

Senator Jay Rockefeller

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Opening Statement – Veterans’ Affairs Mark Up  
January 28, 2010

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for this mark up, following up on the powerful and emotional hearing of October 8th last year with military personnel and family members exposed to toxic materials in their combat service, and even from their military housing.

At that hearing, my remarks and questions focused on Russell Powell, a medic with the West Virginia Guard. He and hundreds of other members of the Guard were exposed to toxic chemicals while on duty guarding the Qarmat Ali Water Treatment Facility in Basra, Iraq. For years, they were kept in the dark -- not told about their exposure. And today, they are still struggling to get the health care they need.

That is simply not acceptable. It must be fixed. And I believe today’s mark represents the first important step forward.

I greatly appreciate that Chairman Akaka has incorporated a vital provision from Senator Bayh’s legislation -- which I have cosponsored -- to guarantee these guardsmen the quality VA health care coverage they have earned.

That guarantee is an important element of the Homeless Veterans and Health Care Act and I strongly support it.

But at last fall’s hearing, we also were moved by the heartbreaking testimony from military family members.

In particular: families describing serious water problems at Camp Lejeune and dangerous toxins in the air at Atsugi Naval Air base in Japan.

There is no doubt, we all agreed: Military personnel and family members dealing with the painful consequences of toxic exposure deserve the best health care possible.

Chairman Akaka’s new legislation provides the right kind of care to families from Camp Lejeune and Atsugi Naval Air base.

But his bill goes beyond those two locations and their toxic exposure incidents. It creates a process between the VA and DoD to deal with thousands of potential exposures through a joint board. And, so future families don’t have to wait for decades, the bill establishes a clear time frame for the board’s decisions.

I firmly believe we must be absolutely clear about our shared responsibility. The VA’s responsibility is our veterans and their care. DoD has a longstanding policy of caring for their military dependents.

DoD bears significant responsibility and has to take responsibility, today. The Pentagon has to acknowledge what happened and bear the financial costs. This matters.

The Akaka bill strikes the proper balance -- allowing the VA to provide coverage for veterans while DoD covers their families. The Chairman's legislation gets it right and I strongly support his efforts. This is our chance to do the right thing, honor our veterans' service and recognize their families' sacrifice, by ensuring they get the care they seek, they need, and they deserve.