

October 22, 2025

The Honorable Mike Johnson
Speaker
568 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
Minority Leader
2433 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable John Thune
Majority Leader, U.S. Senate
511 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader, U.S. Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Chair Roger Wicker
U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Ranking Member Jack Reed
U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Chair Mike Rogers
House Committee on Armed Services
2216 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Ranking Member Adam Smith
House Committee on Armed Services
2216 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Leader Thune, Leader Schumer, Speaker Johnson, Leader Jeffries, Chair Wicker, Ranking Member Reed, Chair Rogers, and Ranking Member Smith:

As you prepare to finalize the Fiscal Year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act (FY26 NDAA), we—the undersigned civil and human rights organizations, together with those representing members of the armed forces and veterans—write to express serious concern about a number of harmful provisions included in the House and Senate versions of the bill.¹ In particular, we are deeply troubled by provisions that would dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and other efforts to promote equal opportunity in the Department of Defense and the U.S. military—and that would even forbid future efforts designed to advance these core American values. These existing initiatives do not impose quotas or require any decisions to be made based on race, gender, or other characteristics. Instead, they include basic requirements that have previously enjoyed bipartisan support, such as collecting data on the composition of the armed forces. 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

¹ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026, S. 2296, 119th Cong. (1st Sess. 2025); Streamlining Procurement for Effective Execution and Delivery and National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026. H.R. 3838, 119th Cong. (1st Sess. 2025).

prepared to meet the complex challenges of modern warfare.² 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.³ 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.”⁴ 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.”⁵

Despite broad recognition that a fighting force representative of the entire nation is essential to the military fulfilling its mission, both the House and Senate versions of the FY26 NDAA include provisions that would strip away those very 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 bills would go further, codifying those changes through statutory amendments. Specifically, both bills seek to repeal statutory language requiring the Department of Defense to collect demographic data on service members, establish and report on strategic goals related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and employ a Chief Diversity Officer. In addition, S. 2296 would remove requirements to include a diverse set of participants on promotion selection boards and end officer training on “race relations, equal opportunity, opposition to gender discrimination, and sensitivity to hate group activity.” H.R. 3838 goes even further, prohibiting the use of any funds to support the promotion of equal opportunity or related practices altogether. 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

² 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>

³ 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>

⁴ 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>

⁵ 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>

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.⁶ The same study found that military families who experienced discrimination or harassment were more likely to discourage their children from serving.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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 exclude from the final NDAA any provisions that would weaken or eliminate diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in the military. Enacting such harmful measures would not only undermine the strength of our military and endanger national security but also betray our nation’s promise of equal opportunity for all.

Please reach out to Malik Neal, Senior Policy Advisor for Economic Mobility and Opportunity (malik.neal@splcenter.org), if you have any questions or would like additional information.

Sincerely,

Southern Poverty Law Center
Legal Defense Fund
National Women’s Law Center Action Fund

Joined By:

Veterans’ and Military Community Organizations

⁶ 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

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ 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>

⁹ 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>

Black Veterans Project
Minority Veterans of America
Secure Families Initiative
Service Women's Action Network
The Chamberlain Network
Veterans For American Ideals
Vet Voice Foundation

Civil and Human Rights Organizations

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
Center for Responsible Lending
CenterLink
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
Human Rights First
Impact Fund
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Just Solutions
KWH Law Center
Lambda Legal
LatinoJustice PRLDEF
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights
Leadership Conference for Civil and Human Rights
League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
Legal Momentum, The Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund
Matthew Shepard Foundation
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 Partnership for Women & Families
National Urban League

PFLAG National
Reproaction
Reproductive Freedom for All
Right To Be
Rights CoLab
Springfield Food Policy Council
T'ruah
Union for Reform Judaism
WisCOSH, Inc.
Women Employed
Women Lawyers On Guard Action Network
Women of Reform Judaism