

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am Dr. Raul Ruiz, and I am honored to represent California's 36th district, which includes much of Riverside County in Southern California, and I am proud to say includes more than 45,000 veterans.

It was an honor to have served on the Veterans' Affairs Committee, and it is great to be back.

I'm here today to talk about one of the most pressing health threats facing veterans and servicemembers: exposure to burn pits.

Our military uses burn pits to eliminate waste, including chemicals and plastics, creating giant plumes of black smoke containing carcinogens and particulate matter.

For years, the Department of Defense used burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan, even while recognizing that exposure to burn pits may pose health risks to our troops.

Now, veterans all across the country are developing rare and severe pulmonary diseases and cancers, despite living healthy lifestyles and not having any other risk factors.

Unfortunately, the VA and the DOD are not working together and are not doing everything in their power to

give our servicemembers and veterans the care they need and the benefits they have earned.

They claim that the studies on this issue find no direct link between exposure to burn pits and long-term, adverse health effects.

The fact is, the studies that have been done are inconsistent, asked the wrong questions, lacked complete information, and are flat-out insufficient to make a determination.

We have to evaluate available case studies to demonstrate a clear pattern and raise suspicions.

Many veterans exposed to burn pits emitting known carcinogens have developed rare auto-immune diseases, like constrictive bronchiolitis and rare cancers, with no other risk factors – indicating a possible causal link.

As a public health expert, I know that when we have a high enough suspicion with a severe enough illness, we must act, and act with urgency.

We can't wait 10 years for the multi-cohort longitudinal prospective studies to decide whether or not to act.

We need to put our veterans above bureaucracy.

We can start with these three things:

First, stop our troops' exposure to these carcinogens out in the battlefield.

Second, conduct public health education outreach to doctors so they understand the illnesses our veterans are facing and can make effective treatment recommendations.

As part of that, we also need to reach out to veterans who have been exposed and train them to recognize subtle changes in their health, so they can get the appropriate medical care before their condition worsens.

Third, we need to make sure that our veterans get medical treatment quickly, that it's covered by the VA, and that they receive the benefits their families rely on.

This Committee plays a crucial role.

I want to thank Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Roe for supporting the House passage of H.R. 1381, the Burn Pit Registry Enhancement Act, which I introduced with Senator Tom Udall.

This bill will allow a veteran's designee to update their burn pits registry entry to reflect their cause of death.

This data will be crucial to medical research evaluating the effects of burn pit exposure, which can save the lives of other exposed veterans.

I call on the Senate to pass this bill to ensure the tragic loss of hundreds of veterans across our nation are properly counted in the burn pits registry.

Our work is not over. There are more steps we can take immediately.

First, I have started a bipartisan Congressional Burn Pits Caucus with Congressman Brad Wenstrup, and I invite everyone on this dais to join the caucus so we can get the answers our veterans deserve.

Second, we must have hearings in this Committee to ask the VA these tough questions, such as why so many crucial details were left out of the studies, rendering them largely ineffective.

Third, there is bipartisan legislation we can act on now to start addressing this issue, like my bill H.R. 4137, the Jennifer Kepner HOPE Act, a bill to provide quality, affordable health care for all exposed veterans.

I will also soon be introducing the Veterans Right to Breathe Act, which will make pulmonary illnesses presumptive. This bill will allow veterans to receive the disability compensation benefits they have earned and deserve.

I look forward to working with all of you to tackle this emerging health crisis for our veterans.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify before the Veterans' Affairs Committee.