



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

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

MARCH 26, 2025

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 2024 alone, 8,911 newly bereaved military and veteran survivors connected to TAPS for care and services, the most in our 30-year history. This is an average of 24 new survivors coming to TAPS each and every day. Of the survivors seeking our care in 2024, 37 percent were grieving the death of a military loved one to illness, including as a result of exposure to toxins; 29 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, Ranking Member McGarvey, 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 have been 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 as well as fulfills any referrals to support all those grieving the death of a military and 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.

AVIATOR CANCERS EXAMINATION STUDY (ACES) ACT (H.R.530)

TAPS Strongly Supports

TAPS fully supports the bipartisan ***Aviation Cancers Examination Study (ACES) Act (H.R.530)*** and thanks Representative Austin Pfluger (R-TX-11) for reintroducing this important legislation in the 119th Congress, along with 13 original co-sponsors.

According to a 2021 study conducted by the U.S. Air Force and two studies conducted by the Department of Defense (DoD) in 2023 and 2024, military and veteran aviators are at a higher risk of developing certain cancers than the U.S. general population. To address this critical issue, the ***ACES Act*** would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to oversee a multi-year study — conducted by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) — on the prevalence and mortality rate of cancer among aviators and aircrew who served in the Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps.

The ***ACES Act*** is supported by the Toxic Exposure in the American Military (TEAM) Coalition, a nonpartisan consortium of veterans, military service organizations, and subject matter experts. As the leading voice for the families of those who died as a result of illnesses connected to toxic exposure and co-chair of the TEAM Coalition, TAPS led efforts to pass the bipartisan ***Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022***.

The ***PACT Act***, signed into law by President Biden on Aug. 10, 2022, is the most significant expansion of benefits and services for veterans in more than 30 years. This historic law ensures veterans of multiple generations who were exposed to burn pits, toxins, and airborne hazards while deployed are eligible to apply for immediate, lifelong access to VA health care and benefits for their families, caregivers, and survivors.

The passage of the ***PACT Act*** is a tremendous victory, but the work does not stop. Each year, more survivors whose loved ones died due to toxic exposure-linked illness connected with TAPS for grief support and help navigating their benefits. Of the survivors seeking our care in 2024, 37 percent were grieving the death of a military loved one due to illness, including toxic exposures.

TAPS remains committed to promoting a better-shared understanding of illnesses that may result from toxic and environmental exposures, radiation, or PFAS. We will continue to work with the VA to identify and expand ***PACT Act*** presumptive conditions. TAPS will also continue to work with Congress to advance further toxic exposure-related legislation to ensure impacted service members, veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors receive critical health care and mental health support, and the benefits they have earned.

There is an urgency for early diagnosis and intervention, which saves and prolongs the lives of service members and veterans, beloved by family and friends who consider each day together as precious and irreplaceable.

To that end, TAPS also urges the use of the Individual Longitudinal Exposure Records (ILER) — an electronic database of service members' and veterans' exposures used in collaboration between the VA and the Department of Defense (DoD) — to identify trends, locations, and potential exposures to proactively reach out to service members and veterans to help save lives. We also request that these records be accessible to service members, veterans, and their families, to help them make better informed decisions regarding their care.

Col (Ret) Andrew Shurtleff, U.S. Air Force

“My name is Andrew Shurtleff. I retired from the U.S. Air Force in December 2022 after nearly 23 years of service to our nation. I was trained as a fighter pilot in the F-15C and F-22, culminating in approximately 1,500 total flight hours flying both operational missions and teaching the next generation of fighter pilots. I had a promising career — hand-picked to help stand up the sole F-22 flying training squadron, early promotion to lieutenant colonel, top marks as a squadron commander, and distinguished graduate from senior developmental education. In 2018, after graduating from the Naval War College and while serving at Headquarters Air Combat Command, I was looking forward to the next challenge — promotion to colonel, a flying O-6 command, and endless future opportunities. I was also in the best shape of my life and training for a Half Ironman. I was simply on top of the world!

“That all changed on Jan. 8, 2019, when I received a call from my doctor saying I had cancer. Scans revealed a fist-sized tumor growing on my left kidney. Additional tests showed the kidney cancer had already spread to my lungs. I was 41 years old, married with 13- and 10-year-old sons, and stage 4 cancer. While I was selected for promotion to O-6 a few weeks after my diagnosis, I was also permanently grounded and eventually disqualified from aviation service. My promising flying career was over.

“Scheduling and attending doctor appointments became a near full-time job for the next several months. In the last six years, I have undergone two surgeries, multiple procedures, three radiation treatments, and an untold number of scans and blood draws; participated in a clinical trial; and have exhausted all known viable treatment options. Following my partial lung resection surgery in June 2019, I had a half-inch tube protruding from my back attached to a small vacuum used to remove fluid from my chest cavity.

“My friend, August ‘Pfoto’ Pfluger, now Congressman Pfluger, came to visit me in the hospital and slowly walked with me around the hallways while carrying that vacuum. It’s something I will never forget. The last six years have been an emotional roller coaster for me and my family. Today I remain in the fight for my life and continue to receive cancer treatment.

*“It’s natural for people to question the need for the **ACES Act** when the **PACT Act** was just enacted in 2022. The **PACT Act** is a great piece of legislation that expands VA health care and benefits to veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic substances. The **PACT Act** removes the veteran’s burden of having to prove service connection for certain medical conditions. While the **PACT Act** will likely help millions of veterans and their families, it is also limited to certain time periods and specific locations. To be clear, the **PACT Act** does not cover aviators, like me and thousands of others, who have been proven to have significantly elevated cancer diagnoses and deaths simply from doing their daily flying duties as documented in three studies from 2021-2024.*

*“In a way, I was lucky, as my cancer was diagnosed while on active duty and was therefore service-connected. As such, I receive VA health care and benefits for my condition. But there are an untold number of veteran aviators who are not as lucky, whose cancer was diagnosed after their military aviation service, and do not receive any benefits. The purpose of the **ACES Act** is to right this wrong by identifying the things in the military aviation operating environment that are more likely than not to cause cancer. We must identify the root cause affecting otherwise healthy aircrew. The health and continued service of our aircrew directly impacts national security and should be prioritized appropriately. The United States needs to address the health risks posed to aircrew by their unique work environment by dedicating the resources to fully investigate, understand, and eventually mitigate those risks. That is why the **ACES Act** is needed.”*

CDR (Ret) Scott Allen, U.S. Navy

“My name is Scott ‘Stacker’ Allen, and I served as a Navy instructor pilot in the E-2C Hawkeye (radar plane) as part of the Airborne Early Warning & Control (AEW&C) community. During my tenure, I participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and I deployed to the Arabian Gulf, Mediterranean, Adriatic, North Atlantic, and spent over five years training Hawkeye aircrew stateside. Over the course of my service, I logged more than 3,200 flight hours in the Hawkeye and executed over 290 carrier landings. It was an honor to serve my country in the United States Navy until my retirement from active duty in 2010.

“Four years post-retirement, at age 52, I was diagnosed with Stage 2 colon cancer. This prompted me to investigate whether others in my field had experienced similar health challenges. Through my research, I discovered that I was not alone. Consequently, I compiled a list of E-2 Hawkeye aircrew members I personally knew who were diagnosed with cancer and did not survive: Jim ‘Goat’ Godek, Ron ‘Mad Dog’ Marullo, Terry ‘Bobby V’ Vinton, Dennis ‘Les Vegas’ Hassman, John ‘Q-Ball’ Quinlan, Jason ‘Chud’ Chuderwitz, and James Ian ‘Rev’ Maize.

“These were my squadron mates in two different squadrons (VAW-120, VAW-124). Analysis of online obituaries indicates that the average age was 42, which suggests not only a higher risk of a cancer diagnosis but a significantly higher mortality rate — approximately 16 times greater — than that of the general population. This observation raises questions, given that aspiring Navy pilots and Naval flight officers (NFOs) must be in peak physical condition to be considered for training. It is perplexing how these men could deteriorate from peak health at age 22 to succumbing to various forms of cancer by age 42.

*“Understanding this phenomenon is crucial, and that is what H.R.530, the **ACES Act**, can provide. By supporting the **ACES Act**, we can find the source of this recurring tragedy and produce the answers that will bring closure to surviving families left behind. This isn’t just the right thing to do — or the noble thing — it is the only way to ensure a better future for military aircrew who follow us. It’s what they would want. It’s what they all deserve.”*

ENSURING VETERANS’ FINAL RESTING PLACE ACT OF 2025 (H.R.647)

TAPS Strongly Supports

TAPS is grateful to Representative Rudy Yakym (R-IN-2) for reintroducing the **Ensuring Veterans’ Final Resting Place Act of 2025 (H.R.647)**. 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 VA for the cost of the urn or plaque if they later 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.

CLEAR COMMUNICATION FOR VETERANS CLAIMS ACT (H.R.1039)

TAPS Supports

TAPS is grateful to Representative Tom Barrett (R-MI-7) for introducing the ***Clear Communication for Veterans Claims Act (H.R.1039)***, which proposes that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs collaborate with a federally funded research and development center to evaluate notice letters sent to claimants for benefits under laws administered by the Secretary, among other purposes. The primary objectives of this evaluation are as follows.

1. Assess whether modifications to the letters could decrease paper usage and costs incurred by the federal government.
2. Enhance the clarity, organization, and conciseness of notices and letters to claimants in accordance with the laws administered by the Secretary.

TAPS is of the opinion that veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors would derive significant benefits from receiving clearer communication from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), with legal disclaimers positioned at the conclusion of all notices. It is believed that this approach would contribute to a reduction in appeals and an increase in the accurate processing of claims for all veterans, caregivers, and survivors.

Should the involvement of a third-party entity be deemed beneficial in simplifying language while ensuring compliance with all relevant laws, TAPS fully supports this notion. It is critical that our veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors comprehend the requests made by the VA, and more importantly, that the VA provides accurate information to survivors while ensuring they understand what the letters mean for them.

PRIORITIZING VETERANS' SURVIVORS ACT (H.R.1228)

TAPS Strongly Supports

TAPS greatly appreciates Representative Juan Ciscomani (R-AZ-6) and Chairman Mike Bost (R-IL-12) for reintroducing the ***Prioritizing Veterans' Survivors Act (H.R.1228)***. This important legislation, which TAPS strongly supports, would return the Office of Survivor Assistance (OSA) organizationally to its previous location within the Office of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA).

OSA was established in 2008 in recognition of the sacred obligation the nation has to the survivors of military service members and veterans. Its director was to serve as a principal advisor to the VA Secretary on policies impacting military service members' and veterans' survivors, and to serve as a resource for surviving family members regarding the benefits, care, and memorial services provided across the entire VA.

Unfortunately, this office has been relocated several times over the past 15 years — moved from within the Office of the Secretary under the Chief of Staff to the Office of the Secretary aligned with the Veteran Experience Office; then to the Veterans Benefits Administration, where it was placed in the Office of Outreach, Transition and Economic Development; then moved under the Pension and Fiduciary Service, and most recently to the Office of the Under Secretary for Benefits. These moves have made it difficult for survivors to understand its role, find needed information on resources, and access all the department's support with reliable consistency.

While the Department of Defense (DoD) is able to use existing contact information to reach out to grieving families in the event of the death of an active-duty service member to ensure that they have access to the comprehensive support provided by both the DoD and the VA, the VA lacks a similar proactive capability. Prior to the death of their veteran, family members are often unknown to the VA because they are not receiving benefits or services. Thus, following a veteran's death, the burden falls on grieving families to identify, interpret, apply for, and comply with the complex eligibility requirements and siloed administration of benefits, care, and memorial services across one of the largest agencies in the government.

Despite the best intentions of Congress and the VA leadership and employees, the multiple ongoing navigation challenges survivors must manage across their survivor journey too often become confusing, frustrating, and unmanageable, and many fail to even access the much-needed assistance available to them. For example, surviving spouses are expected to find and use the same entry points for information as veterans. Regrettably, survivors tell us that calls to the general helpline can result in inaccurate information, and some have even been told that they are ineligible for benefits during their initial call. Survivors share this experience with one another, and the unfortunate result is that they become less willing to turn to the VA for assistance. This is harmful to the survivor, and it undermines trust in the VA among the community it serves. Although survivors represent only 1 percent of those receiving VA services, it is essential that all VA staff they may come in contact with are properly trained and equipped to provide the same customer service that the department's motto expresses so clearly.

From the perspective of the community, OSA would be the logical entry point or “front door” to access VA assistance, but far too many survivors don't know it exists. It falls on organizations like TAPS to inform them of all the VA resources they may be eligible for and to reach out to OSA on their behalf. The frequent moves of OSA and its minimal staffing appear to the survivor community to reflect a less than full understanding of the comprehensive nature of their needs and willingness to support their access to the full range of care, benefits, and memorial services that they so desperately need at a most difficult time in their lives.

With more than 506,000 survivors currently eligible for DIC, OSA staffing should be significantly increased to better serve surviving families. OSA should be the official entry point into the VA for survivors, with the authority, bandwidth, expertise, and access needed to answer any and all challenges that survivors face regarding VA benefits and services.

There should also be a dedicated survivor helpline within the MyVA411 central call center to provide access to trained agents with the cultural competency to address survivor issues. We applaud the VA for implementing an education-specific helpline for survivors in 2019, which has been a huge success.

The limited awareness among survivors regarding OSA highlights the VA's need to more effectively communicate and promote this essential program. TAPS strongly believes that OSA should be elevated to the Office of the Secretary, and granted the necessary authority and access to all programs and services survivors are eligible to receive.

TAPS remains committed to working with Congress and the VA to ensure that the organizational placement, staffing, and department-wide connectivity are in place to enable OSA to serve as the "front door" for the department and the advocate for the increasing number of surviving veteran families seeking access to all VA benefits, care, and memorial services.

SIMPLIFYING FORMS FOR VETERANS CLAIMS ACT (H.R.1286)

TAPS Supports

TAPS thanks Representative Rob Bresnahan, Jr. (R-PA-8) for introducing the ***Simplifying Forms for Veterans Claims Act (H.R.1286)***, 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.

DENNIS AND LOIS KRISFALUSY ACT (H.R.1344)

TAPS Strongly Supports

TAPS thanks Representative Guy Reschenthaler (R-PA-14) for introducing the ***Dennis and Lois Krisfalusy Act (H.R.1344)***, 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. This legislation is 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 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 2025***. 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.

VETERAN APPEALS TRANSPARENCY ACT OF 2025 (H.R.1741)

TAPS Supports

TAPS thanks Representative Keith Self (R-TX-3) for introducing the ***Veteran Appeals Transparency Act of 2025 (H.R.1741)***, which would help improve the VA claims process and add transparency to the actions of the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA). This important legislation would require the BVA to publish weekly on the VA website the appeals cases assigned to the board for a decision during the upcoming week and the date they were filed with the court. However, it would not require the BVA to issue a decision on any or all of the appeals cases during that week, which would be reflected in a disclaimer on the VA website to add further clarity to the process.

The BVA has long played a critical role in ensuring veterans and survivors have a clear and affordable legal process to appeal an initial VA claims decision. TAPS believes this legislation will provide greater transparency to the appeals process for veterans and survivors, and we look forward to its passage.

VETERANS' COMPENSATION COST-OF-LIVING ADJUSTMENT (COLA) ACT OF 2025

TAPS Strongly Supports

TAPS appreciates Chairman Morgan Luttrell (R-TX-8) and Ranking Member Morgan McGarvey (D-KY-3) for introducing the **Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) Act of 2025** to ensure veteran and survivor benefits keep pace with the rising cost of inflation.

The **COLA Act** will help safeguard veterans disability compensation and Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) paid to survivors. The current monthly DIC rate for eligible surviving spouses is \$1,653.07 (Dec. 1, 2024) and has only increased due to cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) since 1993.

TAPS is committed to continuing to work with Congress and this committee to pass the **Caring for Survivors Act of 2025 (H.R.680)**, which would increase DIC from 43 percent to 55 percent (\$2,107.22) of the compensation rate paid to a 100 percent disabled veteran, providing parity with other federal survivor programs.

More than 506,000 survivors receive Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) from the VA. DIC is a tax-free monetary benefit paid to eligible surviving spouses, children, or parents of service members whose death was in the line of duty or resulted from a service-related injury or illness. TAPS is committed to strengthening DIC and providing equity with other federal benefits.

Lynn Tennant, Surviving Spouse of SSG Adrian Tennant of New York, U.S. Army

“Adrian, a 20-year retired Army veteran, lost his life after a very brief and hard 34-day battle with acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL) T-Cell. He left behind me, his wife of 18 years, and two young children, ages 13 and 9 at the time. Adrian had only been retired from the Army for seven years. He never truly got to enjoy his retirement, as he enrolled in college to pursue a career in information technology. I gave up my career to let him follow his goals and raise our children.”

“His loss has put a great financial burden on me to raise our two children. I was awarded DIC finally after five years, which I am thankful for, but between that, Social Security benefits, and my job, it still isn't enough in these tough economic times. I am heading back to school to further my career in education, but the loss of his income and retirement pay has made things very difficult.”

Katie Hubbard, Surviving Spouse of CSM James Hubbard, Jr. of Kansas, U.S. Army

“Due to his status at the time of my husband’s death, the only financial benefit we are eligible for is DIC. James W. Hubbard, Jr. died May 21, 2009, while in treatment for leukemia caused by the burn pits in Iraq.

“Having your income cut by more than 60 percent while trying to navigate funeral costs, bills that aren’t stopping, and unexpected ambulance and ER charges nearly took me out too. My mental health was not conducive to returning to the workplace quickly after being his caregiver and dealing with the unexpected loss, yet I had to figure out something to make up the income or lose our home too. My future, my best friend, and my normal were gone.”

Heather Welker, Surviving Spouse of SSG Mark Welker of Missouri, Missouri National Guard

“My husband loved this country and gave it 21 years of his life. During those years he would always tell me, ‘It’s for our future.’ So his career was first priority, which took time away from family. It was supposed to make retirement years easier for us, or so we thought.

“In October of 2022, he was diagnosed with cancer, and the tumor was in a location that had no possibility of surgery because of organs and arteries. It also denied him the ability to continue working, so he was granted disability compensation. I soon had to leave my employment of 18 years to be his caregiver.

“Fast forward to March 5, 2024, that morning my husband died from his service-connected cancer. We were robbed of our golden years together. I have not been able to find employment comparable to what I had before, plus the loss of any income he provided through disability compensation.”

REVIEW EVERY VETERANS CLAIM ACT OF 2025

TAPS Supports

TAPS thanks Chairman Morgan Luttrell (R-TX-8) and Ranking Member Morgan McGarvey (D-KY-3) for introducing the **Review Every Veterans Claim Act of 2025**. This important legislation would preclude the VA from denying a claim based solely on the veteran’s failure to appear for a VA examination, scheduled in conjunction with a claim. It would also require the VA to consider the evidence already in the veteran’s claims file when making a decision on their claim.

IMPROVING VA TRAINING FOR MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA CLAIMS ACT

TAPS Strongly Supports

TAPS greatly appreciates Representative Young Kim (R-CA-40) for reintroducing 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 (VA).

This important legislation would establish sensitivity training for VA employees who process or decide MST claims, or communicate with claimants regarding evidence supporting such claims. It would also require the VA 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.

VETERANS CLAIMS EDUCATION ACT OF 2023 (H.R.1578)

TAPS Strongly Supports

TAPS thanks Representative Scott Peters (D-CA-50) for reintroducing the ***Veterans Claims Education Act of 2023 (H.R.1578)***, 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 nearly 32,000 survivors who have applied for PACT Act-related benefits thus far, increased regulatory oversight is crucial to ensure 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, TAPS believes 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.

BOARD OF VETERANS’ APPEALS ATTORNEY RETENTION AND BACKLOG REDUCTION ACT

TAPS Supports

TAPS thanks Ranking Member Morgan McGarvey (D-KY-3) for reintroducing the ***Board of Veterans’ Appeals Attorney Retention and Backlog Reduction Act***. This important legislation 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 VA currently 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.

SURVIVOR BENEFITS DELIVERY IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2025

TAPS Strongly Supports

TAPS greatly appreciates House Veterans' Affairs Committee Ranking Member Mark Takano (D-CA-39) for introducing the ***Survivor Benefits Delivery Improvement Act of 2025***, which would improve equitable access to certain benefits of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for survivors of veterans, through the collection of demographic data, and would improve outreach services to individuals who served in the uniformed services, their dependents, and survivors.

In addition to collecting demographic data, TAPS recommends adding "Cause of Death" as a tracked demographic. This data would be incredibly important in understanding the different types of losses survivors face, as well as creating programming and resources that are relevant for all survivors.

The lack of data collection based on the cause of death has also led to issues with the implementation of the ***PACT Act***. For example, the VA estimates there are 382,000 potential survivors who may be eligible for PACT-related benefits, but this number includes all manners of death, including those who died of old age, by suicide, or in car accidents, not just those filing claims related to toxic exposure.

This helps explain why after extensive outreach by the VA and organizations like TAPS, more survivors have not applied for PACT-related benefits. Unfortunately, the potential survivor numbers have also informed the Congressional Budget Office's (CBO) scoring of current survivor legislation, such as the ***Love Lives On Act*** and ***Caring for Survivors Act***, almost doubling the cost and creating exorbitant scores, making it difficult to find funding.

The Survivor Benefits Delivery Improvement Act of 2025, would also require an assessment of the resources of the VA Office of Survivors Assistance (OSA) and the development of a strategy to ensure the availability of these necessary resources. TAPS strongly supports the development of such a strategy and will continue to work in partnership with the VA to ensure that survivor needs are included in this discussion.

CONCLUSION

TAPS thanks the leadership of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Disability and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee, distinguished members, and professional staff for convening this important hearing to address key veteran and survivor legislation introduced in the 119th Congress. TAPS is honored to submit a statement for the record on behalf of the thousands of veteran and military surviving families we serve.