

Senator Christopher J. Dodd

Testimony on the Support for Injured Servicemembers Act

Before the House Subcommittee on Workforce Protections

September 17, 2007

Chairwoman Woolsey, Ranking Member Wilson, and distinguished committee members: Thank you for this opportunity to testify on a measure vitally important to our troops and their families.

I am very proud to have worked with former Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole on this legislative effort to expand FMLA for military families. Unfortunately, Senator Dole is unable to be here today. Nonetheless, I deeply appreciate his asking me to draft this essential legislation to implement one of the key recommendations put forth by the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors.

As co-chairs of the Wounded Warriors Commission, Senator Dole and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala deserve our gratitude and I commend them for their thoughtful work in developing the Commission's report. I also want to take a moment to note that I am both pleased, and extremely grateful for, the bi-partisan support from my Senate colleagues including: Senator Clinton, the bill's cosponsor and Senators Dole, Graham, Kennedy, Chambliss, Reed, Mikulski, Murray, Salazar, Lieberman, Menendez, Brown, Nelson of Nebraska, and Cardin. Through the efforts of these colleagues just last month, this measure was unanimously adopted as an amendment to the Children's Health Insurance Program reauthorization.

Fourteen years ago, the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) declared a simple principle: workers should never be forced to choose between the jobs they need and the families they love. In the years since its passage, more than 50 million Americans have taken advantage of its protections to care for a sick loved one, recover from illness, or welcome a new baby into the family. And after the seven years, three presidents, and two vetoes it took to get the FMLA finally enacted into law, I am pleased to see that the debate is no longer about whether Americans have the right to its protections; but rather, about how it may best be expanded. I can say without reservation that no one is more deserving of those protections than those who risk their lives in the service of our country. Most of all, wounded soldiers deserve the care of their closest loved ones. That is exactly what I have offered in the Support for Injured Servicemembers Act.

It should come as no surprise that the Commission found that family members play a critical role in the recovery of our wounded servicemembers. The commitment shown by the families and friends of our troops is truly inspiring. According to the Commission's report, 33 percent of active duty servicemembers report that a family member or close friend relocated for extended

periods of time to help in their recoveries. It also points out that 21 percent of active duty servicemembers say that their friends or family members gave up jobs to find the time to care for them. To quote from the Commission's moving report:

“In virtually every case [of a wounded servicemember], a wife, husband, parent, brother, or sister has received the heart stopping telephone call telling them that their loved one is sick, or injured, half way around the world.”

These loved ones bear a tremendous burden. Add to that the fear of losing their jobs—it is more than we should demand from these families. How could we be unmoved by the story of Sarah Wade, whose husband lost an arm and suffered a severe traumatic brain injury in Iraq? Ms. Wade was fired from her job for spending too many months helping her husband recuperate—because she had, to quote her employer, “a lot going on” in her life. It's true—thousands of families like hers will have “a lot going on” in their lives until the day their soldiers' recoveries are complete. They will have “a lot going on,” because their loved ones sacrificed parts of their bodies for our country. And the very least we can give those families is the assurance that Sarah Wade never had—the assurance that, when they have returned from caring for the wounded, their jobs will still be there.

And with an all-volunteer military, supporting our military families is more essential today than ever: We recruit a soldier, but we retain a family. That is why the Commission recommended that FMLA be expanded to provide family members of combat-injured servicemembers up to six months of leave to care for their loved ones. And those six months are vital: according to staff at Walter Reed Medical Center, six months is the average length of time an injured servicemember needs to recover self-sufficiency. For the first time, this bill offers FMLA leave not just to parents, spouses, and children, but to next-of-kin, including siblings. Families—not the government—should decide for themselves who takes on the work of caring for their injured loved ones. This legislation recognizes that fact, and it's a major accomplishment. But it is just a first step in providing the support that our military families need.

Since its passage, I have sought to expand FMLA to include more employees, particularly in small businesses, to expand the definition of who is a caregiver, and also to provide paid leave. For many years, I have worked to build on the proven success of the FMLA and have been driven by my strong belief that more Americans are deserving of its protections. I will continue these efforts and seek additional resources for our military families, such as comprehensive child care, but will focus on passing the Support for Injured Servicemembers Act as soon as possible.

I deeply appreciate the partnership of Chairwoman Woolsey, along with Chairman Miller, who introduced companion legislation in the House of Representatives. I'd also like to recognize Congressman Altmire, who is here today, for his work on behalf of expanding FMLA for our military families. Our full debt to our troops is unpayable. But perhaps the best thing we can do for them is to get out of the way—to make it possible for the love of family to help heal their wounds. What this legislation does, then, is break down a barrier: the barrier between our troops and the care they need the most.

In conclusion, the Support for Injured Servicemembers offers just one of the critical ways in which we can better assist our military families. In a few moments you will hear from a group of people who truly understand the challenges facing our soldiers and their families. They have my admiration and my gratitude, and I look forward to working with all of them, including my long-time ally Debra Ness of the National Partnership for Women and Families. Together, we can provide critical support to the working families who sacrifice so much for our collective safety and security.

Again, I thank the subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today.