



**UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE**

**4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-4000**

**PERSONNEL AND  
READINESS**

**MAR - 7 2023**

The Honorable Jack Reed  
Chairman  
Committee on Armed Services  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

The Department's response to section 549A of the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2021 (Public Law 116-283), "Multidisciplinary Board to Evaluate Suicide Events," is enclosed. Section 549A requests that the Secretary of Defense submit a report on the progress of implementing the guidance that mandates each suicide event involving a member of a covered Armed Force be reviewed by a multidisciplinary board.

This report provides a status update on the efforts to implement the requirements provided in section 549A. The Department continues to work through prospective policy gaps, finalizing the prospective policy and developing supporting information to help the end user successfully execute a multidisciplinary board review.

Thank you for your continued strong support for the health and well-being of our Service members. I am sending similar letters to the other congressional defense committees.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr.", is positioned above the printed name.

Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr.

Enclosure:  
As stated

cc:  
The Honorable Roger F. Wicker  
Ranking Member



**UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE**

**4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-4000**

**PERSONNEL AND  
READINESS**

**MAR - 7 2023**

The Honorable Mike D. Rogers  
Chairman  
Committee on Armed Services  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

The Department's response to section 549A of the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2021 (Public Law 116-283), "Multidisciplinary Board to Evaluate Suicide Events," is enclosed. Section 549A requests that the Secretary of Defense submit a report on the progress of implementing the guidance that mandates each suicide event involving a member of a covered Armed Force be reviewed by a multidisciplinary board.

This report provides a status update on the efforts to implement the requirements provided in section 549A. The Department continues to work through prospective policy gaps, finalizing the prospective policy and developing supporting information to help the end user successfully execute a multidisciplinary board review.

Thank you for your continued strong support for the health and well-being of our Service members. I am sending similar letters to the other congressional defense committees.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr." with a stylized flourish at the end.

Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr.

Enclosure:  
As stated

cc:  
The Honorable Adam Smith  
Ranking Member



**UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE**  
4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-4000

PERSONNEL AND  
READINESS

MAR - 7 2023

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Chair  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Madam Chair:

The Department's response to section 549A of the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2021 (Public Law 116-283), "Multidisciplinary Board to Evaluate Suicide Events," is enclosed. Section 549A requests that the Secretary of Defense submit a report on the progress of implementing the guidance that mandates each suicide event involving a member of a covered Armed Force be reviewed by a multidisciplinary board.

This report provides a status update on the efforts to implement the requirements provided in section 549A. The Department continues to work through prospective policy gaps, finalizing the prospective policy and developing supporting information to help the end user successfully execute a multidisciplinary board review.

Thank you for your continued strong support for the health and well-being of our Service members. I am sending similar letters to the other congressional defense committees.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr.", written in a cursive style.

Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr.

Enclosure:  
As stated

cc:  
The Honorable Susan Collins  
Vice Chair



**UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE**  
4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-4000

**PERSONNEL AND  
READINESS**

**MAR - 7 2023**

The Honorable Kay Granger  
Chairwoman  
Committee on Appropriations  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Madam Chairwoman:

The Department's response to section 549A of the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2021 (Public Law 116-283), "Multidisciplinary Board to Evaluate Suicide Events," is enclosed. Section 549A requests that the Secretary of Defense submit a report on the progress of implementing the guidance that mandates each suicide event involving a member of a covered Armed Force be reviewed by a multidisciplinary board.

This report provides a status update on the efforts to implement the requirements provided in section 549A. The Department continues to work through prospective policy gaps, finalizing the prospective policy and developing supporting information to help the end user successfully execute a multidisciplinary board review.

Thank you for your continued strong support for the health and well-being of our Service members. I am sending similar letters to the other congressional defense committees.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr.", is positioned above the printed name.

Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr.

Enclosure:  
As stated

cc:  
The Honorable Rosa L. DeLauro  
Ranking Member

# Report to the Congressional Defense Committees



## Multidisciplinary Board to Evaluate Suicide Events

**February 2023**

The estimated cost of report or study for the Department of Defense (DoD) is approximately \$9,020 for the Fiscal Years 2022 – 2023. This includes \$0 in expenses and \$9,020 in DoD labor.

Generated on 2022Oct14 RefID: 9-F2873B2

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is in response to section 549A of the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 (Public Law 116–283), which requests that the Secretary of Defense submit a report on progress in implementing “Multidisciplinary Board to Evaluate Suicide Events” guidance. This report provides an update on issuing Departmental guidance that requires each suicide event involving a member of a covered Armed Force to be reviewed by a multidisciplinary board established at the command or installation level, or by the Chief of the covered Armed Force.

Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 6490.16, “Defense Suicide Prevention Program,” requires Military Departments to establish a review board for suicide events. Although DoDI 6490.16 requires Services to establish a review board for suicide events, the policy does not currently provide procedures that promote Department of Defense (DoD)-level standardization and there is limited DoD-level policy that standardizes guidance for suicide event reviews. In response to the requirement in section 549A of the NDAA for FY 2021, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs (OASD(HA)) collaborated with representatives from across the DoD to review and collect information and determine the way forward. A working group was formed to scope and develop guidance for the DoDI, with input from behavioral health (BH) subject matter experts (SMEs).

The OASD(HA) developed a general approach, which included: (1) develop project plan; (2) identify SMEs; (3) develop scope; (4) perform literature review and current state assessment; (5) discuss and develop section considerations; and (6) issue policy.

The DoD continues to work through prospective policy gaps, finalizing the prospective policy and developing supporting information to help the end user successfully execute a multidisciplinary board review. Due to the additional time required to collect, compile, review, and assess data and information from multiple DoD Components, this action is taking more time than initially anticipated. Publication of the policy is anticipated in December 2023.

## BACKGROUND

Section 549A of the William “Mac” Thornberry NDAA for FY 2021 (Public Law 116–283), “Multidisciplinary Board to Evaluate Suicide Events,” requests that the Secretary of Defense establish guidance that requires each suicide event involving a member of a covered Armed Force to be reviewed by a multidisciplinary board, and to provide a progress report on the status of developing and implementing this guidance.

*(a) Guidance Required.--The Secretary of Defense shall issue guidance that requires each suicide event involving of a member of a covered Armed Force to be reviewed by a multidisciplinary board established at the command or installation level, or by the Chief of the covered Armed Force. Such guidance shall require that, for each suicide event reviewed by such a board, the board shall—*

*(1) clearly define the objective, purpose, and outcome of the review;*

*(2) take a multidisciplinary approach to the review and include, as part of the review process, leaders of military units, medical and mental health professionals, and representatives of military criminal investigative organizations; and*

*(3) take appropriate steps to protect and share information obtained from ongoing investigations into the event (such as medical and law enforcement reports).*

*(b) Implementation by Covered Armed Forces.-- Not later than 90 days after the date on which the guidance is issued under subsection (a), the Chiefs of the covered Armed Forces shall implement the guidance.*

*(c) Progress Report.--Not later than 180 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Defense shall submit to the congressional defense committees a report on the progress of the Secretary in implementing the guidance required under subsection (a).*

*(d) Covered Armed Forces Defined.--In this section, the term "covered Armed Forces" means the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Space Force.*

It is complex to standardize processes and procedures across Services for multidisciplinary boards to evaluate suicide events particularly where the Services already have their own pre-established processes in place. When implementing standardized processes and procedures across the Services, it is necessary to address current needs, gaps, and challenges while also minimizing burden. Due to this complexity, addressing the requirements described above is a significant ongoing effort spanning nearly 2 years. In January 2021, the OASD(HA) reviewed the section 549A requirements in collaboration with the Defense Suicide Prevention Office (DSPO). Due to the clinical components associated with the information gathering for a suicide event review, OASD(HA) was designated as the office of primary responsibility to establish policy to implement multidisciplinary board reviews to evaluate suicide events. OASD(HA) engaged with stakeholders, including BH SMEs from the Behavioral Health Clinical Community to determine the way forward to address the requirements.

## **SUMMARY OF POLICY DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS**

The OASD(HA) outlined a general approach to develop the guidance, which included: (1) develop project plan; (2) identify SMEs; (3) develop scope; (4) perform literature review and current state assessment; (5) discuss and develop section considerations; (6) translate discussions to draft guidance; (7) establish working group; (8) review and update guidance; and (9) finalize draft.

Following the development of the project plan, OASD(HA) engaged SMEs from DSPO, Family Advocacy Program, Defense Health Agency, and Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences to establish a "tiger team." The tiger team developed the "scope" of the effort, which enabled a common understanding and targeted discussion. Next, the team gathered information to inform policy and guidance development, including but not limited to current service policies related to fatality board reviews and evidence-based best practices for suicide event reviews, such as the use of a multi-level, public health approach to investigate potential

contributors to suicide. This information was leveraged to inform the prospective guidance, including purpose, responsibilities, and procedures.

## **CONCLUSION**

The DoD continues to work through prospective policy gaps, finalizing the prospective policy and developing supporting information to help the end user successfully execute a multidisciplinary board review. Due to the additional time required to collect, compile, review, and assess data and information from multiple DoD Components, this action is taking more time than initially anticipated. Publication of the policy is anticipated in December 2023.



## REFERENCES

Department of Defense (2020). *Defense Suicide Prevention Program*. DoDI 6490.16. Retrieved <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/649016p.pdf?ver=2020-09-11-122632-850>

## APPENDIX

### List of Acronyms

BH	Behavioral Health
DSPO	Defense Suicide Prevention Office
DoD	Department of Defense
DoDI	Depart of Defense Instruction
FY	Fiscal Year
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
OASD(HA)	Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs
SME	subject matter experts