

United States Senate

March 5, 2024

The Honorable Frank Kendall
Secretary of the Air Force
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, DC 20330-1670

Dear Secretary Kendall,

We write to you today to continue engagement with your office regarding mental health among servicemembers across the Department of the Air Force, with a specific focus on those stationed in cold weather locations. As you know, cold weather locations have long endured increased risks related to suicide, a trend that has unfortunately manifested across both the civilian and military populations. Many factors drive this trend and are well-known to contribute to military suicides as a whole. Through this letter, we aim to address the financial aspect.

Airmen and Guardians in cold weather locations are asked to perform their duties in harsh environments, with temperatures that regularly dip below -20 degrees Fahrenheit during the winter. And while units often issue appropriate cold weather gear to the military member in order to continue operations through the winter, Airmen, and Guardians are left to shoulder the financial burden of ensuring their families are appropriately equipped for the long winter season, a financial burden that a majority of Airmen and Guardians across the Department do not encounter. When you add up the cost of necessities such as coats, boots, and related gear, studded snow tires, snow blowers, engine block heaters, etc., the financial burden is not small. In cold weather locations these items are not just nice-to-have, they are necessities.

This financial burden is unique to the north and has second and third-order effects beyond a servicemember's bank account. Should an Airmen or Guardian feel financially unable to appropriately equip themselves or their families for a healthy lifestyle outside of work and during the winter season, they are likely to favor more sedentary activities indoors, which can lead to increased depression and suicidal ideations. Providing additional funds for our Airmen and Guardians in cold weather locations—installations that the Department directed they be assigned—is not likely to *solve* the Department's suicide problem, but it will assuredly help.

To this end, the Fiscal Year 2023 NDAA introduced cold weather pay that was designed to be a critical tool to attack multiple facets of the mental health crisis among service members in our most northern locations. However, more than a year later, we continue to hear from Airmen and Guardians across Alaska, Montana, and North Dakota that they have yet to receive special duty pay specifically for performing cold weather operations, special duty pay that was clearly intended to be a separate consideration from the "hardship duty pay" that roughly 100 Alaska-

based Airmen and Guardians receive. It is not difficult to see that this failure to act is in clear violation of Congressional intent, both in scale and scope.

To help bring clarity to what defines a “cold weather location” and to remove any ambiguity from the intended application, language in the Fiscal Year 2024 NDAA defines a “cold weather location” as any location where the temperature reaches -20 degrees Fahrenheit or below. For the Department of the Air Force, this would include Eielson AFB, Clear AFS, Malmstrom AFB, Minot AFB, Grand Forks AFB, and other applicable/smaller units and detachments serving in a qualifying location. We should make it easier, not harder, for servicemembers and their families to live and thrive in Alaska, Montana, and North Dakota. It’s completely in your control to act.

We implore you to implement this pay as Congress intended, and look forward to working with you on this.

Sincerely,



Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator



John Hoeven
United States Senator



Dan Sullivan
United States Senator



Kevin Cramer
United States Senator

cc: Undersecretary of the Air Force, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Chief of Space Operations, Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force