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Testimony Before the United States House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
H.R. 9516 - *Military Families National Parks Access Enhancement Act*

Good morning, Chair Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Gabriella Kubinyi, and I am the surviving spouse of United States Navy Petty Officer Second Class Jeffrey Ferren, who died while serving on active duty in Virginia.

I am here today to express my strong support for HR 9516, the *Military Families National Parks Access Enhancement Act*. This bill represents a meaningful step towards honoring the sacrifices made by our military families, particularly those who have lost loved ones in service to our nation.

The National Defense Authorization Act of 2022 (NDAA 2022) authorized the expansion of the Interagency Military Lifetime Pass, or Military Pass program, to offer lifetime access for veterans and Gold Star Family members, a significant upgrade from the previous annual passes. This change reflected the nation's commitment to honoring the service of military personnel and their families, specifically those who wear the Gold Star Lapel Pin. The Department of Defense presents this pin to families of service members who have died in a "qualifying situation," such as in war, an international terrorist attack, or a military operation outside of the United States while serving with the US Armed Forces.

This initiative not only provides free access to roughly four hundred million acres of public land which are some of America's most beautiful and diverse landscapes but also encourages service members, veterans, and their families to make lasting memories enjoying the country's natural heritage. For survivors, there is an added aspect, the national parks as a place for remembrance, healing, and grief work.

The Military Pass waives entrance fees for locations run by the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and standard amenity recreation fees for the Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers sites for current military service members and their dependents, veterans and Gold Star Families.

Although the 2022 NDAA expansion was well-received, it unfortunately excluded surviving families who are eligible for the Department of Defense's Next-of-Kin Pin, which also has a

gold star, that is presented to the families of service members who die while serving on active duty.

H.R. 9516 seeks to broaden eligibility to include my family. My husband died at the age of 31 years old. He was as healthy as far as anyone knew. When he died, the ship he was stationed on, the USS Oscar Austin, was about two months away from a 6-month deployment. As an engineman, his job was imperative to the operation of the ship. This meant he was working 6 or 7 days a week, for 16 to 18 hours a day. He was also drinking a lot of coffee and Red Bull to be able to keep going. Work, stress, and caffeine became a deadly combination, especially for a sailor with an undiagnosed heart condition.

The expansion of the Military Pass program to include all families who have lost a service member is a significant and crucial step. This change acknowledges a crucial fact often overlooked in discussions about military casualties: the majority of military deaths occur outside of hostile action. For instance, in the year my husband died, 2012, out of 1,308 total military deaths, only 239 resulted from hostile action. The remaining 1,069 deaths were due to various causes including accidents, illness, suicide, and other non-combat related incidents. This stark reality underscores the importance of recognizing and honoring all military families who have experienced loss, regardless of the circumstances.

Recent data further emphasizes this point. In 2022, there were 844 military deaths, and notably, none of these deaths were attributed to hostile action or terrorist attacks. This information highlights the diverse risks and challenges faced by military personnel, extending far beyond combat situations.

The expansion of the Military Pass program is crucial because it recognizes the sacrifice of all military families who have lost a loved one, irrespective of the cause of death. It acknowledges that service-related deaths are not limited to combat and provides support to a much larger number of bereaved military families. By broadening the eligibility criteria, this initiative ensures that all families who have experienced the loss of a service member are honored and supported, offering a small but meaningful gesture of support to those left behind.

This approach better reflects the complex nature of military service and provides a more comprehensive recognition of the sacrifices made by service members and their families. It sends a powerful message that every life lost in service to the country is equally valued and remembered, regardless of how that loss occurred. The expanded program will touch many more families who have made the ultimate sacrifice, providing them with access to America's natural heritage as a means of healing and remembrance.

The bill's expansion to more surviving family members is commendable. I believe that this gesture recognizes the service and sacrifice of not only the service member, but the family as well. It would also provide a tangible benefit that can be extremely meaningful for a family's healing and remembrance. This will also ensure that these families will not face a financial barrier accessing part of what their loved one served to protect.

I would also like to note that H.R. 9516 would bring this benefit in line with the same eligibility to be a part of the military branches surviving family programs. In my case, I have been involved with the Navy Gold Star Family Program since its inception. The program shared an email on the original expansion, and it has led to confusion within the survivor community on who is eligible. Even the Navy Gold Star Program shared the information under the assumption that all families in its program were eligible.

While I applaud Representative Chavez-DeRemer on her bill to expand eligibility for the free annual military passes to surviving families of active-duty deaths, there is a group of survivors who are still not eligible. There is an opportunity to expand its scope to more comprehensively honor all those who have given their lives in service to our country.

These families are those whose loved ones passed away after their time on active duty, from a disease or injury they incurred during their service. Veterans who die from a VA service-connected disability.

The 2022 NDAA also extended a free lifetime pass to veterans. This lifetime veteran pass provides more than just individual access. It allows veterans to share the experience with their loved ones, as the pass covers not only the veteran but also the occupants of a single, private non-commercial vehicle. In locations where fees are charged per person, the pass admits the veteran and up to three additional adults.

An important implication of this expansion is its potential impact on families of veterans who pass away due to service-connected disabilities. In such cases, the surviving family members may have already been granted free admission to these lands and parks through their loved one's veteran status. This provision ensures that these families can continue to enjoy America's natural treasures without financial burden, serving as both a gesture of gratitude for the veteran's service and a means of support for their bereaved families.

Many veterans have enjoyed their time on earth in our country's national parks, creating memories that their families will be able to cherish once they are gone. One such veteran was Katie Benson. Tragically, Katie lost her battle with cancer that has been linked to her deployment to Kuwait, where her barracks were adjacent to an open air asbestos disposal site.

Throughout her life, Katie found solace in the natural beauty of her home, Portland, Oregon. While Katie was sick, she and her husband would spend hours stargazing together, enjoying their time together. As Katie got sicker, the couple traveled across the nation, finding fleeting refuge in the majesty of our national parks while bravely dealing with her treatments.

Her husband Sri, said, “Those moments became our sanctuary, allowing us to escape, however briefly, from the weight of our reality. Visiting these parks now that she is no longer here, allows me to connect with her memory in a way that photographs alone cannot capture. Katie sacrificed her life for the freedoms we cherish and reveled in the beauty of this land. Expanding eligibility to next-of-kin of anyone who dies due to their service, whether on active duty or subsequently would be a profound tribute to their sacrifice and a gesture of healing that far surpasses any conventional acknowledgment of their service.”

HR 9516 is a commendable bill that honors our heroes and their families. By expanding its scope to include all active-duty deaths, we can ensure that we comprehensively recognize and support those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our nation, regardless of where that sacrifice is realized.

This amendment not only provides enduring recognition for Gold Star Families but also ensures they can find solace and healing in the beauty of our nation’s cherished public lands—free from financial constraints. It is a gesture that reflects our nation's gratitude and underscores our commitment to those who have given so much. I urge the committee to consider this expansion and to move forward with this important legislation. Our military families deserve nothing less than our full support and recognition.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions the members of the committee may have.