



**For Immediate Release
Friday, Sept. 21, 2018**

FORMER VA SECRETARY CALLS ON CONGRESS TO ADVANCE BLUE WATER NAVY ACT

Former Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. David Shulkin on Thursday sent a letter to the chairmen and ranking members of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees, asking that they advance H.R. 299, the Blue Water Navy Veterans Act, which will restore Agent Orange benefits to thousands of servicemen and women.

The bill, which cleared the House of Representatives unanimously several months ago, has now stalled in the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, chaired by Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-GA). Without committee action soon, the bill will be effectively dead until the next Congress takes office in January, at which point the years-long process will start anew.

The Act would restore benefits provided to Navy veterans who served in the bays, harbors and coastal waters of Vietnam, and who were presumptively exposed to Agent Orange through runoff that was pumped into shipboard water and filtration systems. Although significant research supports the premise behind the Act, none has been fully conclusive. Shulkin addressed that concern in his letter.

"As Secretary, I was faced with the dilemma of what

to do when there was insufficient evidence to make a reasonable conclusion. I stated then - and continue to believe - that in the absence of reliable data to guide a decision, the answer must not be to simply deny benefits," the former secretary wrote. "When there is a deadlock, my personal belief is that the tie should be broken in favor of the brave men and women that put their lives on the line for all of us."

"We're pleased to have Secretary Shulkin's support as this long-fought effort nears its final hurdle," said Cdr. John Wells (USN, Ret.), executive director of Military Veterans Advocacy. "We have worked on Capitol Hill for years to see this legislation advance, and we are now so very close to achieving the restoration of benefits for these service members."

Shulkin concluded his letter with a reflection on a similar issue he faced as secretary:

"As Secretary, I had the privilege of supporting benefits to a number of World War II veterans who were exposed to mustard gas but were forced to fight their own government for these benefits for almost 70 years," he wrote. "I know that we can do better than that for our Vietnam Veterans."

"From Secretary Shulkin's lips to God's ears," Wells said.

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