

COREY MCGEE PUBLIC AFFAIRS SPECIALIST FOR DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS  
AFFAIRS

STATEMENT OF  
COREY MCGEE  
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HEARING BEFORE THE  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS  
AND SEAMLESS TRANSITION

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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. It is an honor to be here on behalf of the newly injured soldiers coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan who will be transitioning into civilian life to find new careers, not just jobs. From experience, I can tell you that it is not an easy road to travel, but I hope that today will bring us one-step closer to creating a better experience for combat wounded veterans and their families around the United States.

After receiving the news that I had to retire from the military due to the wounds I received in combat, I decided that I needed to think about what was next. I was worried that no one would want to hire a paraplegic. I had joined the Army straight out of high school, and the only thing I was trained for was to be a sniper for a scout platoon. Even if there were an opportunity for employment, how would I know about it and set up an interview? What would I wear and how would I get to the interview? Because I had planned to be in the military for the next 20 years, I did not have a resume and the only degree I had was a high school diploma. I had no back-up plan. It never occurred to me that I would be paralyzed and searching for gainful employment.

After a few months after returning from Falluja, I met a woman by the name of Jennie Lohowicz who gave me the answers I needed to begin to travel on the road to success. She introduced me to the, "Coming Home to Work Program." This program allowed me to serve as a Department of Veterans Affairs volunteer, which enabled me to get the experience I needed to work in the business world. Though it goes against that old Army cliché, I volunteered. I joined a nationwide volunteer group of thousands who serve veterans at VA hospitals helping in a variety of assignments from escorting patients, to medical appointments within the hospital, to working in administrative work. Volunteering gives returning soldiers an opportunity to transition back into civilian life, as well as establish relationships with VA staff and members of the veteran service organization community. It also allows soldiers to use old and current skills as well as learn new skills without the pressure of a "job". It helps soldiers transition into the community and establish relationships just as a young business professional in the real work world.

I have been through a lot within the last three years. From a quadriplegic to a paraplegic, to the man standing here today as I transitioned from an undereducated soldier with few practical skills, to a college educated Public Affairs Specialist with the help of this program. Even though I could no longer serve my country within the Army, I am proud to continue to serve from

within. I now have a full time position at the VA as a Public Affairs Specialist while also attending college full-time at the Northern Virginia Community College. Thanks to my experiences, I was able to find a job in the VA medical center in Atlanta, Georgia, where I am moving with my soon-to-be wife. I plan to transfer to Emory University to further my education in the fall. I would not change a thing within the last seven years of my life. I would do it all over again if I could, because I would not be here today without everything I have done.

Having said that, though, there is one change that I would like to recommend that might be able to help soldiers and their families. I have two children from a previous marriage and know what it is like to worry endlessly about how to take care of them financially after a military career is cut short. After receiving the training I needed from VA as a volunteer for a year, I knew I wanted to work for the VA as an actual employee once completing my medical discharge. However, no government agency could hire me nor guarantee me a position since I was still technically employed by the military. By the end of my year and a half of volunteering with the VA, I was living off of the hospital grounds, going to work almost every day, and only rarely returned to Walter Reed for physical therapy and exams. Yet, I still had no idea if there would be a job for me upon my release from the military. It took two months for me to secure a position once discharged, a long time when you support two children and live in such an expensive city. My suggestion is for the entire process to be more streamlined, to make it easier for these young heroes to directly transition from a volunteer position to a permanent position once released. A government employer should have the option to hire a soldier part time that is currently on medical hold and meets the standards for the position. For those soldiers who may not need office training, it would be most beneficial to have a point of contact to guide them to employers who are interested in hiring soldiers, disabled or not. Even better would be the establishment of a web site designed solely for retired soldiers and their families that would highlight job opportunities or training seminars and classes. This website could be similar to the numerous other job-market search sites, like monster.com or usajobs.com, but would only be accessible to retiring soldiers. This will help families to eliminate the worry of finding a career and help soldiers recover faster during their rehabilitation.

Mr. Chairman, that ends my statement, and I thank you for the privilege of appearing before the committee today.