

Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough said he is “frustrated” by his department’s slow pace of expanding benefits for military burn pit victims but insists that federal rules limit his ability to move quicker on the issue.

In an interview on “The Problem with Jon Stewart” hosted by comedian Jon Stewart, McDonough said he wants to expand the list of burn-pit-related illnesses eligible for presumptive benefits soon, but is facing internal obstacles to do that.

The biggest hurdle is establishing a scientific link, and I will be damned if I don’t establish that,” he said. “We do operate within the context of a series of requirements, and we have not yet been able to meet the requirements.”

In August, VA officials announced for the first time that veterans suffering asthma, rhinitis and sinusitis who were exposed to toxic smoke while serving in Iraq, Afghanistan and other recent conflict locations will be granted presumptive benefit status.

That allows them to more quickly receive medical and financial assistance from the department, without having to prove specific injury details.

Veterans groups have called the action a small first step in helping the estimated 3.5 million exposed to toxic smoke from burn pits during overseas deployments over the last 20 years. But they have also emphasized that the department needs to move quicker to recognize rare cancers and other illnesses caused by the toxic exposures, to assist veterans suffering now. Stewart has been a vocal champion of the issue in recent years, appearing at multiple Capitol Hill rallies alongside veterans advocates to push for legislation to speed up the process. He dedicated the first episode of his new show to the topic, featuring interviews with veterans suffering from the health effects of their deployments and the sit-down in McDonough’s office to push for a quicker response from VA.

“From what I’ve seen, [researchers] have done a ton of National Academy of Science studies, and people waive those all the time and say that no links have been established [between burn pits and vet’s illnesses],” Stewart told McDonough.

In response, the Department of Education announced changes to “restore the promise” of the program and “make it easier for members of the military to get credit toward forgiveness while they serve.”

“But unfortunately, those studies all say there is insufficient data, and that data is not going to be getting any better because it’s provided by the Defense Department. And if it’s insufficient in 2008, it’s going to be insufficient in 2020.”

Lawmakers have proposed legislation to get around those federal rules and award benefits to burn pit victims quicker. Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester, D-Mont., and ranking member Jerry Moran, R-Kansas, spoke with Stewart on a podcast accompanying the episode and said they are still hopeful that work can be completed soon.

While the loan forgiveness program is not solely focused on service members, they make up a significant portion of program recipients.

Officials said at least 17,000 current troops will benefit from the new rules, but the number could be much higher as staff combs through various loan accounts to see how many of the estimated 550,000 borrowers expected to benefit had some military service

Under current rules, loan forgiveness recipients must either work full-time at a government job — federal, state, local and military posts are all included — or a not-for-profit, non-partisan organization such as the Peace Corps. It covers individuals who have direct loans or previously consolidated federal student loans and have been paying down the debt for the last 10 years.

The rationale behind the program is to give those public servants financial relief, rather than force them to leave those public service jobs in an effort to erase their debts.

But in the past, rules surrounding those repayments required strict monthly guidelines and only covered certain types of loans. Earlier this week, [60 Minutes](#) profiled multiple service members who paid back tens of thousands of dollars over a decade, only to discover at the end that their loan forgiveness applications had been rejected on technicalities.

Education Department officials Wednesday’s announcement is designed to prevent that from happening again.

“These changes are important steps toward a better and stronger PSLF program, one that will move away from the current situation in which too few borrowers receive forgiveness, and too many do not receive credit for years of payments they made because of complicated eligibility rules, servicing errors or other technicalities,” they said in a statement.

Department leaders also promised to devote extra attention to members of the military.

Starting in 2022, staff will match department data with other federal databases to ensure that all federal workers (including troops) automatically qualify for the debt relief. That means those individuals could see their debts suddenly erased, without any work on their part.

“Military service members and other federal employees devote themselves to serving the United States, and we should make it as easy as possible for them to get [financial relief],” the department announcement stated.

The changes also include broadening the types of federal loans previously eligible for forgiveness and relaxing strict monthly repayment rules.



Verse of the Day

Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

Revelation 4:11 KJV

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Our monthly meetings are on hold until the pandemic is cleared and a vaccine is developed. No meetings are being held at the Wesley Chapel Library at 2861 Wesley Chapel Rd., Decatur, Ga. Our meetings are the fourth Wednesday of every month and start at 6:30 (PM) for approximately one hour and a half, unless otherwise advertised. We will be respectful of your time.

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"Be on your guard, stand firm in the faith, being men of courage, be strong." 1Cor 16:13

Sincerely,

William A. Harris, Jr.

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www.veteransforchristinc.org

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