

July 13, 2015

Chairman John McCain
Ranking Member Jack Reed
Armed Services Committee
United States Senate
Washington DC 20510

Chairman Mac Thornberry
Ranking Member Adam Smith
Armed Services Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington DC 20515

Dear Chairmen and Ranking Members:

The National Military Family Association has long been an advocate for benefits and programs that strengthen and protect Uniformed Services families and reflect the Nation's respect for their service. We are grateful for your support of military service members, their families, and survivors. Thank you for your leadership and the work of the Members and staff of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees as you prepare to complete the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016 (NDAA). We endorse the recommendations to Conferees made by The Military Coalition, but would like to provide additional perspective on some issues of critical importance to military families.

We ask Congress to end sequestration, which places a disproportionate burden on our Nation's military to reduce the deficit. Sequestration has hurt military families and threatens the readiness of service members and increases uncertainty about whether services and programs families rely on will be available when they need them.

Health Care

We **strongly support** Section 701 in S. 1376 allowing up to four urgent care visits without prior authorization under the TRICARE program. Barriers to acute care are widespread within the Military Health System (MHS). Families who call their local Military Treatment Facility (MTF) seeking an appointment to treat an illness or injury are too often told no appointments are available. Requests for referrals to a network urgent care facility when no appointment is available at an MTF are often denied, despite existing TRICARE policy authorizing such referrals. Too often, families are left with the Emergency Room as their only option for treatment of acute medical problems such as ear infections and strep throat – conditions that aren't emergencies, but must be treated promptly. Section 701's urgent care authorization waiver would allow military families to access the right care, at the right time, in the most appropriate setting.

We also support the following health care provisions:

- Sec. 704 of H.R. 1735 allowing access to infertility treatments for members of the Armed Forces and dependents
- Sec. 711 of H.R. 1735 calling for a unified medical command
- Sec. 711 of S. 1376 ensuring covered TRICARE beneficiaries obtain health care appointments within access standards and wait-time goals
- Sec. 712 of H.R. 1735 establishing criteria under which licensed mental health counselors may be reimbursed under the TRICARE program
- Sec. 712 of S. 1376 ensuring beneficiaries who are covered under a TRICARE health plan can seamlessly access health care under that health plan in each TRICARE region
- Sec. 713 of S. 1376 improving mental health care provided by health care providers of the DoD
- Sec. 716 of S. 1376 designation of non-department mental health care providers with knowledge relating to the treatment of members of the Armed Forces

- Sec. 725 of H.R. 1735 a Sense of Congress regarding mental health counseling for members of the Armed Forces and families
- Sec. 732 of S. 1376 requiring the publication of data on patient safety, quality of care, satisfaction, and health outcome measures under TRICARE
- Sec. 735 of S. 1376 requesting a report on the plan to improve pediatric care and related services for children of members of the Armed Forces

Pay and Compensation

We are particularly concerned about proposals that will cut compensation and significantly change the financial outlook for service members and their families. The Senate proposal calls for pay increases below the Employment Cost Index (ECI), which is the current standard in statute. **Please do not make this NDAA the third in a row to allow a military pay increase less than the ECI.**

We **oppose** the provisions in S. 1376 reducing Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) up to five percent. Continued reductions in pay and benefits threaten military families' financial security. **Three straight years of capping military pay raises below private sector wage growth, increasing service members' out-of-pocket housing costs, and reductions in the commissary subsidy mean the purchasing power of military families has eroded.**

We also **oppose** provisions in S. 1376 that would eliminate BAH for the junior member of a dual-military married couple and reduce BAH for service members who choose to reside with other service members. BAH is part of the military compensation package earned individually by each service member. Eliminating it for one member of a dual-military married couple would be an unfair "marriage penalty," especially to female service members, who are more likely to be married to another service member.

We **support** Sec. 606 and Sec. 607 of S. 1376 providing limitations on the Family Subsistence Supplemental Allowance (FSSA) and allowing DoD to obtain information from the Department of Agriculture to determine the number of SNAP households that contain a service member. While SNAP is a significant help to many military families, the program's inclusion of BAH paradoxically means families living in high cost locations do not qualify for assistance while families of similar size and service member rank do in places with lower housing costs. Because BAH only covers the cost of rent and utilities, it does not help families with the higher cost of food, gasoline, and other necessities in areas such as Hawaii, southern California, and Washington, D.C. We ask Congress to evaluate the SNAP program to see if this disparity can be addressed in a way to better meet the needs of low-income military families.

Retirement

We appreciate the efforts by the House and Senate to act on retirement reform recommendations from the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission. The proposed hybrid retirement system that combines a defined benefit with the ability to receive matching Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) contributions from DoD will provide a portable retirement benefit for those service members who decide not to serve 20 years, as well as an incentive for service members to serve a full career and leave with an equivalent benefit to what today's retirees receive over time.

We support the following retirement provisions:

- Continue TSP Match beyond 20 years of service
- Repeal the COLA-1% penalty for future entrants
- Provide a government TSP match of up to 5 percent of service member contributions

Commissary and Exchange Benefit

Military families consistently tell us how much they value the savings they achieve by shopping at the commissary, which we consider a vital element in military compensation. For this reason, we **oppose** the provisions in S. 1376 that would transfer the cost of second destination shipping to commissary patrons, thereby increasing prices. We **support** Section 641 of H.R. 1735 that would protect commissary supplies and prices for military families assigned to Asia and the Pacific.

We reiterate our opposition to Section 652 of S. 1376, which would require the Department of Defense to carry out a pilot program privatizing five commissaries. We fear that taking such a step would lead to the erosion of the commissary benefit, which military families tell us they rely on. We support the amendment to the text requiring a thorough assessment before privatizing any element of the military resale system.

Enhancing Quality of Life for Military Families

We thank the committees for including sections that address important issues for military families including:

- Improvements in sexual assault prevention and response
- Improvements in the transition of military members and their families to civilian life, and efforts to improve employment opportunities for separating military members
- Improvements in the Financial Literacy and Preparedness of military members and their families

We support the following education provisions:

- Sec. 562 of S. 1376 on authorizing DoD assistance to local educational agencies that benefit eligible dependents with severe disabilities
- Sec. 563 of S. 1376 providing authority to use appropriated funds to support DoD student meal programs in domestic dependent elementary and secondary schools located outside the U.S.
- Sec. 571 of H.R. 1735 continuing authority to assist local education agencies that benefit dependents of members of the armed forces
- Sec. 573 of H.R. 1735 supporting efforts to improve academic achievement and transition of military dependent students

We also support the following provisions:

- Sec. 537 of H.R. 1735 establishing a breastfeeding policy for the Department of the Army
- Sec. 539 of S. 1376 allowing the Secretary of the VA to notify service members, veterans and their family members of the availability of online access to the higher education component of the Transition Assistance Program
- Sec. 557 of S. 1376 a Sense of Congress on the service of military families and on sentencing retirement eligible members of the Armed Forces
- Sec. 562 of H.R. 1735 on the availability of additional training opportunities under the Transition Assistance Program
- Sec. 564 of S. 1376 providing for a biennial survey of military families on military family readiness matters
- Sec. 567 of H.R. 1735 creating an employment pilot program for members of the National Guard and Reserve
- Sec. 572 of H.R. 1735 extending authority to conduct family support programs for immediate family members of service members assigned to Special Operations
- Sec. 582 of S. 1376 providing financial literacy training with respect to certain financial services for members of the uniformed services

- Sec. 595 of H.R. 1735 providing coordination with non-governmental suicide prevention organizations and agencies to assist in reducing suicides
- Sec. 623 of S. 1376 providing transportation to transfer ceremonies for family and next of kin of members of the armed forces who die overseas during humanitarian operations
- Sec. 624 of S. 1376 reviewing DoD policies on travel of next of kin to participate in the dignified transfer of remains of members of the armed forces and civilian employees of DoD who die overseas

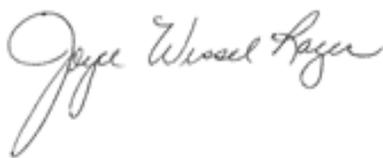
We **oppose** Senate Sec. 534 regarding the Sense of Congress on transferability of unused education benefits to family members and Sec. 535 removing entitlement to unemployment insurance while receiving Post-9/11 education assistance.

We **support** Sec. 642 of S. 1376, a transitional benefit we have long recommended. Sec. 624 provides transitional compensation and other benefits for dependents of members of the Armed Forces ineligible to receive retired pay as a result of court martial sentences. When a service member is convicted of a crime and loses benefits, the family loses them, too. In many instances, spouses have foregone their own careers, lost earnings and a retirement savings of their own to support the service member's career. When their service member is sentenced or discharged with forfeiture of pay and allowances, families are left with nothing. Military spouses and children need sufficient opportunity and resources to start a life outside of the military when disconnection due to service member misconduct occurs.

We appreciate your diligence in reconciling these important legislative provisions that will have such an impact on service members, their families, and survivors. If we can be of assistance in your efforts to support military families or if you have any questions or need further information, please contact Kelly Hruska in our Government Relations Department at (703) 931-6632 or KHruska@militaryfamily.org.

The National Military Family Association is the leading nonprofit dedicated to serving the families who stand behind the uniform. Since 1969, NMFA has worked to strengthen and protect millions of families through its advocacy and programs. We provide spouse scholarships, camps for military kids, and retreats for families reconnecting after deployment and for the families of the wounded, ill, or injured. NMFA serves the families of the currently serving, retired, wounded, or fallen members of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Commissioned Corps of the USPHS and NOAA.

Sincerely,



Joyce Wessel Raezer
Executive Director