



STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

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

APRIL 14, 2021

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 loved one. TAPS was founded in 1994 as the 501(c)(3) non-profit organization to provide 24/7 care to all military survivors regardless of the duty status of the service member at the time of death, the survivors' relationship to the deceased, or the circumstances of the service member's death.

TAPS provides comprehensive support through services and programs that include peer-based emotional support, casework assistance, educational assistance, and community-based grief and trauma resources all at no cost to military survivors. TAPS provides additional programs including but not limited to a 24/7 National Military Survivor Helpline; national, regional, and community programs including military survivor seminars, retreats, and Good Grief Camps for children to facilitate a healthy grief journey; and information and resources provided through the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing. TAPS provides a significant service to military survivors by facilitating meaningful connections to other survivors with shared loss experiences.

TAPS was founded in 1994 by Bonnie Carroll following the 1992 death of her husband, Brigadier General Tom Carroll, who was killed along with seven other soldiers when their Army National Guard plane crashed in the mountains of Alaska. Since its founding, TAPS has provided care and support to more than 100,000 bereaved military survivors. In 2020 alone, TAPS connected with 7,583 newly bereaved loved ones - an average of 21 new survivors every day.

As the national non-profit organization providing grief support and casework assistance to all those impacted by a death in the military, many TAPS volunteers and staff members have grown with their grief by engaging with TAPS programs and services and now support the mission by caring for other newly bereaved survivors.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and distinguished members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) thanks you for the opportunity to make you aware of issues and concerns of importance to the families we serve, the families of the fallen.

The mission of TAPS is to offer comfort and support for surviving families of military loss regardless of the location or manner of their death. Part of that commitment includes advocating for improvements in programs and services provided by the Federal government through the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Department of Education (DoED), Department of Labor (DOL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), as well as State and local governments.

TAPS and the VA have mutually benefited from a long-standing collaborative working relationship. In 2019, TAPS and the VA entered into a new and expanded Memorandum of Agreement that formalized their partnership with the intent to provide extraordinary services through closer collaboration.

Under this agreement, TAPS continues to work with military survivors to identify resources available within the VA and private sector. TAPS also collaborates with the VA in the areas of education, burial, benefits and entitlements, grief counseling, survivor assistance, and other areas of relevance to all military survivors.

TAPS appreciates the opportunities provided by the quarterly Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DoD) Survivors Forum, which work as a clearinghouse for information on government and private sector programs and policies affecting surviving families. TAPS partners with the VA/DoD Survivors Forum to share information with our colleagues on TAPS programs and services that support all military loved ones following the death of a service member and specific resources available for the COVID-19 global crisis.

TAPS President and Founder, Bonnie Carroll, serves on the Department of Veterans Affairs Federal Advisory Committee on *Veterans' Families, Caregivers, and Survivors* where she chairs the Subcommittee on Survivors. The Committee advises the Secretary of the VA, through the Chief Veterans Experience Officer, on matters related to Veterans' families, caregivers, and survivors across all generations, relationships, and Veteran status. Ms. Carroll also serves as a PREVENTS Ambassador for the VA's initiative on preventing suicide.

Colonel John M. McHugh Tuition Fairness for Survivors Act of 2021

TAPS is thankful to Representative Moore and Representative Trone for introducing the *Colonel John M. McHugh Tuition Fairness for Survivors Act of 2021* earlier this week.

Currently there are 151,825 Chapter 35 recipients, most of which are the dependents of 100% disabled veterans. The set rate for Chapter 35 is currently \$1,265 per month averaging out to just over \$11,000 per year to pay for all college related expenses, and in most cases will not cover the cost of attendance at an in-state institution of higher learning (IHL) let alone an out-of-state IHL.

Chapter 35 is by far the most outdated education benefit that the VA provides. Even with the \$200 a month increase included in the Forever GI Bill, it is still half of what the Montgomery GI Bill pays, and minimal compared to the Post 9/11 GI Bill and the Fry Scholarship.

Long term, TAPS would like to sunset Chapter 35 and move everyone into Chapter 33. In the meantime, guaranteeing in-state tuition for those receiving Chapter 35 is a low cost lift that will drastically improve education options for surviving families and reduce their need for student loans.

Survivors using the Fry Scholarship, dependents using transferred entitlement, and veterans using the Post 9/11 GI Bill are all currently eligible for in-state tuition at any state school in the country.

Survivors using Dependents Education Assistance (DEA) under Chapter 35 are excluded. The benefits under DEA are also significantly lower than the Post 9/11 GI Bill, Fry Scholarship and Montgomery GI Bill. Eligible recipients of DEA are dependents of 100% disabled veterans or those who died of a service-connected death. Since these dependents and survivors receive less tuition assistance, guaranteeing them in-state tuition would help ensure those benefits go further and would not limit a student's school choice.

"In order to build a life for my daughter and myself, I knew I had to go to school and choose a career that would allow me to raise her in a single-parent household. Because I am a pre-9/11 veteran and Matt died prior to 9/11, myself and my daughter had Chapter 35 education benefits that we are grateful to receive. However, due to the Chapter 35 benefits not being updated to include the ability for a veteran or surviving spouse/child to use them at any state school- in any state- and receive in-state pricing, I now have student loans for my BS in Psychology degree

and I'm currently paying completely through loans for my MA in Industrial & Organizational Leadership. I paid the difference between in-state and out-of-state tuition. I was penalized because I did not move to my home state of record, Pennsylvania, where I entered the service. I was not the same person who left for the Marines at the age of 18." **Renee Monczynski, Surviving Spouse of AT2 Matthew Monczynski**

"My daughter, Chloe Mackey, is the surviving child of SSG Matthew Mackey. She has a 4.3 GPA and is at the top of her graduating class this year. She is eligible for both the Fry Scholarship and Chapter 35. She has been accepted to Syracuse, the University of Alabama, and Louisiana State University. She has chosen to leave Louisiana and go to the University of Alabama. With it comes a heart-wrenching choice of having to waste months' worth of her Fry Scholarship purely for the in-state tuition rate. If Chapter 35 would allow for students to be granted in-state tuition, she has enough academic scholarship money to pay for her tuition and fees and will be wasting thousands of dollars in her benefits just for the in-state tuition rate. That benefit, which is being wasted, could be used to further her education in graduate school; instead, it is being used just for a lower tuition rate on tuition that won't even be paid by the Fry Scholarship, but her academic scholarships. She's lucky to have the option of choice even though she feels penalized for being at the top of her class and being awarded scholarships. Without the scholarships, she could justify using her months of Fry Scholarship. Instead, she has to justify losing thousands of dollars over in-state/out-of-state rates based on which benefit she uses. Please consider academic students, like Chloe, that feel penalized for being a good student and choosing a school that is willing to give her an amazing academic scholarship and wasting her benefits, or going to school somewhere she doesn't want to be." **Kannan Mackey Fugler, Surviving Spouse of SSG Matthew Mackey**

"Allowing for In-State Tuition for Chapter 35 benefits would positively impact my family. My 15-year-old daughter would be able to attend her college of choice, Arizona State University. I have steered her away from that dream because we live in California and she could only attend college in her own state to maximize the current VA benefits." **Monica Jaikaran, Surviving Spouse of MA1 Dameshvar Jaikaran**

TAPS requests Congress pass the Colonel John M. McHugh Tuition Fairness for Survivors Act to guarantee in-state tuition for those using Chapter 35 benefits.

Chapter 35 Delimiting Date

Over 150,000 surviving families and families of disabled veterans rely solely on Chapter 35 education benefits, which are significantly less than the Montgomery GI Bill or Chapter 33 benefits. When we removed the delimiting date for the Post 9/11 GI Bill, we once again excluded Chapter 35 families. Most of those eligible for this benefit are caregivers or grieving spouses raising children. With a 10 or 20 year time limit, most do not have time to take advantage of the benefits with their own responsibilities.

Removing the time limit would help bring parity to those only eligible for Chapter 35, and provide them the ability to use the benefits when it works best for them. Most of the surviving spouses TAPS has heard from would prefer to wait to return to school until their children are much older or out of the house, and this will allow them the flexibility to do so.

“Future surviving spouses wouldn’t have to worry about a looming deadline while trying to recover from tragedy and raise a family on their own, while also working to cover the difference in tuition that Chapter 35 often doesn’t cover.” **Julie McQueeney, Surviving Spouse of GYSGT Michael Scott McQueeney**

“Removing the expiration date for Chapter 35, would give my 18-year-old son more time to finish Medical School. He is currently studying abroad in Fiji and chose not to use Chapter 35 benefits this year, so he could use this education benefits in Med School if he finished in time. I would not feel this insurmountable amount of pressure to use or lose my Chapter 35 benefits within the allotted time frame.” **Monica Jaikaran, Surviving Spouse of MA1 Dameshvar Jaikaran**

“I was his sole caregiver while raising two special needs children and trying to run my own small business. The VA put a 10-year limit on my VA education benefits to end September 2021, which I found out after I filled out the educational papers. I did not know I was limited to 10 years. When I did find this out I searched and searched for a program that I could actually use in my life and next journey.” **Michelle Briggs, Surviving Spouse of SGT Robert William Briggs**

Modern Information Technology System

The failed roll out of the Forever GI Bill in 2018 highlighted a much larger issue at the VA. The VA is using decades old IT systems and trying to work in the 21st Century with 50 year old technology that physically cannot keep up with the demands of today's students or Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs).

TAPS is grateful to the committee for providing money to the Department of Veterans Affairs, Education Services in 2020 to help bring the IT programs into the modern era. We have all seen how outdated the systems are and how frustrating it is for processors to quickly process the large number of claims they receive. We support the draft language to ensure that money is used to build out that system in the next three years, and we appreciate that all chapters are included in that process. Chapter 35 benefits are even harder to process than other education benefits. We appreciate the inclusion of Chapter 35 in the IT modernization.

The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors thanks the leadership of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs subcommittee on Economic Opportunity and its distinguished members for holding this important hearing. TAPS appreciates the opportunity to testify and provide a statement for the record in support of these important pieces of legislation.