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**STATEMENT OF
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OF THE DAV (DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS)
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
FEBRUARY 8, 2022**

Chairwoman Luria, Ranking Member Nehls and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting DAV (Disabled American Veterans) to submit testimony for the record for your oversight hearing titled, "Honoring Our Promise: Reviewing the Effectiveness of Services for Dependents and Survivors."

DAV is a congressionally chartered national veterans' service organization (VSO) of more than one million wartime veterans. To fulfill our service mission, DAV directly employs a corps of benefits advisors, more than 240 national service officers (NSOs), all of whom are themselves wartime service-connected disabled veterans, at every Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) regional office (VARO) as well as other VA facilities throughout the nation including the Board of Veterans' Appeals (Board).

For more than a hundred years, DAV has been serving survivors and dependents as well as providing advice on benefits administered by the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). For many, navigating the complicated processes of VA can be frustrating and overwhelming, especially when it is during a family crisis such as the loss of the veteran. Our testimony will discuss DAV's service and outreach programs, VA's current resources and outreach, and our recommendations for improving awareness and access to benefits for survivors and dependents.

DAV SERVICE AND OUTREACH

DAV provides survivors and dependents with free representation in their benefits claims and appeals and in 2021, veterans' survivors and dependents received approximately \$750 million in Dependents Indemnity Compensation (DIC), survivor pension, education and burial benefits with DAV's assistance.

In our experience, one of the most common issues raised by veterans pertains to benefits and programs available for their dependents in the event of their death. We encourage veterans to understand the benefits available and to prepare their spouses and dependents. Not only do we accomplish this through one-on-one contact, and

assistance with completing forms and applications, but we also provide outreach and information in a variety of means.

For decades, DAV has been providing outreach directly into veterans local communities across the nation. DAV currently provides our Information Seminars series to educate veterans and their families on specific veterans' benefits and services. Traditionally these seminars are held in-person; however, with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, these are also held in a virtual on-line environment. These free seminars are conducted by DAVs highly trained and experienced NSOs. We encourage veterans to include their spouses and dependents to participate in these seminars as our NSOs touch on several topics including NCA burial benefits, DIC, survivors' pension, educational programs and possible entitlement to health care under the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA).

DAV has other tools available for veterans and their families. DAV's website contains information on veteran survivor benefits to include specific benefits such as Aid & Attendance for survivors, the Fry Scholarship, VA Home Loan Guaranty benefits and children born with certain birth defects. The site (dav.org/veterans/resources/veteran-survivor-benefits/) includes additional resources and links directly to VA's benefits pages. An additional resource that DAV provides is our published booklet on death benefits. This booklet contains the information indicated above and we provide them at our outreach events.

As noted previously, DAV has over 240 National Service Officers around the country, but additionally we have another 1,000 accredited service officers and over 2,000 volunteer service officers, available within local communities across the nation. They not only provided assistance and representation for veterans but also for survivors and dependents and their services are all free, regardless of membership in DAV.

Although DAV and other VSOs provide a wealth of assistance, resources and outreach, some seek help directly from VA. While VA does administrate these programs, survivors and dependents may find it difficult to obtain one-on-one assistance directly from VA.

VA RESOURCES AND OUTREACH

Like many veterans, survivors and dependents experience difficulty in navigating the VA system of benefits and potential entitlements. Survivors and dependents can contact VA via their toll-free number for assistance; however, many survivors and dependents feel that they do not receive complete explanations and instructions for obtaining and accessing benefits and programs.

VA does provide a variety of resources available for survivors and dependents. For many years, VA has published a benefits handbook and the 2021 edition of the Federal Benefits for Veterans, Dependents, and Survivors handbook is available online,

which highlights veterans and survivors benefits and is a valuable resource. However, it is rather difficult to locate this online without knowing that the handbook exists.

Recently, VA updated their website specific for survivors, dependents and family caregivers (va.gov/family-member-benefits/). This page outlines health care, education and training, employment, home loan options, pre-need eligibility determinations for burial in a VA national cemetery, burial benefits, survivors' pension, DIC, the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers and the Program of General Caregiver Support services. VA's site includes the ability to submit a question and receive a response through Ask VA (AVA).

Additionally, the site includes outreach materials on a variety of topics including videos on "VA benefits for affected family," "VA memorial benefits serve families," and "Survivor's pension offers security." The site contains more videos as well as brochures and information in a variety of formats.

While VA does publish and maintain a large array of resources for survivors and dependents, the issue really becomes whether veterans and their survivors are actually aware of them. For example, in calendar year 2020, former VA Under Secretary of Benefits (USB), Dr. Paul Lawrence, conducted multiple virtual veteran town halls across the nation with the assistance of several local and national VSOs. Some of the most frequently raised questions and concerns related directly to survivor and dependent benefits.

While VA does have a rather robust social media engagement with veterans and the public in general, very little is provided on these sites specific to survivors and dependents. We applaud the VA for creating a very large amount of content and resources for survivors and dependents; however, it is clear that VA has a problem with providing awareness to survivors and dependents on their benefits, entitlements and additional programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While VSOs and other stakeholders can assist with spreading VA's resources, it is ultimately VA that needs to improve its awareness campaigns and engagement. Below are DAV's recommendations and suggestions for VA to improve awareness and services to survivors and dependent benefits.

1. **Maintain an ongoing awareness campaign on social media.** As we have mentioned, VA has numerous resources for survivors and dependents; however, they are not fully utilized. We recommend VA utilize social media sites to tout the Federal Benefits for Veterans, Dependents, and Survivors handbook and its site specific to survivors, dependents and family caregivers. Each year this could be updated and start promoting these resources just prior to Memorial Day with continued emphasis through Veterans Day.

2. **Improve training for call centers or a specific line for survivors and dependents.** Many survivors experience frustration with VA call centers over benefits and programs specific to them and their needs. VA must provide survivor and dependent-centric training to their call centers for better service and understanding. However, we would also recommend a line specific for survivors and dependents in need of assistance. Currently three VAROs around the country handle DIC and survivors pension claims. We recommend a hotline or dedicated line to someone within these three VAROs that address questions and issues quickly and directly based on the experience they already possess.
3. **Create an office within VBA, similar to the Department of Defense's (DOD) Casualty Offices.** DOD provides services and assistance directly to the families of service members who die while on active duty. We suggest that VA develop a similar office within VBA. This office would reach out to the families of veterans when VA is advised of the veteran's death. This would include providing one-on-one assistance with burial benefits, DIC or survivor's pension and educational and other programs. Survivors and dependents would receive all of the information they need at a stressful time from a trained professional who can navigate them through VBA and NCA applications and processes.
4. **Provide information on survivors and dependents benefits to veterans in all decision notifications.** When VA notifies a veteran of their VBA claims decision, they provide additional information on appeals, education, and insurance programs. We recommend VA to start including information or at least links to VA's sources on benefits for survivors and dependents.
5. **Advise veterans directly at specific timeframes.** Entitlement to DIC is based on the veteran's death being related to a service-connected condition or when the veteran has received 100% disability for 10 consecutive years. When a veteran meets the latter requirement, we recommend that VA create a unique notification that the 10 years have been reached and provide awareness and information on all of the benefits survivors are eligible for.

We need to remember those who have served our nation in support of a service-disabled veteran. The men and women who gave up their own careers, life dreams and financial stability to ensure their veteran could be cared for by the loving hand of a family member deserve VA's best efforts. DAV urges VA to do better in providing awareness and services to survivors and dependents who are in need of the various programs.

Madame Chair, this concludes my testimony and we thank you for the opportunity to provide our comments and recommendations.