

Good morning Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee for Benefits. I am Rose Lee representing Gold Star Wives. I have been a past President and Chairman and a member of Gold Star Wives since 1972. Gold Star Wives of America, Inc., is a Congressionally chartered service organization comprised of surviving spouses of military service members who died while on active duty or as a result of a service-connected disability. Many of our membership of over 13,000 are the widows of service members who were killed in combat during World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

We thank the Subcommittee for inviting Gold Star Wives to give oral testimony before you today. As you are aware, our needs and especially those of active-duty widows are not always apparent to other veterans' service organizations, however helpful and supportive they have been over the years. H.R. 801 is a very good starting point for improving programs that would have an impact on the lives of our members. Expanding the definition of "eligible dependent" for VA outreach services, improving educational assistance, increasing burial assistance, and expanding the coverage for Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance programs all are worthy goals and we support this bill.

We are very pleased to see that the Subcommittee has seen fit to make the necessary statutory changes to make it clear that the Secretary for Veterans' Affairs has a duty to ensure that surviving spouses are provided with the information concerning all of the benefits and health care services administered by the Secretary. While it is not clear under the current law that the widows of those servicemen who gave their lives for their country were to be served by the Secretary in his outreach programs, this legislation should correct any such misunderstanding. Gold Star Wives has had significant experience in undertaking such outreach on its own and now is pleased that it could have a true partner in ensuring that widows are informed of their rightful benefits.

Gold Star Wives would like to offer a special word of thanks to Veterans Affairs Undersecretary for Benefits Joe Thompson and his staff, especially staff members Diane Fuller and Lynda Petty. Their outreach efforts to Gold Star Wives over the years has been exemplary. They have provided our organization with much needed information concerning benefit inquiries that our organization gets almost on a daily basis. They have always been there for us and their assistance has been exceptional.

The recent reinstatement of D.I.C. benefits for those widows of servicemembers whose remarriage has ended has been of special interest for our outreach efforts. These are women whose husbands may have been killed

in World War II, Korea or Vietnam and who remarried. Many of those remarriages have ended and those women have had no contact with the VA and are unaware that they may be eligible for D.I.C reinstatement. Consequently, members of Gold Star Wives wrote to Dear Abby and Dear Ann Landers to have them inform those widows of the new D.I.C. eligibility. We at Gold Star Wives were overwhelmed by the response. We received thousands of letters of inquiry and heartfelt thanks for the information.

Consequently, that portion of H.R. 801 calling for the requisite statutory language directing the Secretary to use a variety of means in an outreach program is especially vital. Outreach services for separating servicemen and veterans who may be contacting the VA should be routine and accomplished with a minimum of problems in targeting those groups. H.R. 801's new statutory language incorporating language from Congressman Doyle's bill making that first point of contact with the VA the springboard for outreach services is laudable. But, reaching those who may be eligible for programs who may not have a need to contact the VA requires the use of all forms of the media, the internet and veterans publications. We would hope that the Secretary's public affairs office makes full use of these resources in any outreach program it may devise. Getting out the word on who may be eligible for VA benefits should include an active program of public service announcements and advertisements that run during regular media watching

and listening hours. Even one appearance on a television program like Oprah by the Secretary would go a long way in reaching those widows who may not even know they are eligible for VA assistance. VA programs can make a significant difference in the lives of a senior widow and just finding out about them is the first step.

Gold Star Wives again wants to commend Committee Chairman Smith and you, Mr. Chairman for the provisions in H.R. 801 that expand the VA educational benefits to include the independent study courses in the certificate programs at institutions of higher learning. We also want to express our gratitude for the portion of H.R. 801 that expands restorative training to disabled spouses or surviving spouses. These are significant benefits in helping to allow spouses to take advantage of educational opportunities in this new era of education. As you well know, education is a lifetime process. These programs allow for the new expansion of education through the media and over the Internet. It is vital that we keep up VA assistance in this changing educational environment.

Still, I want to make it clear that any expansion of the Montgomery G.I. Bill should also include the same provisions in Chapter 35 for survivors. It is our understanding that this is the case, but we want reassurance for the record that it is the legislative intent of the Subcommittee to include survivors in the

provisions of this bill expanding or increasing any Montgomery G.I. Bill benefits.

Gold Star Wives also supports the increase in the burial and funeral allowance from \$1500 to \$2000 for veterans whose deaths are service connected, and from \$300 to \$500 for veterans with non-service connected deaths, and the increase for burial plot allowance from \$150 to \$300. This is helpful for the surviving family members at a time of great need and with the rapidly growing death rate among veterans it makes sense. The amount payable for these benefits has hardly kept up with inflation and the purchasing power of these provisions does remain very limited. This represents a starting point for future improvements.

The increase in family coverage under the Servicemen Group Life Insurance benefits is also very significant. These increases reflect the needs of a family at the time of the death of a family member. Again, these increases are limited and represent a starting point for future improvements.

Thank you for inviting Gold Star Wives to appear before you today and present our views on H.R. 801.