



## **TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS**

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May 9, 2016

The Honorable Johnny Isakson  
Chair, Veterans Affairs Committee  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Blumenthal  
Ranking Member, Veterans Affairs Committee  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Blumenthal:

As the national organization that has provided comfort and care to the families of America's fallen military heroes since 1994, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) would like to thank you including legislative language in the "Veterans First Act" mirroring H.R. 2531, the "Military Spouses Achieving College Education for Survivors Act of 2015 or ACES Act of 2015. TAPS is pleased that you chose to amend section 701 of "The Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014", to clarify the period of eligibility during which certain spouses are entitled to assistance under the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship. This language is included in Section 302 of H.R. 3016.

We are also pleased that you included language which would amend section 3317(a) of title 38, U.S.C., to allow individuals eligible for the Fry Scholarship (both children and spouses) to be eligible to use the Yellow Ribbon Program while they attend school.

Eligible surviving spouses were thrilled when the Fry Scholarship was expanded to include them. The enabling legislation allocates 15 years within which to use 36 months of education benefit, with an effective date of January 1, 2015. However, the law was written to define the eligibility period as starting from the date of death of the military service-member. The result is that the 15 years allocated to use the benefit is shortened. For certain Post-9/11 survivors the possibility of using this critical benefit is almost negated. Some survivors would have fewer than two years available to use a 36 month education benefit, which often times takes at least four years to use, even on a full time traditional student basis.

The ACES Act corrects this inequity by extending the time for approximately 1,840 of our earliest Post - 9/11 surviving spouses to attain their education by ensuring that all survivors will have a minimum of 6 years to use the benefit. The legislation also allows survivors affected by this legislation the ability to reselect the expanded benefit, had the surviving spouse made an irrevocable use of benefit decision prior to this legislation being enacted.

It is important to recognize the inherent injustice within the existing law. While intending to honor the service and sacrifice of our Post-9/11 heroes by ensuring that their survivors are afforded the means to provide for themselves and their families, current law severely limits the participation of the earliest eligible survivors whose courageous spouses were among the first patriots to answer America's call and paid the ultimate sacrifice.

We salute your efforts and leadership in addressing this important survivor issues and we would like you to know that you have our continued thanks. Please feel free to contact us regarding this and any issue affecting survivors of the fallen.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bonnie Carroll". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a thin horizontal line.

Bonnie Carroll  
Founder and President