United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 8, 2013

The Honorable Charles Hagel
1400 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1400

Dear Secretary Hagel,

We write to express our concern with recent statements made by Department of Defense officials claiming the Department does not have the legal authority during the government shutdown to provide immediate death gratuity payments to surviving family members who lose a loved one in combat. As you know, the death gratuity program provides for a special tax free payment of $100,000 to eligible survivors of members of the Armed Forces, who die while on active duty.

This vital benefit provides family members with an immediate cash payment to help meet their financial needs during the period immediately following the service member's death. Often, these benefits are used to cover memorial service and burial costs, travel expenses and the unforeseen lapse in a family member's regular paycheck, which terminates at death. It goes without saying the death gratuity is a small price to pay in order to support family members of those who have paid the ultimate price in service to their country.

We strongly urge you to use whatever legal discretion you have to ensure that the nation can fulfill that sacred obligation, and to promptly notify us of changes required under law while the Congress continues to work towards reopening the government. Most immediately, we request that you seek an interim solution to allow the families of the five service members killed in Afghanistan this weekend to welcome their loved ones home. One such solution could be financial assistance from the Fisher House, which has offered an advance grant to families of the fallen. We pledge to work with you and do anything in our power to ensure this problem is resolved. Any delay in providing families with this essential benefit is absolutely unacceptable.

Sincerely,

Roy Blunt
United States Senator

Chris Coons
United States Senator

Joe Manchin
United States Senator

Jerry Moran
United States Senator

Claire McCaskill
United States Senator

John Boozman
United States Senator

Tom Carper
United States Senator