



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 10, 2009

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CARDIN ASKS PENTAGON FOR DATA ON THE USE OF ANTIDEPRESSANT MEDICATIONS BY TROOPS IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

Link to record-high suicide rate is a real concern

Washington, DC – **U.S. Senator Benjamin L. Cardin (D-MD)** today sent a letter to Defense Secretary Robert Gates requesting an accounting of how many troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan have been prescribed antidepressant medications while deployed. Senator Cardin expressed his concern that there may be a connection between the reported use of such prescription medications and the record-high suicide rate among active-duty soldiers.

“As a nation, we ask so much of our men and women in uniform without knowing the full extent of the mental trauma inflicted by combat. We can take steps to limit multiple deployments and extended separations, but we also must work to remedy the strains and deteriorating mental health of so many of our combat troops. It is imperative that we determine if DOD is prescribing anti-depressants to its service members appropriately. My concern is not the long-term efficacy of these drugs, but the sheer volume and manner in which these drugs are being administered to our troops overseas.”

The full text of the letter is below. A PDF copy is attached.

November 10, 2009

The Honorable Robert Gates
Secretary of Defense
3400 Defense Pentagon
Room 3B856A
Washington, DC 20301-3400

Dear Secretary Gates:

I am writing to you today regarding my deep concern for the deteriorating mental health of so many of our combat troops. On November 3, 2009, the Wall Street Journal reported that during the most recent month of October, 16 active-duty American Soldiers killed themselves, bringing the total

number of active-duty suicides thus far in 2009 to 134. At this rate, it is expected that the total number of suicides in 2009 will eclipse last year's total of 140 – the highest yearly number of suicides in Army history, and the first time that the rate of active-duty suicides exceeded that of the U.S. population.

Multiple deployments, extended separations from family and loved ones, and the overwhelming stress of combat experience have each placed a unique and tremendous strain on the men and women of our all-volunteer force. In response, Congress has helped provide relief by increasing the size of our forces to reduce the number and frequency of deployments.

Unfortunately, Congress cannot as easily provide a remedy for the stress or mental trauma created by combat experience. To begin to do so, Congress must first examine how the Department of Defense (DoD) is addressing the dilemma of mental trauma suffered by members of our Armed Forces. To do so in a comprehensive manner, it must also examine the extent to which DoD is prescribing antidepressants to its service members, especially those deployed in-theatre, and the methods it is employing to ensure that sufficient observation periods are conducted by properly trained mental health providers. In short, my concern is how DoD is managing the sheer volume and manner by which antidepressant drugs are being administered to our service men and women overseas.

To this end, I ask that you compile and provide to my office a report identifying the estimated number and percentage of troops since June 2005 who have been prescribed antidepressant medications while serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is my understanding that electronic data is readily available for this purpose, and can be retrieved without compromising the privacy of patients or violating the protections of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

The men and women serving in our military deserve the utmost assurance that Congress is doing everything in its power to see that they are provided the best medical care available. As part of that commitment, we must also ensure that these same men and women, volunteering to serve our Nation, are not being exposed to what may potentially endanger them when they seek the medical and mental healthcare they need.

I ask that you please acknowledge receipt of this request, and provide an estimated date of when I can expect to receive this information. I stand ready to work with you on this issue, and look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,

Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

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