

Sen Tillis Statement for the Record: SVAC Markup 8/5/20

Thank you Mr. Chairman. I want to take a minute to discuss S. 4393, The Toxic Exposure in the American Military Act of 2020, or The TEAM Act, named in recognition of the TEAM Coalition.

The TEAM Coalition is a diverse group of 30 military and veteran service organizations. I have worked with the coalition for the better part of a year to refine the legislation which, if enacted, will fundamentally reform the way we provide health care and the associated benefits to veterans who were exposed to toxic substances.

This is no simple task and we spent the weekend working to iron out the remaining details with Senator Tester and committee staff. We are making progress, but we still have more work to do. While the details can quickly become overwhelming, the crux of our effort is simple:

- Empower veterans who were likely exposed to toxic substances to receive free preventative health screenings from VA, including all necessary testing and consultation AND, if medically necessary, follow on health care. This does two key things:
 1. It allows us to catch potential health conditions before they become more severe, and get the veteran the treatment they need without delay. As Benjamin Franklin once said: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” That is true with respect to a veteran’s life, and it is true with respect to our federal budget. Not only will we save lives, we will save money, by providing the care on the front end,

when a course of treatment is more likely to cure or slow the progression of any health complications.

2. This will also allow us to better understand the ways in which toxic substances interact with our bodies, allowing the medical community to advance its approach to care, and improve the standard of care for future generations of veterans.
- The TEAM Act will establish an independent scientific commission tasked with researching new and emerging conditions that may be associated with toxic exposures, and present their findings and recommendations to VA, Congress, and the public.
 - As we have seen with Camp Lejeune, Agent Orange, and other exposures, too often it requires an Act of Congress to provide the benefits to veterans who were clearly made ill in the course of their service.
 - This commission, and the related requirements on VA, will ensure that all veterans face a level playing field, and their health and benefit determinations will be made on the basis of science, not politics or budgets.
 - The TEAM Act also requires VA to act after receiving a scientific report on the potential health effects of any given exposure. Once VA receives a new scientific study, they must make a determination in a set timeframe as to whether or not a presumption of service connection is warranted. If it is – they must initiate a formal rulemaking process to establish a new presumption. If VA determines that a presumption is not warranted, they must publicly justify that decision, including the clinical evidence on which they based their decision. This trigger

will serve as a forcing function – avoiding delays in granting benefits when appropriate, and increased transparency when VA determines that a presumption of service connection is not warranted.

I could go on for hours, and the devil is always in the details, but the concept of the bill is fairly straightforward. I am confident that all of my colleagues on this committee support this in concept, and I look forward to continuing our conversations and getting this thing right. As I mentioned earlier, our staffs have been discussing the details of my bill extensively over the past few days, and it is clear to me that we still have more work to do. And while time is most certainly of the essence, as servicemembers and veterans continue to get sick and die from conditions related to exposures, I know we must get this right.

I want to thank Senator Blackburn for joining the TEAM Act as a co-sponsor yesterday and invite other committee members to support this critical effort. I appreciate the commitment from the Chairman and the Ranking Member to continue to work with my office throughout August to finalize this bill. I thank you for your time and attention to this important issue, and I look forward to productive conversations in the coming weeks, and passing this bill unanimously upon our return in September. Thank you Mr. Chairman.