

Rep. Tulsi Gabbard's Statement for the Record
HVAC Member Day- 5.16.18

Thank you Chairman Roe and Ranking Member Walz for offering the opportunity to testify before the Veterans Affairs Committee today.

Less than 1 percent of Americans volunteer to put their lives on the line to serve in our military. Their service and sacrifice, along with that of their families, deserves our nation's utmost respect and gratitude. After our nation's heroes return home, hang up their uniform, and transition back to civilian life, it is one of our nation's greatest responsibilities to care for our veterans, and ensure they receive the services and benefits that they've earned and deserve.

I ask for your support for two pieces of bipartisan legislation, the Deborah Sampson Act and the Burn Pits Accountability Act.

Female veterans represent the military's fastest growing population with an estimated 2.2 million women, including 14,000 in my home state of Hawai'i, who have served. Yet, when these women come home, they're still facing a VA that was created by and for men, and in many cases is ill-equipped to understand and serve their unique needs. Women veterans have lower rates of access to the VA than men but face higher rates of post-traumatic stress, military sexual assault, unemployment, and homelessness.

I urge my colleagues in this committee to support HR 2452, the Deborah Sampson Act, to address the glaring gender disparities at the VA and to take care of all of our veterans when they return home.

Over 140,000 of our nation's servicemembers and veterans have reported exposure to burn pits and toxic airborne chemicals over the past three decades. Exposure can produce serious and potentially life-threatening health effects, including neurological disorders, rare forms of cancer, lung diseases, and more—triggering some to call the crisis the 'Agent Orange' of the post-9/11 generation.

However, there is no mandatory tracking system on exposure-- only self-reported data. There is no research, and little information on how this exposure impacts the health and well-being of our servicemembers and their families.

Just last week, a 21-year Army retired veteran from Waianae reached out to my office about his exposure to burn pits during both of his deployments in Iraq. Since his return home, Chris has received emergency surgery to remove his appendix, had a cancerous tumor removed, and eight inches of his colon removed. While doctors have told him that his cancer was incredibly rare for his age and fitness level, the VA denied his claim to cover him while he was out of work for four months to recover.

I introduced bipartisan legislation, HR 5671, the Burn Pits Accountability Act, with Congressman Brian Mast. Our bill would record whether or not a service member was exposed to burn pits to begin the process of understanding, assessing, and treating these service-related

ailments, and ensure that our nation's veterans like Chris receive the treatment and services they earned and deserve.

As a country, we make a solemn promise to each and every person who takes the oath of enlistment — for too many that promise is, and remains, broken. I urge the Committee to act quickly on both the Deborah Sampson Act and the Burn Pits Accountability Act as we work towards keeping our promises and providing our veterans with the care and respect that they have earned.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today.