

Chairwoman Wasserman Schultz, Ranking Member Carter,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the subcommittee today about an issue that we all know to be incredibly important – our nation’s commitment to our veterans. I come before you to speak about certain programs, which I believe, with robust funding and strong bill and report language, will make a real, tangible difference in the lives of veterans and their families.

There is not a single member of this committee who doesn’t know that we need to take serious actions to address the problems presented by toxic exposure. Burn pits have been called this generation’s Agent Orange. I know you all share my determination to avoid repeating our past mistakes. We’ve all heard from our VSOs and our veterans’ communities about the long-term health implications of exposure to burn pits, and about the hurdles that so many of our veterans have faced in receiving benefits from the VA. Some members in this body have personally been exposed, and many of us have friends or loved ones who are suffering from chronic problems because of exposure.

That’s why I am urging you to include my submitted report language regarding the Burn Pit Population Surveillance pilot program, which would allow the VA’s centers of excellence to evaluate the emerging technologies that use x-ray imaging equipment to create 4-D models of lung functions and could allow doctors to identify respiratory illnesses and other lung ailments far earlier. This pilot program would give us necessary data to see if these technologies could be used by our VHA to severely cut down on long-term illnesses caused by burn pit exposure.

I would also like to urge you to fund new construction at the Lyons VA Medical Center, a project I submitted as a Community Funded Project. These funds would allow the Lyons VA to expand their Community Living Center, adding 20 private rooms for senior veterans who need longer-term care. You all know the value of the VA’s Community Living Centers, which provide nursing-home levels of care for senior veterans in a setting they can be comfortable in, with activities, family spaces, pets, and friends.

As our veteran population ages, the VA expects an increased need to nursing-home level of care. Funding this expansion for the Lyons VA would allow them to grow to meet the need and provide a greater opportunity for patient centered care in private room settings. This new facility would not only enhance my region’s veterans’ services, but it would also create steady, long-term jobs in my community.

I’ve worked closely with many of you on this committee to ensure that our veterans receive every benefit to which they are entitled and that they receive the highest possible level of care when they need it. As a veteran, I know firsthand that caring for our veterans is not a partisan issue, but one that we all can and must get behind. Thank you for the work you all do make sure our VA is strong and our veterans are supported. I yield back.