

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 5, 2022

The Honorable Carlos Del Toro
Secretary of the Navy
1200 Navy Pentagon
Washington, DC 20350-1200

Secretary Del Toro:

Master of Arms Seaman Recruit Xavier Mitchell-Sandor's decision to take his own life was not the result of a single failure, but a cascading series of events that forced a young man to believe he had no way out. His death is a tragedy, but there were multiple mistakes made by the *USS George Washington's* leadership and warnings that could and should have prevented it. The Navy's recent report on the April 2022 suicides of three members of the *USS George Washington's* crew exposes significant failures of our collective responsibility to care and provide for the men and women who volunteer to defend our nation. To that end, the Navy must go further than the recommendations in the report and reform requirements governing the shipyard lives of Sailors.

The conditions onboard the *USS George Washington* were simply not habitable for U.S. Navy Sailors. While undergoing Refueling and Complex Overhaul, the *USS George Washington's* shipboard environment was hazardous and noisy with 24/7 shipyard operations and quiet hours only from 10 PM-6 AM. Electrical power, heating, air conditioning, and hot water were frequently interrupted across various sections of the ship for up to weeks at a time. Welfare and recreation services, such as television, were not available onboard. In addition, there were limited places to sit and relax, and the parking lot for personal vehicles was over a mile away. As a result, many Sailors, including MASR Mitchell-Sandor, chose to sleep in their cars rather than sleep onboard the ship. When asked about these concerns during the Navy's investigation, the ship's leadership were unaware of many of the challenges facing the ship's crew. This is unacceptable, and the Navy should immediately reform regulations for crew move-aboard to minimize exposing sailors to this environment until strictly necessary. Sailors with duty tours on ships that will be undergoing maintenance availability for the entirety of their tour should be provided permanent housing and never required to move onboard.

The access to and screening for mental health concerns among the crew of the *USS George Washington* failed because the staff was overwhelmed, under-resourced and separated from the ship's crew. Sailors seeking routine mental health screenings experienced waits of up to two months for care due to a significant backlog and an under-resourced ship's psychologist. The *USS George Washington* did not have both Deployed Resiliency Counselors (DRC) assigned to the ship and their offices were located off ship, approximately a three-mile walk away from the ship. Further, many Sailors didn't understand what the DRC did, didn't know who the DRC was or where the DRC was located; even if they did, many sailors were hesitant to take that much time off to get counseling. Members of Mitchell-Sandor's division reported they were hesitant to

seek mental health treatment through Navy channels due to concerns it would affect future career opportunities. Further, according to the report “leadership, specifically Leading Petty Officers (LPOs), didn’t have time to deal with mental health issues of their subordinates.” It is completely intolerable for the Navy to place sailors onboard a ship with these conditions and tremendous barriers to accessing care and support. The Navy must immediately reform regulations to establish unwaivable requirements for manning, screening, and access to mental health care during long periods of shipyard maintenance.

Thank you for your commitment to serve as the Secretary of the world’s greatest Navy. We know that these challenges are personal for you and that you have devoted your time as Secretary to eliminating harmful behaviors, cultivating a shared sense of teamwork, and holding leaders accountable for the care of the Sailors. We look forward to continuing to work with you to reform and improve the readiness and health of our Sailors, Navy civilians and their families.

Sincerely,



CHRISTOPHER S. MURPHY
United States Senate



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senate