

**STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

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Good afternoon, Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and Members of the Committee. I appreciate your interest in the VA's Caregiver Support Program and the opportunity to answer your questions today. I am accompanied by Dr. Colleen Richardson, Executive Director, Caregiver Support Program.

The contribution of caregiving has an important impact in the lives of family members and an increasingly valuable role in our health care system today. Through our combined 37 years of VA clinical experience, Dr. Richardson and I, have witnessed, and recognized the impact of caregiving on the health and well-being of our Veterans. The role of caregiving is not only time and energy intensive, it has an impact on one's physical, psychological, and financial health. The VA Caregiver Support Program's (CSP) mission is to provide resources, training, tools and support services to the caregivers of our Nation's Veterans. The VA's CSP is breaking new ground and setting the standard on caregiving in the health care industry. By being a trailblazer, the program is in a dynamic state of evolution and to evolve, we require consistent feedback and partnership with all of you, our partners who are with us today, Veterans, caregivers, and our many stakeholders that make our work possible. We are proud to be leading the country in providing a program which offers unmatched benefits, services

and supports to caregivers of Veterans to enable them to achieve their optimal level of independence and well-being.

In 2010, the VA established the CSP to administer the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) and the Program of General Caregiver Support Services (PGCSS), two programs which support caregivers of Veterans in need of personal care services. Initially, PCAFC was targeted towards caregivers of eligible Veterans who incurred or aggravated a serious injury, in the line of duty on or after September 11, 2001. Through the MISSION Act of 2018, VA was authorized to expand eligibility to Veterans who incurred or aggravated a serious injury or illness in the line of duty for all eras in a phased approach (Phase I, which occurred October 1, 2020 and Phase II, which will go into effect October 1, 2022).

The adoption of the new MISSION Act regulations was to address issues in the lack of standardization, consistency, and equitability identified in PCAFC while expanding the program and making it more inclusive for Veterans and caregivers of all service eras. We have doubled the size of the program in 16 months since expansion – quite an accomplishment and credit is due to our CSP staff throughout the enterprise. Their work is particularly notable during the COVID era where many clinicians also stepped forward to help with first and fourth mission assignments to ensure we could meet the care demands placed on our system and our nation. And, where the challenges of the new normal work environment required them to accomplish the expansion and in new and untested ways. We recognize the hard work of our staff yet we acknowledge that there is so much more to be done.

To be clear, we were not able to fully anticipate the challenges COVID would present nor the impact the regulation would have on different eras of Veterans when drafting the modified regulations. Through the evaluation of feedback from internal quality assessments, Veterans, caregivers, and VSOs, along with other partners, including those with us today, we recognize the need to take a step back and reassess.

We have heard and understand the issues that have been raised about the rate of acceptance in PCAFC as well as the concerns regarding our legacy participants and eligibility criteria. CSP has taken efforts to closely examine program data and as we gain increasing granularity with our data systems, we can better identify and define trends that help us and others understand the true performance of this program.

Now, more than ever, Veterans and caregivers have more options available to appeal a PCAFC decision with which they disagree. A ruling by the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, makes available PCAFC decisions to be appealed to the Board of Veterans Appeals (Board). CSP is actively implementing the necessary infrastructure and processes to offer the full spectrum of options available under the Appeals Modernization Act (AMA), which include: Supplemental Claim, Higher-Level Review, and appeals to the Board.

As a VA nurse, a daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter of Veterans and in partnership with the Dr. Richardson, a psychologist, combat Veteran and former member of the Navy Medical Service Corps, you have our commitment to guide CSP to be the preeminent program in the industry on caregiving. We welcome and invite you, this committee, our partners and stakeholders to help us in achieving our mission. I

thank you again for this opportunity to discuss the accomplishments and opportunities of our program and we stand ready to respond to your questions.