

All Afflicted Veterans Deserve Assistance



A common goal of Vietnam veterans struggling with afflictions linked to Agent Orange but excluded from government benefits is to get what they deserve before their ailments kill them.

Visit the website of the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Association and you will find an “in memoriam” list of veterans who didn’t make it. These are ex-soldiers who risked their lives for our country, and suffered because of exposure to a toxin dispersed by our country, but were denied help by our country.

Arbitrarily, the federal government has limited benefits to veterans who served on land in Vietnam or on its inland waterways. Soldiers stationed on board ships along Vietnam’s coast, who were also exposed to Agent Orange through the ships’ drinking water, have been shut out.

Bills now being pushed by Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., in the Senate and Chris Gibson, R-N.Y., in the House could right this longstanding wrong. The bills should be passed soon, while some of these veterans are still alive to collect the benefits they are due.

Too many have already perished with payment pending. They were forced to deal on their own with serious diseases such as leukemia and diabetes that have been tied to Agent Orange exposure.

Gillibrand and Gibson have been pushing for years to have the eligibility for Agent Orange benefits extended to blue water veterans. Pushing them has been the Blue Water Navy group and Military-Veterans Advocacy, national organizations that both have sparkplug and indefatigable force of nature Susie Belanger in leadership positions. Belanger lives in Wilton and is the wife of a Navy veteran. She is one of thousands of spouses and children of blue water Vietnam veterans also hurt by their arbitrary exclusion from benefits.

In 2011, this newspaper wrote about one such blue water veteran and his wife, Charles and Dolores Cooley of Fort Edward, whose benefits had been cut off by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The Cooleys were draining their savings and in danger of losing their house. Because of the publicity in *The Post-Star*, the Department of Veterans Affairs reviewed Cooley’s case and restored his benefits at a higher level. It also gave the Cooleys a large lump sum payment to compensate for benefits that were wrongly withheld.

But helping only veterans whose stories land on the front page is neither fair nor sensible. The federal government must acknowledge that sailors on ships in the seas around Vietnam also faced exposure. The ships drew drinking water from the sea, processing it through desalinization systems that concentrated the toxin in Agent Orange.

Australia, which sent ships to Vietnam as an ally of the U.S., has recognized the danger from on-board water systems. Australia compensates its blue water veterans suffering from diseases linked to Agent Orange exposure.

For years, Agent Orange was emblematic of the tendency of the U.S. military to use up its soldiers and throw them away. After years of resisting, the government finally recognized that many thousands of soldiers had been poisoned by the dioxin in Agent Orange and deserved help.

That help should be extended to all the veterans who were exposed. Gillibrand, a Democrat, and Gibson, a Republican, are showing the way with their bipartisan effort. Everyone in Congress should line up behind them, because we can afford to provide these veterans with benefits, and we are obligated to do so.

Local editorials represent the opinion of The Post-Star's editorial board, which consists of Publisher Terry Coomes, Editor Ken Tingley, Projects Editor Will Doolittle, Controller/Operations Director Brian Corcoran and citizen representative Jerri Lynn Cook.