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May 5, 2021

Honorable Mark Takano
Chairman
House Veterans' Affairs Committee
United States Senate
Washington DC 20510

Honorable Mike Bost
Ranking Member
House Veterans' Affairs Committee
United States Senate
Washington DC 20510

Dear Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Bost:

On behalf of the American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (AFGE) which represents approximately 700,000 federal and District of Columbia government employees in 70 agencies, including 270,000 employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), I write to express our positions on the following bills being considered by the Committee today:

H.R. 1273, the "Vietnam Veterans Liver Fluke Study Act"; H.R. 2268, the "Keeping Our Promises Act"; H.R. 2607, the "FASTER Presumptions Act"; H.R. 2825, the "Fort McClellan Health Registry Act"; H.R. 2436, the "Veterans Burn Pits Exposure Recognition Act of 2021" H.R. 2372, the "Presumptive Benefits for War Fighters Exposed to Burn Pits and Other Toxins Act"; H.R. 2742, PFAS Registry Act of 2021"; H.R. 2530, the "Enewetak Atoll Cleanup Radiation Study Act"; H.R. 1585, the "Mark Takai Atomic Veterans Healthcare Parity Act of 2021"; H.R. 1355, the "K2 Veterans Care Act of 2021"; H.R. 2368, COVENANT Act"; H.R. 2580, the "Palomares Veterans Act of 2021"; H.R. 1972, the "Fair Care for Vietnam Veterans Act of 2021"; H.R.2569, the "Veterans Exposure Equity Act"; and H.R. 2127, the "TEAM Act".

The committee is considering 15 bills at this hearing that would either study the impact of certain chemicals and burn pits on veterans, or automatically grant a presumption of service connection for veterans who served in specific places and times and that have developed particular conditions. This includes bills related to toxic substances in Uzbekistan, Agent Orange in Vietnam, and the "toxins, chemicals, and hazards" found in burn pits. These bills will offer long overdue benefits to multiple generations of service members for a variety of conditions.

AFGE supports legislation that will simplify the process for the VA to collect data about various toxins and chemicals veterans were exposed to and for veterans to apply for and receive benefits for exposure during their service. Additionally, by conceding that veterans were exposed, the VA can streamline the claims process and allow employees to process claims more accurately and efficiently. AFGE is proud to represent the employees who process these claims, many of whom are veterans themselves. AFGE urges the VA, after the enactment of each of these bills, to consult with AFGE in a working group to make sure that employees receive adequate training



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on the new processes related to these claims and ensure that new trainings and procedures are followed universally at each Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Regional Office.

AFGE is also proud to represent Veterans Health Administration (VHA) clinicians, including the Compensation and Pension (C&P) and Integrated Disability Examination System (IDES) examiners. These clinicians provide examinations that determine the severity and eligibility of veterans and discharging active-duty military who are seeking a disability benefit. As Representative Slotkin's "Veterans Burn Pits Exposure Recognition Act of 2021" requires that that all VA medical providers who administer these exams related to burn pits "shall consider the total potential exposure through all applicable military deployments, and the synergistic effect of all combined toxic substances through inhalation, dermal exposure, and ingestion," AFGE wants to take this opportunity to remind the committee of how specialized and nuanced these examinations are, and that the VA should prioritize keeping these exams within the VA, instead of continuing to contract them out at an alarming rate.

AFGE would also like to thank Chairwoman Luria for her inclusion of Section 2(e) of the "COVENANT Act" that creates a "Standard Medical Training Curriculum" for VA personnel who perform exams related to toxic exposures. Additionally, AFGE would like to highlight Section 303 of Ranking Member Bost's "TEAM Act" and applaud his inclusion of a requirement that "health care personnel of the Department of Veterans Affairs are appropriately trained to identify, treat, and assess the impact of illnesses related to exposure to toxic substances." AFGE strongly believes all toxic exposure legislation should require training for healthcare personnel that mandates labor representatives have input with the VA while the training is being designed. This training will help the mission of serving veterans.

Thank you for considering AFGE's views on these important pieces of legislation. For additional information or questions please contact Elliot Friedman at Elliot.Friedman@afge.org.

Sincerely,



Everett B. Kelley
AFGE National President