

Eric Smith, Member Veteran, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America

Testimony of Eric Smith

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Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Hearing

“Veterans’ Employment: Improving the transition from the Battlefield to the Workforce”

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Madam Chairwoman, ranking member, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to share my experiences today as a combat veteran struggling to find employment in this difficult economy.

My name is Eric Smith. I served in the United States Navy as a Hospital Corpsman for 5 1/2 years, deploying twice to Iraq. During my tours, I gained valuable experience in the medical field under the most extreme conditions imaginable. In spite of my experience and service, I’m struggling to find a job today—and I know I am not alone. Although mine is just one story, I know that my experiences are mirrored in the over 200,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who are struggling to find work in today’s economy.

As a Navy Corpsman, I carried enormous responsibility and acquired a wide range of technical and leadership skills that should translate into a good job in the civilian workforce. I enlisted in the Navy when I was 17 years old. By age 19, I had skills, training and responsibilities far beyond those of my civilian peers in the medical field. As a senior corpsman, I lead a 4-man team for a 20+ bed ICU, and I performed procedures that only the most experienced civilian nurses were trained to perform.

During my deployment to Iraq, I served as the primary corpsman for an infantry platoon in the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment. In a combat zone, a platoon’s corpsman is their medical lifeline, performing duties that in the civilian world are normally left to a Physician’s Assistant. In this capacity, my medical and leadership training were unparalleled.

With this experience, I was confident that upon returning home from Iraq I could find an excellent job in the medical field. After two tours, I left military service in 2008. I strongly believed I left with an impressive resume that would translate well into the civilian market. This did not prove to be the case.

In 2009, I applied for a job as a Certified Nursing Assistant. By comparison to the high-tempo environment of my combat tour, this was a mundane position—but I welcomed the opportunity to keep serving in the medical field. My corpsman resume was extensive. My experience in numerous medical disciplines and procedures impressed the three nurses who interviewed me for the position. When they recommended me to the doctors in charge of the clinic, I was confident that I would get the job. However, I never received a call back.

Looking back, I’m almost positive that despite my knowledge and experience, I was ultimately disqualified from the position for lack of civilian equivalent certifications. I was disappointed by this outcome. However, I was more frustrated by the reality that graduation from Naval Hospital

Corps school and years worth of experience provided me with no certifications that translated into the civilian world. I was equally frustrated by the lack of a uniform process for acquiring these civilian certifications while in the military. Presently, the Navy has systems in place that offer some opportunities to gain these valued civilian certifications; however, these systems are not standardized and they are largely driven by a Sailor's own initiative. For example, certification is easily attainable for a Corpsman who is assigned to a small command in an outpatient clinic with rigid 9 to 5 hours. He or she can leave work to attend certification courses. It is an entirely different scenario for a corpsman who works 12-hour night shifts at a hospital ward or a "Greenside" Corpsman who is preoccupied with back-to-back combat deployments. The current system is not equitable, nor is it reflective of a sailor's valuable experience and training. In the end, I firmly believe this hurts Navy Corpsmen like myself looking to apply our skills in the civilian medical field. It makes us less competitive than our less experienced civilian peers.

My experience is mirrored across the services. Far too many combat Corpsmen are becoming highly skilled in their trade, yet high operational tempo and multiple deployments prevent them from obtaining equivalent civilian certifications. Quite frankly, we are not setting our veterans up for success.

While assigned to the Marine Corps Forces, I attended the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) before leaving the service. The military allows you to attend the class as far as 12 months out before separation. I did so exactly one year out from my separation date and only weeks away from my second deployment to Iraq. However, as I prepared to deploy for a second tour, much of the valuable information offered in the class was not retained. Many service members were in a similar position. TAP was one less thing to do before we separated and the earlier we did it the better. Why not shorten that window, so that more of the information provided through TAP is retained?

If there was one thing I retained from TAP, it was that I was told my veteran status and military experience would put me ahead of my civilian peers when I transitioned out. I was told I would be wanted in the civilian workforce because I had proven myself a reliable leader. Based on my experience transitioning home, I have not found this to be the case. In fact, I do not feel I am on a level playing field with my civilian peers.

In the military I was more than qualified for the positions I applied for in the civilian workforce. But in the civilian world, my military education and training did not translate because I didn't have a piece of paperwork saying so. The resume that I thought would put me ahead of the pack actually put me behind. Today, several years later, I am still struggling to find a job and utilize the skills that the Navy spent over \$1 million and six years to give me.

Unfortunately, my story is not unique nor is it limited to veterans seeking work in the medical field. There are thousands of highly skilled veterans with training far beyond their civilian peers that cannot seek equivalent employment outside of the military. Additionally, the leadership and management skills that veterans have obtained in combat are being overlooked by a civilian workforce that does not understand their experience.

As a veteran, it is difficult to understand why my hard-earned experience in the military is hearsay in the civilian world without required civilian certifications. I have applied to jobs where I supposedly had a 'veteran's preference' to no avail. Posting my resume to sites such as Monster.com and Snag-A-Job.com have proved fruitless. With no other options, in the past year I have sought part-time work as a bartender, mail sorter and flatbed trailer tarper. Still, part-time work has been scarce. I have walked in the early mornings to a 7-11 in Baltimore to be picked up for day labor. Desperate for income, I have also volunteered to be a test patient in drug studies. At one point, I spent over \$300 on a round-trip train ticket from Baltimore to Metropark, NJ to enroll in a study, only to be told within minutes that I did not qualify.

The time between separation and your final adjustment to civilian life can be rough and often times very lonely. Save for my father who is a veteran, there are few people who understand the struggles of returning combat veterans. Right now, there are just too few services to help veterans like myself transfer our military skills to the civilian market. As an Iraq veteran, I have no way of translating my military vocational skills without going back to school to 're-learn' what the Navy already taught me. Additionally, there is no tool that employers can use to understand my military resume and credentials. One is desperately needed.

To find a solution to this issue, I joined Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). Two weeks ago, 27 of my fellow veterans and I came here to Capitol Hill to ask Congress for its support in solving this problem as part of IAVA's Storm the Hill 2011. Throughout the week, we met with 117 offices and 57 members of Congress to ask them to commission a study and report about how military vocational skills and certifications translate to the civilian world. If this tool existed, I believe that I would have been able to leverage my military training into gainful civilian employment when I came home from Iraq in 2008. If it existed, I believe we also would not be living in a country where Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are consistently unemployed at rates that are 2 percent higher than our civilian peers.

As the civilian unemployment rate declines, joblessness among new veterans continues to skyrocket—this is unacceptable. As a country, we must act now to reverse this trend and uphold the nation's commitment to our men and women serving in uniform. In addition to ordering a study, we must make the TAP program mandatory throughout all branches, encourage veterans to start small businesses and promote veteran hiring through tax incentives. It's not too late if we act now. And IAVA's 2011 Policy Agenda lays out a clear path for the public and private sectors to work together to end new veteran unemployment. <http://iava.org/policyagenda>

I am proud of my service to my country and the brothers and sisters I fought beside in Iraq. I am just one man. But my story reflects the struggle of over 200,000 veterans in the current job market. I am asking you to act now and show them that you have their backs.