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***If Veterans don't help Veterans, who will?***

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## Veterans share frustrations at hearing on Agent Orange, radiation resolutions

Kyla P Mora , [kmora@guampdn.com](mailto:kmora@guampdn.com) 2:33 p.m. ChT April 7, 2017



*(Photo: Kyla P Mora | PDN)*

Multiple residents offered oral testimony at a recent public hearing on Agent Orange contamination and radiation exposure, mostly on the same theme: frustration over Guam's leaders' inaction.

On April 4, the Guam Legislature's Committee on Culture and Justice convened a hearing to discuss Resolution 25-34, related to supporting the Fighting for Orange-Stricken Territories in Eastern Regions, or FOSTER, Act, and Resolution 40-34, related to recognizing the radiation exposure of Enewetak Atoll cleanup veterans and including them in the Mark Takai Atomic Veterans Healthcare Parity Act.

Robert Celestial, Pacific Association for Radiation Survivors president, was joined by Vietnam veterans and former military civil service personnel to testify about atomic radiation and Agent Orange exposure on Guam.

Frustration at lack of recognition was a common theme for many who testified.

Navy veteran and Yona resident Howard Collins, who served as assistant fire chief for 32 years after four years of active service, said he is tired "of being told there is no such thing as Agent Orange on Guam."

“We get these nice letters that are only good for the garbage cans. We’re getting tired of this runaround,” Collins said. “You’re telling me I don’t see something’s wrong? What about all the civilians that worked at Naval Station? You’re telling me I didn’t see them load contaminated dirt and soil to take away from the base? We’ve lost I don’t know how many people, and you’re telling me I didn’t see this stuff.”

Collins said he's lost faith in leaders to help.

“They’re talking about getting congressmen to help. I don’t believe so,” Collins said. “I’ve asked the congresswoman for help. I’ve been to her office many times.”

On April 3, Guam Del. Madeleine Bordallo issued a letter to Comptroller General Gene Dodaro of the U.S. Government Accountability Office, asking for information about where the federal government stored, transferred and used Agent Orange during the Vietnam War.

Bordallo also requested information about dioxin-contaminated hot spots and plans to remediate contaminated sites, including how much the Department of Defense has spent to date on site cleanup.

Many giving up

Even as investigations inch forward, however, some disillusioned veterans on Guam have stopped seeking assistance.

Guam Veterans Affairs Office Administrator Joe A. San Agustin said after only eight months in his current position, he has seen many give up.

“I’m finding that many of our vets have not come forth to file for benefits because they’ve lost faith in the system,” San Agustin said. “We have the responsibility and duties to continue to fight these issues up to the very top so that we provide them with the care and benefits that they are entitled to.”

San Agustin urged Vice Speaker Therese Terlaje to include civilians affected by the toxic herbicide Agent Orange in any reparative measures taken. He also supports current investigations into Agent Orange on Guam.

The hearing also brought to light insufficient veteran care and support on Guam.

In June 2013, Sen. Frank Aguon Jr. introduced Bill 134 to create a Guam Veterans Registry. The stated goal of the registry is to create an accurate database to provide veterans with current information on health care, benefits and activities. The registry was to be maintained and updated by the Office of Veterans Affairs.

However, the registry “has not been compiled, and there has been little to no effort to compile this registry,” Terlaje said.

According to Veterans Commission Chairman Dan Mendiola, such a registry is important to strengthen VA benefits and ensure Guam veterans get fair treatment. Mendiola said Guam receives \$809 in federal funding per veteran, compared to \$1,249 per veteran in Hawaii.

“This has to be the time when the Legislature and governor’s office get their act together and push this thing forward,” Mendiola said.