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Dear Secretary Denis McDonough,

My name is Allen Luo, and I was honorably discharged after almost a decade of service in the United States Marine Corps. The entirety of my time spent in the service, I lived by many values that separated us from any other military in the world. The core values are most famously known as the core values of the Marine Corps, which are honor, courage, and commitment. My predecessors and successors have all taken an oath to these values, and have conducted ourselves to the highest levels of integrity throughout our service. I have been a man that has walked in the shadows of giants, and have first handedly witnessed the self-sacrifice and intrepidity that embodies the American spirit. Though my time in the service is over, I still carry these values. We pledged to be great Marines, but even better citizens. In spite of this, I can't help but to feel dejected over the treatment of those who have given up so much for their country. The American government has demanded the best of us, yet in our time of need, they have turned a blind eye.

I have stated that I was a man that walked in the shadows of giants. That was not an understatement. When I was seven years old, I witnessed the collapse of the world trade center. I remember the blaze that consumed the skyline, and the new towers of billowing fire and ash that

had replaced the old. I also witnessed brave men and women who ran towards the inferno with hopes of saving fellow souls. I would meet individuals with that same persona in the military. Where lies the conflict is that these brave men and women would selflessly make the hard choice and risk life and limb for the sake of others, but once the work is done, they are cast to the wayside. We make these hard choices without being asked, we have lost pieces of ourselves physically and mentally, we have seen the horrors of war and death. I truly think that veterans deserve better.

The most common age when someone enlists in the military is eighteen years old. During that time, they are clothed, sheltered, fed, paid, and maintained. While it is good for those who enlist, I believe it creates a safety net that institutionalizes the individual. Those who immediately leave high school and enter an environment where they go from being provided for by parents to fending for themselves creates a dependency on the military to keep you full, healthy, and paid. When service members leave the military, this chain of dependency is broken. An individual who is now older and has relied on an entity to keep them completely sustained has to figure out who to stay afloat in the *real* world without any shelter, healthcare, or income.

I believe a solution for this matter is as simple as dedicating the last 6 months of a standard 4 year contract to transitioning into the civilian world. In these 6 months, service members will be completely detached from their parent units and attached to a transition readiness unit and focus solely on the aspect of preparing for what the end of military service entails. Their responsibility is now to become as prepared as possible to tackle the challenges that await. In this 6 month time frame service members will be registering for Veterans Affairs

healthcare services, documenting injuries sustained, learning how to apply for jobs, how to utilize education benefits, and financial readiness courses. The military already has a transition readiness program, but in my opinion this is not a sufficient enough window for a service member to be fully prepared. The current program is only a week long and does not detach that service member from his/her unit which means that they still have other commitments. This program should also offer job placement programs. Statistically, speaking veterans are highly employable given the skills and certifications, but they simply do not have the tools to market themselves correctly. I believe that extending the time and allowing service members to fully prepare will solve a lot of issues like health care post service, veteran homelessness, and veteran unemployment.

Secondly, another issue is the quality and delivery of health care that veterans receive through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Although news and other media agencies have reported on the poor quality of health care the VA provides, many simply do not understand just how bad it can be. It is not uncommon to show up to an appointment and wait three to four hours before you are seen by a physician. When you actually do get to see a physician, your injuries get buried under a mountain of referrals and testing that get thrown to the wayside because it will take another month or two to get an appointment to get evaluated. This health care delivery system was so bad that in recent news, many veterans have become martyrs to highlight this issue. Recently veterans have been committing suicide in VA hospital parking lots. From 2017 to 2019, 20 veterans had committed suicide in these facility parking lots (Thibodeaux). If this doesn't shine a light at the quality of care, I don't know what will.

I believe the best way to solve this glaring issue is if we allow veterans to choose between VA medical centers and private medical centers. Currently, to go to a private medical center you would need a mountain of paperwork pertaining to why you cannot use the VA. I believe the current process slows down delivery of healthcare and also discourages others from even trying because of the amount of time and paperwork required to even start. Simply creating an interface that allows veterans to choose in-network and out-of-network providers would benefit veterans tremendously.

Lastly, the most glaring issue that has gained notoriety amongst those who are serving and have served is veteran suicide. Although the number constantly fluctuates, according to the VA, in 2019, an average 17 veterans would commit suicide a day (VA). That number is unacceptable. We demand the best from service members when we fight these wars, but when they return, we often forget about their sacrifices and pains. Every resource provided by the VA feels like a check in the box hotline for mental health and the first step of intervention from psychologists/psychiatrists is to medicate those who experience mental health issues. Veterans often become substance abusers and addicts because of this. I believe every service member that has deployed should be required to complete a psychological evaluation before leaving the military. Those who haven't deployed but still feel the effects of mental health can also opt-in for an evaluation. If diagnosed, I believe the last step should be to medicate after exhausting multiple options and therapies. Again, I feel that veterans should not be confined to the resources that are provided by the VA healthcare system. Sometimes people can't connect to a certain counselor, but that shouldn't mean the end of the line for their mental health. Routine mental health checks should also be conducted with those affected until favorable results are achieved.

Programs that offer mental breaks like retreats should also be available. This solution might not answer all the problems in front of us, but it sure is a start.

In the last two decades, America has been at war. Sometimes during self-reflection, I always ask myself, "Was it all worth it?" I never think about all the good I've done, instead I think about the people we lost, the birthdays we missed, the sleepless nights, the aches and pains. I can't help but to feel that it wasn't worth it. Witnessing the complete disregard for those who volunteered for a cause that we thought was greater than ourselves, only to return home and see that we were just a cog in the machine is quite disheartening. I don't believe in handouts, but I believe that we all have an obligation to take care of those who fight our wars. This is the price of war, and if we can't afford it, we shouldn't be asking people to fight them.

Sincerely,

Sergeant Allen Luo

United States Marine Corps Veteran

Bibliography

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