

Gold Star Wives of America



HOUSE VETERANS
AFFAIRS, SUBCOMMITTEE
ON DISABILITY
ASSISTANCE AND
MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
LEGISLATIVE HEARING

MARCH 29, 2023



National President

Tamra Sipes

House Veterans Affairs, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance, and Memorial Affairs
Legislative Hearing

Testimony for the Record Presented by:

Ms. Tamra Sipes
National President
Gold Star Wives of America

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Distinguished Chairman Luttrell and Ranking Member Pappas and Members of the House Veterans Affairs, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs. I am honored to share Gold Star Wives of America's views regarding the numerous pieces of legislation presented and proposed by members of the 118th Congress. Your committee is critical to the community I am a part of. I work hard to advocate for the American widow and widowers that must continue living their lives after paying the ultimate price for our freedoms.

My name is Tamra Sipes, and I am the widow of Petty Officer 1st Class Robert Sipes and the National President of Gold Star Wives of America. My husband was a Navy Search and Rescue Corpsman. He was my hero, our nation's hero, and killed while attempting to rescue children from a house fire. He was 34 years old, and I was 28. The blaze occurred on October 8, 1995, while we were stationed at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island in Washington State. During his years of service, he was called out on over 55 missions while stationed at El Toro Marine Corps Air Station, including one on Christmas Day.

A truck had gone over a cliff, with the cab landing on a ledge. The driver was unconscious, and there were high winds. The helicopter hovered over the canyon while my husband repelled down to the driver. He could not get the driver out of the cab with his safety gear on, so he unhooked himself to crawl into it, pulling the driver out onto the ledge to secure him into the basket. Due to the high winds, he took a beating from the canyon walls to keep his patient secure as the helicopter hoisted him back up.

His body was black and blue when he got home that night. He said the bruises weren't that bad; we saved a life. He never told me what happened. I read about it in a report almost a year later when he came home from work with medals pinned to his flight suit. He had been presented with the highest award you can receive during a non-wartime period: the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for Heroism. My husband lived to save lives for our country.

Most importantly, he was my loving husband and father of three children, ages 10, 2, and 6 months.
And then it was just me, and three little ones...
I joined Gold Star Wives in 1996.

Gold Star Wives of America (GSW) is a national non-profit organization dedicated to supporting surviving spouses of fallen service members. Founded in 1945, GSW is a support and advocacy organization for the surviving spouses of those who sacrificed their lives to serve our country. We work to ensure that the surviving spouses of our fallen heroes receive the benefits they are entitled to and are treated with dignity and respect.

Part of ensuring surviving spouses are treated with dignity and respect is providing benefits and support to help surviving spouses and their families survive financially and emotionally. With this mission at the center of our mind, we remind this committee of our legislative goals before commenting on three pieces of legislation that directly pertain to our community: H.R. 234 the Gerald's Law Act, H.R. 854 the Captain James C. Edge Gold Star Spouse Equity Act, and H.R. 1529, the Veterans' Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2023.

Gold Star Wives Legislative Goals for the 118th Congress

1. Increase VA Dependency and Indemnity Compensation
2. Remove remarriage penalties
3. Update the definition of surviving spouse
4. PACT Act implementation

H.R. 234, the Gerald's Law Act

Gold Star Wives of America is supportive of H.R. 234; this legislation requires the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide a burial and funeral allowance for a veteran who dies from a non-service-connected disability in a home or other setting at which the veteran was receiving VA hospice care (if such care was directly preceded by VA hospital or nursing home care). As spouses of servicemembers who have passed away, we believe that requiring veterans to die in VA facilities to receive

critical benefits that ultimately fall on the families to pay, is unnecessary. Further, it seems likely that these situations may save the VA both funding and essential hospital space to serve other veterans in their care. Many of our veterans choose to die in the comfort of their homes or in a setting they prefer, and we believe we should not punish them and their families for that decision. We applaud General Bergman and his original co-sponsors for introducing this common-sense measure.

H.R. 854, Captain James C. Edge Gold Star Spouse Equity Act

Gold Star Wives is supportive of H.R. 854 with numerous amendments.

We are grateful for Representative Waltz's efforts to address what has become a harmful injustice that we know both sides of the aisle wish was not current American policy.

That is the fact that our great Nation incentivizes surviving spouses to not remarry, encouraging them to lie about relationships, and often weigh living by the codes of their chosen religion and thereby losing economic resources that were often earned literally by the blood and death of their loved one.

Shortly after my husband died, I remember walking the halls at the Naval Air Station on Whidbey Island, Washington, in a fog, with my children trying to navigate the health records and appointments. I was next in line at a Tricare help window, and the receptionist looked at my ID, which showed I was an un-remarried widow, then looked at my kids and me and said, "don't ever remarry." I looked at her and thought, I'm 28 years old. I have no family. No community and nowhere to go back to. How am I going to get through this... She said, "...if you remarry, you will lose your benefits and never get them back." She was correct at the time, and I needed to ensure my children were provided for. I didn't remarry.

Under current law, if surviving spouses remarry before the arbitrary age of 55, we forfeit lifesaving benefits. If we have children, the amount we receive per child is nowhere near the cost of raising that child.

This legislation would allow spouses under the age of 55 to receive DIC benefits again. However, it fails to again provide critical survivor's benefits under Sections and Chapters: 1781, relating to medical care for survivors and dependents of certain veterans; Chapter 35, relating to educational assistance.; Chapter 37, relating to housing loans.; and Section 1562(a)(2), relating to Medal of Honor special pension.

However, including these changes would only address one-half of the overall issue facing our community. The legislation fails to address the cause of the issue, which is that these benefits are taken from spouses who remarry in the first place.

Our Nation's Veterans rightly do not lose disability compensation, education benefits, or medical care because they marry or divorce. Similarly, our surviving spouse's benefits were paid for by the death of their loved one. Why would we think it is sound, moral, or logical policy ever to take those benefits away? Why do we not apply a similar standard to our veterans if they get married or divorce? Because it is unconscionable.

Marriage is complex and often includes love, the merging of families, and economic factors. However, our existing policy insinuates that marriage should economically compensate for the benefits received by the widow or widower. It implies that the new spouse should be able to make up for the economic earnings lost through the marriage merger. Again, we find this logic flawed and immoral, at odds with most faiths, and also a tax on the men and women that deserve the benefits earned by their deceased spouses.

We believe in the leadership of the 118th Congress to finally right old wrongs. Not with half-measures. But by truly doing the right thing for those who made the ultimate sacrifice. Anything less is simply weighing costs against actually doing the right thing. Do the right thing.

To us, it seems the primary reason Congress has not acted on this blight on our Nation, is the cost it presents to Congress via the Congressional Budget Office. Asking young men and women who have gone through the worst of tragedies and trauma, to risk their family's livelihood due to a budgeting gimmick seems unconscionable. Do the right thing and fix this.

H.R. 1529, Veterans' Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2023

Gold Star Wives is supportive of H.R. 1529 if amended.

We strongly encourage the committee to amend the legislation to create equity between survivor benefits and other federal survivor benefits; as written, this critical legislation will increase the compensation rates for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation

for the survivors of certain disabled veterans. However, this increase does not create parity across federal survivor programs.

Survivors only receive 43% of the compensation a veteran rated 100% disabled receives. However, if someone who works for a federal agency dies because of their job, their surviving spouse is eligible for up to 55% of their compensation. This is a significant disparity that must be corrected.

Our surviving spouses have lived on the edge for many years. With the current inflation and cost of living, most of these spouses will be unable to sustain themselves and must find programs to help offset their basic needs. We receive regular calls asking for help, and the situation is only becoming more strained.

An increase in DIC is not only the right thing to do, but it will also result in significant assistance to the men and women suddenly thrust into an incredibly traumatic and economically challenging situation.

GSW is grateful for the work of Representative Jahana Hayes, and Chairman Tester and Senator Boozman for their work on the Caring for Survivor Act of 2023, which would increase DIC compensation to 55% of the rate of a 100% disabled veteran compensation as well as lower the threshold for DIC eligibility for survivors of 100% permanently and totally disabled veterans. This bill would ensure that surviving military spouses can live with dignity and respect, knowing their sacrifice is not viewed as less than, by our country. We ask that the DAMA Committee consider amending this bill to include similar language or to consider stand-alone language at your next legislative hearing.

Conclusion

Thank you for including Gold Star Wife's views on these incredibly important policy proposals that affect our Nation's veterans, service members, and spouses.

The future of our Nation's national security is directly tied to how we treat and honor our veterans and service members, families, and spouses. Suppose the Nation sees our widows and widowers living in poverty with a Congress working to take away benefits because our spouses choose to remarry; what kind of impression will that leave on those thinking of military service? What kind of impression will that leave for those considering marrying someone who serves?

There is a lot of overdue work for this committee. We know they are not easy choices. They are moral questions. We believe this committee will choose to do the right thing.

GSW wholeheartedly thanks the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees for your time and attention to these issues of vital importance to the survivor community. We look forward to working with the Committees in any way we can to move these priorities forward.

Tamra Sipes

Tamra Sipes joined Gold Star Wives in 1996. Her husband, Robert Sipes, was a Navy Search and Rescue Corpsman and was killed while attempting to rescue children during a house fire while stationed at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island on October 8, 1995, at the young age of 34. During his years of service, he was nationally recognized as first runner-up EMT of the year by the National Association of EMTs; completed over 55 missions while stationed at El Toro Marine Corps Air Station; presented with the Navy Commendation and the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for Heroism. He was meritoriously promoted to E6 while stationed at Kaneohe Bay Marine Corps Base, BUT most importantly he was the loving husband of Tamra age 28 and father of three children ages 10, 2 and 6 months when he was killed.

Tamra currently works in the event industry. She used her Chapter 35 benefits to obtain an Associates Degree, which she received at the age of 49, after her children were out of school. She has continued her education through certifications from FEMA, Intl Live Events Association (ILEA), World Health Org. and the Event Leadership Institute (ELI), plus multiple other trainings throughout the years to stay up to date on event industry changes.

Volunteerism plays an important role in Tamra's life. In addition to Gold Star Wives of America, she has served on the board of the Island County Economic Development Council, board of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Island County, is a member of Soroptimist Intl. of the Americas serving in multiple roles including the Soroptimist International of the Americas (SIA Federation board, which includes a membership of over 20 countries).