



**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

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

**November 15, 2018**

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; and 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 80,000 bereaved surviving family members. For more information, please visit [TAPS.org](http://TAPS.org).

TAPS receives no government grants or funding.

Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke, and distinguished members 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), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Department of Education (DoED), Department of Labor, state governments, government contractors, 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 accidents, illness or disease.

TAPS was honored to enter into a new and expanded Memorandum of Agreement with the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2017. This agreement formalizes what has been a long-standing, informal working relationship between TAPS and the VA. The services provided by TAPS and 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.

### **Forever GI Bill**

TAPS is grateful to have been involved in the passage of the historic Forever GI Bill in 2017. Several of the key components were legislative priorities of TAPS for many years, including access to the Yellow Ribbon Program for survivors and an increase in Dependents Education Assistance. TAPS is very concerned though that the implementation has been poorly executed. Some of the concerns brought to us include excessive wait times for payments, long waits for the call center, payments that were incorrect, and inconsistent responses from VA on what the problems have been and timelines. We are also very concerned that this backlog, which has already impacted the Fall Semester for many students, will now carry over into the Spring Semester.

### **GI Bill Comparison Tool**

Throughout the implementation process, there have been several issues with the GI Bill Comparison Tool that should not have been impacted. On September 5, 2018, all of the Basic Allowance of Housing (BAH) rates from the tool were removed. VA representatives stated they have no knowledge of why this happened and could not give an accurate guess as to how long those numbers were missing. TAPS only noticed it because a surviving spouse brought it to our attention. Within hours of TAPS informing HVAC of this issue, the BAH rates were restored but still reflecting 2017/ 2018 not 2018/2019 rates.

On October 3, 2018, all of the student complaints were removed from the Comparison Tool. The flags were still in existence but the data showing how many and the type of complaints were

missing. TAPS immediately notified HVAC of this concern and the complaints were restored within a few hours, but again VA has no knowledge of how or why this happened.

TAPS is very concerned with how long these issues existed before they were caught and how many students could not access BAH rates during that time frame. The Comparison Tool is not a part of the IT updates, therefore it should not have been tampered with.

## **Section 110**

Section 110 of the Forever GI Bill was split into two parts. The Shawna Hill amendment, which allows a service member to transfer benefits to a new dependent if the original dependent dies, was successfully implemented by the Department of Defense. However, the portion that allows survivors to transfer amongst each other after the death of a service member falls under VA. When we requested the application for survivor to survivor transfer on August 23, 2018, we were told there was not one. Instead we were informed that they can “request” it using the “ask a question” function on VA.gov. The following quote is taken directly from the response we received from VA:

“If the transferor is deceased, to initiate a transfer a survivor may request to transfer their remaining entitlement to another eligible dependent of the Transferor via Right Now Web <https://gibill.custhelp.va.gov/>.”

TAPS requests that VA create an actual physical application to ensure that transfer from survivor to survivor is done in a way that protects survivors and the VA. With no application there is no signature or requirement that shows who requested it. This could cause issues in the future, such as one sibling doing it without the others knowledge, etc.

## **Negative Impact**

The delayed payments and inconsistent information from VA have had a negative impact on surviving families and veterans. The following is from a surviving spouse, highlighting the impact of the delayed payments:

“I had perfect credit and money in savings 2 months ago, but I just haven’t been as prepared as I thought. I gave my daughter money while waiting on the VA to pay, because I figured I could afford it since I would have my school money soon. I am now behind on 3 small credit cards and they are calling for payments, my credit score has taken a hit. I cry every day.”

- Surviving spouse and child using the Fry Scholarship, Texas

## **Suggested Actions**

TAPS, along with several VSOs, strongly believes that the following steps need to be taken to ensure that the VA is able to handle the remaining implementation and be held accountable.

1. Reinststate the position of Deputy Undersecretary for Economic Opportunity or create a fourth administration in VA for Economic Opportunity to ensure that the GI Bill is given the tools it needs going forward.
2. Conduct a feasibility study into using batch payments, similar to how the Department of Education pays Title IV funds.
3. Pass the SITREP Act on the Senate side to ensure students are not penalized by schools because the VA is delayed in making payments. TAPS raised this issue a year ago because of our concerns.
4. Mandate that VA immediately appropriate the \$30 million in IT Funds that was included in the Forever GI Bill.

TAPS looks forward to working with both the Committee and VA to ensure that all veterans and survivors are paid and that the new IT systems work properly so that we do not have these issues going forward.

**It is the responsibility of the nation to provide for the support of the loved ones of those who have paid the highest price for freedom. Thank you for allowing us to speak on their behalf.**