

IAVA says burn pit exposure could be "the Agent Orange of our era"



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Last week, when Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) Chief Policy Officer, Army vet Melissa Bryant, spoke before the Senate and House Committee on Veterans Affairs, one of the items she addressed was the exposure of vets to toxic exposure to chemicals, metals and other hazardous materials through burn pits. During her testimony, she told them she believes these exposures could be "the Agent Orange of our era."

This statement came from both her fear of what lies ahead and her experience with the past as Bryant was exposed to burn pits in Baghdad, and her father's exposure to Agent Orange during his tour in Vietnam.

"I was helping him look through his VA disability claims and he was speaking to all the issues of Agent Orange which you can trace back to when he was in Vietnam in 1968," Bryant says. "So, 50 years later he is still suffering from the effects of walking through defoliated areas with Agent Orange. So that's something that from my deployment experience a decade ago, I have to question, where am I going to be 40 years from now?"

It's a concern she says many IAVA members share, and a concern which the courts recently [ruled is valid](#). Even aside from that legal ruling, Bryant says the wide-ranging effects on a large number of veterans made the inclusion of toxic exposure on the VSO's 2018 ["Big 6" legislative priorities](#) a no-brainer. When it comes to tackling the issue she says it will require an increase in the amount of data taken in on who may have been affected, and a chain of custody for that data after it is recorded.

"We need to ensure that we are capturing the data of those who were exposed downrange," Bryant says. "It needs to start from the DOD side and then transfer over into what hopefully will be in your electronic health record as you become a veteran and transition into the VA... ensuring we're able to track those who have been exposed. Then, we can start peeling back the layers of the onion to see where those exposures lead to bad health challenges."

After seeing the issues Vietnam vets dealt with in addressing Agent Orange, as well as Gulf War vets dealing with the fallout from Kuwaiti oil wells, Bryant says IAVA believes the government must get on this issue before it gets worse. And she believes it most certainly will get worse, as the health conditions connected to toxic exposure may take years, or even decades to manifest.