

**Congresswoman Cheri Bustos**  
**Testimony before the House Committee on Veteran Affairs**  
**Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity**  
**H.R. 5882, the *Gold Star Spouses Leasing Relief Act***  
May 23, 2018

Thank you, Chairman Arrington and Ranking Member O'Rourke, for allowing me to testify today.

I am here to speak in support of my bipartisan legislation, the *Gold Star Spouses Leasing Relief Act*, which would provide additional support for the widows and widowers of our fallen heroes by allowing them to terminate residential leases without penalty in the wake of the servicemember's death.

This issue first came to my attention when I met a Gold Star spouse, Kylie Riney, of Farmington, Illinois. Kylie's life was forever changed on October 19, 2016, when her husband, Sgt. Douglas Riney, tragically died defending our freedoms in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Kylie and her two young children, James and Elea, were living in Texas at the time, where Sgt. Riney had been assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment at Fort Hood. They moved there before his first of two deployments in support of Operation Freedom's Sentinel.

After her husband's death, Kylie chose to move back to their home state of Illinois to be surrounded by family as they mourned this inconceivable loss. But in the wake of this tragedy, their landlord refused to allow Kylie to terminate the lease she and her husband had signed.

The families of our fallen heroes have already sacrificed far too much, and we should do everything in our power to ensure grieving spouses receive the support they need without having to jump through any more hoops. For this reason, I was proud to introduce H.R. 5882, the *Gold Star Spouses Lease Relief Act* with Congressman Brad Wenstrup, an Army Reserve officer and Iraq War veteran, as my co-sponsor.

Currently, the *Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA)* protects servicemembers from lease termination fees when they deploy or receive a permanent change of station. Our legislation narrowly extends that law's residential leasing protections to apply to the surviving spouses of servicemembers who are killed while serving.

Spouses of servicemembers are already protected under several sections of the SCRA, including those pertaining to land rights, tax treatment and voter registration. This narrow addition does not introduce any new categories or definitions to the SCRA and would only apply to residential leases to which the servicemember was a party.

State legislators introduced similar legislation in the Illinois General Assembly, where it passed the House and Senate unanimously and is currently awaiting the Governor's signature. But, since

so many of our military families cross state lines to serve, we need federal legislation to ensure that all Gold Star spouses are protected.

I can't think of anything worse than taking advantage of a grieving widow whose spouse made the ultimate sacrifice for our country. I hope we can pass this common sense legislation to ensure this does not happen again.

Thank you, Chairman Arrington and Ranking Member O'Rourke for your consideration.