



January 23, 2024

The Honorable Mike Bost
Chairman
House Veterans Affairs Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
352 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Bost:

The Fleet Reserve Association (FRA) respectfully submits this correspondence as a statement for the record in conjunction with the House Veterans Affairs Committee hearing on military survivor benefits, scheduled for Tuesday, January 30, 2024. This statement provides the Association's recommendations on key survivor issues.

The Association wants to thank this committee for holding this hearing on military survivor benefits. The FRA recognizes the sacrifices Survivors have endured and works to eliminate survivor benefit inequities. The Association also works to improve and protect existing survivor benefits issued by the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

The FRA is a leader in the military/veteran's organization community and represents current and former Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard personnel on compensation, benefits and quality of life programs and works to improve benefits for these service members, their families, and *survivors*.

At the request of the FRA Senators John Cornyn (Tex.) and Elizabeth Warren (Mass.) and Representatives John Garamendi (Calif.) and Mark Amodei (NV) introduced the "Respect for Grieving Military Families Act" (H.R. 3232/S.1588), which would stop the Department of Defense from clawing back deceased military retirees benefits while their families are still in mourning.

Surviving spouses who are unaware that the Defense Finance and Accounting Services (DFAS) should be notified immediately on the death of the military retiree are surprised to learn of this requirement. Those who had joint bank accounts, in which retirement payments were made electronically, gave little if any thought that DFAS could swoop down and recoup any overpayments of retirement pay from such accounts. This action could easily clear the account of any funds remaining whether they were retirement payments or money from other sources. Instead of withdrawing the payment all at once the bill would allow a gradual repayment over 12 months and gives the Secretary of Defense the option to forgive the over payment.

The FRA supports making the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) benefits equal to other federal survivor benefits and is supporting the “Caring for Survivors Act” (H.R. 1083/S. 414). Currently, DIC is approximately 43 percent of a 100 percent disabled retiree’s compensation. Survivors of federal civilian workers have their annuity set at 55 percent of their Disabled Retiree’s Compensation. FRA supports raising DIC payments to 55 percent of VA Disability Compensation for a 100 percent disabled veteran. Increasing DIC payable to survivors of catastrophically disabled veterans to match other Federal survivor benefit plans is long overdue.

Catastrophically disabled veterans, whose spouses serve as primary care givers, receive additional allowances due to the severity of their service-connected multiple disabilities. These spouses perform full-time duty which precludes them from working towards retirement or Social Security benefits in their own right. When the veteran dies, the surviving spouse's income is reduced to the same Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) payment that other surviving spouses of veterans receive, whose death was service connected. The percentage of replacement income can be as little as 15 percent. The income replacement of other federal survivor benefit plans is close to 50 percent of the benefit upon which they are based. Congress should provide for survivors of catastrophically disabled veterans on a similar basis.

In closing, allow me to express my sincere appreciation for the opportunity to provide this statement for the record and my best wishes for a productive second year of the 118th Congress. Our leadership and Legislative Team stand ready to work with this distinguished Committee and their staff to improve benefits for survivors.

Sincerely,

John R. Davis

John R. Davis
Director, Legislative Programs

Cc: Ranking Member Mark Takano