

Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton
Testimony on Extending FMLA Coverage to Military Families before the House
Committee on Education and Labor Subcommittee on Workforce Protections
September 18, 2007

I want to thank Congresswoman Woolsey for holding this hearing and to all our witnesses for their testimony today.

We have a duty to honor our veterans, service members, and their families – something I take very seriously as a Senator, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and an American. It is a duty that cuts across party lines and cuts to the heart of our values as a nation.

I have met with so many veterans and service members who have told me about the difficult and dangerous situations they faced on the battlefield. All too often, they have returned home only to face new battles just to get the treatment and care they need and deserve: enduring deplorable conditions at Walter Reed; navigating a maze of bureaucracy to receive disability benefits; visiting VA Hospitals in need of guaranteed funding; struggling to re-enter civilian life.

In July, the bipartisan Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors – chaired by former Senator Bob Dole and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala -- issued its final report on the need to reform the medical care our troops and veterans receive.

The Commission visited 23 treatment facilities run by the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the private-sector. Literally thousands of service members, veterans, family members, and health care personnel submitted their personal stories as well.

Based on its review, the commission recommended that one important way in which our nation can strengthen the help we provide injured service members is by improving and expanding support for military families through the Family and Medical Leave Act. That is why I am proud to partner with my friend Chris Dodd in championing the “*Support for Injured Servicemembers Act of 2007*,” which implements this key recommendation of the commission’s report.

We have introduced this legislation as a stand-alone bill, and we successfully passed our amendment through the Senate as part of the Children’s Health Insurance Program legislation. We’ve also introduced our measure as an amendment to the Senate’s Defense Authorization legislation. And we have received substantial bipartisan support, including from Senators Dole, Graham, Mikulski, Chambliss, Brown, Cardin, Menendez, Salazar, Kennedy, Reed, Boxer, Murray, Lieberman, and Roberts.

The Family and Medical Leave Act was the first bill signed into law during the Clinton Administration. It has helped more than 60 million men and women trying to balance the demands of work and family. I believe it is time to strengthen that Act for military families. Our legislation provides up to six months of job-protected leave for spouses, children, parents or next of kin of service members who suffer from a combat-related injury or illness.

The families of service men and women face extraordinary demands in caring for loved ones injured in service to our nation. And currently, these spouses, parents and children can receive only twelve weeks of leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act. As the Dole-Shalala Commission found, all too often, this is just not enough time – as injured service members grapple with traumatic brain injuries, severe physical wounds, and other problems upon returning home from Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

In fact, 33 percent of active duty, 22 percent of reservists, and 37 percent of retired service members reported to the Commission that a family member or close friend had to leave their homes for extended periods of time to help them in the hospital. About 20 percent said friends or family gave up a job to be with them or act as their caregiver.

Imagine: your husband or wife, son or daughter, returns from Iraq with an serious injury. You want to be with them and take care of them. Right now, you have to choose between the person you love and the job you need. That's not a choice military families should have to make. If you are injured in service to this country, we should not add insult to injury by failing to do everything we can to help you when you get home.

These men and women took on great risk and sacrifice to protect our nation. Doing right by them and their families is not a Democratic issue or a Republican issue. It is a matter of America's values and moral responsibility.

This is a step we can take immediately that will make a real difference. Our men and women in uniform have made tremendous sacrifices on our behalf. As a nation and as citizens we have a duty in return. Thank you.