

# Don't Wait for an Army to Die – Communications Department Report

By Mokie Pratt Porter, Director of Communications



Significant numbers of Vietnam veterans have children and grandchildren with birth defects related to exposure to Agent Orange. A Ford Foundation public relations campaign to win the sympathy of the American people for the plight of Agent Orange victims in Vietnam does not plan to address the plight of Agent Orange victims in America.

On June 2, the Ford Foundation announced that it and the U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin are hoping to mobilize resources to raise awareness about the ongoing health consequences of dioxin contamination in Vietnam resulting from the wartime spraying of Agent Orange. The end goal is to gain the support of Congress, American business, and the American people.

When VVA representatives asked at the meeting whether American veterans and their offspring also would be part of the public relations campaign, the chair of the Working Group replied: "We have given you the report."

A June 1 report, "U.S. Vietnam Veterans and Agent Orange: Understanding the Impact 40 Years Later," by the National Organization on Disability with funding from the Ford Foundation, concludes that it is not "too late to correct the lapses in the nation's treatment of veterans who were exposed to dioxin during the Vietnam War," and that "one lesson of the Agent Orange experience has been that the consequences of such chemicals are rarely easy to predict, and that the burdens they impose may well be borne for generations."

The report includes five detailed recommendations: 1) outreach to all affected veterans and their families; 2) outreach to health practitioners and disability-related service agencies; 3) medical care for affected children and grandchildren; 4) a fresh approach to research; and 5) direct service to veterans and their families.

VVA recognizes the work and commitment of the Ford Foundation Special Initiative on Agent Orange/Dioxin and the U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin. Moreover, the June 1 report provides highly useful recommendations related to the unfinished business of Agent Orange/Dioxin for Vietnam veterans and their progeny.

But if the Ford Foundation's publicity campaign will focus exclusively on the plight of Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange, then Vietnam veterans need to launch their own grass-roots publicity campaign.

## THE TASK AHEAD

This is not just a VVA issue. VVA members, chapters, and state councils need to reach out and work with other veterans' organizations in their communities. We cannot allow veterans to find out about their A/O exposure from the perspective of the Vietnamese victims. This is not about animosity toward Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange; it is a response to telling only one side of the story.

We need real stories about real people. We are in the process of gathering these stories. If you wish to share your family's second- and third-generation health struggles from what you believe to be due to exposure to Agent Orange/Dioxin, please send an email to [mporter@vva.org](mailto:mporter@vva.org) or call 301-585-4000, ext. 146.

Some have suggested holding veterans' health forums at the chapter and state council levels. That's a good way to get local media attention and a perfect forum to discuss the issue of A/O, as well as the host of illnesses and maladies associated with military service.

It is useful to have a nuts-and-bolts, how-to plan for this type of health forum. What we need is something that could be shared with other states and chapters, such as a checklist for organizers of local health forums, or a document that has tips for putting on a highinterest, high-attendance, high-media-coverage veterans' health forum.

This is not just about the Vietnam War and Agent Orange; it is about all toxic exposures in all theaters of our recent wars, whether in Thailand, Eglin Air Force Base, Guam, Puerto Rico, Texas, the Gulf, Iraq, or Afghanistan. The larger lesson continues to be that the cost of war doesn't end when the guns are silent. In fact, it takes a generational toll.

This effort is just getting started. What works in one area may not work in another area. But sharing ideas, info, intel, and good stories is needed. Local initiative, local creativity, and local enthusiasm and energy will be essential.