

**Opening Remarks of
Ranking Member Andy Kim
Military Personnel Subcommittee Hearing
*COVID-19 in the Department of Defense: Impact on the Department of Defense
and Service Members***

February 28, 2023

This is the first hearing of this vital subcommittee. We are charged with supporting our servicemembers and their families, and I can think of nothing our Congress can do that is more meaningful than that.

We can and should review how the pandemic affected the Department of Defense. Nearly three-quarters of a million people affiliated with DOD were infected by COVID-19. Thousands were hospitalized and hundreds died. Every loss of life is tragic, and we hope that the actions taken during the pandemic minimized the loss.

We also cannot ignore the toll the Pandemic has had on our service members and their families who were facing childcare closures, delayed PCS moves, and limited access to health care.

While I recognize the value of reviewing the actions of DOD during the heart of the pandemic including a mandate that is no longer in effect, I look forward to working with the Chairman and my colleagues in a bipartisan manner on other matters more immediately impacting National Security and the quality of life of our service members and their families. From the troubling data on military suicides across the Services, to chronic childcare shortages across military bases, to challenges accessing health care, there are many areas where I am confident, we can find common ground on matters under the purview of our subcommittee. Yes, there are deep divisions in our politics in Congress, but if ever there was a place where we could come together it would be in this committee charged with supporting those that protect us. Let's focus on where we can come together to get things done and not immediately jump to where we have the divisions.

Since the COVID-19 Pandemic began, DoD has remained agile on two very important fronts. First, the Department played a critical role in meeting the whole-of-government needs by providing health care workers and logistics expertise, among others. In addition, the Department responded to shifting force health protection guidance.

As we start today's hearing, I believe DoD and the Services have all complied with the FY23 National Defense Authorization Act provision rescinding the COVID-19 vaccine mandate. And while the vast majority of service members across all components complied with the August 2021 COVID-19 vaccine requirement, a small percentage of them decided – for various reasons – to either refuse to vaccinate or seek an exemption.

There are legitimate questions to discuss here. For those who sought an exemption, I want to know from each of the Military Departments how they established a COVID-19 vaccine exemption process and whether those processes were standardized as required in the FY2022 National Defense Authorization Act. I am particularly interested on this issue as it relates to discharge characterizations which is an important factor since these characterizations impact benefits after the service member has transitioned to civilian life.

But as we engage on this discussion today, let's keep the politics out of it and approach with calm and civility. Let's keep perspective that decisions were made in the chaos of the pandemic with the focus on saving lives. We can seek to learn best practices and always improve in how we care for those who serve us.

Let's keep perspective that vaccine requirements are not new to the military and as the Congressional Research Service points out the "U.S. military instituted its first vaccination program in 1777 when General George Washington directed the Continental Army to be protected from smallpox."

Let's keep perspective that there are currently up to 17 vaccines required for servicemembers, some for all and others based on jobs and deployment locations.

I will end by simply reading the statement that House Armed Services Committee Chair Mike Rogers released in 2021 when he was the Ranking Member.

"Vaccines protect our men and women, many of whom live in cramped and crowded conditions, from the spread of disease while at home or deployed across the globe. Teleworking isn't an option for the Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen, and Guardians who work every day to confront near-peer rivals and non-state terrorists... We must not allow COVID-19 to be a hindrance on our force. Secretary Austin earlier confirmed that, as of Mid-July, over 70% of active-duty troops had received at least one vaccine shot. That is encouraging news and I hope that number reaches 100% quickly.

I yield the balance of my time.