

I thank Jack Kielty, Tunnel to Towers, and Sergeant Hamid for their great service to this great Nation.

CELEBRATING OCFA BEST AND BRAVEST AWARDS

(Ms. PORTER asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend her remarks.)

Ms. PORTER. Mr. Speaker, I rise to commemorate the 16th annual Orange County Fire Authority Best and Bravest Awards. This program celebrates OCFA's firefighters and professional staff, highlighting the brave service that keeps our communities safe.

For California, fire season is no longer just a season; it is year-round. Climate change has intensified the frequency and severity of wildfires. In this tough environment, OCFA personnel have consistently risen to the occasion, preventing tragedy, protecting lives, and safeguarding homes and possessions.

In Congress, I have proudly championed legislation to help firefighters. My bills would boost firefighter pay and benefits and standardize national disaster research to better support their work. Showing gratitude to first responders means supporting them both on and off the job.

Congratulations to the Best and Bravest Award winners, and I thank everyone at OCFA for their outstanding courage, dedication, and resilience.

DON'T DO WHAT WE DO IN CALIFORNIA

(Mr. LAMALFA asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. LAMALFA. Mr. Speaker, I come from California, which there is a certain amount of risk in saying that because we do a lot of wacky things there. It is a wonderful State with wonderful geography, wonderful weather, and so many great things, but the governance sometimes—I don't know.

What we are exporting currently is a lot of the work of the California Air Resources Board, which currently is trying to regulate locomotives into technology that doesn't even yet exist, and therefore, foist that same nontechnology onto other States. We are talking about the logistics of moving freight in California but also out of California and that can't be moved because they don't have a plan for that.

They would have them switch locomotives at the border, but with CARB's plans, they don't really care about that. They want to make everybody in the whole country buy locomotives to meet a Tier 4, they call it, which isn't even available yet. Beyond Tier 4, they want to go to zero emissions, which isn't really zero, the so-called electric trains. They are not even available. The technology isn't there, and CARB wants all of this done by the year 2030.

Imagine the logistics of getting food from California, which people rely on. Mr. Speaker, 99 percent of certain crops come from California. We won't be able to ship them out as well as the military material that might need to be moved out of our State in times of war or conflict. Anyway, don't do what we do in California.

PRESERVING A CIVIL WAR BATTLEFIELD

(Mr. MOONEY asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. MOONEY. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to commend the recently established public/private partnership between the Berkeley County Commission, the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation, and the Martinsburg-Berkeley County Parks and Recreation Board in West Virginia's Second Congressional District, which I am blessed to represent.

This partnership will lead to the establishment of Hoke's Run Battlefield Park near Falling Waters 163 years after the battle was fought, highlighting the importance of Berkeley County and West Virginia's role in the Civil War.

The planned preservation of the 10-acre battlefield where Union General Robert Patterson battled Confederate General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson will educate visitors on the small battle's historic importance to the first major battle of the Civil War at Bull Run. The park will feature a recreation trail, interpretive signage, and a pavilion.

I look forward to the opening of this new park, bringing area residents and visitors alike to learn more about the rich history of Berkeley County, West Virginia, as the northern gateway to the Shenandoah Valley.

WORKING FOR VETERANS' BENEFITS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 9, 2023, the gentleman from California (Mr. TAKANO) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material in the RECORD.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from California?

There was no objection.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I am honored to be here today with my friend, assistant Democratic leader JOE NEGUSE, to talk about my law, the Honoring our PACT Act.

It was signed into law by President Joe Biden in August of 2022 and has

since helped more than a million veterans and their survivors receive the healthcare and benefits that they have earned.

In the 116th Congress, we passed the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019 that helped blue water Navy veterans receive care and benefits for exposure to Agent Orange during the Vietnam war.

These veterans waited decades for this relief. I am so glad that we could help them cut red tape and make it easier for them to receive healthcare for certain conditions, but it took way too long to get it done.

After blue water Navy, we were hearing from veterans around the country about being exposed to burn pits and other toxins when they were serving our country more recently. They were experiencing serious illnesses that they thought were connected to their toxic exposure.

Many of these servicemembers were directed to throw trash, plastic, and other items into burn pits, and this meant breathing in the toxic air, or they were exposed to jet fuel for long periods of time due to their job in the service.

It is easy to look back and think that this was not a good idea, but they did not have a choice at that time and were following orders.

It was taking the Department of Veterans Affairs too long to address these veterans' illnesses on its own due to the perceived cost and the difficulty in obtaining the scientific evidence needed in order to help.

We knew there was a strong need, and with the lessons learned from blue water, we knew we needed to act. This was the origin of the Honoring our PACT Act.

When we send our servicemembers into harm's way, we make a pact to care for them when they come home. This is one of the most sacred promises in our country and the ultimate goal of this law.

Thanks to the PACT Act, veterans no longer need to prove the connection between their service and an illness. The law outlines 23 categories of presumptive respiratory illnesses and cancers, representing over 300 individual conditions for which veterans can quickly get healthcare and benefits. Since the law was signed, several more presumptive conditions have been added to the list with more on the way.

Congress was able to work together on a bipartisan basis to get this done for veterans. Unfortunately, not much has gotten done for veterans since then, which truly troubles me. Helping those who have served should be a non-partisan issue and one that gets due attention, no matter which party is in charge.

I will continue momentarily, but I yield to my friend from Colorado (Mr. NEGUSE), our assistant Democratic leader.

Mr. NEGUSE. First, let me say, Mr. Speaker, that we are so grateful to the

ranking member for his steadfast leadership in leading the Veterans' Affairs Committee, and of course, his leadership with respect to the PACT Act.

I couldn't be more grateful to the colleagues that I have the privilege of serving with in the House Democratic Caucus, whom the country will hear from tonight, many of whom are veterans, people like Representative DELUZIO and Representative CARBAJAL, individuals who have given a great deal to our country, made countless sacrifices, and now are leading the charge here in Congress to protect our veterans.

I couldn't be more grateful to people like Dr. RAUL RUIZ whose leadership year after year make the case for the Congress to treat this particular issue with the urgency that it deserves, ultimately culminating in the PACT Act.

The PACT Act, as you heard from our ranking member, marked the largest expansion of benefits in a generation, cutting red tape and waiting times for veterans who were exposed to toxins and developed certain illnesses.

It was historic in that it provided benefits to generations of veterans, many of whom were long forgotten. There are one million PACT Act claims, Mr. Speaker, and we are just getting started.

For the families who have suffered the ultimate loss, the PACT Act means access to life insurance, to tuition benefits for their surviving family members, home loan assistance, monthly stipends, and more.

Mr. Speaker, you will hear from Mr. JIM COSTA and Mr. TIM KENNEDY and so many other members of our caucus the same admonition, which is that we have to do everything in our power to provide for the families of fallen servicemembers.

We have made progress in that regard, but there is much more for us to do. House Democrats stand ready, as we always are and will be, to get that job done.

I thank the ranking member again for his leadership, I thank the members of the House Democratic Caucus for their leadership, and I look forward to making more progress in the days, months, and years ahead.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I yield to my friend from Pennsylvania (Mr. DELUZIO), a veteran, and up until recently, an esteemed member of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Mr. DELUZIO. Mr. Speaker, I thank the ranking member for yielding time.

I think we can all agree in this body that this country has a sacred obligation to care for those that wore the uniform, who served in peace or in war or both, and that starts with adequately funding and staffing the VA to make sure that those who have earned their benefits, who have earned their care, can receive them.

That is why the Honoring our PACT Act that the ranking member and so many others got through this Congress is such a big deal. It is why it is so

powerful. It expands VA healthcare and benefits for veterans exposed to toxic chemicals across generations who have served, and it fulfills that sacred promise this country has made.

Veterans have long been exposed to some nasty stuff in service in Vietnam, the Gulf war, Afghanistan, Iraq, and other places. My generation saw burn pit exposure in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. We now know how dangerous this exposure can be and is for folks; cancers and diseases.

The PACT Act meets this moment. It adds a presumption of service-related illnesses coming from that toxic exposure. It cuts through red tape that had been blocking too many veterans from the care they have earned.

We see the numbers. Over a million veterans and survivors have already had claims approved under the PACT Act. That is a big deal. It means those veterans and their families now have access to those benefits that are hard earned that their service ought to have guaranteed.

In this body we often have hot air, debates, all the rest. Here is some practical advice. Last year, we saw veterans have a deadline to submit their intent to file, and many did. That was to get backdated benefits back to when this bill passed the Congress in 2022.

Veterans and survivors who submitted that intent to file need to submit an actual claim as soon as possible if they have not yet done that. That is to ensure they get the most out of the PACT Act for those benefits that they have earned. They have a year after submitting intent to file to submit their final claim forms to receive those backdated benefits.

□ 1730

Mr. Speaker, VA.gov is the website to do it, to get more information, check the status of your claim. My office and the office, I am sure, of every Member here is willing to help a veteran. Go see a VSO, a veteran service organization, an accredited claims agent, an attorney. You can find some help.

I remind my fellow veterans of this: These are earned benefits. You have earned them through your service. Make sure that you are getting what you need to take care of yourself and your family.

The PACT Act is a big deal, but it is only going to be successful if we fund it, if we make sure every veteran in this country knows what they have earned, and we give the VA the resources they need to meet veterans' demands.

That is our task in this body. I will work with everyone here to get it done. I am proud of the work we have done in this Congress.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from California (Mr. RUIZ), who helped me champion veterans last Congress, an amazing doctor, and an amazing neighbor of mine.

Mr. RUIZ. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding.

The Honoring our PACT Act is the most significant expansion of healthcare access and benefits for veterans in generations.

Now, over 5 million veterans and family members will have the peace of mind that if they become ill due to their exposure to toxic burn pits or they are disabled and cannot work, or God forbid, they pass away, they will receive the benefits that they need to overcome an illness, the healthcare to be able to stay at home with their family because they are unable to work, and if they pass, they will have peace of mind that their family will get their benefits.

Look, for many years I have brought this issue up in committees, in the Veterans' Affairs Committee and the general public that veterans were dying of cancers, veterans were unable to breathe due to pulmonary illnesses, all of which were due to the toxic air that they breathe from the smoke from burn pits.

The initial excuses were the evidence does not show any correlation. As a scientist, I refuted that. They asked the wrong questions, and their methodologies were flawed.

Then the other excuse was that it was too expensive. Well, our values are to put the lives of our veterans first and foremost. We send them to war without consideration of the cost of war; therefore, it is our moral obligation to take care of veterans.

I fought this tooth and nail under the banner of the name of Jennifer Kepner, a veteran who served in Balad Air Base in Iraq who died of pancreatic cancer. Before she died, I met with her at home at her kitchen table. She made me promise that no other veteran should suffer what she went through in trying to get the care and the benefits for her family. We accomplished and fulfilled that promise when we introduced the presumptive benefits for warfighters exposed to burn pits and other toxins which was included in the Honoring our PACT Act, which was the heart and soul of the Honoring our PACT Act because it gave presumptive benefits to 23 illnesses and categories of illnesses which total over 300 illnesses—and that is continuing to grow.

The reason why we are here is because House Democrats continue to fight hard to ensure the implementation of the PACT Act.

Last year, I spoke very frequently about a pending deadline for veterans to file an intent to file a claim for the PACT Act, which if they did so within a year after they filed that intent to file, they would get presumptive benefits and backpay to the day that the law was enacted.

We are nearing the deadline of that intent to file, which means that veterans had a year to file their claim, to get that backpay until the day the law was signed, and if they haven't then they should do so before August 14 or before the year of when they filed that intent.

If they do so, then they will get their pay and their benefits to the date of when the law was signed. If they don't or if they miss that year after they filed that intent, they should not despair. It is not as if this is your last chance of getting the claims; the only difference will be that they will get their benefits backtracked to the date that they filed their claim from that point on.

It is very urgent that we inform our veterans that if they filed an intent to file that they file the claim before the end of the year to the date that they filed their intent to file. That is why it is very important that veterans go to VA.gov, the VA website, or call 1-800-827-1000, call their Members of Congress, work with their county veteran service organizations representative or any of the VSOs and get the information that is needed so they don't miss out on the additional full benefits that the PACT Act gave our veterans.

Mr. Speaker, I again thank everybody who was involved. I thank President Biden and Secretary McDonough who were the game changers during this long fight that we have been having that culminated in such a victory for our veterans.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, let me add that Representative RUIZ—Dr. RUIZ was instrumental in the part of this PACT Act package that dealt with the 23 presumptive illnesses.

Let's be clear that the 23 presumptive illnesses aren't just 23 diseases. They are actually buckets, Mr. Speaker, 23 buckets, we are talking more like 300 illnesses that are covered by the PACT Act.

We endeavored hard to make sure that veterans did not have to wait decades for all of the hard scientific evidence to come in. We relied on analogues, such as the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers, and the toxic substances that our first responders were subjected to, and we observed that those first responders had a pattern of illnesses that began to arise in numbers that did not match what would be in the general population and we could use such approaches to begin to identify those very similar kinds of diseases that were arising from exposure to toxic burn pits.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from California (Mr. COSTA), a longtime advocate for veterans.

Mr. COSTA. Mr. Speaker, I commend the hard work and the efforts and the passion that Representative TAKANO, the ranking member on the committee and previous chair, has given to this issue. The hard work finally has paid off, and for that we thank him.

For far too long, our Nation has failed to honor its promise to all our veterans who are victims of toxic exposures. It is our sacred obligation, I believe, to take care of the troops we send in harm's way—that is the American way—and to take care of them and their families when they return home.

Sadly, nearly 3.5 million veterans have been exposed to the contaminants

such as burn pits, toxic fragments, radiation, and other hazardous materials during their deployment.

Until the mid-2010s, the burn pits were commonly used in Iraq and Afghanistan and other locations to dispose of waste collected at military bases.

Well, we have discovered that the aftermath has resulted in drastic impacts to those veterans. Nearly 3.5 million deployed veterans were exposed to burn pits in the last 30 years. Think about that, 3.5 million veterans. Mr. Speaker, 70 percent of the disability claims involving these toxic exposures were denied—they were denied by the Veterans Administration, and that is just wrong—leaving many of them, including 750,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, without any benefits. That is disgraceful.

House Democrats and President Biden fought like hell to change this, and we did. The PACT Act is the largest expansion—think about this—the largest expansion of benefits for service for toxic-exposed veterans in over 30 years through the hard work of Representative TAKANO and other members on that committee joining with our Democratic Caucus.

We have added over 23 presumptive conditions, or categories as was noted before, for burn pits and Agent Orange and expanded the VA healthcare to millions of veterans, including those who served in Vietnam, the Gulf war, and post-9/11 eras.

Mr. Speaker, 2 years later, we are beginning to see the results. It is long overdue. More than 5.6 million veterans have received screenings for toxic exposures. Over 1 million veteran claims have been granted by the Veterans Administration, a 75 percent approval rate for PACT Act-related claims.

What a change.

Nearly 24,000 veterans in my district alone, the 24th District in the San Joaquin Valley, are eligible for benefits, including 2,100 processed claims and a total of over \$5.17 billion in retroactive awards for PACT Act-related benefits for veterans and their survivors. This is a sea change. It is a big deal.

I thank President Biden, and I thank Secretary McDonough for their help. I thank all those Members who have been involved in this for their hard work. I am proud to have been a co-sponsor and to have voted for this historic law that has improved the lives of veterans in my district and nationwide and their families, for the families sacrifice, as well, and we should never ever forget that.

In closing, we must continue to build upon the success and to ensure that our veterans can retire with the dignity and the respect they deserve because they have earned it. They have earned it.

The bottom line is this: For those men and women who are currently serving our country, we thank you, and we think of you every day. For the veterans and their families—as I said, the

families sacrifice, as well—a grateful nation can never ever say thank you enough.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from California (Mr. CARBAJAL), a strong advocate for veterans, a marine veteran himself and my good friend.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding.

Mr. Speaker, as a proud marine veteran and the Representative for more than 34,000 of my fellow veterans across California's 24th Congressional District, I am proud to see the real impact that the Honoring our PACT Act has had for veterans and their families across the United States.

Mr. Speaker, 2 years ago, we came together with President Joe Biden to pass the largest and most significant expansion of veterans benefits in more than 30 years.

Since then, we have seen more than 1.5 million claims filed for toxic exposures and other health risks resulting from service in Vietnam, the Gulf war, and wars of the post-9/11 era.

More than 2,000 of those claims have come from veterans in my own region.

We cannot give up the momentum on this important bill.

While we have seen so many already utilizing these expanded benefits, current estimates suggest that more than 5 million veterans were exposed to some amount of toxic substances during their military service.

That is why I am encouraging all veterans who submitted an intent to file last summer make sure they are following through and submitting an actual claim as soon as possible to ensure that our veterans can get backdated benefits to the date that this bill was signed into law.

I thank Ranking Member TAKANO and the House Democratic leadership for helping uplift this important deadline and reminding the American people in our veteran communities that we are still here every week fighting for their health, safety, and prosperity, all of which were earned by their years and decades of service.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I have the urge to say "oorah." I thank the gentleman for his service to our country, not only as a Representative but also as a marine veteran.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from Rhode Island (Mr. MAGAZINER).

□ 1745

Mr. MAGAZINER. Mr. Speaker, "Our debt to the heroic men and valiant women in the service of our country can never be repaid. They have earned our undying gratitude." These words spoken by President Harry Truman still ring true to this day.

Millions of servicemembers and veterans have answered the call to serve and protect the freedoms that we hold dear. Just as our Nation's servicemembers make a promise to leave no one behind on the battlefield, we must leave no veteran behind when they come home.

The PACT Act honors this promise. It is the largest expansion of VA benefits in a generation and ensures that millions of veterans who have been exposed to Agent Orange, burn pits, and other toxins during their military service receive the care that they have earned and deserve.

The PACT Act is one of the greatest accomplishments of the Biden-Harris administration, and it was made possible by the leadership of then-Speaker NANCY PELOSI and Chairman MARK TAKANO, among many others.

In Rhode Island, more than 3,200 veterans have already received PACT Act benefits with another 4,000 projected to be added to the program in the coming years. Over 1 million veterans and their families have received PACT Act benefits nationally.

I have been working very closely with my Rhode Island Second Congressional District military and veterans advisory committee to spread the word about the PACT Act and how veterans in our district can access those benefits.

However, there is still more work to be done. All too often, benefits claims sharks exploit veterans and their families with exorbitant fees. We must do more to protect veterans and their families from these predatory practices.

We must also ensure that veterans and their family members who were exposed to toxic PFAS chemicals on military bases and elsewhere receive the healthcare that they need, and I have cosponsored legislation to make that a reality.

We must always fight to ensure that veterans receive the care and benefits they deserve because they deserve nothing but the very best.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I yield to my good friend from North Carolina, a great champion of veterans, Representative DEBORAH ROSS.

Ms. ROSS. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to celebrate the historic PACT Act. Thanks to this critical legislation, we are closer today than ever to ensuring every single veteran has access to the exceptional care and benefits they deserve.

In less than 2 years, I am happy to report, as my colleagues have also reported, 1 million PACT Act claims have been granted to more than 800,000 veterans and survivors across the country.

As the proud daughter of an Air Force veteran and a doctor, it is especially meaningful to recognize this milestone today.

We make a sacred promise to all of our Nation's veterans that after bravely serving our country in uniform, we will care for them when they return home. That is why we can and must do more to ensure that no veteran faces financial or logistical barriers to accessing the medical treatment and benefits they are owed.

Crucially, the PACT Act included the Camp Lejeune Justice Act, our bipar-

tisan bill to enable servicemembers from Camp Lejeune who were exposed to toxic chemicals to pursue long-overdue justice in court.

This legislation, unfortunately, did not go quite far enough, and too many veterans continue to face unacceptable barriers to accessing the remedies.

I recently introduced, with Congressman GREG MURPHY, who is also a doctor, the bipartisan Camp Lejeune Justice Corrections Act to make additional reforms, including capping attorney's fees, expanding jurisdiction to alleviate the large backlog of cases our courts are facing, and clarifying the right to a jury trial.

Today and every day, let's continue the fight to support our courageous veterans, servicemembers, and their families.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman from North Carolina for her work on the section of the PACT Act that relates to justice for those servicemembers who were in residence at Camp Lejeune. It is a decades-long effort to bring justice for those members, and I urge our government to move as expeditiously as possible to get those claims settled with all of our veterans across the country who have served at Camp Lejeune.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to my friend from Ohio, a member of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs and a fierce advocate for veterans, Representative GREG LANDSMAN.

Mr. LANDSMAN. Mr. Speaker, I thank Representative TAKANO for hosting tonight and for his leadership on the PACT Act, which has helped so many veterans.

Our veterans and servicemembers have sacrificed so much on behalf of all of us. We know now that during their service, millions were exposed to toxic substances, and these exposures have caused serious health issues for so many.

This is why, 2 years ago, Representative TAKANO and others passed the PACT Act. This landmark legislation expanded healthcare for veterans exposed to these toxic substances. Since its passage, over 32,000 Ohioans and over 1 million veterans nationwide have had their PACT Act claims granted by the VA. This means that these folks are finally getting the healthcare they deserve.

As a member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am proud to serve our veterans and advocate for better benefits, more funding, and continued investment in their well-being.

In our district, we have over 30,000 veterans. By ensuring the continued acceptance of PACT Act claims, funding the VA properly, and passing important veteran legislation like our Employing Veterans to Feed America Act, which provides jobs for veterans, we are doing important work.

I am grateful for all the veterans in southwest Ohio and across the country. I promise to keep working to improve their lives and the lives of their loved ones.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I thank Congressman LANDSMAN for his amazing advocacy for our Nation's veterans.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to my good friend from the State of New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment, Representative MELANIE STANSBURY.

Ms. STANSBURY. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to celebrate and honor our veterans and to celebrate and highlight the extraordinary passage of the PACT Act, which is the single-most significant expansion of veterans' benefits in generations. We passed that bill here in Congress under Democratic leadership with the support of President Joe Biden just 2 years ago.

It expands VA benefits to over 3 million veterans across the United States. In New Mexico, we have a long and proud tradition of service that extends across all of our communities, from the Navajo Code Talkers and the heroes of Bataan to the veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The courage, valor, and dedication of our veterans are woven into the very fabric of who we are as New Mexicans. In fact, over 133,000 New Mexicans have served this great Nation, including my own veteran at home, my partner who served this country in the United States Marine Corps.

To all of our veterans and Active-Duty military, we thank them every day for their service and sacrifice. We are here because of the sacrifices they have made to defend this country and our democracy.

We must also thank those veterans who fought to pass the PACT Act itself, including, among them, New Mexico's own Master Sergeant Jesse Baca of the New Mexico Air National Guard and his wife, Maria, who fought for over a decade for our veterans exposed to burn pits and who stood on the steps of this Capitol Building to help get the PACT Act passed.

Now, it is up to us as leaders across the country to ensure that our veterans and our families are cared for. We know that when we care for our veterans, we care for New Mexicans.

Voting for the PACT Act was one of the proudest moments of my service to this country here in Congress. Today, one of my greatest and most awesome and humbling duties is to ensure that every New Mexican veteran accesses the benefits of the PACT Act.

To those who have not yet signed up who have served this country and, over the course of their service, were exposed to burn pits, toxins, and other workplace hazards, there is still time. The VA is there for them. They have their backs, and so do we.

To all of our veterans who have served this great country, they have put everything on the line. Now, it is our turn for the PACT Act to serve them. I thank them for their service and sacrifice.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I yield to another great friend from the great State of North Carolina, an amazing advocate for veterans and someone who

has been a fierce advocate for justice for our Camp Lejeune veterans, the amazing Representative KATHY MANNING.

Ms. MANNING. Mr. Speaker, I thank the chairman for his hard work and friendship.

Mr. Speaker, for far too long, millions of veterans exposed to toxins like burn pits and contaminated water did not receive the care and benefits they earned. That is why, in the last Congress, House Democrats took action to correct this injustice.

I was proud to help pass the PACT Act, historic legislation to deliver long-overdue benefits and healthcare to 3.5 million veterans exposed to toxins while serving our country.

The PACT Act expanded eligibility for healthcare at the VA, including expanded coverage for illnesses related to Agent Orange. For veterans' families who lost their loved ones, the law may provide monthly stipends and access to life insurance, among other benefits.

Now, 2 years after President Biden signed the PACT Act into law, it is helping veterans and their families across the country. The VA has received over 1.4 million PACT Act claims, including over 4,700 claims from veterans in my home district, North Carolina's Sixth District.

Our country has an obligation to care for those who bravely serve our Nation. With the PACT Act, Democrats and the Biden administration are delivering on that promise. I was proud to help pass this deeply important legislation and support the thousands of veterans in my district who are now able to get the care they need.

Mr. Speaker, I will always work to honor the sacrifices America's veterans have made and to ensure they are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I yield to my good friend from the State of Minnesota, another great champion of veterans and someone who has a veteran's medical center in her district, Representative ILHAN OMAR.

Ms. OMAR. Mr. Speaker, 2 years ago, we passed the PACT Act, one of the most consequential pieces of legislation to address the severe health problems that so many of our veterans who served our great country are facing. I thank my colleague, Congressman MARK TAKANO, for his leadership in getting this bill across the finish line.

□ 1800

This bill has made it easier for veterans and their families to get the relief and the care they deserve.

I have heard from so many Minnesotans on how life-changing this legislation has been, from Brian who lost his wife to pancreatic cancer to Andrew who lost his brother to leukemia and to Amanda whose husband Rafael was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer and is now getting the treatment he deserves because of the PACT Act.

All of the family members and veterans I have met with know this bill

could have been a game changer for them, their loved one, or just how crucial it is to help the next veteran.

Whether it was Agent Orange in Vietnam or exposure to toxic waters at Camp Lejeune or burn pits and other toxic exposures in Iraq and Afghanistan, this is a part of our military's history and legacy. I am glad we are finally addressing it in the most comprehensive way it deserves.

While I am grateful this program has been enacted to provide veterans and their loved ones with the care and benefits they have earned and deserve, only a small percentage of Minnesotans are taking advantage of this program. Less than 10,000 veterans out of more than 100,000 veterans in Minnesota who qualify under this program have enrolled. It is crucial that we continue to get the word out about this lifesaving program.

Mr. Speaker, to see if you or someone you know qualifies, please go to va.gov/pact.

I will not stop fighting until every one of my constituents who is eligible receives the care they deserve, and I will keep advocating for crucial reforms to stop future servicemen and -women from experiencing the same hardships, because when we ask young people to serve our country in uniform, we should not also be asking them to expose their bodies to toxins and to live with the consequences of those toxins for the rest of their lives.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I thank Representative ILHAN OMAR for all her amazing work to help the veterans in her district and across our country.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from New York (Mr. KENNEDY), who is the newest member of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. Speaker, I rise to honor the veterans who have made great personal sacrifices to serve our country.

To all those who have donned the military uniform, on behalf of a grateful nation, I say thank you.

First, I would like to express my gratitude to Assistant Leader JOE NEGUSE and Ranking Member MARK TAKANO for holding this Special Order to honor our veterans. From burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan to Agent Orange in Vietnam, veterans exposed to toxic substances face challenges that impact their quality of life and long-term health.

We owe it to our veterans who have defended democracy and preserved our precious freedoms to deliver the benefits that they have earned and deserved. That is why Democrats passed and President Biden signed into law the PACT Act which represents the largest expansion of benefits and services for veterans exposed to toxins during their time in service in over 30 years.

To date, over 1 million PACT Act claims have been approved. People are receiving the care and benefits that they need and deserve. As an added

success, the law has led to an increase in veterans accessing medical services from VA hospitals, crucially including a generation of Vietnam veterans. Additionally, the widows of veterans will receive compensation because of this law, fulfilling the Nation's duty of care to the families of veterans.

The PACT Act is making a difference for veterans in New York and across the country in accessing the benefits that they need to lead healthy lives.

Again, I say to our veterans: our Nation is forever indebted to you for your noble service. God bless you all.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I thank Representative KENNEDY for hitting the ground running as one of our newest Representatives. I know he is going to be getting the message out to the veterans who live in his district to make sure that they submit their PACT Act claims and to access the benefits that they have earned through their service.

When President Biden signed the Honoring our PACT Act, he declared that every eligible veteran should be able to apply immediately. We had written the law in such a way that the healthcare and benefits would be phased in, but President Biden decided that every veteran should be able to apply for benefits as soon as it became law.

Within 24 hours, the Department of Veterans Affairs had created a website where veterans and their families could learn more about the law and how to apply for benefits. This shows how committed President Biden has been with House Democrats to support the veteran community. He understood what a difference this important law would make for veterans, and he did not want them to wait to be able to apply.

The successful implementation of the PACT Act shows that the Biden Administration was invested in helping veterans and implemented this law far faster than most laws. We all know, and we all knew veterans and their families could not wait any longer. This was many years coming for veterans who were already facing illness or cancer from toxic exposure, and many of these veterans were able to get updated disability ratings and access to healthcare.

I find it odd that while the PACT Act is sometimes known as the burn pits bill, when we talk about veterans waiting for decades, the PACT Act actually addressed Agent Orange claims and exposure to Agent Orange that had not been covered by previous legislation. So this took care of unfinished business with Agent Orange and exposure to radiation. So those veterans who were from previous conflicts, conflicts previous to Afghanistan and Iraq, were also eligible to get their toxic exposure illnesses addressed and covered by this legislation.

In fact, this legislation covers veterans who were involved in the global war on terror around the world. It was

not just confined to those veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Before the PACT Act, veterans were likely to need to prove exposure to specific chemicals in order to receive healthcare and benefits. This is nearly impossible when talking about burn pits because of the myriad of materials that were burned in them. Over 6 million veterans and their survivors have completed a toxic exposure screening to ensure they are eligible for care and benefits now and in the future.

VA also announced recently that over 1 million veterans had been granted their disability benefits, which is tremendous news, less than 2 years since this bill became law.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the veterans service organizations who all came together to support this bill and willed it into law. They showed Congress and President Biden just how important it was that we took care of veterans and their survivors.

Democrats and President Biden have proven time and time again that we do not just say thank you for your service. Our actions show just how grateful we are for that service and that we were willing to pay for all the costs of war.

So I want to thank Assistant Leader NEGUSE and all of my colleagues who have joined me on the floor today for this Special Order hour on the Honoring our PACT Act.

I am proud to have authored this important legislation that has helped thousands of veterans.

I am grateful to Speaker Emerita PELOSI who understood that we needed to deliver for veterans in the 117th Congress and who was a key player in getting this legislation over the finish line.

I want to thank President Biden for his continued support of the veteran community. I don't know of a President who has any greater love for veterans than President Biden. It is who he is. So it is with great sincerity and great emotion that I thank him for his decades of service to our veterans. As I said much earlier, he decided that all eligible veterans would be immediately able to apply for benefits instead of the original phased-in approach. He knew how critical this would be for countless veterans and their families.

We put partisanship aside and came together to help veterans and their families. More than 1 million veterans and survivors have already received benefits, and thousands more veterans have signed up for VA healthcare.

However, as I said earlier, there are some 300,000 veterans who have submitted an intent to file at some point last year who have 365 days to actually submit their claim. For most of these veterans, this 365-day window is this month or early August. In order to receive backdated benefits back to 2022, these veterans need to submit their claims as soon as possible.

However, we are not going to stop here. While we celebrate the Honor the

PACT Act and the more than 1 million veterans who have benefited from it, we know there is more work to do. As ranking member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am working to end veteran homelessness and to make the VA an even more welcome place for women and LGBTQ+ veterans and stop attempts at more privatization of VA healthcare.

We made a solemn promise to our servicemembers that if they serve our country, then we will take care of them. This means every veteran.

We also ensure and will ensure they get the best possible care at VA facilities. We will honor our pact with them, and we will honor the promise that we made to them with my legislation, but I will not stop working to improve the lives and livelihoods of veterans around the country.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from Colorado (Mr. NEGUSE), who is the assistant leader, to have the last word for tonight's Special Order hour.

Mr. NEGUSE. Mr. Speaker, I thank the ranking member, again, for his leadership, his clarity of conviction, and the steadfast commitment that he has shown to our Nation's veterans time and time again. I certainly could not say it any better than he has, as you have heard, Mr. Speaker, from a wide cross section of the House Democratic Caucus, Members representing every community in our great country.

Our commitment to our Nation's veterans is rock solid. It is evidenced by the work that Ranking Member TAKANO and House Democrats, in partnership with President Biden, were able to ultimately accomplish in the last Congress, as you can see, Mr. Speaker, 1 million claims under the PACT Act, real families, real stories, and real impacts for countless veterans who have made incredible sacrifices for our country. We are indebted to them, and we will continue our commitment to them in the weeks, the months, and the years ahead led by Ranking Member TAKANO and by the leadership of the Members whom you have heard from this evening.

I thank the ranking member for yielding.

Mr. TAKANO. Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank Office of Assistant Leader JOE NEGUSE and Ranking Member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee MARK TAKANO for hosting this special order hour and helping to raise awareness about the extended efforts made to secure and expand PACT Act benefits for over 1 million veterans and survivors.

The landmark bipartisan Sergeant First Class Health Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act, otherwise known as the PACT Act, was signed into law in 2022, enacting perhaps the largest health care and benefit expansion in VA history.

This law provides expanded benefits to Veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic substances, helping generations of Veterans—and their survivors, receive the critical care they deserve.

And as of 2024, these VA health care benefits were expanded to millions of Veterans—years earlier than initially called for by the 2022 passage of the PACT Act.

As a senior member of this Congress and a longtime supporter of Veterans, I know the passage of this law has been a step in the right direction to address all harms Veterans in America sadly face and continue to face, particularly Black and minority Veterans.

There is a long and painful history of denial of service-related toxic exposure that dates back to nuclear testing conducted during and in the decades following WWII that cause premature deaths, cancers and other service-related injuries.

For decades, millions of Veterans have unknowingly been exposed to toxic substances and radiation during their military service.

As a result of these exposures, Veterans have had to face a range of serious health complications, including many types of cancers, cardiovascular, respiratory, and neurological disorders, and other chronic illnesses.

Although the severity of the health issues can vary, many Veterans have faced debilitating conditions that require ongoing medical care and support and can cause disability, reduced quality of life, and premature death.

Current estimates suggest that more than 5 million Veterans were exposed to toxic substances or radiation during their service.

The type and extent of exposures vary significantly, depending on the time and location of a Veterans' military service.

During World War II, service members involved in construction projects and serving on ships were exposed to asbestos.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Veterans involved in nuclear testing and handling nuclear weapons risked exposure to radioactive materials.

During the Vietnam War Veterans faced exposure to Agent Orange, a toxic herbicide containing dioxin.

In particular, the pattern of not acknowledging service-related toxic exposure includes Agent Orange service-related exposure that was not acknowledged until passage of the Agent Orange Act of 1991.

Agent Orange was a herbicide used to defoliate vegetation and kill crops over the rural landscape in Vietnam from 1961 to 1971.

The health conditions caused by this exposure were compounded by mental distress when the government denied that the conditions were linked to Vietnam era military service.

Before passage of the PACT Act, Veterans with toxic exposures had to prove a direct connection between their medical conditions and a specific toxic exposure that they faced during their military service.

Because of the difficulty connecting a condition to an exposure, the VA denied nearly 80 percent of disability claims related to burn pit exposures before the passage of the PACT Act.

The PACT Act sought to remedy this from ever happening again.

In particular, the law added a "presumptive" service connection for hundreds of conditions linked to burn pits, agent orange, and other hazards while serving our country, and thus lowered the burden of proof required to receive disability benefits.

Now, the average nationwide percent service connection rate for Veterans with these granted claims is 70 percent, meaning that

they receive more than \$20,000 in earned benefits payments from VA each year.

Additionally, nationwide, we know that Veterans have submitted over one million total claims since the PACT Act was enacted. And over 76 percent of all claims have been approved, a sharp increase from pre-PACT levels—resulting in over \$2.4 billion in benefits to Veterans and the survivors.

These benefits are also particularly important to the state of Texas, which has the largest veteran population in the U.S.

Since its enactment in 2022, Texas has led the Nation in Veterans filing disability claims associated with the PACT Act at over 161,920.

From these PACT Act-related claims, VA has delivered more than \$600,231,041.75 in earned benefits to Texas Veterans and survivors.

Importantly, since the PACT Act was signed into law, more than 68,867 Texas Veterans have also signed up for VA health care.

These numbers make clear that the PACT Act is working, ensuring that the courageous men and women who serve our country avoid having to navigate unnecessary webs of red tape to receive treatment or benefits.

Just as our Veterans made a commitment to serve our Nation, we too have a responsibility to serve them long after they take off the uniform.

With the passage of the PACT Act and the proactive steps the Administration has taken following its enactment to ensure that actual benefits are realized for over one million Veterans, Congress has done just that.

□ 1815

MATH IS UNCOMFORTABLE

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 9, 2023, the gentleman from Arizona (Mr. SCHWEIKERT) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the majority leader.

Mr. SCHWEIKERT. Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from Alabama (Mr. CARL).

HONORING BALDWIN COUNTY SHERIFF HUEY
"HOSS" MACK

Mr. CARL. Mr. Speaker, I proudly rise today to honor Baldwin County Sheriff Huey "Hoss" Mack, who will be retiring later this year and will become the director of Alabama Sheriffs Association.

Sheriff Hoss Mack served as the county sheriff for the last 18 years. His educational background includes a degree in criminal justice and a master's degree in human resource management.

He began service in Baldwin County Sheriff's Office in 1989 before becoming sheriff and was elected in 2006. Sheriff Hoss Mack has always been heavily involved in multiple criminal justice organizations, including both the Alabama and the National Sheriffs' Association. Not only has Hoss served Baldwin County with the utmost integrity, but he has been a friend of mine, and I appreciate that.

He is a true American and a true public servant. Baldwin County is blessed

to have had Sheriff Hoss Mack for the last 35 years, and I wish him fair winds and good luck in his next endeavor.

Mr. SCHWEIKERT. Mr. Speaker, we are going to try to do something a little tricky this evening. You are going to see the continuing theme of, hey, here is where we are borrowing and here is where the borrowing is coming from.

Then I am going to hit on some of the things that—what is the next one—drive me almost insane on the questions I get here, the things I get on this stupid thing. I have come to this conclusion: We live in a world where the propaganda, the fake information, and the distortion fields around us actually do not want America to succeed.

That is a pretty dark thing to say, but let's actually walk through my theory. I am going to make the point. On some of these presentations, I have been blessed. If you go on YouTube, I had one a couple months ago, I think there is, like, 1.3 million views. Go look at the comments section. I will argue about half those comments are bots. They are fake.

You see things like: Well, if you just didn't give any money to Israel, we could balance the budget. You start to realize that there is a world out there that takes advantage of our open society, that comes at us with things that are lies, and the poor person out there who is just trying to take care of their family, on occasion, grabs their phone, tries to read little bits of news, maybe reads a comment or two, and they don't realize the information coming at them is absolute crap.

Then the other problem that I am going to show here is when I have my own President get behind a microphone, look at the American people, and say things that are absolutely not true. Then an idiot like myself tries to come up and say: I have a path. There is a path. If I can get my brothers and sisters on the left to work with us on the right, there is a path to save this country.

It is really hard when the State of the Union goes on that podium right there and says things that are absolutely not true.

Does that mean they are also a deliverer of fake information because math is hard? Math is uncomfortable. Telling the truth is hard. Maybe this place has lied for so many decades that the public says: Look, we are just going to believe whatever is comfortable.

Let's actually walk through, first, a little bit of reality here. I will start with this chart because it sort of lays out where we are at today. Do you see the red? That red area is 74 percent of the spending, and 74 percent of the spending in this place is on auto pilot. We don't get to vote on it.

Do you see the blue? That is what I get to vote on. That is defense and non-defense discretionary. I get to vote on that. Every dime of it is borrowed. Every dime a Member of Congress votes on is borrowed money. Also,

guess what—we are in so much trouble—I have net interest on this, which I think is unfair because there is this thing called net. That is the publicly borrowed. That is where the Treasury sells bonds.

I think, this week, we are selling \$111 billion—maybe it is \$112 billion or \$113 billion—in three different auctions this week just to finance our insatiable spending because, remember—this is one of the things I find is uncomfortable even at home—100 percent of the borrowing from today through the next 30 years, according to CBO, is interest, Medicare, and if we backfill Social Security in a decade from now. It is demographics.

Yet, how do you make policy? There are ways to fix it with policy. When the leader of the free world looks into a camera and says things that are just insane when it comes to being on a calculator.

Take a look one more time. Non-defense discretionary, defense, all of that is borrowed, and a wedge—I should do a chart that shows you how much is borrowed money. I originally thought we might be at \$2.5 trillion borrowing this year. Some of the tax receipts are a little bit better. Some of the spiking growth that we had in the first part of the fiscal year on healthcare costs have flattened ever so slightly, so we are probably going to end up borrowing around \$2.3 trillion this year.

What that means is even part of the mandatory spending, Medicare, because remember, Medicare isn't all on the trust fund. The trust fund only covers 38, 40 percent. The rest comes out of the general fund. Once again, look at this chart and understand your government functionally is an insurance company with an army. That is meant to be sarcastic, but it is meant to sink in.

Let's actually walk through. I am going to walk through a couple of these just to sort of lay out where we are actually at. CBO predicts by 2054, so 30 years from now, budget deficits are entirely driven by Social Security and Medicare shortfalls.

We are not allowed to say that, are we? Does anyone remember the State of the Union? There was a handful of us, Democrats and Republicans, who had been quietly working for a year trying to put together a plan to save Social Security in the long run.

The President gets there and says: Promise me you won't talk about Social Security or Medicare. People look terrified and go: Okay. Yes, good campaign issue. They care more about winning the next election than protecting seniors. It is the great lie around here. You talk about it saying: I want to find a way to modernize and save, and you will get the crap kicked out of you. You also told the truth.

You have to look at the data, the charts. Remember, the SSA, the Social Security Administration's actuary numbers are actually substantially more optimistic than the Congressional Budget Office, so we are going to