

Testimony for Public Hearing
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
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Good Afternoon members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. My name is Elisa Anne Smithers and I am a current member of the Hawaii Army National Guard. I am also a combat veteran who has served two combat tours- Iraq, 2004-2006 and Kuwait, 2008. I am currently enrolled with the Veterans' Affairs (VA) for a back injury occurred while serving in Iraq; however, I did not pursue treatment for possible Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to problematic circumstances which I will outline within this testimony. This testimony will be based on my experiences with VA upon completion of my combat tour in Iraq.

I was activated for deployment to Iraq with C Company Brigade Support Battalion (BSB), 29th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) in 2004-2006. While in Kuwait, in route to Iraq, a mission requiring females came up. I volunteered for that mission along with 6 other females. We were attached to the 100th/442nd Infantry Battalion for entry and service while in Iraq. Upon serving with the 100th, I was asked to work directly for the Special Operations Task Force we were assigned to for the remaining 6 months. Details of the assignment are still classified and I cannot go into detail of my missions. For orientation of this testimony I can say that I worked under arduous conditions while on missions, completed over 300 combat mission hours, fired my weapons and witnessed death. I was reintegrated with C Company BSB two weeks prior to being redeployed to the states.

Injuries and events causing injury include: Sprained Back, mild concussion due to close proximity to a mortar round explosion, smoke inhalation and suspected minor pelvic fracturing due weight carried during training and missions. Upon redeployment to the states I documented these events during our Reverse Solder Readiness Processing (SRP) process. I was given VA paperwork to fill out where I documented my injuries. I also noted that I needed follow-ups for my back and possible PTSD. There was a VA rep at this initial Reverse SRP. He informed me that I would be sent to Tripler upon return to Hawaii for follow-ups and for processing into the VA.

Upon returning to Hawaii I had follow-up appointments for my back but never to see someone about my thoughts of suicide, nightmares, etc. Nor did I seek help via military leadership with pursuing treatment in fear that I would be kicked out of the Army. I called the numbers provided to us for VA. VA stated that they were tracking my paperwork for my back but not for needing to see someone about my mental health issues. They informed me that I would have to go the VA hospital for different paperwork for my mental health issues. I did go the to the VA hospital where I was asked to wait to be called. The waiting room was extremely crowded that day and I had to return back to work with my civilian job. I did not get to see someone that day. I called VA to see if there was any other way to see someone for I was having a very difficult time

sleeping and was afraid of hurting myself or someone. They told me that I had to come in and process. I just could not come in and deal with the long waits and work.

I struggled for a few months in silence. In 2006 there was still a general culture where leaders expected us to be stronger. Thoughts of suicide, violent outburst, the fact that I was sleeping in my closet just to curb anxiety while sleeping were all conditions that could have ended up preventing me from going to Officer Candidate School (OCS) or could face discharge if I had told anyone about it. I really just wanted VA to send me to see someone to talk to.

We had a Yellow Ribbon event (cannot remember if it was called that in 2006). There was a VA rep there. I asked him if there was some way I could see someone without waiting or processing in. He told me unfortunately there was a backlog and very long wait for service. He then told me "no offense but you are female. What could have seen there that was that bad". He continued to say that I could probably benefit from some of the other services available. Although he probably had good intentions, with the state of mind I was in, all I heard was 'you couldn't be bad enough for VA services because you are a woman'.

I did not go back to VA after that. Months went by and I suffered from heavy drinking, violent outburst, nightmares and had an incident with my daughter. She tried to wake me up and I throw her against a window thinking I was being attacked. I immediately made appointments with a civilian psychologist. I paid for that with my personal insurance and money. I saw her a few times until I started running close to my maximum visits allowed from insurance.

We had another Yellow Ribbon type of event that where I ran into a rep from the Vet Center. I told her what was happening and she saw me the very next day in her office in Kapiolani. The Vet Center told me that I was definitely suffering from PTSD and possibly TBI. They informed me that I could continue seeing them until I had hit the maximum amount of visits allowed under the program. I had to see VA for ongoing treatment. I did not go to VA due to the experience I had previously.

Eighteen months after deployment I received a letter stating that I was accepted into the VA system and had two months left for particular services (can't remember the specific details). I just remember being so upset that it took so long. I swore to never step foot into VA.

The visits to a civilian physiologist and the Vet Center saved my life. I am truly convinced that I would have committed suicide or hurt my children if I did not seek help on my own.

My hope is to see VA decentralize and create smaller departments. The system is too large. Just the location here on Oahu is terrible. Trying to find parking at Tripler, long waits at the VA hospital and the mere size of the hospital is very frustrating. Not the most conducive place for war veterans.

The Vet Center and civilian resources were great but there were pros and cons:

- Vet Center:
 - Pros: Easy access, quick service and relatable. Therapists were familiar and prepared to work with veterans. The group therapies with other veterans were also invaluable.
 - Cons: Could not prescribe medicine for sleep issues, visit limits and could not give diagnosis for follow-on treatments.
- Civilian Provider
 - Pros: Easy access, quick service and quick referral to providers for medication as needed.

- Cons: Cannot relate to veterans in some cases, generally do not understand military culture and very costly.

These events in this testimony purely represent what I went through. I know much has changed; however, through my leadership roles in the National Guard, I do know there still exists long waits and frustration with locations and processes with the VA. Receiving services is also very difficult due to civilian work conflicts. Most services offered to the guard do not consider reimbursements for time pay lost from missing work.

I hope my testimony contributes to changes needed with the VA.

Thanks for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Elisa Smithers