

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

February 16, 2024

Dear Secretary McDonough,

As you are aware, the *Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022* created a new statutory process for establishing presumption of service-connected disabilities for veterans. Specifically, Section 202 of the PACT Act implemented a new framework in Chapter 11 of Title 38 U.S.C (38 U.S.C. §§1171-1176) to establish, modify, or remove presumptions of service connection based on toxic exposure, including locations. As you move forward with the rulemaking processes to implement the PACT Act, we urge you to establish a presumption of service-connected disability for veterans who served in the Panama Canal Zone (PCZ) between January 1, 1958, and December 1999 and developed diseases consistent with herbicide exposure.

As the Department of Defense routed herbicide to Southeast Asia in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, many vessels offloaded these toxic chemicals at U.S. bases in the Panama Canal to clear outgrowths of vegetation in the area. Available records and veteran accounts of their service corroborate the presence of Agent Orange and Agent Purple in the PCZ. At least 400 veterans who served in the PCZ have now developed cancer, heart disease, or other health issues consistent with herbicide exposure. However, they have been consistently denied the disability compensation and recognition they desperately need and deserve. After reviewing the relevant records and veteran testimonies, we believe that a clear link exists between service in the PCZ and health conditions consistent with herbicide exposure.

With the passage of the PACT Act, Congress fully recognized the importance of expanding the presumption of service-connected disability to veterans who served in areas beyond mainland Vietnam. Congress has extended these presumptions before, notably with the *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act* (P.L. 116-23), which extended the presumption of service connection for certain diseases associated with herbicide exposure to veterans who served offshore of Vietnam and veterans who served in or near the Korean Demilitarized Zone. Notably with the PACT Act,

Congress granted the VA authorities and independence to expand service-connected presumptions to veterans.

We strongly urge you to use the processes within the PACT Act to provide PCZ Veterans with the compensation they earned and need. We look forward to working together to ensure all our veterans receive the compensation they deserve.

Sincerely,



Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress



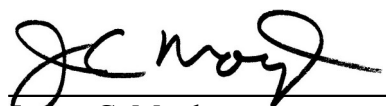
María Elvira Salazar
Member of Congress



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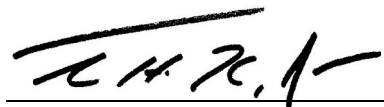
David J. Trone
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André Carson
Member of Congress



Al Green
Member of Congress
Scion of the Enslaved
Africans -
Sacrificed to Make America
Great



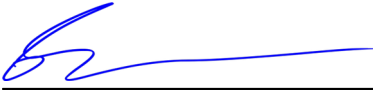
Thomas H. Kean, Jr.
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