



**STATEMENT OF**

**ASHLYNNE HAYCOCK**  
**Manager, Education Services**

**TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS (TAPS)**

**BEFORE THE**

**UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**  
**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**March 20, 2018**

## **Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors**

The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) is the national nonprofit organization providing compassionate care for the families of America's fallen military heroes. TAPS provides peer-based emotional support, grief and trauma resources, grief seminars and retreats for adults, Good Grief Camps for children, casework assistance, connections to community-based care, online and in-person support groups and a 24/7 resource and information helpline for all who have been affected by a death in the Armed Forces. Services are provided free of charge.

TAPS was founded in 1994 by Bonnie Carroll following the death of her husband in a military plane crash in Alaska in 1992. Since then, TAPS has offered comfort and care to more than 75,000 bereaved surviving family members. For more information, please visit [www.TAPS.org](http://www.TAPS.org).

TAPS receives no government grants or funding.

### **Ashlynn Haycock**

Ashlynn Haycock is currently the Manager, Education Services for the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS). Ashlynn was recently appointed to the Department of Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee on Education (VACOE). She is the surviving daughter of US Army SFC Jeffrey Haycock, who died in the line of duty in 2002, and US Air Force Veteran Nichole Haycock, who died by suicide in 2011. She graduated from American University with a Bachelor's degree in Political Science in 2013. While at American University she was one of the first recipients of the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John Fry Scholarship.

Ashlynn has been involved with TAPS as a survivor for over 15 years. She has been on staff with TAPS for four years and was instrumental in creating the TAPS Education Support Services program and online education portal. She is an experienced professional in all areas of education benefits for surviving children and spouses at the federal, state and private levels. Ashlynn is regularly invited to participate in forums focusing on veteran and survivor education benefits. She has assisted over 1,500 survivors in accessing education benefits worth over \$170 million in assistance since 2013. Ashlynn was highly involved in growing the TAPS partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs since 2014 to establish a Memorandum of Agreement, which was expanded in 2017.

Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke and distinguished members of the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, 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.

While the mission of TAPS is to offer comfort and support for surviving families, we are also committed to improving support provided by the Federal government through the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Department of Education (DoED), state governments and local communities for the families of the fallen - those who fall in combat, those who fall from invisible wounds and those who die from illness or disease.

TAPS appreciates the attention the Committee has paid to making sure that veterans and surviving family members have access to quality education. Surviving family members using their education benefits often face many of the same challenges facing all students. TAPS is proud to work with other organizations, including the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Veterans Education Success and Student Veterans of America, to ensure safeguards are in place to protect all recipients of education benefits from the VA and DoED.

TAPS would like to thank the committee for all the provisions in the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 that assisted our surviving families, such as Yellow Ribbon for Fry Scholarships recipients, the removal of the delimiting date for Fry-eligible spouses and an increase in Chapter 35 educational benefits. We look forward to seeing them implemented in the coming months.

We are most appreciative of the opportunity to comment on and offer our support of H.R. 4830, the "*Servicemembers Improved Transition through Reforms for Ensuring Progress Act*" or the "*SIT-REP Act*."

Indicative of the specialized support that TAPS provides is the education portal and individualized guidance on education benefits available for the children and spouses of America's fallen heroes. TAPS staff members work with each individual to maximize the financial support they can receive to complete their education from both government and private agencies.

TAPS would like to recognize the outstanding support we receive from the VA on behalf of the survivors we serve. For several years we have been honored to have a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) with the education specialists in the office of Economic Opportunity in the Veterans Benefits Administration enabling TAPS and the VA to work most efficiently in solving problems that surviving spouses and children encountered while accessing their VA education benefits. This relationship also allowed the VA to discover areas where policy or processes could be improved so they could serve survivors more effectively.

The VA Office of Survivor Assistance, including director Moira Flanders and her staff, works closely with TAPS to answer questions and concerns that are raised by surviving family members. We also appreciate the opportunities provided by the DoD/VA Survivors Forum, held quarterly, which works as a clearinghouse for information on government and private sector programs and policies affecting surviving families. This is ably facilitated by Craig Zaroff of the VA Benefits Assistance Service.

TAPS was recently honored to enter into a new and expanded Memorandum of Agreement with the VA. This agreement formalizes what has been a long-standing, informal working relationship between TAPS and the VA. The services provided by TAPS and the VA are complementary, and in this public-private partnership each will continue to provide extraordinary services through closer collaboration.

Under this agreement, TAPS continues to work with surviving families to identify resources available to them both within the VA and through private sources. TAPS will also collaborate with the VA in the areas of education, burial, benefits and entitlements, grief counseling and other areas of interest.

## **Implementation Challenges**

We have heard from many TAPS surviving spouses concerning the implementation of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017. While they are most appreciative of the enhanced benefit, many have encountered stumbling blocks.

TAPS' biggest concern with all the changes being implemented on August 1, 2018, is that there will be delayed payments and processing time for payments for veterans and survivors enrolled for the fall 2018 semester.

Even with the few changes that went into effect in the fall of 2017, TAPS had issues with many institutions of higher learning (IHLs) demanding payment from the student because of delayed VA payments. Students receiving VA payments were not allowed to attend classes, register for Spring 2018 or use campus facilities (library, health center) because the VA payment was delayed. In some cases, students were put on payment plans they could not afford or forced to take out student loans with egregious origination fees in order to continue their education program.

TAPS would recommend that students receiving VA payments have the same protections as those who receive Title IV funding such as Pell Grants and Federal student loans. These Title IV students are allowed to attend classes, participate in extra-curricular activities and use campus facilities, as long as the IHL knows that payment will arrive.

TAPS strongly believes that the best way to do this is through a legislative change. We have been in discussion with the House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC) majority staff to assist these students.

After we spoke of our concerns at the House Veterans Affairs Committee hearing on the implementation of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 (the Forever GI Bill), we were pleased when Representative Gus Bilirakis approached us to express his interest in sponsoring this important legislation. We worked closely with his staff and the HVAC staff to come up with language that would correct this injustice for veterans and survivors using their VA education benefits.

H.R. 4830 would give the Secretary of Veterans Affairs the ability to disapprove any course of education unless the educational institutions providing the course permit individuals to attend or participate in courses pending payment by the VA and accept a Certificate of Eligibility (COE) as a promise of payment.

## **Survivors Share Their Stories**

### **Yesenia Bernal, surviving spouse of Army SPC Rudolfo Bernal and student at Aurora College**

*I was put on a payment plan, made to pay upfront the payments missed and late fees. I was refunded the payments but not the late fees at the end of the semester. This impacted our budget at home, of course, but we adjusted to make it work. I had to pull from other accounts to do so, which generated yet another fee. I am blessed to have graduated tuition free, ever grateful for the Fry scholarship. I feel like sharing that story sounds ungrateful, because it was the only financial hardship I had throughout my school career compared to what other students have to pay. However, if I hadn't had the additional funds to make it work I would have had to take the semester off.*

### **Weston Haycock, surviving child, student at Montana State University**

*Weston is enrolled at Montana State University and because the VA tuition payment had not arrived before the start of the semester the school advised him to take out a loan and repay it when the VA money arrived. They did not inform him that there would be initiation fees he had to pay back on top of the original loan amount. The VA money arrived when it was supposed to—4 weeks after being certified by the school, but nevertheless Weston was penalized.*

### **Timmy Swenson, surviving child, student at Blinn College, Texas**

*Timmy's grandmother shares their story: Timmy and I did a visit in April of his senior year to Clarendon College. The visit included the finance office. Timmy drove up (10 hour drive) on Friday, August 25, the day Houston was beginning evacuations for hurricane Harvey. He was to move into dorm on Saturday, the 26th. Move in went well. He was very concerned about what was going on at home. Then, when he went to main admin on Monday to check in to begin classes on Tuesday, he was informed that he*

*could not attend any classes until monies had been paid. Apparently Clarendon College is too small to have a full time VA advisor. Poor Timmy was panicked, but didn't want to worry us as Harvey was impending! He didn't know what to do, but decided to deplete his saved living expense money to pay his tuition. He contacted Ashlynnne at TAPS, and eventually was reimbursed. Then, mostly due to my husband's health issues, and being 10 hours away, he transferred to a closer college for this semester. Blinn College in College Station, Texas, finally allowed him to enroll. He had to make a payment plan again for tuition, which I was luckily able to cover the first payment for him. He received reimbursement just before second payment was due. Extremely stressful times. If something could be done to alleviate these issues for these Gold Star kids, it would sure help!*

**Malena Smith, surviving child, Indiana University of Pennsylvania**

*This year they decided to change how they would remove the late fees and have them not affect you. In previous years I have had to fight them to get the late fees and the installment plan taken off of my account by having the military and veteran resource center's director for Indiana University of Pennsylvania get involved and settle it with the military person in the bursar's office who is not that helpful and did not want to remove them last spring but did and he said it was a one-time only thing to get them removed. The late fee and installment plan is \$70.*

*The fall is not too much of a problem because of when the bill is due and when they receive the money from the government. That being said this past spring was different. They began asking for money at the normal time but not enforcing it until February. Our documents for how many credit hours we are taking don't get sent in until the end of add/drop period which in the spring is a week after class begins. My information was not sent in until the week of the 29th of January if not later. It all depends on how long it takes them to get through the others that have to be submitted. I got the confirmation email that said my information was submitted to the VA on the 5th of February. Then on the 5th of February I also got an email from the bursar's office regarding my billing statement saying that the money is due by the 20th of February. Then the school got paid by the VA on the 9th of February. I also received an email on the 9th of February that I have been enrolled in a payment plan and that it's a one-time installment for the rest of the balance due and it has to be paid by the 20th of March. Then on the 10th of February I got another email saying that I had been assessed a two payment plan in the amount of \$40.00. And the two payments are due on the 25th of February and rest of balance on the 20th of March. It says in the email that if you are contracted to receive a scholarship, VA Benefits or third party payment, the plan and charge will be removed when payment is received. It also has a new due date of the 25th of February.*

*When I paid the remaining balance on the 12th the payment plan and charge was removed without any issue. However I know that this will happen again because the office of Military and Veteran Resource Center submits our paperwork to the VA. Do I blame them for any of this? No. However I wish that the bursar would be able to flag*

*my account or make a note that my money is coming from the VA so that this doesn't happen. Thank you for fighting for us in Congress and wanting to pass this law.*

## **Other Legislation**

We would like to offer short comments on some of the other legislation being discussed at today's hearing.

### **H.R. 1206**

TAPS supports the "*Reducing Barriers for Veterans Education Act of 2017.*"

This bill makes an individual who is eligible for educational assistance under the Post-9/11 Educational Assistance program eligible for assistance with the fees for applying to IHLs. Surviving spouses and children using the Fry scholarship will also be eligible for help with these fees.

### **H.R. 3940**

TAPS supports the "*Veterans Education Disaster Assistance Act.*" The horrific disasters that impacted so many students this past fall impacted the education benefits of many veterans and survivors. We should do what we can to make them whole again concerning their housing stipends and supply stipends.

### **H.R. 3023**

TAPS is concerned that eliminating the authority of the Department of Veterans Affairs to pay reporting fees to educational institutions will undo the advances achieved by the Forever GI Bill. We have heard from our partner organization, the National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASAA), and share their concerns that this will reduce the abilities of some institutions of higher learning to provide veterans and survivors resources on campuses.

## **The Way Ahead**

TAPS would like to reinforce the fact that the more survivors know about their benefits, the better they are equipped to make informed decisions. We would like to see what the VA's communication plan is to publicize and inform veterans and survivors about changes to their benefits as a result of the Forever GI Bill.

Those serving our veterans and survivors need to get the word as well. While mandatory training for school certifying officials is included in the Forever GI Bill, we are concerned about the IHLs being aware of the changes coming in August 2018. We know that the Office of Economic Opportunity is pushing out information to IHLs. We hope there will be coordination within the IHLs so that the person actually talking to the student is aware of the changes.

Continued cooperation between the VA, the Committee and interested VSOs, MSOs and survivor advocates is essential to make the implementation of the Forever GI

Bill a success. TAPS will continue to provide feedback to both the VA and the Committee on the experience of survivors.