To amend title 38, United States Code, to improve benefits and assistance provided to surviving spouses of veterans under laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

APRIL 16, 2013

Mr. SANDERS introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A BILL

To amend title 38, United States Code, to improve benefits and assistance provided to surviving spouses of veterans under laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-

tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the “Survivor Benefits Im-

provement Act of 2013”. 
SEC. 2. EXTENSION OF INITIAL PERIOD FOR INCREASED DEPENDENCY AND INDEMNITY COMPENSATION FOR SURVIVING SPOUSES WITH CHILDREN.

Section 1311(f)(2) of title 38, United States Code, is amended by striking “two-year” and inserting “five-year”.

SEC. 3. ELIGIBILITY FOR DEPENDENCY AND INDEMNITY COMPENSATION, HEALTH CARE, AND HOUSING LOANS FOR SURVIVING SPOUSES WHO REMARRY AFTER AGE 55.

Subparagraph (B) of section 103(d)(2) of title 38, United States Code, is amended to read as follows:

“(B) The remarriage after age 55 of the surviving spouse of a veteran shall not bar the furnishing of benefits specified in paragraph (5) to such person as the surviving spouse of the veteran.”.

SEC. 4. BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN OF CERTAIN THAILAND SERVICE VETERANS BORN WITH SPINA BIFIDA.

(a) In General.—Subchapter III of chapter 18 of title 38, United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the following new section:
§ 1822. Benefits for children of certain Thailand service veterans born with spina bifida

“(a) Benefits Authorized.—The Secretary may provide to any child of a veteran of covered service in Thailand who is suffering from spina bifida the health care, vocational training and rehabilitation, and monetary allowance required to be paid to a child of a Vietnam veteran who is suffering from spina bifida under subchapter I of this chapter as if such child of a veteran of covered service in Thailand were a child of a Vietnam veteran who is suffering from spina bifida under such subchapter.

“(b) Spina Bifida Conditions Covered.—This section applies with respect to all forms and manifestations of spina bifida, except spina bifida occulta.

“(c) Veteran of Covered Service in Thailand.—For purposes of this section, a veteran of covered service in Thailand is any individual, without regard to the characterization of that individual’s service, who—

“(1) served in the active military, naval, or air service in Thailand, as determined by the Secretary in consultation with the Secretary of Defense, during the period beginning on January 9, 1962, and ending on May 7, 1975; and

“(2) is determined by the Secretary, in consultation with the Secretary of Defense, to have been
exposed to a herbicide agent during such service in Thailand.

“(d) HERBICIDE AGENT.—For purposes of this section, the term ‘herbicide agent’ means a chemical in a herbicide used in support of United States and allied military operations in Thailand, as determined by the Secretary in consultation with the Secretary of Defense, during the period beginning on January 9, 1962, and ending on May 7, 1975.”.

(b) CLERICAL AMENDMENTS.—

(1) SUBCHAPTER HEADING.—The heading for subchapter III of chapter 18 of such title is amended by inserting “AND THAILAND” after “KOREA”.

(2) TABLE OF SECTIONS.—The table of sections at the beginning of chapter 18 of such title is amended—

(A) by striking the item relating to subchapter III and inserting the following new item:

“SUBCHAPTER III—CHILDREN OF CERTAIN KOREA AND THAILAND SERVICE VETERANS BORN WITH SPINA BIFIDA”; and

(B) by inserting after the item relating to section 1821 the following new item:

“1822. Benefits for children of certain Thailand service veterans born with spina bifida.”.
SEC. 5. PILOT PROGRAM ON GRIEF COUNSELING IN RETREAT SETTINGS FOR SURVIVING SPOUSES OF VETERANS WHO DIE WHILE SERVING ON ACTIVE DUTY IN THE ARMED FORCES.

(a) Pilot Program Required.—

(1) In general.—Commencing not later than 180 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall carry out, through the Readjustment Counseling Service of the Veterans Health Administration, a pilot program to assess the feasibility and advisability of providing grief counseling services described in subsection (b) in group retreat settings to surviving spouses of veterans who die while serving on active duty in the Armed Forces.

(2) Participation at election of surviving spouse.—The participation of a surviving spouse in the pilot program under this section shall be at the election of the surviving spouse.

(b) Covered Services.—The services provided to a surviving spouse under the pilot program shall include the following:

(1) Information and counseling on coping with grief.
(2) Information about benefits and services available to surviving spouses under laws administered by the Secretary.

(3) Such other information and counseling as the Secretary considers appropriate to assist a surviving spouse under the pilot program with adjusting to the death of a spouse.

(c) LOCATIONS.—The Secretary shall carry out the pilot program at not fewer than six locations as follows:

(1) Three locations at which surviving spouses with dependent children are encouraged to bring their children.

(2) Three locations at which surviving spouses with dependent children are not encouraged to bring their children.

(d) DURATION.—The pilot program shall be carried out during the two-year period beginning on the date of the commencement of the pilot program.

(e) REPORTS.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 180 days after the completion of the first year of the pilot program and not later than 180 days after the completion of the pilot program, the Secretary shall submit to Congress a report on the pilot program.
(2) CONTENTS.—Each report submitted under paragraph (1) shall contain the findings and conclusions of the Secretary as a result of the pilot program, and shall include such recommendations for the continuation or expansion of the pilot program as the Secretary considers appropriate.

(f) DEFINITIONS.—In this section, the terms “active duty”, “surviving spouse”, and “veteran” have the meanings given such terms in section 101 of title 38, United States Code.