

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 14, 2026

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

The Honorable Anthony Tata
Under Secretary of Defense
Personnel & Readiness
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Hegseth,

We write with deep concern following the tragic death of Airman First Class Keon McDaniel, an Air Force trainee from Grand Rapids, Michigan, stationed at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland.¹ Airman McDaniel passed on June 16th amid a significant influenza outbreak that has reportedly spread to hundreds of other recruits at Lackland.² This outbreak follows the Department of Defense's (DoD) April 2026 decision to make the annual influenza vaccine voluntary for servicemembers³ in an effort to restore "freedom and strength to our joint force."⁴ The loss of any servicemember is heartbreaking, and an outbreak of this magnitude raises serious concerns about the Department's public health policies.

Keon grew up in an Air Force family and graduated from Grand Rapids Central High School in 2019 before answering the call to serve his country. He joined the Michigan Air National Guard's

1 "37th Training Wing Mourns the Loss of Basic Military Trainee," *37th Training Wing*, June 17, 2026. <https://www.37trw.af.mil/news/article/4519880/press-release-37th-training-wing-mourns-the-loss-of-basic-military-trainee/>.

2 Eleanor Watson, "Air Force unit in Texas faces flu outbreak weeks after vaccine requirement dropped" *CBS News*, June 18, 2026. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/lackland-air-force-base-texas-flu-outbreak-mandate/>.

3 Eleanor Watson, "Air Force unit in Texas faces flu outbreak weeks after vaccine requirement dropped" *CBS News*, June 18, 2026. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/lackland-air-force-baunderscores-texas-flu-outbreak-mandate/>.

4 Melissa Quinn, "Pete Hegseth scraps mandatory flu shots for U.S. service members," *CBS News*, April 21, 2026. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pete-hegseth-scraps-mandatory-flu-shots-american-service-members/>.

Civil Engineering Squadron and, during his sixth week of training, experienced a medical emergency. He later passed away at Brooke Army Medical Center.⁵ When tragedies like this occur, the American people and the Congress that represents them deserve immediate transparency and accountability.

While the DoD made the right decision to reinstate the influenza vaccine requirement for new recruits, this outbreak at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland underscores the importance of science-based decision-making guided by medical professionals when making public health decisions affecting our servicemembers. Politicizing the administration of lifesaving vaccines has led to the death of a servicemember, the hospitalization of numerous trainees, and an expensive race to retroactively provide our servicemembers the health care they need and deserve. Further, as vaccine manufacturers transition their production to prepare for the next flu season, the DoD's current stock of vaccines is reportedly set to expire on June 30th. As these vaccines expire, health officials will either be forced to administer them beyond their recommended use date or wait until August for an additional delivery.⁶

Influenza remains a serious, but largely preventable,⁷ illness that can spread rapidly in densely populated settings, including military bases. As the current situation unfolds, one fact remains clear: widespread vaccination is one of the most effective tools available to mitigate influenza outbreak⁸ and protect the health of American servicemembers. Even a temporary departure from established, evidence-based public health practices can cost lives, harm military readiness, and threaten public health.

We therefore ask the following questions to protect the lives of those serving our country:

1. What analysis did the Department conduct before modifying its influenza vaccination policy in April 2026?
 - a. Following this policy change, were servicemembers still able to receive an influenza vaccine if they wished to receive one? How was this information communicated to them?

5 Sarah Edgecomb, "Air Force trainee from Grand Rapids dies after medical emergency," WZZM13. <https://www.wzzm13.com/article/news/local/air-force-trainee-dies-grand-rapids-keon-mcdaniel/69-728e7562-939f-414a-9468-113b9b86baa9>

6 Melody Schreiber, "US military races to vaccinate new recruits before flu shots expire," *The Guardian*, June 29, 2026. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/jun/29/us-military-flu-shots>

7 Trombetta, Claudia Maria et al, "Influenza Viruses and Vaccines: The Role of Vaccine Effectiveness Studies for Evaluation of the Benefits of Influenza Vaccines," *Vaccines* vol. 10,5 714, May 1, 2022. doi:10.3390/vaccines10050714

8 "Healthy Habits to Prevent Flu," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, September 3, 2025. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/prevention/actions-prevent-flu.htm>

- b. What information was available to servicemembers on influenza and the influenza vaccine?
 - c. Were any servicemembers ever denied access to an influenza vaccine after requesting one?
 - d. Were servicemembers ever discouraged or dissuaded in any form from receiving an influenza vaccine following the policy change?
 - e. What steps did the Department take to ensure that servicemembers who wished to receive an influenza vaccine continued to have timely access after the policy change?
 - f. Has the Department initiated any review to determine whether the policy change affected vaccine uptake, disease transmission, or military readiness?
2. What led the Department to reinstate the influenza vaccine requirement for new recruits?
3. Does the Department plan to implement safeguards to minimize harms to the health and lives of servicemembers from any future changes to vaccine requirements or public health standards?
4. What is the Department's plan to utilize its current stock of influenza vaccines and to address any anticipated supply gaps following the tragic events at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland?

With respect to the tragic death of Airman McDaniel specifically, we ask the following:

5. Has the Department conducted or initiated a formal review of the circumstances surrounding Airman McDaniel's death? If so, what are the preliminary findings?
6. What was the timeline of Airman McDaniel's illness and medical treatment, including onset of symptoms, clinical evaluation, treatment, and hospitalization?
7. What support and information have the Department provided to Airman McDaniel's family in the wake of his death?
8. What information, if any, has the Department provided to Airman McDaniel's family regarding the circumstances of his death and any ongoing investigation?

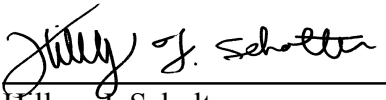
We urge the Department to ensure that Airman McDaniel's family receives timely and direct answers to any questions they may have about the circumstances of his death before any additional findings or information are made public. Keon's family has already made the greatest sacrifice. They deserve to hear the truth directly from the Department, delivered with compassion and respect.

In addition to a written response to the above questions, we respectfully request a briefing from the Department to the signatories of this letter, the House Armed Services Committee, and any other interested Members of Congress to discuss this influenza outbreak and the Department's decision-making process regarding its influenza vaccination policy change and subsequent reinstatement.

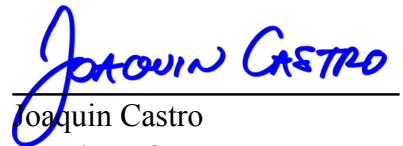
The United States maintains the most capable military in the world. With that strength comes a responsibility to take care of our servicemembers based on the most advanced scientific recommendations, particularly when considering changes in policies like vaccine mandates. Decisions based on politics or incomplete information risk devastating servicemembers' health, morale, and readiness.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter. I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Hillary J. Scholten
Member of Congress



Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress



Chrissy Houlahan
Member of Congress



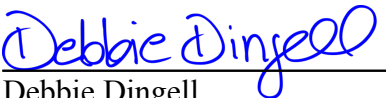
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