

## Pentagon confronts Gold Star divide among grieving military families

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📷 **1 of 3** | Andy Weiss, father of the late 1st Lt. Daniel Weiss, at his home on June 27. Daniel died by suicide in March 2012 after several tours in Afghanistan. Groups such as the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)... (Taylor Glascock for The Washington Post) **More** ▾

By [Dan Lamothe](#)

*The Washington Post*

First Lt. Daniel Weiss was a 25-year-old Army Ranger preparing for his fourth combat deployment to Afghanistan when he died by suicide at his Tacoma, apartment in 2012. There were difficult days after that, recalled his father, Andy. But what proved both surprising and hurtful, he said, were efforts to ensure his son's death was viewed differently than those of fellow service members who had been killed in action.

The family learned, for instance, that Daniel's name would be excluded from a monument at Joint Base Lewis-McChord memorializing casualties of war. A few years later, at a brunch for military survivors back home in Illinois, the Weisses were told their invitation had been an accident. Though they were allowed to stay, he said, it was made clear the event was for Gold Star families.

“To this day,” Andy Weiss said he feels a “profound sense of loss” when thinking about his son — a pain made worse by “this divisive ‘you’re a Gold Star and you’re not.’” There should be no distinction, in his view. To suggest otherwise, he added, is “ridiculous.”

Weiss' frustrations are part of a larger, emotionally charged dispute over how America recognizes the families of deceased U.S. troops. The debate was expected to come to a head soon, after the Biden administration spent months reviewing the recommendations of a congressionally appointed working group assigned to settle on a standardized definition for Gold Star families — a process that included consideration of not only troops killed in combat but also suicide victims like Daniel Weiss, and those who die in tragic accidents, such as helicopter crashes, or from fatal service-related illness.

On Friday, however, after multiple inquiries from The Washington Post, the Pentagon withdrew the working group's proposal — which remains shrouded in secrecy — as it

awaited final approval. Maj. Grace Geiger, a Defense Department spokeswoman, declined to detail the group's recommendation but said the decision to pull it back was based on initial feedback from within the administration. It will be resubmitted, she added, "at an appropriate time."

The "Gold Star" term dates to World War I, when families hung window banners in their homes bearing blue stars for loved ones fighting overseas and gold ones for those who died. Congress later passed legislation stating that the families of those who die overseas shall receive a Gold Star lapel pin, a small, distinctive decoration with a gold star and purple background. Among the actions that qualified were dying "in military operations involving conflict with an opposing enemy force" or in a terrorist attack against the United States.

The family of service members who die off the battlefield qualify for what's called the Next of Kin pin. And while both kinds of families generally receive the same government benefits, culturally one stands apart, some say.

The Gold Star title is a "unique and special honor for those who have given their lives in defense of this nation in combat," said retired Gen. Mark A. Milley, who, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff until last year and a wartime commander for many years before that, developed a kinship with many families of those killed in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. In an interview, Milley said he supports maintaining the narrow definition the Pentagon has had in place for years.

This report is based on interviews with more than 20 people familiar with the issue. No matter what decision is made, those most closely involved in the discussion said, the outcome is certain to cause pain to grieving families and inflame long-simmering tensions among organizations typically united in their support for military families.

The broadest proposed change would encompass families of combat casualties and those whose deaths were from suicide, accident or illness. The latter category could include President Biden, whose son Beau, a lawyer in the Army National Guard, died of brain cancer in 2015. The president has linked his son's death at age 46 to noxious smoke he inhaled while deployed to Iraq years earlier.

The White House declined to discuss its preferred course of action. In a statement, the National Security Council said the president "respects — and remains deeply grateful for — all those military families" grieving.

“Each loss hurts,” the statement says. “Each one tells a story. Each story deserves the country’s solemn recognition.”

## **The dispute**

The effort to broaden the Gold Star definition is led by the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), an influential nonprofit established in 1994. Andy Weiss leads Chicago-area grief support groups for the organization. Its founder, Bonnie Carroll, lost her husband, Army Brig. Gen. Tom Carroll, in a plane crash in Alaska two years earlier, and in 2015 received the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her work.

In a June letter to senior lawmakers, TAPS and a few dozen other military and veterans nonprofits made their case that it’s time for Congress to legislate an “inclusive definition” that recognizes an array of military deaths. The signatories estimated that doing so would cover about 3 million people, and include all kinds of survivors, any time Congress looks anew at the government benefits provided to military survivors. Past legislation, they argued, has not included consistent language, muddying understanding of what a Gold Star family is.

“Creating a consistent, legal definition,” the letter said, “will ensure future legislative proposals improve benefits for ALL surviving families.”

Among the organizations that co-signed were Blue Star Families, the Independence Fund and the Military Officers Association of America. But other major nonprofits withheld their support, including the American Legion, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), the Travis Manion Foundation and the Wounded Warrior Project.

Ryan Manion, chief executive officer of the Travis Manion Foundation, said the definition of a Gold Star family doesn’t need to change to properly recognize other grieving military families. Her brother, a Marine Corps officer, was killed in Iraq in 2007.

“Loss is loss, and I run an organization that represents and has programming for families who have lost a loved one, no matter the circumstances,” she said. “But I think we run a slippery slope when we try to take a specific designation or recognition and expand that.”

Allison Jaslow, an Iraq War veteran who is CEO of IAVA, credited TAPS for its work on behalf of grieving families, but said she sees this proposal as overly broad.

“What I wouldn’t want to do,” she said, “is for the sake of inclusivity not appropriately honor those who truly made the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of our country.”

The American Legion in May drafted a resolution defining Gold Star status narrowly as close family members of someone who has been killed or died in a variety of other actions overseas. Matthew Shuman, a senior official with the organization, said members discussed the issue for some time and decided to act as it became apparent Congress was interested.

Carroll, the TAPS founder, said that ultimately her objective is to eliminate the “hierarchy of grief” that can compound the challenges mourning families face.

## **Leaders ‘need to step up’**

The dispute’s volatility caught senators by surprise two years ago in an episode that has not been reported previously.

Sens. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), and Joni Ernst (R-Iowa) united to introduce legislation that would have created a new federal holiday, Gold Star Families Day, on the last Monday of September, elevating a day first recognized by Congress in 1936. The proposed legislation defined Gold Star families broadly as the immediate loved ones of any service member who died “while serving in the Armed Forces” or “from a service-connected injury or illness.”

That definition, supported by TAPS, caused a backlash from the families of service members killed in combat and some senior defense officials, prompting some co-sponsors of the bill to withdraw their support and effectively tanking the legislation, said Tony Cordero, president of Sons and Daughters in Touch, a nonprofit supporting the children of U.S. troops killed in action during the Vietnam War. Two other people familiar with the matter, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive issue, confirmed the account.

Warren’s office declined to comment. Ernst, a retired Army officer, “has spoken directly to Gold Star spouses and families, and understands the importance of honoring their fallen loved ones accordingly,” her office said in a statement. The bill never received a vote.

Cordero, whose father, William, was killed when his plane went down during a mission over North Vietnam, said his group is “adamantly opposed” to an “all-of-the-above approach.” He recommended instead a rebranding and redesign of the Next of Kin pin,

and encouraged the Pentagon to regard the designation with appropriate seriousness such that those families don't feel slighted.

“It is incredibly difficult to thread the needle with the precise words so that you don't offend someone who's loved one died of natural causes, died in a training accident, died of suicide, died of anything other than combat,” Cordero said. “Because the minute you use the wrong word, the entire conversation descends into an emotional mess, and that's not good for anybody.”

Others are split on the issue.

Jane Horton, whose husband, Christopher, was killed in action in Afghanistan in 2011 while serving in the Army National Guard, said the issue can't be left to surviving military families to decide because “it is not possible to make an unemotional decision regarding our loved one's service and sacrifice.” Horton, who worked on military casualty assistance issues in both the Obama and Trump administrations, said senior military leaders “need to step up and make hard decisions” to define the Gold Star designation “once and for all.” She declined to share her opinion on how the issue should be handled.

Pam Zembiec, whose husband, Douglas, died in an ambush in Baghdad while serving in the Marine Corps in 2007, said the Pentagon is not diminishing the deaths of U.S. troops outside combat zones by withholding the Gold Star designation from them. She supports keeping the designation focused on those killed in action.

“It's not about the grief and the death and the loss,” she said. “It's about taking away from history.”

Nancy Mullen said that while her husband, Sean, was killed in action in Afghanistan while serving in an Army Special Forces unit in 2013, she favors making the title apply broadly.

“We don't choose how our loved one dies, and they die from service,” she said. “I hate to see our community fighting over that when there are so many other things that are more important.”

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