

May 7, 2024

Lloyd J. Austin III, Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon,
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dr. Lester Martinez-López, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs
1000 Defense Pentagon,
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Lt. Gen. Telita Crosland, Director, Defense Health Agency
7700 Arlington Blvd
Falls Church, VA 22042

Rear Admiral Guido F. Valdes, Director, Defense Health Network Pacific Rim
Attn: US Navy, 1200 Navy Pentagon
Washington, DC 20350

Dear Secretary Austin and Assistant Secretary Dr. Martinez- López:

The Kitsap Public Health Board commends the deputy secretary of defense signed memo directing the stabilization of the Military Health System and the release of the MHS Strategic Plan. The Board requests urgent prioritization of rebuilding and strengthening the healthcare workforce and services available in Washington State, specifically at Naval Hospital Bremerton and Navy Medicine Readiness and Training Command Bremerton.¹

As outlined in the background information below, our community, including those employed by and affiliated with the Department of Defense, faces an ongoing health crisis.² Our Health Board urges immediate restoration and expansion of these critical medical services at Naval Hospital Bremerton. Specifically, we request that the Military Health System and Defense Health Agency prioritize the following actions:

1. Reinvest in Naval Hospital Bremerton to revive needed services as a center of excellence to facilitate these efforts. (MHS Strategic Goals 2.1, 2.2, 3.4, 4.4)
2. Invest in the workforce by increasing numbers of primary care, obstetrical, behavioral health, and specialty providers at Kitsap military health facilities. (MHS Strategic Goals 1.1, 1.3)
3. Pursue efforts to attract and reattract beneficiaries to military treatment facilities through increased service availability and internal and public communication about available services. (MHS Strategic Goal 2.3)

¹ Military Health System Strategy Fiscal Years 2024-2029 (https://www.health.mil/Reference-Center/Publications/2023/12/15/MHS_Strategic_Plan_FY24_29)

² Resolution 2023-04 (https://kitsappublichealth.org/about/files/board/KPHB_Resolution_2023_04.pdf)

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4. Modernize military health data systems to allow interoperability and secure data sharing with Kitsap Public Health and civilian health systems, granting local and state public health agencies access to vaccination, laboratory, and surveillance data and allowing interoperability of clinical data with community health information exchanges. (MHS Strategic Goal 3.1)
5. Integrate military health capabilities with Kitsap Public Health and civilian health systems through work agreements and formalized partnerships with civilian health organizations. (MHS Strategic Goal 4.2)
6. Commit to maintaining Tricare reimbursements at cost recovery levels to prevent adverse financial impact on Kitsap providers caring for military beneficiaries. (MHS Strategic goal 4.3)
7. Review partnerships and provide financial subsidies to Kitsap organizations caring for significant numbers of military beneficiaries. (MHS Strategic goal 4.3)
8. Contribute to workforce development and educational programs like Olympic College's healthcare expansion to support career development of needed frontline healthcare professionals and the career transition of military corpsmen into advanced health professions. (MHS Strategic goals 1.1, 1.3, 2.1, 4.3)

Background

Kitsap County, Washington, is home to Puget Sound Naval Shipyard and Naval Base Kitsap. The Navy is integral to our county's history, economy, and community. Active-duty service members, their families, and military retirees total about 70,000 people who live or work in Kitsap, and an additional 26,000 civilians are employed by the Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor. Together, these residents comprise over one third of Kitsap's total population of approximately 280,717 people and have significant public service needs, including general and medical specialty care.³ Crews of nuclear-powered aircraft carriers arriving for extensive overhauls at the west coast's largest and only carrier-capable dry dock in Bremerton can cause rapid increases in our local population, which add considerable additional demand on available services.

Since the establishment of the Defense Health Agency in 2013 and the resulting downsizing and outsourcing of medical care, Naval Hospital Bremerton has experienced closure of emergency, critical care, labor and delivery, and other service lines, requiring Navy members and beneficiaries to receive care in the civilian medical sector. This shift has exacerbated longstanding and worsening capacity concerns within Kitsap County's existing hospital, emergency, primary, and obstetrical care services at a time when the health system workforce capacity in Kitsap County is insufficient to meet the needs of the community.

In July of 2023, Kitsap Public Health Board passed Resolution 2023-04 declaring high costs and insufficient access of healthcare services in Kitsap County public health crises.⁴ The resolution details how the inadequacy and inaccessibility of these needed services have been compounded by the closure of Naval Hospital Bremerton birthing center in 2022. Recruitment and retention of a robust healthcare workforce has been further challenged by a high cost of living and low reimbursement rates for Medicare, Medicaid, and Tricare beneficiaries.

Details of Kitsap's strained healthcare system and the impact of this strain on the people who live here are described at length in Kitsap Public Health District's 2023 Community Health

³ Kitsap County Total Population 2022

(https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/kitsap.public.health.district.assessment.and.epi.team/viz/KitsapCountyTotalPopulation/Population_Kitsap)

⁴ KPHD Improving Healthcare access (<https://kitsappublichealth.org/information/data.php>)

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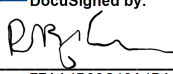
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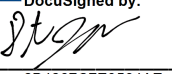
Assessment and in a report commissioned by the Health Board and published in February of 2024 by the Center for Health Security at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health entitled "Healthcare System Challenges in Kitsap County, Washington." ^{5 6} Our community, including individuals employed by or otherwise affiliated with the Department of Defense, has experienced frequent bottlenecks in emergency department admissions and frequent lengthy wait times for emergency medical services.⁷ According to data abstracted from birth certificates, nearly 50% of Kitsap residents who gave birth in 2021 did *not* receive adequate prenatal care; this was 1.6 times higher than the overall state average.⁸

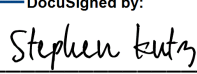
Based on the urgent healthcare crisis, we urge efforts on the 8 actions outlined above. We believe that these requests are aligned with our mutual goals of healthcare service readiness and appreciate your attention and effort to improve the continuum of care for military members and all who live in Kitsap.

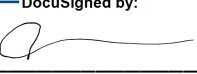
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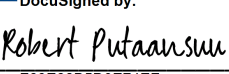
The Kitsap Public Health Board

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Becky Erickson
Mayor, City of Poulsbo

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Drayton Jackson
Member, Kitsap Public Health Board

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Stephen Kutz
Representative, Suquamish Tribe

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Ashley Mathews
Councilperson, City of Bainbridge Island

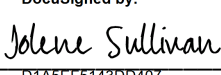
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Rob Putaansuu
Mayor, City of Port Orchard

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Christine Rolfes
Commissioner, Kitsap County Board of Commissioners

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Dr. Tara Sell
Chair, Kitsap Public Health Board

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Jolene Sullivan
Representative, Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe

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Dr. Michael Watson
Member, Kitsap Public Health Board

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Greg Wheeler
Mayor, City of Bremerton

Cc: Senator Murray, Senator Cantwell, and Representative Kilmer, and Kitsap Legislative Delegation

⁵ 2023 Kitsap Community Health Assessment (kitsappublichealth.org/information/cha.php)

⁶ John's Hopkins Health Access Assessment (https://kitsappublichealth.org/information/files/JHU_Report_Healthcare_System_Challenges_and_Opportunities.pdf)

⁷ 2023 Kitsap Community Health Assessment Healthcare Chapter (<https://kitsappublichealth.org/information/files/cha2023healthcareaccess.pdf>)

⁸ 2023 Kitsap Community Health Assessment Pregnancy and Birth Chapter (<https://kitsappublichealth.org/information/files/cha2023pregnancybirth.pdf>)