

U.S. Sens. Baldwin, Blumenthal, Lynch, Green: Introduce Bipartisan, Bicameral Legislation To Cover K2 Veterans' Toxic Exposure Care And Benefits

Posted on Thursday, Feb 25, 2021

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

Contact: press@baldwin.senate.gov, 202-224-6225

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, U.S. Senators Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) and U.S. Representatives Stephen F. Lynch (D-MA) and Mark Green (R-TN) introduced the bicameral, bipartisan K2 Veterans Care Act. This legislation would establish a “presumption of service connection” for the veterans who served at Karshi-Khanabad Air Base (K2) in Uzbekistan and who have since been diagnosed with toxic exposure-related illnesses and diseases, requiring the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide health care and benefits.

“The Pentagon has known for years that our U.S. troops were exposed to cancer-causing toxins while serving in Uzbekistan and it’s simply wrong for the VA to deny them health care and disability benefits. The VA has taken a similar approach in the past, delaying recognition and compensation for American veterans exposed to toxic substances like Agent Orange in Vietnam, and with military burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan, while veterans became sick and died. We can’t let that happen again,” **said Senator Baldwin.** “Our legislation does right by those who served at K2 and were exposed to health risks. We have a commitment to these troops and we need to keep it.”

“The K2 Veterans Care Act is critically important to those veterans who volunteered

to serve their country and trusted they would be cared for if they were fortunate enough to return from battle or complete their service obligations. Many have suffered after being stationed at K2, and are still suffering, and we greatly appreciate the work that Senator Baldwin is doing to make sure we get the targeted health care we need,” **said Leroy Miller, a K2 Veteran from Wisconsin.**

“This bill will be a lifeline for the veterans who were exposed to dangerous toxins in the glowing ponds and black goo reported at K2,” **said Senator Blumenthal.** “We must honor the commitment we make to our servicemembers when we send them to war and ensure these deserving veterans get the treatment they urgently need. The strong evidence of K2 veterans suffering from cancers and other illnesses at high rates is a moral mandate to act. The lives of hundreds—and potentially thousands—of veterans are at stake and the VA cannot waste any more time to make good on its promise to treat our nation’s bravest. I’m proud to lead this important effort alongside Senator Baldwin and Representatives Lynch and Green.”

“Almost two decades ago, our K2 heroes and their families risked everything to defend our country following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks,” **said Rep. Lynch, Chairman of the House Oversight and Reform Committee’s Subcommittee on National Security whose Subcommittee investigation led to the release of declassified DOD documents detailing K2 veterans’ exposure to toxins.** “Despite clear evidence uncovered by the National Security Subcommittee that K2 veterans were exposed to cancer-causing hazards, the VA continues to reject their claims for service-connected disability benefits. Our veterans and their families deserve better. Today’s bill is an important step toward rectifying this injustice. I thank Congressman Mark Green and Senators Richard Blumenthal and Tammy Baldwin for their leadership on this critical issue.”

“It is shameful that the Department of Veterans Affairs has not yet acknowledged a service connection between deployment to K2 Air Base and toxic-exposure related illnesses,” **said Rep. Green.** “Our K2 veterans fought for us, now it’s time to fight for them. Our bill requires the VA to acknowledge a causal relationship between deployment to the base and the rare cancers and other serious illnesses our veterans are facing nearly two decades later. This is a significant step forward in the fight for justice and ensures that those who served at the base can receive the treatment they need. America’s K2 veterans put their lives on the line to protect our freedoms. It’s long past time we do what’s right and give them the respect and medical care they deserve.”

As many as 15,000 U.S. servicemembers deployed to K2 Air Base—an old Soviet military site leased to the U.S. from the Uzbek government between 2001 and 2005—to support military operations into northern Afghanistan following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Recent [media reports](#) and [declassified Department of Defense \(DOD\) documents](#) released by the House Oversight and Reform Committee's Subcommittee on National Security indicate that K2 servicemembers were exposed to multiple cancer-causing toxic chemicals and radiological hazards during their deployments. These toxins include hazardous petrochemicals, volatile organic compounds (VOCs), depleted uranium, burn pits, and elevated levels of tetrachloroethylene.

According to a September 2004 health assessment, the U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine [found](#) that, “the potential for daily contact with radiation exists for up to 100% of the assigned units” at the K2 base. In April 2020, the VA announced that it would study illnesses among K2 veterans including cancers, but results from the study are not expected for at least 18 months.

The K2 Veterans Care Act would create a “presumption of service connection” for illnesses associated with toxic exposures at K2. This presumption of service connection would require the VA to provide health care and disability benefits to any K2 veterans who presents diseases associated with jet fuel, VOCs, particulate matter, depleted uranium, asbestos, and lead-based paint—all of which were toxins [found](#) at K2.

The legislation has been endorsed by Wounded Warrior Project, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Disabled Veterans of America (DAV), and the Stronghold Freedom Foundation.

“Many veterans who served at the Karshi Khanabad (K2) base have developed serious health issues due to exposure to toxicants,” said Wounded Warrior Project Vice President of Government Affairs Jose Ramos. **“The K2 Veterans Care Act of 2020 will provide these veterans the hospital care, medical services, and nursing home care they need and deserve. We thank Senators Blumenthal and Baldwin for introducing this bill and look forward to working with them to ensure its passage in the Senate.”**

“The veterans who deployed to Karshi-Khanabad Air Base (K2) were exposed to dangerous substances while serving our country,” said Director of VFW's National Legislative Service Pat Murray. **“Thousands of troops worked**

and slept in dangerous conditions every day and they are suffering illnesses because of their service. The VFW supports this proposal and looks forward to its swift passage so our K2 veterans can begin to receive the care and benefits they rightfully deserve.”

The Senate legislation has also been cosponsored by U.S. Senators Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Robert Menendez (D-NJ), and Dianne Feinstein (D-CA). The House version of this legislation currently has 58 cosponsors.

The full text of the Senate legislation can be [found here](#). The full text of the House legislation can be [found here](#).

An online version of this release is available [here](#).