



**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

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

**TOXIC EXPOSURE: EXAMINING THE VA'S PRESUMPTIVE  
DISABILITY DECISION-MAKING PROCESS**

**SEPTEMBER 25, 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](http://TAPS.org).

TAPS receives no government grants or funding.

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester and distinguished members of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, 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.

### ***Understanding Illnesses that May Result from Toxic Exposure***

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, veterans who served after 9/11 may have been exposed to a dozen different wide-ranging environmental and chemical hazards, some of which carry very real risks. Whether from burn pits, depleted uranium, or toxic fragments, they are getting sick and dying young from uncommon illnesses and early onset disease.

The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) interest in understanding illnesses that may result from toxic exposure stems from our desire to ensure surviving families have access to all available survivor benefits earned through the service of their loved one. The information that can be gathered from our survivor histories is also invaluable in establishing patterns and baselines that can be applied to the veteran community, save lives, and prevent this now and in the future.

Over the past five years, survivors of a military death due to illness seeking TAPS services increased by 51.37 percent. In 2018, more than 26 percent of

family members who came to TAPS had experienced a loss due to illness. This is second only to suicide, at nearly 31 percent, and far surpasses all other circumstances of death, including hostile action.

Since 2017, TAPS and Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) have been privileged to partner with the Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) to advocate for warriors suffering from illnesses caused by toxic exposure and surviving family members whose loved one died after experiencing symptoms of that exposure.

TAPS and other partners are working together to share lessons learned, gather data, and advocate for Post 9/11 veterans, their families, and survivors. Through this partnership, we have made great strides over the past two years to create a growing awareness of the issue of toxic exposure by enlisting support from other organizations, such as members of The Military Coalition (TMC).

TAPS is also a founding member of a new veteran and military toxic exposure working group called the Toxic Exposure in the American Military (TEAM) coalition. The TEAM coalition includes 15 Veteran Service Organizations (VSO) and Military Service Organizations (MSO) all addressing toxic exposure issues.

### ***Illness Loss Survivor Testimonials***

Since 2008, TAPS has been contacted by over 11,000 surviving family members whose loved ones died due to illness. While we know there's a significant number of veterans who die of common illnesses, we have become deeply concerned that like the Vietnam era, post 9/11 veterans have been exposed to toxins that are known to cause cancer. TAPS is working to gather survivor stories and aggregate data to better understand the scope and types of illness loss.

Here are a few of the many stories we have collected from our surviving families:

#### **Coleen Bowman, Widow of SGM Robert Bowman**

"In June 2011 after two deployments, Rob was diagnosed with an extremely rare cancer Cholangiocarcinoma (bile duct cancer). During deployments, Rob was in close proximity to an open air burn pit that burned around the clock. His vehicle was struck at least 10 times by IEDs. Rob passed away on January 13, 2013 at the age of 44. Several of the men that Rob served with have many different illnesses, to include cancer, and several have passed away since at very young ages."

#### **Robyn Thompson, Widow of LTC Todd Thomson**

"His cancer was far advanced, and was spreading rapidly, and genetic testing indicated it was one of the rarest forms of colon cancer diagnosed in our country."

**Kris Marbutt, Widow of Sgt John Marbutt**

"He worked very closely to the burn pits. In 2010 he was diagnosed with a brain tumor and told it was benign. He was initially denied a CT scan. He was diagnosed with a second 'huge tumor' glioblastoma. He died on October 21, 2016, he was 34 years old."

**Jennifer Moser, Widow of LTC Gregory Moser**

"In June, 2016 he was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer (alk mutation, a non smokers lung cancer). His doctor signed a letter stating that his cancer was likely due to toxic exposure."

**Laura Forshey, Widow of Sgt Curtis Forshey**

"Three months into his deployment, he began to experience bloody noses that would go on for hours at a time. He went to the doctor there on the FOB where they ran bloodwork. The results showed his white blood count was way off. They flew him to Landstuhl, Germany. His wife, Laura, and their 3 month-old son Ben, along with Curtis parents flew to be with him in Germany. While they were in flight, Curt passed away. His cause of death was a brain aneurysm, caused from the cancer they discovered. Acute Promyelocytic Leukemia. Curt was 22 years old. He died on March 27, 2007. With proper diagnosis and treatment it is curable in 80-90% of patients."

**June Heston, Widow of BG Michael Heston**

"Mike was active duty in the Vermont National guard. Mike deployed to Afghanistan three times. First in 2003 for 7 months, then 2006-2008 for 15 months, and last 2011-2012 for one year. In April of 2016 Mike had gone into the doctor not feeling well. For 10 months doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with him. Finally in January of 2017 Mike was diagnosed with a very rare form of pancreatic cancer, stage 4. Mike passed away shortly after that on November 14, 2018."

***Exposure-Related Illnesses***

Sadly, there are millions of service members and veterans who were potentially exposed to burn pits and other toxins while serving, and many will die from

exposure-related illnesses. Their loved ones will make up a large portion of the next generation of TAPS survivors.

While the government has created a self-report registry, they admit it's a flawed and limited system that covers only exposures to burn pits. There are many other instances of exposure that are not tracked, and only a small number of those exposed to burn pits have actually registered. Sadly most young veterans who have died of rare cancers never knew to register.

By the year 2021, TAPS believes that deaths due to illness will surpass all combat deaths, non-combat deaths, accidents, and suicides combined. It's time to take action and learn more about which toxins are causing rare cancers in our young people. Research must be done in and outside of government. We don't have time on our side, we already know a number of toxins our troops were exposed to are carcinogens. We must get that information into the hands of veterans and their medical providers so they can plan for early screening and make connections for accurate diagnosis and effective early treatments.

The Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs are working hard to mine data to match exposures to veterans but we must work harder and faster. The Individual Longitudinal Exposure Record (ILER) may be groundbreaking but we must make sure this critical information will be available to service members, veterans, families and survivors.

### ***What TAPS IS DOING***

In the case of our TAPS families, we must provide answers to our survivors. So many are left wondering how their loved one survived deployments and returned home safely, only to succumb to illnesses years after returning home.

Like we did when we saw increasing trends and deaths by suicide, TAPS is developing a program to specifically address the needs of our survivors who grieve the death of their loved one to an illness. Many are left wondering how their physically fit military member could succumb to such an aggressive and rare illness that ended their life. We must all move forward together.

### ***CONCLUSION***

TAPS believes it is time to legislate funding for research, treatment, education, programs and awareness campaigns so we can save lives. Those who volunteer their lives to protect the freedom of our nation and the families who stand beside

them are ready to know America's priority is to protect and provide for all those who are ready to make the ultimate sacrifice.

The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors thanks the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs and its distinguished members for holding this important hearing on toxic exposure, and providing TAPS the opportunity to submit a statement for the record.