



Statement of Travis Horr
Director, Government Affairs
of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
before a hearing of the
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees

April 28, 2021

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran and distinguished members of the Committee, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 425,000 members, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit our statement for today's hearing on one of IAVA's top priorities for the 117th Congress, addressing injuries from burn pits and other toxic exposures.

Year after year, the concern grows surrounding the health impacts of burn pits and toxic exposures in recent conflicts. Burn pits were a common way to get rid of waste at military sites in Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly between 2001 and 2010. The effect of burn pits is not just the chemicals in the smoke, but the particulate matter these men and women breathed in from the ashes and dust from the fires themselves.

According to IAVA's most recent member survey, 86% of IAVA members were exposed to burn pits during their deployments and over 88% of those exposed believe they already have or may have symptoms.

Like many of our members, I was exposed to a burn pit on a daily basis during my seven month deployment to Afghanistan. The burn pit was an all too common feature in our small, squad sized patrol base in Southern Helmand Province. I had the responsibility of keeping the burn pit burning. At the end of almost everyday I would take roughly half a gallon of jet fuel and spread it around the burn pit. I would then take a piece of cardboard, also covered in jet fuel, light it on fire, and throw it in to light the burn pit. It was an all too normal and mundane part of my deployment.

There are other hazards beyond burn pits that occurred in Iraq and Afghanistan that may pose danger for respiratory illnesses including human waste, irritant gases, high levels of fine dust, heavy metals in urban environments, explosives and depleted uranium used in munitions. Without due attention, this issue may become the Agent Orange of the post-9/11 era of veterans, with veterans waiting decades for closure and care. It is past time that comprehensive action is



taken to address the growing concern that these exposures have had severe impacts on veterans' long term health.

For many that feel they are suffering from their exposure to burn pits or other toxic exposures, accessing quality care can be a challenge. At VA, barriers to care are even more apparent, as the VA does not fully recognize claims connecting injury or illness to burn pit exposure. According to the VA 72% of disability claims for toxic exposures are still being denied.

Like those who fought for recognition of the effects of Agent Orange, the hope for those exposed to burn pits and other toxic exposures is that they will one day be able to claim certain illnesses and injuries as presumptive service-connected illnesses or injuries due to their exposure. Until the VA recognizes the damage burn pits had on the health of those who served around them, access to VA benefits and health care will be challenging.

For these reasons, IAVA is extremely supportive of two bills on the agenda today. We believe that both the *Toxic Exposures in the American Military (TEAM) Act* (S. 927) and the *Presumptive Benefits for War Fighters Exposed to Burn Pits and Other Toxins Act - "War Fighters Act"* - (S. 952) must be passed into law this year. IAVA believes that both of these bills are crucial for veterans that have been exposed to burn pits and other toxic exposures and have made them a centerpiece of our campaign to support servicemembers that have been exposed.

The *War Fighters Act* is incredibly important landmark legislation which will create a presumption of service-connection for illnesses of veterans that have deployed since 1990, such as respiratory diseases or cancers. This legislation is needed for those veterans that are sick and dying and unable to prove that their health problems are service related. As of September 2020, VA was still denying 72% of burn pits and toxic exposure disability claims. This legislation would ensure that we do not repeat past mistakes when it comes to veterans that have toxic exposures. Creating a presumptive benefit for veterans who are suffering would remove the burden of proof that a burn pit or overseas toxic exposure is the direct cause of their illness. Many veterans might not become sick for years after their exposure, making their claims process more complicated and proving a direct link to their illness incredibly difficult. Additionally, due to the nature of these exposures and where they occurred, it is unrealistic to believe that a 100% link will ever be established between toxic exposures and a growing number of illnesses. This is why we must ensure that those who are currently ill have access to the benefits and health care that they deserve.

The *TEAM Act* will ensure that all veterans are able to access high quality VA care for any toxic related issues. This protects veterans that may be waiting on a disability claim from VA, or those that are not yet sick, and receive the care that they deserve. By significantly expanding the



eligibility of VA health care to cover veterans that have been exposed to toxins, both foreign and domestic, we can ensure that no veteran falls through the cracks again. In addition to providing health care for veterans, this legislation would also create a framework for an independent commission to establish presumptive conditions for veterans that will cover all toxic exposures, both foreign and domestic, into the future. This will protect future generations of veterans in the future from exposures that are impossible to predict today. IAVA was proud to join with our VSO allies in the TEAM Coalition and our Congressional allies to introduce this legislation and we are committed to seeing it's passage by the end of the 117th Congress.

Additionally, while both of these bills will help veterans that have been exposed to toxic exposures both overseas and domestically, they will also increase studies done on these exposures to help both veterans and health care professionals. While 100% direct links of toxic exposure to certain illnesses may be challenging to establish, increased research can help determine veterans and their health care providers with valuable information that could save lives.

IAVA, our VSO allies, and many members of this committee have been on the forefront of toxic exposure issues for years. It is thanks to that work that the VA Burn Pit Registry has continued to increase in the number of veterans that are registered, giving VA crucial information on their symptoms. Important legislation has been passed in recent years that strengthens that registry, like the IAVA-backed *Burn Pits Accountability Act*, and other legislation that will increase tracking, reporting, and researching these exposures. However, more must be done to help those that are suffering from their illnesses due to exposure now. Those that have been exposed and are sick need access to the life-saving resources that VA offers. IAVA will continue to fight until they have access to the health care and benefits that they rightfully deserve.

There is no one bill that will tackle the incredibly large issue of over 3.5 million servicemembers and veterans that have been exposed to burn pits and other toxins. However, IAVA believes that both the *TEAM Act* and the *War Fighters Act* will complement each other to ensure that veterans are protected, and are able to get the health care and disability benefits that they deserve. They will also create incredibly important frameworks to ensure that veterans are protected from future exposure. We also support legislative efforts to provide government transparency into what servicemembers were exposed to during their deployments, as well as improved data tracking, and research into causes and cures for related illnesses.

Members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to share IAVA's views on these issues today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have and working with the Committee in the future.



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Biography of Travis Horr:

Travis Horr serves as the Director of Government Affairs, working to advance IAVA's advocacy efforts in Washington, D.C. Prior to IAVA, he worked at a strategy consulting firm, as well as political campaigns in both Maine and Delaware. Travis served in the Marine Corps Infantry for four years and was stationed at Marine Barracks 8th & I in Washington D.C., and Camp Pendleton, CA. He deployed to Helmand Province, Afghanistan in 2010 in support of OEF. Travis is a Maine native and graduated from the University of Southern Maine with a B.A. in Political Science with Honors utilizing the Post-9/11 GI Bill.