

SBP DIC “widow tax” policy still the law

For a decade, war widows in matching yellow suit jackets and hats quietly and persistently have knocked on Capitol Hill doors seeking an end to the “widows’ tax,” a government policy that deprives them of benefits from their husbands’ military service. They are always warmly received, but that’s where the hospitality ends. Despite pledges of help from scores of federal officials — including President Barack Obama and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi — their long quest remains unfulfilled. Every year since 2005, the Senate has voted to eliminate the policy that denies widows the ability to collect both a military survivor’s benefit and the full annuity bought when their military husbands were alive. But in each of those years, the fix was dropped when House and Senate negotiators wrote the final bill in private. “What we always hear is that there is just no funding for us. ‘Sorry, this is not your year,’” said Vivianne Wersel, chairwoman of the Government Relations Committee at Gold Star Wives of America. Her husband died of a heart attack in 2005, days after returning from his second tour in Iraq. “What happens behind closed doors, we get thrown under the bus.”

The widows’ tax is a law that won’t allow surviving spouses to receive the retirement pay due them when their spouse died from a cause related to military service, and at the same time collect the full annuity — essentially an insurance policy most of their spouses opted to buy. They paid an average of 6.5% of their retirement pay in premiums, often \$100 or more a month. Because one benefit is subtracted from the other, affected surviving spouses lose about \$1,000 a month on average. There are about 54,000 survivors who are affected by the policy, whose spouses served in conflicts from World War II to Afghanistan, and that number could grow. The widows say politicians have promised time and time again to help them, but they don’t. Part of the problem is the cost. Eliminating the offset in benefits is expensive, said Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL), who has been the widows’ longtime ally. Making good on the promise would cost \$6.7 billion over a decade. But knowing the cost hasn’t stopped politicians from promising to

help. Pelosi, as House minority leader in 2005, took up the widows’ cause as part of the Democrats’ GI Bill of Rights, before her party gained control of Congress.

Two years later, Obama, then a senator, co-sponsored legislation to eliminate the offset just before he spoke at a Gold Star Wives reception on Capitol Hill. In his budget proposal to the Congress last week, he didn’t include it.

Kimberly Hazelgrove, 36, of Lorton, Va., whose husband died in Iraq in 2004, said she recalls Obama coming to the reception and promising to help them. The 36-year-old mother of two said she’s now left wondering what happened to the promise. “I have yet to see it, after a year in office, that really being a priority for them,” said Hazelgrove, who has lobbied on Capitol Hill with her kids, ages 6 and 9, in tow. Last June, four military widows showed up before 8 a.m. for a House Armed Services Committee session where their issue was on the agenda. Several hours into the hearing, an aide told them the discussion had been pushed back because of its sensitive nature. At 10:30 p.m., the matter finally came to a vote. By then, Sandra Drew of Herndon, Va., was the only widow still there. Drew, whose husband was killed in Bosnia in 1995, said

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