

## **The Mark Takai Atomic Veterans Healthcare Parity Act**

**Sponsored by Senators Smith, Tillis, Wyden, Merkley, Baldwin, King, Warren, Gillibrand, Klobuchar, Brown, Tester, Coons, and Hirono**

Senator Smith introduced the Mark Takai Atomic Veterans Healthcare Parity Act. This bill would give healthcare benefits to service members that participated in the cleanup of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands. This bill is a companion to H.R. 632, a bipartisan bill introduced by Congresswoman Meng of New York.

### **Background**

From 1946 to 1958 the United States Military conducted more than 40 nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands. Service members who served on active duty as part of these nuclear tests qualify for benefits under the Radiation Compensation Exposure Act. However, the thousands of service members who participated in the cleanup of these test sites between 1977 and 1980 are not eligible to receive these benefits.

Service members on Enewetak Atoll who were involved in the cleanup were commonly not provided any form of protective gear, instead they wore t-shirts, shorts, and combat boots while they removed highly radioactive debris, soil, and fallout from the islands. Today, many of these veterans suffer from various types of cancer, respiratory issues, and heart diseases at early ages and at higher rates. There are even reports that the children of these veterans may also be suffering from illnesses caused by having a parent who was exposed to radiation. These veterans are forced to pay out of pocket for these medical costs because the VA does not recognize them as Atomic Veterans.

While Enewetak Atoll was resettled in 1980, some areas involved in the cleanup effort remain uninhabitable due to high levels of radiation. The United States maintains a laboratory on Enewetak to monitor radiation levels and has set up a trust fund to assist locals effected by the U.S. nuclear tests. We frequently call on our men and women in uniform to take on some of the hardest and most dangerous assignments in the world and when they return home as veterans, we need to make sure they get all the benefits and care they need.

### **What does the bill do?**

This bill will classify veterans who participated in the cleanup of the Enewetak Atoll as “radiation-exposed veterans.” Cancers and other eligible illnesses would then be presumed to be service-connected injuries, entitling survivors to make disability claims and have their treatments paid for by the VA.

For more information on this bill, please feel free to contact Sam Fellman at 202-224-5641 or by email at [Sam\\_Fellman@Smith.Senate.Gov](mailto:Sam_Fellman@Smith.Senate.Gov).