



## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Veterans Organizations Sue DoD Over Withheld Records of Toxic Exposures at K2 Airbase**

**NEW HAVEN, CT** – Today, Stronghold Freedom Foundation (SFF) and Connecticut Veterans Legal Center (CVLC) filed a federal lawsuit against the Department of Defense (DoD) under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The suit seeks disclosure of records documenting toxic conditions at Karshi-Khanabad Air Base (K2) in Uzbekistan, a major staging ground for the war in Afghanistan.

Immediately following the September 11 attacks, many of the first boots on the ground in Afghanistan passed through K2. More than 15,000 U.S. servicemembers eventually deployed between 2001 and 2005. “While we know that toxic materials were present at K2, the DoD has not revealed enough specifics regarding the contamination nor have they revealed the extent of exposure to deployed servicemembers,” said Matt Erpelding, SFF Executive Director and K2 veteran. “So many of us who served at K2 got sick while we were there – nausea, headaches, rashes. Since, too many of us are sick, and have died of rare and serious illnesses.”

“K2 veterans have a right to know what toxic substances they were exposed to during their service,” said U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal, who introduced the K2 Veterans Care Act in 2021. “The Department of Defense’s withholding of this critical information imperils thousands of veterans’ lives and is an unacceptable obstacle to receiving vital medical treatment. Lives are at stake and this wrong must be swiftly corrected before it is too late.”

“The litigation filed today is a result of numerous FOIA request attempts to obtain information about the toxins documented at K2 by the U.S. Government,” said Mr. Erpelding. “This information will expedite the diagnosis and treatment for veterans, as well as provide researchers at Johns Hopkins with vital data for their work on diagnosing diseases linked to these toxins. The Stronghold Freedom Foundation team continues to work tirelessly for anyone who spent time at K2 and their families. We have to act quickly so that these veterans and their families receive the care and treatment they deserve.”

“It is unfathomable that the Department of Defense is continuing to obstruct the public’s right to information that is directly impacting the health and lives of people who have served our country, but Connecticut Veterans Legal Center has unfortunately seen it time-and-time again.



We are proud to fight beside SFF to obtain this critical information and ensure K2 veterans have access to the healthcare they earned and deserved,” said Alison Weir, CVLC Executive Director.

More than 200 days that have passed since SFF and CVLC first submitted their FOIA requests. DoD has produced no responsive records. “For a veteran, nothing is more disheartening than being abandoned by your own government,” said Derek Nelson, Army veteran and a law student intern with the legal team representing the plaintiffs. “By withholding this information, the DoD has abandoned these sick and dying K2 veterans. We hope this lawsuit today is an important step in remedying that abandonment and providing K2 veterans the justice they deserve.”

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***Stronghold Freedom Foundation** is a nationwide nonprofit organization that serves to address the toxic exposures of veterans who were deployed to K2 during Operation Enduring Freedom. SFF grew from a grassroots movement of K2 veterans who, after finding each other on social media, joined together as they navigate serious health issues they believe were caused by toxic exposure there.*

***Connecticut Veterans Legal Center** is a Connecticut-based nonprofit organization that advocates on behalf of veterans, including by providing legal assistance to veterans who have been denied critical health and disability benefits by the Department of Veterans Affairs.*

***The Veterans Legal Services Clinic**, which represents SFF and CVLC, is part of the Jerome N. Frank Legal Services Organization at Yale Law School.*