

STEVEN A. BOHN, SPECIALIST 4 (RET)

TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE
U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

MAY 25, 2011

Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, Members of the Committee,
I am honored to have the opportunity to appear before you today, and as a wounded warrior, to share my experience regarding the transition from military service to civilian life. I believe in my country and I believe in my government. This is why I hope you can help fix the problems that so many of us wounded warriors are dealing with every day after already having gone through so much.

My name is Steven Andrew Bohn. I was born and raised in Salem, Massachusetts. I grew up poor and worked for everything I have. I dropped out of high school with 3 1/2 credits left to graduate, so I could get a full time job and help support my family.

I joined the Army in 2007 after learning that a friend of mine had been killed in Iraq by an IED blast. After infantry training, I was assigned to the historic 101st Airborne Division, 1/506th Infantry Regiment. My unit deployed to Afghanistan in March 2008 to a remote base in Wardak province near the Pakistan border. The base was the size of a soccer field and held 28 of us. Conditions were pretty basic; having no running water, for example, we cleaned ourselves with baby wipes, and got to shower once a month at a forward operating base. I enjoyed the challenge of our rugged conditions. We went on hundreds of missions while holding down our outpost. But I was devastated when my best friend, Specialist Paul Conlon, from Somerville, Mass., and our first lieutenant were killed in August 2008. Still I knew I had to stay strong to survive.

I was badly injured on November 6, 2008, when a suicide bomber driving a dump truck packed with 2000 lbs of explosives drove up to our outpost and detonated it. The building I was in collapsed on me and I suffered severe internal injuries and spinal injuries. I was hospitalized for a total of 6 months, and underwent two major surgeries that included resection of the small intestine, bladder reconstructive surgery and a spinal surgery. I was also diagnosed at Landstuhl, Germany with mild Traumatic Brain Injury.

From Injury to Medical Retirement

While I know your focus today is on the transition from DoD to VA, I experienced some rough transitions long before my medical retirement from service. After being initially hospitalized at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan and then at Landstuhl Germany, I was flown to Fort Campbell, KY rather than to Walter Reed where I was supposed to be sent for surgery. At Fort Campbell, I was initially assigned to a Warrior Transition Unit (WTU). When I was finally evaluated there by physicians, they realized the mistake and I was transferred to Walter Reed. After undergoing

spinal surgery at Walter Reed, I was transferred to the VA Boston Healthcare System's West Roxbury Campus' spinal cord injury unit so that I could be closer to my family during that convalescence. Whatever coordination should have taken place between Walter Reed, West Roxbury, and the Fort Campbell WTU to which I'd been assigned apparently didn't occur, because Fort Campbell threatened to put me on AWOL if I didn't return. As a result, I was flown back to Fort Campbell. Later I was returned to Walter Reed to undergo bladder surgery

After post-surgical convalescence at Walter Reed, I was assigned to a Warrior Transition Unit at Fort Meade, Maryland. That WTU experience involved little more than spending time in the barracks. Thanks to Senator Kerry's intervention, I was transferred to a Community Based Warrior Transition Unit (CBTWU) at Hanscom Air Force Base in Concord MA, which enabled me to live at home, work on the base, and finish up my medical care. I was assigned there for a period of 12 months. During that time, I underwent a Medical Evaluation Board which eventually assigned me a 40% Permanent disability rating, 30% for my spinal injuries and 10% for my neck injuries. That rating does not take account of my internal injuries. I was finally medically retired from the Army on October 27, 2010.

Transition from Military Service to VA

Let me try and explain the DoD-VA transition I experienced. Initially, the process seemed to begin well, with the CBTWU sending my paperwork to VA 180 days before my estimated separation date so that the claims-adjudication could be as timely as possible. I was contacted by VA soon after leaving the military to schedule compensation and pension examinations. But those examiners were backlogged, and I've had long waits to schedule the many exams I've had to undergo. I still have to have a neurosurgery exam, which had been delayed because of the apparent need for another MRI. As I understand it, VA cannot adjudicate my case until it has the results of all those exams.

While I could see some evidence of DoD-VA coordination as it related to establishing entitlement to VA compensation, something seemed to have fallen through the cracks in terms of getting VA medical care. While I've had multiple VA compensation examinations, it wasn't until earlier this month that anyone at VA approached me to discuss any treatment. At that time, I was contacted by a social worker, who arranged for me to get physical therapy. Unfortunately no one seemed to have been aware of my spinal cord injuries. Because of those injuries, physical therapy really isn't appropriate. I still have two herniated discs which are pinching nerves in my neck and causing great pain, but I am uncertain what additional treatment might still be possible. At this point, many months after becoming a veteran, I have yet to be assigned a VA primary care doctor.

Today and the Future

I was asked recently, "How are you doing since getting out of service?" Now nearly seven months later, I would have to say, "I'm struggling." I'm not by nature a complainer. But I'm still living on my retirement pay of approximately \$699/month, not even half the pay I earned as an Army Specialist. All of that money goes to rent for my one bedroom apartment. I still have

other bills which I cannot pay. I know I'm not the only soldier going through all of this, and that others must sometime wonder where their next meal will come from. Given the extent of my injuries, I'm not physically able to work. My back and my neck are in constant pain. I applied for Social Security disability but was denied.

I grew up in Salem, but now live in Peabody just north of Boston, Massachusetts. It's close to home, but it isn't a low cost area. I expect to get additional compensation from the VA that takes into account of all my injuries. But the case still hasn't been finally adjudicated. As you can imagine, it is difficult to be in this kind of limbo, waiting many months for VA to adjudicate my case, and to live on so little for so long after going through so much.

People ask me about the future. I grew up poor and I've always been a hard worker. I'm 24 years old. I want to work! I completed my GED degree, and have worked as a roofer and a chef. But, with my injuries, I can't go back to either kind of work, and am not sure what jobs I can do. I did attend a Transition Assistance Program before leaving the Army. But that kind of program didn't allow for the one-on-one help I need, and didn't really answer my questions about vocational rehabilitation, or schooling, or prepare me for the rough transition I've faced. But I'm determined to persevere.

I was also recently asked, "Knowing everything that's happened to you, would you do it all over again?" My answer now and will always be, "of course." I joined the service after a close friend of mine was killed in Iraq. I understood the risks.

I know this country isn't perfect and I know things take time but I also know that I'm not alone in having to wait so long for all of our well deserved benefits to take effect. I understand it's not unusual for wounded warriors from Massachusetts who have been medically retired to wait 9 to 12 months for the VA to adjudicate their claims. In contrast, I'm told that Rhode Island warriors may get claims adjudicated in about six months.

As far as I know, the DoD's Disability Evaluation System, which aims to work with VA to simplify and streamline disability evaluations, is still not fully employed. Apparently the WTU where I was stationed was a pilot site, but that simply meant that a small percentage of service members were processed through the pilot. Most face the same slow road I'm traveling.

The VA claims adjudication process alone has been complicated and I've been lucky to have a great advocate from Wounded Warrior Project who is now helping me with my claim. But I've wondered if this process could have gone differently. With injuries as extensive as mine, I think it was pretty clear early on that I would not be able to stay in the service. I understand that in those instances, VA-DoD policy calls for assigning a senior-level nurse or social worker to help coordinate all the complexities involved in the transition from military status to community reintegration. No one ever discussed with me or my family the possibility of having a Federal

Recovery Coordinator assigned to my case. But I wonder if having had that kind of help might have made a difference.

This hasn't been an easy journey for me. I've had a long, difficult recovery. My spinal injuries still cause me a lot of pain and I will continue to undergo care and evaluation. Neurosurgeons warn me that my condition could deteriorate. I can understand and to some extent cope with all of that. What is more difficult to understand, and that causes me concern for the warriors who may sustain severe injuries in the days and months ahead, is why after so many years VA and DoD haven't solved the kind of transition problems I've experienced.

I hope this hearing will highlight and hopefully help resolve many of these problems, and spare other warriors the mental and financial anguish I've encountered.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to my experience and taking the time to care.