

CONGRESSWOMAN ELISE STEFANIK
SUBMITTED STATEMENT TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
VETERANS AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH,
ON H.R. 3989, SUPPORT OUR MILITARY CAREGIVERS ACT
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 20, 2016

Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley – thank you for the invitation to testify on this important legislation. I look forward to discussing this key issue moving forward.

As a member of the House Armed Services Committee with a critical Army base in my district, I am dedicated to providing support to servicemembers, veterans and their families. Since September 11th, 2001, the Army’s 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum has been the most actively forward deployed division in the Global War on Terror.

We have asked our servicemembers and their families to sacrifice an immeasurable amount over the last 14 years, so it is vital that we do not leave them behind – this is especially true for our military caregivers, the selfless group that cares for our heroes behind the scenes. These men and women are often left out when discussing veterans’ issues.

Military caregivers are an essential component of the communal and family support system for our disabled veterans. Military caregivers are usually spouses

and other family members who spend their days taking care of disabled veterans in order to provide an environment that enhances their everyday lives.

In 2010, Congress passed a law implementing the Family Caregiver Program. This was an important piece of legislation that made veterans who sustained injuries in the line of duty eligible for a package of benefits that includes access to a primary caregiver. These benefits would ensure that the family members who dedicate their lives as caregivers receive access to health care, caregiver training, and stipends for additional costs associated with their disabled veteran.

Unfortunately, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has had a difficult time managing the high demand of Family Caregiver enrollees, which is much larger than originally accounted for during implementation. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), VA officials estimated that they would receive 4,000 enrollees and staffed the program based on this estimate. However, in the first few months of implementation there were over 15,000 enrollees to the Family Caregiver Program. VA medical centers lack sufficient caregiver support coordinators and the necessary clinical staff to carry out medical assessments for eligibility.¹

¹ Government Accountability Office (GAO). 2014. *Actions Needed to Address Higher-Than-Expected Demand for the Family Caregiver Program*. Informational, Washington, D.C. : GAO.

These implementation issues have led to a delay in both the application and the appeals process. Application deadlines are not being met by their own internal standards and the staff is still shorthanded. These issues are not only unacceptable, but I believe they are preventable.

This is why I introduced H.R. 3989, Support Our Military Caregivers Act after meeting with a constituent who is a caregiver facing the burden of the VA backlog.

This bill would use pre-existing funds currently appropriated for the review and appeals process for an objective, independent party to conduct external, clinical reviews. This bill would ensure that new or modified processes are veteran-centric, outcomes-based and continually improved through the use of best practices. We can accomplish this by permitting a third party to work within the Department of Veterans Affairs to streamline claims and reduce the caregiver backlog through a more clinical analysis rather than benefits adjudication. The VA would maintain the third party until the overage of appeals is streamlined and the backlog is down to an acceptable rate in accordance with recommendations from the Government Accountability Office.

Military caregivers are silent heroes in our communities and deserve the respect and benefits proportionate to their significant contributions. I look forward to

discussing this issue further in order to implement a solution and get our military caregivers the benefits they have earned.