

Prepared Statement
of
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Vice Chief of Naval Operations
Before the
Senate Armed Services Committee
“Survivor Benefits and Entitlements”
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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Senator Levin, members of this distinguished Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the ongoing support and assistance we provide our surviving family members and the care provided for our severely injured Sailors. Providing this support and care to our Sailors and their families is a Navy priority and each case is handled individually by a trained professional.

Navy Casualty Assistance

These deliberations today are both important and serious. We go to great lengths to recruit and train our service members and to welcome them and their families into the great tradition and heritage of the United States Navy. Members of the armed forces may give their life while serving our country in the line of duty. When a Sailor dies, our sole mission is to render prompt and compassionate assistance to help reduce the suffering of the service member's family. We have a casualty assistance network available 24/7, a group of highly dedicated and trained professionals that notify the next of kin as fast as possible and then remain with them during the weeks ahead. These Casualty Assistance Calls Officers (CACO), who are customarily accompanied by a Navy chaplain, make all notifications in person. The Navy's highly effective program is staffed by specially selected senior enlisted and officers who are well suited to effectively perform this difficult task.

The CACO's full time responsibility is to support the family. The CACO will assist with funeral preparations; travel to and from a burial site; and attend the burial service. The CACO assists the family with various claims to obtain their benefits and entitlements as well as any

relocation desires. Supporting the CACO are Regional Casualty Coordinators and headquarters personnel who personally supervise each case to ensure that all families are accorded the highest level of attention and assistance. As you might imagine, the needs of individual families vary dramatically but the assigned CACO attempts to anticipate and react expeditiously to any issue or concern that may arise. This is a well-executed program and I am proud of our CACOs and their selfless devotion to Navy families.

Survivor Benefits and Entitlements

As I mentioned, the CACO assists each family in obtaining the full financial support to which they are entitled. Navy centrally manages the processing of all death benefits and entitlements. Certification proceeds at a good pace. A Death Gratuity payment is made to the designated beneficiary as soon as possible following notification of the member's death. Accrued unpaid pays and allowances owed to the member, to include any unused leave, reenlistment bonus installments, uniform allowances, etc., are generally paid within 7 to 10 days. Payment of Servicemember Group Life Insurance (SGLI) generally occurs within 7 to 10 days. Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) is generally paid within thirty days. Payment of Dependency Indemnity Compensation (DIC) from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is paid within 6-8 weeks and the Survivor Benefit Plan annuities are also paid within 6-8 weeks. I want to add that Navy truly appreciates the strategic partnerships formed with the VA and Social Security Administration (SSA) to expedite benefits processing, partnerships that have streamlined submissions and greatly increased processing efficiencies. I would like to mention that there are times, however, when this process is temporarily – and consciously – halted in order to protect the interests of a family member. For example, in the case of a minor child named as a beneficiary; we must wait until a legal guardian is appointed before making payment.

These cases are not systemic problems but systemic protections for the individual receiving benefits.

The Navy also counsels and encourages our surviving family members to utilize the financial counseling offered by the Office of Servicemembers Group Life Insurance as well as grief counseling offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs, both of which have proven reliable and available free of charge.

Medical Care and Support of Our Critically Injured

The Navy also has a coordinated and tailored response for the men and women of our armed forces returning from Iraq, Afghanistan, and other areas of conflict with severe debilitating injuries. These service members and their families are faced with very difficult long-term challenges. The Navy and Marine Corps team provides a strong coordinated and unified approach to assist them and their families to recover and reintegrate.

Our patients and their families deserve excellent health care. Severely wounded Sailors and Marines are almost always transferred from overseas to National Naval Medical Center (NNMC) in Bethesda for care. NNMC representatives meet with all incoming medevac patients and family members upon their arrival. Patients are admitted and surgical and/or medical teams make further medical assessments and establish the best course of treatment.

Planning for post-hospital care begins almost immediately upon arrival at Bethesda. Because family support is essential to the recovery of injured service members, the Navy takes full advantage of all resources afforded to them and maximizes these in developing the most appropriate care plan for their recovery and rehabilitation. Depending on the specific needs of the Sailor and Marine, their care plans could include care at another Military Treatment Facility, a Veterans' Medical Center, or in some cases a specialized civilian facility.

Some examples of our integrated health care delivery team include the coordination between the NNMC Social Work and Case Management Departments, counselors from the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Marine Corps Liaison Office – all located on the Bethesda campus. Representatives from these organizations interact with patients and family members throughout the course of treatment. They serve as educators for their respective programs and advocates for the needs of the patient and their families.

Our goal is for every patient to return to active duty. Some of those who are injured, and placed in a limited duty status, go on to receive specialized care only available through the Department of Veterans Affairs. These service members remain on Active Duty and are closely monitored by Navy Medicine. Other Sailors or Marines, who have fully recovered, but sustained permanent injuries, may seek waiver status to remain on active duty, and receive their care at Military Treatment Facilities. Regrettably, some service members have sustained injuries that will prevent them from remaining on active duty. In these cases, the patient and their families are supported to the fullest extent possible as they transition to veteran's status under the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Conclusion

Chairman Warner, I thank you and the members of this committee for your continued support and the opportunity to appear before the full committee today. All of us serving in the armed forces are thankful for your attention to this important matter.