



American Gold Star Mothers, Inc.

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Organized 4 June 1928
Incorporated 5 January 1929
Chartered by Congress 12 June 1984
Founded by Grace Darling Seibold

February 2, 2022

Mr. Troy Nehls, Chairman
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
United States House of Representatives
364 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Statement re: "Honoring Our Promise: Reviewing the Effectiveness of Services for Dependents and Survivors"

Dear Mr. Chairman:

On behalf of American Gold Star Mothers, Inc., we thank you for the opportunity to provide comments for today's hearing. We would like to highlight the following points:

Topic: **SUICIDE LOSS NOT BEING RECOGNIZED**

There are over 30 bills regarding suicide or suicide prevention sitting in the House Veterans' Affairs, Judiciary, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, and the Subcommittee on Health. All have had limited movement or none for all of 2021.

There appears to be confusion on what to call the dependents or surviving family members after a military suicide. All of the following have been used in separate statements and proposed legislation: Gold Arrow Family, Purple Star Family and adding an additional service banner, the Green Star Flag. This leads to confusion for the American public as well as in the survivor community. Either the House or Senate should write one bill to formalize a new service banner. Then a new name for these families should be decided and further education to the public AND the military would then take place.

This is an extension of the lack of consistent definition and identification of the differences between the Gold Star and Next of Kin designations, as per definition of the DoD. This causes much confusion and heartache in the survivor community.

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Topic-AGENT ORANGE EXPOSURE, GLIOBLASTOMA AND BURN PIT CLAIMS

There are two bills in legislation about Agent Orange exposure. H.R.3596 makes recommendations about the care and compensation for the veteran serving between January 9, 1962, ending service May 7, 1975, and includes their spouses and multiple generations of their offspring. It has not moved out of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs since 9/7/21. The second bill is H.R.2569, which expands the presumption of service-connected diseases.

There is currently no active legislation about this specific diagnosis on veterans' health, yet increasing numbers of our veterans are receiving this diagnosis and as they succumb to the effects, their surviving family members will be affected.

There are 26 bills in legislation regarding burn pits. S.1605 National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2022 made into law on 12/27/21. (Under Subtitle B—Energy and Environment Sec. 316. Exemption from prohibition on use of open-air burn pits in contingency operations outside the United States.) All other bills regarding presumptive benefits, exposure, recognition, transparency, enhancement, and right to breathe are still sitting in committees.

Topic-EDUCATION

We are in favor of H.R.5198/related to H.R.6260-Casualty Assistance Reform Act of 2021, designed to direct the Secretary of Defense to establish a working group to review and recommend improvements to the casualty assistance program of the Department of Defense, and for other purposes. The professionalization of the Casualty Assistance Officer role is a step in the right direction. Thereafter, the key to any new legislation, regardless of the demographic it affects, is effective communication and education. This will start at the Department of Defense and then proceed through the various branches. DoD personnel must first fully understand what these new designations will entail and the benefits that are and are not conveyed or implied. Only then will they be able to effectively respond to the surviving family members and provide timely, accurate information. This will need to be followed by appropriate training and education for existing and new surviving family members.

Topic-CHALLENGES UNIQUE TO CAREGIVERS, COVID

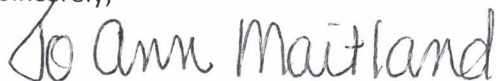
We represent a demographic who has access to very few benefits following our service member's death, mothers. At this time, we do not have a statement regarding any challenges brought about by COVID that are unique to the surviving parent community.

Topic-LGBTQIA+

At this time, we do not have a statement regarding any challenges presented to LGBTQIA+ parents.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to offer our perspective on these important issues. Thank you for continuing to make improvements to the military survivor community.

Sincerely,



Jo Ann Maitland
National President