Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

February 3, 2012

The Honorable Leon E. Panetta
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are concerned by reports that Army medical evacuation helicopters in Afghanistan are in some cases being unnecessarily delayed. These delays are apparently due to the dearth of attack helicopters to escort medical evacuation helicopters. If the lack of escort helicopters is resulting in even small delays in evacuations, why has the Department of Defense not moved more attack helicopters to Afghanistan?

One proposed way of addressing this issue is to arm the Army's medical evacuation helicopters. While the Army has provided briefings on the policy, medical and operational explanations to some of us as to the use of marked, unarmed helicopters for medical evacuations in Afghanistan, we remain concerned that this policy may contribute to unnecessary delays in transporting our most critically wounded soldiers and Marines to appropriate medical care. It appears that our British allies as well as the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Special Operations Command, fly similar (if not, at times, identical) missions with armed and unmarked helicopters.

Given the use of armed and unarmed helicopters for medical evacuation, we would like comparative data as to how actual response times for the armed and unarmed helicopters vary, to help determine what the factors are affecting response times, and a comparison of the survival rate of those personnel evacuated by armed and un-armed, marked helicopters. Additionally, we would like to know how the Department intends to address the reported need for additional attack helicopters in Afghanistan.

Let us be very clear. We know that the servicemembers flying medical evacuation in Afghanistan are some of the best and bravest America has to offer. These heroes are risking their own lives to provide the best possible care for our wounded. The medical care provided to our wounded servicemembers today is the best in the world and has saved countless lives. Our concern is not with those providing the medical care, but rather with the potential that Pentagon policy decisions are needlessly restricting this medical care or are limiting the ability of commanders to evacuate the wounded.

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Mr. Secretary, we ask that you include all of us when you provide responses to Congress on the pros and cons of changing the current policy as well as efforts to move more attack helicopters into Afghanistan. We look forward to a prompt response that thoughtfully analyzes potential improvements to the existing medical evacuation system. We are committed to working with you and each other to ensure that our servicemembers receive the best possible medical care.

Sincerely,

W. Todd Akin
Member of Congress

Vicky Hartzler
Member of Congress

Joe Wilson
Member of Congress

Walter B. Jones
Member of Congress

Tim Griffin
Member of Congress

John Kline
Member of Congress

Mo Brooks
Member of Congress

Jon Runyan
Member of Congress

Robert J. Wittman
Member of Congress

J. Randy Forbes
Member of Congress

Ken Calvert
Member of Congress

Gus M. Bilirakis
Member of Congress

Renee L. Ellmers
Member of Congress

Sue Myrick
Member of Congress

Steve King
Member of Congress

Louie Gohmert
Member of Congress

John R. Carter
Member of Congress