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On Jan. 16 a small group of Fort McClellan veterans and supporters held the "Trail of Toxicity March on Washington" to bring awareness to their quest for recognition from the VA. Pictured here are some of the signs they held while marching toward the Department of Veterans Affairs headquarters on Northwest Vermont Avenue in Washington, D.C.

Soldiering on

VA agrees to acknowledge veterans' concerns online, but continues to deny claims of toxic exposure

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Thousands of veterans who trained at Fort McClellan say contamination at the military base caused them to become seriously ill. For more than a decade they've demanded the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) acknowledge the source of their sicknesses and approve their exposure-related benefits claims.

The VA recently sat down with a Fort McClellan veteran to actively listen to their allegations for the first time, ending what veterans have called an enduring "systematic lockout."

As previously reported ("Toxic soldiers," Street Roots, Dec. 5) veterans in Portland and across the United States claim they suffer from an array of strikingly similar health problems including cancer, brain tumors, reproductive disorders and fibromyalgia, as the result of exposure to contamination during their training at Fort McClellan near Anniston, Ala.

An estimated 600,000 veterans have served at the base since 1935, but VA spokesman Randy Noller says the VA has no way of knowing how many are still alive, nor how many Fort McClellan veterans have filed claims alleging toxic exposure.

The fort closed in 1999 – nine years after the Environmental Protection Agency declared the area a Superfund site (the

agency's designation for the country's most toxic sites in need of cleanup). In the years that followed, thousands of veterans reported health problems they believe are connected to the contamination.

Partially responsible for contamination in the area is Monsanto, which produced PCBs in nearby Anniston for decades. According to both veterans' activists and VA officials, Monsanto's smokestacks were malfunctioning from 1969 to 1971 and PCBs spewed into the air, blanketing the area with toxic particles. Monsanto settled with the residents of Anniston for \$700 million in 2003. Veterans say PCBs landed on the base, but VA says they did not, and that if soldiers were affected, it was due to time spent in the adjacent town of Anniston – meaning the VA is not liable.

PCBs were banned in 1979. According to the EPA, they can cause cancer and have adverse effects on the immune, reproductive, nervous and endocrine systems.

Chemical weapons training, a leaking landfill, asbestos in the barracks and a radiological and nuclear burial ground also contributed to the base's highly toxic

environment, say veterans.

But Veterans Health Administration officials from the department of Post Deployment Health, Dr. Ralph Erickson and Dr. Terry Walters, say Department of Defense testing has not revealed the presence of toxins outside of safe limits at the fort.

In February, the VA released a statement marking its first step toward acknowledgment of the sick veterans who served at the allegedly chemical-laden fort when it said it would update its website.

Street Roots chronicled the struggles of Portland resident and Fort McClellan veteran Laynie Roland in its initial report. Roland says that since the story was published, the VA has continued to deny her disability benefits claims. She says reports of the VA's recent statement give her hope.

"We wait, and we hope, and we are grateful for every little bread crumb we are given," says Roland.

According to the VA, the decision stemmed from a meeting between veteran and activist Sue Frasier and VA officials on Feb. 12.

"As a result of this meeting," says the statement released by VA spokesperson Noller, "the VA's Office of Public Health is updating its website to include more information for veterans and service members on potential environmental hazards at Fort McClellan."

But according to Walters and Erickson, the statement stemming from that meeting means the VA is adding a webpage where relevant information about the fort can be compiled and linked to, and is not an admission that the soldiers were exposed to toxins.

For Frasier, this seemingly small victory comes after a lengthy and frustrating campaign she's waged since 2002.

For 12 years, she's boarded a Greyhound bus almost monthly for the overnight, nine-hour ride between her home in Albany, N.Y., and Washington, D.C.

When she took up this cause in her early 50s, she says she never thought it would take so long to get results.

"Back in the early days, I had no money for a hotel, so I'd leave Albany late at night, ride overnight, and then arrive at Union Station at 6 a.m.," she says. "I'd get off the bus, grab a quick meal, and then change into my business clothes in the bathroom."

She would then arrive at Capitol Hill by 9 a.m. and spend the day wandering from

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— LAYNIE ROLAND
VETERAN, FORMER FORT MCCLELLAN
TRAINEE

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