

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

May 5, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
S-230, U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
S-221, U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Leader McConnell, Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Leader McCarthy:

As Congress works to deliver the American people relief through an additional COVID-19 response package, we write to urge inclusion of the Burial Rights for America's Veterans' Efforts (BRAVE) Act (S. 598/H.R. 497). The BRAVE Act would increase VA burial benefits for non-service connected deaths and authorize annual adjustments based on Consumer Price Index (CPI) increases for all VA burial benefits. This update is more important now than ever.

Forty percent of veterans are over the age of 65¹ and many young veterans suffer respiratory damage associated with burn pit exposure². Therefore a significant share of veterans are at high risk for COVID-19 exposure becoming fatal. VA is tracking 9,691 veterans who have tested positive for Coronavirus (resulting in 770 known veteran deaths to date). The actual number of veteran cases is likely considerably higher given that not all veterans receive health care from VA.

Veterans should be treated equally based on their service. Unfortunately, current policy penalizes survivors based on the circumstances at the time of death. Veterans who die of a non-service connected condition outside of a VA facility, perhaps at home under quarantine or in a non-VA emergency room, are offered just \$300 for funeral expenses³. Meanwhile, VA will pay up to \$796 toward burial and funeral expenses for non-service connected deaths inside a VA facility. The BRAVE Act would grant parity to survivors by making the benefit the same regardless of where a veteran dies.

The last increase to the non-service connected burial allowance occurred in 1978. The last increase to the service connected burial allowance occurred in 2001⁴. That means these benefits

¹ VA Veteran Population Data: https://www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran_Population.asp

² Ackerman, S. (2020) Military 'Burn Pits' Trashed These Veterans' Lungs. Then the Virus Hit. *The Daily Beast*. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/military-burn-pits-trashed-these-veterans-lungs-then-coronavirus-hit>

³ VA Funeral Benefits: <https://www.benefits.va.gov/compensation/claims-special-burial.asp>

⁴ Statement of Dr. Paul R. Laurence, VA Undersecretary for Benefits. (August 1, 2018). Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs.

have stayed the same while the costs of funerals have increased. The average funeral cost in 2019 was \$9,135⁵. Moreover, VA has testified support for the BRAVE Act and requested an update to this benefit as a legislative proposal in its Fiscal Year 2021 budget submission⁶.

Every veteran who served honorably deserves a dignified farewell. At this time of crisis, it is critical that Congress acts to update and fix the unfair VA funeral benefit structure. Thank you for your leadership and for standing up for our nation's veterans during this time of crisis.

Sincerely,



Gary C. Peters
United States Senator



Adam Kinzinger
Member of Congress



Cheri Bustos
Member of Congress

⁵ News Release. National Funeral Directors Association: <https://www.nfda.org/news/media-center/nfda-news-releases/id/4797/2019-nfda-general-price-list-study-shows-funeral-costs-not-rising-as-fast-as-rate-of-inflation>

⁶ VA FY21 Budget Submission, Volume 1, Page 19, Legislative Proposal 21:
<https://www.va.gov/budget/docs/summary/fy2021VAbudgetVolume1supplementalInformationAndAppendices.pdf>