

## Veterans' Benefits

### The VFW's Concerns:

Toxic exposures during military service, including open air burn pits, have caused invisible, but grave health complications for our nation's service members, past and present. These health hazards appear to be so widespread that toxic exposure has now become synonymous with military service, which will likely negatively impact recruiting goals and the strength of our military. Congress has established streamlined options for certain veterans who suffer from these conditions, such as Gulf War Illness, to receive benefits. However, the current structure for recognizing the health effects of new exposures, or adding health conditions to known exposures such as Agent Orange, makes it difficult for veterans to prove that their health conditions are related to military service. A permanent comprehensive and evidence-based framework is necessary to improve the current practice of requesting congressional intervention every time a new toxic exposure is identified.

Through a partnership with the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has determined that 17 diseases are associated with exposure to Agent Orange. NASEM has also found an association between exposure to Agent Orange and additional diseases, including hypertension and monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance (MGUS). However, VA has refused to add these diseases to the list of conditions presumed to be associated with Agent Orange exposure. Thus, it is nearly impossible for veterans who are suffering from these life-threatening conditions to receive benefits.

Veterans who were exposed to toxic substances and environmental hazards also face a greater risk of death during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many health conditions for which there exists a presumption of service connection, including Type 2 diabetes mellitus, and cancer, greatly increase the likelihood of death for individuals who contract the COVID-19 virus. Surviving spouses often have difficulty establishing successful claims for benefits when these service-connected comorbidities are not listed on veterans' death certificates.

### The VFW's Solutions:

- Congress must pass legislation to establish an independent commission to identify currently unknown and potential future toxic exposures, and to recommend new studies; require VA to enter into an agreement with NASEM to evaluate scientific evidence regarding diseases associated with toxic exposures; and require VA to grant a presumption of service-connection for the diseases identified.
- Congress must pass legislation that would add hypertension and MGUS to the list of presumptive conditions associated with exposure to Agent Orange.
- Congress must pass S. 89, *Ensuring Survivor Benefits During COVID-19 Act of 2021*, which would require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to secure medical opinions for veterans with service-connected disabilities who die from COVID-19 to determine whether their service-connected disabilities were the principal or contributory causes of death.