

December 20, 2019

To: Governor Northam, All Senate of Virginia Members, All Virginia House of Delegate Members, All Congressional Members Representing Virginia Districts

Re: Hate Speech and Criminal Threats Against Virginia Army National Guardsmen and Their Families

Honorable Elected Officials,

We write to you as spouses of Virginia Army National Guardsmen. Some of our husbands have made their entire careers in service to our country and work full-time for the Virginia Army National Guard, and they are away from home on a regular basis. Some of our husbands are traditional guardsmen drilling once a month and several weeks during annual training, and they juggle the responsibilities of civilian and soldier life. Regardless of the time they spend serving their country, these soldiers are patriots who have volunteered to protect their nation and the citizens that inhabit it. Our spouses have deployed to the Middle East (many of them several times); they have supported Virginia's communities during hurricanes and snowstorms, ushering many to safety and getting patients and doctors to hospitals to receive critically needed care. These soldiers are touted on TV and in social media as heroes deserving of our ultimate respect. How many homecoming stories have you watched evoking emotions of pride and solidarity?

This past week, we have witnessed the citizens of the Commonwealth of Virginia (and even some not from Virginia) threaten the lives of Virginia Army National Guardsmen and their families over the much-talked-about, yet-to-be-legislated new gun control measures proposed by Governor Northam. On December 12, Virginia Congressional Representative Donald McEachin spoke in the media concerning the Governor's ability to mobilize the Virginia National Guard to enforce new gun control measures if enacted. These comments sparked a reaction that is shocking and disappointing to us as residents of Virginia. Attached you will find a sampling of the hate speech and criminal threats posted in the comments of Major General Timothy P. Williams' post on the Virginia National Guard Facebook page. We CANNOT be indifferent to this type of behavior. We CANNOT accept this as "the way our society is these days." There must be accountability for people who use this type of rhetoric on social media platforms.

According to the American Library Association Website, hate speech is described as, "*Generally, however, hate speech is any form of expression through which speakers intend to vilify, humiliate, or incite hatred against a group or a class of persons.*" After reading the attached comments, we believe you will agree that this speech is hate speech and not protected free speech. Some might be quick to dismiss many of the comments as originating from "internet heroes" who are bold behind the screen but likely will not act. However, it was not that long ago that hate speech cost a young woman her life in Charlottesville. These situations can spiral out of control in a hurry.

Also, according to § 18.2-60 of the Code of Virginia:

"Threats of death or bodily injury to a person or member of his family; threats of death or bodily injury to persons on school property; threats of death or bodily injury to health care providers; penalty.

A. 1. Any person who knowingly communicates, in a writing, including an electronically transmitted communication producing a visual or electronic message, a threat to kill or do bodily injury to a person, regarding that person or any member of his family, and the threat

places such person in reasonable apprehension of death or bodily injury to himself or his family member, is guilty of a Class 6 felony. However, any person who violates this subsection with the intent to commit an act of terrorism as defined in § 18.2-46.4 is guilty of a Class 5 felony.”

We have supported our spouses in their unfailing dedication to this nation. We have juggled the responsibilities of mother and father as our spouses deployed and felt the weight of that responsibility every day they are gone. Many of you say that you support our troops. We are making a two-pronged request of showing that support from you. 1. Hold accountable the people that have used hate speech and made criminal threats against our soldiers and our families. 2. Use your media relations teams in a coordinated effort to de-escalate the current situation but also monitor this situation as the 2nd Amendment issue in Virginia progresses. Plan an approach moving forward so that elected officials can effectively respond in the media without shifting public hysteria towards a focused group of people. Please use your collective influence to protect our soldiers and our families. Our children should never be the focus of death threats or hate speech because of politics. Our soldiers have given more than many Virginians could ever appreciate; this treatment is not what they deserve. Pride and solidarity are not only for “media-worthy” moments, it is what we are asking of you now. We thank you for your time and future work on this issue. Please send responses to: [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Cheryl Williams, Wife of Major General Timothy Williams
Porter Kobernik, Wife of Lieutenant Colonel Kurt Kobernik
Bethany Price, Wife of Major Brandon Price
Michaela Claywell, Wife of First Sergeant Denver Claywell
Jessica Turner, Wife of Sergeant First Class Brandon Turner
Sarah Springer, Wife of Sergeant First Class Wayne Springer
Ashley Bosserman, Wife of Sergeant First Class Paul Bosserman
Bethany Jesse, Wife of Former Guardsman Sergeant Eric Jessee

Enclosures:

Distribution List
Exhibits of Hate Speech and Criminal Threats