

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-569](#), a report to the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

From January 2002 through November 2015, 17,911 servicemembers died while on active duty, leaving approximately 24,000 surviving dependents. The military services' casualty assistance programs guide these survivors through the casualty assistance process following the death of a servicemember.

Senate Report 114-49 included a provision that GAO review the Gold Star Advocate Program and the training provided for casualty assistance officers. This report assesses the extent to which (1) DOD and the Coast Guard have implemented the Gold Star Advocate Program and conducted outreach to survivors; and (2) DOD has developed a training program for casualty assistance officers consistent with attributes of an effective training program.

GAO analyzed statutes, DOD and Coast Guard policies on casualty matters, and DOD's military services' casualty assistance guidance and training materials. GAO interviewed officials involved in the Gold Star Advocate Program at DOD, its military services, and the Coast Guard—which is part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD and the Coast Guard develop interim policies for the Gold Star Advocate Program and determine goals and metrics for its outreach; and that DOD develop additional indicators for better evaluating its training. DOD and DHS on behalf of the Coast Guard concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-16-569](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell, (202) 512-3604, farrellb@gao.gov.

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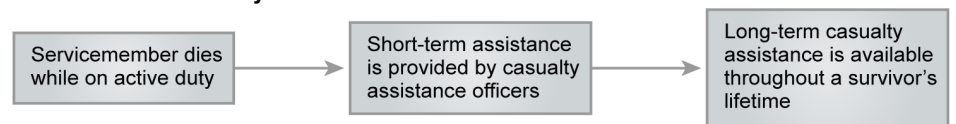
CASUALTY ASSISTANCE

DOD and the Coast Guard Need to Develop Policies and Outreach Goals and Metrics for Program Supporting Servicemembers' Survivors

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) and the Coast Guard took steps to implement the Gold Star Advocate Program in 2014 by designating Gold Star Advocates who have received, addressed, and reported a variety of issues raised by survivors, and they conducted some outreach to survivors for the program, but they have not established policies to manage the program. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014 required the designation of personnel to provide support to survivors of servicemembers who died while on active duty. Known as Gold Star Advocates, these personnel are available at any point in the casualty assistance process. If a survivor is not satisfied with the casualty assistance he or she has received, the survivor may contact a Gold Star Advocate. According to DOD officials, few issues have risen to the level of the program's attention because survivor issues are generally resolved by casualty assistance officers—who serve as liaison between the survivor and the service branch following the death of a servicemember, and assist with funeral arrangements and the application and receipt of benefits and entitlements—and long-term assistance programs, which are available to provide support throughout a survivor's lifetime.

Overview of the Casualty Assistance Process



The Gold Star Advocate Program is available to survivors at any point in the casualty assistance process

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-16-569

However, while steps have been taken to implement the program, neither DOD nor the Coast Guard has established policies for the program, including roles, responsibilities, and procedures. Additionally, although DOD and the Coast Guard have conducted some outreach for the program, they have not developed goals and metrics for outreach, without which some survivors may remain unaware of the casualty assistance available to them. While the program is available to serve survivors of all servicemembers who died while on active duty, its outreach methods are primarily directed toward survivors of servicemembers who have died since the program was implemented in 2014.

DOD and its military services have developed a casualty assistance officer training program that addresses the duties required of casualty assistance officers that is consistent with some attributes of an effective training program, but DOD and its military services may not have the indicators needed to evaluate the effect of that training on casualty assistance program performance. For example, DOD administers a web-based survey to survivors regarding the quality of casualty assistance they received, but the survey has roughly a 10 percent response rate. With such a low response rate, DOD acknowledged that results should be interpreted cautiously. Without improved indicators for evaluating the effect of casualty assistance officer training, DOD may not have the information needed to improve the quality of casualty assistance provided to survivors.