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Vietnam vets deserve better

By KIRSTEN GILLIBRAND

<http://www.timesunion.com/AspStories/story.asp?storyID=873718&category=opinion>

Too many veterans who served our country decades ago still suffer from horrible medical problems stemming from their time in the military. Time and again, the federal government has failed to provide them with the quality care they have earned.

Sometimes, it is bureaucracy that stands in the way. Other times, it is red tape or cost-cutting measures that prevent vets from getting the care they deserve. But for hundreds of thousands of Vietnam veterans, it is a shameful technicality in the law.

During the Vietnam War, the U.S. military sprayed 20 million gallons of the defoliant Agent Orange. The chemical cleared the way for combat troops to see their enemies, but it also infected service members with serious, long-term illnesses.

It is time to face the consequences of Agent Orange.

Right now, 800,000 Vietnam veterans, who were exposed to Agent Orange and need medical care, are being ignored. More than 13,500 of them live in New York.

Federal law requires the Department of Veterans Affairs to cover all illnesses directly linked to Agent Orange exposure. But in 2002, the VA determined that the government would only cover veterans who were "boots on the ground." That excluded those known as Blue Water veterans -- those who were on duty in the air and sea around Vietnam.

But Agent Orange didn't discriminate among those on land or water or in the air. When this toxin spread through wind and water, it infected millions of our troops stationed on ships and aircraft miles away from Agent Orange drop sites.

Just like those who were "boots on the ground," hundreds of thousands of Blue Water vets are chronically ill as a result of Agent Orange exposure.

From Type II diabetes to Parkinson's, to several blood and respiratory cancers and higher rates of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, Agent Orange has been proven to cause a broad range of serious illnesses. But not one single Blue Water veteran's Agent Orange-related illness is covered by the VA.

These courageous veterans risked everything to fight for us. And now, because of their service and sacrifice, they are sick and need care. Serving as seamen or airmen should not deny them the needed benefits they've earned.

Even Dr. Mark Brown, former director of the VA's environmental agents service, has publicly acknowledged that there is no scientific basis for excluding Blue Water Navy veterans from coverage. But the VA continues to deny them care.

It's an outrageous injustice, and it must be changed.

Last month, I introduced the Agent Orange Act of 2009. It would fix the existing law so that Blue Water veterans and every service member awarded the Vietnam Service medal, or who was deployed on air, land and sea in Vietnam would be fully covered by the VA.

It would also streamline the VA's processing of Vietnam War veterans' claims for service-connected conditions by extending the VA's presumptive coverage of Agent Orange benefits to all Vietnam veterans.

Agent Orange is a very difficult chapter in our nation's history. It is time that we correct the errors of the past.

We have a solemn responsibility to those who answer our nation's call to service. They fulfilled their duty.

Now, it is our duty to make sure they have access to every benefit they have earned -- from health care to education and affordable loans to buy a house.

Let's make sure we never stop fighting for those who fought for us.

Kirsten Gillibrand represents New York in the U.S. Senate.