



THE JOURNEY OF LOVING, CARING, LOSING, GRIEVING, & LIVING ON

THE EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES OF AMERICA'S
MILITARY AND VETERAN CAREGIVER SURVIVORS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Caregiver to Survivor (CzS) Partnership
Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) | Elizabeth Dole Foundation (EDF)
Red Cross Military and Veteran Caregiver Network (MVCN)

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, millions of Americans caring for an ill or injured loved one have become bereaved caregiver survivors. The pandemic contributed to these losses, along with the continued rise in suicide and drug-associated deaths. Military and veteran families and caregivers have not been immune from these losses or from those due to toxic exposures.

Today, illness and suicide loss account for the top two causes of death for service members and veterans. Through years of caring, their families have faced changes in roles and relationships, too often becoming burdened by otherwise avoidable hardships due to a lack of understanding and insufficient support. They have not, however, escaped death's legacy of loss and grief.

To respectfully understand the journey of the growing population of bereaved caregivers and suicide survivors, it is essential that we research, record, and report their experiences.

The Caregiver to Survivor (C2S) Project was designed to increase our understanding of the journey of military and veteran caregiver and suicide survivors by giving voice to their experiences, and the moments that matter most to them before and after their loss and grief. It identifies their needs and their requests and shares the steps being taken by C2S Partners to ease the often long, laborious, and lonely journey of caregiver and suicide survivors.

“Our nation’s military and veteran caregivers and caregiver survivors are the hands and hearts of a nation.”

MAJOR FINDINGS

The bereavement experience of military and veteran caregiver and suicide survivors may include the following: isolation, quarantines, anticipatory grief and traumatic loss. They also often face legal and financial hardships. Grieving survivors of all ages are often at greater risk for living with depression and higher stress levels especially without support.

Focus group and survey feedback, and research, identified common challenges that occur before and after the death of a military or veteran loved one:

- **Having multiple or changing roles is depleting** — physically, emotionally, mentally, and financially, especially when necessary for managing the safety and welfare of self and family. Juggling ongoing caring roles — especially while grieving — is almost impossible.
- **Planning for and meeting legal and financial needs requires assistance**, but stigmas create barriers to seeking help at all phases of the caregiver-to-survivor journey.
- **Identifying and accessing resources and services is difficult.** Accessing mental health services for family members of all ages and relationships can be especially challenging. In grief, connections to peer support and a peer-support network are lifesaving.

An extensive literature and research review by the Elizabeth Dole Center of Excellence for Veteran and Caregiver Research concluded that research on bereavement experiences overall, and on specific interventions, is generally limited. There is a mismatch between survivor-reported needs and researched interventions: survivor needs are multidimensional, but interventions are narrow and typically focused on the individual, not the family. The differential effects of interventions on types of survivors, their needs, and circumstances are understudied. Outcome measures are limited and tend to rely on self-reporting.

The Center did find evidence that both pre-bereavement and peer-support interventions were effective. Pre-bereavement interventions that occurred early in grief — in the anticipatory-loss phase pre-death — yielded better outcomes. Peer-support interventions, even remote, were particularly effective in cases of suicide loss.

MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Focus group and survey feedback, and research, made recommendations to best support caregivers and survivors before and after the death of a military or veteran loved one:

- **Increase access to a full range of relevant resources and services** for the entire caregiving and suicide-loss survivor family before, during, and after the death of a military or veteran loved one.
- **Expand the availability of grief and bereavement support — especially peer support** — for survivors of all ages before and after death to mitigate the profound, prolonged, and potentially permanent impact of loss for the entire caregiving and suicide loss survivor family.
- **Broaden research that can spur innovations in policy, programs, and practices** to best serve all military and veteran caregiver and suicide survivors.

C2S ACTIONS

Jointly, the [Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors \(TAPS\)](#), the [Elizabeth Dole Foundation \(EDF\)](#), and the [Red Cross Military and Veteran Caregiver Network \(MVCN\)](#) will continue to share their standardized process for the “warm referral” of caregiver and suicide-loss survivors among their organizations and with relevant stakeholders to ensure better support before and after a loved one’s death. Other actions include:

- TAPS will lead the collaboration of Gold Star organizations to support the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) pilot of a Gold Coat Program to train volunteer survivors to offer supplementary support to caregivers and survivors, including information on resources and services and navigation assistance before and after the death of their loved one.
- TAPS will continue to offer evidence-informed, peer-based grief and bereavement activities for surviving friends and family of all ages. To increase understanding of their grief experiences and the benefits of bereavement support, TAPS will increase its training of caregiver and suicide-loss survivors, peer supporters, mentors, and professionals — including governmental personnel — through the [TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing®](#).
- EDF’s Hidden Helpers Coalition will offer support and guidance for family members, including developmentally appropriate resources and support for children and youth. Materials will be made available for children and parents on EDF’s forthcoming Family Resource Hub. Webinars, featuring experts on grief and children, will be offered to provide guidance to family members.
- EDF will also expand its information and offerings of training and CEUs to health care providers through its [Academy for Inclusive Care](#) and create new financial resources for caregivers to better navigate financial challenges and secure their financial future.
- The Red Cross MVCN is hosting a new inventory of verified resources and services for caregivers anticipating loss and caregiver survivors experiencing bereavement on the [Red Cross Hero Care Resources Directory](#) platform. This dedicated web-based search tab contains content specifically responsive to the needs of military and veteran caregivers and caregiver survivors. It will help individuals, organizations, and agencies find and utilize more verified and relevant resources and services. This information has been shared with the National Resource Directory (NRD) and Code of Support Patriot Link and will be available to other stakeholders.
- The Red Cross MVCN will offer additional [Caregiver Education](#), to include webinars and virtual engagements, such as texts and chats. These will be recorded in an online library and will include training to provide education for practical skills on how to care for a loved one and whole health opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic of bereavement has touched our nation, and military and veteran caregivers and survivors, in significant and lasting ways. Grief combined with separations, debilitation, and deaths from COVID; service-connected illness; and the trauma of suicide loss becomes complicated.

The C2S partners listened closely and intentionally to the moments that mattered most to them before, during, and after their loved one's death. They heard that: Confusion and chaos are common and often overwhelming and depleting; loss and grief occur before, during, and after death; access to the right resources and services at the right time can prevent and mitigate the greatest challenges and worst consequences; children and youth are significantly and lastingly touched by loss; and early interventions of bereavement and peer support are helpful to survivors of all ages.

Equipped with this information, we can better support the caregiver and suicide-loss survivor on the journey of loving, caring, losing, grieving, and living on. We can reduce the potential for greater and prolonged suffering — especially for the youngest and most vulnerable of our military and veteran survivors.

On the Cover: Each June, a Michigan meadow becomes a sea of red Flanders poppies, white daisies, and blue bachelor buttons as a living tribute to SGT Mateo Donaldson, who died by suicide in 2015 after serving our country. Mateo's surviving parents planted the wildflowers to honor their son, never knowing the comfort it would bring to military survivors and to service members and veterans carrying invisible wounds.

Photo Courtesy Of: Angie Smith Photography + More