

December 10, 2025,

Dear Member of Congress,

We, the undersigned civil and human rights organizations, together with those representing members of the armed forces and veterans, write to express opposition to a number of harmful provisions included in Fiscal Year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act (FY26 NDAA). These provisions dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and other efforts to promote equal opportunity in the Department of Defense and the U.S. military and forbid such efforts going forward. If enacted, these provisions would jeopardize the health and well-being of service members, hinder recruitment and retention, and undermine military readiness. We strongly urge you to reject them.

The strength of the U.S. military lies not merely in its numbers, but in its ability to harness the talents and skills of Americans of all backgrounds. When individuals with diverse perspectives, cultures, and life experiences serve together, they build a force that is more agile, innovative, and prepared to meet the complex challenges of modern warfare.¹ Such diversity also improves retention and strengthens readiness and cohesion, which is why military leaders and veterans have consistently affirmed that investments in advancing equal opportunity in the military are essential to mission success.² Gilbert Cisneros, Jr., former Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, testified before Congress that investments in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives are a “force multiplier,” explaining that “with the Department’s priority mission to provide a combat-credible force, we must prioritize a force that is lethal, resilient, and reflective of America’s diversity.”³ A group of 35 top former military leaders echoed this conclusion, emphasizing that “units that are diverse across all levels are more cohesive, collaborative, and effective.”⁴

Despite broad recognition that a fighting force representative of the entire nation is essential to the military fulfilling its mission, the FY26 NDAA includes provisions that would strip away those very

¹ Honorable Agnes Schaefer, *Testimony before the Subcommittee on Military Personnel, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, 118th Cong.* (Dec. 13, 2023) (“The principles of DEIA enable the Army to better accomplish its mission... Research shows that diverse teams drive innovation. Equitable treatment allows everyone to share their talents to build readiness and support the mission.”)

<https://www.congress.gov/118/meeting/house/116600/witnesses/HHRG-118-AS02-Wstate-SchaeferA-20231213.pdf>

² Department of Defense, *Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Strategic Plan*, (Aug. 2024) (“DoD needs diverse perspectives, experiences, and skillsets to remain a global leader, to deter war, and to keep our nation secure. Leveraging this strategic diversity and expanding access to attract, retain, and advance the best talent our nation has to offer are the only way DoD will be able to outthink, outmaneuver, and outfight any adversary or threat.”)

<https://www.dailysignal.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-DIVERSITY-EQUITY-INCLUSION-AND-ACCESSIBILITY-STRATEGIC-PLAN.pdf>; Letter from Secretary Lloyd Austin to Chairman Jack Reed (Sept. 26, 2024), <https://static.politico.com/7b/8e/058641bd4d1bb1eb8ae1b53f914a/secdef-fy25-ndaa-heartburn-letter-to-hasc-and-sasc.pdf>

³ Honorable Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr, *Testimony before the Subcommittee on Military Personnel, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, 118th Cong.* (Mar. 23, 2023)

<https://www.congress.gov/118/meeting/house/115498/witnesses/HHRG-118-AS02-Wstate-CisnerosG-20230323.pdf>

⁴ Adm. Charles S. Abbot, et al., *Brief of Amici Curiae in Support of Respondents, Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harvard College & Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina*, Nos. 20-1199 & 21-707, Supreme Court of the U.S. (Aug. 2022), <https://www.harvard.edu/admissionscase/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2022/08/Amicus-Brief-Military-Brief72.pdf>

tools and drive potential recruits away from a career in service to this country. While the current administration has already overhauled the Department of Defense by dismantling offices and initiatives dedicated to promoting equal opportunity, these provisions would go further, codifying those changes through statutory amendments. Specifically, they would repeal statutory language requiring the Department of Defense to establish and report on strategic goals related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, administer programs to promote diversity in military leadership, and employ a Chief Diversity Officer. They would also repeal statutory requirements designed to enhance Inspector General investigations of supremacist, extremist, or criminal gang activity in the military. Most disturbingly, these provisions prohibit diversity, equity, and inclusion practices moving forward, binding future administrations to the same misguided policies. None of these measures serve any legitimate purpose or contribute in any way to the strength, readiness, or cohesion of the U.S. military.

Investment in initiatives to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in our military and policies that promote the full inclusion of service members and their families remain critical to ensuring people of all backgrounds can serve and advance in the armed services. A 2021 study by Blue Star Families found that nearly one in three service members of color reported experiencing harassment—incidents that directly influence their decisions about whether to remain in uniform.⁵ The same study found that military families who experienced discrimination or harassment were more likely to discourage their children from serving.⁶ Black and Latino service members remain significantly underrepresented in the officer ranks, while Black service members are twice as likely to face court-martial and disproportionately suffer severe service-related injuries.⁷ Women continue to face disproportionate levels of sexual harassment and account for the majority of sexual assault reports. Moreover, more than 80 percent of LGBTQ+ service members report experiencing sexual harassment or assault during their service.⁸ These realities underscore that diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives are not symbolic gestures—they are essential to combating discrimination, preventing harassment, and ensuring that our military is a place where all who serve are welcomed and treated with dignity. Rolling them back would erase decades of progress and make it harder to recruit both today and in the future, especially as the pool of eligible Americans for the military becomes increasingly diverse.

Supporting the military means supporting all who serve and ensuring the conditions for their success. This requires building a force that is strong, inclusive, well-qualified, and fully representative of our nation. Funding the Department of Defense must not come at the expense of the cohesion, strength, and readiness of our military. For these reasons, we urge you to oppose these provisions in the NDAA. Enacting such harmful measures would not only undermine the

⁵ Blue Star Families, *The Diverse Experiences of Military & Veteran Families of Color*, (Feb. 2022) https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/BSF_MFC_REI_FullReport2021-final.pdf

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Zachary Cohen, et al. Military Data Reveals Dangerous Reality for Black Service Members and Veterans, CNN (June 14, 2020), <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/13/politics/military-diversity-data/index.html>; U.S. Government Accountability Office, DOD and the Coast Guard Need to Improve Their Capabilities to Assess Racial Disparities (2020), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-20-648t.pdf>

⁸ Ashley Schuyler, et al., Experiences of Sexual Harassment, Stalking, and Sexual Assault During Military Service Among LGBT and Non-LGBT Service Members, *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 33 (3) (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22506>

strength of our military and endanger national security but also betray our nation's promise of equal opportunity for all.

Sincerely,

Southern Poverty Law Center
Legal Defense Fund
National Women's Law Center Action Fund
American Civil Liberties Union–National
Americans United for Separation of Church and State
Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC
Association for Special Children and Families
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action
Black Veterans Project
Center for Responsible Lending
CenterLink
Chicago Women in Trades
Clearinghouse on Women's Issues
Color Of Change
EdTrust
Equal Justice Society
Equal Rights Advocates
Equality California
Feminist Majority
Global Project Against Hate and Extremism
Gold Star Wives of America, Inc
Human Rights First
Impact Fund
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Just Solutions
KWH Law Center
Lambda Legal
LatinoJustice PRLDEF
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights
League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
Leadership Conference for Civil and Human Rights
Legal Momentum, The Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund
Matthew Shepard Foundation
Minority Veterans of America
Modern Military Association of America
Movement Advancement Project
National Action Network
National Council of Jewish Women
National Employment Law Project
National Employment Lawyers Association

National Institute for Workers' Rights
National Organization for Women
National Organization for Women, Columbia Area
National Organization for Women, Missouri
National Organization for Women, Pinellas
National Partnership for Women & Families
National Urban League
PFLAG National
Reproaction
Reproductive Freedom for All
Right To Be
Rights CoLab
Santa Fe National Organization for Women
Secure Families Initiative
Service Women's Action Network
Springfield Food Policy Council
T'ruah
Union for Reform Judaism
Veterans For American Ideals
Vet Voice Foundation
WisCOSH, Inc.
Women Employed
Women in the Service Coalition (WiSCI)
Women Lawyers On Guard Action Network
Women of Reform Judaism