

# Lawmakers Rush to Aid Military Families



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<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,83001,00.html>

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By Kelley Beaucar Vlahos

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers are expected to push aggressively for new and expedited benefits and services for military families now that the numbers of killed, missing in action and prisoners of war are increasing, experts say.

“Everyone is scrambling to see what they can do,” observed Kathy Moakler of the National Military Family Association, a non-profit advocacy group that facilitates aid for military families and educates the public, the military community and Congress on available benefits and services.

There are several measures afoot in Congress to aid military families, with at least two that would directly affect family members of those servicemen and women killed in action. As of Wednesday, there were 48 Americans killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

On Monday, the Senate passed a bill introduced by Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, which would increase the death gratuity to survivors of those killed in action to \$12,000 from \$6,000. House aides say there might be a similar provision rolled into the defense budget.

“We can never fully repay the debt of our nation to those who have laid down their lives for the cause of freedom,” Collins said after her bill was passed Monday.

“The best we can do is honor their memory, ensure that their sacrifice is not in vain and help provide for their families,” she added.

The gratuity is given to family members within 72 hours of the death of an active duty serviceman or woman. The last time that the death gratuity was raised was in 1991 during the Persian Gulf War. At that time, it was increased from \$3,000 to \$6,000.

Last week, the House passed a bill introduced by Rep. Walter Jones Jr., R-N.C., which would make the current \$6,000 gratuity entirely tax exempt.

“Our troops, both past and present must know Congress stands behind them 100 percent,” Jones said following the vote. “If these men and women can stand to give their lives as they fight for our freedom, then the least we can do is vote to benefit their way of life.”

According to Department of Defense officials, there are number of benefits, in addition to the gratuity, which serve to help survivors maintain their quality of life after tragedy. They include:

- Rent-free government housing for 180 days and paid moving expenses;
- Burial costs;
- The unused leave of the service member;
- Life insurance totaling \$250,000 or more depending on individual’s plan;

- Social Security benefits;
- Lifelong healthcare, prescription drugs and dental care;
- Lifelong commissary and exchange privileges;
- Forty-five months of education tuition provided by the Veterans Administration Education Benefit; and
- Dependency and Indemnity Compensation pay, which is a lifelong monthly check to surviving spouses who don't remarry. The payment is \$945 per month, with an additional \$234 for each dependent child under 18 years.

Some survivors also qualify for monthly payments under the Uniformed Services Survivor Benefit.

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