



Gold Star Wives of America, Inc

**Statement of Barbara Burt on behalf of
Gold Star Wives of America, Inc.
Before the
Committees on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.
February 24, 2026**

Chairman Bost, Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Takano, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished Members of the Committees,

My name is Barbara Burt. I appear today on behalf of Gold Star Wives of America, Inc., representing the widows and widowers across this nation who have lost their spouses due to their military service. Gold Star Wives of America, Inc., was established in 1945 to advocate for policies and financial assistance that provide support for improved quality of life for military survivors and their children due to their military service member's death. We have been advocating for such families for 80 years and are continuing to do so today.

My family and I are a part of the Gold Star Wives of America, Inc. organization. I am the widow of Robert Burt Jr., who served in the United States Army with the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam. Bob continued his service in the Army Reserve, and later served full-time as a recruiter for the Kansas Army National Guard. Bob's PTSD was apparent immediately upon leaving the service. He struggled with life in public settings. He held 13 jobs in 13 years and we moved many times in those years. In 1989 I bought our home and started a Residential Program for severely disabled children and adults. And we agreed that Bob would work at home. We had established our home to be a place of peace and healing and it became that for Bob. He thrived there. He healed. Family life became easier and more stable. He had a good life, filled with our children,

grandchildren and great grandchildren, as well as our residents, he made friends and we traveled. That easier, more stable life lasted for 30 years and then the hidden damage from Agent Orange showed up. In July 2019 the VA diagnosed Bob with Multiple System Atrophy (MSA) which is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder that affects both the central nervous system (which controls how a person moves), and the autonomic nervous system, which controls involuntary functions such as blood pressure, respiration, speech etc. Within 2 years, MSA robbed him of everything including his life. From the age of 19 his life was affected by Vietnam, as was our family's. Bob's service became the guiding factor of our lives. After Bob's death I became trapped in my grief. Gold Star Wives of America, Inc. became my redemption and my restoration.

Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) was created to provide financial stability to the family that is left behind. It is intended to prevent economic collapse after such a significant loss. It is also intended – as the word “indemnity” suggests – as a reminder that the loss of a loved one due to service to the country is permanent, with compensation for that loss attached to the grieving spouse and children in loving memory and tribute.

As a new member of GSW I have been awestruck by the reality of who these wives and husbands are. Many are women who gave up everything to serve as the caretakers of their husbands. They gave up any thought of what they wanted or needed for themselves in order to pick up the pieces of their family's lives. They strived to meet every need whether it was medical, emotional or financial with no guarantee of a future. When their spouse returned broken in body, spirit or in a flag draped casket, they walked head first into a lifetime of long days of caretaking, loss and economic devastation, without hesitation. Military wives and husbands stepped up for a country who did not always step up for them.

Gold Star Wives of America, Inc. has advocated for over 30 years to update the inadequate amount of DIC. But these efforts have not yet resulted in change. The amount has only risen due to Cost of Living Increases and, while appreciated, DIC remains far below the meaningful replacement income that Federal and military retirees enjoy. We hear that it will cost too much. I wonder if that is exactly why it is so easy to ignore the reality of what daily life is for a military survivor. I watch Gold Star Wives grieve their spouses while facing days of less than necessary heat, food, housing and

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personal needs. And yet they still step up, for each other, for the Veteran and Military Communities and for their local communities. Selfless, brave women who validated my grief while showing me that purpose can be found through loss. As the Bible says, there can be “beauty from ashes.”

Currently, most surviving spouses live on approximately one thousand six hundred ninety-nine dollars and thirty-six cents per month from DIC. If they are lucky, they may have some Social Security to augment this. Not all do. The DIC number does not represent meaningful stability. It represents choices and consequences. It represents choosing between heat or cooling and medicine, between groceries and gasoline to reach a doctor’s appointment, postponing dental care, and stretching meals farther than anyone should have to.

Many of our members left careers, reduced work hours or worked in jobs that had flexible hours to serve as full-time caregivers to their disabled veteran spouses. That interruption affected lifetime earnings, retirement savings, and Social Security benefits long after the caregiving ends. For most, DIC is not supplemental income. It is foundational.

This financial strain has resulted for many members in the loss of long-held family homes, a move into shared housing or transient living arrangements. These outcomes are not the result of mismanagement, but of fixed benefits not meaningfully replacing a portion of the income our spouses received prior to their deaths.

Members of the Veterans’ Affairs Committees, you have the ability to help us. I am here to suggest how you might help us by soliciting your support for bills pending before this Congress. Today, I will focus primarily on H.R. 2055 and H.R. 6047, but I will also offer comments regarding H.R. 1685 and H.R. 2264, which reflects issues we anticipate formally adding to our agenda in the coming year.

First, H.R. 6047, the Sharri Briley and Eric Edmundson Veterans Benefits Expansion Act, would provide a modest but meaningful increase of 1 percent above COLA for the first year and 0.50 percent the second year. We respectfully urge support for that increase. But this increase should be viewed as progress not completion. We also strongly support the provision increasing compensation for catastrophically disabled veterans. I want to thank Chairman Bost and the members of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee for moving this legislation out of Committee two weeks ago. It was

an important and symbolic first step. I am confident that Republicans and Democrats will, as they always have in the past, find common ground on a solution to get this bill to the President's desk this year.

Members, enactment of H.R. 6047 is but a downpayment -- as Chairman Bost stated at the House markup two weeks ago. Our goal remains enactment of H.R. 2055, the Caring for Survivors Act. Currently, DIC benefits replace only 43% of a 100% service-connected veteran's disability income upon their passing. The Caring for Survivors Act would increase DIC benefits to reflect the same percentage of replacement income -- 55% -- that surviving spouses of other Federal retirees, both civilian and military, receive. This bill being signed into law is not only a matter of fairness for spouses however, it is also a matter of survival for many Gold Star wives and husbands who are struggling to make ends meet.

Turning to H.R. 1685, the Justice for ALS Veterans Act, legislation that highlights the fact that eligibility standards must reflect medical reality. ALS typically carries a life expectancy of two to five years after diagnosis. When policy for entitlement to DIC requires eight years of total disability in the face of that reality, the result is structural exclusion.

I now turn to S. 410 and H.R. 1004, the "Love Lives On Act." The Love Lives On Act affirms our nation's responsibility to stand with Gold Star Wives and Husbands beyond their moment of loss. It asserts that honoring service must emphatically include honoring those who constantly endure life with the rigors of its sacrifices, along with its lasting associated costs. Chairman Moran, thank you sir for championing this bill in the Senate. And thank you to the many members of the committees on Veterans' Affairs and beyond who have signed on in support for both the Senate and the House bills.

Finally, Gold Star Wives of America, Inc. supports H.R. 2264, the Service-Connected Suicide Compensation Act. The goal of this bill is simple. It would presume in law for purposes of compensation benefits that a death by suicide of a veteran with a service-related mental health condition is service-connected as well. Members of the Committee, nearly four years ago you eased the burden on veterans seeking to prove their disabilities & diseases were related to various military exposures with enactment of the PACT Act. H.R. 2264 follows that same logic. Rather than battling the VA to prove

our loved one's death was related to military service, H.R. 2264 reasonably shifts that burden of proof to the benefit of the wives, husbands and families.

Recognition must endure.

Stability must strengthen.

And sacrifice must not be discounted.

Members of the Committee, we urge your favorable consideration of all of these bills. While our Veterans service ended in uniform, our responsibility to carry forward their legacy and to navigate the long-term consequences of that service did not. I thank you for your attention to my testimony on behalf of our Military Survivors and families who gave to this nation our ultimate sacrifice, that of our loved ones. We ask that you keep them in your thoughts as you deliberate and legislate on these important bills.

Again, thank you for providing Gold Star Wives of America, Inc. with the opportunity to testify today.

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