

Daniel J. Hanson

Statement of Daniel J. Hanson  
Operation Iraq Freedom Veteran  
Before the  
U. S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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My name is Daniel Joseph Hanson and I am 27 years old. I joined the United States Marine Corps in January 2003. I was eventually assigned to 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and in February 2004 was deployed to Ar-Ramadi Iraq. The deployment started with one of our Marines shooting himself in the head and killing himself. It was not long before we started losing men and funerals seemed to become a regular thing. It was hard to know that you had just talked to someone the day before and now you were saluting an empty pair of combat boots, an upside down M-16 and a pair of dog tags. When it was all over in October 2004 we lost a total of 35 Marines.

On our 'cool down' period before returning we had a few classes discussing what each person had seen and how they were dealing with it. For me it was very difficult to talk about anything that bothered me because I was not an infantryman and felt as if I did not have the right to raise my hand because of it. I felt as if I was subpar because the other people in my battalion had been through much worse and I was weak if I couldn't handle the things that I went through. After a few classes we all returned from the deployment and shortly after went on leave. That is all that we went through in regards to post deployment, a few classes to make sure that if we had any traumatic events we made sure we let somebody know.

I was deployed a second time to Okinawa Japan in 2005. At this point I was married and had a child on the way. Upon returning from Okinawa I had my son and began preparations to get out of the Marine Corps. I was drinking almost every single day, getting in fights and was very depressed. I got out of the Marine Corps in January 2007 and decided I was out of control and needed to get help.

Before I was released from active duty a friend and fellow Marine hanged himself in the basement of his home with an electrical wire. He had gone to the Saint Cloud VA Medical center seeking help, but was turned away. A couple weeks later (February 7th, 2007) my good friend and father figure SgtMaj J.J. Ellis was killed in combat. His funeral at Arlington National Cemetery got me to start drinking just a few short weeks after I was trying to get things together again. Then on March 23, 2007 my brother and best friend, who was also a Marine, hanged himself in the basement of his home. Travis was working with the VA Medical Center, but was not willing to open up to them about his internal struggles.

At that point I really went off the deep end. I started working with the VA Medical Center on an outpatient basis. I struggled with anxiety and depression which eventually lead to a lot of destruction. In August of 2007 I separated from my wife and eventually got divorced, after I got another woman pregnant while I was still married. I started racking up DUI after DUI and spent some time in jail. I went to the Saint Cloud VA Medical Center and went through the Dual

Diagnosis Program. There was good content and it was very informative. However, it lacked any sort of discipline and there was a gentleman that was smoking meth in the stairwell at one point in time. It seemed more like something that would be to teach people about what drugs and alcohol can do to a person, but there was not a whole lot of real life application. Also, there was no aftercare so once I was cut loose I was pretty much on my own. I still did follow up at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center, but I was so far gone outpatient would not suffice.

About a month after I completed the Dual Diagnosis Program I attempted to kill myself by swallowing a large amount of prescribed pills. I woke up in the Saint Cloud VA Medical Center and was put up in the psych ward. I was put on a 72 hour hold and then released. There was almost no follow up after my departure from my 72 hour hold and then I was just thrown back into my life again. I continued to drink, cheat, and live a life of anger. I started using drugs again because the alcohol was not doing enough to help me cope during the day. I got another DUI and found myself in jail yet again. A week after my last DUI I found myself looking at a lot of jail time. I was scared, broken and wanted to die yet again. One week later I checked myself into Minnesota Teen Challenge, which is a 13-15 month faith based program.

The Minneapolis VA Medical Center does not offer anything close to a 13-15 month long inpatient treatment program. I was walking around wanting to die every single day, month after month, and no 30, 60, or 90 day program would have been able to get me to where I needed to be. A year removed from the world that had just become too much for me and that I hated seemed like way too much to commit to, but it has saved my life. Minnesota Teen Challenge changed me more than I ever thought possible. I have completely changed my thoughts, actions, and attitude over the last year. It was a struggle and I considered leaving many times, but that is because I have always been a person that always took the easy way out. I now want to live and I want to live a successful life free of any chemicals.

While at Minnesota Teen challenge one of the biggest struggles that I dealt with was not having the funds to complete the program. I was not able to get the VA to fund the program while I was attending so I put in a claim to have my disability raised. I fell behind in child support, bills and eventually my payments to MnTC. It made things very difficult in the midst of me trying to get my life straightened out. I finally got my claim completed one day after my graduation and up until then I thought I was going to have to sleep in my car to come out to Washington D.C. to testify.

In my working with the VA the three biggest things that I noticed was through my experiences at the VA Medical Center. First, they do not provide any long term care at all. The longest program that I know about is the Dual Diagnosis Program at the Saint Cloud VA Medical Center and I believe that it is only 90 days at the most. The problems that I picked up over the years of bad living were not going to go away in a matter of months. There are a lot of veterans I know that walk around in constant pain and depression because they have never been able to overcome the root of their problems. A program that lasts for a year or more is much more likely to help a person, and help them not just cope with their problems, but get rid of them all together. Minnesota Teen Challenge has changed my life from wanting to die every day to wanting to get up every day because I finally have a passion to live. Second, there was never any accountability in my experiences with the VA system. If I missed appointments or just stopped calling all

together it did not seem to really matter to anyone. I felt like I was just another number going through the revolving door of head doctors that had to talk to me. I had the opportunity to work with a lot of great VA employees over my time there, but I never really felt connected. Never thought anyone really cared. Third, there are a lot of great organizations that are not connected to the Government, but are not being utilized because it may be more expensive. The VA cannot possibly take care of all the hurting veterans on their own and I believe that being able to utilize the resources of organizations not connected to the VA is necessary to help all of them.

I would not be where I am now without the help from the Department of Veterans Affairs, but I could have gotten here a lot sooner. I have watched my friends and family who are veterans suffer through many of invisible wounds and there is no reason for it. Being able to get outside programs funded, keeping accountability of veterans and opening up to long term rehabilitation programs will save lives. I appreciate your time and the opportunity to share my testimony.