Wounded Warrior Project Submits Statement for the Record on Current State of Department of Veterans Affairs' Family Caregiver Program

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health Today Examined Program's Progress

Washington, D.C. (December 3, 2014) – Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) today submitted a statement for the record on the current state of the Department of Veterans' Affairs' (VA) Family Caregiver Program, which was examined this morning in a hearing before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs (HVAC) Subcommittee on Health. WWP has long been committed to serving this generation of injured veterans and their caregivers through advocacy and action, including a coordinated effort to ensure enactment and implementation of the Caregiver Assistance Law of 2010, specifically advocating for a program that would provide caregivers with needed training, technical support, mental health counseling, health care coverage, respite care, and a modest financial stipend.

"Maintaining very close ties with injured veterans and their families, WWP has seen how profoundly a warrior's injury changes an entire family's life," said Charlie Abell, executive vice president of Policy and Government Affairs at WWP. "The Family Caregiver Program now provides critical supports to family caregivers of seriously disabled veterans, but over four years after its passage we continue to see major flaws in its implementation, flaws that VA has yet to remedy or even address."

VA implemented the Family Caregiver Program a year after the law was enacted with the adoption of interim final regulations; three years later, VA is still operating under an "interim" rule. Several of these unresolved issues have created inconsistency and ambiguity across the program, particularly regarding:

- Eligibility Criteria and Mental Health: The regulations fail to take adequate account of how disabling post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety can be and of the extent to which caregiver assistance may be necessary for veterans with such conditions.
- Clinical Determinations: The regulations rely too heavily on "clinical judgment" in determining eligibility and extent of needed caregiver assistance, without providing clear direction on who is to make those clinical judgments and on what basis.
- Appeals Process: The regulations fail to provide direction on appealing an adverse decision or assuring that a right to appeal is a meaningful one.

More work is also needed to address major flaws in the effectiveness of caregiver respite care; the determination of reducing or discontinuing caregiver benefits; and the calculation of caregiver stipends.

Since 2010, WWP has been using the information gathered from its Annual Alumni Survey to refine its existing programs, develop new initiatives, identify gaps in existing services and support, and create and advocate for legislation that positively impacts warriors and their families. This year's data showed 3 out of 10 warriors need the aid and attendance of another person because of their injuries and health problems; among them, more than one-fourth need more than 40 hours of aid per week. The results also showed 43.2 percent of warriors reported having a traumatic brain injury and 75 percent reported experiencing PTSD.

"As the lead advocate for the caregiver-assistance law, WWP remains committed to serving this generation of injured veterans and their caregivers and will continue to press for regulatory change," Abell said. "We are dedicated to ensuring that the vital support and compensation provided under the program is strengthened and that flaws in VA's implementation of that law are resolved."

About Wounded Warrior Project

Wounded Warrior Project is recognizing its 10-year anniversary, reflecting on a decade of service and reaffirming its commitment to serving injured veterans for their lifetime. The mission of Wounded Warrior Project is to honor and empower Wounded Warriors. WWP currently serves more than 60,000 warriors and nearly 9,000 family members through its 20 unique programs and services. The purpose of WWP is to raise awareness and to enlist the public's aid for the needs of injured service members, to help injured servicemen and woman aid and assist each other, and to provide unique, direct programs and services to meet their needs. WWP is a national organization headquartered in Jacksonville, Florida. To get involved and learn more, visit https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/give-back

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