PREPARED STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

REGARDING

TOXIC EXPOSURES: EXAMINING AIRBORNE HAZARDS IN THE SOUTHWEST ASIA THEATER OF MILITARY OPERATIONS

BEFORE THE

HOUSE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

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Chairwoman Luria, Ranking Member Bost, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to represent the Office of the Secretary of Defense and appreciate the opportunity to discuss the scientific research on exposure to hazardous airborne toxins in the Southwest Area Theater of military operations and the potential long-term health effects to our Service members and Veterans. The Department of Defense (DoD) is committed to continually improving our understanding of exposures and potential health effects to prevent and mitigate exposures, and medically evaluate, treat and care for those we entrust to deploy, fight and defend our Nation.

DoD has and will continue to collaborate with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), other federal agencies, academia and epidemiological and health-related researchers focused on a full understanding of potential long-term health outcomes associated with burn pit and other complex airborne exposures during deployments. To date, a considerable volume of research on this very important topic has been completed, is ongoing, and is planned through various programs resourced by Congress, DoD and VA. Additionally, the DoD and VA have held six Airborne Hazard Symposia since 2012. As a result of the first symposium, the Borden Institute published the Specialty Clinical Publications book, “Airborne Hazards Related to Deployment (2015)” written by the U.S. Army Public Health Center and other DoD and VA scientists.

DoD recognizes and is concerned about the potential acute and chronic health effects of airborne hazards to Service members and Veterans. Smoke from open burn pits contains a variable mixture of chemicals that potentially have short- and long-term

health effects, especially for those who were exposed for longer periods, or those more prone to health effects, such as individuals with asthma or other lung or heart conditions. In addition to emissions from open air burn pit operations, other deployment-associated environmental hazards could include indigenous ambient particulate matter, exhaust from military vehicles, or other pollutants.

As part of the DoD's proactive outreach and education activities, eligible Service members are encouraged to participate in the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry, to include opting for the physical examination available to any registry participant. The physical examination adds an objective assessment of physical manifestations of a condition or illness and current health status. At present, there are 213,683 Veterans and Service members participating in the registry. DoD will continue collaboration with the VA on the best way to analyze the registry data to evaluate potential health outcomes.

In 2011, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) Report published an initial report on the "Long-term Health Consequences of Exposure to Burn Pits in Iraq and Afghanistan." The National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, at the request of VA, recently published an update to the IOM report. The updated report titled "Respiratory Health Effects of Airborne Hazards Exposures in the Southwest Asia Theater of Military Operations," was released to VA, Congress and the public on September 10-11, 2020. The report provides - valuable scientific information, findings and recommendations on health outcomes and exposure to airborne hazards and burn pit emissions; identification of knowledge gaps that limit the health studies analyzed; use

of emerging technologies to aid future research; and future research collaboration between VA and DoD. DoD is reviewing the Academy's findings and recommendations with the VA to address knowledge gaps and application of emerging technologies to future research aimed at better understanding whether respiratory health issues are associated with airborne exposures during deployment, and to continuously improve the medical care provided to Service members and Veterans.

In addition to a concerted focus on health effects research to improve knowledge, diagnosis and health care, DoD and the VA recognize the need to improve recording of occupational and environmental exposures across garrison and deployment operations. The DoD and VA are currently collaborating on the development and employment of the first-ever Individual Longitudinal Exposure Record (ILER). The ILER is a record of an individual's potential and documented exposures from garrison or deployment activities. The ILER will be available to DoD and VA medical providers, epidemiologists and researchers, as well as to VA claims adjudicators. The ILER also will enhance medical evaluation and treatment; support epidemiological investigations and research to better understand potential and actual health outcomes; and create a systematic and reliable way to provide evidence in favor of Service member exposures.

The committee can be assured that current medical information on service members and veterans with respiratory issues can be shared between DOD and VA. The current legacy electronic medical records (DOD's AHLTA and VA's VISTA) are completely interoperable and both DOD and VA are transitioning to a common electronic health record called GENESIS.

DoD will continue to closely work with the VA, Interagency and academic partners to pursue targeted research to better understand the potential health effects of burn pits and airborne hazards. We will subsequently translate this research into prevention, diagnosis and treatment to better care for our Service members and veterans.

DoD is grateful for the consistent Congressional support that enable the collaborative actions focused on the health and readiness of Service members. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony and I look forward to answering your questions.