

Tracy Keil, Caregiver and Spouse of OIF Veteran

Statement of Tracy Keil

Before the

Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Hearing: Pending Health and Benefits Legislation

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Good Afternoon. Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to share my family's experience with you today.

My husband Matt was shot in the neck while on patrol in Ramadi, Iraq on February 24th 2007 just 6 weeks after we were married. The bullet went through the right side of his neck, hit his vertebral artery, went through his spinal cord and exited through his left shoulder blade. Matt instantly became a quadriplegic. When I first saw him 3 days after he was injured I was in shock, they explained to me that he had a "Christopher Reeve type injury". He would be on a ventilator for the rest of his life, and would never move his arms or legs.

Matt and I looked at each other in his hospital room at Walter Reed and he asked me if I still loved him? I said "baby you're stuck with me!" at that moment we knew that we would be okay if we stayed in this together. I knew that we just needed to work really hard to get Matt off his ventilator to increase his life expectancy. Ultimately we moved to Craig Hospital in Denver to be closer to family support.

Four weeks to the day of arriving at Craig Hospital in Denver, Matt was officially off of his ventilator and we could truly concentrate on him doing physical rehabilitation. Matt had regained about 10% function of his left arm but not his hand. He was feeling good and getting used to his new normal of being in a wheelchair and asking for help for everything.

It was while we were at Craig hospital that we started talking about having a family. Craig doctors talked to us about invitro fertilization and recommended some doctors for us to speak to when we were ready to start a family. We started to get really excited that even though so much had been taken away from Matt physically that we could still have the future we always dreamed of.

My husband is the most amazing man I have ever met, he is strong, honest and loyal and he wanted us to both have everything we always wanted before his injury and we agreed that this injury wasn't the end, it was the beginning of a new life, and we were in this together.

We had our whole lives ahead of us. Matt was just 24 when he was injured and I was 28. We are very fortunate that he survived his injuries that day and we made a promise to each other on our wedding day "For better or worse, in sickness and in health" I meant every word and still do

today. It is a challenge for my husband and I everyday but we knew we still wanted to start a family. I remember back when he was in rehabilitation at Craig Hospital it's all we could talk about was when we were going to be adjusted to our new normal and when would we be ready to have children. We always knew we had wanted children.

In 2008 we moved into a fully handicap accessible home built for us by Homes For Our Troops. We were starting to feel like things were falling into place in our lives. We felt like we were starting to get back on track to where we were before Matt was injured.

His injury unfortunately prevents him from having children naturally. In mid 2008 I started asking the VA what services they could offer my husband and I to assist us with fertility. I can remember hitting road blocks at every turn. I decided to take things into my own hands and write letters and make phone calls to try and get anyone to listen to us that we needed help. Fertility treatments are very expensive and since I had left my full time job we were still adjusting to living on one income.

I felt helpless and hopeless and thought that our dreams of having a family may never come true. The VA finally said that they would cover the sperm withdrawal from my husband....that costs \$1,000 and that they would store the sperm for us at no charge.

It was very difficult when I found out there was no help available for us from the VA or Tricare. I felt very defeated, sad, disappointed and in some ways I felt helpless. I researched everything I could about how to get Tricare to cover some of the costs but they couldn't because it was a direct result of my husbands' injury and that fell under the VA. The VA said that they had no programs in place for this sort of thing. I even started asking non profits to assist with the cost and they couldn't help due to the other immediate needs of injured service members.

I am very pleased that this issue is being addressed because it is necessary for the success of the families. We shouldn't have to struggle with how we are going to pay for costly fertility treatments when they are a direct result of a combat injury. We already have so many adjustments to make to all of our hopes and dreams and plans. We should never have to contemplate whether or not to even have children because of how expensive fertility treatments can be. I have always wanted more than anything for my husband to feel whole again. There is no magical cure for a spinal cord injury, there is nothing out there that will help him walk again or move his arms. What we do have though is a strong voice. We can help other families just like ours so they don't have to go through what we went through.

In January 2010 my husband and I decided that we needed to move forward with our plans to start a family and we began our journey of fertility treatments. We selected a doctor in the private sector that has been a leader in IVF. Having a doctor located near our home was very important for us because I had to go to the doctor every other day and then daily near the time of the transfer. This made it very easy for my husband to be there with me every step of the way. I was on several medications that I took 3 times a day along with giving myself hormone injections into my stomach three times a day for several weeks. I would go back to the doctor every other day for blood draws to check my hormone levels to make sure everything was progressing normally. Tricare did not cover any of the costs of anything related to the fertility treatments because I did not have any fertility issues, everything was a direct result of my husbands' injury.

Matt and I were very fortunate that we got pregnant on our first try with IVF. We welcomed our twins Matthew and Faith on November 9, 2010.

Fertility treatments are not a guarantee of having children, but it gives us hope. It gives us hope that we can have a normal life just like everyone else. Part of living the American Dream for us was having a home to raise our children...and of course having the children to fill our home. Now we have both and while it is incredibly difficult to raise children while your husband is in a wheelchair it is possible. We are living proof of anything is possible.

To be honest, not walking is the easy part. The hard part is that it affected every single aspect of our lives. Matt requires assistance with almost everything. As his caregiver, I feed him, bathe him, dress him, get him in and out of bed, I am the sole driver in our household, I even assist him with changing the channel on the TV. He has lost almost all independence. The day we had our children something changed in both of us. This is exactly what we had always wanted, our dreams had arrived. While it may be challenging to care for my husband and my children, this is exactly what our family is supposed to be. I strongly believe that my husband is supposed to be in a wheelchair, I can't tell you why, but this is what our life is supposed to look like. We are happy, we are healthy and we are living out our dreams. Now that my husband is medically retired we have the ability to raise our children together as stay home parents. We are a team and my only wish is that other families could find this happiness.

Since having our children I see my husband light up again, I see him happy, fulfilled. He is truly living the American Dream. I cannot imagine where we would be if we didn't save money knowing we would need to do IVF in the future.

One of the things I love the most about having children now is that their dad is just their dad. They don't see the wheelchair. They will be kind to people with disabilities and more understanding. All of the injured veterans who have children are helping share with others that people with disabilities are just like everyone else, they just do things a little differently. My husband is a shining example of a wonderful father who loves his children and we would have done anything possible to have them.

They make him feel like the man he was before he was injured, they complete our life together and the kids have helped fulfill our American dream. The VA, Congress and the American People have said countless times that they want to do everything they can to support my husband or make him feel whole again and this is your chance. Having a family is exactly what we needed to feel whole again. Please help us make these changes so that other families can share in this experience.

If the VA does decide to begin offering fertility treatments I think it's important to note that this is a very personal issue. Selecting a doctor to perform these treatments was very personal for my family and we didn't want to use "just anybody". We wanted to go to the best. I think it would be wonderful to let the private sector help these men and women start their families and do their part to help injured service members. This way if the families choose, they can go to a private sector doctor to have these services performed. I know that it is a challenge for my family to drive to the VA on a daily basis for treatments. Sometimes families can find something closer to their homes to make things easier. We have to remember that we are talking about the most

severely injured veterans that encounter fertility issues due to their injuries, so doing whatever is easiest for the family is extremely important.

Fertility is an area where we need experts in the field with extensive experience. Those doctors are already set up in private practices across the country. I think it would be very beneficial to the families to fee base the fertility specialist of their choice. There is also the option of capping the benefit at a certain amount of money or a certain amount of rounds of fertility treatments. As family of a severely injured veteran, I do not expect taxpayers to pay for every single thing we could ever wish for, so putting a limit on the fertility amounts is certainly understandable and expected.

There are about 600 men and women who have returned home with damage to their reproductive ability. Today I ask you to please support these brave service members in their dream to have families. I am here today to say that this injury took away so much of my husband physically that he cannot get back, but we could not let this injury take away our dream of a family. Having children meant that we were back to where we were before he was injured. It brought a sense of accomplishment and fulfilled our dreams of a family. In some ways it made my husband feel whole again.

I hope that hearing our story today has helped you understand the importance of offering fertility treatments to injured veterans who have lost the ability to reproduce naturally. What happened to them is by no fault of their own. Wartime changes a family, it shouldn't take away the ability to have one.

Thank you for your time,

Tracy Keil