



# Duckworth, Senators Call on Administration to Help Servicemembers and Veterans Exposed to Burn Pits Receive Proper Care During Coronavirus Pandemic

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Combat Veteran and U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), along with Senators Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Mike Rounds (R-SD) and Dan Sullivan (R-AK), sent a bipartisan letter to the Departments of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) urging the Administration to take immediate action to help ensure servicemembers and Veterans who were exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances receive the care they need during the coronavirus pandemic. The letter requests that DoD and VA ask servicemembers and Veterans who test positive for COVID-19 about their prior toxic exposure history to help medical professionals better understand the potential increased risk of severe symptoms.

“By ensuring that each servicemember and Veteran who tests positive for the virus is asked about their prior toxic exposure history during their first health assessment after the test, your agencies can work toward the collection of data that can assist medical professionals in better understanding the potential increased risk of severe symptoms that those who have served our country are facing during this public health crisis,” the Senators wrote.

Earlier this month, the Senators introduced the bipartisan [\*Pandemic Care for Burn Pits Exposure Act\*](#), which would require the collection of information on exposure to burn pits, which can cause respiratory illness, to ensure servicemembers and Veterans who test positive for COVID-19 get the care they need. This bill is endorsed by the Toxic

Exposures in the American Military (TEAM) coalition, which consists of 30 [organizations](#), including Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Association (IAVA) and Wounded Warrior Project.

Full text of the letter can be found [here](#) and below:

Dear Secretaries Esper and Wilkie:

We write to ask the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to take immediate action to help ensure that servicemembers and veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances who may be at heightened risk of severe symptoms related to coronavirus (COVID-19) receive the care they need. By ensuring that each servicemember and veteran who tests positive for the virus is asked about their prior toxic exposure history during their first health assessment after the test, your agencies can work toward the collection of data that can assist medical professionals in better understanding the potential increased risk of severe symptoms that those who have served our country are facing during this public health crisis.

We urge DoD and the VA to implement procedures identical to those included in our Pandemic Care for Burn Pits Exposure Act (S.3868), which would require any servicemember or veteran who tests positive for COVID-19 to be asked during their next health assessment if they were previously based or stationed near an open burn pit, or were exposed to toxic airborne chemicals or contaminants. Many servicemembers and veterans are at higher risk for experiencing serious or potentially life-threatening symptoms should they contract coronavirus, and it is important that their doctors are aware of the potential -adverse health impacts that burn pit exposure may have on COVID-19 patients.

More than 200,000 military personnel who served in Iraq and Afghanistan have signed up for the Department of Veterans Affairs' Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry to date, and the VA estimates that over 3.5 million veterans were exposed to burn pits. These veterans were exposed to a variety of toxic substances on military bases from burn pits, and servicemembers who worked in these areas are subject to higher rates of asthma, emphysema, and rare lung disorders.

We also request that you take action to ensure that servicemembers and veterans are aware of the resources that are available to them during the pandemic. Our veterans served us on the front lines, and we must serve them with the support and resources they need when they return home.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,