

**Statement of  
Gold Star Wives of America, Inc.**

before the

Subcommittee on Disability Assistance & Memorial Affairs  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
United States House of Representatives

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Presented by

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Gold Star Wives of America, Inc.

“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 has borne the battle, his widow and his orphan.”

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

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## **INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND**

Chairman Hall, Representative Lamborn, and Members of the House Veterans' Affairs Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on behalf of all Gold Star Wives regarding the importance of addressing critical services for America's military widows and their children.

My name is Kimberly Hazelgrove. I am the widow of CW2 Brian Hazelgrove of Indiana, killed in Iraq on January 23, 2004. I am here before you as a representative of America's military widows and a member of Gold Star Wives. My hope is by the end of my testimony; you will see the need to act immediately to rectify the unfair and inadequate resources that Gold Star Families endure after notification of death of their service member.

On January 22, 2004, I was a Sergeant First Class in the US Army stationed at Fort Drum, the mother of an infant and toddler, step-mother to two children and the wife of a deployed soldier. Life was hard, but with the support of our units and families, I was independently managing the household and raising our family, always with the hope the Brian was safe and anticipating his eventual return. The next day, our lives were changed forever when Brian was killed.

Over a year passed before I was able to present the Department of the Army's Casualty Assistance Office feedback on the various aspects of my case. They responded with appropriate measures to correct discrepancies and implemented procedures to ensure further training of personnel and strict adherence of policy. However, much still needs to be done to secure our military survivors' future quality of life.

## **PERSONNEL TRAINING**

I feel that adequate training and experience is still lacking for all personnel who may have to function in the various roles while supporting a Casualty's family. Across the spectrum of DoD and VA, there is not one single dedicated office to a Military Survivor. It is left to the various representatives of these organizations to do their best to inform, assist and support the family member in their time of need. And they can only do so much within their subject area of expertise. The family member is left to their own resources to research, navigate and infiltrate through the entire process to find answers.

The Notification Officers face the most daunting task of all; informing the family of their loss. These brave men and women face a number of scenarios of reactions, ranging from avoidance to violence, and likely through multiple reactions during their time with the family. Unfortunately for these personnel, the Notification procedures across the military are still inconsistent. Unsuspecting Notification Officers (Primarily a Chaplain and an Assistant) are sent to the wrong address. In my case, the Notification Officers received the wrong address for me from Fort Drum's Casualty Assistance Office and actually had to call me in the middle of the night before arriving at my house. By the

time they arrived, I knew why they were coming. I was a soldier and had received training on this scenario. Now, I was the recipient. I know my husband filled out all of the appropriate paperwork that was required before his deployment because I was present at the time. In addition, copies of this paperwork were kept at the unit, sent home with him and also put into his personnel file. Where was the breakdown in communication and procedures that allowed this to happen?

Casualty Assistance Officers (CAO) provide the initial and essential support to meet any need within their power of the grieving family members. My Casualty Assistance Officer (CAO) was an extraordinary person and I owe most of my recovery from this tragedy to him. I met CPT Brian Batchelder early the next morning at my home. With very little training, inadequate resources and at times minimal support from outside personnel, he loyally devoted himself to meet our needs. He escorted me throughout the application process to initiate my benefit entitlements, tracked my sister's safe and prompt arrival back into the country from her own deployment, helped facilitate funeral arrangements, assisted in the relocation of my family and provided unlimited emotional support.

Although extremely helpful and intuitive, CPT Batchelder was not an expert on benefit entitlements or transition procedures.

He also lacked the basic resources to perform the essential duties of the task he had.

Adequate workspace with communication equipment was not provided. Many times he was forced to return to his office within his unit to work on my case. While there, he was

tagged with responsibilities outside of his Casualty Assistant duties. Left with no options, he worked out of his home or car to minimize the impact on my family.

CPT Batchelder was assigned to my case for a period of about six months and then reassigned for a deployment tasking. A new CAO was assigned to my case to complete outstanding issues, including the formal results briefing on my husband's death and lingering benefit entitlements that had been interrupted. This new CAO was a very young lieutenant inexperienced in military programs and services, demonstrated a lack of motivation or initiative and lacked the exposure to the events that had transpired over the previous months. After a couple meetings with this person and lack of assistance, I did not pursue further communication.

Like many widows, I moved away from where I was stationed with my husband to start a new life. I gave up my Army career and moved to Lorton, VA in January 2005. At this time, I had not received Survivors Benefit Plan payments from the Defense Finance and Accounting System for which I was entitled since May 2004. The payments stopped just three months after he was killed because of a clerical issue with my original documentation and I had exhausted efforts to fix the problem myself. Repeated attempts to correct my Survivors Benefit Plan entitlement through two local Retirement Services Officers (RSO) also failed. The Retirement Services Officers that I contacted were unfamiliar with the procedures or policies affecting these types of benefits and I found myself educating them on what needed to be done.

I eventually contacted the Department of the Army's Casualty Assistance Center. I recruited the help of Dan Ruiz and LTC Logan. With their help, I made contact with the correct office and person within the Defense Finance and Accounting Office and was able to reactivate my Survivors Benefit Plan in September 2005, 18 months after I was entitled to the benefit.

### **BENEFIT ENTITLEMENTS**

Six months is a very short time to require a family that has just endured a traumatic, life altering, event, even under the best circumstances, to be able to navigate the current military survivor system. For the widow of an active duty service member, like myself, the military expects a transition of responsibility from the active military component to Veteran's Affairs. A family previously established in family housing and accustomed to living on the military base has increased financial burdens to consume and a new identity to grasp. The response to the family member is critical within the first year after the loss of their loved one and it is imperative that there is continuity of service and support to the families of our service members.

As a widow, I receive monetary supplements because of my husband's death while serving his country. I applaud your success in increasing the initial death payments and SGLI payments to families of the deceased service member. I would like your support in fulfilling the commitment to fully sustain the benefits of our widows and those of our children for the future.

The SBP payment that I worked so hard to receive for almost two years brings \$99 a month into my household. My full entitlement a month as a surviving spouse is \$1647. The dollar for dollar offset generated by the income I receive from the VA's Dependency Indemnity Compensation reduces my entitlement by over \$1500 a month. Because of my husband's rank and years of service when he died, I actually receive a little left over money, where most spouses receive no money at all. This money supplements increased child care, healthcare and household expenses that I incur as a single working mother and sole provider to my children. I would like this panel to realize the entire scope of inequity of this offset. Disabled military retirees, federal retired annuitants and their survivors receive their benefit without offset of VA benefits. The military survivor is equally entitled to full benefits.

I have reached the three year milestone of widowhood and my dental and healthcare coverage has ceased. I am currently researching my options through my local TRICARE Representative. There are increased costs associated with continued coverage that did not exist while I was covered under the Active Duty Prime program.

## **CONCLUSION**

I ask the panel to understand that many widows are not able to make the monetary sacrifice that I have made here today in order to testify. Fortunately, I am able to be here before you with the blessing of my company to enlighten you of the burden that my family has had to endure over the past three years and the continued inequity of

entitlements directly related to inconsistent years of service commitments. I ask you to remember the young widows at home caring for their young children who can not be here before you. I ask you to remember the widows in other states who can not afford to be here before you. Your decisions can make a difference in their lives.

As my children grow older and our lives change, so do our benefits. I continually need to seek out subject matter experts within the benefits arena on my own. Healthcare, Education, Social Security, Survivors Benefit annuity and Dependents Indemnity Compensation all have different requirements that need met. Legislative actions on benefits continue to manipulate entitlements. These are time consuming and tedious tasks as the information and experts are compartmentalized and geographically dispersed. I work a full time job and raise two small children. This has not left me with much time to track down the exact person who is going to help me get a specific benefit.

Gold Star Wives of America has been a source of support and information beyond anything I have received thus far. The ladies volunteer their time and efforts into educating me on the process that forever lies ahead of me as a widow. I stand behind the firm belief and support the Gold Star Wives request that Regional Survivors Offices should be established to meet the needs of military survivors during and after the Casualty Assistance Officer has finished his duties. This office would provide oversight to the policy issues of survivors, provide transitional assistance, legislative feedback and act as the main coordinator between the Department of Defense and the Department of

Veterans Affairs. This is a key component to ensuring the commitment to your service members that their families will be taken care of.

As a service member entering military service, nowhere are you told that your family will have to fight to receive adequate benefits upon which they are entitled in the event of your death. Families plan for financial stability in the event of tragedy based on our promise that they will be taken care of. And yet I testify before you here today as an example that this has not happened to the full extent.

I thank this Subcommittee for using this hearing as one more avenue of awareness and education and for giving me an opportunity to share my thoughts and experiences as a Gold Star Wife. I will be happy to work further with the Subcommittee on any initiatives. Thank you for your time and consideration.

#### BIOGRAPHY--MS. KIMBERLY D HAZELGROVE

Kimberly Hazelgrove was born in Cleveland, Ohio and is the widow of Chief Warrant Officer Brian D Hazelgrove, U.S. Army, who served in Iraq. He died on active duty overseas in 2004. Kimberly has two children and two step-children. In 1994, Kimberly entered the US Army as an Intelligence Analyst. She served nine years of duty with tours to Korea and to Cuba in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, attaining the rank of Sergeant First Class. Unable to fulfill the requirements of active duty after Brian's death, she left the service to pursue a career in the Intelligence field. Kimberly is a dedicated mother to her children and advocate of widows and veterans issues. She became a

member of Gold Star Wives in January 2005 and has been active since. Kimberly is currently parliamentarian for Potomac Chapter and is in training to become more active on legislative work. All her Gold Star Wives work is voluntary. Her mission is to provide support to new young widows and educate policy makers.

Kimberly is currently employed by Lockheed Martin Mission Services on the Intelligence Analysis Training Team.

#### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Neither Ms. Hazelgrove nor the Gold Star Wives of America, Inc. have received any Federal grant or contract, relevant to the subject matter of this testimony, during the current or previous two fiscal years.

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Signature, Ms. Kimberly D Hazelgrove

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Date