

**STATEMENT OF  
MS. CHERYL RAWLS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
OUTREACH, TRANSITION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SERVICE  
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**February 8, 2022**

Chairwoman Luria, Ranking Member Nehls and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the effectiveness of services for Veterans' survivors provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

I want to express my appreciation for your continued support of Veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors. I also want to acknowledge our Veterans Service Organization (VSO) partners as well as other Veteran partners who work with us to provide the best care and services for Veterans and their families and who do so much to advocate on behalf of Veterans. Secretary McDonough has described his four principles of Advocacy, Access, Outcomes and Excellence to guide the Department in its mission to serve Veterans and their families. I am proud to support those principles. This sacred mission is both personal and professional for me, and it remains the honor of my lifetime to serve Veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors.

VA is committed to supporting Service members, Veterans and their family members. In many circumstances, VA's relationship with survivors begins long before they lose their loved ones. VA, in partnership with the Department of Defense (DoD), Department of Labor, Department of Education, the Office of Personnel Management, and the Small Business Administration, begins educating and supporting Service members and their families prior to their transition into civilian life.

Transition begins no later than 365 days prior to separation or retirement. The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is an interagency program designed to provide Service members and their families with information on benefits and services to ease their transition from military to civilian life. VA's portion of TAP provides a full, one-day course outlining VA benefits and services. Specifically, *Module 2: Supporting Yourself and Your Family*, contains a topic called "Support for Your Loved Ones," where transitioning Service members learn about life insurance programs; burial and memorial benefits; survivor education benefits; disability compensation and pension benefits for survivors; and managing monetary benefits and fiscal stewardship (see Table 1 for a complete list of VA's survivor benefits). In addition, TAP VA Benefits Advisors are available to provide one-on-one assistance as requested to answer questions, explain benefits and connect all Service members, Veterans, and loved ones to helpful resources.

Additionally, the Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) Planning Your Legacy Guide is a key outreach tool for Veterans who are planning for their survivors. This outreach tool is a source of pre-need planning information and record storage for Veterans and their families. The tool is intended to be used as a supplement to the "Summary of VA Dependents' and Survivors' Benefits" pamphlet. Veterans, family members, caregivers, and survivors are also welcome to attend any outreach event where they can receive one-on-one assistance and receive answers to questions they may have.

## **Support for Survivors**

In the event of a Service member's or Veteran's passing, VBA plays a vital role in supporting their survivors. Specifically, VBA's Office of Survivors Assistance (OSA) was established by P.L. 110-389, Title II, section 222, in October 2008 to serve as a resource regarding all benefits and services furnished by the Department to survivors and dependents of deceased Veterans and members of the Armed Forces. OSA also serves as a principal advisor to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and promotes the use of VA benefits, programs, and services to survivors.

Over the years, OSA has built and maintained collaborative partnerships with local, state, tribal and Federal agencies, as well as VSOs, faith-based and community organizations and other stakeholder groups to increase awareness of benefits and services available to surviving family members. OSA also advocates for the needs of survivors in VA's policy and programmatic decision making, makes appropriate referrals to VA Administrations and Staff Offices to ensure survivors receive benefits and services for which they are eligible, communicates with surviving family members in a proactive and timely manner and develops innovative outreach opportunities to reach survivors who are eligible but not receiving benefits.

OSA works closely with VA's internal and external partners to reach survivors who may be eligible for benefits. This includes regular communications with VSOs, such as Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, and other survivor-focused groups. OSA is a member of VA's Veterans' Family, Caregiver, and Survivor Advisory Committee and also provides discussion, training and coordination with other VBA offices; the Veterans Health Administration; and the National Cemetery Administration. OSA also works with other Federal agencies, such as Customs and Border Patrol, and the Departments of Agriculture, Justice, and Homeland Security. Through OSA, VBA attends and participates in speaking engagements at VSO National Conventions, which are attended by the Legacy Six, Gold Star Mothers, and Gold Star Wives. Additionally, OSA coordinates weekly with our counterparts in DoD and individual service survivor programs, meets monthly with the Gold Star and Surviving Family Member Forum, and provides training to service casualty officers (U.S. Army, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps and the National Guard and Reserve components).

As part of its partner engagement, OSA has a dedicated email address (officeofsurvivors@va.gov) and phone number (1-202-461-1077). During calendar year 2021, OSA responded to over 5,950 email and phone inquiries from Veterans, survivors, family members and caregivers about benefits and the status of their claims. OSA also sent personal condolence letters to the surviving family members of nearly 1,150 Service members who died while on active duty. Additionally, in fiscal year (FY) 2021, OSA participated in 17 events with TAPS, Gold Star Wives, and Gold Star Mothers. OSA also held seven Casualty Assistance Officer training events, two VA/DoD Survivor Forums and numerous training events for other VA employees. OSA's Assistant Director also participates monthly with DoD in a Gold Star and Surviving Family Representatives meeting, and quarterly with the Casualty Advisory Board and Central Joint Mortuary Affairs Board.

In keeping with its mission, during FY 2020, OSA collaborated with VA's Veterans Experience Office to create a Survivor's Journey Map. The Journey Map describes the end-to-end survivor experience throughout major steps in their experience with VA, including the emotions they may experience, the people they encounter, the moments that bring them joy, and the moments when they are faced with challenges. The purpose of the Journey Map is to illustrate the survivor experience from the survivor's perspective, so VA may better meet their needs and ensure positive experiences. VA aims to improve knowledge of benefits and services available to eligible survivors and dependents. One of the most important lessons learned from the Journey Map is that outreach plays a key role in learning about VA benefits. Using this Journey Map as a guide for improvement, VA now includes survivor benefits in all outreach engagements. Additionally, VA is researching and developing new ways to connect with survivors in FY 2022.

### **Pension and Fiduciary Service (P&FS) Programs**

VBA also plays a key role in providing monetary benefits to survivors in the form of non-service-connected survivors pension, Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) and burial allowance. VBA's P&FS is responsible for oversight of these benefits. Survivor's pension is a benefit that generally provides monthly payments to survivors of Veterans who meet certain wartime service requirements and who have income and net worth within certain limits. P&FS also administers DIC, which generally is a tax-free monetary benefit paid to eligible survivors of military Service members who died in the line of duty or eligible survivors of Veterans whose death resulted from a service-connected disability. Additionally, P&FS oversees burial allowances for Veterans, which are payable to individuals or professionals with a relationship to the Veteran who are paying for the Veteran's burial or funeral costs and will not be reimbursed by any other organization.

## **In-Service Death**

When a Service member passes while in service, VA partners with DoD immediately to provide outreach, guidance, and claims assistance with compassion to support the survivor(s) during this difficult time.

Upon notice of an in-service death, the regional office Casualty Assistance Coordinator provides outreach to the surviving family members as instructed by VA guidance. VBA's Office of Field Operations and Outreach, Transition and Economic Development Service manage the Casualty Assistance Program, which is a cooperative VA/DoD service to help survivors of Service members who die while on active duty. The military will give direction on when VA contact should be initiated. Usually, the first contact with survivor(s) will be made by telephone to set up a personal visit at a time and place convenient for the survivor(s). However, if 30 days has passed, VA will contact survivor(s) with a letter and enclosed business card to set up an appointment.

When VA receives DD Form 1300, *Report of Casualty*, from DoD, VBA immediately begins processing the claim for DIC. VBA has a dedicated staff to process original claims for in-service death at the Philadelphia VA Regional Office, ensuring efficient and accurate benefits delivery to survivors during their time of need.

## **Improved Delivery of Benefits and Services**

Ensuring the efficient and accurate delivery of benefits to survivors is one of VA's key focuses. To improve benefits delivery to survivors, VBA has undertaken several projects that are designed to provide enhanced claims processing through updates in forms, procedures and the use of automated claims processing.

VA continues to review and update forms related to DIC and burial claims to ensure the forms are clear and request information needed to process a claim quickly. VA also reorganized its Adjudication Procedures Manual to focus on improving navigation and accessibility of content, to ensure that claims adjudicators can find applicable procedural guidance more efficiently, which will result in more efficient claims processing.

VA is committed to improving the overall delivery of DIC and monetary burial benefits using automation. In April 2021, VA completed its initial delivery of claims automation, which provided the ability to process DIC and burial claims end-to-end. In FY 2021, these automation processes completed over 48,000 monetary burial claims (57% of monetary burial claims received) and over 10,000 DIC claims (17.2% of all DIC claims received). This advancement in technology allows VBA to deliver timely decisions to survivors, while allowing field personnel to focus on more complex claims.

VA continues to seek ways to improve and expand the use of automation in its benefits delivery to provide faster, better service to survivors. In some instances, when VA receives a first notice of death, VBA automates a burial payment to the surviving

spouse of record and terminates benefit payments. This reduces the burden of the surviving spouse in navigating the claims process immediately after the loss of their loved one. As an example of the successes in automation that enable VBA to complete claims more efficiently, VBA recently processed a claim for a Vietnam Veteran who served in the U.S. Army from 1973 to 1976. He passed away on January 1, 2022. His spouse submitted a claim for DIC on January 21, 2022, and the claim was completed automatically the very next day, on January 22, 2022. In addition to being granted month-of-death benefits in the amount of \$3,915.42, the spouse also received \$2,000 in service-connected burial benefits.

## **Conclusion**

VA shares Congress' goal of supporting the survivors of our Service members and Veterans in a caring and compassionate manner that honors their loved one's service. VA continues to work to achieve this goal and serves as a resource regarding all benefits and services furnished by the Department to survivors of deceased Veterans and members of the Armed Forces.

Chairwoman Luria, Ranking Member Nehls, this concludes my testimony. I am happy to respond to any questions you or the Committee may have.

Table 1:

<b>VA Benefits for Survivors</b>	
<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Brief Description</b>
Health care	Spouses, surviving spouses, dependent child(ren), or family caregivers of a Veteran or Service member, may qualify for health care through the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA) program, the Department of Defense's TRICARE program, or one of VA's programs related to a Veteran's service-connected disability.
Education and training	Surviving spouses or child(ren) may qualify for survivors' and Dependents' Education Assistance Program (Chapter 35) benefits, the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship or job training through a GI Bill program.
<u>VA home loan programs for surviving spouses</u>	Surviving spouses may be eligible for VA-backed home loans in certain circumstances.
<u>VA life insurance</u>	VA life insurance can offer financial security for Veterans, Service members, and their spouses and dependent children.
<u>Pre-need eligibility for burial in a VA cemetery</u>	Veterans can apply to find out in advance if they can be buried in a VA national cemetery, called a pre-need determination of eligibility—and it can help make the burial planning process easier for family members in their time of need.
<u>VA burial benefits and memorial items</u>	VA burial benefits can help Service members, Veterans, and their family members plan and pay for a burial or memorial service in a VA national cemetery. Family members can also order memorial items to honor the service of a Veteran, such as memorial or burial flags.
<u>VA Survivors Pension</u>	VA Survivors Pension offers monthly payments to qualified surviving spouses and unmarried dependent children of wartime Veterans who meet certain income and net worth limits set by Congress. As of September 30, 2021, there were 139,864 survivors in receipt of this benefit.
<u>VA DIC for spouses, dependents, and parents</u>	Surviving spouses, child(ren), or parents of a Service member who died in the line of duty, or the survivor of a Veteran who died from a service-related injury or illness, may be able to receive a tax-free monetary benefit called DIC. As of September 30, 2021, there were 460,591 survivors in receipt of this benefit.

More information can be found online at [VA Benefits For Spouses, Survivors, And Dependents](#).