

# U.S. SENATOR BOB CASEY

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CHAIRMAN Special Committee on Aging

## **Chairman Bob Casey's Opening Statement** ***"Heroes at Home: Improving Services for Veterans and their Caregivers."***

The Senate Special Committee on Aging and Senate Veterans Affairs Committee will come to order. Welcome to our first joint hearing. This joint committee hearing, this Congress, entitled "*Heroes at Home: Improving Services for Veterans and their Caregivers.*" It's been more than a decade since the Aging Committee held a joint hearing. And I want to thank Senator Tester and Senator Moran for bringing together our two committees today to examine the important issues and unique challenges faced by veterans and their caregivers. I also want to note that Senator Scott, a member of our Aging committee, will be serving as the Ranking Member for the Aging Committee hearing today, that is part of this joint hearing, and I am grateful for his leadership and acting in that capacity.

Our conversation today is particularly timely given that tomorrow is the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, commemorating the Allied invasion of Normandy during World War II. We thank those service members who fought on that day and obviously just saying that does not convey anywhere near the depth of our gratitude for all that they did to save our country and to literally save the world. And we of course extend that thanks to those who are serving today, all members of the armed forces for the work they do every day, protecting our Nation.

Veterans and their families make great sacrifices to serve our country. Our duty, as Members of the Senate is to provide support to those who serve our country. We must provide care for those who return home from service with injuries – both mental and physical – and for those who face disease or illness later in life.

Today's hearing is about the military family and paid caregivers who uphold this duty to provide invaluable long-term care to veterans. Joining us today are some of the most resilient people in the Nation. Both veterans and their caregivers. The caregivers who provide unwavering support to the men and women who served in the armed forces.

I've said this before, we cannot claim to be the greatest country in the world if we do not have the greatest caregiving in the world, and that includes supporting military families and their paid caregivers. Military caregivers come in many different forms – spouses, family, friends, neighbors, and paid workers. The majority – actually, more than 96 percent – of these caregivers are women.

As we will hear from our witnesses, that caring for a loved one can place significant physical, emotional, and financial stress on the veteran, caregiver, and family members. Additional challenges for caregivers include navigating the VA system, applying for programs, and finding other resources.

We will hear today from Peter Townsend, who comes to us from Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania. He is joined by his wife and caregiver Lisa, and we will hear from them about the needs and the experience of being a care recipient and what that care means to his continued quality of life and health. Long-term care is intended to provide supports and services to help people live as independently and as safely as possible in the setting of their choice. Caregiving services may include, of course, help with activities of daily living, managing medications, transportation, and so much more.

The VA offers a wide range of long-term care programs, providing a model of how to honor the desires of those who want to keep living independently in their homes and in their communities. For example, many veterans rely on VA respite care so caregivers can take much-needed time for themselves or home health aide services to help them in their homes. While the VA offers options and supports for veterans and their caregivers, we'll hear from our witnesses today that we must do an awful lot more.

We must strengthen the long-term care supports that are currently available and help more caregivers access these services. That is why I am proud to support bipartisan and bicameral legislation to expand veterans' access to long-term services and supports through the Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act. I want to thank my colleagues Senator Tester, Senator Moran, and Senator Hassan for leading on this important effort.

The VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers, known as PCAFC, is an important support for family caregivers. It has, however, had challenges over the past decades. As the program has been reconfigured, too many veterans and their caregivers have been denied benefits. This is not a new problem. In 2017, the Senate Aging Committee held a hearing on military caregivers. During that hearing, two of my constituents, Wanda and Samuel Ickes discussed how the VA pushed them out of the Family Caregivers program.

In response to those concerns, I released a report on the program, entitled "Discharged and Denied." My report found that the VA failed to anticipate the need of the Caregivers program, then abruptly discharged thousands of veterans – all without oversight or a clear appeals process. Now that veterans of all eras are eligible for the Family Caregivers Program, the VA must, must not repeat its earlier mistakes. The VA should act swiftly to ensure the program benefits every single family it was meant to serve.

With the recent passage and implementation of the PACT Act, we've seen the largest health care and benefit expansion in the VA's history. The PACT Act expanded access to health care for veterans who experienced toxic exposures in the Vietnam, Gulf War, and post-9/11 eras, which has now helped grant one million claims to veterans. We need to make sure the VA has

the resources it needs to support these newly enrolled veterans and their caregivers. And finally, we need to make sure VA's resources are accessible to those they are designed to serve.

As Chairman of this Committee, the Aging Committee, I have pushed the VA to make its websites and technology accessible for people with disabilities, including injured service members, as required by law. I am pleased that the VA has made progress, but more work remains to be done. I am working with Senator Scott, to pass Senate bill, 2516, the Veterans Accessibility Act, which will require the VA to establish a Veterans Advisory Committee on Equal Access to evaluate the VA's compliance with all, all federal disability laws.

Thank you, Senator Scott, for your support on the Veterans Accessibility Act and to the Dole Foundation for endorsing the bill. Thank you for that. We have our work cut out for us, obviously. We need to uphold our duty to support our veterans and their families. We need to make sure the programs designed to serve them are working as intended. We need to make sure VA resources are accessible. And we need to take our lessons learned from the VA to ensure that all who provide long-term care support and services, whether they are military or civilian, family members or direct care workers. We need to make sure these individuals are valued and are compensated for their work.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about their essential work and how Congress and especially the Senate can better support our nation's military caregivers and their families.

Before I turn to Chairman Tester, I am going to run out because I have to go to the Judiciary committee to introduce a judge for a brief period of time and I will be running back. So, I will miss Chairman Tester's opening, but I will make sure that I tune into C-SPAN to see it. Thank you, Chairman Tester.