

ISSUE BRIEF: FAMILY CAREGIVERS FOR VETERANS

Family members of severely disabled veterans, whose lives and livelihoods have been interrupted to care for their loved ones, need increased federal support and assistance while they care for veterans on the road to recovery.

The Situation

- Families of severely injured veterans of Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom face daunting challenges. Often, these families need to drop everything to take care of the physical and mental injuries of their sons, daughters, spouses, or parents.
- Once severely disabled veterans return home, their family caregivers provide the needed support to maintain the veteran's independence and remain in their community. Research shows family caregivers efforts can even delay or avoid institutionalization of the veteran.
- Caring for a severely disabled veteran exacts a high cost on family caregivers. They often shoulder burdens, strain, and develop depression as a result of their caregiving responsibilities. They face the disruption and change of their family's life, withdrawal from school or loss of employment and employer-based benefits, sacrificing their health, well-being, and economic future.

The Challenge

- A complex system of overlapping and changing support programs for severely disabled veterans poses a great challenge for family caregivers to understand and navigate, resulting in a state of confusion for the caregiver.
- Although close family members are willing to bear the burden of being the primary caregivers for severely disabled veterans, they seldom receive proper support services and deserve the thanks from their government through financial compensation and social and medical support.
- Family caregivers themselves face enormous physical, mental, and psychosocial challenges, yet caregiver support services from DOD and VA are limited by law and lack resources.

The Solution

- Family caregivers should receive a comprehensive array of support services, to include respite care, financial compensation, vocational counseling, basic health care, relationship, marriage and family counseling, and mental health care for the psychological burden faced by caregivers. By supporting the caregiver, we support the veteran.
- Policymaking and planning to better serve family caregivers of severely injured veterans should include statistically representative data from a periodic national survey and individual assessments of family caregivers of severely injured and disabled veterans.
- A "Caregiver Toolkit" should be provided both in electronic and hard copy, to include a concise "recovery roadmap" to assist families in understanding and maneuvering through the complex systems of care and resources available to them.