



National Military Family Association, Inc.

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TheVoice
for Military
Families

Statement of

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of the
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The National Military Family Association (NMFA) is the only national organization whose sole focus is the military family and whose goal is to influence the development and implementation of policies that will improve the lives of those family members. Our mission is to serve the families of the seven uniformed services through education, information and advocacy.

Founded in 1969 as the Military Wives Association, NMFA is a non-profit 501(c)(3) primarily volunteer organization. NMFA today represents the interests of family members and the active duty, National Guard, Reserve, and retired personnel of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, Public Health Service, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

NMFA volunteer Representatives in military communities worldwide provide a direct link between military families and NMFA's staff in the nation's capital. Representatives are the "eyes and ears" of NMFA, bringing shared local concerns to national attention.

NMFA receives no federal grants and has no federal contracts.

NMFA's web site is located at <http://www.nmfa.org>.

Deborah Kline Fryar, Deputy Director, Government Relations

Ms. Fryar was hired as Deputy Director of Government Relations for the National Military Family Association (NMFA) in March 2004. In that position, she monitors issues relevant to the quality of life of families of the uniformed services and represents the Association at briefings and other meetings. She began as a volunteer with the Association in 1996 after being appointed as an NMFA Representative for Kaiserslautern, Germany and continued her service in Stuttgart, Germany, and Fort Lewis Washington. She was appointed to the NMFA Professional Development Program Committee (PDP) in May 2002. Ms. Fryar currently serves on the Congressionally-mandated Department of Defense Beneficiary Advisory Panel for the Uniform Formulary, which is a Federal Advisory Panel. She serves on The Military Coalition's Veterans and Health Care Committees. Additionally, she represents military families on the Navy Force Management Oversight Committee (FMOC) Working Group of the Injured Marines and Sailors Program.

A Texas transplant, Ms. Fryar earned a B.S. in Nursing from West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas. She has spent the past sixteen years as a military spouse. One of the most important parts of her life is her active duty husband, Ron, who is also a strong advocate of military families. She has been involved at all levels of family programs to include being a Core Instructor and Master Trainer for Army Family Team Building. Ms. Fryar has been involved in a myriad of other volunteer family programs to include Health Services Auxiliaries at various military hospitals, American Red Cross, Army Family Action Plan (AFAP), Marines' Toys for Tots, Compassionate Ministries, Ladies Ministries and a Military and Uniformed Services Support Group at her church.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Wounded Servicemembers Have Wounded Families

NMFA asserts that behind every wounded servicemember is a wounded family. NMFA believes that support for the wounded/injured in today's conflict must take a more inclusive view of military families. That view cannot include just the spouse and the children.

Who are the Families of Wounded Servicemembers?

In the past, most benefit programs offered by the Department of Defense (DoD) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have regarded a servicemember's family as only his/her spouse and children. Now, however, it is not unusual to see the parents and siblings of a single servicemember presented as part of the servicemember's family unit. Almost 50 percent of the force is single today. As more single servicemembers are wounded, their parents and siblings must take on the task of helping their son, daughter, brother, or sister through the recovery process. To serve all wounded/injured servicemembers, we must also provide support to the parents of single servicemembers and their siblings as well.

Adaptive Housing Assistance

Many families are spending much of their own money to pay for needed housing modifications, often taking out personal loans to pay for these adaptations. NMFA supports an increase to the amount of assistance for specially adapted housing. We also support adaptive housing assistance for disabled veterans residing temporarily in housing owned by a parent or sibling. Additionally NMFA recommends that Congress consider extending the Adaptive Housing Benefit to a multi-use benefit up to the limit provided in law.

Transition to VA

The transition between the DoD and the VA health system can be confusing for servicemembers and their families. Transition time lines and available services extended to wounded servicemembers sometimes vary by Service. NMFA is concerned that servicemembers in the transition to private sector employment continue to face challenges. NMFA supports the establishment of professional qualifications for disabled veterans' outreach program specialists and local veterans' employment representatives.

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of this Subcommittee, the National Military Family Association (NMFA) appreciates your interest in the families of veterans, especially the families of servicemembers who have been disabled and injured. We are grateful to the Subcommittee for this opportunity to express our views concerning the needs of those families and to comment on the proposed legislation under discussion today. NMFA is concerned that servicemembers in the transition to private sector employment continue to face challenges. Of prime importance is the translation of military training skills. We also hear that some employment representatives hired to counsel wounded servicemembers are not experienced. Additionally, families have told us that more needs to be done to help financially during the servicemember's recovery time and transit to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

NMFA appreciates your leadership and sensitivity in addressing the financial requirements and needs for increases in adaptive housing. The proposal to provide adaptive housing assistance for disabled veterans residing temporarily in housing owned by parents or siblings is critical to the families of single servicemembers. Likewise, the proposed increases in the amount of assistance for certain disabled veterans for specially adapted housing would be invaluable in keeping pace with today's increased construction costs, and would help alleviate some of the expenses that are often incurred by the families of wounded single servicemembers. Your insight to increases in adaptive housing and awareness of the need to hire professional individuals who are qualified to work as local veterans' employment representatives will go a long way in assisting wounded servicemembers in coming years.

Since the beginning of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), there have been 13,189 U.S. servicemembers Wounded in Action (WIA) (Washington Headquarters Service Defense Manpower Data Center, Statistical Information Analysis Division, June 30, 2005). That number increases almost daily. Of the total number of servicemembers wounded to date, 61.5 percent have been E-4 and below and almost 50 percent are under the age of 25. The force that is being wounded/injured today is a young force. In recent Congressional testimony, Major Tammy Duckworth, a wounded servicemember, stated *"...as I look around at the other wounded Soldiers, it is clear that the majority of them are young with long lives ahead of them. Whether we will continue to have the honor of serving in uniform, or return to productive civilian lives, we will require continued access to high quality VA services as we age. The VA will need to support this need over the long term as currently wounded Soldiers will be accessing its programs over a lifetime"* NMFA believes that it is imperative that a comprehensive system be in place not just to support wounded and injured veterans but also their families over the long term.

In this statement, NMFA will address issues related to families of servicemembers in the following subject areas:

- Wounded Servicemembers Have Wounded Families
- Who Are the Families of Wounded Servicemembers?
- Adaptive Housing Assistance
- Transition to VA

Wounded Servicemembers Have Wounded Families

NMFA asserts that behind every wounded servicemember is a wounded family. Spouses, children, parents, and siblings of servicemembers injured defending our country experience many uncertainties. Fear of the unknown and what lies ahead in the weeks, months, and even years, weighs heavily on their minds. Other concerns include the injured servicemember's return and reunion with their family, financial stresses, and navigating the transition process to the VA. It is NMFA's belief that, when designing support for the wounded/injured in today's conflict, the government, especially the VA, must take a more inclusive view of military families. That view cannot include just the spouse and the children. To serve all wounded/injured servicemembers, we must also provide support to the parents of single servicemembers and their siblings as well.

Who are the Families of Wounded Servicemembers?

In the past, the VA and the Department of Defense (DoD) have generally focused their benefit packages for a servicemember's family on his/her spouse and children. Now, however, it is not unusual to see the parents and siblings of a single servicemember presented as part of the servicemember's family unit. In both the active and reserve components, almost 50 percent of the force is single. Having an injured or wounded servicemember is new territory for family units. Regardless if the servicemember is married or single, their families will be affected in some way by the injury. As more single servicemembers are wounded, more parents and siblings must take on the task of helping their son, daughter, brother, or sister, through the recovery process. Most parents and siblings are thankful their servicemember survived and for the outstanding medical care their servicemember is receiving; however, the burden of care can be overwhelming.

Military units and family readiness groups have been forced to communicate with parents during deployments because parents expect to be included in information about their deployed children. When that single servicemember is injured, the parent(s) are taking time off their jobs or even quitting their jobs to travel to Walter Reed Army Medical Center or the National Naval Medical Center at Bethesda to be with and care for their child. They are the ones driving the servicemember to therapy, learning how to care for their wounds, and watching for signs of physical setbacks or some sort of mental illness during the recovery. Because the severely injured single servicemember cannot be on their own, there is only one place they can go when they leave the hospital: back to Mom and Dad. NMFA has heard of some married servicemembers, their spouses and small children going back to live with their parents for a short time following their hospitalization. The proposed bill this Subcommittee is reviewing to expand the support for adaptive housing to parents of these servicemembers recognizes the role parents are assuming as caregivers for our severely injured heroes, especially in the period immediately after their release from the hospitals.

Adaptive Housing Assistance

When wounded servicemembers go home to recuperate in the homes of their parents and siblings, their families are spending much of their own money to pay for needed modifications, often taking out personal loans to pay for necessary housing adaptations. Whether installing wheelchair ramps, adapting bathrooms with handicap

accessories, redoing floors, widening doors and hallways, installing handrails and specialized Braille products, or hiring electricians and plumbers, the costs for making these adaptations is expensive for these families. Caring for the injured/wounded in their homes during their recovery time, these families forgo their own lives for the needs of their wounded child or sibling.

Immediate and long term financial pressures affect the family of every wounded/injured servicemember. The initial hospitalization and recovery period often requires the servicemembers' family to leave work for an extended period of time in order to be with their loved one, thus potentially losing a source of income and incurring tremendous travel expenses, child care costs and other unexpected living expenses. The added home renovation/construction costs often are necessary at a time when the family can least afford these expenses. Faced with the imminent arrival of the servicemember home from the hospital, families feel they must make the renovations—regardless of their ability to pay—in order to ease the recovery of their child. One injured servicemember's parents, who had to abandon their jobs to care for their wounded son, voiced a concern that they didn't know how families who depended on two incomes could quit their jobs to take care of their disabled son or daughter. Another servicemember's parents said he and his wife are pleased with the medical care their son received, but the military needs to take a look at the assistance provided to parents of wounded servicemembers. The increased financial burden placed on families of wounded servicemembers to pay out of pocket for housing adaptations requires immediate attention.

NMFA supports an increase to the amount of assistance to specially adapted housing. We also support adaptive housing assistance for disabled veterans residing temporarily in housing owned by a parent or sibling.

Currently, severely disabled servicemembers are eligible for a one time only use Adaptive Housing through the VA. While this is a noteworthy benefit, the problem is that the modification is a "one-time" use benefit and funds not used initially cannot be reserved for use at a later time. NMFA would like to see the benefit be converted to a multi-use benefit where the balance could be carried over. Since many of the severely injured troops return to their parents' homes before subsequently moving to their own homes, they would benefit from the opportunity to carry over any unused portion of the allowance.

NMFA recommends that Congress consider extending the Adaptive Housing Benefit to a multi-use benefit up to the limit provided in law.

Transition to the VA

The transition between the DoD and the VA health system can be confusing for servicemembers and their families. Transition time lines and available services extended to wounded servicemembers sometimes vary by Service. The DoD and each military Service have developed unique programs for treating seriously injured servicemembers: the Army Disabled Soldier Support System (DS3), the Marine For Life (M4L), the Navy Sea Warrior/ Safe Harbor, the Air Force Palace HART, and the DoD Military Severely Injured Center. These programs have each made progress in the delivery of information and

support services for the injured and their families. NMFA thanks the Services and the DoD for their efforts to provide support to injured servicemembers and their families and hopes they will continue their joint efforts. We continue to ask that the role of the DoD and the VA be clearly explained and delineated and joint efforts between all the Services and the VA in support of the servicemember and family continue to be the priority.

We would ask that the DoD, VA, and Department of Labor continue joint efforts in placing wounded servicemembers and their spouses in proper jobs. As mentioned earlier, translation of military training skills into everyday job terms is an important part of helping disabled veterans placed in comparable jobs that utilize their skills. To help ensure that servicemembers are being serviced by highly trained employment counselors who understand the issues involved in properly placing disabled veterans, **NMFA supports the establishment of professional qualifications for disabled veterans' outreach program specialists and local veterans' employment representatives.**

Invisible Wounds

NMFA also realizes that visible wounds are not the only injuries affecting military families. Many servicemembers will return with psychological injuries manifesting as anxiety, mood disorders, depression, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Wounded servicemembers are at higher risk of developing PTSD or psychological or emotional problems. Over time, some servicemembers may be predisposed to alcoholism and drug abuse, unemployment, homelessness and suicide. While these psychological injuries are inflicted by the hazards and trauma of being in a combat environment, the unfortunate reality is that the stigma of having mental health injuries causes many individuals to suffer silently. Psychological disorders can make the transition from military to civilian life a harrowing one and in the process, families can become collateral damage. NMFA asks DoD, the VA, and Congress to remain vigilant regarding mental health issues affecting returning servicemembers and their families.

Because “wounded servicemembers have wounded families,” NMFA recommends the following to support wounded and injured servicemembers and their families:

- Include parents in the definition of family when discussing the support needs of servicemembers;
- Increase the amount of money available for adaptive housing;
- Provide adaptive housing assistance to disabled veterans residing temporarily in housing owned by a parent or sibling;
- Establish professional qualifications for disabled veterans' outreach program specialists and local veterans' employment representatives;
- Encourage continued coordination efforts between the military Services, OSD, and the VA in support of the wounded servicemember and family;
- Continue awareness of mental health issues affecting returning servicemembers.

Mr. Chairman, NMFA appreciates the opportunity to raise awareness of issues affecting wounded servicemembers' families. We are thankful for your leadership and

sensitivity in addressing the financial requirements and needs for increases in adaptive housing and assistance for disabled veterans residing temporarily in housing owned by parents or siblings. Your willingness to address the need to hire professional individuals who are qualified to work as local veterans' employment representatives will go a long way in assisting wounded servicemembers for an extended time.