

Testimony of
Mr. Billie Speicher

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Statement from Billie Speicher
1359 North Palm Avenue
Ontario, California 91762

Good morning. My name is Billie Speicher and I appreciate the chance to talk to you today about the asbestos bill you've been working on.

I'm here today for three reasons ---to speak up for the men that used to work side-by-side with me who will someday will have to live through what I'm going through -I want to speak for my family -and I'd like to urge more research into the cancer that's changed my life.

I have mesothelioma. I don't have to tell you what that means - you've been at this long enough - it's a deadly cancer and by all rights I should only have a few months to live.

I was exposed as an aircraft mechanic for the Marine Corps in the late 1950s ---and as a pipe fitter from 1965 to 1999. Looking back I can't think of two more dangerous lines of work. Although none of us knew it then -no one told my buddies and me that asbestos could kill you.

Working on airplane brakes and insulation -and later on in refineries and industrial shops knocking off pipe insulation and installing and removing pipes and valves and cutting asbestos cement pipe -asbestos was everywhere. It was all over me and all over everyone who worked near me.

I got the bad news last May. At first the doctors I was seeing for two years kept telling me I had asthma -even though I had CAT scans that showed my lungs were scarred.

But finally the fluid built up so much in my lungs they realized I had mesothelioma. Now I'm living with a lot of pain -and I can barely get my breath. Can't hardly sleep at night either.

You know that mesothelioma is a death sentence. One year -18 months tops -that's all they give you -and all they gave me. Well I'm still alive and kicking today because of one thing - an experimental drug called Veglin. It was discovered by Dr. Gill. I started getting the Veglin shots about a month after my diagnosis and so far they have stopped me from getting any new tumors.

You can probably figure out that new experimental medicines like Veglin are very expensive. They are and that's one of the reasons I want to talk to you about the bill your thinking about up here in the Senate.

I've filed a workers comp claim in my home state of California to help cover my medical

expenses. The lawyer who handles this case for me tells me that since I have meso I will most likely receive the maximum level of benefits under state law for a permanent and total disability. I'm not sure how much ---somewhere between 200 and 300-thousand dollars. California law also provides lifetime medical benefits for me since I have mesothelioma. I also have a court case coming up and the trial date is set for February 22nd this year.

Now I've followed this bill you're talking about since I got meso last year and I have to say that I don't like the idea of it. I'm no legal expert but to me the jury system in our country is about as important as it gets. And I just don't think it's right to take those rights away from people like I hear this proposal will do.

But -I don't want to be rude because you've invited me here so --if you are going to do something with this new trust fund there are a couple of things I hope you keep in mind.

For one thing ---if you were to put this thing into law today -well that would wipe out my trial right? -and even if I go to court before that and win -or win a settlement ---you get this thing passed by summer -it all goes away and it'd be like I never got my day in court. I'd have to start all over again and go into this trust fund that's supposed to be set up in about a year. I don't want to be disrespectful -but I was in the Marines -except for war -I don't think the government does anything very fast. Thing is I don't have a lot of time. And you may not know it but I live in California where folks like me with meso get put at the head of the line with their court cases.

I know the idea is that you're setting up a trust fund and I'm supposed to get help from that -but that's the next thing -the way I understand it --the way you wrote this bill up the help I'm supposed to get from my state in the workers comp system would be subtracted from the compensation I'm supposed to get from this new trust fund.

I just don't think that's right. I'm not sure because I don't know all the specifics -but I have to believe I'm going to do a lot better in court than what you've got in mind in this trust fund. So I get less help from this bill -and I'm going to have to wait a long time -and on top of it all the compensation I'm entitled to from my state is taken out of what I'm supposed to get from this trust fund. And that includes death benefits my wife will get when I'm gone. Seems to me that there oughta be a law against that.

Now, I don't want anyone thinking I've come up here with my hand out saying "show me the money" -because that's not what I care about.

I need help with my medical bills -those Veglin shots are keeping me alive -the only thing that's keeping me alive. Second I want to make sure my family is taken care of ---my wife and my kids and the most beautiful grand kid you've ever seen. It's costing a lot of money to keep me alive - and it'll cost a whole bunch more. I don't want my family stuck with a pile of debts after I'm gone ---I'm telling you right now that's causing me as much pain as the cancer that's eating away at my body.

But finally - I want to say a word about research and the guys I used to work with. I'm here today to speak for them. Not just the guys who busted pipe and asbestos insulation with me -but the hundreds of thousands of guys all over the country who did it for years ---and may still be doing

it today -because you know asbestos is still out there in the construction trades in buildings. And construction workers are exposed to asbestos whenever they do renovations.

You also know that every day another worker is diagnosed with meso or some other asbestos related disease -and many more will keep on coming in the future.

So whatever you do you have to make it work for them. And you also have to do something to help with the research to find a cure for Mesothelioma. I don't know if you've put any money in this bill to help with that. But you ought to.

And you ought to do it even if the federal government has to pay for it. Now I know that may not go over to good -there's a war on and we have a big deficit. But the plain truth is that the Government had a lot to do with exposing guys like me to asbestos. I got my first taste of it working on airplanes when I was in the Marines. Navy guys -marines -a whole lot of veterans got their first exposure to asbestos serving their country.

So I'd just like to close by saying I hope you do the right thing by us when you finish writing this bill -and I hope you're thinking about all the workers in the future like me who are going to hear the same thing I did last May ----that they only have about one year to live. Let's find a cure for mesothelioma ---we know it's going to still be killing people for years and years -so let's do something about it.