcomes-back-service-members-impacted-by-covid-19-vaccine-mandate/>.

<sup>9</sup> Wallace White, Four Years Later, Veterans Still Fighting To Get Justice For COVID Vaccine Crackdowns, Daily Caller, July 24, 2025, <https://dailycaller.com/2025/07/24/four-years-later-veterans-still-fighting-to-get-justice-for-covid-vaccine-crackdowns/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

The Honorable Peter B. Hegseth  
July 29, 2025  
Page 3

cc: The Honorable Richard Blumenthal  
Ranking Member  
Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations

The Honorable Anthony J. Tata  
Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness  
Department of Defense