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HASC NDAA Member Day
Welch Statement
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Thank you Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Rogers and members of the Committee for this opportunity to testify today. I come before you today to highlight an issue that effects constituents in all of our districts.

Too many veterans are suffering from cancers, lung diseases and other illnesses connected to their exposure to burn pits at military bases during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Only after pressure from veterans and many of us in Congress has the Defense Department finally begun to close the remaining burn pits in operation and disclose the information needed to determine how to best care for these veterans going forward.

In 2020, we called on DoD to end the use of burn pits and provide the VA with a list of burn pit locations, and in 2021 we required VA health screenings to include questions about burn pit exposure.

But it's too little too late for many veterans suffering from health issues. In my home state of Vermont, Sergeant Major Michael Cram and Brigadier General Michael Heston died from diseases linked to burn pits that they were exposed to during their service in the Middle East. The tireless advocacy of their widows, Pat Cram and June Heston, has put a spotlight on this issue. I know they will continue to raise awareness and fight to get recognition for diseases associated with exposure to burn pits. In turn, we need to do better for our veterans.

First, we must end the use of burn pits once and for all. No one serving in our military should be exposed to toxic fumes on military installations.

Second, we must improve and expand the burn pit registry. The registry is essential because it provides first-hand accounts that help researchers understand the potential effects of exposure to burn pits and ultimately help improve the care of our veterans. An estimated 3 million veterans and active-duty service members are eligible to join the registry, but just over 241,000 have joined as of today. It is essential that all veterans know the importance of signing up for the registry and that it is accessible and easy to use.

Finally, we must improve care for veterans exposed to burn pits. It is essential that medical workers at the DOD and VA receive training on the potential health effects of burn pits. Congress has a responsibility to these veterans to expedite the review process to establish a presumption of service connection. To do so, we must aggressively and consistently invest in research on the health effects of burn pits. Our veterans can't afford to wait.

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Provisions to accomplish these goals have been included in the House version of the NDAA in years past but were ultimately not signed into law. This year, I hope we will be able to get these provisions over the finish line. Thank you again, Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Rogers, for the opportunity to speak today, and I urge you to consider these provisions as you begin the difficult task of writing this year's NDAA.