

Atomic Veterans Healthcare Parity Act Remarks
Senator Al Franken
(as prepared for delivery)

Thank you Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Blumenthal for the opportunity today to speak on behalf of the Atomic Veterans Healthcare Parity Act, which I introduced with Senator Tillis. Thank you also to Senator Coons and Senator Wyden for cosponsoring the bill and to the others testifying on behalf of this important legislation.

Like the members of this Committee, one of my highest priorities as a Senator is making sure that our veterans and their families get every benefit that they deserve. We need to help our veterans find a home and a job, recover from their physical and psychological wounds, and take full advantage of the benefits they were promised when they enlisted – benefits they've earned with their service and their sacrifices, as well as the sacrifices of their families.

The veterans of the cleanup on Enewetak Atoll have not gotten the benefits they earned. During the 40s and the 50s, the United States conducted more than 40 nuclear tests on the Enewetak Atoll in the Marshall Islands.

Thousands of members of the United States Armed Forces participated in the cleanup of Enewetak between 1977 and 1980. Service members removed radioactive fallout, soil, and debris – including significant amounts of plutonium – and dumped it in a crater on Runit Island that was covered with 18 inches of concrete. We dropped so much nuclear material on Enewetak, it was as if we had dropped 1.6 Hiroshima bombs every day for twelve years.

These service members were typically without any form of protective gear. They wore Defense Department-issued t-shirts, shorts, and combat boots to move highly contaminated material. Today, half of Enewetak Atoll is still considered unsuitable for human habitation. Thirty-six years after the cleanup was completed, residents still must be

tested for radiation levels, especially those who work closely with the soil – just like our veterans did.

Now our service members who were actually part of the nuclear tests during their active service do receive extra benefits as “Atomic Veterans” to deal with illnesses that are assumed to be related to radiation exposure. However, service members that were part of the cleanup do not receive these extra benefits, despite their exposure.

Many of the veterans who served on Enewetak Atoll have already passed away. Many more of the “cleanup” veterans suffer from various types of cancer, respiratory, and heart diseases at early ages and at high rates. There are reports that their children may also be suffering from illnesses caused by having a parent who was exposed to radiation. “Cleanup” veterans are forced to pay out of pocket for their medical costs because the VA does not recognize them as “Atomic Veterans.” Despite being put in harm’s way, these Veterans that cleaned up after the nuclear tests are not being adequately compensated by their government.

In order to right this wrong, Senator Thom Tillis and I introduced the Atomic Veterans Healthcare Parity Act. This bipartisan, bicameral legislation ensures that veterans who participated in the cleanup of the Enewetak Atoll receive the benefits they deserve. Benefits that their service should have entitled them to long ago.

Thank you again to Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Blumenthal for the opportunity to testify on this important piece of legislation. I look forward to working with you and the Committee to move this very important legislation forward.