



PERSONNEL AND  
READINESS

OFFICE OF THE UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
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WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-4000

MAY - 7 2025

MEMORANDUM FOR SECRETARIES OF THE MILITARY DEPARTMENTS

SUBJECT: Supplemental Guidance to the Military Department Discharge Review Boards and Boards for Correction of Military / Naval Records Considering Requests from Service Members Adversely Impacted by Coronavirus Disease 2019 Vaccination Requirements

- References:
- (a) Executive Order 14184, "Reinstating Service Members Discharged Under the Military's COVID-19 Vaccination Mandate," January 27, 2025
  - (b) Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Memorandum, "Updated Guidance on Correction of Military Records for Service Members Involuntarily Separated for Refusal to Comply with Coronavirus Disease 2019 Vaccination Requirements," April 1, 2025
  - (c) Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs Memorandum, "Correction of Military Records for Former Members of the Air Force Following Rescission of August 24, 2021, and November 30, 2021, Coronavirus Disease 2019 Vaccination Requirements for Former Members of the Armed Forces," September 6, 2023
  - (d) Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs Memorandum, "Correction of Military Records for Former Members of the Army Following Rescission of August 24, 2021, and November 30, 2021, Coronavirus Disease 2019 Vaccination Requirements for Former Soldiers," September 6, 2023
  - (e) Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Manpower and Reserve Affairs Memorandum, "Correction of Naval Records for Former Members of the Department of the Navy Following Rescission of August 24, 2021, and November 30, 2021, Coronavirus Disease 2019 Vaccination Requirements for Former Members of the Armed Forces," September 6, 2023
  - (f) Secretary of Defense Memorandum, "Providing Supplemental Remedies for Service Members and Veterans Negatively Impacted by the Department of Defense Defunct Coronavirus Disease 2019 Vaccination Mandate," April 23, 2025

On January 27, 2025, the President issued reference (a), concerning the Department of Defense's since-rescinded coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) vaccination mandate, which was unlawful as implemented, and "an unfair, overbroad, and completely unnecessary burden" on Service members. The Secretary of Defense has taken decisive action to execute the President's guidance to correct this injustice:

- (1) All former Service members discharged solely for refusing to receive the COVID-19 vaccine may pursue reinstatement in the military, and be considered for eligibility to receive backpay; and
- (2) Former Service members who attest that they voluntarily left the military or allowed their service to lapse according to appropriate procedures due to the military's previous COVID-19 vaccination mandate may pursue a return to military service.

In addition, some Service members were separated with less than a fully honorable discharge characterization for their refusal to take a COVID-19 vaccine, depriving them of veterans' benefits. Other Service members, who remained in service and requested religious, administrative, or medical accommodations related to the COVID-19 vaccine requirement, may still have adverse information in their records connected to those requests.

To remedy these harms, on April 23, 2025, the Secretary of Defense directed the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to issue additional guidance to the Military Department Review Boards concerning the review of requests from Service members and former Service members adversely impacted by the COVID-19 vaccine mandate. I hereby direct the following:

- The Secretaries of the Military Departments will, through their Boards for Correction of Military / Naval Records (BCM/NRs), continue to apply the guidance contained within reference (b), which my office issued to facilitate the reinstatement or return of eligible individuals who wish to continue their military service.
- Within 15 calendar days of the date of this memorandum, the Secretaries of the Military Departments will rescind references (c), (d), and (e) and distribute the attached guidance to their Discharge Review Boards (DRBs) and BCM/NRs in their place.
- The BCM/NRs should carefully consider claims by individuals who filed formal requests for administrative or medical accommodation, including requests for religious accommodation, related to the Department's previous COVID-19 vaccine mandate, yet continued to serve. Adverse actions in a Service member's records solely associated with their refusal to take a COVID-19 vaccination or seek an exemption from that COVID-19 vaccine mandate should be removed.

This guidance is not intended to interfere with or impede the BCM/NRs' statutory independence, nor does it limit the Boards from considering additional claims related to harms caused by the Department's previous COVID-19 vaccine mandate and providing appropriate remedies.



Jules W. Hurst III  
Performing the Duties of the Under Secretary of  
Defense for Personnel and Readiness

Attachment:  
As stated

cc:  
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff  
General Counsel of the Department of Defense  
Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs  
Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs

**Supplemental Guidance to the Military Department Discharge Review Boards and Boards for Correction of Military / Naval Records Considering Requests from Service Members Adversely Impacted by Coronavirus 2019 Vaccination Requirements**

*Generally*

1. The requirement that Service members receive a coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) vaccine without an adequate due process mechanism for vaccine accommodations was an injustice.<sup>1</sup>

2. This document provides clarifying guidance to Discharge Review Boards (DRBs) and Boards for Correction of Military / Naval Records (BCM/NRs) (collectively, the “Review Boards”) considering requests from present or former Service members to correct records, when such present or former Service members:

a. Were involuntarily separated based solely on their refusal to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, and who submit discharge upgrade requests (as defined in paragraph 5) pursuant to that separation;

b. Submitted a request for administrative or medical accommodation for exemption from the COVID-19 vaccine mandate, and request correction of service records containing adverse information or reflecting adverse action (including withholding of favorable personnel actions) solely associated with such requests; or

c. Suffered additional harms or injustices not specifically addressed within this guidance, that were solely related to a Service member’s refusal to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

*Discharge Upgrade Requests*

3. Service members who were involuntarily separated solely for refusing to be vaccinated, did not receive the same treatment across the Department. While some Service members were assigned “honorable” discharge characterizations, others received “general (under honorable conditions)” characterization and as a result, lost access to important educational benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Montgomery GI Bill, and potentially other veterans benefits.

4. To correct this injustice and enhance uniformity across the Military services, the Review Boards should generally grant a discharge upgrade request from a former Service member when:

a. The former Service member was involuntarily separated;

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<sup>1</sup> Attachment 2 to Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Memorandum, “Updated Guidance on Correction of Military Records for Service Members Involuntarily Separated for Refusal to Comply with Coronavirus Disease 2019 Vaccination Requirements,” April 1, 2025.

b. The separation was based *solely* on a refusal to receive the COVID-19 vaccine;  
and

c. There are no aggravating factors in the Service member's record, such as misconduct.

5. Review Boards should normally grant requests to upgrade the characterization of service to "honorable," change the narrative reason for enlisted separation (i.e., to "Secretarial Authority"), and change the reentry code to an immediately-eligible-to-reenter code under these specific circumstances. Officer records should be changed to have similar effect.

6. If an applicant's military records reflect multiple reasons for involuntary separation (i.e., when separation *was not solely* due to the fact that the former Service member refused to receive the COVID-19 vaccine), the Review Boards should apply existing policies that require the former Service member to establish evidence of an error, impropriety, inequity, or injustice in their discharge in order to warrant relief.

***Removal of Adverse Actions and Information Solely  
Associated with COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate***

7. The Department's COVID-19 vaccine mandate also caused harms that were not reflected on separation documents. For instance, some Service members received administrative letters of reprimand, negative or inconsistent evaluations, or withholding of opportunities for Reserve Component personnel to perform inactive duty training for pay to achieve a "good year" for participation and retirement purposes.

8. While previous guidance<sup>2</sup> required the Secretaries of the Military Departments to update Service member personnel records to remove adverse actions solely associated with denials of requests for exemption from the COVID-19 vaccine mandate on religious, administrative, or medical grounds, this relief should not have been limited to Service members who formally filed an exemption request. The inadequacy of the consideration afforded to those who submitted accommodation requests undermined the faith of many Service members, and they should not be penalized for deciding not to request an exemption that had little or no likelihood of success.

9. To ensure that present and former Service members are not penalized for pursuing religious and other exemptions to the COVID-19 vaccine mandate in good faith, the BCM/NRs will carefully consider applications by individuals who request correction of records containing adverse information or reflecting adverse action solely associated with a request for exemption from the COVID-19 vaccination mandate, or with appeals of denials of such requests. Additionally, any present or former Service member who attests that they would have filed a request for exemption from the COVID-19 vaccine mandate were it not for the Department's very high rate of disapproval of such requests shall be evaluated as if they had requested, and been denied, such an exemption.

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<sup>2</sup> Secretary of Defense Memorandum, "Rescission of August 24, 2021 and November 30, 2021 Coronavirus 2019 Vaccination Requirements for Members of the Armed Forces," January 10, 2023.

10. If adverse information associated solely with a request for exemption from the COVID-19 vaccination mandate is found within an applicant's official military personnel file, the BCM/NR should, as appropriate, exercise its broad discretion to assess the potential impact on the Service member's career and correct impacted personnel records appropriately.

***Other Harms or Injustices Suffered by Service Members  
Not Specifically Addressed in this Guidance***

11. Present and former Service members may have suffered other harms from the COVID-19 vaccine mandate that are not specifically addressed in this guidance. Adverse action may include the overt withholding of favorable personnel actions, including such actions as removing individuals from approved lists to attend training or professional military education, to assume leadership positions, or to conduct a permanent change of station transfer on schedule.

12. Many Service members may have been denied these opportunities while waiting for the adjudication of their administrative or medical exemption requests. Even more concerning, some have reported that they were pressured to voluntarily separate from the military due to their COVID-19 vaccine status, even while awaiting adjudication of their exemptions.

13. The BCMR/NRs should exercise broad discretion in providing appropriate corrections to the records of Service members and former Service members who suffered harms resulting from the Department's COVID-19 vaccine mandate.