

United States Senate

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

KEITH B. ASHDOWN, STAFF DIRECTOR
GABRIELLE A. BATKIN, MINORITY STAFF DIRECTOR

October 25, 2016

The Honorable Ashton Carter
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
Washington, DC 20310

Dear Secretary Carter:

The Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs is examining the Department of Defense's alleged recoupment of reenlistment bonuses given to veterans who served combat tours overseas. It is troubling that the Pentagon would require these veterans to bear such a steep financial cost on top of the tremendous personal sacrifices they have already made for our country. Until more information is known, I ask that the Department please cease and desist any further collection efforts and harassment of the finest among us.

According to recent reports, the Pentagon has ordered approximately 10,000 service members in the California National Guard to pay back reenlistment bonuses that were distributed nearly 10 years ago.¹ These bonuses—some amounting to \$15,000 or more—were originally given to National Guard soldiers for reenlistment for combat in Iraq or Afghanistan.² After an audit found that the California National Guard awarded these bonuses improperly, the Pentagon sought to recover the money.³ Although the media reports singled out the California National Guard, the Pentagon has acknowledged that veterans in every state could be affected.⁴ To date, the Pentagon has apparently recouped more than \$22 million from our nation's veterans.⁵

The error by the California National Guard has direct financial consequences for many former service members and their families. If the veterans fail to repay their bonuses, they could face interest charges, wage garnishments, and tax liens.⁶ These veterans face these hardships due to no fault of their own and for simply answering their country's call to service. One news report

¹ David S. Cloud, *Thousands of California Soldiers Forced to Repay Enlistment Bonuses a Decade After Going to War*, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 22, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-national-guard-bonus-20161020-snap-story.html>; see also Holly Yan & Curt Devine, *California Guard Vets Told to Repay Millions in Enlistment Bonuses*, CNN, Oct. 25, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/10/24/us/national-guard-recruitment-bonus-repayment/index.html>.

² Corky Siemaszko, *Pentagon Demanding Soldiers Return Reenlistment Bonuses*, NBC NEWS, Oct. 24, 2016, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/iraq-turmoil/pentagon-demanding-soldiers-return-reenlistment-bonuses-n671941>; see also *Lawmakers Blast Pentagon Over 'Boneheaded' Clawback of Improper Military Bonuses*, FOX NEWS, Oct. 24, 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/10/24/lawmakers-blast-pentagon-over-clawback-improper-military-bonuses.html#>.

³ Cloud, *supra* note 1.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Holly Yan & Curt Devine, *California Guard Vets Told to Repay Millions in Enlistment Bonuses*, CNN, Oct. 25, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/10/24/us/national-guard-recruitment-bonus-repayment/index.html>.

tells the story of a 26-year Army veteran who sends \$650 a month—about a quarter of her family's income—to the Pentagon.⁷ She worries that she may have to sell her house to repay the Pentagon.⁸

Our nation owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to our veterans. It is simply unacceptable that the finest among us should be forced to pay—literally—for the mismanagement and errors perpetrated by National Guard leadership. The sacrifices that these service members and their families have made to this country can never fully be repaid. The least we can do for these men and women is to honor the agreements made a decade ago when they volunteered to serve in a time of war.

There about 2.5 million veterans who served during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars nationwide, including about 42,000 in Wisconsin.⁹ In light of these serious concerns, I respectfully ask you to provide information about the Department of Defense's collection of reenlistment bonuses. Please provide the following information and materials:

1. The number of veterans by current state of residence for whom the Department of Defense is seeking to collect reenlistment bonuses.
2. At what level of Department leadership was the decision made to recoup reenlistment bonuses from service members? When were you made aware of the efforts to recoup reenlistment bonuses from service members? Please explain.
3. Please explain what the Department of Defense is currently doing to relieve veterans of the responsibility to repay their reenlistment bonuses.
4. Please explain how the Department of Defense intends to spend the \$22 million already recouped from our nation's veterans.

Please provide this material as soon as possible but no later than 5:00 p.m. on November 8, 2016. When delivering production sets, please produce to Majority staff in room 340 of the Dirksen Senate Office Building and to Minority staff in room 613 of the Hart Senate Office Building.

The Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs is authorized by Rule XXV of the Standing Rules of the Senate to investigate "the efficiency and economy of operations of all branches of the Government."¹⁰ Additionally, S. Res. 73 (114th Congress) authorize the Committee to examine "the efficiency and economy of all branches and functions of Government with particular references to the operations and management of Federal

⁷ Siemaszko, *supra* note 2.

⁸ Cloud, *supra* note 1.

⁹ See U.S. Dep't of Vet. Affairs, Nat'l Center for Veterans Analysis & Statistics, Table 7L: VetPop2014 Living Veterans by State, Column (v), data as of 9/30/2013, available at http://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp.

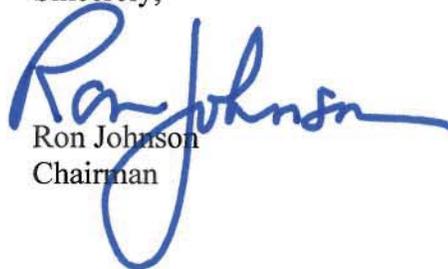
¹⁰ S. Rule XXV(k); see also S. Res. 445, 108th Cong. (2004).

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regulatory policies and programs.”¹¹ For purposes of responding to this request, please refer to the definitions and instructions in the enclosure.

If you have any questions about this request, please contact Scott Wittmann of the Committee staff at (202) 224-4751. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Ron Johnson
Chairman

cc: The Honorable Thomas R. Carper
Ranking Member

Enclosure

¹¹ S. Res. 73 § 12, 114th Cong. (2015).