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4TH DISTRICT, WISCONSIN

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Congress of the United States House of Representatives

September 15, 2021

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin,

We are writing to bring to your attention concerns about possible mistreatment and/or neglect of Afghan refugees at Fort McCoy, WI. We urge your immediate attention to these troubling allegations, and ask that you conduct a thorough and comprehensive investigation and take other steps as necessary to ensure the safe and respectful treatment of those who are in the charge of your Department as part of our nation's efforts to protect vulnerable Afghans.

As you know, these individuals have already suffered enough, including having to leave their country because of threats to their safety and security. It is of the utmost importance that at this critical time in their lives when they feel a sense of relief but also vulnerability, that those charged with their care ensure their safe and dignified treatment. Among the concerns that have been raised with my office are reports of individuals at Fort McCoy:

- speaking to refugees in a rude condescending manner and staff directly calling refugees animals to their faces and/or referring to refugees as animals to other staff and
- families still lacking access to basic necessities, including undergarments and feminine hygiene products.

These families fled their homes and left everything behind, and many arrived here literally with only the clothes on their backs. They should be treated with compassion and dignity. As you know, they come from a country with a history of conflict and constant foreign intervention. Not only are these families displaced, but they may be scarred by the brutality and barbarity of the Taliban. They should not experience mistreatment or neglect at the hands of Department of Defense, Department of State, or Department of Homeland Security officials or contractors, employees, or volunteers working on behalf of these agencies. Period.

We are hopeful it is not a situation reminiscent of the arrival of refugees at Fort McCoy from Cuba 41 years ago. During that time there were reports of refugees running away from the base due to the bad conditions. After all this time and experience with refugees from various countries, including Laos, Iraq, Somalia, Burma and now Afghanistan, those charged with their

well-being and safety must be able show empathy. It is important that staff at Fort McCoy and elsewhere working with these individuals are sensitive and understanding of what these families are experiencing and their trauma.

We are equally concerned about reports that these vulnerable individuals still lack access to basic needs, including undergarments and feminine hygiene products. We urge you to swiftly take action to address these concerns and ensure that any such shortfalls are immediately alleviated and that these vulnerable individuals have access to all their basic needs while they await movement to their final places of refuge in our country. We know that many organizations, including those in our districts, stand ready to help you to identify and meet these needs.

We are requesting that you investigate these concerns. Additionally, please provide us with information about how you ensure that your current practices and policies regarding respectful and dignified treatment of these individuals are adhered to and what mechanisms are available to these individuals to confidentially and safely report concerns or mistreatment without fear of retaliation, including the number of such reports you have received since refugees began arriving at Fort McCoy and the disposition of those reports. Our responsibility to protect and ensure the safe and dignified treatment of these individuals did not end with their evacuation from Afghanistan. These refugees are under your care and deserve the best we can offer.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter. We look forward your reply. If you have questions, please contact Congresswoman Moore's Deputy District Director, Maria Kasperski at (414) 297-1140 or by email at maria.kasperski@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,



Gwen Moore
MEMBER OF CONGRESS



Ilhan Omar
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

cc: Major General Darrell J. Guthrie, U.S. Army Fort McCoy
Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Secretary Antony J. Blinken, U.S. Department of State