

## DRINKING WATER

### VA to pay disability benefits for Camp Lejeune contamination

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The Department of Veterans Affairs will pay out billions of dollars in disability benefits to Marines who were exposed to contaminated drinking water over a stretch of more than 30 years at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune in North Carolina.

The agency published a [final regulation](#) today that will allow thousands of veterans or their surviving spouses or children to receive compensation for eight diseases that have been linked to the base.

"Based on evidence from several internationally recognized scientific authorities ... Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert McDonald has determined there is sufficient scientific and medical evidence available to establish a presumption of service connection for eight diseases associated with exposure to contaminants in the water supply at Camp Lejeune," the VA said in a statement.

The payments, beginning in March, will be made to veterans who were stationed at the base for at least 30 days between Aug. 1, 1953, and Dec. 31, 1987, and suffer from any of eight diseases: kidney cancer, liver cancer, non-Hodgkin lymphoma, adult leukemia, multiple myeloma, Parkinson's disease, aplastic anemia and bladder cancer.

The base drew its tap water from wells that were later found to be contaminated with chemicals including a metal degreaser and dry cleaning agent, and studies since have linked the development of multiple cancers among veterans who lived at the base to the drinking water.

The agency estimates it will pay more than \$2 billion over the next five years to more than 100,000 veterans. The VA estimates that about 900,000 veterans in total were stationed at the camp during the period of contamination.

#### 'A huge victory' and 'an unanswered question'

Medical care for veterans and their families affected by the contamination is covered under a provision in a 2012 health care law, but until the rule issued today, veterans' disability claims related to Lejeune health problems were not automatically covered and instead were evaluated on an individual basis.

"Say you had a vet who comes down with kidney cancer. The law paid for medical care, but if that veteran should become disabled, it's possible that nothing else could happen," said Mike Partain, who was born on the base in 1968 and has been an advocate on the issue since he was diagnosed with breast cancer 10 years ago.

"Now they've taken care of if they become disabled or can't work," he said. "That's a huge victory. It's the largest presumptive service connection that's been extended by the VA since Agent Orange."

Partain, who lives in Florida and is now cancer-free, said the next step he's hoping for is to get the government to cover disability claims for family members like him who lived on the base and suffered medical problems.

"The next question is the dependents. What do you do for the mothers, the fathers, the children who were living on the base that are affected by this? That's an unanswered question," he said.

The federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, which has published several studies about the Camp Lejeune contamination, will hold a public meeting Jan. 21 to discuss its findings.