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Senate rejects PACT Act protections, sending 'signal' that benefits could be cut, vet group says

Burn Pits 360, a veteran advocacy group said while the measure isn't directly changing PACT Act care or funding, it could "signal" larger changes to veteran benefits.

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The Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act, or PACT Act, signed into law in 2022, determined 23 illnesses to be service-related for veterans who were exposed to burn pit toxins during deployments. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Samuel D. Corum.

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The Senate voted against a non-binding resolution calling for the protection of health care benefits for veterans exposed to burn pits during

their service.

Introduced by Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), ranking member of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, the measure aimed to “ensure full and uninterrupted funding” for health care and benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs provided by the PACT Act as well as “preventing any cuts or delays.”

Early in the morning on Friday, the Senate rejected the measure in a 52-47 vote. Republicans overwhelmingly voted against it, with the exception of Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) who voted in favor of the majority-Democrat-backed amendment. Sen. John Fetterman (D-PA) did not vote.

The Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act, passed in August 2022, known as the PACT Act deemed 23 illnesses — including lung cancer — to be service-related for veterans who were exposed to burn pit toxins during deployment. Burn pits were commonly used at military sites to get rid of waste during wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The chemicals that veterans were exposed to from those pits have since been linked to numerous illnesses.

Approximately 3.5 million American veterans were exposed to burn pits and other airborne hazards during conflicts in the last two decades, according to the veterans’ advocacy group Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

The PACT Act also helped Vietnam War veterans get care after their exposure to Agent Orange, a defoliant used during the war that left some veterans stricken with severe illnesses.

Rosie Torres from Burn Pits 360, a veterans advocacy group focused on issues related to toxic exposure due to military service, said that although the measure doesn’t actually change the PACT Act, it’s causing more uncertainty around veteran benefits and “sends a signal to the veteran community that these protections can be cut at any time.”

“I think amendments like this, we should worry, because it’s giving that implication that should it come to that, then this is our position,” Torres said. “Then explain your position to your constituents that you voted on this amendment — that these laws won’t be protected.”

Before encouraging Republicans to vote against the measure, Sen. Jerry Moran (R-Kan.) said on the Senate floor that toxic exposure is not a partisan issue and that Republicans are always in favor of fully funding the VA.

“When the VA comes back to Congress asking for more money, like they did last September because of unexpected shortfalls, we said yes,” Moran said. “The administration of this Congress will continue to prioritize full and uninterrupted funding in the VA, putting funding necessary to fill the laws like the PACT Act that Congress enacted.”

Patrick Murray, national legislative director for Veterans of Foreign Wars said that the resolution was “more of a message than anything binding.” However, if PACT Act funding, care or benefits do get rolled back, veteran care might be rationed or not given “in a timely manner,” he added.

“When you’re talking health care, those types of delays can be potentially deadly,” Murray said.

The Congressional measure does not officially remove funding related to the PACT Act, but discussions around cuts to veteran benefits have been gaining traction.

Changes to veteran disability benefits, more specifically, a revision of disability rating awards for future claims, were one of the issues highlighted in VA reforms for the Project 2025 policy guide written by former staffers from President Donald Trump’s first administration, including his former VA Chief of Staff. Trump has publicly disavowed Project 2025, but many of the ideas from the conservative policy blueprint have made their way into Trump’s executive orders. A review by POLITICO found dozens of cases where the executive actions aligned with policies promoted by the 900-page guide.

“I think there’s this misconception that the PACT Act just miraculously healed everyone and like we can all go home and celebrate. That’s not it,” Torres said. “I’m still watching my husband suffer every day, every year. I’m getting phone calls from friends that are from K2 veterans saying that they’re now been diagnosed with cancer, so it’s far from over. We want a sit down and we want to hear what their plans are.”

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J

James

22 February, 2025

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Patty is a senior staff writer for Task & Purpose. She's reported on the military for five years, embedding with the National Guard during a hurricane and covering Guantanamo Bay legal proceedings for an alleged al Qaeda commander.