UPDATE: Senate Passes Bill to Help Veterans Exposed to Toxins and Burn Pits

Biden is expected to sign the PACT Act. His son, Major Beau Biden, was exposed to burn pits and later died of brain cancer.

August 4, 2022 By Bob Barnett

Tuesday night, the U.S. Senate passed legislation to support the health care of veterans who were exposed to toxins and burn pits, notably those diagnosed with respiratory cancers linked to the chemicals associated with the pits.

Referred to as the PACT Act or the Honoring Our PACT Act, the legislation passed with a vote of 86-11, reports The Hill. (The bill's full title is the Sgt. 1st Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act.)

The previous week, several Republican senators tanked the bill, which they had previously supported, leading to public outrage and then Tuesday night's vote.

President Joe Biden is expected to sign the bill into law. As Cancer Health reported in the original article below, from March 2, he has been a staunch support of the legislation as well as cancer-related issues and veterans. Earlier this year, Biden supercharged his 2016 Cancer Moonshot Program, which aims to cut the cancer death rate in half in the next 25 years, and in June the CDC awarded $215 million to support cancer prevention and the Cancer Moonshot goals.

Below is the original article:

In his first State of the Union speech, President Joe Biden called on Congress to pass new legislation to help veterans whose health has been impaired due to exposure to burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan. He also announced that the Veterans Administration will take new measures to care for veterans diagnosed with any of nine rare respiratory cancers related to exposure to toxic chemicals (such as those created by burn pits) during their service.

For President Biden, the issue is personal. “Our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan faced many dangers,” he said during the speech. “One was stationed at bases and breathing in toxic smoke from ‘burn pits’ that incinerated wastes of war—medical and hazard material, jet fuel, and more. When they came home, many of the world’s fittest and best trained warriors were never the same. Headaches. Numbness. Dizziness. A cancer that would put them in a flag-draped coffin.

“I know. One of those soldiers was my son Major Beau Biden. We don’t know for sure if a burn pit was the cause of his brain cancer, or the diseases of so many of our troops. But I’m committed to finding out everything we can.” He recognized invited guest and activist Danielle Robinson, whose husband Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson died due to “cancer from prolonged exposure to burn pits” that “ravaged Heath’s lungs and body.”

The Veterans Administration, Biden announced, will add nine rare respiratory cancers to the list of presumed service-connected disabilities related to exposure to toxic chemicals in the air, water or soil for veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan. According to the VA, those cancers are:

- Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) of the larynx;
- SCC of the trachea;
- Adenocarcinoma of the trachea;
- Salivary gland-type tumors of the trachea;
- Adenosquamous carcinoma of the lung;
- Large cell carcinoma of the lung;
- Salivary gland-type tumors of the lung;
- Sarcomatoid carcinoma of the lung and;
- Typical and atypical carcinoid of the lung.

Biden called on Congress to pass a bill to protect these veterans. According to The Hill, the Senate passed the bipartisan Health Care for Burn Pit Victims Act in mid-February. Its fate now rests in the House. The bill expands health care for combat veterans who served after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack and were exposed to toxic burn pits.

Broadening the cancer theme, Biden emphasized that "supercharging” the Cancer Moonshot program, announced in early February, was one of the four main “unity themes” in the speech. “Our goal is to cut the cancer death rate by at least 50% over the next 25 years, turn more cancers from death sentences into treatable diseases.” To get there, he called on Congress to fund ARPA-H, the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health, under the National Institutes of Health. “ARPA-H will have a singular purpose—to drive breakthroughs in cancer, Alzheimer’s, diabetes and more.”

In a statement released shortly after the State of the Union address, Karen E. Knudsen, MBA, PhD, who is CEO of the American Cancer Society (ACS) and the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN), said the organizations were “pleased to hear the President again call on lawmakers, health care providers, the cancer community at large and the American people to join together in this mission. By accelerating discovery, improving access to services patients and their families need and advancing public policy we will change the trajectory of this disease.”

Knudsen had specific praise for the new emphasis on veterans. “The American Cancer Society and ACS CAN applaud the president for prioritizing access to care for military veterans,” Knudsen said. “As the daughter of an army special forces officer, I understand the extraordinary risk faced by veterans. Presumptive status will help to ensure servicemen and women who are diagnosed with cancer following toxic exposure don’t face unnecessary delays or other barriers to accessing disability benefits.”

To read one veteran’s cancer story, see “A Breast Cancer Diary: Sheila McGlown.”

To learn more about cancer advances, see “The Next Cancer Breakthroughs.”

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