

**Congress of the United States**  
Washington, DC 20515

August 10, 2021

The Honorable Denis McDonough  
Secretary of Veteran Affairs, U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

We write today to applaud the Veterans Health Administration for its work to establish a Military Exposure Research Program (MERP) to study in more depth the health impacts of military occupational exposures to toxic chemicals. As you work to establish the MERP in fiscal year 2022, we ask that you consider working with the 157<sup>th</sup> Air Refueling Wing (the 157<sup>th</sup>) at the Pease Air National Guard Base in Newington, New Hampshire, as they continue their pursuit of investigations into cancer and potential occupational exposures.

In 2018, leadership of the 157<sup>th</sup> was presented with concerns about unusually high rates of cancer and other illnesses among former members of the 157<sup>th</sup> and veterans who were stationed at the former Pease Air Force Base, situated at the same site until its closure in 1991. This community group, led by several widows of service members, asked the 157<sup>th</sup> to explore the rates of cancer among the population who had served at Pease and whether military occupational exposures at the base may have contributed to cancer and illness. The 157<sup>th</sup> agreed to pursue these questions and has worked over the last two years with the U.S. Air Force School of Aerospace Medicine (USAF SAM) on a cancer mortality study. Released earlier this year, this study showed that while in general cancer mortalities at Pease were statistically in-line with cancer mortality among the general population, there were statistically significant findings showing increased rates of mortality for several cancers such as lung/bronchial, prostate and breast cancer.<sup>1</sup>

While the 157<sup>th</sup> and community members are grateful for USAF SAM's work, all agree that there were limitations to the study and more research must be done. The 157<sup>th</sup> is currently working to identify next steps in their research and potential partners. Given the work that has already been started at Pease and the dedication of the 157<sup>th</sup> and community stakeholders to this cause, we believe Pease is an ideal site for the MERP to work with as it launches.

Our service members and families here in New Hampshire and across the country deserve answers on the health impacts of toxic exposures they encountered while serving our nation. We appreciate your commitment to our veterans and their families and your attention to the important topic of military occupational exposure.

Sincerely,



---

Jeanne Shaheen  
United States Senator



---

Maggie Hassan  
United States Senator



---

Ann McLane Kuster  
Member of Congress



---

Chris Pappas  
Member of Congress

---

<sup>1</sup> United States Air Force School of Aerospace Medicine, Epidemiology Consult Service Division (2021). *Pease Military Cancer Mortality Study*.

[https://www.157arw.ang.af.mil/Portals/51/documents/Pease\\_Cancer\\_Study/Pease%20Military%20Cancer%20Mortality%20Study\\_Final.pdf?ver=XCje21TpleiCStsH-CPWhQ%3d%3d](https://www.157arw.ang.af.mil/Portals/51/documents/Pease_Cancer_Study/Pease%20Military%20Cancer%20Mortality%20Study_Final.pdf?ver=XCje21TpleiCStsH-CPWhQ%3d%3d)