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Senators Seek Compensation for Veterans Exposed to Agent Orange in the U.S.

VA Typically Provides Coverage for Vets Who Served in Vietnam

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Thousands of veterans likely exposed to Agent Orange during stateside service gained new momentum Wednesday in a years long fight for benefits and compensation after a group of senators highlighted the issue in a query to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Six senators, including the top-ranking Democrat on the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, sent an open letter to VA secretary [Robert McDonald](#) asking for compensation for as many as 2,100 veterans who served on Agent Orange-contaminated aircraft in the years following the Vietnam War.

The veterans served on C-123 cargo aircraft that had been used to spray toxic defoliants in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. The aircraft had been repurposed after the war and sent stateside for service.

Years after the conclusion of the war, veterans exposed to the herbicide began to have health problems, including cancer, diabetes and skin problems. In the 1990s, the VA instituted policies that allowed veterans who served in certain areas at certain times during the war to qualify for benefits under the presumption of exposure to Agent Orange, even if it wasn't documented in their health records.

But some veterans say they fall into gaps in this presumptive coverage policy, creating a high barrier to prove their disease was definitively caused by exposure to toxins.

“Justice for these veterans is long overdue to compensate them for the constant effects of Agent Orange contained in dangerous levels in the aircraft they flew,” said Mr. Blumenthal said in an interview. “They’ve been left very unjustly and unfairly without recourse.”

Richard Matte falls into this group. He was a crew member on C-123s based at the Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts and who has been fighting for full compensation for years with the help of veterans advocates and the Veterans Legal Services Clinic at the Yale Law School.

He and others flew on planes that had seen action in Vietnam and still carried residue from Agent Orange for years after returning stateside. The Air Force has documentation of persistent contamination going back to 1979, when it conducted tests on some of the planes. The aircraft eventually were destroyed by the Air Force because of the threat the Agent Orange contamination posed to crews.

“The tide may finally be turning for this group of disabled, elderly veterans that have long been fighting for recognition,” said Sarahi Uribe, a law student who works at the veteran clinic at Yale.

In January, the Institute of Medicine issued a report indicating between 1972 and 1982 as many as 2,100 Air Force reservists were exposed to toxic dioxins left over from Agent Orange and “some reservists quite likely experienced non-trivial increases in their risks of adverse health outcomes.”

The VA hasn’t responded to the findings but in a statement said “VA has assembled a group of clinical subject matter experts to review and respond to findings and recommendations in the IOM report.”

The senators’ letter calls on the VA to provide compensation and benefits coverage to the C-123 veterans and to then reach out and let veterans know of their new disability status.

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