

Statement for the Record

of the

NATIONAL MILITARY FAMILY ASSOCIATION

Before the

**UNITED STATES SENATE
VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

June 15, 2017

**Not for Publication Until Released by
The Committee**

The National Military Family Association is the leading nonprofit organization committed to strengthening and protecting military families. Our over 40 years of accomplishments have made us a trusted resource for families and the Nation's leaders. We have been at the vanguard of promoting an appropriate quality of life for active duty, National Guard, Reserve, retired service members, their families and survivors from the seven Uniformed Services: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and the Commissioned Corps of the Public Health Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Association Volunteers in military communities worldwide provide a direct link between military families and the Association staff in the Nation's capital. These volunteers are our "eyes and ears," bringing shared local concerns to national attention.

The Association does not have or receive federal grants or contracts.

Our website is: www.MilitaryFamily.org.

Since its enactment in 2009, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has been an exceptionally valuable benefit for service members and their families, allowing thousands of veterans and family members to pursue postsecondary education and prepare for careers outside the military. The educational benefits available through the GI Bill have drawn many individuals to the military, while the opportunity to transfer those benefits to a spouse or children has encouraged others to remain in the service. From almost every standpoint, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has been an unqualified success. Preserving and enhancing the benefit for future generations of service members must be a priority.

While the Post-9/11 GI Bill is already an exceptionally valuable benefit for service members and their families, it is also true that gaps exist, reducing the value of the benefit for some members of our community. Our Association appreciates that Congress is considering provisions to further improve the Post-9/11 GI Bill and increase its value for service members and their families. While each of the provisions under consideration has merit, there are two that directly address family members using transferred GI Bill Benefits. We urge Congress to give special consideration to these proposals that would increase the value of the benefit for military families.

S. 410, *Shauna Hill Post-9/11 Education Transferability Act*

Under current law, Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits may only be transferred to a spouse or child while the service member is still in the military. No new designation can be made after the service member separates or retires. While this restriction is reasonable in most cases, it makes no provision for the tragic circumstance in which a family member passes away before using the transferred benefit. The *Shauna Hill Post-9/11 Education Transferability Act* addresses this issue by allowing veterans to transfer unused GI Bill benefits to a family member following the death of the original designee. Families in this situation have already undergone the unspeakable pain of losing a spouse or child. They should not also have to suffer the loss of earned education benefits.

S. 798, *Yellow Ribbon Improvement Act*

One disparity that has always puzzled us is the provision barring spouses of currently serving service members using transferred benefits from participating in the Yellow Ribbon GI Education Enhancement Program (Yellow Ribbon program). Ending that inequity would greatly increase the value of the benefit for many military families and make it possible for more military spouses to pursue the education they need to help support their families.

Like their civilian counterparts, many military families rely on two incomes to help make ends meet. However, the challenges of military life – specifically, frequent relocations due to military-ordered moves – make it difficult for military spouses to pursue careers. Many end up returning to school to pursue education in portable career fields more compatible with the military lifestyle. For a family in this situation, transferring Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to a spouse is a logical and practical choice, allowing a spouse to obtain needed education and training without adding to the family's financial burden. One Air Force spouse told us this about her decision to use transferred GI Bill benefits to complete her own education:

Getting this degree will raise my earning potential, and impact my family's budget. By the time my kids are ready to go to college, I could be earning much more money, and have an easier time helping pay their tuition...The Post-9/11 GI Bill has the potential to make a real difference for my family NOW. He is a "lifer," and won't be out of the military for another 10-15 years (knock on wood). By then, he won't need the benefit. But I need it now, and our family

needs my employment income now...Getting this degree will help me become more employable. It will make me more competitive. I may still struggle to find a job, and military life may still present its own challenges, but it's always better to make sure there are multiple doors (and windows!) open to me. This degree will unlock them all.

This military family – and many others – benefited from the opportunity to transfer Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to a spouse. However, the benefit for this family was significantly reduced in value because military spouses – like currently serving service members and Fry Scholarship recipients -- are not eligible for the Yellow Ribbon program.

The Yellow Ribbon program greatly enhances the value of the Post-9/11 GI Bill by offsetting some of the difference between tuition cost and the base GI Bill benefit. It allows veterans and children using transferred benefits to attend private institutions without incurring a heavy financial burden. The same benefit should be available all individuals using transferred GI Bill benefits, to include Fry Scholarship recipients, currently serving service members, and military spouses. The *Yellow Ribbon Improvement Act* addresses this inequity by extending Yellow Ribbon eligibility to anyone using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits.

We are grateful to Congress for recognizing the value of the GI Bill for service members and their families, and for considering steps to improve the benefit and preserve it over the long term. Thank you for the opportunity to express our views for the record.