

**Rep. Spanberger Remarks at Veterans Affairs Member Day Hearing
June 22, 2023**

Thank you, Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and Members of the Committee for the opportunity to speak this morning about a bill that I care about very deeply.

In 2019, a 39-year-old veteran Air Force firefighter contacted my office about having been denied the VA benefits he had earned. Mike Lecik served as an Air Force firefighter, deploying twice to the Middle East. After coming home to Powhatan County, he proudly served in his local volunteer fire department and as Chief Fire Inspector at Fort Lee.

Mike was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, an aggressive and rare type of cancer that attacks the body's plasma cells. But when he went to the VA for care, he was told that the VA would not cover treatment costs for his illness — because they do not recognize the service connection between military firefighting and deadly diseases like Mike's.

However, studies show that these firefighters are more likely to suffer certain diseases and chronic illnesses due to the harsh nature of their work. During fire suppression activities, firefighters inhale carcinogenic toxins. Their turnout gear and firefighting foam also contain high levels of PFAS, which have been linked to various types of cancers. In fact, Congress recognized these potential harms when we passed the fiscal year 2020 N-D-A-A — which required the Department of Defense to phase out firefighting foam that contains PFAS.

Due to these factors, firefighters experience higher rates of cancer than the general U.S. population. In fact, a 2018 study from the American Association for Cancer Research found that exposed firefighters had roughly twice the risk of developing multiple myeloma precursor disease as the general population.

We know that Mike’s service to our country — his devotion to our nation’s strength and security — led to his multiple myeloma. And that’s what makes the VA’s denial of his benefits all the more shameful.

In March 2021, Mike passed away at 41 years old, leaving behind his wife Tiffany and his three bright, beautiful daughters.

Today, I’m reintroducing the Michael Lecik Military Firefighters Protection Act – for the third time – alongside my colleague Don Bacon, a former U.S. Air Force Chief. Our bill would finally — finally — recognize the connection between the occupational hazards military firefighters face and these deadly diseases.

Last year, Democrats and Republicans voted to pass – and the President signed into law – the *Honoring our PACT Act*, which extended healthcare to 3.5 million veterans. We also passed the *Federal Firefighters Fairness Act*, which created the presumption that federal firefighters who become disabled by certain cancers contracted the illness on the job. These reforms were the right thing to do – and long overdue.

We need to harness this momentum to deliver justice to our military firefighters and their families. Today, I urge my colleagues on the Committee to do the right thing by bringing forward the *Michael Lecik Military Firefighters Protection Act*.

Thank you, and I yield back.