



**THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON**

March 23, 2001

The Honorable Lane Evans  
Ranking Democratic Member  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
U. S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Evans:

Thank you for your February 14, 2000, letter regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) health care and benefits for veterans who may have been exposed to herbicides while serving at Fort Drum, New York. I apologize for the delay in responding to you and trust the following discussion addresses your concerns on this issue.

The law provides for a presumption of exposure to Agent Orange only for veterans who served in Vietnam. However, under VA's regulations, whenever it can be established that a veterans was exposed to certain herbicide agents during military service, whether at Fort Drum or anywhere else, the veteran qualifies for a presumption of service connection for any disease that VA recognizes as being associated with such exposure. This relieves the burden of proving a nexus between exposure and disease on the veteran. I have asked the Under Secretary for Benefits to share with each of the Veterans Service Centers the information that the Department of the Army has supplied regarding the testing of herbicides at Fort Drum, so that those facts need not be proven by claimants who served there.

Regarding the issue you raised about the Agent Orange Registry, after consultation with Veterans Health Administration officials, I believe that it is feasible to include Fort Drum veterans in the Registry. When VA established the voluntary Agent Orange Registry health examination program in 1978, it was intended to focus on the health problems encountered by the approximately 3 million U.S. veterans who may have been exposed to herbicides in Vietnam. During the past 22 years, over 300,000 Vietnam veterans have chosen to participate in the Agent Orange Registry health examination program. These veterans received quality medical attention for their conditions and were able to discuss their concerns and fears with a knowledgeable and sensitive health care provider. Many Vietnam veterans continue to request an initial Registry examination from VA.

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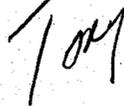
The Honorable Lane Evans

Last year, after learning that tens of thousands of Vietnam-era veterans who were deployed to Korea in 1968 or 1969 were potentially exposed to Agent Orange, we decided to make the Agent Orange Registry examination available to them. I recognize that there may be other instances where U.S. servicemembers may have been exposed to Agent Orange or related herbicides containing dioxin contaminants, including certain veterans who served at Fort Drum, as well as other exposed during its manufacture, testing, or transport.

It has been VA policy to provide to any veteran, who is concerned about Agent Orange exposure and is enrolled in VA care, a comparable examination without being entered into the Registry data base. However, in recognition of the concerns that you have raised, I am directing my staff to expand the Agent Orange Registry to offer such examinations to any U.S. veteran who is concerned about possible health effects from exposure to Agent Orange during active duty.

Thank you for your continuing interest on the important issue of herbicide exposure. Please let me know if we can provide further information.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tony', written over a diagonal line that extends from the 'Sincerely yours,' text above.

Anthony J. Principi