

June 7, 2024

The Honorable Jack Reed
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roger Wicker
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Rogers
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Adam Smith
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jon Tester
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jerry Moran
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Bost
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mark Takano
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senators Reed, Wicker, Tester and Moran and Representatives Rogers, Smith, Bost and Takano,

The undersigned Military and Veterans Service Organizations respectfully request Congress pass legislation to establish a standard definition in statute for Gold Star as it relates to families of service members and veterans who have “died while serving or from a service-connected injury or illness.”

An inclusive definition of Gold Star would recognize that the “Casualties of War” include those service members killed in action, those who die from visible and invisible wounds, those who die by suicide or from their exposure to deadly toxins as a result of their service, and all those who have “died while serving or from a service-connected injury or illness.” Approximately 3 million bereaved military or veteran family members would be impacted by this legislation.

There is currently no legal definition of Gold Star in statute, but there are over 30 references to Gold Star Families in statute varying from “killed by hostile action” to “died in the line of duty” to the preferred definition, “died while serving or from a service-connected injury or illness.”

Failure to have a legal, consistent definition causes challenges for lawmakers when writing legislation impacting Gold Star Families. Legislators often use language that is narrow and unintentionally excludes survivors. Creating a consistent, legal definition will ensure future legislative proposals improve benefits for ALL surviving families.

EXAMPLES OF EXISTING DEFINITIONS:

Gold Star Wives of America, Inc. (1945) – “Died while serving on active duty or from a service-connected disability”

American Gold Star Mothers (1928) – “Became missing in action, died while on active duty, or as a result of such service”

Gold Star Families Remembrance Week (2016) – “Died while serving or from a service-connected injury or illness”

Gold Star Children’s Day (2021) – “Children of fallen service members”

Gold Star Spouses Day (2010) – “Died while serving on active duty or from a service-connected disability”

Gold Star Mothers Day (1936) – “Losing a son or daughter who served in the Armed Forces”

Gold Star Family Fellowship (2023) – “Died while serving or from a service-connected injury or illness”

Gold Star Lapel Button (1947) – A gold pin with a gold star in the center and purple background that is presented to all survivors, “Engaged in action against a U.S. enemy OR engaged in military operations involving conflict with an opposing foreign force OR serving with friendly foreign forces engaged in an armed conflict in which the U.S. is not a belligerent party against an opposing armed forces OR an international terrorist attack against the U.S. OR a foreign nation friendly to the U.S., recognized as an attack by the Secretary of the Military Department concerned OR military operations while serving outside the U.S. (including the commonwealths, territories, and possessions of the U.S.), as part of a peacekeeping force” during set dates of conflicts”

Next of Kin Pin (1973) – A gold pin with a gold star in the center that is presented to all survivors, “Died while serving on Active Duty in the Armed Forces or while assigned to an Army Reserve or Army National Guard unit in a drill status”

There is no differentiation of military headstones, the folding and presentation of the American flag, the playing of Taps, or the distribution of government benefits based on the geography or circumstances of a service member’s death, whether they died in combat, by accident, an illness related to their service, or by suicide.

A service member’s death is honored and remembered based on their life and service. Congress should define Gold Star Families as the families of those who have “died while serving or from a service-connected injury or illness,” to ensure all future legislation and programs are consistent, and that all Gold Star Families are honored and supported equally.

For further questions, please contact Candace Wheeler or Ashlynn Haycock-Lohmann at 202-588-8277 or policy@taps.org.

Respectfully,

Air Force Sergeants Association (AFSA)

American Red Cross

America's Warrior Partnership

AMSUS, The Society of Federal Health Professionals

AmVets

Association of Military Banks of America

Association of United States Navy (AUSN)

Blinded Veterans Association (BVA)

Blue Star Families

Camp Corral

Chief Warrant and Warrant Officers Association, United States Coast Guard (CWOA)

Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service (COAUSPHS)

Cohen Veteran Network

D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families

Easterseals DC MD VA

Easterseals, Inc.

Elizabeth Dole Foundation

Fleet Reserve Association (FRA)

Hearts of our Heroes Foundation

K-9s for Warriors

Military Chaplains Association of the United States of America (MCA)

Military Child Education Coalition

Military Family Advisory Network

Military Officers Association of America (MOAA)

Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH)

Military Order of the World Wars (MOWW)

Military Spouse Chamber of Commerce

National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASAA)

National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA)

National Defense Committee (NDC)

National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS)

National Military Family Association (NMFA)

Naval Enlisted Reserve Association (NERA)

Non Commissioned Officers Association (NCOA)

Partners in PROMISE

Project Sanctuary

PsychArmor Institute

Psych Hub

RallyPoint

Reserve Officers Association (ROA)

Service Women's Action Network (SWAN)

SolaMed Solutions, LLC

Student Veterans of America (SVA)

Swords to Plowshares

The Independence Fund

TREA: The Enlisted Association

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)

United Through Reading

United States Army, Warrant Officers Association (USAWOA)

U.S. Coast Guard Chief Petty Officers Association and Enlisted Association (COPA)