



**STATEMENT OF
TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS (TAPS)
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE
LEGISLATIVE HEARING**

**PRESENTED BY
CANDACE WHEELER
DIRECTOR, GOVERNMENT AND LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS**

JULY 10, 2024

The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) is the national provider of comfort, care, and resources to all those grieving the death of a military or veteran loved one. TAPS was founded in 1994 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization to provide 24/7 care to all military survivors, regardless of a service member's duty status at the time of death, a survivor's relationship to the deceased service member, or the circumstances or geography of a service member's death.

TAPS provides comprehensive support through services and programs that include peer-based emotional support, casework, assistance with education benefits, and community-based grief and trauma resources, all delivered at no cost to military survivors. TAPS offers additional programs including, but not limited to, the following: the 24/7 National Military Survivor Helpline; national, regional, and community programs to facilitate a healthy grief journey for survivors of all ages; and information and resources provided through the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing. TAPS extends a significant service to military survivors by facilitating meaningful connections to peer survivors with shared loss experiences.

In 1994, Bonnie Carroll founded TAPS after the death of her husband, Brigadier General Tom Carroll, who was killed along with seven other soldiers in 1992 when their Army National Guard plane crashed in the mountains of Alaska. Since its founding, TAPS has provided care and support to more than 120,000 bereaved military survivors.

In 2023 alone, 9,611 newly bereaved military and veteran survivors connected with TAPS for care and services, the most in our 30-year history. This is an average of 26 new survivors coming to TAPS each and every day. Of the survivors seeking our care in 2023, 34 percent were grieving the death of a military loved one to illness, including illness as a result of exposure to toxins; 30 percent were grieving the death of a military loved one to suicide; and only 3 percent were grieving the death of a military loved one to hostile action.

As the leading nonprofit organization offering military grief support, TAPS builds a community of survivors helping survivors heal. TAPS provides connections to a network of peer-based emotional support and critical casework assistance, empowering survivors to grow with their grief. Engaging with TAPS programs and services has inspired many survivors to care for other, more newly bereaved survivors by working and volunteering for TAPS.

Chairman Luttrell and Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Disability and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) is grateful for the opportunity to provide a statement for the record on issues of importance to the 120,000-plus surviving family members of all ages, representing all services, and with losses from all causes who we are honored to serve.

The mission of TAPS is to provide comfort, care, and resources for all those grieving the death of a military loved one, regardless of the manner or location of death, the duty status at the time of death, the survivor's relationship to the deceased, or the survivor's phase in their grief journey. Part of that commitment includes advocating for improvements in programs and services provided by the U.S. federal government — the Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Department of Education (DoED), Department of Labor (DOL), and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) — and state and local governments.

TAPS and the VA have mutually benefited from a long-standing, collaborative working relationship. In 2014, TAPS and the VA entered into a Memorandum of Agreement that formalized their partnership with the goal of providing earlier and expedited access to crucial survivor services. In 2023, TAPS and the VA renewed and expanded their formal partnership to better serve our survivor community. TAPS works with military and veteran survivors to identify, refer, and apply for resources available within the VA, including education, burial, benefits and entitlements, grief counseling, and survivor assistance.

TAPS also works collaboratively with the VA and DOD Survivors Forum, which serves as a clearinghouse for information on government and private-sector programs and policies affecting surviving families. Through its quarterly meetings, TAPS shares information on its programs and services and fulfills any referrals to support all those grieving the death of a military or veteran loved one.

TAPS President and Founder Bonnie Carroll served on the Department of Veterans Affairs Federal Advisory Committee on *Veterans' Families, Caregivers, and Survivors*, where she chaired the Subcommittee on Survivors. The committee advises the Secretary of the VA on matters related to veterans' families, caregivers, and survivors across all generations, relationships, and veteran statuses. Ms. Carroll is also a distinguished recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.

VETERANS CLAIMS EDUCATION ACT OF 2023 (H.R. 2971)

TAPS Strongly Supports

TAPS thanks Representative Scott Peters (D-CA-50) for introducing the ***Veterans Claims Education Act of 2023 (H.R. 2971)***, which would ensure that veterans and survivors are aware of the free resources that assist with filing a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) claim. It would also reduce the chances of veterans and survivors being taken advantage of by predatory actors.

Since the *Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022* became law on Aug. 10, 2022, the VA and numerous Veteran Service Organizations (VSO) have noticed an influx of media advertisements and solicitations from predatory claims consultants. With the VA estimating that up to 382,000 potential survivors may be eligible for PACT Act benefits, increased regulatory oversight is crucial to ensuring that these survivors receive adequate care and representation throughout the VA benefits claim process.

Historically, surviving spouses have had a large target on their backs from predatory actors, and claim sharks are no different. TAPS wants to ensure that surviving spouses applying for benefits from the VA are not taken advantage of by predatory actors when there are so many free and low-cost options available.

Although veterans are considered a vulnerable population to predatory actors, we believe that surviving spouses are as well. When a disabled veteran dies, surviving spouses lose more than half of their financial benefits and are provided limited support in figuring out how to file for benefits as a surviving spouse. If you call the VA, they will provide you the form number for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) or tell you to contact a VSO for free assistance in filing a claim. If you Google how to “file a DIC claim as a widow,” the first response takes you to the VA’s website. Seven of the next nine results are paid sponsorships from claim sharks. The 10th response takes you to the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) — the first true VSO result available.

This critical legislation would ensure that the VA informs all claimants of accredited assistance if an accredited representative did not help with the claim. Those representatives would be at no cost to the claimant. Additionally, it would create a tool similar to the GI Bill Comparison Tool that would provide the information of accredited VSOs that can assist with claims. It would also allow claimants to report any non-accredited representation they received that charged an illegal fee.

TAPS strongly supports these changes that will help create better-informed consumers, and reduce the risk of survivors being exploited by predatory actors or claim sharks.

PROTECTING BENEFITS FOR DISABLED VETERANS ACT OF 2023 (H.R. 6362)

TAPS Supports

TAPS appreciates Representative Maxine Waters (D-CA-43) introducing the ***Protecting Benefits for Disabled Veterans Act of 2023 (H.R. 6362)***, which would provide authority for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to assign a disability rating of “total” to a veteran who meets certain parameters and is unable to secure or maintain substantially gainful employment as a result of a service-connected disability.

This legislation would allow the VA to assign a disability rating of total to a veteran if the Secretary of Veterans Affairs determines the veteran has a service-connected disability rated at least 60 percent, or has two or more service-connected disabilities with one being at least 40 percent and a combined total of at least a 70 percent disability rating.

The VA would also be able to make a determination on a veteran’s disability rating in cases where a veteran’s employment income is less than the poverty threshold established by the United States Census Bureau. In cases where the veteran maintains substantially gainful employment, exceeding the poverty threshold, but — after factoring in total household and medical expenses and the cost of living where the veteran resides — the VA may also determine that the total rating is appropriate.

TAPS believes this legislation will strengthen disabled veterans and their families who struggle to maintain substantially gainful employment or experience financial hardship as a result of their disability and cumulative circumstances.

MARK OUR PLACE ACT (H.R. 6507)

TAPS Supports

TAPS is grateful to Chairman Morgan Luttrell (R-TX-8) for introducing the ***Mark Our Place Act (H.R. 6507)***, which would authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to furnish or replace a headstone, marker, or medallion for the grave of an eligible Medal of Honor recipient, regardless of the recipient’s dates of service in the Armed Forces.

Under current law, Medal of Honor recipients who served after 1917 are eligible, but veterans who served before that date are not eligible. This important bipartisan and bicameral legislation would eliminate the service era requirement. It would also authorize the VA to provide headstones with Medal of Honor markers for veterans buried in private cemeteries. The *Mark Our Place Act* will ensure all Medal of Honor recipients receive the recognition they deserve.

DENNIS AND LOIS KRISFALUSY ACT (H.R. 7729)

TAPS Strongly Supports

TAPS thanks Representative Guy Reschenthaler (R-PA-14) for introducing the ***Dennis and Lois Krisfalusy Act (H.R. 7729)***, which would expand eligibility for memorial headstones, markers, and receptacles in national, state, or tribal veterans cemeteries to eligible spouses or dependent children of veterans regardless of their date of death.

Named in honor of Dennis and Lois Krisfalusy, who both died in the Mexico earthquake in 1985. Although Dennis was recognized with a memorial marker in 2023, his wife, Lois, is ineligible to be included on the memorial marker.

Current law restricts eligible spouses and dependent children who passed before Nov. 11, 1998, or who pass after Oct. 1, 2024, from being added to a memorial headstone or marker. This bipartisan legislation would extend the federal law for 10 years until Oct. 1, 2034.

TAPS strongly recommends we make this law permanent with no end date, to mirror the provision within the *Preserving Veterans Legacy Act of 2024*. We respectfully urge its swift passage before the current law expires.

Military spouses and dependent children serve and sacrifice for our country alongside their veterans. Thus, these eligible family members should be afforded the honor and dignity of burial with their veterans and service members, and the shared recognition they have earned.

FLOWERS FOR FALLEN HEROES ACT OF 2024 (H.R. 8792)

TAPS Strongly Supports

TAPS greatly appreciates Representative Ryan Zinke (R-MT-1) introducing the ***Flowers for Fallen Heroes Act of 2024 (H.R. 8792)***, which would re-establish a secure program and payment system for family members and the general public to order floral arrangements for gravesites under the purview of the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), without excess administrative fees or markup.

The ABMC was established by Congress in 1923 as an agency of the executive branch of the federal government. It administers, operates, and maintains 26 American military cemeteries located in 17 foreign countries, “most of which commemorate the service and sacrifice of Americans who served in World War I and World War II.”

The ABMC created the Flower Fund Program in 1950 to assist surviving families and American citizens with a tangible way to commemorate and honor their loved ones who died in service to our country and were buried in American military cemeteries overseas. Family members and citizens paid for the flowers, but ABMC employees assisted in ordering them through local flower shops overseas for their placement at gravesites. The program operated for 65 years, but was discontinued by ABMC in 2015.

TAPS appreciates the American WWII Orphans Network (AWON) bringing this important issue to our attention.

Marilynn Rustand Lieurance, Surviving Daughter of 1LT Hanford “Rusty” James Rustand, AWON

“For many war orphans, the flower program was the single thread of connection we had to our dads who were buried so far from the home they loved and fought for. Many of us didn’t hear stories about our dad or see a picture of our dad until many years later when we were adults. All we had was that one connection through our government that enabled us to put flowers on our dad’s grave.”

TAPS is proud to stand with the American WWII Orphans Network in support of the *Flowers for Fallen Heroes Act of 2024* alongside the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, AMVETS, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Honor Flight Network, America’s Warrior Partnership, Navy SEAL Foundation, Blue Star Families, Gold Star Wives of America, Inc., Military Order of the Purple Heart, American Ex-Prisoners of War, Rolling Thunder®, Inc., The OSS Society, A Soldier’s Child Foundation, 8th Air Force Historical Society, Navy Nurse Corps Association, Buffalo Soldiers 9th & 10th Cavalry Association, Sons and Daughters In Touch, 91st Bomb Group Memorial Association, B-17 Alliance, and Gold Star Children.

In addition to reinstating the ABMC Flower Program, we respectfully ask Congress to protect this program in perpetuity, so that generations of Gold Star Families have a tangible way of honoring and commemorating their loved ones who served and sacrificed for our nation.

DAYTON NATIONAL CEMETERY EXPANSION ACT OF 2024 (H.R. 8910)

TAPS Supports Intent

TAPS thanks Representative Michael Turner (R-OH-10) for introducing the ***Dayton National Cemetery Expansion Act of 2024 (H.R. 8910)***. This legislation would authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to enter into an agreement with the

Montgomery County Land Bank to transfer approximately 58 acres of land across from the Dayton National Cemetery to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to be used for the expansion of the national cemetery.

Dayton National Cemetery is located in Montgomery County, Ohio. It was established as a permanent burial site in 1867 and transferred to the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) in 1973. The cemetery is one of eight National Cemeteries with the remains of veterans from every major United States conflict dating back to the American Revolutionary War. The national cemetery was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2012.

We defer to the VA to determine if expanding the Dayton National Cemetery will ensure it continues to commemorate and honor the next generation of veterans who serve and sacrifice for our country.

PRESERVING VETERANS' LEGACY ACT OF 2024 (Discussion Draft)

TAPS Strongly Supports and Urges Swift Passage

TAPS greatly appreciates Representative John James (R-MI-10) introducing the ***Preserving Veterans' Legacy Act of 2024***. This legislation would provide permanent authority to the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) to bury eligible spouses and dependent children, who predecease their veteran and active duty service members. The current law will sunset on Oct. 1, 2024.

This critical bipartisan legislation is co-sponsored by Chairman Morgan Luttrell (R-TX-8), and Representatives Jack Bergman (R-MI-10), Chris Deluzio (D-PA-17), and Don Davis (D-NC-1), all of whom are veterans. This bill would also provide headstones and markers for groups of individuals buried in group interments if each individual in the group is eligible for a headstone or marker.

TAPS has provided care and support to more than 120,000 bereaved military survivors since our founding in 1994. We have heard from many of them firsthand how important it is to their families to be assured that their final resting place will be together.

Our military and veteran families have served and sacrificed for our nation and should be afforded the permanent honor of being buried with their loved ones in a VA National Cemetery.

TAPS respectfully calls on Congress to swiftly pass this urgent legislation before the current law expires!

ENSURING VETERANS' FINAL RESTING PLACE ACT OF 2024 (Discussion Draft)

TAPS Strongly Supports

TAPS is grateful to Representative Rudy Yakym (R-IN-2) for introducing the ***Ensuring Veterans' Final Resting Place Act of 2024***. This important legislation would authorize the provision of certain additional burial benefits for individuals for whom an urn or plaque is furnished, if the cost of the urn or plaque is reimbursed by a non-Department entity.

We have been hearing from surviving families who initially elected to receive an urn or plaque in honor of their deceased veteran that they were unaware this election would forfeit burial benefits going forward.

This legislation would allow surviving families to reimburse the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for the cost of the urn or plaque if they also elect to inter their veteran in a VA National Cemetery. Under current law, families are not allowed to elect both. Unfortunately, this has caused additional emotional and financial burdens on military and veteran surviving families.

MODERNIZING ALL VETERANS AND SURVIVORS CLAIMS PROCESSING ACT (Discussion Draft)

TAPS Supports

TAPS thanks Representative David Valadao (R-CA-22) for introducing the ***Modernizing All Veterans and Survivors Claims Processing Act***, which would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to report on efforts to expand the use of automation tools to process veterans' and survivors' claims.

Expanding access to automation tools for other subdivisions of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) would help decrease processing times and improve accuracy. The current wait times for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) for surviving families have increased substantially due to the passage and implementation of the *Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022*.

The VA's Disability Compensation Service has access to more automation tools than Pension and Fiduciary Service, which has proven to help lower processing times for veteran claimants. We are optimistic that the report will emphasize the urgent need for the Pension and Fiduciary Service and other subdivisions to access and utilize those same essential tools.

RURAL VETERANS' IMPROVED ACCESS TO BENEFITS ACT OF 2024 (Discussion Draft)

TAPS Supports

TAPS supports the ***Rural Veterans' Improved Access to Benefits Act of 2024***, which would provide permanent authority for contract physicians to perform Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability examinations. While this bill primarily codifies current VA policy, formalizing it is important to ensure that future administrations also contract physicians to assist with disability exams.

TAPS believes that providing this permanent authority is especially important in rural communities, where veterans may lack the same access to disability exams as those in urban areas. Additionally, this legislation would provide parity for rural veterans, who may not have access to the same level of care from the VA as those living near a VA medical center.

IMPROVING VA TRAINING FOR MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA CLAIMS ACT (Discussion Draft)

TAPS Strongly Supports

TAPS greatly appreciates the ***Improving VA Training for Military Sexual Trauma Claims Act***, which would improve claims based on military sexual trauma (MST) under laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

This important legislation would establish sensitivity training for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) employees who process or decide MST claims, or communicate with claimants regarding evidence supporting such claims. It would also require the Secretary to update MST training annually to ensure the VA is exceeding its quality of care standards.

In addition, this bill would improve sensitivity training to ensure that a veteran who makes an MST claim is not retraumatized during an examination by a contracted health care professional.

Improving MST sensitivity training for VA employees and contracted health care professionals is critically important to safeguarding the physical and mental health of MST survivors during the VA claims process, and is paramount to their continued recovery and well-being. TAPS strongly supports this critical legislation and looks forward to its passage and implementation.

SIMPLIFYING FORMS FOR VETERANS CLAIMS ACT (Discussion Draft)

TAPS Supports

TAPS thanks Representative John Duarte (R-CA-13) for introducing the ***Simplifying Forms for Veterans Claims Act***, which would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to seek an agreement with a Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC) for an independent assessment of claimant forms.

We understand that the term “claimant,” as defined under Section 5100 of Title 38, United States Code, “means any individual applying for, or submitting a claim for, any benefit under the laws administered by the Secretary,” would include both veterans and survivors.

We appreciate that Section D under Definitions of this bill incorporates language that represents survivors, “an entity that advocates for veterans and survivors of veterans.”

TAPS believes it is important to clearly represent survivors in legislative text to clarify the intent and coverage. The exclusion of “survivors” within legislative text can have unintended consequences, which we have seen in the past.

BOARD OF VETERANS APPEALS’ ATTORNEY RETENTION AND BACKLOG REDUCTION ACT (Discussion Draft)

TAPS Supports

TAPS thanks Representative Morgan McGarvey (D-KY-3) for introducing the ***Board of Veterans’ Appeals Attorney Retention and Backlog Reduction Act***, which would amend Title 38, United States Code, to reform and enhance the pay of Board of Veterans’ Appeals attorneys to improve recruitment and retention, and increase the decision quality and claims processing speed of the board.

TAPS believes this legislation will help recruit and retain high-performing attorneys to the Board of Veterans’ Appeals, reduce the claims backlog, and improve decision outcomes for our veterans and their survivors. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) faces recruitment challenges for attorneys, largely due to the higher pay in the private sector. Offering competitive pay will attract attorneys who are genuinely motivated to work for the VA.

Given the consistent backlog TAPS is seeing with claims and appeals, this critical legislation would significantly improve hiring and retention at the VA Board of Veterans Appeals.

VETERANS' BURIAL IMPROVEMENT ACT (Discussion Draft)

TAPS Supports

TAPS thanks Ranking Member Chris Pappas (D-NH-1) for introducing the ***Veterans' Burial Improvement Act***, which would amend Title 38, United States Code, to improve the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs relating to memorial affairs.

The *Veterans' Burial Improvement Act of 2024* seeks to enhance various laws related to memorial affairs administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Key provisions of this legislation include:

1. **Permanent Authority for Burial Benefits:** Removes the Oct. 1, 2024, deadline for providing headstones and interment in national cemeteries for spouses and children who predecease active-duty service members. As demonstrated in the *Preserving Veterans' Legacy Act of 2024*, TAPS supports this change and believes its impact on our veterans, service members, and their families is invaluable.
2. **Transportation of Deceased Veterans:** Authorizes the Secretary to pay for the transportation of deceased veterans (not to exceed \$700) to burial sites, including a transportation allowance and adjustments based on the Consumer Price Index. It also covers actual transportation costs for veterans who die in VA facilities or while receiving certain types of care. TAPS supports this section due to the drastic change in a survivor's household income following a veteran's death. It will not only ease the logistical burden of organizing transportation, but also alleviate the associated financial strain.
3. **Elimination of Time Limitation for Medal of Honor Recipients:** Removes specific time limitations on burial benefits for Medal of Honor recipients, also referenced under the *Mark Our Place Act* (H.R. 6507). TAPS supports this provision. According to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society, nearly 300 service members received the Medal of Honor before 1917. The previous law omits six out of the 13 wars recognized by the VA, ranging from the American Revolution to the Global War on Terror. These service members deserve proper recognition if their graves are not currently marked.
4. **Provision of Group Burial Markers:** Allows the Secretary to furnish group headstones or markers for burial sites containing the remains of multiple veterans, subject to certain conditions and approvals. As referenced under the *Preserving Veterans' Legacy Act of 2024*, TAPS supports this provision. We recognize that there are situations where the remains of multiple service

members cannot be separated and identified. We also understand the strong bonds formed within the military, and thus, it is important to honor the wishes of service members who choose to be laid to rest together.

5. **Burial or Interment of Additional Persons:** Expands eligibility for burial in cemeteries accepting VA plot or interment allowances to include certain veterans discharged under conditions other than dishonorable and their dependents, even if they don't meet the minimum active-duty service requirement of 24 months. TAPS supports this provision, recognizing the importance of honoring a service member's initial willingness to serve and their subsequent service. We believe that the service and sacrifice of our veterans and their families begin the day they commit to serve, and this provision would appropriately honor that commitment.

In conclusion, TAPS values this legislation for its acknowledgment of our veterans, service members, and their families, recognizing their steadfast loyalty and dedication to our nation and the significance of their final place of rest. It emphasizes honoring not just how or when they died, but how they lived.

VA INSURANCE IMPROVEMENT ACT (Discussion Draft)

TAPS Supports

TAPS appreciates Ranking Member Chris Pappas (D-NH-1) introducing the **VA Insurance Improvement Act**, which would amend Title 38, United States Code, to make certain improvements to the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs relating to insurance for veterans.

Expanding Veterans Group Life Insurance (VGLI) eligibility will provide security to veterans who need it the most. Veterans often have a harder time getting approval for private life insurance policies due to service-connected injuries or illnesses being viewed as pre-existing conditions, especially when they are already service-connected.

Life insurance is an essential financial benefit for the surviving dependents of veterans. Following the death of a veteran, the financial responsibility of their survivors increases while their household income decreases drastically, for some as much as 70 percent. This important legislation will bring peace of mind to our veterans and ensure their legacy will bring financial stability to their families.

Additionally, the inclusion of the Space Force in the Traumatic Injury Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance (TSGLI) will provide parity of benefits for those who are serving in our newest military branch.

SURVIVOR BENEFITS UPDATE ACT OF 2024 (Discussion Draft)

TAPS Supports Section 2 and Opposes Section 3

TAPS thanks Ranking Member Chris Pappas (D-NH-1) for introducing the ***Survivor Benefits Update Act of 2024***, which would extend the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) delimiting date for benefits for surviving spouses of Persian Gulf War veterans.

Extending the timeline for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) and Survivors Pension for surviving spouses of Persian Gulf War veterans will allow them a longer window to apply for benefits. It would also allow surviving spouses who missed the time frame due to the current delimiting date to apply for benefits. We strongly support and appreciate this provision!

However, TAPS opposes Section 3 regarding the processing of Survivor Benefit Claims:

In Section 3, the proposed legislative language uses the phrasing “may be considered” instead of the current “shall be considered.” This change would require survivors to first determine which benefits they qualify for and then file a separate claim for each benefit. The current system under the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) allows survivors to file a single claim for all benefits.

One of our major concerns with this change is if survivors apply for only one benefit, most survivors would naturally be drawn to the Survivors Pension because of its straightforward name. The term Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) does not stand out as clearly. In such cases, would the VA proactively advise survivors, after reviewing only one application, to consider applying for other survivor benefits they have not yet applied for?

While TAPS appreciates the intent to streamline the survivor claims process, we believe it should not shift the burden to our survivors. This legislative proposal would increase the number of claim forms, exacerbate survivors’ confusion and frustration, and potentially fail to provide the best benefits and entitlements available to them. The current provision in Title 38, United States Code, Section 5101(b)(1) protects survivors by ensuring they are reviewed for all survivor benefits.

This change to the survivor benefit claims process would be a disservice to our survivors when they are turning to the VA and other organizations for support during their time of grief and loss.

TAPS appreciates the intent of this legislation and supports Section 2, but we oppose Section 3 and respectfully request it be removed from consideration.

CONCLUSION

TAPS extends gratitude to the leadership of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, its distinguished members, and professional staff for holding this important hearing on veteran and survivor issues. TAPS is honored to testify on behalf of the thousands of military and veteran surviving families we serve.