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Caregivers' Testimony before the
U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging
6/14/17

Thank you Chairman Collins and Ranking Member Casey for inviting me here today to testify. I would also like to thank the Elizabeth Dole Foundation and Senator Dole, Ryan Phillippe, and Terri Tanielian for taking the time to be here today. It is humbling to have voices like theirs speak on behalf of caregivers like myself.

It is my hope that by sharing a small part of my journey as a caregiver with this committee that you can ensure future caregivers do not face the same hurdles that my husband and I—and other caregivers—have had to overcome.

My husband Sam had been married to the Army long before he married me. In the 80s, he was an Army Ranger which meant despite it being so-called “peacetime”, he still saw action. That’s when he suffered his first TBI, in Panama. Later, he was in a bad accident that got a lot of metal put in his body, so much that the Army said he couldn’t do his job anymore and released him.

After 9/11, he couldn’t not do the job the Army trained him to do. He went and got every waiver he needed so he could go back in the Reserves as an MP, a military policeman. He signed up for every single deployment. He was deployed more than he wasn’t. Over the course of those deployments, Sam earned three Purple Hearts. He did his job. He brought every single person back alive. He went above and beyond his duty.

Sam came back from his deployments looking like the same person, but he didn’t come back acting like the same person. When you meet him, when you speak to him for a couple minutes, he looks like anyone else. Talk to him a little bit longer, and you start to see his issues in his eyes, in the way he talks. Sam undeniably still lives with the effects of war.

One day, when Sam was home on leave from a deployment, he had gone into the backyard to grill dinner. After he had been gone a while, longer than dinner should have taken, I glanced out the window and saw flames lapping at the side of the house. But I didn’t hear Sam doing anything about

it. I ran outside and saw Sam was just standing there, wide-eyed, staring at the fire eating away at our house. I pushed him away, closed the grill, put the fire out, and that's when I realized he had some serious issues. That's when I realized he would need some extra help. The Army didn't see it that way.

When Sam came back from that last deployment, where he suffered his last major TBI, the Army released him and said he was healthy enough to go back to his civilian life. In the 60 days of leave he had between leaving the military and going back to his old job, I began noticing more of the little things that were different about him. He was stuttering, he couldn't process things, his memory was terrible. He was different, distant.

I took him to the VA, and I pushed the issue. Sam wasn't the same person. The more I talked about the issues he was having, the more the doctors realized I was right. But I had to write my Senator to get the Army doctors to reevaluate him so he would get the right benefits from the military.

It should not have been that hard. The Army was going to send him back to civilian life and he couldn't hold a job. He could have ended up homeless. Or worse. I couldn't and wouldn't let that happen. I had to figure out everything out on my own. I had to make it right for him, for us. When he came back with his issues, I stepped up because he couldn't. I took control because he couldn't. I became his caregiver.

When we had access to the VA Caregiver Program, it was very good to us. It allowed me to have respite time as a caregiver. To have the downtime, the respite time when I could focus on me, that stipend, you can't put dollar signs on it.

As you consider how to improve the lives of caregivers, know that the Military and Veteran Caregiver Services Improvement Act makes important strides in improving coordination between the Department of Defense and the VA when service members are transitioning into civilian life and in extending a priceless stipend to so many caregivers and veterans in need. Those are certainly policies that would have helped me and Sam as we figured out this new life. I hope you will support this legislation and help ensure it is signed into law.

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to share and I look forward to

your questions.