

VFW-Supported Toxic Exposure Bill Passes in the House

‘Honoring Our PACT Act’ bipartisan legislation moves on to the U.S. Senate

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WASHINGTON — After a hard push from the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), members of Congress, and other veteran service organizations, the *Honoring Our PACT Act*, focused on assisting toxic-exposed veterans, passed in the U.S. House of Representatives by a vote of 256 to 174, Thursday morning.

“This is a huge win for the VFW,” said VFW National Commander Matthew “Fritz” Mihelcic. “Through our Action Corps network and National Legislative Committee members, we delivered our message to the top of Congress’ inbox. The House heard our voice and is finally taking action to recognize, care for and compensate our veterans for all the costs of war.”

The VFW Action Corps is a national grassroots advocacy network comprised of more than 300,000 VFW members and other supporters of veterans. Members received a call to action Feb. 25 to contact their representatives and urged them to vote “YES” as soon as the bill was brought to the House floor.

Introduced and championed by House Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano, the ‘PACT Act’, which stands for Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics, will expand health care and benefits to all veterans with service-connected illnesses as a result of being exposed to toxic chemicals, environments and other hazards such as burn pits, during their war service. The bill will cover veterans spanning generations.

“For too long, Congress and VA have been slow to act on toxic exposure — but today, the House took a bipartisan vote to change that and finally make good on our promise to toxic-exposed veterans by passing my Honoring our PACT Act,” said Takano in a press release immediately following the passage of the bill. “After years of diligent input from toxic-exposed veterans, my colleagues, our staff, VA, and VSOs, we passed the most

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comprehensive legislation to date to treat toxic exposure as a cost of war and ensure that all toxic-exposed veterans can access the care and benefits they've earned."

On Wednesday, Mihelcic spent the day campaigning for the bill. Beginning with a press conference held outside the U.S. Capitol Building, members of the VFW joined Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Chairman Takano, members of Congress, advocates Jon Stewart and John Feal, and other VSOs to show their support for the bill. Mihelcic was one of the featured speakers during the event and emphasized the debt the nation owes its veterans beyond the end of conflicts.

"There is a cost of war, but that also includes the cost of peace," said Mihelcic in his remarks. "Our service members answered the call of their country and it is America's responsibility to care for them, even after the guns fall silent."

"The *'PACT Act'* is the VFW's top legislative priority," Mihelcic added.

Later in the afternoon, Mihelcic testified in-person before the 117th Congress during a special joint hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs, where he delivered the VFW legislative priorities goals for 2022. During the question and answer portion of the hearing, Mihelcic gave an impassioned answer about the bill, putting pressure on those who had not made up their minds on which way to vote.

"How can any right thinking American not vote for this PACT Act?" Mihelcic admonished. "If you are on the fence, you need to get off the fence. You need to pick a side."

Democrats, who unanimously voted for the bill, were joined by 34 Republicans in passing the legislation.

During Tuesday night's State of the Union Address before Congress, President Biden asked legislators to address the issue.

"Pass a law to make sure veterans devastated by toxic exposures in Iraq and Afghanistan finally get the benefits and the comprehensive health care they deserve," said Biden.

The bill now faces a vote in the Senate before it gets to the White House for the president's signature.

"It is never too late to do what's right and uphold the promise our nation has made to those who served our country," said Mihelcic. "The House has done their part in honoring our veterans. The time is now for the Senate to do the same."