

Veterans' Families, Caregivers, and Survivors Advisory Committee
January 25-26, 2023 Meeting
Betty Seaman – January 25, 2023 Public Comments

Members of the Veterans' Family, Caregiver, and Survivor Advisory Committee,

Thank you for your service on the committee and this opportunity for the public to share concerns. My comments today are my personal views not necessarily those of any organization I am associated with. My name is Betty Seaman, my husband Jim, a Navy veteran, passed away from a service-connected illness in 2018. In the ensuing years, I have become involved in individual, grassroots, and organized efforts to increase awareness, educate, and advocate for those affected by military toxic exposures, specifically from the family member perspective.

The PACT Act has been instrumental in addressing many military toxic exposure issues such as the burnpits and Camp Lejeune, but many toxic exposure incidents still need attention; one being the NAF Atsugi Japan Shinkampo Incinerator Complex incident.

The toxic exposure of approximately 26,000 military and family members, including 8000 children, who resided at NAF Atsugi between 1985 and 2001, is acknowledged by the DON, DOD and VA. The situation was dire enough that the Department of the Navy spent years addressing the issue. Eventually the DOJ filed a lawsuit against the Shinkampo Incinerator Complex owners which culminated in the Japanese government purchasing the complex and shutting it down in 2001.

The Navy developed a risk communication plan to notify and inform servicemembers and their families of the exposure and risks. Beginning in 1998, as part of this plan, current and future residents at Atsugi were notified. Residents exposed prior to this were not notified. The risk communication plan "solution" for those prior residents consists of information on the Navy Medicine and VA websites regarding the incident. The absurdity of former residents knowing web pages exist regarding an issue they don't know exists would be comical if the potential consequences weren't so tragic.

In a 2008 review of the Navy's Atsugi Health Risk Assessments, Battelle Memorial Institute recommended the establishment of an Outreach Program for communication with former Atsugi residents, particularly the residents during the initial ten years of incinerator operation who have not had the "opportunity to learn about their exposure and potential health risk."⁽¹⁾ The recommendation was ignored, neither the DON, nor the DOD, nor the VA has made an effort to notify *all* exposed veterans who were

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stationed at Atsugi, let alone the family members. One has to believe the notification of those affected was feasible as, in 2008, the Department of the Navy was able to send letters to all veterans stationed at Camp Lejeune between 1957 and 1984 regarding that toxic exposure incident.⁽²⁾

Additionally, it appears after 2008, efforts to track possible health consequences for all those exposed to the incinerator ceased. Battelle recommended the defining and identifying of an NAF Atsugi Cohort. The report states, “No program for medical surveillance is possible without identifying the subject population and establishing a registry by which the actions and findings of the program can be tracked.”⁽¹⁾ The recommendation was ignored.

In 2009 testimony before the Senate Committee on Veteran’s Affairs, Captain Paul Gillooly from the Navy/Marine Corps Public Health Center indicated the VA would receive a list of all affected active duty personnel stationed at NAF Atsugi from 1985 to 2001. Also, that the list would aid in future outreach and surveillance activities. Questions remain as to whether the VA has used this list for any outreach or surveillance.

Three of four of my family – my husband, myself, and one of our daughters have had cancer. I don’t know and will likely never know if our time living on Atsugi played a part in that; or plays a part in other health issues in our family. I do know the US Navy, DOD, and VA never made a good faith effort to notify my family and so many others of our exposure. They denied us the knowledge that may have resulted in us paying a bit more attention to some of the subtle symptoms Jim, myself, and his medical providers ignored prior to his stage IV cancer diagnosis.

The relationship between the VA and DOD with the military, veterans, and family members is one based on mutual trust, allegiance, and commitment. The VA and DOD have a moral obligation to make a good faith effort to notify all those affected by military toxic exposures; past and present, military members AND family members; along with maintaining registries to monitor possible long term health effects from those exposures.

Thank you again for time.

Respectfully,

Betty Seaman

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⁽¹⁾ Battelle Memorial Institute. *“Review of NAF Atsugi Health Risk Assessments and Related Environmental Data to Determine if Additional Population-Based Medical Screening is Indicated”*. Prepared for Navy and Marine Corps Public Health. Task 644. 2008.

⁽²⁾ United States, Congress, Senate, Committee on Veterans’ Affairs. *“VA/DOD Response to Certain Military Exposures”*. 111th Congress., 1st session, S. Rpt. 111-437. 2009.