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Veterans News

Senators push 15M bill to study birth defects in children of veterans exposed to toxic chemicals

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WASHINGTON — The generational effects of chemical warfare agents and other hazardous materials on the descendants of service members would be evaluated under a bill to fund \$15 million in research on birth defects identified in the children and grandchildren of toxic-exposed veterans.

The Molly R. Loomis Research for Descendants of Toxic Exposed Veterans Act would commission multiple studies that look at the connections between toxic exposures of service members in combat zones and severe disabilities that were later diagnosed in their descendants. The bill is included in two separate appropriations bills for the Defense Department and the Interior Department that have advanced in the Senate. House lawmakers have not offered a companion bill.

Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee's subpanel on defense, and Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., co-sponsored the research legislation, which would fund multiple studies by federal agencies and nonprofit organizations. "While there has been some research on the link between birth defects and generational exposure to toxins and chemicals, there has yet to be comprehensive, government-led studies into the effects of toxic

exposure on descendants of toxic-exposed veterans,” according to a statement from Tester’s office.

The funds would support the Toxic Exposures Research Program and build knowledge on the generational impact of chemical exposures on military members and their descendants, according to Tester, who also is chairman of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee. “This bill aims to empower the toxic exposures research group to conduct more vital research related to toxic exposure,” Rubio said. The legislation is named after the daughter of a Vietnam-era Navy veteran exposed to Agent Orange during military service aboard the USS Ogden, an amphibious transport dock ship. Molly Loomis, whose father was exposed to Agent Orange during military service in Vietnam, was born with spina bifida, a condition where the spine does not develop properly during fetal development.

The birth defect has been identified in descendants of Vietnam War veterans exposed to the herbicide. (Molly Loomis) Molly Loomis of Bozeman, Mont., was born with spina bifida, a presumptive disability that has been diagnosed in the biological children of Vietnam War veterans. Spina bifida is a condition where the spine and spinal cord do not grow properly during pregnancy.

Her father, Richard Loomis, died in 2013 from bladder cancer, which was presumed to be connected to his exposure to Agent Orange, according to the family. “I try putting myself in my dad’s shoes and how it might feel to face toxic exposure health issues. But then to learn your exposure could have resulted in the birth defects, disabilities, even shortened lifespans of your own children, perhaps grandchildren, too — I don’t think I can fully imagine the nightmare of that,” Loomis said. “Not everyone chooses to protect their country, but I’d say everyone wants to protect their children.”

Service members exposed to toxic substances are more likely than the general population to develop rare cancers, heart conditions and chronic lung conditions, according to the legislation. Descendants of toxic-exposed service members also can experience lifelong medical conditions related to their parents’ or grandparents’ exposure to toxic substances, the legislation said.

Mokie Porter, communications director for the advocacy group Vietnam Veterans of America, described the legislation as another mechanism for funding an area that historically has been overlooked in research by the Department of Veterans Affairs. “Before these Vietnam veterans pass on, they want to ensure their children are taken care of. The children and grandchildren of toxic-exposed veterans have health conditions that have not been fully addressed,” Porter said. “Most of the evidence linking exposure to birth defects is anecdotal because the research isn’t being done.”

Porter said new research dollars also would enable studies to be done outside the VA, including universities, medical centers and other nonprofit organizations with a background in studying birth defects and chemical exposures. The VA presumes spina bifida in biological children of certain Vietnam-era veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange and other herbicides was caused by military service.

People with spinal bifida can have paralysis and require extensive surgeries and medical care. But Porter said while spina bifida is the most recognized birth defect associated with military chemical exposure, the link is still considered limited for lack of scientific evidence.

A previous bill — the Toxic Exposure Research Act — that Congress adopted in 2016 had authorized research into birth defects associated with chemical exposures during military service. But the VA has refused to act on it, said Jack McManus, an Air Force veteran and president of the Vietnam Veterans Association of America. The VA determined research was not feasible because it would focus on the descendants and not the veterans themselves, he said.

McManus, a former sergeant who served from 1965-1969, said he was a crew member on planes that sprayed herbicides in Vietnam and has experienced multiple health effects, including several types of cancer, neuropathy and diabetes. He does not have children. The new legislation would require an interagency group on toxic exposures to work to raise awareness about associations between toxic exposures and birth defects, McManus said. The bill also would require research and current treatments for serious health conditions identified in the descendants of toxic-exposed veterans to be published on a dedicated website. The interagency group was established two years ago under the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act, or PACT Act. The PACT Act awards disability benefits for veterans with diseases and injuries that are presumed to be linked to toxic exposures during military service, including from burn pits, radiation and other hazardous materials.

*Read more at: <https://www.stripes.com/veterans/2024-09-04/veterans-toxic-exposure-birth-defects-children-15071006.html>
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