

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 21, 2025

The Honorable Peter Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Hegseth:

We write to you regarding your recent announcement that service members with medical shaving waivers lasting longer than one year will be processed for administrative separation and may be involuntarily separated from the Armed Forces. This decision is unjust, discriminatory in impact, and corrosive to both the readiness and morale of our Armed Forces.

Medical shaving waivers exist to protect service members from harm due to medical conditions that cannot be resolved or treated immediately. These waivers are issued for medical conditions, including pseudofolliculitis barbae (PFB), a condition that disproportionately affects Black men. PFB prevalence among Black servicemembers ranges from 45 to 83 percent—far higher than in other populations—and DoD data show they comprise the majority of shaving waiver cases despite being a minority of the force.¹² However, PFB cases among White and Hispanic troops have also increased since 2020.³ The military services have a longstanding policy of waiving shaving requirements for medical or religious reasons, and these waivers have not prevented service members from performing their jobs and completing the mission. Punishing troops for this condition that is beyond their control is not necessary for the effectiveness of the military, but it certainly undermines equity and fairness by creating a policy that disparately impacts minority service members.

This policy also raises serious legal and constitutional questions, and it remains unclear whether service members with religious beard waivers will be subject to the same punitive standard. Any attempt to conflate or collapse medical and religious accommodations risks violating the First Amendment and existing Department of Defense religious freedom protections.

Unfortunately, this policy does not increase troop readiness or make our Armed Forces a more effective, leaner, and more lethal military. In fact, forcing high-performing members with PFB to separate will decrease troop morale and will result in the loss of experienced members of our Armed Forces, including those in critical skill fields who are impossible to replace in the near term, which, unlike shaving waivers, would decrease the capacity of the military to meet its missions. This is a significant loss of talent, training, and taxpayer investment. Worse, it sends the damaging message that troops are disposable when

¹ International Journal of Cosmetic Science, “Pseudofolliculitis Barbae: Understanding the Condition and the Role of Facial Grooming,” J. Gray and A. McMichael, Volume 38, Issue 51, May 22, 2016, pp. 24–27, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ics.12331>.

² Military Medicine, “Pseudofolliculitis Barbae in the U.S. Military, a Review,” Michael Tshudy and Sunghun Cho, Volume 186, Issue 1-2, January 30, 2021, pp. 52-57, <https://academic.oup.com/milmed/article/186/1-2/e52/5948064>.

³ “Surveillance Snapshot: Pseudofolliculitis barbae Cases in Active Component Service Members, 2000–2022,” *Military Health System*, August 1, 2023, <https://health.mil/News/Articles/2023/08/01/Pseudofolliculitis-barbae>

their medical needs do not conform to your narrow and rigid rules. During your recent speech at Quantico, you said, “we do not have a military of Nordic pagans” and that beards were considered unprofessional appearances.⁴ This is deeply insulting to our service-members who, for medical or religious purposes, cannot shave.

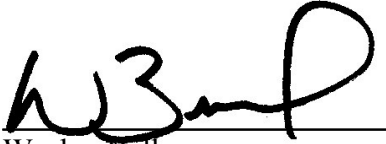
We urge you to immediately suspend implementation of this policy and develop a fairer, more just standard that effectively supports members with chronic medical conditions and religious exemptions while maintaining unit readiness. In addition, we ask that you provide the following information:

1. How many service members currently have a religious waiver for shaving?
2. What percentage of service members with religious waivers for shaving are Black or Hispanic? What percentage are White? What percentage are Asian?
3. How many service members currently have a medical waiver for shaving?
4. What percentage of service members with medical waivers for shaving are Black or Hispanic? What percentage are White? What percentage are Asian?
5. Has the Department made any changes, or is it considering any changes, to its policies related to religious waivers for shaving? What changes have been made or are under consideration, if any?
6. What is TRICARE’s recognized standard of care for PFB, including dermatology consultations, topical medications, depilatories, and laser hair removal?
7. Please provide any data that the Department collected, examined, or analyzed, and any other research that informed your decision to change the policy on medical waivers for shaving.
8. Please provide any research from the Military Health System that indicates the incidence of PFB resolving for service members in less than one year.
9. Has the Department considered alternative measures to protect service members with facial hair from CBRN threats, such as Protective Mask hoods or enforcing shaving requirements, in deployed environments with a high risk of CBRN attack?

Our service members deserve dignity, fairness, and respect. This policy fails those tests. We call on you to reverse course and demonstrate that the Department of Defense stands with all who serve our country.

Sincerely,

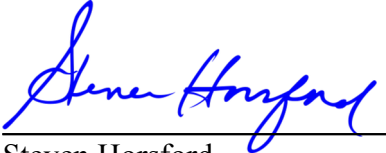
⁴ Secretary of War Pete Hegseth Addresses General and Flag Officers at Quantico, Virginia, Department of Defense, September 30, 2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/4318689/secretary-of-war-pete-hegseth-addresses-general-and-flag-officers-at-quantico-v/>



Wesley Bell
Member of Congress



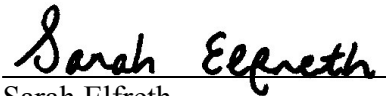
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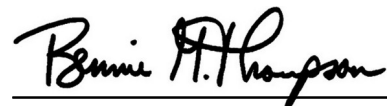
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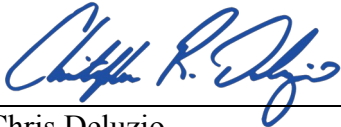
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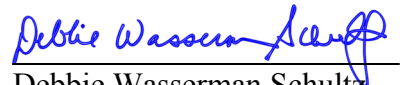
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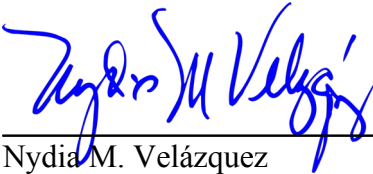
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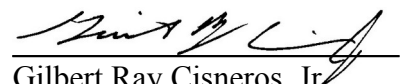
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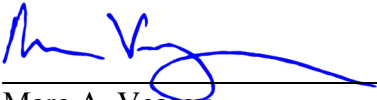
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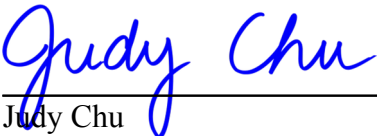
Ro Khanna
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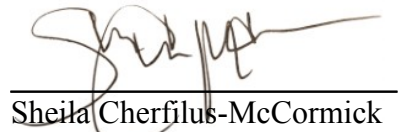
Marc A. Veasey
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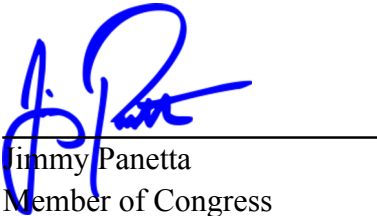
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Judy Chu
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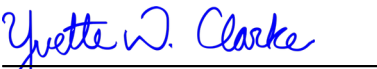
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George Whitesides
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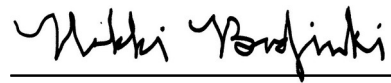
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Maggie Goodlander
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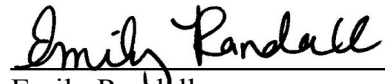
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