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May 24, 2022

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin
Secretary
United States Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

The Honorable Frank Kendall III
Secretary
United States Air Force
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20350

Dear Secretary Austin and Secretary Kendall:

I am writing in regards to the concerning number of airmen who have been relieved or retired from the U.S. Air Force following the denial of COVID-19 vaccine religious accommodation requests. It is alarming to me and many of my fellow Oklahomans and Americans that so many of our nation's airmen continue to be denied the very constitutional rights they are sworn to protect.

It has come to my attention that the Air Force has only approved 81 religious accommodations despite receiving more than 13,356 requests. To make matters worse, the Air Force has indicated that "to date, after denial of a religious accommodation request or appeal, 202 DAF Service members have retired and 250 DAF Service members have been administratively separated."

This complete disregard for the sincerely held religious beliefs of our nation's airmen is unacceptable and unlawful. There is no Department of Defense exception to the Constitution or to the Religious Freedom Restoration Act; under the law and DOD policy, service members are to be afforded the very same rights they have honorably sought to serve and protect. And as you likely know, correctly applying RFRA and current DOD instructions regarding religious liberty would not mandate that all religious accommodation requests are always approved. But it does require a fair evaluation.

Furthermore, American taxpayers and the U.S. military have devoted considerable time and resources to train each of these airmen for their service. During renewed wars of conquest on the European continent and continued great power competition in the Indo-Pacific, our country cannot afford for the Air Force to sacrifice our nation's military readiness by capriciously dismissing airmen based on their religious convictions.

You may be aware that on March 28, 2022, U.S. District Judge Reed O'Connor allowed a lawsuit brought by 35 sailors refusing inoculation on religious grounds to move forward as a class action lawsuit. With the U.S. Navy pausing efforts to separate and discipline sailors

refusing the COVID-19 vaccine due to religious objections, the Air Force should follow suit and uphold religious freedom protections to spare airmen from separation and discipline. Our men and women in uniform should not face disparate rules on this fundamental issue simply because they serve in the Air Force as opposed to the Navy.

As you reexamine this issue, I hope you will agree that separating hundreds of airmen for their religious convictions is misguided, unlawful, and hurts our national security. At a time when our nation faces a growing number of daily threats, it is irresponsible for the Air Force to remove these airmen without just cause. Continuing to relieve airmen following denied religious accommodation requests while the Navy discontinues such efforts unfairly punishes service members in the Air Force.

I eagerly await your reply on what actions you will take to protect the religious liberties of our airmen.

In God We Trust,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'James Lankford', with a stylized flourish at the end.

James Lankford