

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 19, 2020

The Honorable Matthew P. Donovan
Under Secretary of Defense, Personnel and Readiness
4000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-4000

Dear Mr. Donovan,

As the U.S. military continues to face the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are writing to you to urge the Department of Defense to begin rapid surveillance testing of military personnel, their families, civilian employees, and contractors in order to save lives, preserve hospital capacity, and maintain military readiness.

One of the lessons we have learned this year is that coronavirus is spread via asymptomatic or lightly symptomatic individuals. As you know, the New England Journal of Medicine recently published a study of over 1,800 U.S. Marine Corps recruits. This study showed the challenge of detecting coronavirus based largely on symptoms. More than 90% of the individuals who tested positive for coronavirus in the study were not symptomatic.¹ This study utilized the molecular PCR test for its analysis. However, the U.S. military does not have the time, resources, or capacity to utilize PCR testing for its entire population of servicemembers, family members, civilians, and contractors.

We urge you to immediately make plans to utilize the latest rapid antigen tests for coronavirus to detect the asymptomatic carriers of coronavirus. Last month Slovakia successfully tested a large majority of its population over a two week period and found almost as many positive individuals in one weekend with antigen testing as they found with PCR testing since the start of the pandemic.² As a result of their widespread surveillance antigen testing, Slovakia is now seeing significant drops in new cases.³ Similar efforts are underway in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.⁴

We understand that rapid testing of military personnel, families, civilians, and contractors must be followed up with a PCR test. Also, a negative result on a rapid antigen test does not in any way remove the need for continued policies including face masks, physical distancing, and other countermeasures. Given the extremely lower cost of an antigen test compared to a PCR test, the Department of Defense already has the resources to conduct multiple antigen tests over a two-week or four-week period, similar to the U.S. Marine Corps study, to help reduce the chance of a false-negative test result.

¹ Andrew G. Letizia, M.D., "SARS-CoV-2 Transmission among Marine Recruits during Quarantine", New England Journal of Medicine, November 11, 2020, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa2029717>.

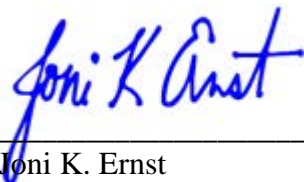
² <https://www.ft.com/content/6d20007c-25ad-4d1a-b678-591acaa57df9>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-slovakia-idUSKBN27T2DP>

⁴ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/uk-expands-covid-mass-testing-moonshot-across-england/>

Thank you for your commitment and steady leadership during this time and we look to working with you to find solutions and maintain the readiness of our military force.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Joni K. Ernst". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J".

Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Thom Tillis". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "T".

Thom Tillis
United States Senator