



PRESS RELEASE

Vietnam Veterans of America

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Veterans Groups Sue VA for Withholding Information Demanded by Veterans Poisoned by Camp Lejeune's Toxic Water *VA's Controversial "Subject Matter Expert" Program Keeps Public in the Dark*

(Wash., D.C.)—Today Vietnam Veterans of America, along with The Few, The Proud, The Forgotten, filed suit under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to compel the Department of Veterans Affairs to produce records on the Camp Lejeune Subject Matter Expert (SME) program. The VA created the SME program in 2012 to evaluate disability compensation claims. Since that time, the public has filed numerous requests for information on the SME program, but VA has largely ignored such requests.

“It is high time the federal government and all of its entities stop lying and withholding evidence on the toxic substances to which veterans and their families have been exposed. To have anonymous subject experts is not the American way, and in a democracy, this lack of transparency is not acceptable,” said John Rowan, National President of Vietnam Veterans of America.

Between 1953 and 1987, nearly one million veterans, their families, and civilian employees at Camp Lejeune, a Marine training base in North Carolina, were exposed to toxic drinking water in one of the worst contaminations in U.S. history. Many have since developed illnesses like kidney, bladder, and breast cancer, and many have lost their lives as a result. Thousands of veterans have applied for disability compensation for diseases related to their exposure to toxic water aboard Camp Lejeune. The VA has denied the vast majority of these claims.

Initiated in 2012, the SME program tasks an anonymous group of clinicians with issuing medical opinions on the disability compensation claims of Camp Lejeune veterans. Since the VA created the SME program, the grant rate for these claims plummeted from approximately 25 percent to 8 percent.

From the limited information publically available, veterans groups and medical professionals have identified concerns about the clinicians' credentials, methods, and expertise. SME program clinicians have repeatedly cited scientific reports that VA officials have admitted are outdated. In

at least one case, the VA relied on a report by an SME program clinician who cut and pasted a Wikipedia entry to provide a medical opinion on a rare type of cancer.

Veterans groups submitted a FOIA request to the VA in December 2015, seeking comprehensive records on the Camp Lejeune SME program, including policies, procedures, and objectives; fiscal impact; data and statistical information; and training records. The VA has not responded to this request.

Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), ranking member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, said, "the SME program has been using incorrect and outdated information. The alarming drop in the grant rate of Camp Lejeune claims deserves real, penetrating scrutiny."

"The VA claims it created the Camp Lejeune SME program to assist veterans, but it is adversarial and unjust. Everything we know about the program indicates it should be scrapped," said retired Marine Master Sergeant Jerry Ensminger, founder of The Few, The Proud, The Forgotten, who lost his daughter at age nine to childhood leukemia linked to exposure to Camp Lejeune's toxic water.

"The VA's lack of transparency is alarming. The qualifications and methodology of the SME clinicians are concerning. Given that the VA has called this program a model for toxic exposure compensation claims in the future, veterans need to understand how this program works." said Rory Minnis, a former Marine and law student intern at the Veterans Legal Services Clinic at Yale Law School.

Vietnam Veterans of America is the nation's only congressionally chartered veterans' service organization dedicated to the needs of Vietnam-era veterans and their families. In keeping with its founding principle, "Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another," VVA aggressively advocates for all veterans.