



## Disability History and Awareness Month 2023

### Lee Roy Torres

A significant number of people with disabilities are also veterans. Countless veterans sustained disabling physical injuries, mental illnesses, and invisible disabilities because of their service and sacrifice. After decades of advocating for its passage, Congress bipartisanly (by a considerable margin) passed burn-pit legislation to provide VA assistance to veterans afflicted with illnesses related to the army's use of burn pits and other toxic disposal methods.



The man who spearheaded the primary efforts to pass burn pit legislation was Lee Roy Torres, who served in Iraq and was stationed at Balad Air Base. During his time in Iraq, Torres inhaled toxic fumes from burn pits and other harmful waste disposal sites where chemicals, plastics, and batteries were routinely burned in large piles without adequate safety precautions. After being honorably discharged, Torres began experiencing symptoms within weeks of coming home, requiring him to step away from his position as a Texas State Trooper – a role he had served in before his being called to active duty. The state refused to reassign Torres, ultimately forcing him to resign (though he later sued the state, taking his case to the Supreme Court and receiving a favorable outcome). Torres was also struggling to get his medical needs covered by the VA because the cause of his illness was challenging to verify; in fact, many veterans have difficulties obtaining proper diagnoses and care for disabilities inherited from their service. Since his discharge, Torres and his wife devoted themselves to securing adequate care for veterans exposed to burn pits by founding “Burn Pits 360” and lobbying Congress for VA reforms.

Veterans are a significant group within the disabled community, and they're also among the most vulnerable. Many veterans that come home come back with physical disabilities and emotional trauma that requires complex care and robust support systems. As we continue to celebrate Disability Awareness Month, it's essential to highlight and honor the many veterans who have become disabled during their extraordinary service and sacrifice.

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