

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 22, 2017

The Honorable James Mattis
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20310-1000

Dear Secretary Mattis,

We write to you regarding reports that Active Duty and Reserve service members posted degrading comments and shared nude photos of female service members on the internet. We appreciate the commitment of military leadership to address this important issue; however, this is not the first time the Department has dealt with this kind of inappropriate behavior of service members. We are disappointed that the Department once again must react to reports of online harassment.

Despite the Pentagon's attempts to crack down on this kind of behavior, it was not uncovered by Department of Defense personnel, but by investigative journalists. Moreover, the online harassment recently perpetrated through Facebook groups like Marines United, and websites used by Navy personnel to share photos of female sailors from at least 12 commands, continue derogatory trends the Department should have addressed after witnessing them within the US Military Academy's men's rugby team email scandal and the Facebook group Just the Tip of the Spear. If it were not for the courage and willingness of the first reporter, a combat wounded Marine Corps veteran, the contemptable treatment of female service members would have likely continued unnoticed to the public. The lack of success of the Department of Defense's efforts to curb service member involvement in these kinds of groups before it became a serious problem demonstrates a fundamental flaw in the way that military leaders view and address the problem of online harassment.

Although the existence of online behavior dedicated to harassment and intimidation of females by their peers is a societal problem, in a military environment, it represents a clear threat to good order and discipline required by a highly successful military. As a result of our strong concern regarding this issue, we ask what proactive steps the Department of Defense will take to discover and eliminate all forms of service members' online harassment. We understand that this may be a daunting challenge, however you must agree that commanders bear the weight of attempting to address and remove all sources of intimidation, harassment, or reprisal whether online or in the barracks.

The military, which instills values of integrity, courage, loyalty, and honor in all those who serve, has a responsibility to all servicemembers to eliminate degrading behavior online long before it affects unit cohesion and readiness. We appreciate your attention to this important matter and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



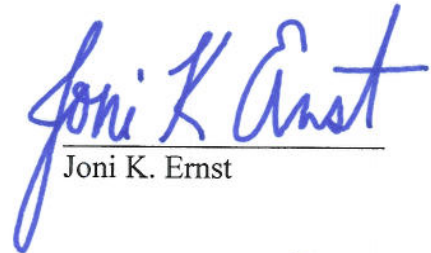
Claire McCaskill



Deb Fischer



Jack Reed



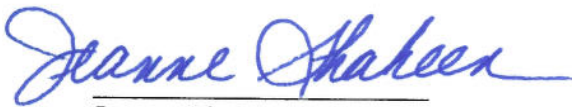
Joni K. Ernst



Bill Nelson



Dan Sullivan



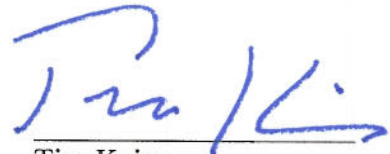
Jeanne Shaheen



Kirsten E. Gillibrand



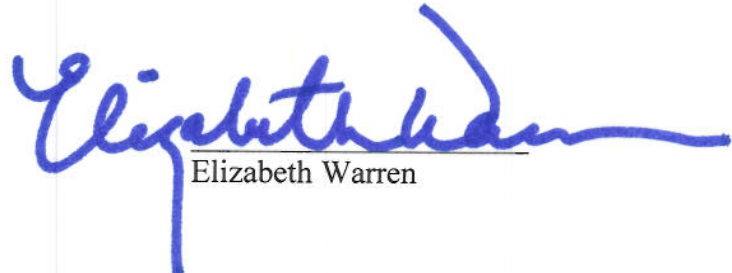
Richard Blumenthal



Tim Kaine



Martin Heinrich



Elizabeth Warren