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COMMITTEES:

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ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
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United States Senate

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August 3, 2006

The Honorable Larry Craig
Chairman
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Warner
Chairman
Senate Armed Services Committee
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Daniel Akaka
Ranking Member
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Carl Levin
Ranking Member
Senate Armed Services Committee
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Craig, Chairman Warner, Ranking Member Akaka and Ranking Member Levin:

I write to respectfully request that you consider holding a joint hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee for the purpose of examining the adequacy and efficacy of the federal government's assistance for veterans suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

While the military and the government agencies responsible for serving our veterans have vastly improved their responses to mental health issues since Vietnam and even the first Gulf War, the effects of military service on the mental health of our Armed Forces continues to present serious challenges. Despite the strides we have made in confronting these challenges, the problem is by no means solved and requires continued efforts on behalf of the military, the Department of Veterans' Affairs and Congress.

In particular, it has become increasingly evident in recent months that some incidents of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among our warfighters are not being properly diagnosed or addressed. In the worst cases, service members may be discharged from service for PTSD-related symptoms instead of being treated for their service-related injury. With the duration of our ongoing military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan uncertain, we must act to address this matter before it is too late for many of our men and women in uniform.

Those suffering from PTSD are marked by clear biological changes as well as psychological symptoms. Complicating the problem, PTSD frequently occurs in conjunction with related disorders such as depression, substance abuse, problems of memory and cognition, and other problems of physical and mental health. The disorder is also associated with impairment of a person's ability to function in social or family life, including occupational instability.

Unfortunately, the symptoms of PTSD are often easier to recognize than the disease itself. Symptoms such as substance abuse or occupational instability often lead to military punishment, including being discharged from the Armed Services. I draw your attention to recent reports

suggesting that discharges due to personality disorders have risen substantially at some bases around the country. Waiting times to see military mental healthcare providers are reported to be over a month long.

In addition to turning the lives of service members and their families upside down, the failure to treat mental illness in its early stages has lasting repercussions for the capacity of the Department of Veterans' Affairs to provide timely and appropriate services to veterans in need. A military discharge that is based on faulty grounds can result in the denial – in whole or in part – of the veterans' benefits that a service member has earned. Moreover, allowing a veteran's mental illness to go untreated places an increasing and unnecessary strain on our already limited veterans' health resources.

We all recognize that a tension exists between the pressure to field combat forces in a timely manner and the need to provide exhaustive and comprehensive care – particularly in the area of mental health – to our service members. While the Senate would be remiss to ignore this tension, I firmly believe we can serve both objectives. It is with this in mind that I urge you to schedule a joint hearing between your committees to examine current policies and practices and to identify steps that the federal government could take to remedy any shortcomings. In light of the sacrifices they have made for our nation, I believe our fighting men and women, and our veterans, deserve our urgent attention to this important issue.

I know that you have worked on these issues for many years, and I respect your leadership on behalf of the interests of America's service members and veterans. I thank you in advance for your consideration of my request and look forward to working with you on this and other important issues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ken Salazar". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Ken Salazar
United States Senator