

United States Senate  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 3, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20420

The Honorable Christopher C. Miller  
Acting Secretary of Defense  
U.S. Department of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Wilkie and Acting Secretary Miller:

We write to ask the Departments of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) to identify the steps the Departments are taking to improve the care for servicemembers and veterans previously exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances, who contract the coronavirus (COVID-19). It is critical that the Departments continue to develop, update and implement best practices for treating this class of patients with specific medical needs, especially as our understanding of the virus's disparate impact on patients with pre-existing medical conditions continues to grow.

In April, Senators Klobuchar and Rounds urged the VA to take additional measures to make certain that our at-risk veterans—including those exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances—receive the necessary medical care. In June, we introduced the *Pandemic Care for Burn Pits Exposure Act* to require DoD and VA medical professionals to ask any servicemember or veteran who has tested positive for a virus designated as a pandemic (including COVID-19) if they were previously exposed to burn pits. The legislation also requires servicemembers and veterans exposed to toxic airborne chemicals or stationed near an open burn pit to be automatically enrolled in the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry, unless they choose to opt out of enrollment. We believe these measures are necessary to properly treat this class of patients as we continue to experience increasing infection rates across the country.

By instructing physicians to discuss relevant environmental exposures when documenting each patient's medical history—and educating care providers about the potential risks servicemembers and veterans face during the pandemic—the Veterans Administration has taken important steps to ensure that patients who have experienced toxic exposure are properly treated. DoD and VA must also make full use of the data in the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry to properly care for our servicemembers and veterans during this public health crisis.

In the months since the pandemic began, medical research has documented one of the most important and challenging characteristics of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19—its widely disparate impacts on patients with pre-existing conditions, such as chronic obstructive


pulmonary disease (COPD), diabetes, obesity and so on.<sup>1</sup> The virus's tendency to cause varying responses in patients with different pre-existing medical conditions—coupled with our continued challenges in understanding the long-term health implications of exposure to burn pits—make research into the ways in which prior exposure to burn pits impacts a patient's response to COVID-19 infection essential.<sup>2</sup>

In light of these concerns, we respectfully request you answer the following questions:

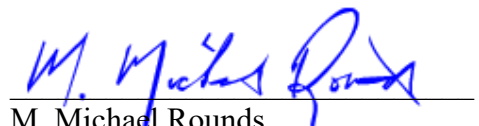
1. What steps are you currently taking to conduct research into the impact of prior exposure to burn pits on a patient's prognosis for recovery from COVID-19?
2. What steps have your Departments taken to keep servicemembers and veterans who tested positive for COVID-19 and have a history of toxic exposure informed of the ways in which their history of exposure may impact the course of their COVID-19 infection?
3. What steps have you taken to ensure that your Departments' medical professionals are taking a patient's prior exposure to burn pits into account when treating these patients for COVID-19 infection and any complications of this infection?
4. What steps have your Departments taken in recent months to expand telehealth capabilities to help minimize the potential for exposure to the coronavirus?

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Amy Klobuchar  
United States Senator



M. Michael Rounds  
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth  
United States Senator

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.news-medical.net/news/20201104/Correlations-found-between-long-COVID-patients-and-preexisting-health-conditions.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/692355.pdf>