

## STATEMENT FROM REP. CASTRO

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Date: Tuesday, September 10, 2019

Fr: Congressman Castro

Re: HVAC Member Day Hearing Remarks

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### REMARKS

Good morning Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Roe. Thank you for inviting each of us here today for this opportunity to highlight the important work that we are doing on behalf of our veterans community. I would like to take my time to help shed light on the health effects that have resulted from our men and women in uniform being exposed to burn pits while deployed on our nation's behalf.

My district includes San Antonio, Texas – a city with a significant active duty and veteran population. In fact, San Antonio is also known as Military City USA. It is from this veteran's population that I have heard the firsthand stories of those veterans effected by burn pit exposure. Brave servicemen and women have shared the challenges that they have endured as a result their exposure to toxic fumes emanating from the burn pits.

These veterans and their families have endured significant medical issues and the emotional and financial pressures that accompany those conditions. I have seen that these veterans are just a sample of a broader population of veterans exposed to burn pits throughout Afghanistan, Iraq. Numerous military bases in the Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom theatres of operation produced several tons to several hundred tons of solid waste per day.

The Department of Defense has reported that burn pits in both Iraq and Afghanistan totaled over two hundred. Open-air burn pits were the primary waste disposal method during the majority of the duration of these wars. Air sampling data indicate that smoke from these burn pits contained chemicals associated with respiratory and lung conditions.

Our service men and women's exposure to this toxicity is undeniable, and the level of toxicity cannot be questioned. It is clear that the use of burn pits posed significant health risks to our military personnel serving in those countries for the first decade of conflict. We can't afford to cast a blind eye to the level of exposure, and number of servicemen that are impacted, if we say as elected officials we are going to take care of our veterans.

We cannot allow this toxic exposure to become the Agent Orange of our generation, which left service members fighting for recognition and benefits for decades. This issue is bipartisan and impacts veterans of every creed and color, regardless of party affiliation. All of us here in Congress need to understand that.

I have made the issue of burn pits central to my veteran's advocacy. Last year, I led a bipartisan letter to this committee requesting a hearing on the use of burn pits and

associated health effects. Earlier this year, I led a letter for the establishment of a congressionally directed medical research program that was focused specifically on the Burn Pit issue. I've also hosted town hall events on the issue in several Texas cities. However, today I would like to highlight the legislation I introduced this Congress that will help these veterans and their families.

### **Family Member Access to Burn Pits Registry (H.R. 1001)**

Earlier this year, I reintroduced *Family Member Access to Burn Pit Registry Act* (H.R. 1001). Nearly 150,000 veterans and service members have participated in the burn pit registry to document their health issues. These include lung diseases and cancers, which they believe originate from their exposure to the noxious fumes of burn pits. However, when an eligible veteran passes away before participating in the registry, the VA currently prohibits a family member of the deceased veteran from participating in the registry on the veteran's behalf.

This bill would allow a family member to participate in the burn pit registry on behalf of a deceased veteran or service member – allowing them to document the experience of a loved one in the burn pit registry. This will enhance the pool of shared experiences that the government can use to analyze the real effects of long-term exposure to burn pits. Additionally, this change in VA policy will not incur any additional cost. It is a common sense fix to help bolster the VA Burn Pit Registry.

### **Burn Pits Veterans Revision Act (H.R. 1005)**

I also introduced the *Burn Pits Veterans Revision Act* (H.R. 1005). This bill will require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to amend the ratings disabilities to add a diagnostic code and evaluation criteria for obliterative bronchitis. This is an illness we know is a direct result of exposure to burn pits. In fact, The U.S. Social Security Administration has added the disease obliterative bronchiolitis after medical research causally related the disease to environmental toxins, including burn pits, in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, The Department of Veterans Affairs has not formally recognized obliterative bronchiolitis.

The VA uses specific four-digit diagnostic codes that allow for accuracy in diagnosis and rating evaluations. This is a specificity that's largely been missing – resulting inconsistent and inaccurate ratings. Similar to my other legislation this bill will not cost any additional money because this condition is already being rated as other – similar – conditions. Consistent and accurate ratings will likely cut down on cost, lower the number of appeals, and ensure that veterans receive the care they need. These bills are each narrowly focused and effective ways to serve those who have served us.

It's critical that we keep pushing hard to raise awareness around this issue, not just on Capitol Hill, but around the country. We need to encourage veterans to come forward and register with The Department of Veterans Affairs Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry so that we can continue to fully understand the long-term health

effects of burn pits exposure. As scientific evidence continues to surface, it's vital that we act on what we can in terms of counteracting the effects of these harmful burn pits and the ensuing health conditions. It is Congress' responsibility to ensure that we're providing service members and veterans with the care they need on this matter and so many others.

I would like to thank you Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Roe as well as everyone here today for working with and advocating for our men and women in uniform. There's nothing more important than protecting those who sacrifice their lives to protect us.