



Durbin: Tobacco use impacts military readiness

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Senator engages military public health leaders in a discussion regarding the high rates of tobacco use among service members at Senate hearing

U.S. Navy Surgeon General raises growing concern over e-cigarette usage

WASHINGTON, D.C. - In a hearing of the **Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense on the Defense Health Program**, Vice Chairman **Dick Durbin (D-IL)** pressed the **Surgeons General** of the U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, and U.S. Air Force on their response to the high rate of tobacco use among service members. Durbin asked, “When we use the word ‘readiness’ in every other sentence, when talking about our military, the obvious question is: why is it that the rate of tobacco usage in the military is significantly higher than it is in the civilian population?”

Though overall smoking rates are on the decline, tobacco use among military service members remains dramatically higher rate than among their civilian counterparts. In the U.S. Army, 32 percent of soldiers use tobacco, compared with 19 percent of the general adult population. Smoking rates and rates of use of chewing tobacco and “dip” pose significant threats to the well-being of military service members. It has been

scientifically demonstrated, for example, that smokers incur a 20 percent longer hospital stay than non-smokers and have double the risk of post-surgical infection when compared with non-smokers.

In addition to concerns raised regarding overall tobacco usage rates, Durbin questioned the U.S. Army's tobacco policy for recruits during Advanced Individual Training (AIT). The Army previously required recruits to abstain from tobacco during AIT, which is the 4- to 52-week period following 10-week boot camp. Boot camp is smoke-free.

“In the military, the smoking rate is thirty-two percent. Thirty-two percent, despite the fact that the men and women who come into the military and go through basic training, during that period of time, are told flat out: you cannot use tobacco products for weeks on end. And that is the standard, and that is a rule. A rule which was lifted, for reasons I can't understand, when it came to AIT, advanced training. That was done about ten years ago. Why, I don't know.”

In an exchange with Durbin, Vice Admiral Forrest Faison also raised particular concerns regarding the growing prevalence of e-cigarette use among service members. Under U. S. Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus' leadership, smoking and smokeless tobacco rates of use have declined among sailors, but as Vice Admiral Faison testified today, “where we're having trouble now is e-cigarettes.”

For the last two years, Durbin has included language in both the Defense Appropriations Bill and the National Defense Authorization Act to eliminate the military's previously instituted price discount for tobacco products. Studies show that a ten percent increase in cigarette prices reduces consumption by 3 to 7 percent among adults. Yet, before the Durbin-authored provision was signed into law, tobacco sold at military exchanges was subject to a 5 percent discount compared to prices in the local community, and because of lax enforcement and ill-defined community comparisons, discounts were as high as 25 percent off or more.