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Written Testimony of

Gold Star Wives of America, Inc.

**Before the HOUSE VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL
AFFAIRS HEARING**

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“With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see right, let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who have borne the battle, his widow and his orphan.”

... President Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865

Chair Luria and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for providing the opportunity to present today's written testimony. Specifically, we'd like to submit our support for HR 3402, the Caring for Survivors Act of 2021 which would raise the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) and bring parity with other federal survivor programs.

In his Second Inaugural Address in 1865, President Abraham Lincoln said "... to care for him who have borne the battle, and for his widow and orphan". These words reflect the sacred promise our country has made to veterans and survivors.

To give a bit of historical context around the issue, in 1956, the death compensation was provided to survivors regardless of income. The amount was determined by wartime or peacetime service. Compensation was amended again in 1969 by Congress with a fixed rate of compensation assigned to each rank. In 1993, Congress established PL 102-568, which resulted in two types of DIC. The first is referred to as rank based DIC determined by pay grade of the deceased military service member/veteran. Rank based DIC is in the process of being phased out through attrition. The second type of DIC is flat rate DIC. All surviving spouses whose military spouse died on or after January 1, 1993 receive the monthly flat rate DIC regardless of rank. As of June 30 2021, the VA reported that there are 427,860 surviving spouses who receive DIC. The largest group of DIC recipients is the surviving spouses from World War II, the Korean Conflict, and Vietnam. Over 90% of these surviving spouses are over the age of 55, with 40% over the age of 75. Most are well past their most productive earning years. Prior to the Vietnam War, society encouraged women to work in the home, maintain the house, and raise the children. Because of the Vietnam War, some of these women became the caregivers for their disabled Veteran spouses.

The Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) increases have been the only changes in DIC since the flat rate was implemented in 1993. There has been no raise to either flat rate or rank based DIC and it is long overdue. When DIC is compared to payments to surviving spouses of other federal employees, DIC lags behind by almost 12%. As published for December 2020, the DIC flat rate for a surviving spouse is \$1,357.56 per month. This equates to 43% of the disability compensation rate for a fully disabled single Veteran whose rate is \$3,146.42 per month.

Since 1993, surviving spouses of military Veterans are finding themselves falling further and further behind in meeting their financial obligations from month to month. Many surviving spouses of the WWII, Korea, and Vietnam eras are receiving only DIC; some receive DIC and minimum Social Security benefits. These DIC recipients struggle monthly with their budget of \$1,357.56, juggling bills to meet the rising costs in, housing, utilities, food, clothing and other personal living expenses. This situation can lead too often to homelessness, a plight we do not wish to befall anyone, and least of all the surviving spouses of our military Veterans.

Our very first GSW newsletter in 1945 addressed the need for increased benefits: *we are grateful for that extra pint of milk, but now we are asking for that orange juice*. What a difference for so many surviving spouses to be able to pay for one more tank of gas, or one more bag of groceries per week. Congress removed the SBP-DIC offset for the 65,000 widowed who receive SBP. **There are over 362,000 widowed constituents who only receive DIC and have no SBP. They need that orange juice.**

Only 15% of those receiving DIC also receive SBP. Those that receive SBP include those widows of military spouses who attained full retirement status both pre and post 9/11; AND widows of active duty deaths post 9/11. **Those widowed pre 9/11 of active duty deaths do not qualify for SBP.**

It is incumbent upon Congress to take action to rectify this inequity by increasing the current amount of DIC paid at least to a level comparable to other Federal employees. This would be in keeping with the promise our country made to its Veterans and survivors. Our widows from WWII, Korea, and Vietnam eras are now in their seventies through nineties. These are the survivors who need the increase the most.

HR 3402 in the House of Representatives and S. 976 in the Senate would raise DIC from 43% (\$1357.56) to at least 55% (\$1730.53) of a single 100% disabled Veterans' compensation (currently \$3146.42). Bringing DIC compensation to at least 55% would provide parity with other Federal survivor programs. These figures reflect the amounts for those receiving the flat rate for DIC.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our thoughts on bringing DIC parity with other federal programs. The time to bring action on this bill is now.

Voices of Surviving Spouses:

I am member of GSW; my husband was shot and killed on active duty in 1984 when I was pregnant with our fifth child. I worked hard to provide for our children. Now I am in my 70's and rely on DIC and Social Security. I am not eligible for SBP as it was an active duty death prior to 9/11. In order to make ends meet, I still have to work part time by house sitting, pet sitting, and babysitting. An increase in DIC, which would amount to just a few hundred dollars a month, would allow me not to have to keep looking for ways to supplement my income to pay bills. Nancy Menagh, proud widow of Capt. Philip Menagh, Silver Star.

Now in my 60's, I am a member of GSW, who has raised our child alone after my husband passed due to Agent Orange. Not eligible for SBP, I rely on DIC and Social Security. Because of the high cost of housing, I have had to live in a rental with numerous roommates. An increase in DIC would make a difference to my well being and financial security. Valerie Morey, proud widow of Sgt. Steven Morey, Silver Star and Purple Heart.

In 1993, I became a widow of what you know as "Blackhawk Down". At the time I was a young mother of a five year old and a dedicated stay at home mom. Because of Social Security and DIC I was able to stay at home to raise our daughter. Once our daughter aged out of Social Security, I have had to find full time employment to provide for myself and may have to continue working once I am of Social Security age. I am not eligible for SBP. Shari Briley, proud widow of CW03 Donovan Briley, Silver Star and Purple Heart.

Additional comments from GSW members of what an increase would mean to them:

"I could purchase a reliable car"

"I could get needed repairs on my car to keep it running a little longer"

"I could get needed repairs on my home"

"I would not have to depend on my children for financial assistance"