

****OPENING STATEMENT****

- Good afternoon, and thank you for joining us today to hear from veterans, medical experts, and Veterans Service Organizations about the long-term health consequences of war.
- When we promise to train and equip our servicemembers so they are ready for war, we also promise to care for them as veterans after they return home.
- We know now that not all injuries are visible, not all reveal themselves immediately, and not all are due entirely to enemy action.
- Some conditions can take years to manifest, and too often they are the results of our own government's actions, whether it's spraying the battlefield with Agent Orange to remove hiding spots from the enemy or using burn pits to dispose of waste.
- No matter the cause, our promise remains the same: fight for us, and we will fight for you.
- Last Congress, we made tremendous strides in keeping that promise. We are bringing relief to Vietnam-era veterans dealing with Hypothyroidism, Bladder Cancer, and Parkinsonism.
- But the fight's not over.

- Current science shows even greater evidence of an association between Agent Orange and other conditions, like Hypertension and M-GUS [Monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance].
- So here we are again.
- Relief for these conditions is long overdue. We have wasted decades deliberating over science and wrestling with bureaucratic red tape. We should not delay any longer.
- Even as Vietnam-era veterans struggled with the decades-long effects of Agent Orange, the next generation of brave men and women were fighting new wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria.
- There, many servicemembers were exposed to open burn pits to dispose of waste. Many returned with obviously damaged lungs, while others continue to fall ill today – in some instances a decade or more after coming home.
- As a government, we didn't learn our lesson after Vietnam – our veterans are still fighting red tape to get the health care and benefits they earned and need.
- Because of VA inaction on behalf of Agent Orange-exposed veterans, Congress has acted to provide benefits for Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans and Korean War Veterans who served on the DMZ.

- And most recently, we worked to add three presumptive conditions in keeping with the scientific evidence provided by the National Academies.
- But that's not an ideal solution.
- We must develop a comprehensive system that is able to quickly deliver care and benefits to veterans as science develops around currently known and newly discovered exposures, without Congressional action.
- This system must prioritize serving veterans' urgent needs and delivering lifesaving care. Only then will we begin to fulfill the promises we made to care for those who sacrificed so much on our behalf.
- Otherwise we will continue to hear from vets like Jeff O'Malley, a Vietnam War veteran, and William Thompson, an Iraq War veteran, about how their government is failing to address the costs of war associated with their service to our nation.
- I ask that my colleagues listen closely to their testimony today.
- I also want to thank our other witnesses for joining us today - to help us better grasp the scientific evidence that should inform our decision making, and the impact of these exposures on the veteran community at-large.