

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 13, 2022

Colonel Daniel Heape
Inspector General
Texas Military Department
Texas National Guard Joint Forces Headquarters, Bldg. 8
2200 W. 35th Street
Austin, Texas 78703

Dear Inspector General Heape,

We write to express our concern regarding the deplorable conditions for our National Guard troops participating in “Operation Lone Star” (OLS). The environment currently fostered by OLS, which was launched on March 6th, 2021¹ by Governor Greg Abbott and the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) with Texas Military Department (TMD) support, is severely concerning with recent reports showing unacceptable living conditions, low morale, and suicides. These alarming reports call into question decisions made by the leadership of the TMD and Governor Abbott and necessitate an immediate impartial and comprehensive investigation of all TMD actions related to OLS and the conditions of National Guard troops deployed at the U.S.-Mexico border.

From helping communities combat the COVID-19 pandemic, assisting with recovery efforts from Winter Storm Uri, and helping both Texans and Louisianans in the aftermath of Hurricanes Laura and Ida, we have asked our National Guardsmen to take months from their civilian lives to help our communities. Our National Guardsmen are resilient and among our country’s finest, but back-to-back deployments take a toll on a servicemember who has already spent weeks away from home. Being activated again for OLS, sometimes with less than a four-day notice,² is leading to troops to scramble get their civilian affairs in order, if they are able to, without any idea when they may be able to return to their civilian lives.

Latest estimates from the state put troop totals at 10,000 servicemembers either at the U.S.-Mexico border or supporting OLS from other parts of the state.³ Not only are these 10,000 lives being disrupted for a mission that is a political stunt, but they are not even being appropriately compensated by TMD. Reports show that some National Guardsmen have experienced discrepancies with their pay, like receiving only 75% of what they are due.⁴ There are also reports of a “lack of cold weather equipment, body armor, first aid kits,” and even adequate

¹ <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-dps-launch-operation-lone-star-to-address-crisis-at-southern-border>

² <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2021/12/23/wave-of-suicides-hits-texas-national-guards-border-mission/>

³ <https://www.borderreport.com/hot-topics/immigration/10000-national-guard-and-texas-state-troopers-deployed-to-border-for-operation-lone-star/>

⁴ <https://www.khou.com/article/news/local/texas/national-guard-border-pay-issues/285-e7675ad0-5735-4e31-bcaf-5f61f83d01d9>

sleeping facilities for those assigned to OLS.⁵ While TMD claims to have corrected the chronic under-payment issues and state they are in the process of providing the facilities and supplies necessary for the mission, it's clear that TMD was not prepared for the sudden increase in activations required for OLS. This has led to overloaded payroll systems and left soldiers to serve in, as TMD described it, "austere conditions."⁶

Reporting also shows that OLS-assigned troops have trespassed on private land they do not have permission to enter. Under current OLS guidelines, in order for patrols to be done on private land, DPS must enter into an agreement with the landowner giving them access to their land. If there is no agreement, then no one, including Texas National Guard troops acting in a state capacity, can access their land. According to an article from December 17, 2021, the National Butterfly Center's director, Treviño Wright, has obtained photographic evidence of armed soldiers regularly going through the Center's privately owned land even though there is a visible "No Trespassing" sign at the premises.⁷ These flagrant violations of private property calls into question the authority these soldiers are acting on and whether leadership is giving these patrol groups lawful orders.

It is clear there are many reasons to be concerned for servicemembers supporting this mission, including the growing number of confirmed deaths by suicide that have occurred to troops on orders supporting OLS.⁸ Just last week, a news outlet reported on another suicide attempt by a National Guardsman assigned to OLS between Christmas and New Year's Day.⁹ This comes after the same outlet reported that, "One junior soldier on the border said a soldier in his platoon publicly declared his suicidal intent," in early December.¹⁰ This soldier had his personal weapons taken away but was sent back out with his rifle and live ammo less than 24 hours later.¹¹ The brewing mental health crisis is made worse by the fact that soldiers are able to carry their personal weapons in Texas while on state active-duty orders, which means troops supporting OLS are surrounded by firearms at almost all times. Maintaining the mental health of our servicemembers is critical and decisions attributed to OLS, like denying hardship requests, are only hampering efforts to help them.

As members of the Texas Congressional delegation, we are concerned OLS is severely eroding the readiness of our National Guardsmen and their ability to be deployed on federal orders. When National Guardsmen are deployed on state active-duty orders, their well-being is entrusted to the state. However, it is clear State leadership does not have our troops best interest in mind. Instead, they continue to use them as political props, whether it be through assigning them to support OLS or by refusing to comply with federal vaccine requirements intended to protect

⁵ <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2022/01/04/another-operation-lone-star-soldier-dies-amid-morale-crisis/>

⁶ <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/01/07/texas-border-national-guard-pay-suicides/>

⁷ [Texas National Guard Filmed Trespassing During Border Operations \(theintercept.com\)](https://www.texastribune.org/2022/01/07/texas-border-national-guard-pay-suicides/)

⁸ <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/01/07/texas-border-national-guard-pay-suicides/>

⁹ <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2022/01/04/another-operation-lone-star-soldier-dies-amid-morale-crisis/>

¹⁰ <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2021/12/23/wave-of-suicides-hits-texas-national-guards-border-mission/>

¹¹ <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2021/12/23/wave-of-suicides-hits-texas-national-guards-border-mission/>

them from COVID-19. As such, we urge you to launch a full investigation into TMD's actions related to OLS and how this mission is impacting the well-being, morale, and overall readiness of our troops so Texans can have a full accounting of what is happening to these servicemembers.

Thank you and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



VERONICA ESCOBAR
Member of Congress



SHEILA JACKSON LEE
Member of Congress



SYLVIA R. GARCIA
Member of Congress



COLIN ALLRED
Member of Congress



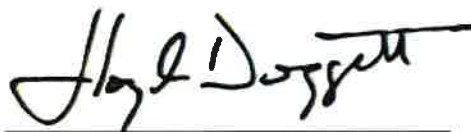
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