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News Release

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Washington, D.C. -- Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo D. West Jr. today announced that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is developing legislation that would benefit children with birth defects which may be related to their mothers' service in Vietnam.

Secretary West said, "To have a child with birth defects can be devastating for any family. I am so pleased that VA can reach out to women veterans of the Vietnam War and help them and their children."

The proposal is part of Secretary West's response to a VA-commissioned report on Vietnam veterans and Agent Orange from the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). While the NAS concluded in the report that there is inadequate/insufficient evidence that children of Vietnam veterans faced an elevated risk of birth defects, Secretary West said an internal VA study completed after the NAS review provided "compelling evidence" associating women's Vietnam service with birth defects.

Women Vietnam veterans were excluded from many birth defect studies reviewed by NAS because of their relatively small number. The results of a VA study of 90 percent of the 4,410 women Vietnam veterans surviving as of January 1, 1992, showed the risks of having a child with certain birth defects were significantly elevated.

Approximately 2.6 million veterans, 7,484 of them women, served within the borders of South Vietnam and in adjacent waters.

VA already provides benefits for spina bifida, a congenital defect of the spine, in children of veterans who served in the Republic of Vietnam during the Vietnam War. The Department also presumes service-connection for chloracne, porphyria cutanea tarda (a liver disorder), prostate cancer, acute and subacute peripheral neuropathy (nerve impairment), soft-tissue sarcoma, Hodgkin's disease, multiple myeloma, respiratory cancers (lung, bronchus, larynx, and trachea), and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in Vietnam veterans.

West also called on NAS to complete within six months a review of the evidence regarding a possible association between diabetes and herbicide exposure.

"I requested quick turnaround to determine the significance of a recent study of the incidence of diabetes among certain dioxin-exposed employees," he said. "We amended our contractual agreement with NAS so veterans do not have to wait two years until the next scheduled NAS report for a decision on whether or not a presumption for diabetes should be established based on this new evidence."

Dioxin is a compound found in certain herbicides, including Agent Orange, used in Vietnam. The law presumes that all military personnel who served in Vietnam and later suffer certain diseases were exposed to herbicides.

Vietnam veterans who believe they have health problems that may be related to their Vietnam service or exposure to herbicides while serving in Vietnam should contact the nearest VA medical center or regional office. VA's nationwide toll-free number is 1-800-827-1000.