

Mrs. Tiffany Petty

Written Testimony

Senate Meeting

Thursday February 3, 2005

Mrs. Tiffany Petty

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I am very honored that you picked me to represent so many men and women. If what you hear from me makes a difference in the way things are done in the event of another family's loved one's death, then I have accomplished my goals. I could not ask for a better chance to make a difference. Thank you for listening to what I have to say. The first issue I would like to address is with the notification of Jerrick's death from the Army. I was officially notified from the army of Jerrick's death the day after his parents were notified. My sister-in-law called me after an officer went to the family. She called me to see if I was doing okay. I was not happy with finding out from my in-laws, hours after they were told, about my husband's death. I believe the army should make sure they have immediate family's information updated regularly so that the spouse is notified immediately, rather than the day after the parents are notified. The spouse should always be the first notification, even if it has to be delayed.

The first casualty assistance officer that worked with me was good. I do not have any complaints about the way he treated me. Unfortunately I did not work with him long. I was handed over to another officer within a couple weeks that was not trained or knowledgeable for being an assistance officer. He tried to be as much help as he could, and he was very kind and considerate of my needs, but he was not able to answer questions or help me with certain needs. He would try to get questions answered for me by asking others, but he could not find the right people to talk to.

The casualty assistance officers were very kind and very businesslike, but yet personal. It was obvious that they had feelings about what they had to do, and considered my feelings the entire time, with all information given. I wanted to know what had happened to my husband, and they told me that he was killed almost instantly. I later learned that he was flown by helicopter to a hospital where he fought for his life for two hours. He was able to communicate to a fellow soldier by squeezing his hand when he was asked questions. All of this information was very important to me. The problem was that I was given information that could be verified later by his fellow soldiers and I should not have been given inaccurate information of any kind. The casualty officers should know all information is verifiable at some time. If they do not know the circumstances surrounding the loved ones death, they need to say that rather than just trying to make the family feel that their loved one did not suffer.

The casualty officer had one very specific task that we know was incredibly difficult for him. At the time he handled it very diplomatically. I had to choose how to send my husband's body home. There was a piece of his body missing, and I had to choose whether to send him home with or without it. It was a terrible question to ask, but I am glad they gave me the choice to have him sent home sooner without it, or later with it. It was the right thing for them to do, even though it was very hard on my part and his. He handled it very honorably, and with compassion and diplomacy.

The casualty assistance officers have a very difficult job, and they treated me with the utmost respect and kindness. I believe they did their best with the information they were given, but they do need to be more educated about the tasks that come after the burial. When I had questions about benefits available, or simple things like moving my furniture to Pocatello from the base in Kentucky, they were not able to help me. They did not have the answers I needed, and they did not know how or where to get the answers. In my opinion, that does need to be remedied.

The monies given to me directly after my husband's death to take care of expenses was not nearly enough. I had to use that money for air fare to get home, funeral flowers, burial plot, and for getting immediate family from areas of Nevada and Idaho to the place of the funeral. A lot of families in this day and age cannot afford to travel long distances to attend their loved ones funeral without assistance. I was told that the initial check after his death was for that reason, but it was not enough to pay for immediate family, for the kids and I to fly from Missouri to Idaho, and the extra funeral expenses.

The army was very gracious to provide the National Guard Armory free of charge to hold the funeral. Everyone there was very good at helping with all the arrangements. Because of a pending protest, our family felt secure with having the funeral and viewing there where cameras and interviews were not allowed. Anyone that tried to sneak in was quickly removed from the building before the family was bothered. As a result of the army's cooperation the protest did not happen, and the news media was kept at bay. One of the soldiers, Lieutenant Marsano, also kept a sharp eye at the grave side. We did have some news media sneak in at that point. Lieutenant Marsano very quickly removed them, and again we were not bothered. I am very thankful for the men and women that helped during that time. They volunteered their help, and they were very thorough at keeping the funeral as peaceful as they could.

After the death of my husband, I needed to fly home to take care of the funeral. The army didn't have anyone to escort me, which in my situation was very important. At the time I was a young mother with two babies, and I was not in any condition, due to major surgery, to travel in a hurry for an undetermined amount of time. I needed accompaniment and the army should have at least taken care of the airfare for the children and I, and my aunt and uncle to accompany me. My aunt couldn't bring me and the children home because her son had been in an army accident days before in Iraq, so she should not have been left alone and could not accompany me alone. My uncle had to come with us to help me with the children. If he couldn't make it, someone from Idaho would have had to fly to Missouri to help me and the children get home. The cost would have been more if we had to do that. Keep in mind that most families are usually at a base, not near their home and when given the news of a death they need to find a way home. There are other young mothers that have medical problems as well. The army needs to be aware and sympathetic to these mothers. I was fortunate enough to have people to help me, but there are others that do not have the same good fortune.

When I spoke at a local Veteran's Day Celebration (October 2004), I learned that the army had not yet paid for my husband's funeral expenses at a local funeral home. It should not have taken the army 9 months to pay for this. This is not the kind of thing the family remembers to follow up on during a time of grief and mourning. The army should have been on top of this, even if the survivor has items they are responsible for. The army should also be clear with the survivors, so that they know what they are responsible for. If the first initial check was for this, they should

have told me at the beginning.

We did have problems with the headstone at Jerrick's grave. Jerrick was buried on December 20, 2003, and when I went up to his grave a little over a week before Memorial Day, the headstone still had not been placed. I was very upset by this. The headstone should have been placed soon after he was buried rather than five months later. After some phone calls and a couple of headaches we were able to get the headstone placed a week before Memorial Day. The families would like to visit their loved one's grave and not have to worry about whether or not everything will be done the way it is supposed to be. This is not the kind of thing the families are supposed to worry about. The army should have been on top of this.

I have had quite a few problems with Social Security. Social Security keeps inconsistently changing my home address for my checks. I purchased a home and put in a change address immediately. My home address was re-forwarded to my old address, a rented apartment, twice already. When I called the last time to find out why I wasn't receiving my checks I talked to a representative that was very rude and condescending. She told me that the address had been changed and I asked her why. She could not tell me how it had happened. I know that I did not put in the change so I was a little upset that it had happened a second time without my knowledge or permission. I asked what I could do to fix the problem and she could not give me a straight forward answer. I told her that I could not understand what she was trying to explain, so I asked her to go over everything one more time a little slower and more efficiently. She then asked me if I was "stupid?", and I was appalled. She then went on to tell me that I should talk to someone else in the home office in Pocatello, Idaho because I was too ignorant to understand her. I couldn't believe that I was being spoken to in such a manor. I had explained to her that I needed to get the problem solved as soon as possible because I have to rely on those checks every month to support my family, and that I couldn't go another month without those checks. She told me that she was not concerned with that. I did not get anything solved with that phone call. The office in my home town wasn't helpful either. I ended up calling again later and got the problem solved within just a few minutes once I got to speak with someone.

I have also had problems with trying to talk to someone with Social Security. I am a single mother of two small children so I don't get a whole lot of time to sit on the phone for long periods of time during calling hours. Children require constant care and attention when they are the age of three and under. I do not have the time to sit on hold for ten to twenty minutes to talk to someone, and sometimes when you do get through the representatives are impatient and rude. Again, I believe this is a problem that needs to be remedied.

I was happy that the army provided our family with life insurance. That has helped greatly, but I do have a couple issues that should be addressed.

Before my husband left for Iraq, I learned that he had signed all of the insurance policy over to his parents. I immediately talked to him about it, so he changed it to 60% of it to me and the children, and the other 40% to his parents. I didn't know how much he left to us until his death. What bothers me most about this situation is that I have quite a few medical problems, and I have not been able to work for the last few years because of them. He knew that I would have to depend on this life insurance to raise the children, but he still left almost half of it to his parents. I did open another life insurance policy on him just days before he left for Iraq. This was after he signed the paperwork for the army life insurance and before I knew how much he had left to his

parents in the event of his death. We were very fortunate that we had that extra life insurance policy, but other families may not have that opportunity.

The question I have about this situation is that is it ethical for soldiers to leave their life insurance policy to parents instead of their spouse and children. The surviving spouse is the one to take care of the children for the rest of their growing years, and they might have to depend on that life insurance policy. Should the soldiers be able to give it away to family not in charge of the care of his or her children? Does the army educate their soldiers of the importance of additional life insurance and how to distribute it?

I am very thankful for the Tri-Care medical insurance. If I did not have the insurance I would not have been able to get a lot of my medical problems taken care of. There are some issues that need to be addressed in this area as well. I do not live close to a VA hospital so there are some things I do not get covered for. For example, I have to wear glasses or contacts. Tri-Care insurance does not cover the fees for the doctor's visit, prescription, or the glasses or contacts. From the information I have gotten from friends who are soldiers, I must go to a base or VA hospital to get coverage. Unfortunately the nearest to either places is at least two and a half to three hours away. I do not have the time or means to drive that far just for glasses, contacts or prescription. By doing all of this in my home town it costs more than what I can really afford. When I have to pay a couple hundred dollars just to see, out of my pocket, it takes away from the regular expenses I need to take care of each month. Where I have only the social security and VA checks to depend on each month, I cannot afford to spend so much money on things other than my monthly expenses. If my children were to need glasses, would the insurance pay for them?

Another problem I have with the insurance is the care I get from doctors in this area. I will not go see my primary physician unless I absolutely have to. He misdiagnosed my cancer and he would not immunize my children. I had to take my children to the local Health and Welfare department to get their immunizations, and I ended up in emergency surgery for the cancer and a hernia. I am not at all happy with the care, but I can't get the information I need to know how to change doctors. I do not know how to find out who takes Tri-Care in this area either. I have plenty of insurance questions, but I do not know where or who to get the answers from.

I have received a lot of support from the community and from the soldiers that were with my husband in Iraq. I greatly appreciate the help I have received from the people that it is expected from, but the most help and support has been from the people that are not obligated to do so. The most support I have received all together has been from the soldiers that were with my husband over seas. The soldiers from Fort Campbell have answered all the questions I ever had about my husband while he was in the army, and they have been kind enough to share some wonderful stories of the things he did while he was with them.

When I moved to Idaho I left all of our belongings in storage on the base. When I learned of Jerrick's death I came home with my immediate belongings only. Just the things that would fit into luggage bags for the plane ride home. I did not know exactly where any of the items were stored so I did not know how to get any of it back. For months I did not have a crib for the baby, clothing, beds, etc. The casualty assistance officers did not know how to track any of it down

either. After the soldiers got back from Iraq, they called me and asked if I would come visit them. While I was there they got my belongings shipped home, they helped me get a new military identification card, and they answered any questions I had surrounding Jerrick's death. I have a big military family so I do get to see a lot of what kind of support our soldiers that are coming home are getting. The soldiers that are coming home alive are still heroes. I have seen some problems with how they are dealing with life away from war. I see that they are still living in an idea of war even though they are not over seas. I believe they need to have some extra care when they get home too.