

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 28, 2021

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, D.C. 20301

The Honorable Denis McDonough  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretaries Austin and McDonough:

As National Breast Cancer Awareness Month concludes, we are concerned about how toxic exposure affects women's health, including the potential increased risk of breast cancer.

While the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have made important progress in increasing services and resources for our female servicemembers and veterans, we must better understand and address the relationship between burn pit exposure and the health needs of our military. Currently, there is no published research that directly explains how exposure to burn pits has affected the health of women. But research does support the conclusion that environmental factors contribute to the risk of developing breast cancer, and we know that active duty servicemembers have a 20 to 40 percent higher risk of developing breast cancer than civilians. In addition, between 2000 and 2015, the VA reported that the number of women between the ages 45 to 64 diagnosed with breast cancer increased by five times. We encourage DoD and the VA to work together to conduct research into the relationship between toxic exposure during deployment and breast cancer in post-9/11 servicemembers and veterans.

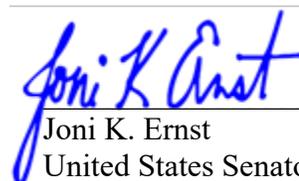
Additionally, the Congressionally Directed Medical Research at DoD reported that a majority of female servicemembers diagnosed with breast cancer are under the age of 40, and recent research found that these women have a higher mortality rate.<sup>1</sup> While we recognize the Departments' efforts to provide access to mammograms, we are concerned that women under the age of 40 who are at greater risk for developing cancer may not be receiving the screenings they need. It can take years for cancer to develop, and we urge DoD and the VA to make sure veterans are aware of the resources that are available to them so they can get the care they need.

We look forward to working with you to ensure that appropriate resources are provided to address the unique challenges facing female servicemembers and veterans. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Amy Klobuchar  
United States Senator



Joni K. Ernst  
United States Senator

<sup>1</sup> Zimmer, A. S., Zhu, K., Steeg, P. S., Wu, A., Gatti-Mays, M. E., Soltani, S., Perkins, J. G., Shao, S., Brown, D., Georg, M., Hu, H., Shriver, C. D., & Lipkowitz, S. (2018). Analysis of breast cancer in young women in the Department of Defense (DOD) database. *Breast cancer research and treatment*, 168(2), 501–511. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10549-017-4615-8>