

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

July 15, 2021

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write to express our grave concern about your intent to allow the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to offer gender transition surgery to our nation's veterans. We urge you in the strongest possible terms to reverse your decision.

Like you, we are deeply committed to the men and women who serve. Many of us have served ourselves. We want every veteran to feel welcome, respected, and safe in all instances, especially when seeking the care and benefits they have earned. That is why we have supported, and will continue to support, efforts to address the high rates of harassment and discrimination in your Department. That is also why we have committed ourselves to improving the access and quality of the services that VA provides and to addressing the most important issues facing veterans, caregivers, survivors, and beneficiaries.

One of those issues is toxic exposure. As you know, many veterans have potentially been exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances while serving on active duty. Some of them report experiencing serious health effects like respiratory distress and rare cancer as a result. We must ensure that these veterans do not wait decades for the benefits they have earned from VA like some Vietnam veterans did. Creating a compassionate, fiscally-responsible, and scientifically-sound pathway to VA care and compensation for these veterans is arguably one of the most pressing issues facing Congress, the Administration, and the veteran community. That is why we have been asking you for months to provide VA's views and cost estimates about the toxic exposure legislation pending in the House and Senate. You have yet to respond to our repeated requests for this information. We question why addressing toxic exposure – which may be a matter of life and death for millions of military families for generations to come – is a lower priority than gender transition in your estimation.

It is also alarming that you have decided to reverse the exclusion of gender transition surgery in VA's medical benefits package without more information to justify this decision. The VA healthcare system is facing a number of serious issues, including access challenges and an expected significant surge in demand for care following the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, you have made this decision without knowing

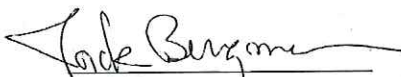
how access to care and waiting times will be further challenged by it; how it will increase enrollment, utilization, and reliance on VA's medical facilities and community care networks; how it will stress VA's already overburdened staff and infrastructure; or how many additional taxpayer dollars will be required to carry out this controversial procedure.

We also have serious reservations about gender transition surgery, generally speaking. Veterans struggling with gender identity are at a high risk of suicide and self-harm. Yet some studies have found that their risk of mental health issues and mortality is no lower following gender transition surgery than before. This suggests that offering these vulnerable veterans with an irreversible, difficult, and highly specialized procedure does not address the underlying conditions that leave them at-risk and in need of support. Instead, you should be focusing VA's attention and resources on proven ways to stop suicide among veterans and expand the reach of VA's suicide prevention programs and resources to engage with the majority of veterans who die by suicide without having had contact with the Department. That includes timely implementation of the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 (Public Law 116-171) and the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program, in particular.

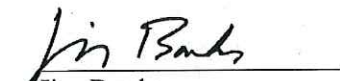
Given these considerations, we must oppose the inclusion of gender transition surgery in the VA healthcare system. We ask you to do the same and reverse your decision immediately.

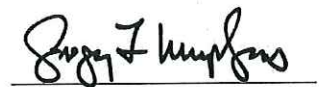
Thank you for your attention to this matter and commitment to veterans and their families.

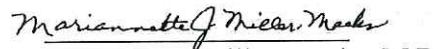
Sincerely,

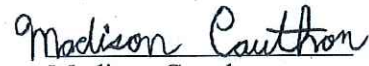
  
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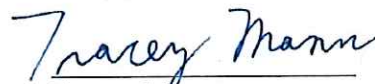
  
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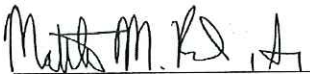
  
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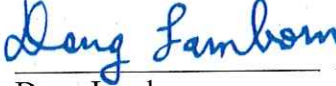
  
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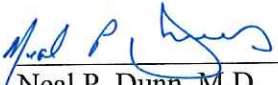
  
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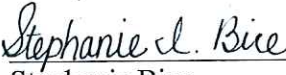
  
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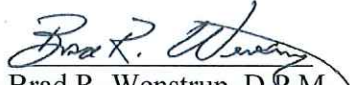
  
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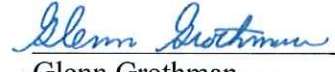
  
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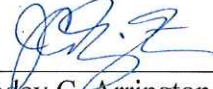
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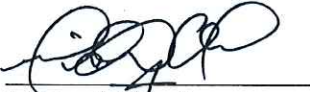
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