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Survivor Outreach Services Program Virgin Islands Testimony to the Committee on Government Services, Consumer and Veterans Affairs in support of BILL NO. 31-0158- An Act amending title 1 Virgin Islands Code chapter 11 by adding section 200f establishing the last Sunday in September as Gold Star Mother's Day.

SURVIVOR OUTREACH SERVICES (SOS) MISSION: Build a unified program which embraces and reassures survivors that they will be continually linked to the Army family for as long as they desire. Since August 2009, the Army fielded the SOS program across the states and territories to provide direct services to survivors of the military fallen, primarily the Army. As the program grew the needs of surviving family members in remote areas, lacking an active military (army) post, became increasingly clear so that the program services were extended to survivors of the fallen of any branch of the military, to include their survivors and survivors of veterans and retirees, who express such need; SOS serves these survivors for as long as they desire. (NOTE: The Navy has a program which serves its survivors for one year)

“Our Fallen Warriors have given— in the words of Abraham Lincoln— **“the last full measure of devotion” to our nation** and the Army has a commitment to their Families”.

The purpose of the SOS program is to deliver on that commitment by expanding and standardizing programs and services across all components and for all Survivors; partnering with the community in a way that demonstrates our care and support of Survivors continually linking them to the Army/ military Family for as long as they desire

We are expected to Remember, Respect and Honor: Gold Star Mother's Day is observed in the United States on the last Sunday of September each year. It is a day for people and communities (not just the military) to recognize and honor those who have lost a son or daughter while serving the United States Armed Forces.

“Each year on Gold Star Mother's Day the United States president calls on all Americans to display the nation's flag and hold appropriate meetings to publicly express their love, sorrow, and reverence towards Gold Star Mothers and their families. Government buildings are also required to display the flag”.



Background

The name the Gold Star Mothers was taken from the custom of military families who put a service flag near their front window. The flag featured a star for each family member serving in their country – living members were denoted in blue but gold stars honored family members who were killed while in an active duty status. In 1918 President Woodrow Wilson approved the wearing of black arm bands bearing a gilt (gold) star by those who had a family member who died in the military service to the United States. This distinguished them from the blue stars, which represented a family member presently serving in the armed forces.

Further, American Gold Star Mothers, Inc. is an organization of mothers whose sons or daughters served and died while serving their nation in times of war or conflict. AGSM Inc. organizes **major events** that take place on or around Gold Star Mother's Day each year. Previous activities included a Gold Star flower wreath laying service, as well as an afternoon tour of President Lincoln's cottage in Washington DC.

The State of New Jersey has designated the last Sunday in September as Parents of Fallen Military Sons and Daughters Day. This day is a tribute to all parents whose children died as a result of their service with the United States Armed Forces. It commemorates the contributions, commitments and sacrifices made by those parents individually and through the American Gold Star Mothers, Inc.

Local Events/Activities that Remember Honor and Respect since 2009 include but are not limited to the following:

- Support Meetings (STT and STX) Monthly, Quarterly or as scheduled
- Tree Planting/ Watering Ceremonies (STT, STX and STJ)
- Survivor Card Project in schools (STT-All Saints Cathedral High School National Honor Society Students) started talks to develop projects on STJ and STX (Year Round)
- Memorial Day Survivor Participation (May)
- Gold Star Family and Mother's Day (September)
- Veteran's Day Survivor Participation (November)
- Wreaths Across America Participation (December)

Effect on Public life

Gold Star Mother's Day is not a designated public holiday in the United States so public life is not affected; however participation from our community, which includes the National Guard, Reserves and the general population, showing a strong support for our

Gold Star Mothers and families of the fallen will stimulate healing from the grief of the loss for these families. The knowledge that they are not grieving and missing their fallen alone promotes and strengthens the belief that the loss was not in vain.

American Gold Star Mothers, Inc. was incorporated in 1929, obtaining a federal charter from the US Congress. It began with 25 mothers living in the Washington DC area and soon expanded to include affiliated groups throughout the nation. On June 23, 1936, a joint congressional resolution designated the last Sunday in September as Gold Star Mother's Day, a holiday that has been observed each year by a presidential proclamation.



Symbols: A gold star symbolizes a family member who died in the line of duty while serving the United States Armed Forces. It may be seen on a service flag or in the form of a pin, which is worn by Gold Star mothers. The pin is not limited to mothers and it is awarded by the US Department of Defense.

Behind every Gold Star Pin is a story of loss and strength.

These two buttons officially represent a military loss. They are presented to the surviving families of our brave men and women who die while on active duty military service to our nation.

Partnerships & Supporters:

- Virgin Islands National Guard
- Office of Veteran's Affairs
- American Legion (Territory wide)
- Schools (growing)
- Community Agencies/ Organizations
- Individuals

The families of service members who paid the ultimate sacrifice deserve our respect, gratitude and the very best support we can provide. When you see someone wearing either pin, know that he or she has lost a loved one who selflessly served our nation.

When the Gold Star first appeared on flags in 1918, families would pin a gold star over the blue service star hanging in their window to indicate that their loved one had been killed overseas. In 1947, **the Gold Star Lapel Button** (commonly called a pin) was designed and created to be presented to eligible surviving family members of service members who died while deployed in support of Overseas Contingency Operations, or

who died from wounds sustained in theater (Public Law 80-306) The Gold Star lapel pin consists of a gold star on a field of purple surrounded by laurel leaves.

The Next of Kin of Deceased Personnel lapel pin consists of a gold star on a gold background surrounded by four oak sprigs. It was approved in 1973 for the primary next of kin of service members who lose their lives while serving on active duty or while assigned in an Army Reserve or Army National Guard unit in a drill status, and is authorized for issue retroactive to March 29, 1973. The widow or widower, each parent, each child, stepchild, child through adoption, brother, half-brother, sister, and half-sister is entitled to receive and wear these pins in recognition of their loss and the sacrifice of their loved one.

Summary/ Closing: The Survivor Outreach Services Program is inclusive of all Survivors, both Active and Reserve Component, who have lost loved ones while on active duty, including those who died in combat/combat related injuries, accident, illness or suicide. Services are available, until the Survivors no longer desire services.

The range of services covers the entire spectrum of care, from life skills education to treatment; however, some services are contingent upon eligibility status. Services are tailored to the needs of the Survivor and may include support groups, educational seminars, advocacy, information and referral, and/or linkage to behavioral health treatment. The Army is committed to our Families, including our Survivors, who have sacrificed so much. They deserve the very best the Army and our community has to offer in terms of programs, services, policies and staff.

Therefore, it is timely and decent for the US Virgin Islands to establish the last Sunday in September as Gold Star Mother's Day alongside the rest of the nation to demonstrate to our families here in the territory

- That the US Virgin Islands is not blind to the service and sacrifice of its people who go off to serve the nation supporting this way of life we freely enjoy in the name of and by way of free speech, free enterprise, freedom to pursue a good life and liberty, freedom to move about, to own property and more
- That our government on behalf of the people is aware of and support our service members, their families especially the families of the fallen
- That our government leaders set the example of Remembering, Respecting and Honoring our fallen by aligning themselves with National leadership, not waiting for an invitation to recognize through events but initiating the call to the Office of Veterans Affairs, the Virgin Islands National Guard and its Family Programs, the American Legions and other Veterans Service Organizations to work as a team of One to ensure we as a community STOP our normal business and remember with our Gold Star Mothers, Families and other survivors of fallen veterans and retirees

- Demonstrate that there is a clear understanding that Grieving is a process, truly understood by those experiencing it and there is no time limit placed on that process
- That military loss is and may be complex and compounded due to the time and distance military loss can occur, therefore requiring special handling of survivors by all especially leaders and persons in positions of authority
- And that the Service and Sacrifice of their loved ones is not and will Never be forgotten and the families, our families will Never be alone

VI Gold Star Population

21 Deceased Service Members with Gold Star Families in the territory
 14 GS Mothers identified 6 of which SOS has direct contact with
 06 GS Fathers identified 4 of which SOS has contact with
 05 GS children identified 2 of which SOS has contact with
 00 GS Spouses residing in the territory
 17 GS Family members (other than spouse, siblings, parents, children)
 55 GS Family members identified but living other than in the USVI
 11GS Parents identified but are deceased
 01 GS Significant other identified but whereabouts are unknown

Respectfully Submitted by: Sandra Benjamin, Support Coordinator USVI

Sun	Sep 25	2016	Gold Star Mother's Day	Observance
Sun	Sep 24	2017	Gold Star Mother's Day	Observance
Sun	Sep 30	2018	Gold Star Mother's Day	Observance
Sun	Sep 29	2019	Gold Star Mother's Day	Observance
Sun	Sep 27	2020	Gold Star Mother's Day	Observance

