

Testimony of James Powers

Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Field Hearing

Columbus, Ohio

November 21st, 2017

Let me begin by thanking both Senator Brown and this Committee for the invitation to testify regarding topics concerning veterans.

Of the over 850,000+ (8% of population 6th most nationally) veterans here in Ohio and over 20 million nationally, this committee is giving ME the opportunity to give testimony regarding veteran issues. I personally view this as a great honor but an even greater responsibility. To tell my story and to be a voice of veterans that need to be heard.

My name is James Powers. I served in the U.S Army and Ohio Army National Guard for a combined 12 years. I deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2009-2010. During my career I served as an Infantryman, Instructor, and Recruiter. I achieved the rank of SGT/E5. I Like any good soldier held our creeds, oaths, and ethos sacred and served to the best of my abilities. During my service I, like over 3.8 million other veterans became injured.

The majority of my injuries I sustained over my military career are not easily visible. But one has almost cost me my life. PTSD. When I came home from Iraq in 2010 my transition back didn't go well. My life for the next 4 years slowly spiraled out of control. It was like quicksand. The more I tried to fix what was wrong the worse I made things. I let it consume everything. My livelihood, military career, relationships, and my overall well-being. I turned to alcohol and

drugs. I would do anything to numb what I still to this day find trouble describing. Until finally on a Tuesday morning in May 2014 when I felt I had no other choice but to put my pistol in my mouth and pull the trigger. CLICK! A misfire occurred, I had improperly loaded the pistol because of how drunk I was. Fortune for me in that moment something else “clicked” in my mind and said “something isn’t right, this isn’t you”.

3 and ½ years later and here I sit before this committee. It has been a bumpy road to say the least. I completed an intensive 10 week residential treatment program. Had it not been for the PTSD/SUD residential treatment program at the Wade Park VA Medical Center I don’t think I would be here to testify before you today. That program and the providers involved should serve as the standard of care for veterans with mental health problems especially PTSD. It is unfortunate that VA funding and availability for programs like this one are next to none. I have learned the art of finding a parking spot at crowded VA facilities. I have gotten used to going back and forth with the VA about them trying to double collect on a debt. Got to experience the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) process. Spent 9 months at the Warrior Transition unit in Fort Knox, KY for that. At least it seemed more efficient than traditional VA claim processing. I finally got the torn ligament in my wrist repaired. Only took 5 years from when I originally presented with pain. I continued to try things to ease the chronic pain in my left foot during that time too. I drove 6 hours back home on the weekends as my wife was expecting our now almost 2 year old son. But finally my military career ended when I was medically discharged/ retired in February 2016.

Since then I keep to myself. I’m SGT Powers turned Mr. Mom to my little man Connor and soon to be little dude Luke who is expected to join us in February. I strive to be a good

husband to my wife Shanon. She keeps me grounded and cool headed. I only wish that the VA would do a better job with the caregiver program. At times she too has questioned the VA shortcomings, which at least helps me feel valid in my issues and it not be me just losing my mind. She even was understanding simply saying “drive safe and call me when you get there” when I made the spur of the moment decision and drove all the way to D.C. in July to see my elected officials about a Congressional Inquiry that the VA seemed to be stalling on responding to. To my luck Senator Brown and his staff were able to help finally get answers about a grossly inaccurate \$11,000 VA overpayment debt. The VA’s eventual response was that the debt was “miscalculated” due to a “manual processing system failing to properly communicate with an automated system”. If you ask me it sounds like a fancy way to say human error. I keep routines so to help me stay mindful. I still struggle daily. But not nearly what I used to and for that I am happy.

I surround myself with a small group of veterans. Some that I have known since childhood and others I have had the pleasure to meet along the course of my life. We look out for each other. We know each other’s signs and symptoms. Many times they are just like our own. Just like in the service we are covering each other’s six o’clock. I think I agreed to this for them more than for myself.

I have been prescribed medication over the years. At times being on 3-5 medications. Some requiring routine lab work. Some that would be to counteract side effects of other medications while causing new side effects. It began to feel as if VA doctrine was increased dosage or increase number of medications that will fix any problem. All of this became too much for me. I ended up turning to medical marijuana. I figured it can’t be any worse than all of the

pills. For the last 10 months I have been using it. I only hope the federal government might change the law and see the medical benefits of marijuana like the 29 states that have medical marijuana programs. I have no adverse side effects and feel with in combination with therapy has been far better at managing my symptoms than with traditional medication regimens.

Some things that I and veterans all across this country would like for this Committee to think about:

Tonight when we all go to sleep, around 40,000 veterans will go to bed homeless. Men and women this great nation of ours holds to such high regard for their selfless service are being lost to suicide at a rate of 22 a day (18.5 % of all daily suicides). 30+ day wait times are still happening for appointments. Female veterans who account for 10 percent (about 10 million) of all veterans still struggle to get access to Women's Health services. The VA is still unable to provide the same quality of care that is available in the private sector. Evening and weekend primary or mental health care appointments, Access to urgent, convenience, and emergency services are next to nonexistent. Claims are still taking too long for initial processing, being improperly processed, and taking even longer to be reviewed in the appeals process. Automated phone systems and web services are helpful but still need improvement. Like how hard would it be to ensure all needed phone extensions are available online when you pull up a VA Facility. Or printing the extension on an Appointment reminder should we need to call and reschedule. The CHOICE program conception is great. However implementation and execution of it were ill conceived and lack luster. Disability claims/issues with Burn pit exposure are beginning to seem just like Vietnam veterans who are still fighting about Agent Orange. This list is far from being

all inclusive. Not to mention these things are far from anything new. These issues continue to be echoed by veterans.

If this committee really wants to know about the issues that are facing veterans it's not hard. Go back to your home state's, walk into the nearest VA facility and ask the nearest veteran. Talk to the 20% of your state's law enforcement and first responders that are veterans. Walk into a VFW, American Legion, or AMVETS post. Heck talk amongst yourselves. 20% of politicians are veterans. Get on social media. Listen to the veterans organizations in DC who represent us.

Now I know that only so much can really come from my testimony here today. I know this won't be the turning point in the care of this nation's veterans. Effective change and progress don't happen overnight. I more than anything hope this testimony and any results it produces helps even 1 veteran. That is my measure of success . That my words haven't fallen on deaf ears and blind eyes. That this committee has been reminded of just how big of a responsibility they have in ensuring this country's veterans are never forgotten.