

I'd like to take a moment and thank Chairman Abraham and Ranking Member Titus for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the Love Lives on Act for our military surviving spouse community. With me in attendance today are several of the widows of our nation's heroes. Although I will only be speaking about my own personal experience, each one of these individuals has a heartbreaking story of sacrifice for our nation.

My name is Elizabeth Davis. I'm a 29 year old mother, nurse, and widow to my Marine. My husband, 1STLT Matthew Davis, was killed on 7 November, 2014. While Matt was serving as the officer of the day on regimental duty he was struck and killed by a fellow 2/5 Marine who was drunk driving and evading the police. Matt was a selfless, gregarious, giant of a man with a sense of humor as big as he was. Nothing will ever change my feelings for him, even though I know he will never be coming back. The night I found out he was killed I actually had a heart attack when our best friend showed up in his dress blues to deliver the news in the early hours of the morning. I quite literally will bear the scars on my heart from this news for the rest of my life. After recovering from the shock of being widowed I decided I was going to honor my husband by devoting my time and energy into making this rough journey easier in any way possible for other military widows. I started looking for ways to help widows provide for themselves and their families when I moved back to Virginia.

The first step was to ensure that Virginia accepted the DoD's definition of Gold Star spouse, making sure that we honored the sacrifices of those killed in the line of duty as well as those killed in action. With the help of my Delegate, HB98 was introduced and passed through the Virginia House of Delegates and Senate. Recently, I was granted the opportunity to discuss how the culture of alcohol in the Marine Corps impacted my family at a town hall with the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Neller. I've also remained active on the Stafford County Armed Services Memorial Committee. My long term goal is to ensure that our widowed community, which already has given so much for this great nation, faces no additional or unnecessary hardship.

The next step, which I pray you will support, is to improve the lives of this very small but important community. We are seeking repeal and amendment of the age stipulation through the Love Lives On Act. Currently, as the widow/widower of a fallen service member, you may remarry and retain your benefits after the age of 57. With the vast majority of our heroes being young and leaving behind spouses who are equally young, it is unreasonable to expect the surviving spouse not to seek out happiness and love again well before he or she is 57. As it currently stands, I and the other survivors in this room have no incentive to move on with our lives and rebuild our families. Rather, we are strongly bound to remain single parents with incomplete families in order to retain the benefits that our husbands earned by dying for our country.

The full impact of the current limitations is felt not only by the surviving spouse, but also the children of our fallen. These benefits that have been earned at the cost of loss of life for country are necessary in maintaining the needs of the spouse and all surviving children. This program is vital because it provides the ability to have a safe home and food on the plate for the families who are left behind. In almost every case of a widow or widower, our nation puts the draconian decision of choosing to seek love again or being pragmatic with our finances. This choice is ultimately made for us, hindering the very freedoms our spouses gave their lives for, under the current guidelines.

Why would anyone in this room choose to remarry when we could receive these benefits but date a new person in perpetuity? Amending the statute would cement the belief in our service members that the United States cares what happens to them as individuals. Not only is the sacrifice and commitment that they made in dying for our country forever, but so too is the commitment of the United States to their families should they perish. The risks and lifestyle associated with our nation's military can be unpredictable, but providing benefits for those left behind should not be. We should not be punished for seeking out the love and happiness that our spouses would want us to have. As the spouse we deserve to try to heal and be happy, and for the children left behind they deserve a stable loving home where their parents are legally recognized as a family unit, without repercussion of the loss of necessary income.

Through your vote you can make a positive change for the families of our fallen heroes. By continuing to provide benefits to surviving spouses, families will heal and produce children that will grow up knowing that service has meaning. For us, as widows, life truly is too short. We fully grasp that concept often in our twenties and thirties, when our peers won't have to face these kinds of hardships for decades. Please enable us to have a choice in marriage before the age of 57. The widows and children of the fallen were handed a folded flag on behalf of a grateful nation. In that short moment upon handing the flag over- there is no "if" or "but" when it comes to the commitment our husbands showed this great nation. I have the utmost faith that the men and women in this room will do their best to honor that oath paid for in blood, well before we are 57.