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Burn Pitt Legislation Introduced

Reps. Tulsi Gabbard (Hawaii) and Brian Mast (Fla.), Iraq and Afghanistan veterans respectively, and Sen. Klobuchar (Minn.) have introduced the Burn Pits Accountability Act (H.R.663/S.191). The bill directs the DoD to provide service members in Iraq and Afghanistan periodic health assessments during deployment and during military separations. The assessments include an evaluation of whether or not a service member has been exposed to open burn pits or toxic airborne chemicals. If they report being exposed, they will be enrolled in the Burn Pit Registry unless they opt out.

The bill seeks to address the widespread exposures of service members to airborne toxins from burn pits during post-9/11 deployments. It is a problem experienced by many veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. These toxic exposures could potentially impact millions, and many post-9/11 veterans believe this could be their "Agent Orange" issue of their generation.

The VA estimates 3.5 million veterans are eligible to register in the VA's Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry, which tracks exposures to airborne toxins. Veterans have expressed deep concerns that these exposures could result in cancer, respiratory issues and birth defects.

FRA Members are urged to use the [Action Center online](#) to weigh in on this issue.

FRA Expresses Concerns about Military Resale Consolidation

FRA signed onto a letter sent to the Chairmen and Ranking Members of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees. The letter was in response to the proposal to merge the various elements of the defense resale system that could pose a threat to its continued viability. The letter requests further study and oversight by Congress.

In January 2019, a task force convened by the Department of Defense (DoD) Chief Management Officer (CMO) recommended consolidation of the exchanges and the commissaries. While the military service branches concurred with the report, they expressed concerns that consolidation would take longer and cost more than anticipated, while failing to result in promised efficiencies. The FRA is concerned that if these predictions are

accurate, the defense resale system may be unable to provide services such as low-cost groceries and support for MWR programs. These services are relied on by service members, their families, retirees and survivors. The Association wants to ensure adequate funding for the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) and opposes privatization and consolidation. The objective is to preserve the value of the current benefit and provide access for all patrons.

The letter recommends an independent review by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and requests Congress conduct a hearing on the recommendations included in the BCA. A hearing would allow those committed to preserving the resale system and protecting the earned benefit to express their concerns.

VA Begins New Appeals Process

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has made significant progress on reducing the disability claims backlog. Unfortunately, the appeals process has become backlogged. The VA began implementing the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act (H.R.2288-Public Law 115-55) that was enacted in August of 2017 and first reported in May 12, 2017 *NewsBytes*. The enacted law supported by FRA and sponsored by Rep. Mike Bost (Ill.), created three "lanes" for veterans' appeals:

- Local Higher-Level Review Lane where an adjudicator reviews the same evidence considered by the original claims processor.
- New Evidence Lane where the veteran could submit new evidence for review and have a hearing.
- Board Lane where jurisdiction for the appeal would transfer immediately to the Board of Veterans' Appeals.

The lanes were established Nov. 1, 2018. It would also allow some veterans, already going through the appeals process, to opt into the new system. The FRA is thankful for the oversight hearings that kept pressure on the VA bureaucracy to implement the law in a timely manner.

In addition, the VA hired four additional Veterans Law Judges to the VA's Board of Veterans' Appeals (VBA). The VA's Fiscal Year 2019 budget includes funding for 605 additional employees, which the VA used to establish two new Decision Review Operations Centers. In FY2018, the board added approximately 242 individuals which included judges, attorneys/law clerks and administrative personnel.

New Fisher Houses near VA Facilities

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recently announced that the Fisher House Foundation is establishing new facilities located in Ann Arbor, Mich., Aurora, Colo., and Omaha, Neb. These Fisher Houses are positioned within walking distance from VA treatment facilities and provide cost-free housing. The Fisher House Foundation donates housing facilities to the VA and the military to act as a "home away from home" for active duty military, veterans and their families while receiving treatment at a VA medical facility or major military installation. Currently, there are 80 Fisher Houses around the world -- 38 are located next to VA facilities. An expansion from 38 to 64 is planned over the next few years. For more information on how Fisher House works with VA, [go online](#).

Happy Birthday Coast Guard Reserve

This week (February 19) the U.S. Coast Guard Reserve celebrated its 78th birthday. The U.S. Coast Guard Reserve began with the passage of the Coast Guard Reserve and Auxiliary Act of 19 February 1941. Coast Guard reservist normally train two days a month and may perform up to 15 days of Active Duty for training each year. The Coast Guard Reserve has about 8,000 men and women in service, most of them integrated directly with regular Coast Guard units. The Coast Guard Reserve has been a flexible, responsive and cost-effective workforce that has maintained its primary purpose of providing surge capacity when needed for Coast Guard missions.