

**Senator Elizabeth Dole**  
**Testimony before the**  
**U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging**  
**6/14/17**

Thank you Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Casey, and members of the committee for calling today's hearing.

By doing so, the committee demonstrates its dedication to recognizing our nation's hidden heroes—their honorable service, their enormous sacrifice, and their selfless daily, and often lifelong, journey of care.

Chairman Collins, I owe you special thanks for your support of key legislation and the Hidden Heroes Caucus, sending a strong signal that our nation's leaders must stand with America's military caregivers. Thank you so very much.

This is not my first time testifying before the Senate Special Committee on Aging. Recently, I came across testimony I gave on June 29, 1978-- 39 years ago, as a member of the Federal Trade Commission. And, like each of you, I once sat up there on the dais as a member of this committee.

To be honest, with the many issues before the Senate, I didn't know at the time the true benefit military and veteran caregivers are making to our nation. And the huge personal toll it is taking.

That all changed for me in 2011 when my husband Bob was hospitalized at Walter Reed. I became friends with young spouses, mothers, dads...sitting bedside, selflessly looking after their wounded, ill or injured veteran. Their strength was incredible. Yet, I could see they were carrying an emotional weight almost too heavy to bear. As they reeled over their loved one's injuries, they were being asked to make extremely difficult decisions without any preparation. And they were quietly wrestling with the fact that they might be serving in this new role for the rest of their lives.

As I visited with them day in and day out, my eyes were opened to the critical role these caregivers play in helping our wounded warriors recover and thrive. And sadly, how much stress is placed on them by the

tremendous responsibilities they take on, without any real preparation, often in isolation, and with very little support.

Just as heartbreaking are the stories of pre-9/11 caregivers who have been supporting their loved ones for years, struggling to care for the latent effects of undiagnosed post traumatic stress, Agent Orange, exposure to burn pits, or decades-old traumatic brain injuries that are now causing early on-set dementia. These caregivers are just as terrified. Just as isolated. Just as important to their veterans. But when they apply for the VA Caregiver stipend, they are told that the timing of their veteran's service does not qualify them for support.

I established the Elizabeth Dole Foundation in 2012 to raise awareness and support, empower military caregivers and recognize their service to our nation. We began by commissioning the RAND Corporation to develop the first comprehensive, nationwide, evidence-based research on military caregivers.

At the time, we knew so little, but realized we needed to uncover exactly... Who are military caregivers? How many are there in America? What roles do they play? What are their needs? How old are they? What kind of support do they provide? And for what type of injuries?

There are 5.5 million Hidden Heroes in our nation. Each provides daily support and care around various functions of day-to-day life. These women and men manage medications, schedule and coordinate appointments, provide emotional and physical support, arrange for rehabilitation, handle legal and financial challenges, and more.

Caregivers support every generation, from World War II veterans, like my husband Bob, to injured service members of our current operations. In fact, there are 1.1 million military caregivers, most under the age of 30 with children in the home, who care for post-9/11 era veterans and service members.

Though caregivers may not always be easy to recognize, they are all around us.

Our research also helped clearly define the broad societal benefits of caregiving. RAND's experts concluded that the most important factor to a

wounded warrior's recovery or improvement was a well-supported caregiver. This statement could have been the headline of the report, but it was overshadowed by more alarming findings.

We discovered that by nearly every measure, military and veteran caregivers were suffering under the weight of their responsibilities. The study found high instances of isolation, physical ailments, depression, unemployment, debt, and much, much more.

Yes, caregivers are vital to those who were injured while protecting our freedom and our security. But if we do not come to the aid of these hidden heroes, a crucial, irreplaceable support system for disabled service members and veterans will be imperiled.

There is also an economic argument for supporting military caregivers. They provide nearly \$14 billion dollars a year as an unpaid, voluntary workforce—enormous costs that would otherwise be borne by our society.

These women and men do not necessarily think of themselves as caregivers—for example, “I’m just the spouse taking care of my husband, the mother caring for my son”—and they feel uncomfortable asking for help. This makes it difficult to identify them, and in turn, difficult to connect them to the support they might need.

And, very few services and helpful resources are designed specifically for military caregivers. We want to solve these problems by providing a continuum of care across a lifetime.

That’s why, in addition to continuing our research partnership with RAND, the Elizabeth Dole Foundation is actively working with leaders in government as well as the private sector, nonprofits, and the faith-based community.

Last September, we launched Hidden Heroes, a multifaceted campaign to expose the tremendous challenges and long-term needs faced by our nation’s military caregivers and to inspire fellow Americans to seek solutions. We also introduced HiddenHeroes.org, a first of its kind website full of carefully *vett*ed resources and a safe, secure place for caregivers to connect with one another. In less than a year, more than 60,000 caregivers

and concerned citizens have come to the site to search for information and to take action to help.

Our campaign is chaired by actor Tom Hanks, and we have enlisted the help of several other high-profile individuals as Hidden Heroes ambassadors, like Ryan Phillippe. Ryan is a multi-award winning actor and star of NBCUniversal/USA Network's conspiracy thriller, SHOOTER. He plays the role of military veteran, Bob Lee Swagger. More significantly, Ryan has close family ties to the military community.

In real life, Ryan is using his own "swagger" to privately meet with military caregivers across the country to help amplify their voices. Our Hidden Heroes Campaign features Ryan in a national public service announcement that has been seen across the country in newspapers, magazines, on TV and digitally.

Ryan, your work with us is extraordinary. My heartfelt thanks to you!

We also announced Hidden Heroes Cities, the galvanizing of communities to identify caregivers in their midst and the local resources to support them. I am proud to say we have recruited 100 cities to date, from Augusta to Phoenix, from Pittsburgh to Nashville.

This is where the real action is happening. We need to wrap our arms around these caregivers where they live and inspire them to raise their hands so that our communities can deliver the support they deserve. We are asking you to encourage cities in your states to become Hidden Heroes Cities.

Most importantly, we are not doing this alone. In the Foundation's National Coalition, there are more than 300 partners. The VA, local, state, and federal leaders, faith-based organizations, VSOs and MSOs, philanthropists, corporations, even the media, are helping to power the Hidden Heroes movement.

The VA Caregiver Program is one great example of what happens when coalitions come together to work with Congress to address gaps in services. And we continue to press for needed reforms and to collaborate

with the VA to make this program much more efficient and more accessible to a broader range of military caregivers.

As you listen to Ryan and our other panelists, I urge you to consider taking two actions after today's hearing:

First, make the bipartisan Military and Veteran Caregiver Services Improvement Act the law of the land.

This bill will expand essential services for caregivers of all eras. It will also provide direct assistance with some of the top challenges military caregivers face every day including respite, childcare, financial advice, legal counseling, and education.

I have with me a letter signed by 30 Hidden Heroes partner organizations. It calls on Congress to urgently pass this piece of life-changing legislation. This is the third year in a row we have asked for passage of this critical legislation—let's make it the law of the land this year.

Our second ask is that Congress invest in the critical research necessary to *sustain* positive outcomes for our caregivers in the coming years.

In the next panel, you'll hear from Terri Tanielian, Senior Behavioral Scientist at the RAND Corporation.

As a follow up to our 2014 study, the Elizabeth Dole Foundation commissioned RAND last year to develop a blueprint to forecast the most important areas where additional research is required in order to effectively support military caregivers' long term needs.

Terri will share key findings of the research blueprint today, which was released just this morning. These findings can inform us all—public, private, nonprofit, and local communities—on the most urgent areas where we need additional research.

We urge Congressional leaders to champion this research critical to our support of military caregivers five, ten, twenty years out...to work with us to provide funding to address these urgent research gaps.

And I have to tell you...Based on what we already know, we expect more alarming issues to be uncovered. Anecdotally, we are hearing more about caregiver substance abuse and caregiver suicide. Marriages between veterans and caregivers are more vulnerable than ever—the strain of the urgent challenges now and the long road ahead is becoming too much for too many.

Additionally, I want you to hear from some of our Hidden Heroes. There is truly no better way to appreciate their service and sacrifice than hearing directly from them.

We hope their testimony inspires each of you to join the bipartisan Hidden Heroes Caucus. I hope you'll be an advocate with your colleagues in the Senate and in the House. Show Americans that we can come together around the most important issues of our day.

There is much work yet to be done to ensure our hidden heroes are empowered with the same support and love they give so selflessly every day. And, as I said, we cannot do it alone. We need your help.

Our nation has long admired and respected our military men and women who have served our country so valiantly. And we have always reserved a special honor for those who returned from service with physical and emotional scars.

Our goal now is an America where caregivers are empowered, appreciated and recognized for their service, an America where military caregivers are woven into the very fabric of the nation's appreciation of our military. Thank you so very much.