

Opening Statement
Senator Susan Collins
“Military Caregivers: Families Serving For the Long Run”
June 14, 2017

Good afternoon. I welcome you all – veterans, caregivers, and advocates, especially my former colleague, Senator Elizabeth Dole, who is an extraordinary advocate for our military caregivers.

Our military families, heroes in plain clothing, are serving in American cities and towns every single day.

The effects of military service often do not end with a tour of duty. For many veterans and their families, the journey sometimes extends for a lifetime. For some with both visible and invisible scars, the transition home is not easy. Recovery, too, can take decades. Along the way, mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, and other family members and friends, step in to serve.

Today, we will focus on those who care for America’s veterans. In the United States, there are 5.5 million military caregivers. These family members and loved ones provide care on a constant and routine basis to veterans. They are often vital in assisting veterans to make the transition all the way home. Military caregivers improve recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration of wounded, injured, and disabled veterans.

The number of military caregivers has been on the rise as veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan return home. Approximately 20 percent of military caregivers today are caring for a post-9/11 veteran. The needs and experiences of post-9/11 veterans differ from those of pre-9/11 veterans. While veterans from past conflicts and wars are aging and facing age-related conditions including Alzheimer’s and cardiovascular diseases, post-9/11 veterans tend to be younger, and face higher rates of PTSD, depression, substance abuse, and traumatic brain injury. Today, we will learn more about the unique needs of military caregivers, and how to better support them.

We will also unveil a RAND report, commissioned by the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, called *Improving Support for America’s Hidden Heroes*. This report is a research blueprint for the future that offers a vision to advance our understanding of caregiver needs.

Our military caregivers, like all caregivers, make many personal and financial sacrifices to ensure that their loved ones have the care they need. They may have to miss work, turn down promotions, or even leave the workforce, creating enormous financial strain for families. This toll affects the national economy as a whole. The loss in productivity just among post-9/11 caregivers costs our nation approximately \$6 billion per year.

I have introduced bipartisan legislation that would better serve caregivers, including military caregivers. The RAISE Family Caregivers Act would require the Department of Health

and Human Services to develop a national strategy to recognize and support our more than 40 million family caregivers. The RAISE Family Caregivers Act, which I introduced with Senator Baldwin, has passed the HELP Committee, and I look forward to seeing it signed into law as a result of the advocacy of many here today.

In addition, the bipartisan Military and Veteran Caregiver Services Improvement Act would expand eligibility for VA's caregiver program to veterans of all generations, not just the post-9/11 generation. This is a program that helps veterans who are wounded, ill, or injured, by supporting and providing resources to those who have taken on a caregiver role for veterans.

And, the Lifespan Respite Care Reauthorization Act would authorize \$15 million per year over the next five years to allow full-time caregivers to take a temporary break from their responsibilities. This respite care is critical. It protects the health of caregivers, decreases the need for professional long-term care, and allow individuals who require care to remain at home.

Despite their enormous sacrifice, military caregivers typically do not receive awards and admiration that America's veterans do. That does not mean that they don't deserve it. We must never forget our military caregivers, who are also true heroes. America's military caregivers enable veterans living with visible and invisible injuries to recover, remain involved with their communities, and enjoy fuller lives.

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