

May 22, 2025

The Honorable Pete Hegseth  
Secretary of Defense  
Department of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Hegseth:

I write regarding my concerns about the adverse impact on military readiness resulting from Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s attempt to end the use of fluoride in drinking water to reduce dental disease.<sup>1</sup>

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) currently recommends community water fluoridation to prevent cavities and tooth decay.<sup>2</sup> Although the authority to add fluoride to community water rests with local and state governments, the CDC's current recommendation to fluoridate drinking water is widely followed and integrated into state and local policies. A reversal of the CDC recommendation could roll back this progress.<sup>3</sup> The CDC asserts that:

Water fluoridation is beneficial for reducing and controlling tooth decay and promoting oral health across the lifespan. Evidence shows that water fluoridation prevents tooth decay by providing frequent and consistent contact with low levels of fluoride, ultimately reducing tooth decay by about 25% in children and adults ... The safety and benefits of fluoride are well documented and have been reviewed comprehensively by several scientific and public health organizations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Washington Post, "RFK Jr. tells CDC to Change its Guidance on Fluoride in Drinking Water," Anumita Kaur, April 8, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2025/04/07/rfk-flouride-drinking-water-cdc/>; PBS News, "RFK Jr. will tell CDC to Stop Recommending Fluoride in Drinking Water," Hannah Schoenbaum and Mike Stobbe, April 8, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/rfk-jr-will-tell-cdc-to-stop-recommending-fluoride-in-drinking-water>.

<sup>2</sup> CDC, "Community Water Fluoridation," <https://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/about/index.html>; <https://aspe.hhs.gov/hhs-recommendation-fluoride-concentration-drinking-water-prevention-dental-caries>; Congressional Research Service, "Fluoride in Drinking Water: A Review of Regulatory Issues and Developments," April 5, 2013, p 1.

<sup>3</sup> The Washington Post, "RFK Jr. tells CDC to Change its Guidance on Fluoride in Drinking Water," Anumita Kaur, April 8, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2025/04/07/rfk-flouride-drinking-water-cdc/>; PBS News, "RFK Jr. will tell CDC to Stop Recommending Fluoride in Drinking Water," Hannah Schoenbaum and Mike Stobbe, April 8, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/rfk-jr-will-tell-cdc-to-stop-recommending-fluoride-in-drinking-water>; See example, Massachusetts State Website, "DPH Community Water Fluoridation Statement," (citing the CDC in their water fluoridation policy), <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/dph-community-water-fluoridation-statement>.

<sup>4</sup> CDC, "CDC Scientific Statement on Community Water Fluoridation," <https://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/about/statement-on-the-evidence-supporting-the-safety-and-effectiveness-of-community-water-fluoridation.html>.

However, on April 8, 2025, Secretary Kennedy officially announced that he would be directing the CDC to stop recommending the fluoridation of drinking water in American communities,<sup>5</sup> a policy change for which he has advocated since before the 2024 election and his nomination to lead the Department of Health and Human Services.<sup>6</sup> Experts widely criticize this decision: the American Dental Association called it “injurious to public health.”<sup>7</sup> Another public health expert indicated that: “We will have a lot more people with dental disease than we have now, a lot more dental caries, or cavities...It’ll impact everybody, but mostly those people who do not have access to dental care.”<sup>8</sup>

As the Ranking Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittee on Personnel, I am particularly concerned that Secretary Kennedy’s plans will have dangerous implications for military readiness. In 2011 the Department of Defense<sup>9</sup> found that “dental decay continues to be a major problem for military personnel and is a significant reason for personnel to be classified as non-deployable.”<sup>10</sup> To address this risk, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs “determined that providing optimally fluoridated<sup>11</sup> water at DoD installations” would “improve and sustain the military readiness and health of military personnel.”<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, the Department of Defense mandated, “all installations in the United States and territories that own or operate a potable water treatment facility serving 3,300 persons or more,” to fluoridate the potable water by 2016.<sup>13</sup> As the Department of Defense noted at the time, providing fluoridated water for junior enlisted personnel residing in on-base housing was particularly critical since that population was at the highest risk.<sup>14</sup> According to the Department, “Providing optimally fluoridated water will *directly* reduce their risk for dental decay and improve dental readiness.”<sup>15</sup>

While this safeguard is beneficial for the military personnel that live on military installations, the majority of servicemembers live in civilian communities.<sup>16</sup> The potential reversal of the CDC recommendation is also particularly concerning for the 37% of servicemembers that serve in the

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<sup>5</sup> The Washington Post, “RFK Jr. tells CDC to Change its Guidance on Fluoride in Drinking Water,” Anumita Kaur, April 8, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2025/04/07/rfk-flouride-drinking-water-cdc/>; PBS News, “RFK Jr. will tell CDC to Stop Recommending Fluoride in Drinking Water,” Hannah Schoenbaum and Mike Stobbe, April 8, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/rfk-jr-will-tell-cdc-to-stop-recommending-fluoride-in-drinking-water>.

<sup>6</sup> X Post by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., November 2, 2024, <https://x.com/RobertKennedyJr/status/1852812012478398923?lang=en>.

<sup>7</sup> PBS News, “RFK Jr. will tell CDC to Stop Recommending Fluoride in Drinking Water,” Hannah Schoenbaum and Mike Stobbe, April 8, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/rfk-jr-will-tell-cdc-to-stop-recommending-fluoride-in-drinking-water>.

<sup>8</sup> The Washington Post, “RFK Jr. tells CDC to Change its Guidance on Fluoride in Drinking Water,” Anumita Kaur, April 8, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2025/04/07/rfk-flouride-drinking-water-cdc/>.

<sup>9</sup> Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, “Fluoridation of Water Supplies under the Control of the Department of Defense,” July 18, 2011, p. 1, (citing DoD Directive 1010.10, which requires the Department to support HHS goals and objectives to promote military readiness, including the fluoridation of drinking water) <https://ilikemyteeth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/DoD-Fluoridation-Memo-March-2013.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> “The recommended fluoride concentration in drinking water (also called the optimal level) is 0.7 milligrams of fluoride per liter of water. This is about equal to 3 drops of water in a 55-gallon barrel.” CDC “About Community Water Fluoridation” <https://www.cdc.gov/fluoridation/about/index.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, “Fluoridation of Water Supplies under the Control of the Department of Defense,” July 18, 2011, p. 1, <https://ilikemyteeth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/DoD-Fluoridation-Memo-March-2013.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, “Fluoridation at DoD Owned or Operated Potable Water Treatment Plants,” March 16, 2013, <https://ilikemyteeth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/DoD-Fluoridation-Memo-March-2013.pdf>. See also, “Environmental Compliance in the United States,” Department of Defense Instruction 4715.06, at 12, May 4, 2015, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/471506p.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, “Fluoridation of Water Supplies under the Control of the Department of Defense,” July 18, 2011, p. 1, <https://ilikemyteeth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/DoD-Fluoridation-Memo-March-2013.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* (emphasis added).

<sup>16</sup> Congressional Research Service, “Military Housing,” September 29, 2023, Summary and p. 21, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R47728>.

Reserve and National Guard.<sup>17</sup> Medical readiness of Reserve and National Guard personnel is an ongoing challenge,<sup>18</sup> and this could be exacerbated by the decision to remove fluoride from community drinking water.

These attacks on the use of fluoride for dental health present a serious readiness problem: Sean O’Keefe, the Trump administration’s nominee to be Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, recently indicated to me in questions for the record following his confirmation hearing that, “dental health issues are often the largest cause of non-deployability within a military unit.”<sup>19</sup> Secretary Kennedy’s reversal of CDC’s recommendations on fluoridated water will exacerbate these readiness concerns.

As the Secretary of Defense, you are responsible for ensuring the readiness of American troops to maintain a capable and lethal military. Dental readiness is consistently falling short of the Military Health System (MHS) readiness goals,<sup>20</sup> and will further suffer as a direct result of Secretary Kennedy’s plans. Indeed, his influence is already affecting public policy on fluoridation: in March, Utah banned fluoridation,<sup>21</sup> placing the 16,700 active duty, reserve, and National Guard servicemembers who live in Utah at higher risks of cavities and tooth decay.<sup>22</sup> More recently, another fluoridation ban<sup>23</sup> was imposed in Florida, directly affecting more than 100,000 servicemembers.<sup>24</sup> Secretary Kennedy’s disregard for science-based public health policies is a palpable danger to the readiness of servicemembers and national security. To ensure that the Department of Defense continues to prioritize dental readiness, I request that you respond to the following questions in writing by June 5, 2025:

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<sup>17</sup> Congressional Research Service, “FY2025 Budget Request: Department of Defense-Military,” October 21, 2024, p. 4 (reporting FY2023 actual end-strength personnel numbers for servicemembers across all components), <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IN12447>.

<sup>18</sup> Institute for Defense Analyses, “Improving Reserve Component Medical Readiness,” October 2021, p. iii, <https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/i/im/improving-reserve-component-medical-readiness/d-21567.ashx>. (“Historically, IMR rates have been lower for Reserve Components (RCs) relative to their respective Active Components (ACs). Managing IMR is believed to be a greater challenge for RCs for the following reasons: Reserve Component Service Members (RCSMs) spend less time with their units, they receive most of their healthcare outside the Military Health System (MHS), and in some cases, they lack health and/or dental insurance coverage.”).

<sup>19</sup> Sean O’Keefe’s response to Senator Warren’s Questions for the Record, May 12, 2025, p. 32 [On file with the Office of Senator Elizabeth Warren].

<sup>20</sup> “Evaluation of the TRICARE Program: Fiscal Year 2024 Report: Access, Cost, and Quality Data through Fiscal Year 2023,” TRICARE Evaluation Report and Data, at 2 and 38, February 29, 2024, (showing Dental Class 1 and Dental Class 2 falling short of the dental readiness goal for six consecutive years in a declining pattern), <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.health.mil/Reference-Center/Reports/2024/09/23/Annual-Evaluation-of-the-TRICARE-Program-FY24>.

<sup>21</sup> The Washington Post, “RFK Jr. tells CDC to Change its Guidance on Fluoride in Drinking Water,” Anumita Kaur, April 8, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2025/04/07/rfk-flouride-drinking-water-cdc/>; PBS News, “RFK Jr. will tell CDC to Stop Recommending Fluoride in Drinking Water,” Hannah Schoenbaum and Mike Stobbe, April 8, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/rfk-jr-will-tell-cdc-to-stop-recommending-fluoride-in-drinking-water>.

<sup>22</sup> Utah Department of Veterans & Military Affairs, “Community Member,” <https://veterans.utah.gov/community-member/#:~:text=Utah%20is%20proud%20to%20be.and%20that%20of%20their%20families>; See also, City of Calgary, “Fluoride in Calgary’s Water,” <https://www.calgary.ca/water/drinking-water/fluoride.html> (referencing how this Canadian city banned fluoride from its water supply in 2011 reversed that decision last year after a significant increase in cavities in children).

<sup>23</sup> The New York Times, “Florida Just Banned Fluoride from Public Water. Here’s What to Know,” Emily Cochrane, May 15, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/15/us/politics/florida-fluoride-water-ban.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare&srp=p&pvid=35D9817D-7D3A-4D9B-9790-3761EE7EFF7E>.

<sup>24</sup> Florida Commerce, “Florida Military & Defense: Economic Impact Summary” January 2024, <https://floridavets.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2024-Florida-Military-and-Defense-Economic-Impact-Summary.pdf>.

1. Was the Department of Defense consulted by, or does it have plans to provide consultation to, the Department of Health and Human Services on the plan to modify or reverse the CDC's recommendation to fluoridate drinking water? Please provide any written materials provided as part of that consultation.
2. Was the Department of Defense consulted by, or does it have plans to provide comments or information to, the Department of Health and Human Services on the FDA plan to pull fluoride supplements from the market? Please provide any written materials provided as part of that consultation.
3. What percentage of servicemembers are currently nondeployable due to dental deficiencies (i.e., Dental Class 3 and Dental Class 4)<sup>25</sup>? Please provide a breakdown for active duty, reserve, and National Guard.
4. Since the implementation of the 2013 order to fluoridate water on military installations, has military dental readiness improved? Please provide yearly statistics on the number of servicemembers that were nondeployable due to dental deficiencies (i.e., Dental Class 3 and Dental Class 4)<sup>26</sup> from 2005 through 2025.
5. Please provide a list of Department of Defense installations in and out of compliance with the 2013 order to fluoridate water on military installations.
6. Dental fitness is currently one of eight domains of the Department of Defense's Total Force Fitness Framework.<sup>27</sup> Is the Department of Defense considering any revisions to this framework?
7. Has the Department modeled or estimated the additional number of service members that may be non-deployable or ineligible for service because of dental problems if the CDC reverses its recommendation on fluoridated water or if the FDA removes fluoride supplements from the market? If so, what did those estimates revealed?

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator

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<sup>25</sup> See, Section 3.5: "Dental Readiness" of "Individual Medical Readiness Program," Department of Defense Instruction 6025.19, p. 12, July 13, 2022, <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.esd.whs.mil/portals/54/documents/dd/issuances/dodi/602519p.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> Military Health System, "Why Dental Health is Essential for Warfighters and Military Readiness," <https://health.mil/News/Articles/2022/02/04/Why-Dental-Health-is-Essential-for-Warfighters-and-Military-Readiness>.