



*Alexis and Jason Courneen speak in support of pre-9/11 veteran caregiver benefits at the introduction of legislation to improve such support.*

# Help for the unsung heroes

## A step in the right direction for caregivers

By Ashleigh Byrnes

**A**fter more than a decade of war, a study by RAND Corp. found that more than 1.1 million family members and friends are caring for injured and disabled veterans who have served since Sept. 11, 2001. These caregivers often do so without a formal support network.

For the 5.5 million veteran caregivers in the U.S., this information is likely nothing new—it remains, simply, a daily fact of life. For 4.4 million of those caregivers, things are often even more challenging as they perform their duties without the additional benefits from the VA's Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers program.

The RAND report, released in 2014, helped to draw much-needed attention to the dire situation many caregivers face and offered a resounding echo to the critical changes DAV has long called for.

“Five years ago, DAV played an instrumental role in developing the legislation requiring the Department of Veterans Affairs to establish a comprehensive caregiver support program for family caregivers of severely injured veterans. Unfortunately, when lawmakers finally passed the legislation, it limited these benefits only to caregivers of veterans injured after 9/11. Caregivers of veterans from Vietnam, Korea, World War II and other eras were not eligible,” Washington Headquarters Executive Director Garry Augustine said. “DAV believes that family caregivers of all severely ill and injured veterans—regardless

of when they served—should be eligible for comprehensive caregiver support.”

In late April, Sen. Patty Murray introduced the Military and Veteran Caregiver Services Improvement Act of 2015, a bill that aims to expand the resources available to family caregivers.

One of the biggest changes the bill would make is expanding program eligibility to include veterans of all eras of service. According to the VA, as many as 88,000 family caregivers of veterans are currently ineligible because the veteran was injured or fell ill prior to September 11, 2001. Expanding eligibility for this program is one of DAV's highest legislative priorities.

The bill also focuses on making the following changes:

- Allowing veterans to transfer their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to their dependents;
- Expanding eligibility to include a wider range of illnesses and injuries;
- Removing restrictions on who is eligible to become a caregiver;
- Placing more emphasis on mental health injuries and traumatic brain injury (TBI); and
- Making caregivers eligible for child care programs or offering stipends for child care.

DAV member and Coast Guard veteran Alexis Courneen and her husband, Jason, attended the introduction of the bill. While serving aboard ship in 1998, Alexis was severely injured when she was struck by

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Date	City	Location
July 9	Indianapolis, IN	Murat Shrine Temple
July 16	St. Louis, MO	Chaifetz Arena at Saint Louis University
July 23	Sacramento, CA	Aerospace Museum of California
August 6	San Diego, CA	Liberty Station's NTC Promenade @ Corky McMillin Event Center
August 20	Louisville, KY	Papa John's Cardinal Stadium
August 27	Dallas, TX	Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center
August 27	Denver, CO	Sports Authority Field at Mile High
September 2	Boston, MA	Gillette Stadium
September 3	San Antonio, TX	Norris Conference Centers
September 10	Houston, TX	Minute Maid Park
September 17	New York, NY	Hotel Pennsylvania
September 17	Riverside, CA	Riverside Municipal Auditorium

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**Help for the unsung heroes**

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a several-ton buoy being lifted from the water. She has since lived with the lingering effects of a TBI and many other serious physical injuries.

Jason has been a husband to Alexis and father to their two children, all while balancing full-time employment to support the family. Together, they made the decision to close his business, pick up and move to be closer to the Boston VA medical center where she was able to access the care she needed.

If they had been eligible for many of the benefits afforded post-9/11 veterans, things may have turned out differently.

"Every time she had an appointment 200 miles from home, I had to make a decision: Did I want to be a provider today, or should I go with her?" said Jason.

Jason explained he and Alexis had been on their own for so long, they learned to make it work. However, he admitted, "If I sit here and think about what we've gone through, I get pissed off." He urged passage of the bill, so other families would be able to find some relief in an already difficult situation.

At a Senate Veterans Affairs' Committee hearing just prior to the introduction of the bill, VA Secretary Bob

McDonald stated, "We're very supportive of the legislation you've written. We think that pre-9/11 caregivers should get the same benefits that post-9/11 get."

The bill is estimated to cost \$9.5 billion over four years and would be phased in to reduce strain on the VA. The department has requested additional funding



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*Joseph A. Violante, National Legislative Director*

to support the caregiver program and funds to hire more caregiver program coordinators.

"Family caregivers provide crucial support to help veterans achieve meaningful and active lives, often at the expense of their own education, employment and health," said National Legislative Director Joseph Violante. "Our government owes them meaningful support and recognition for their sacrifice and for the sacrifice of the loved ones they care for.

"By supporting the caregiver, we support the veteran." ■