



Statement for the Record

Tamra Sipes
National President
Gold Star Spouses of America, Inc.

For the House Committee on Veterans Affairs

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Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee,

Gold Star Spouses of America, Inc. (GSSA) greatly appreciates the opportunity to submit this statement for the record. GSSA represents surviving spouses of service members who died on active duty and veterans who died from service-connected conditions. Our work is focused on ensuring that survivor benefits and policies reflect both the permanence of military sacrifice and the long-term realities faced by surviving families.

GSSA recognizes the Committee's continued efforts to strengthen oversight, coordination, and delivery of services within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). We support these efforts and offer the following views to ensure that surviving spouses are fully considered in both policy development and implementation, consistent with the VA's mission "to fulfill President Lincoln's promise to care for those who have served in our nation's military and for their families, caregivers, and survivors."

Toxic Exposure Advisory Committee Establishment Act

GSSA supports the establishment of an advisory committee dedicated to toxic exposure. Improving how exposures are identified, studied, and understood is essential to ensuring that veterans and their families receive timely recognition and appropriate care. Toxic exposure does not affect only the veteran; its impact often extends to spouses and families and, in many cases, continues long after the veteran has passed.

We appreciate that the bill includes dependents and allows for public input. This reflects the reality that families often experience the consequences of toxic exposure alongside the veteran.

However, the bill does not ensure representation of surviving spouses or expertise in survivor benefits. Without that perspective, the advisory committee may not fully capture the challenges survivors face, particularly in establishing service connection for cause of death, navigating delays in claims, and addressing conditions that are not yet fully recognized.

GSSA recommends requiring representation from surviving spouses or survivor-service organizations and including expertise in Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) and survivor benefits. The committee should also be directed to assess how toxic exposure determinations affect survivors, including claims timeliness, access to benefits, and outreach. These changes would help ensure that the full impact of toxic exposure is considered.

Get Justice-Involved Veterans Behavioral Assistance and Care for Key Health Outcomes to Maintain Empowerment (BACK HOME) Act

GSSA supports efforts to improve mental health care and reentry outcomes for justice-involved veterans. Expanding access to care for veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and military sexual trauma (MST) is critical and can help reduce long-term harm to families.

We also support the provision to automatically resume compensation and DIC upon release from incarceration. Delays in reinstating benefits can create immediate financial hardship for veterans and their families, including surviving spouses who rely on these benefits.

GSSA recommends directing the VA to assess the impact of benefit interruptions on spouses and dependents, including surviving spouses, and to improve data collection on family outcomes. Outreach and transition planning should also include coordination with family members when appropriate. Addressing these gaps would support a more complete approach to care.

Toxic Exposure Implementation and Oversight Bill

GSSA supports the establishment of an Office for Toxic Exposure Implementation and Oversight and an Assistant Secretary for Toxic Exposure Coordination. Effective implementation of toxic exposure laws, including the Honoring Our PACT Act, is essential to ensuring that benefits are delivered accurately and without unnecessary delay.

Improved coordination across the VA has the potential to strengthen consistency and accountability. For surviving spouses, this is especially important when establishing service connection for cause of death and accessing DIC and related benefits.

This bill does not, however, explicitly address how implementation efforts will account for survivors. Without clear direction, there is a risk that these efforts will focus primarily on living veterans rather than the full impact on families.

GSSA recommends directing the Office to include oversight of survivor-related outcomes, including DIC eligibility, claims processing timeliness, and outreach to surviving spouses. Coordination with offices and stakeholders representing survivors, along with improved data collection, would help ensure that implementation efforts fully reflect the needs of affected families.

Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee Oversight Act of 2025

Gold Star Spouses of America cannot support the Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee Oversight Act of 2025 as currently drafted.

While we understand the intent to streamline and modernize the VA advisory committee structure, this approach risks reducing the voice of surviving spouses and other underserved communities. The bill would eliminate a number of specialized advisory committees without ensuring that their expertise and representation are preserved.

For surviving spouses, these committees have served as important avenues to raise concerns, identify gaps, and inform policy. Replacing them with broader committees that do not guarantee representation or subject-matter expertise risks weakening those voices at a time when they are still needed.

Although the legislation references survivors and family members, it does not require the inclusion of surviving spouses or expertise in survivor benefits such as DIC, eligibility rules, or claims processing. Without that representation, there is a real risk that survivor issues will receive less focused attention.

GSSA urges Congress to reconsider this approach. At a minimum, any restructuring should include guaranteed representation for surviving spouses, preserve subject-matter expertise, and ensure that survivor-related issues continue to receive focused attention. Without these safeguards, this legislation would weaken the Department's ability to effectively serve veterans' families.

Conclusion

Gold Star Spouses of America appreciates the Committee's continued engagement on issues affecting veterans and their families. The proposals under consideration reflect a commitment to improving how the VA delivers services and support.

At the same time, these efforts must fully account for the needs of surviving spouses and families. Survivors live with the long-term consequences of military service, and policies affecting benefits, health care, and recognition directly shape their stability and well-being.

GSSA supports efforts that improve access, coordination, and implementation, particularly in the areas of toxic exposure and veteran care. However, we cannot support changes that risk reducing the voice of surviving spouses without clear safeguards.

We stand ready to work with the Committee to ensure that these efforts move forward in a way that reflects the realities faced by surviving families and upholds the commitment made to them through service and sacrifice.

Gold Star Spouses of America, Inc.

Gold Star Spouses of America (GSSA) is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to

supporting the surviving spouses of military service members and veterans who have made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our country. Our mission is to provide meaningful connections, advocacy, remembrance, and education (CARE) for active duty military and veteran service-connected surviving spouses and their families. Through our programs and presence, we work to ensure that the needs of the spouses and their families are heard, addressed, and prioritized in communities and by policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels.

GSSA is listed as an approved resource in the National Resource Directory (NRD.gov) and through Military OneSource. GSSA is also recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs for volunteer opportunities within the department's Center for Development and Civic Engagement.