



TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS  
VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA  
WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT

Statement for the Record

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

on

“An Assessment of the Potential Health Effects of Burn Pit Exposure among Veterans”

JUNE 7, 2018

Thank you, Chairman Dunn, Ranking Member Brownley, and distinguished members of the Health Subcommittee, for allowing us to present this statement for the record on behalf of the service members, veterans, family members, and survivors who have been affected by exposure to burn pits and other war related toxins.

For decades, veterans of overseas conflicts and families of our nation's wounded, ill, injured, and fallen heroes have been advocating to investigate and bring public awareness to the harmful effects of toxic exposures in the military. Wounded Warrior Project (WWP), the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), and Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) have partnered to give momentum to these causes and deliver change. While not the only form of toxic exposure that we or others wish to address, burn pits have become synonymous with our community's interest in acknowledging the harm these exposures have caused and ultimately delivering public policy changes that will ensure longer, healthier lives for the men and women who serve our country.

As individual organizations, VVA, TAPS, and WWP have shared concerns for several years about the emergence of toxic exposure as a common thread among former service members who are sick, dying, or already deceased from uncommon illnesses or

unusually early onset of more familiar maladies like cancer. In the past, we have advocated for initiatives such as the creation of the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry in June 2014 and the more recent passage of the *Toxic Exposure Research Act of 2016* (P.L. 114-315, §§ 631–34). Given our collective interest in prevention, treatment, and awareness, Wounded Warrior Project decided in October 2017 to coordinate efforts with TAPS and VVA and invested \$200,000 in a needs assessment to guide our future advocacy. Wounded Warrior Project remains committed to continued investments of resources and expanding its partnerships to include others passionate about this important issue.

Since joining together in partnership, we have concentrated our efforts to raise awareness of toxic exposures among and on behalf of Post-9/11 veterans. Our current undertaking is focused on gathering research and data that will help us all better understand the risks and effects of toxic exposure so that we may work to ensure service members, veterans, families, and survivors have access to the care and benefits they need. Thus far, we have built and maintain a database of empirical research on toxic exposures, and with the help of the U.S. Army, enlisted the help of the “Soldier for Life Program” to share toxic exposure information with their network of over a million veterans. We have created a flyer to be distributed nationally to help veterans take the next steps in identifying and being screened for symptoms of toxic exposures; recorded a podcast on toxic exposures among Post-9/11 veterans, and are networking with other toxic exposure awareness groups such as Burn Pits 360 to further share our message. We have lent our support to the work of others, including the effort behind the *Burn Pits Accountability Act* (H.R. 5671) introduced by Reps. Tulsi Gabbard (HI-02) and Brian Mast (FL-18), and we are working towards delivering an information paper to the Health Subcommittee that provides a full landscape of what our partnership has been able to bring to light over the past several months. More work needs to be done however, and we hope to build upon our momentum in the months ahead.

### **Burn Pits**

In the Post-9/11 era, it is estimated that as many as 3 million American service members may have been exposed to dangerous toxins during their deployments overseas. Potential sources of these exposures include, but are not limited to, depleted uranium used in military armor and munitions, toxins from burning oil refineries/destroyed weapons plants, and more than 260 open-air burn pits used for the disposal of all forms of waste on forward coalition bases around the world.

In its 2011 study on *Long-Term Health Consequences of Exposure to Burn Pits in Iraq and Afghanistan*, the Institute of Medicine stated that it was unable to determine whether long-term health effects are likely to result from burn pit exposure due to inadequate evidence of an association. Although the study did not find a causal relationship between burn pits and long-term health issues, it similarly did not conclude that there is no relationship. That said, each of our organizations continue to see

anecdotal evidence to the contrary. Accordingly, our organizations collectively agree that public policy moving forward should aspire to:

- Support research on the impact of service members exposed to environmental toxins or hazardous substances, and/or deployment illnesses that may have resulted from their military service (e.g., burn pit exposure in Iraq and Afghanistan and Camp Lejeune contaminated water).
- Ensure health care and benefits are established to appropriately compensate and support service members and veterans, family members, and survivors, particularly those experiencing catastrophic and devastating cancers, diseases, other health conditions, or death as a result of their service.
- Implement the Government Accountability Office's September 2016 Report (GAO-16-781) recommendation for the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to examine the relationship between direct, individual, burn pit exposure and potential long-term health-related issues as well as the Institute of Medicine's 2011 report suggestion to evaluate the health status of service members from their time of deployment over many years.

### **Beyond Burn Pits**

As noted above, burn pits are just one of many ways that veterans were exposed to harmful toxins in service. While any progress to bring redress for the wounded, ill, and injured veterans, their families, and the families of the fallen who were exposed to burn pits would be meaningful, the most lasting impact will be made when we investigate other potential causes of death and disease for which there is already conspicuous correlation. In this context, our organizations are also committed to developing public policies that:

- Seek additional research by DoD and VA on the link between cancers that may be caused by toxic exposures in combat zones.
- Expand the current Burn Pit Registry so that it becomes a Toxic Exposure Registry, and includes exposures to depleted uranium, experimental medications, vaccinations, and aircraft fuels.
- Create an education program for distribution in both DoD and VA for veterans and family members that includes the known symptoms associated with toxic exposures in order to initiate earlier intervention.
- Allow surviving family members who believe that their service member/veteran may have died from a toxic exposure to add their names to the Toxic Exposure Registry.

- Encourage the VA to work with the Army Public Health Center to summarize and identify common risks using their Periodic Occupational and Environmental Monitoring Summary (POEMS).

Additionally, while we know this committee only has jurisdiction over VA, we realize there is much to do by DoD. We would like Congress to require DoD to assess and research the diseases and illnesses resulting from toxic exposures by our Post-9/11 veterans in order to help ensure longer, healthier lives for the men and women who serve our country. Eventually, we would like to make sure that all exposures would be delineated so that none are overlooked or fall through loopholes. We would also like to see the list expanded to include depleted uranium, radiation exposures, infectious diseases, and occupational materials. We would hope that identifying each exposure is a step in the right direction.

Lastly, we would like to see an evaluation of all duty locations in which a member served, not just those with open air burn pits, to ascertain the full measure of a service member's toxic exposures. The recently released DoD report from March 2018, *Addressing Perfluorooctane Sulfonate (PFOS) and Perfluorooctanoic Acid (PFOA)*, outlines the full magnitude of the presence of PFOS and PFOA in drinking water and groundwater on our military bases and identifies 401 active and Base Closure and Realignment installations in the United States with at least one area where there was a known or suspected release of perfluorinated compounds. This exposure should not be overlooked.

### **Final Remarks**

In conclusion, we sincerely appreciate the Health Subcommittee's commitment to assessing the potential health effects of burn pits. While our organizations have found compelling evidence in the anecdotal stories of death, early onset of disease, and lingering health ailments that are difficult to attribute to other potential causes, we understand that progress takes time. We are grateful that today's hearing will contribute to a greater understanding and increased information sharing related to burn pit exposure and the potential effects of such exposures on America's heroes and their families.

In the future, we are eager to see the Health Subcommittee expand the aperture further to include other toxic exposures including depleted uranium, radiation exposures, infectious diseases, and occupational materials. We are confident that the TAPS, VVA, and WWP partnership – along with any others who may join or who share our interest in raising awareness and driving change in this area – can provide thoughtful, constructive, and informative assistance in Congress' future efforts, and we look forward to continued engagement with the Health Subcommittee on burn pits and other toxic exposures as we seek to support service members, veterans, family members, and survivors whose lives have been touched by exposure to burn pits.

## **Our Organizations**

*The **Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)** is the national organization providing compassionate care for the families of America's fallen military heroes. TAPS provides peer-based emotional support, grief and trauma resources, grief seminars and retreats for adults, Good Grief Camps for children, case work assistance, connections to community-based care, and a 24/7 resource and information helpline for all who have been affected by a death in the Armed Forces. Services are provided to families at no cost to them. We do all of this without financial support from the Department of Defense; TAPS is funded by the generosity of the American people.*

*TAPS was founded in 1994 by Bonnie Carroll following the death of her husband in a military plane crash in Alaska in 1992. Since then, TAPS has offered comfort and care to more than 75,000 bereaved surviving family members. TAPS currently receives no government grants or funding.*

*The national organization **Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA)** is a Congressionally chartered non-profit veterans' service organization whose founding principle is: "Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another." VVA promotes and supports the full range of issues important to Vietnam veterans, to create a new identity for this generation of veterans, and to change public perception of Vietnam veterans. VVA knows what returning veterans face as we have been through it before. We know that, despite all the rhetoric, returning veterans will face major health problems and as such, VVA has a well-known history of dealing with the health effects of toxic exposures during military service.*

*In the 1970's, established veterans groups had failed to prioritize issues of concern to Vietnam veterans. Thus VVA came into existence at that time out of a clear necessity to advocate for and provide support to veterans in need. VVA will be here for as long as it takes to make sure that those who serve our country receive the care and respect they have earned.*

*VVA is not currently in receipt of any federal grant or contract, other than the routine allocation of office space and associated resources in VA Regional Offices for outreach and direct services through its Veterans Benefits Program (Service Representatives). This is also true of the previous two fiscal years.*

***Wounded Warrior Project (WWP)** is transforming the way America's injured veterans are empowered, employed, and engaged in our communities. Since 2003 we've been tireless advocates for our Nation's finest, improving the lives of over half a million warriors and their families.*

*Warriors never pay a penny for our programs—because they paid their dues on the battlefield. Our free services in mental health, career counseling, and long-term rehabilitative care change lives. WWP is committed to helping injured veterans achieve their highest ambition. When they're ready to start their next mission, we stand ready to serve.*

*WWP is humbled to be recognized as a charity with great impact, operating with efficiency, transparency, and accountability. We are an accredited charity with the Better Business Bureau (BBB), top rated by Charity Navigator, and hold a GuideStar Platinum rating. WWP has not received any federal grants or funding.*

