

House Bill 569 Proponent Testimony

Dr. Geri Lynn Maples, Military Spouse Caregiver to Mr. Robert Maples, Operation Iraqi Freedom Veteran Ohio Army National Guard 324th Military Police Company

Chapter Director, Blue Star Families of Dayton Southwestern Ohio, 2020 Ohio Dole Fellow

November 30, 2022

Chairman Johnson, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Martin and members of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee thank you for the allowing me the opportunity share my testimony in support of House Bill 569.

I am Dr. Geri Lynn Maples, and I am the Chapter Director with Blue Star Families of Dayton & Southwestern Ohio, the 2020 Dole Fellow for the state of Ohio, and for the past 18 years, I have been the sole caregiver to my husband Robert a wounded Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran. It is an honor and privilege to represent Ohio's current and future Military Caregivers. Robert returned home from duty in Iraq on September 1st, 2004. At the time, I was a server at a local restaurant, our two children Shane and Emily were ages 10 and 7. Initially after returning home from service, Robert struggled to find employment. However, a short time later, he was hired for a position in the hospital security field the same field he worked in prior to his deployment to Iraq.

However, things began to quickly go downhill with his health and in 2007 we almost lost him on 3 different occasions. Robert lost the ability to swallow food and even water. He was unable to work for several months and in October of 2008 his VA Medical Team informed us that he was no longer allowed to work. During this period, I was going from job to job trying to make up for lost finances while we waited for his VA Service Connection Rating and Appeals process to be approved. The situation was very stressful, and we were facing foreclosure on our home.

In 2009, I made the bold decision to return to school and embarked on my academic journey and enrolled at Miami University. While at Miami, I took the opportunity to understand the challenges that were wreaking havoc on my husband's health and our family.

In December of 2012. I earned my undergraduate degree. Despite that, the new career and the solid foundation I sought and dedicated my studies too, was unreachable. Throughout 2013, I continued to search for the right position. Unable to forge forward, I enrolled in a master's program in 2014 specifically designed to serve military families.

I graduated in December of that year, and it was at that time, that I discovered my new path. That path enabled me to serve on behalf of military families. In addition, I was able to continue my academic journey that provided me with the tools to continue to advocate on behalf of families like mine who were facing new challenges of many capacities. In 2019, I earned my PhD.

Despite my success, this academic journey has left me with a magnitude of debt. However, it also provided me with the tools to advocate on behalf of my fellow Ohio Military Caregivers who I am proud to serve and speak for today. Like my dear friend and fellow caregiver Alison, who like me had a dream to seek education as a method of transition into her caregiver role. Yet,

found her opportunity thwarted because of financial constraints that left her just 6 credit hours remaining to complete her degree.

According to the Blue Star Families “Caregiving in Military Families Special Report” released in 2021, 43% of Caregivers reported Financial Stress as the number one stressor. 29% reported that they were un/underemployed and facing financial difficulties due to student loans. The Hidden Hero Scholarship will be life changing for Ohio Caregivers by providing them the opportunity to gain the skills needed to adjust to the Caregiver Era.

Aside my massive amount of debt, I consider myself to be blessed to obtain academic success. I understand the value associated with education in the transition to military caregiver. As part of my awareness in serving on behalf of military caregivers, I have come to understand that a lot of other military caregivers do not have the opportunity to complete degrees because of financial limitations. House Bill 569 will be a change maker for the lives of Military Caregivers, their Veterans, and their families.

Chairman Johnson, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Martin and members of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 569.