

Opening Statement - Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Hearing

December 14, 2015

Good morning. My name is Nicole Morris. I am a Navy veteran who deployed to Kuwait in 2004 for Operation Iraqi Freedom. Immediately after leaving active duty, I was told I was eligible for VA health care. I needed to see a doctor and the VA actually referred me out to the private sector and paid the bill. It was a pretty positive experience. However, several years later and I was still eligible for VA health care and was experiencing severe stomach pains. I went to the VA emergency room at Phoenix at 8:30am and waited for someone to see me. Hours and hours went by without me being able to see a doctor. I ended up leaving that night because it was clear I wouldn't be seen by anyone. I came back the next day and ended up waiting again until 10 pm. I was finally seen however it was extremely brief and I was not given the proper medical checkup to determine the issue. I was issued pain meds and released without knowing what my medical issue was.

There were other times I tried unsuccessfully to get appointments through the VA. It was always a hassle. Most of the appointments would be offered one to two months in the future. I'm not sure why I am supposed to stay sick for two months while waiting for a doctor to be available. Other times I would call and be put on hold for thirty to forty-five minutes or more.

Another massive inconvenience was the policy that female veterans who needed specific health care specialists could only be seen on Wednesdays. I'm not sure who made that policy but it doesn't make sense to be the VA and only see female veterans one day a week. I work and go to school and also take care of my child and the VA's scheduling just does not meet my needs.

I also have a close friend from my unit who has more serious complications from our deployment than me. She also cannot get seen by the VA for her conditions and it is extremely frustrating and disappointing to hear how she struggles and how the VA is failing to take care of her.

I am sure the VA does provide for some military servicemembers' medical needs. But for me it just doesn't fit. It would be ideal for veterans like me to just have regular insurance that others have such as military retirees who are allowed to use TRICARE. That way I could call the doctor I choose when I am sick to schedule my appointment and not have to work through the VA. It would also help if my son/daughter and I could be covered on the same insurance policy.

Thank you for allowing me to share my experiences with the VA today. I hope that this will lead to reforms of the current system and improved care for those of us that served.

