



STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

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

April 9, 2019

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 85,000 bereaved surviving family members. For more information, please visit TAPS.org.

TAPS receives no government grants or funding.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, 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.

Discussion Draft - Guard & Reserve

TAPS is excited to see our #2 priority before this committee: Providing parity for surviving children and spouses of those whose loved ones died while serving in the Guard and Reserves. Their service and sacrifices are no different than those serving on active duty. While most survivor benefits are now equal, education benefits are not. It's time to make sure Guard and Reserve surviving families have the same access to the Fry Scholarship as their active duty counterparts.

Some of the stories TAPS has heard from our surviving families regarding this issue are absolutely heartbreaking.

First Sergeant John DuPont served his country honorably for nearly 30 years. He served in the United States Marine Corps and then the Army National Guard. During his National Guard service, he was deployed to Afghanistan. Upon his return, he continued with the National Guard but lost his battle with Post Traumatic Stress (PTS) when he died by suicide in 2011. First Sergeant DuPont took his own life just hours after returning home from a drill weekend where he was preparing for an upcoming deployment. Had he died a few hours earlier before coming home, his children would have been eligible for the Fry

Scholarship. They were deemed ineligible because he made it home from his Guard weekend, and once home was not considered on active duty status.

SPC Anthony Tipps was a member of the Texas National Guard. Specialist Tipps was activated in 2009 and had to leave his career for his deployment to Iraq. When he returned home one year later, he learned that his former employer had not held his job. He was unable to find employment. Specialist Tipps died by suicide less than 3 months after returning from Iraq. Because he was not considered on "active duty status" at the time of his death, his daughter Brittany was deemed ineligible for the Fry Scholarship, even though his death was service-connected.

Colonel David McCracken served honorably in the Army and Army Reserves for over 20 years. During his military career he was deployed multiple times. On his last tour he was activated as a reservist and deployed to the Middle East. Upon return from his deployment, he was diagnosed with brain cancer which was found to be service-connected due to burn pit exposure in Iraq. Because he was not on active-duty orders or training at the time of his death, his children are not eligible for the Fry Scholarship.

These are just three of the stories TAPS has heard from surviving families regarding eligibility for the Fry Scholarship. In the case of First Sergeant DuPont, literally hours differentiate what benefits his children receive. The families have no say in the duty status of the service member, therefore they should not be treated differently. TAPS firmly believes that we must honor the service and sacrifice of all surviving families.

Six months ago, TAPS spoke with Former Congressman Chet Edwards who wrote and introduced the original Fry Scholarship in 2009. When we informed him of this issue he was stunned. His original intent was to include all surviving families. He had no idea that some Guard and Reserve families were being excluded, and has offered his support in fixing this inequity.

TAPS estimates 1,000-1,500 surviving children and spouses would benefit from this expansion. A vast majority are surviving families whose loved ones died from service-connected illnesses or by suicide. These families are in receipt of Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) at the same rate as active duty losses, receive TRICARE and almost all of the same benefits as active duty losses.

Providing parity in education is long overdue and we look forward to seeing this bill passed and implemented. This is part of a long-term TAPS goal to bring all survivors into the Fry Scholarship and phase out the Vietnam Era Dependents Education Assistance (Chapter 35).

Discussion Draft - In-State Tuition

TAPS is excited to see an expansion of In-State Tuition as a priority for the committee. While all Fry Scholarship recipients currently receive in-state tuition, thanks to the Choice Act, TAPS recommends the inclusion of Chapter 35 recipients.

Chapter 35 recipients are often forgotten from legislation. The \$200 increase provided by the Forever GI Bill, is still not comparable with the Montgomery GI Bill. If we are going to provide in-state tuition across the board, we should include survivors whose benefits are not enough to cover tuition at a state school. Since the financial burden for in-state tuition falls on individual states, this should be an easy fix for the committee.

Discussion Draft - Transition Assistance

Military-to-Civilian transition is a psychological and cultural evolution that requires a new definition of wellness as service members shift from a collectivist community into an individualistic one. VA research indicates that veterans who are engaged in care are far less likely to die by suicide. Such support increases the likelihood of a positive transition into civilian life and is a significant protective factor which reduces potential risks for serious issues facing this population, such as suicide. Conversely, 14 of the 20 veterans who die by suicide each day are not engaged in VA care.

Given the high stakes of helping our nation's service members make a successful transition, TAPS is grateful to see such effort put into overhauling the Transition Assistance Program. Our team of suicide prevention and postvention subject matter experts is available to support strategic planning efforts as the TAP program is re-envisioned. While many key aspects were updated by the 2019 NDAA, there is still much work to do. TAPS supported the *Navy Seal Chief Petty Officer Bill Mulder Transition Improvement Act* last year, and we look forward to seeing it pass this year.

Discussion Draft - Definition of dependents

TAPS supports the draft text to make sure the definition of "dependents" is the same for the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). At TAPS, we know that not all family is blood related and applaud the committee for including this definition.

Discussion Draft - 4th Administration, VETOPP Act

TAPS continues to support the creation of a 4th Administration under the Department of Veterans Affairs. We understand and respect that VA has concerns about this issue. TAPS agrees with our partner organizations, Student Veterans of America and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, that it is imperative that Economic Opportunity have its own under secretary.

Responsibilities of this new division at VA would include the administration of housing loan guaranty and related programs, vocational rehabilitation and employment (VR&E), education assistance programs, and transition programs.

At present, these programs are buried within the bureaucracy of VA and lack a true champion at the level of leadership these programs warrant. Over the past century, VA has evolved to focus on compensating veterans for loss. Yet realities and advances of the 21st century and beyond demands the additional goal of empowering veterans to excel post-service. Importantly, this will also advance our nation's goals of enhancing economic competitiveness by focusing on veteran contributions to be future economy, it is imperative we afford VA the opportunity to enrich the lives of veterans through the primacy of VA's economic opportunity programs.

The implementation of the Forever GI Bill last year highlighted many concerns. With the passage of the VETOPP Act, the VA may be better prepared for other improvements to EO programs and allow these important programs to be a priority for the VA.

TAPS thanks the committee and the original sponsors of all this important legislation. We greatly appreciate your thoughtful consideration of the needs of our nation's veterans and surviving families.

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.