

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE

March 26, 2024

1:47 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Forrest Dunbar, Chair
Senator Jesse Bjorkman
Senator Cathy Giessel

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Donald Olson, Vice Chair
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 8

Honoring United States military veterans exposed to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War; and expressing gratitude for the courageous service of those veterans to the United States.

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HCR 8

SHORT TITLE: HONORING VIETNAM WAR VETERANS

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) SHAW

02/14/24	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/14/24	(H)	MLV
02/20/24	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
02/20/24	(H)	-- MEETING CANCELED --
02/22/24	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
02/22/24	(H)	-- MEETING CANCELED --
02/27/24	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
02/27/24	(H)	Moved HCR 8 Out of Committee
02/27/24	(H)	MINUTE(MLV)
02/28/24	(H)	MLV RPT 5DP
02/28/24	(H)	DP: GRAY, RAUSCHER, GROH, SHAW, WRIGHT
03/11/24	(H)	TRANSMITTED TO (S)
03/11/24	(H)	VERSION: HCR 8
03/12/24	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
03/12/24	(S)	CRA

03/26/24

(S)

CRA AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

WITNESS REGISTER

REPRESENTATIVE LADDIE SHAW, District 9
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Sponsor of HCR 8.

BUDDY WHITT, Staff
Representative Laddie Shaw
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Delivered a presentation on the Orange Heart Foundation related to HCR 8.

ROBIN SPENCE, Representative
North Carolina Orange Heart Medal Foundation
Hookerton, North Carolina
POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony in support of HCR 8.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:47:00 PM](#)

CHAIR FORREST DUNBAR called the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:47 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Giessel, Bjorkman, and Chair Dunbar.

HCR 8-HONORING VIETNAM WAR VETERANS

[1:47:28 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR announced the consideration of HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 8 Honoring United States military veterans exposed to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War; and expressing gratitude for the courageous service of those veterans to the United States.

This is the first hearing of HCR 8 in the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Committee. The intention is to hear invited and public testimony and hold the resolution in committee for further consideration.

[1:47:59 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE LADDIE SHAW, District 9, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, sponsor of HCR 8 stated that he is

not a recipient of a Purple Heart nor personally affected by Agent Orange but served with those who were. He emphasized the tragedy caused by Agent Orange, which affected over 2 million Vietnam veterans. He served in South Vietnam in 1970-71, during the peak use of Agent Orange, which was deployed to defoliate jungles, poison rivers, and destroy crops, causing long-term harm to veterans and the environment. He estimated that 300,000 veterans of his generation have died from Agent Orange exposure.

[1:49:20 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SHAW explained that Vietnam veterans never received formal recognition for the harm caused by Agent Orange. He compared the \$180 million settlement for 2.5 million veterans impacted by Agent Orange to the \$10 billion settlement for 125,000 Roundup victims, despite the similarity of the two chemicals as herbicides. He recounted a 2005 visit to Vietnam, where he observed ongoing physical, emotional, and mental effects from Agent Orange at Friendship Village, a clinic for North Vietnamese veterans. He described the experience as heart-wrenching, noting that birth defects, cancer, and environmental destruction persist 35 years later. He expressed gratitude to Senators Dunbar and Bjorkman for co-sponsoring the resolution and urged for recognition of the suffering endured by Vietnam veterans and their families.

[1:52:23 PM](#)

BUDDY WHITT, Staff, Representative Laddie Shaw, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, provided background on the introduction of HCR 8 noting that the Orange Heart Medal Foundation, a nonprofit advocating for recognition of Vietnam veterans affected by Agent Orange, approached Representative Shaw's office. He confirmed the legitimacy of the foundation, highlighting that it operates with volunteer support, minimal cash carryover, and no paid employees, consisting mostly of veterans, spouses, and family members impacted by Agent Orange exposure.

[1:53:55 PM](#)

MR. WHITT outlined the key points of HCR 9, which seeks to formally recognize Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange. The resolution acknowledges their service, the widespread use of Agent Orange, and the exposure of approximately 2.6 million U.S. soldiers. It highlights the known health impacts recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and addresses the ongoing lack of formal recognition from the federal government. The resolution expresses gratitude for veterans' sacrifices, calls

for continued recognition of their heroism, and commits to ensuring future generations remember the historic impact of Agent Orange exposure. He affirmed that all figures and references in the resolution were verified and offered to take questions or defer to Ms. Spence from the Orange Heart Medal Foundation for additional context.

[1:55:46 PM](#)

SENATOR GIESSEL asked if HCR 8 specifies a recipient to whom the resolution will be sent.

[1:56:02 PM](#)

MR. WHITT explained that HCR 8 is a state resolution reflecting the will of the legislature and does not get sent to Washington, D.C., or the federal government. Once signed by the governor, it serves as a statewide recognition. The resolution aims to support the Orange Heart Medal Foundation in reaching out to veterans and their families to inform them about the availability of the Orange Heart Medal, while also affirming the legislature's recognition of Vietnam veterans affected by Agent Orange.

SENATOR GIESSEL asked if the Orange Heart Medal Foundation would receive the resolution.

MR. WHITT replied that the foundation would receive a copy. He said Alaska would be the ninth state to pass the resolution.

[1:57:19 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR announced invited testimony on HCR 8.

[1:57:59 PM](#)

At ease.

[2:06:43 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR reconvened the meeting.

[2:06:56 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR invited Ms. Spence to put her name on the record and begin her testimony.

[2:07:03 PM](#)

ROBIN SPENCE, Representative, North Carolina Orange Heart Medal Foundation, Hookerton, North Carolina, gave invited testimony in support of HCR 8. She thanked the committee for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Orange Heart Medal Foundation. She explained that the foundation was established in 2018 by Navy

Vietnam veteran Ken Gamble, who was inspired to act after witnessing a fellow veteran suffering alone in a VA facility. Frustrated by the lack of support, Gamble designed the Orange Heart Medal using the specifications of the Purple Heart, to recognize Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange. He viewed these veterans as combat-wounded due to their exposure to the toxic chemical and the resulting health effects.

[2:10:34 PM](#)

MS. SPENCE recounted how Mr. Gamble sought federal recognition for the medal by addressing 100 U.S. senators, but his efforts were rejected. Undeterred, he returned to Tennessee, where he and State Representative Sabi Kumar drafted legislation recognizing Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange as combat-wounded. Tennessee became the first state to recognize the Orange Heart Medal in 2019. Since then, 11 states have adopted similar legislation.

[2:12:00 PM](#)

MS. SPENCE, a surviving spouse of a Vietnam veteran who died from Agent Orange-related illness in 2018, emphasized the emotional toll on widows and families as they watched loved ones suffer without recognition. She explained that many feel their loved one was forgotten.

MS. SPENCE stated that the mission of the Orange Heart Medal Foundation is to ensure no veteran or family feels forgotten. She emphasized the generational impact of Agent Orange exposure, noting that research from Vanderbilt University indicates that altered DNA from exposure can affect up to the fourth generation in male veterans and the fifth generation in female veterans. She highlighted the seriousness of this issue and the importance of proper recognition for future generations. She said the foundation will work tirelessly and efficiently to ensure Vietnam veterans are represented and urged Alaska to pass HCR 8.

[2:14:45 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR opened public testimony on HCR 8; finding none, he closed public testimony.

CHAIR DUNBAR noted that both Mr. Whitt and Ms. Spence mentioned recognizing or legitimizing the Orange Heart Medal but observed that this language does not appear in the resolution. He asked if formal recognition of the medal is included in the resolution or if it is intended to be addressed at a later date.

[2:15:28 PM](#)

MR. WHITT stated that the Orange Heart Medal is not mentioned in HCR 8, which is consistent with most states that have passed resolutions. He explained that the decision to draft a resolution instead of a bill recognizing the medal was intentional, as a bill could trigger longer discussions on the federal level, potential fiscal impacts, and codification requirements. The preferred approach of both the bill sponsor and the foundation is to use a resolution. He noted that efforts are ongoing at the federal level, and the hope is that widespread support from multiple states could prompt federal action. The current goal is to pass the resolution to formally recognize Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange as a baseline, with the possibility of pursuing further developments in the future.

[2:16:54 PM](#)

SENATOR GIESSEL stated that the 117th Congress (2021 - 2022) did not pass House Resolution 4982 (Agent Orange Service Medal Act).

MR. WHITT replied that is correct and there is no federally recognized metal for those exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam.

[2:18:09 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR held HCR 8 in committee.

[2:18:45 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Dunbar adjourned the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting at 2:18 p.m.