



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

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TESTIMONY

**Connecticut General Assembly
Select Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

by

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S.B. 314 - AN ACT CONCERNING ISSUES AFFECTING THE VETERANS' COMMUNITY.

Proposes to repeal the statutory requirement for a State Agent Orange Commission and initiate a process by which veterans, who may have been exposed to herbicides while serving in the Armed Forces of the United States in Vietnam, or a physician having the prime responsibility for treating this veteran may at the request of their veteran patient submit a report to the Department of Veterans Affairs the symptoms of exposure to the herbicide including the diagnosis and methods of treatment prescribed. Additionally the identity of the individual may not be disclosed without the permission of the veteran, statistical information collected under this proposal will be available to the public and physicians or hospitals that provide information will not be held liable.

As the Committee may know, I personally spent more than 12 years studying the health effects of Agent Orange and other herbicides used in Vietnam on men and women who served there as well as their offspring. From that experience, I learned that the subject is both controversial and compelling. Having been in the forefront of the battle for recognition of the suffering of our veterans and their families is indeed formidable. I can personally attest that the slow, insidious and devastating health problems that emerge from these exposures and the hesitancy and resistance of government agencies to acknowledge the link between service in Vietnam and the cancers, birth defects and debilitating health experienced by these veterans. The path has been both daunting and disheartening. From these lessons learned, I looked for a better way to document these conditions, substantiate the diseases and the association of these conditions with service in our Armed Forces.

This Committee and Connecticut have more than exercised due diligence in looking into the exposures to toxic and hazardous substances encountered by our servicemen and women during military service. You have enacted legislation that created the Agent Orange Commission (1986), Persian Gulf War Information and Relief Commission

(1997), Assistance to members of the Connecticut National Guard and veterans to obtain federal treatment services for depleted uranium exposure (2005). However after all of the work invested by volunteers, scientists and staff, many Connecticut veterans still remain at risk with only information but few answers.

In 2007, this Committee sponsored legislation that created the Veterans Health Registry now CGS 27-109a, which authorized surveys and collection of data on health status, illnesses and potential correlations to environmental hazards which included vaccinations, chemicals, pesticides and chemical and biological warfare agents. Mr Chairman I want to acknowledge the leadership of Senator Gayle Slossberg, then Chair of this Committee, who spearheaded this very pragmatic and realistic measure which will best address the issue of exposures and health affects for veterans past, present and future. Senator Slossberg also secured funding for this project for the Department of Veterans Affairs which unfortunately was rescinded before we ever received it.

Because this legislation is now Statute, I have continued to pursue the possibility that Connecticut can develop a Veterans Health Registry dedicated to documenting the health of veterans over time, identify emerging health conditions and target resources and treatment modalities which will ensure the best quality of life possible for those who served Connecticut and our Country. We presently have a model, which Commissioner Mullen of Public Health and I are reviewing for suitability. I truly believe that the Department of Public Health should ultimately serve as a repository for any information on the health of veterans collected in our State. I see this as the maximum utilization of the resources and expertise of both agencies to better serve the people of Connecticut.

I believe the authorization in the proposed legislation does exist in the language of 27-109a. The fact that the funding was cut before we were able to initiate the program is the main concern. I do believe there is a need to track the health of our veterans now more than ever. The deployments of our National Guard Units and other veterans serving today to combat areas where they encounter known and unknown hazardous and toxic agents has far reaching implications for them, their families, health care providers and the General Assembly now and in the future. I would recommend that the Committee look to fund the Statute already in existence.

Mr. Chairman this concludes my testimony, I am available for any questions you may have.