Melanie Swoboda
Caregivers' Testimony before the
U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging
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Good afternoon, senators, and thank you Chairman Collins and Ranking Member Casey for having Joe and I at this hearing on military and veteran caregivers.

My husband, retired Sergeant First Class Joseph Swoboda, is a three-time combat veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was deployed during the initial invasion in 2003, again in 2005, and again in 2007. Each time, the deployments were longer and longer. In 2003, he left for eight months, in 2005 for 12 months and in 2007, Joe was overseas for 15 months.

During the initial invasion, and again in 2005, Joe sustained injuries in two explosions, in both of which he lost consciousness. However, because of the intensity of the fighting, there was no time for him to be checked by medics, so he shook it off and remained in the battle. Years later, the injuries he sustained would become impossible to ignore.

This several year period of rapid deployments was a whirlwind. Even when Joe was home, he was not home—when he was not at war, he was training for war, in field exercises, so there was no time to recognize he was having any mental health issues. He had to push through it, and so did I.

After the third deployment, Joe asked to be given an assignment where he could train without being deployed. However, when he stopped going to combat, that was when the problems really started, when we finally had the opportunity to slow down, and these difficulties he was having started coming to light.

I knew he was struggling - he was home, but he had never really come back from Iraq. A fellow soldier, who was also a trusted friend saw his struggle, too, and thankfully, insisted that Joe seek help for the overwhelming symptoms he was experiencing as a result of his Traumatic Brain Injuries and Post Traumatic Stress. The invisibility of his wounds meant most in the Army had never recognized Joe as being injured.

Once these symptoms began to affect his work, Joe was medically retired

from the Army and during his out processing, a staff member at Ft. Benning handed me an application for the VA Caregiver Program. I filled out the paperwork, but I wasn't really sure what I was applying for. Of course, even when Joe had still been active duty, I was his caregiver, but I had never recognized it. All of the tasks I was doing were the ones you'll hear any caregiver talk about: I was managing his medications, I was raising the kids alone, I was managing finances, and I was helping him remember things that he could no longer remember.

I love my husband, and I would absolutely care for him regardless, but having caregiver support programs in place is so important to me because for the first time in 20 years, I can breathe. I can't imagine how much harder this would be without those programs—but I know millions of caregivers manage every single day.

It's still stressful, there's still a lot I have to do, but having the financial support of receiving a stipend and the opportunity for respite care has been crucial for my family.

There are days when I think I can't go on like this, I can't have this much stress and pressure on me. And it's not just the stress on me, I also see how the stress of caregiving affects our children, too. Respite services, though, give all of us an opportunity to recharge.

Support systems like the Dole Caregiver Fellowship, with the network of knowledgeable caregivers who can help answer so many questions, and programs offered by the VA such as the Caregiver Support Program make this sustainable for me and for so many other caregivers.

This kind of support should be available to all military and veteran caregivers, whatever era their veteran served. It's really helping people. It's really making a difference. I hope that you will consider supporting and passing the Military and Veteran Caregiver Services Improvement Act to do just that.

Thank you so much for your time this afternoon. I look forward to answering any questions you might have.