

Media Release



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Advocacy for Veterans by Veterans

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Veterans & Families to President Obama: Toxic Exposures in Iraq and Afghanistan Are Devastating Our Lives, We Need You to Act.

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CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas - In an open letter to President Obama today, more than 700 veterans and family members of the deceased wrote President Obama demanding action on toxic exposures suffered by tens of thousands of service members in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“America’s veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are dying,” the letter reads. “Many of us went to war able to run marathons, but now our health has deteriorated so much that we cannot hold down steady jobs. We are misdiagnosed. We are not getting the medical care we urgently need.”

The veterans were exposed to a range of toxins through the use of more than 200 open-air pits to burn tons of waste in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some burn pits continued to operate despite even after Congress passed a law in 2009 requiring them to be shut down.

“This is a healthcare crisis affecting tens of thousands of people,” said Rosie Torres, who started the organization Burn Pits 360 Veterans Organization to support thousands of veterans and their families after her husband returned from Iraq with a war related lung disease. “Every day I hear from service men and women who put their lives on the line for our security, who are now being left to suffer an injustice of devastating health conditions and deaths.”

More than 81,000 veterans and active service members have registered with the Veterans Administration’s (AHOBPR) Airborne Hazards Open Air Burn Pits Registry. Veterans of these wars are reporting rare forms of cancer, neurological disorders, reduced lung function and pulmonary diseases at rates that far outpace the US population.

But a study from the Institute of Medicine on the health impacts of the toxic exposures that was due in July 2016 has been delayed without explanation. Meanwhile, many veterans continue to report they are unable to get medical treatment or disability benefits and families of the fallen continue to be denied death benefits.

“The burn pits are this generation’s Agent Orange, but we are seeing deaths happen after three or five years, instead of decades later,” Torres said. “We cannot afford to wait for another delayed medical study, we need the president and Congress to recognize this crisis is happening now.”

The letter calls on President Obama to establish benefits and compensation fund for veterans and their families, and to direct the Department of Defense to make public more of its information about the toxic exposures.

Read Accounts from Veterans and Family Members

As a US Army Reservist, my husband deployed several times after 9/11. On October 2, 2010, we ran a half-marathon at Disney World. Seven days later, our world drastically changed. A biopsy confirmed that David had Glioblastoma Multiform (GBM), a statistical anomaly considering he was 45, in outstanding physical shape with no hereditary connections. He died 11 months later. David’s last words to me were: “Did I do a good job?” I told him yes and kissed him goodbye. I am completely convinced – along with the VA who cited that my husband’s death was service-connected - that my husband’s cancer is directly linked to his service in Iraq.” ” -- **Tammy McCracken, wife of the late Colonel David McCracken**

“My husband’s health has been a rollercoaster since he came back from his second deployment from Iraq. He was first diagnosed with Squamous Cell Carcinoma (throat cancer) and started chemo and radiation in February 2008. Brian cannot eat or drink anything by mouth; he feeds only through a G-tube. He is limited in his movements, in a day-to-day task as easy as putting on a shirt.” -- **Rocio Alvarado, wife of Veteran Brian Alvarado**

“When they told me I had a progressive, untreatable lung disease due to toxic exposure from my deployment during Operation Enduring Freedom, I had to decide not to be angry. I went from being a very active, physically fit person to having to give up my career as a police officer. I had to accept that my body was never going to be the same and I had a long fight ahead of me. Instead of giving up I started listening to and reading about the thousands of other veterans who are suffering from respiratory conditions and many other debilitating illnesses that are destroying not only their lives, but also the lives of their families. There is no reason to wait decades to provide the care and treatment needed to better the lives of these people who put their lives on the line to fight for our country. They held up their end of their promise no questions asked. Now it is time for the President to hold up his promise before more veterans have to die in this country as a result of their service.” -- **Cynthia Aman, Veteran**

“My son was Army National Guard and served at Camp Caldwell and Camp Anaconda 2006-2007. After he returned we found he was in stage 3 Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma. The VA

hospital in Clarksburg, WV denied that he got cancer while in Iraq and that he didn't have PTSD that he was depressed because he had cancer. After having his lymph nodes and over 13 tumors removed he received chemo on and off for 2 years. My son took his life November 14, 2009. The VA turned their back on my child and they need to be held accountable.” -- **Ann Leach, Veteran, US Marine Corps**

My son SSG Steven Ochs served with 101st Air Borne. On point for our nation he executed over 180 days of Force Protection that destroyed BMPS, T80's & AT-5's as a Stinger Top Gun. He also escorted high government officials thru the streets of Baghdad; maybe you were one of the officials? He completed three different deployments with a total of 40 months. He returned state side 4-07 went straight to training for his 4th deployment. 9-07 was diagnosed with Leukemia, doctors said he's young and healthy he will get through this no problem, come to find out the cancer was so aggressive and attached to other organs, doctors could not explain. He fought for his life as hard and with strength as he fought for our country. We lost a part of us when he passed 7-12-08. A nurse whispered in my daughters ear "he is not the only one” -- **Jo Ann Ochs, mother of SSG Steven Ochs**

Imagine getting off the plane after suffering through a tour of duty, breathing a sigh of relief because you were not injured only to find out months or years later that you, in fact, were injured in the worst way. A silent killer was growing slowly inside you waiting to rear its ugly head and ruin your life and the life of your family. This is the story of my husband, Tsgt. Eric P. Birch, who was a man who led a clean life and was taken down in 15 months from stage 4 throat cancer that could only be linked to his exposures while serving in Iraq and Qatar. It only makes sense that he would receive a Purple Heart for his sacrifice. --**Carla Birch, Wife of the late TSGT. Eric Birch**

This is the war that followed us home, a war that taught me resilience. I have seen my husband's suffering from illnesses and pain doctor's cannot diagnose or treat. I have seen the Veterans Health Administration and Department of Defense deny him specialized healthcare due to the lack of research and evidence. The use of Burn Pits is one injustice but failure to care for our nation's heroes is another.--**Rosie Torres, wife of Iraq War Veteran Captain. Le Roy Torres**

I saw home videos the other day where I am racing against my boys in our back yard and another where in the Army I completed two twelve mile marches. All of that changed the day I deployed to Balad, Iraq from 2007-2008. Since returning from the war I have had over 200 medical visits. I trained with the most elite law enforcement police officers in the state where I was a Texas State Trooper for over 14 years. I was forced to retire from the State Police due to being diagnosed with a rare lung disease (constrictive bronchiolitis with fibrosis) after being exposed to the largest burn pit in Iraq. I medically retired from the Army after 23 years. These toxic wounds of war have affected me medically, personally, emotionally, collectively and caused a painful impact on my family. I lost all of my life savings and almost lost my home due to the loss of my careers. Everyday I struggle to breathe and to deal with the pain in my body, I don't know if my life will end with cancer attacking my body like it has for the thousands that have died. What I do know is that I love my country and I would serve again. I have chosen to be a voice for those who are no longer suffering. We did not abandon our post or mission; now we ask that

our government do the same for those that have served this great nation.-- **CPT (Ret.) Le Roy Torres, US Army**

Read the Letter

Dear Mr. President:

America's veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are dying. We need you to act.

We, the undersigned, served our country in these wars or are family members of fallen heroes. We write on behalf of the tens of thousands of veterans who faced toxic exposure to the open-air burn pits that operated in the Iraq and Afghanistan to dispose of waste. We write because these veterans are seriously ill, dying or have passed away – and more must be done.

Many of us went to war able to run marathons, but now our health has deteriorated so much that we cannot hold down steady jobs. We are misdiagnosed. We are not getting the medical care we urgently need. We need you to act in this, your final year in office.

Fulfill the promises you made to our military service members and their family members. In a 2009 White House roundtable, you promised that burn pit exposure would not become another Agent Orange, with the government denying the effects, stalling research and failing to provide treatment. You concluded, "Nobody is served by denial or sweeping things under the rug."

With your remaining time in office, we urge you to take these actions to help impacted service members and veterans:

1. Provide us care. Create a specialized health care benefits and compensation fund modeled after the 9/11 James Zadroga Act for the World Trade Center 9/11 victims.
2. End the secrecy. Direct agencies to declassify and make public every air sampling ever conducted in both theatres.
3. Don't let the Department of Defense and the Veteran's Administration sweep us under the rug. Commission an independent research study research to better understand health conditions and deaths related to the effects of combustion burning.
4. Recognize the fallen heroes. Mandate the Department of Defense and Department of Veteran Affairs Secretaries to fulfill the intent of Public Law 112-260 by allowing the families of the fallen to submit a death entry into the National Airborne Hazards Open Burn Pit Registry. Until recently, soldiers were presented with a Purple Heart medal as an acknowledgement of physical wounds received in action. We call on you to initiate discussions to allow the granting a Purple Heart to those who suffer toxic exposures.
5. Use your voice. Use the power and platform of your office to speak out and educate the American people about this generation's Agent Orange.

For those who suffered from Agent Orange during Vietnam, history proves that the President failed at fulfilling President Lincoln's promise: "To care for him who shall have borne the battle,

and for his widow, and his orphan" by serving and honoring the men and women who are America's Veterans.

Leave an honorable legacy by helping the service members, Veterans, and families affected by this injustice.

You, and only you, can do this.

Respectfully,

Burn Pit Families

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Editors: Please find more information about our organization in this media packet.

We would appreciate media coverage beginning immediately, to include news stories/articles and public service announcements about our Veterans who are suffering from deployment related illnesses, as well as the services our organization offers – to include a registry for those suffering from symptoms related to burn pit exposure. We are actively pursuing legislative changes at the national and state level and procedural changes within the Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense regarding deployment related airborne hazards and environmental toxic exposure.

Please contact Rosie Lopez-Torres, Executive Director, at the contact information provided above for more information and to set up interviews.