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office to office, talking to members of Congress about her cause and pitching a bill she authored that would form an official health registry for Fort McClellan veterans. That night she'd re-board the bus and head back to Albany.

Frasier turned to Capitol Hill after multiple attempts to meet with the VA between 2003 and 2005 were unsuccessful. "The VA wouldn't even talk to me on the phone," she says.

But when Bob McDonald was confirmed as the VA's new secretary in 2014, Frasier says it was a "light bulb moment." She knew she had to get down to Washington, D.C., right away to renew her attempts to work with the VA.

At age 64, her efforts with the VA finally paid off. A preliminary meeting in the fall of 2014 paved the way for her to sit down with officials from several different departments within the VA in February.

Two of the VA officials sitting in on the meeting with Frasier had themselves, spent time at Fort McClellan. Their presence, says Frasier, "set it up to be a pivotal turning point."

Those two veterans were Erickson and Walters. Walters says she can't say definitively why thousands of veterans are making claims of toxic exposure, but says it might be a matter of looking for something to blame for their health problems.

"As we age, we all get something," says Walters. "In the case of the Internet age, it's very easy for things to spread."

"Even with something like smoking, it took 60 years to conclusively prove that smoking causes cancer, because we have many exposures in our lives, and who knows what causes things. We don't know the causes of cancers and most illnesses," she says.

Frasier's health is similar to that of other Fort McClellan veterans. "I'm almost a textbook case (of toxic exposure)," says Frasier. "Not the most severe, but a textbook case."

She's had a hysterectomy and gastrointestinal surgery and suffers from asthma and a debilitating muscular disease. Shortly after she was discharged from the Army, she had surgery to remove ulcerated lesions that covered her face. Despite having cosmetic surgery later to hide the scars, she says she makes for a "convincing visual case" in meetings with officials.

Frasier describes her Albany home as a "national archive" of Fort McClellan contamination documentation. She says part

of the battle has been weeding through the misinformation on the Internet. "People sabotage our efforts when they mix things up," she says. "It takes our credibility to the cleaners."

Along with other core members of her organization, the Fort McClellan Veterans Stakeholders Group, she's carefully compiled EPA documentation and test results for different areas of the base. That's the kind of evidence, she says, the VA needs in order to take Fort McClellan veterans seriously. She says it's been a challenging to find reliable people to assist in the research and data collection.

"There are aging issues. We're all so old, and so sick – with cancers, thyroid problems, brain tumors – it really runs the gamut," she says.

One month prior to Frasier's landmark meeting with the VA, about a dozen Fort McClellan veterans participated in "Trail of Toxicity March on Washington" to bring further attention to their quest for recognition.

Among them were veterans Jesse Smith and Sal Caiozzo. While in the capitol they met with Rep. David Jolly (D-FL) who sits on the Congressional Budgetary Committee. They wanted to discuss finding money to notify the hundreds of thousands of potentially affected veterans.

Smith and Caiozzo say they walked away from the meeting with the impression it would be better to wait and see if the VA will be able to find the funds. If the VA initiates the process without prompting from Congress, it would be a much quicker means of notifying veterans and getting them benefits, so news of the VA's intentions of updating its website the following month, they say, was encouraging.

Smith became aware of the Fort McClellan veterans' plight while living in Alabama. He ran against incumbent Rep. Mike Rogers (R-Ala.) for the state's 3rd congressional district in 2014. Smith says his former political opponent concerns him because Fort McClellan is in his district, but despite mounting evidence, "he's denying that anything exists."

Solutia Inc., the company that took over liability from Monsanto for the clean up in Anniston, is among Rogers' campaign financiers, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

A former Army investigator with experience in environmental protection, Smith was inspired to assist with the veterans' campaign. "If we don't come together as a team, we're going to die off as individuals and no one will know what happened," he says.

Despite Rogers' denial, Fort McClellan veterans have established bipartisan support in the halls of Congress.

According to Walters, the VA can't set up a health registry without an act of Congress and only has plans for a website update at this time.

"It's not intended to be a final rendering summary," says Erickson. He says as new information comes in, they will update the website accordingly. "The goal is to stay correct," he says, and documentation submitted by Frasier is under review.

During every session of Congress since 2010, Rep. Paul Tonko (D-N.Y.) has introduced Frasier's bill, which would create

a national health registry for Fort McClellan veterans. The VA could use the registry as a starting point in its investigation into the effects of contamination at the base between 1952 and 1999, so it could later diagnose and treat affected veterans who served there.

In the last session of Congress, the bill garnered the bipartisan support of 84 co-sponsors, including Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) – but it died in committee.

In 2013 the Rhode Island House of Representatives also came out in support of the bill, but issued a resolution requesting it be amended to include all employees and civilians who worked on the base, and all

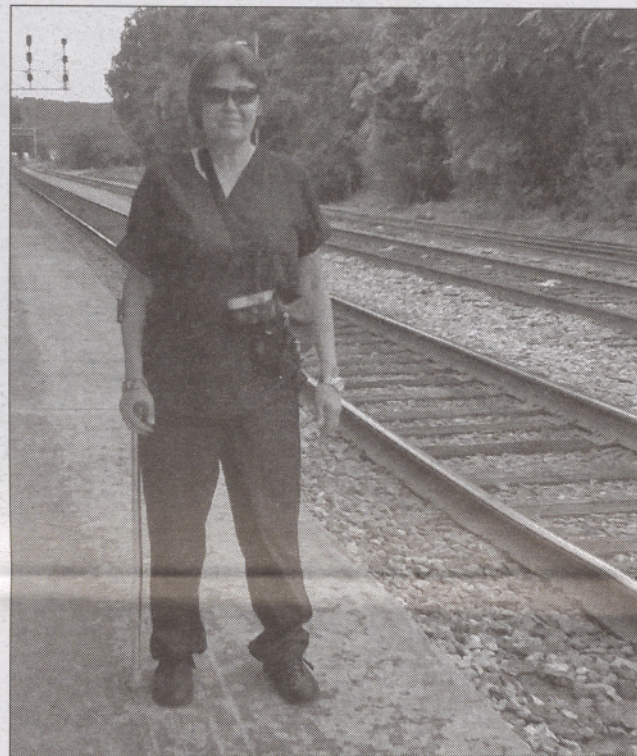


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affected biological offspring. Many veterans claim their children suffer from birth defects and other illnesses related to genetic mutations they suffered from toxic exposure. The bill was not amended and includes only veterans filing claims.

Tonko's spokesperson, Sean Magers, says the congressman is waiting to see if the VA is going to recognize Fort McClellan veteran claims without an act of Congress, but if it doesn't, he will continue to introduce the bill until it passes.

Frasier says during her meeting with VA officials it was agreed the best first step for the VA to take would be to add a page on its website containing official information about toxic hazards veterans may have been exposed to during training.

An open forum for all the various Fort McClellan activist groups to come together was also discussed as a potential next step. "But that's still an open question," says Frasier. She plans to follow up during her next meeting with the VA in May when she submits additional documentation to support veterans claims.

Portland VA spokesperson Dan Herringstad says that locally, the VA will follow whatever directive it receives from national headquarters in regard to Fort McClellan veterans.

Sue Frasier waits for a train at the Anniston Amtrak Station in Alabama, in June 2014. Frasier is a Ft. McClellan veteran and activist who's made near-monthly visits to Washington, D.C., for the past 12 years, prompting the VA to update its website to include information about environmental hazards at Ft. McClellan.

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Learn more about the Fort McClellan contamination issue at news/streetroots.org