



LEAGUE of UNITED LATIN AMERICAN CITIZENS

The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the nation’s oldest and largest Latino civil rights organization, has supported military veterans for nearly 100 years. We’ve advocated for key legislation like The PACT Act and The Brandon Act to ensure service members receive the care and benefits they deserve. LULAC is committed to advancing the wellbeing of all veterans by advocating for access to education, affordable housing, healthcare, and other essential services.

Establishing Presumption of Service Connection for Panama Canal Zone Veterans

Overview

- Veterans who served in the Panama Canal Zone (PCZ) between 1958 and 1999 were exposed to toxic chemicals, including Agent Orange and aerosolized DDT.
- Many have since developed cancers, cardiovascular disease, and other serious illnesses associated with toxic exposure.
- At least 400 PCZ veterans have diagnoses consistent with these exposures.

Current Status



- The PACT Act of 2022 (38 U.S.C. §§ 1171–1176) provides VA authority to create and expand presumptions of service connection for toxic exposures.
- Despite this framework, PCZ veterans do not yet have a formal presumption and many still must prove exposure individually.
- The FY2025 NDAA Joint Explanatory Statement directs DoD to brief Congress on herbicide use in the PCZ, signaling congressional concern.
- DoD is responsible for maintaining the list of locations where tactical herbicides were used; the PCZ is not yet fully reflected.



“I had my first of many exposures to dangerous herbicides [within my] first 20 days in country at Fort Sherman... I have been sick ever since with prostate, bladder and endocrine tumors... All my claims have been denied for years. Now I am 65 years old and struggling still to get the VA to help me.”

ALBERT O. CASTRO, JR.

Reasons to Support a Presumption



Strong factual record and health impacts: Strong evidence and health impact: DoD records, archival materials, and veteran testimony confirm toxic chemical use in the PCZ; hundreds of veterans now have serious illnesses consistent with exposure, and delays in recognition delay care and benefits.

Legal and policy precedent: Congress has expanded presumptions before, including for Blue Water Navy Vietnam veterans and those who served near the Korean DMZ; the PACT Act explicitly authorizes VA to expand presumptions when the evidence supports it.

Fairness and burden of proof: Presumptions exist so veterans are not forced to prove what the government already knows; PCZ veterans present a fact pattern similar to groups already granted presumptions.

Interagency responsibility: Accurate DoD listings and timely VA action together shape real outcomes for veterans; coordination between the departments can correct current gaps in recognition.

Conclusion

- PCZ veterans served and were exposed; timely recognition and care are overdue.
- Using PACT Act authority is a lawful and practical step to deliver earned benefits.
- A presumption would provide care, compensation, and dignity to affected veterans and their families.

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