

## HVAC Testimony 5/26/21:

Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Bost, thank you for convening this member day hearing. I would like to speak about my top HVAC requests.

Veterans are the backbone of our country. Day in and day out they sacrifice their physical health, as well as their psychological and emotional health. We must take care of them. Right now, more than 3.5 million of our nation's veterans have been exposed to burn pits that expel toxins and carcinogens into the air. However, they are not receiving the most adequate care from the VA when they return home.

I am proud to co-lead H.R. 2372, the bipartisan Presumptive Benefits for War Fighters Exposed to Burn Pits and Other Toxins Act to get our sick and dying veterans the care that they not only need but have earned.

Our veterans are heroes and deserve to be treated as such, yet the VA and Department of Defense continue to deny them the necessary care. This bipartisan Burn Pits legislation will establish a presumptive service connection for veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxins and streamline the process for obtaining vital VA benefits. No veteran should die waiting for care and that's why I strongly believe this legislation should be passed by this Committee.

Another piece of legislation I want to highlight that I am leading this Congress is, H.R. 2569 Veterans Agent Orange Exposure Equity Act. The VA currently adds additional restrictions regarding where and what military occupation a veteran must have served while reviewing service-connected disability claims on a case-by-case basis. This process disqualifies too many veterans from receiving the benefits they deserve, even though the VA and DoD recognized that agent orange was used, tested, and stored in locations outside of the Republic of Vietnam.

My Agent Orange legislation would expand the presumption of exposure to this toxic herbicide for Vietnam War veterans, who were deployed to certain areas in Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos. Furthermore, it will

include veterans, who served in the active military, naval, or air service while assigned to a duty station in close proximity to the Republic of Vietnam between January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1962, and May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1975.

As the co-chair of the Bipartisan Addiction and Mental Health Task Force, I want to also bring your attention to the 2020 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report conducted by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. This report found that the suicide rate for veterans ages 18-34 increased from 25.5 suicide deaths per 100,000 in 2005 to 32 suicide deaths per 100,000 in 2017.

Supporting programs that offer suicide prevention counseling to our veterans should be a top priority. Veteran suicide prevention and outreach programs will make a huge difference in providing essential care for our struggling veterans.

I appreciate your consideration of these important priorities that I have spoken about here today. I yield back.