

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 10, 2026

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Chair  
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on  
Defense  
Room S-128, The Capitol  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Christopher Coons  
Ranking Member  
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on  
Defense  
Room S-128, The Capitol  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chair McConnell and Ranking Member Coons:

As you begin deliberations on the Fiscal Year (FY) 2027 defense appropriations bill, we respectfully request that you **continue to include esophageal cancer as a disease eligible for research funding through the Department of Defense (DoD) Peer Reviewed Cancer Research Program (PRCRP).**

Esophageal cancer is the is the sixth leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States.<sup>1</sup> In addition, about four out of five patients (nearly 80 percent) die within five years of receiving an esophageal cancer diagnosis, and almost 50 percent die within the first year.<sup>2</sup> It is one of American's deadliest cancers, largely because effective treatment is rare, early detection is scarce, and no screening guidelines exist for this disease.

Further, many of those at greatest risk for esophageal cancer are men over the age of 55 who have a history of gastro-esophageal reflux disease (GERD), tobacco<sup>3</sup> and/or alcohol use, and/or obesity<sup>1</sup> – all risks that are higher among our nation's veterans compared to the general population.<sup>4,5</sup> Of increased concern, research shows that the incidence of esophageal adenocarcinoma, the most prevalent form of this cancer in the U.S., tripled among younger patients from 1975 to 2015.<sup>6</sup> That means our warfighters and their families are also at risk, and

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<sup>1</sup> Kamal UH, Jamil A, Fatima E, et al. Mortality Patterns of Esophageal Cancer in the United States: A 21-Year Retrospective Analysis. *Am J Clin Oncol.* 2025;48(2):57-66. doi:10.1097/COC.0000000000001147

<sup>2</sup> Cancer Facts & Figures 2026. Cancer.org. Published 2026. <https://www.cancer.org/research/cancer-facts-statistics/all-cancer-facts-figures/2026-cancer-facts-figures.html>

<sup>3</sup> Using Health Factors Data for VA Health Services Research, Paul G. Barnett, Adam Chow and Nicole E. Flores February 2014, p. 28

<sup>4</sup> Greer KB, Blum AE, Faulx AL, et al. Non-endoscopic screening for Barrett's esophagus and Esophageal Adenocarcinoma in at risk Veterans. Published online March 16, 2024. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1101/2024.03.15.24304354>

<sup>5</sup> VAntagePoint Contributor. VA surgeon-researcher, a Navy Veteran, dedicated to improving the survival outcomes for Veterans with esophageal cancer. *VA News.* Published July 6, 2017. Accessed March 6, 2026. <https://news.va.gov/39369/va-surgeon-researcher-navy-veteran-dedicated-improving-survival-outcomes-veterans-esophageal-cancer/>

<sup>6</sup> Codipilly DC, Sawas T, Dhaliwal L, et al. Epidemiology and Outcomes of Young-Onset Esophageal Adenocarcinoma: An Analysis from a Population-Based Database. *Cancer Epidemiol Biomarkers Prev.* 2021;30(1):142-149. doi:10.1158/1055-9965.EPI-20-0944

the studies show that these patients typically present with late-stage disease when treatment is rarely successful.<sup>7</sup>

Our military personnel and veterans also have additional risks. The VA has already established that there is a presumption of service connection for esophageal cancer due to radiation and burn pit exposure. There is also a link to the contaminated drinking water at U.S. Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina from the 1950s through the 1980s. Veterans and their families who were stationed there may have been exposed to drinking water contaminated with industrial solvents, benzene, and other chemicals that have been linked to esophageal cancer.<sup>8</sup>

We greatly appreciate that you have included esophageal cancer in the PRCRP for the last seven years. We also want to thank you for protecting the Department of Defense (DoD) Peer Reviewed Cancer Research Program (PRCRP) in the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2026* (P.L. 119-75) and for increasing funding above the enacted fiscal year 2025 level. Given the lack of early detection tools and effective treatments and the impact that this disease has on our Armed Services and Veteran populations, it is critical that esophageal cancer continues to be included in the PRCRP. A hallmark of the PRCRP is its focus on high-risk, high-reward research, making it inherently different than the approach used by the National Cancer Institute. By continuing to include esophageal cancer as a disease eligible for funding under the PRCRP, Congress will be giving all American men and women at risk for and diagnosed with esophageal cancer a fighting chance for survival and a new hope for the future.

Congress established the PRCRP in FY 2009 to support research into specifically designated cancers with relevance to military service members and their families. Esophageal cancer clearly meets those criteria, particularly given the burden that it has and is projected to have on the military and veteran population and the fact that the VA and Congress have already recognized links between military service and esophageal cancer. **We respectfully request that you continue to include esophageal cancer as a disease eligible for research funding in PRCRP for FY 2027 and grow federal investment in the program.** With your support, we will open new avenues of research to stop the devastation caused by this disease in both our military and civilian populations.

Sincerely,

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<sup>7</sup> Codipilly DC, Sawas T, Dhaliwal L, et al. Epidemiology and Outcomes of Young-Onset Esophageal Adenocarcinoma: An Analysis from a Population-Based Database. *Cancer Epidemiol Biomarkers Prev.* 2021;30(1):142-149. doi:10.1158/1055-9965.EPI-20-0944

<sup>8</sup> 38 U.S.C. 1710(e)(1)(F), 38 CFR 17.400