

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 12, 2023

The Honorable Christine Wormuth
Secretary of the Army
101 Army Pentagon
Washington, DC 20350-0101

The Honorable Frank Kendall III
Secretary of the Air Force
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, DC 20330-1670

Dear Secretary Wormuth and Secretary Kendall:

I write today regarding the recent United States Government Accountability Office report (GAO-23-105219), entitled “National Guard Helicopters, Additional Actions Needed to Prevent Accidents and Improve Safety.” This report, which I requested, reviews both Army and Air National Guard helicopter accidents to determine trends, existing safety processes, and current deficiencies related to the 298 accidents that occurred between 2012 and 2021, including those that resulted in the deaths of 28 National Guard personnel. I acknowledge that the Army and Air National Guard use a variety of processes to promote safety and reduce risks during helicopter training. However, the report shows that the effectiveness of these respective flight safety training programs can be improved. I am particularly concerned by the report’s findings that while the Army and Air National Guard have established flying hour goals, pilots did not fly enough on average to meet these goals due to lack of aircrew availability, maintenance issues, and simulator access. As the report states: *“For example, having too few maintenance personnel limited the number of helicopters available for training. The Army and Air Force, including their National Guard components, have taken steps to mitigate these challenges, such as conducting formal studies, but these steps have not fully addressed the identified challenges. By developing comprehensive strategies, the Army and Air Force would be better positioned to fully address the identified challenges that have hindered National Guard helicopter pilot training.”*

I urge you to act expeditiously to adopt the following GAO recommendations:

1. The Secretary of the Army should ensure that the Director of the Army National Guard, in coordination with the Army Combat Readiness Center, establishes a system of record for tracking the status of accident investigation recommendations through implementation.
2. The Secretary of the Army should ensure the Chief of Staff of the Army, in coordination with the Director of the Army National Guard, updates safety or operational guidance to establish a process to continuously evaluate and update operational risk management

worksheets for Army National Guard helicopter units to reflect relevant safety information such as accident data, hazard reporting, and unit culture surveys.

3. The Secretary of the Air Force, in coordination with the Chief of Staff of the Air Force and the Director of the Air National Guard, should incorporate an evaluation of unit processes for updating risk management worksheets as a component of the Air Force's unit inspection program or other means to ensure that the worksheets reflect relevant safety information such as accident data, hazard reporting, and unit culture surveys.
4. The Secretary of the Army should ensure the Army Training and Doctrine Command's Army Aviation Center of Excellence, in coordination with the Director of the Army National Guard, develops a coordinated plan and identifies the resources necessary for conducting in-flight aviation standardization program evaluations of Army National Guard helicopter unit aircrews on a regular and recurring basis.
5. The Secretary of the Army should ensure the Director of the Army National Guard assesses the resource and workload allocations of safety personnel to determine whether helicopter units are appropriately staffed, or if any adjustments are needed to workloads or resource levels to implement operational flight safety programs.
6. The Secretary of the Air Force should ensure the Director of the Air National Guard assesses the resource and workload allocations of safety personnel to determine whether helicopter units are appropriately staffed, or if any adjustments are needed to workloads or resource levels to implement operational flight safety programs.
7. The Secretary of the Army should ensure that the Chief of Staff of the Army, in coordination with the Director of the Army National Guard, develops a comprehensive strategy that includes goals, priorities, and performance measures to address the challenges that hinder Army National Guard helicopter pilot training.
8. The Secretary of the Air Force should ensure that the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, in coordination with the Director of the Air National Guard, develops a comprehensive strategy that includes goals, priorities, and performance measures to address the challenges that hinder Air National Guard helicopter pilot training.

In their report, GAO found several factors that have hindered helicopter safety processes. The report states that both the Army and Air National Guards' risk management procedures have not been continuously evaluated, and that workload and staffing issues have hindered safety officers. Also, GAO found that the Army National Guard "has not regularly evaluated National Guard aircrew performance during training," and that while the Army does monitor accident report recommendations, they lack "a comprehensive approach for monitoring the status of recommendations through to implementation." Unfortunately, recent efforts have not successfully addressed these challenges, as well as those pilots face during training, such as an inability to meet flying hour goals due to a lack of feedback, maintenance issues, and staffing challenges.

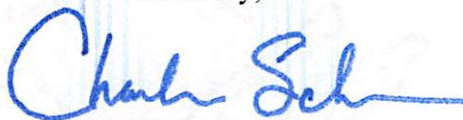
While I appreciate the internal investigations and recommendations the Army and Air Force have made following these crashes, I urge you to implement these recommendations by GAO. It is critical to adopt these steps to ensure adequate measures are taken to mitigate the risks of these flights as much as possible.

I initially requested this report because, tragically, on the night of January 20th, 2021, the New York National Guard lost three servicemembers in a UH-60 crash near Mendon, New York, followed only two weeks later by another crash near Boise, Idaho. The New York Army National Guard investigation into the tragic Rochester, NY crash concluded a procedural error that took place during an emergency training maneuver led to the crash. However, going forward, the Army has restricted the procedure in question to flight simulations only. The Rochester facility does not currently have a simulator and lack of access to simulators is one finding the GAO report states contributes to pilots not meeting training hour goals. As such, I also ask that you also assess the need for additional simulators at facilities including Rochester in order to address the challenges that hinder helicopter pilot training. I am dedicated to providing the Army and the Air Force with whatever resources needed to improve helicopter safety, including purchasing more simulators and hiring more maintenance crews.

The safety of our servicemembers must be of the highest priority. Many of these Guardsmen engage in operations that involve search and rescue and medically focused missions – doing so in the service of others. We must ensure that they have the proper training, resources, and capabilities to do their jobs safely. I thank our Army and Air Force National Guard pilots for their dedication and service. I am committed to supporting the Army and Air Force so we can provide our pilots with the resources they need to do their jobs safely. I know you share this commitment and will work quickly to make these improvements.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter, and I look forward to your response. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to me or my staff.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator