

## **Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

### ***"Harnessing the Power of Community: Leveraging Veteran Networks to Tackle Suicide."***

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Jennifer Satterly, All Secure Foundation

To the Members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs:

All Secure Foundation was founded more than three years ago to help combat warriors and their families heal from the invisible wounds of war, Post-Traumatic Stress. Our very first speaking engagement was a Congressional Briefing held by NAMI on veteran mental health issues in November 2017, and while we would have preferred to get our start at a VFW hall or a high school, my husband, Command Sgt. Major (retired) Tom Satterly and I jumped at the opportunity to share our story in hopes to create awareness of the issues millions of American servicemen and women and their family face.

We were told by many, including a former House of Representative elected official that our presence and statement wouldn't make a difference; that we would be met with a hand shake and a photo op, and that we would be forgotten as soon as the room cleared of staffers headed to the next briefing. We had to try though, we had to make our voices heard, and maybe, just maybe, the stories we shared that afternoon would reach the heart of someone who not only could stand up and say no more but someone who actually WOULD stand up and say no more. Not our warriors. Not our spouses and caregivers. Not our children.

We walked, more like ran, the halls of the Capital buildings and sat one on one with several Members of the Senate, Congress, and House of Representatives. My husband who was a Delta Force CSM for over 20 years shared his story about nearly becoming a veteran suicide himself just 4 years prior. As he choked back his tears telling his story of yet another divorce, a son he barely knew, chronic pain from multiple explosions and surgeries which lead him to a place he never thought he would be, sitting in a parking garage, gun in hand trying to decide if today was the day to pull the trigger. As Tom and I became emotional, Senator Patty Murray reached across the table to put her hand on mine, looked me in the eyes and said, "tell me your story, tell me about the spouses".

It was the first time that day, and the only time that day, that someone at the Capital asked us about those who also serve this great nation, those who have sacrificed a stable home life, those who watch their children painfully leave another house and have to adapt to a new town and school yet again, those who go to bed with a prayer that the love of their life will make it back to the base that night safely in a very unsafe place thousands of miles away, those who wait patiently for the day they will be together again only to discover that when they are, the person they married is now a stranger who's wounds may not be visible, but are no less painful, deep, and in need of treatment.

You might be thinking, "What does a spouses' story have to do with combatting veteran suicide?". My answer is... everything.

I have spent the last 7 years working alongside and with Special Operation Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines. I have talked to hundreds of the toughest, most elite, intelligent, and highly trained warriors that our country dispatches around the world to do it's bidding. I have heard combat stories that would keep any listener awake at night with images so disturbing that you wonder just how a person ever comes home ok after that experience, not to mention dozens of those experiences. I have heard stories of unbearable loss, of heartbreak and of guilt for making it out when their brother or sister did not. I have heard more stories than I can count that are just like Tom's, a well-trained and elite soldier who everyone thought was ok sitting alone with a loaded gun in their hand trying to decide if today is the day to leave the debilitating emotional and physical pain behind. I am most often a stranger to these men and women, a voice on the phone who cares, who listens, who lets them know that the heartache and pain they feel and try to bury is the very thing that makes them human not weak, and after what they saw and did, that they have the fight of their lives ahead of them at home to rebuild what war took away from them. That the trauma has shaped them into a new person and that person has value in this world not in spite of it but because of it. That they matter. That they are seen and heard. That they don't need to fill the empty void and pain with toxic and addictive quick fixes in the vast darkness that they occupy day and night. That they are not evil, bad, or monsters that they sometimes feel they are, but instead heroes our nation called to fight evil, to remove the bad, and battle the monsters that our politicians have labeled as such.

Very few, if any, share the stories they share with me with their spouses. They tell me over and over again, "I don't want to bring the war home. I can't tell them what I saw and what I did. They've already been through so much." The

protection they feel for their spouse is also a cover; a cover for the fear that they will be judged or no longer loved for who they were and what they had to be overseas. Vulnerability is a path towards healing yet they are conditioned and trained to keep quiet and that vulnerability is a weakness. Yet there is no healing without it. Distance and isolation in the relationship is created, just another symptom of PTS. The spouse gets tired of asking "what's wrong?" with no response and the warrior doesn't know how to share the unthinkable. The war torn home is not reserved alone for countries thousands of miles away, the war torn home is an American home and to heal the veteran you have to heal the whole family unit. Hurt people, hurt people. If you don't heal everyone involved, the hurt persists, the cycle cannot be broken, and the pain becomes generational. When a veteran takes his or her life the impact is greater than they can imagine. And that pain is passed on.

Let's talk about what no one wants to talk about, the anger, the physical and emotional abuse, the neglect, the pain, the addiction, the reckless behavior, the anxiety, the perfection-driven aggression, the paranoid behavior that keeps everyone in the house on eggshells. This is the face of Post-Traumatic Stress. These are suicide triggers. The feeling of no longer being who they were and not being able to control or understand what is going on in their mind or with their bodies. No one has explained the biology of PTS, that it is a normal and natural response to a traumatic event, so they feel it's something they should be able to control verses a biological response that is beyond their control and in need of treatment just like any other wound. In the veteran family, no one speaks up, no one asks for help, no one knows where to turn.

Veterans are not just killing themselves because of what they saw and did and lost overseas it is also what they saw and did and lost at home. The shame of another divorce. The pain and heartbreak of a child who doesn't really know who they are, or worse, is afraid of them. The drinking and abuse of pills to dull the senses and memories. The feeling of uselessness, hopelessness, chronic physical pain, and the loss of a tribe that you once would have given your life for. The military's cultural stigma that asking for help is a sign of weakness. The toxic belief that they should "just get over it" now that they're home or the ringing in their ears they've heard from the ignorant masses of "they knew what they were getting into when they signed up to serve." The insecurity of starting a new career over in their 30's or 40's. Not fitting in civilian life, a stranger in a strange land.

It is the spouse, the caregiver, that is most often their advocate, sometimes their only advocate for healing. When a veteran is in crisis, they are not thinking clearly and a spouse or caregiver often is the only one to get them the help they need. That is if they know where to turn for help.

In a recent study by the VA, 80% of veterans would like more family involvement in their care. 80%. We are asking our veterans to take healing upon themselves alone, but that is not what they are asking for. They want their families help. They need their families help. If you want to tackle veteran suicide you must include the family in the treatment of PTS.

There are days that Tom doesn't want to get out of bed. There are days when he wants to bury the pain with one drink too many. There are days he is in so much physical pain that he can barely walk and doing the smallest task causes excruciating pain. There are days when he is so angry that his friends won't see their children graduate or walk down the aisle because their number was up that he takes it out on me, the person who will still be there when the anger settles. There are sleepless nights and long tired days. There is depression.

Then there are my days as a spouse. Days I force him to get out of bed. Days that I take him on a trip for a hike verses a trip to the bar. Days and nights researching alternative treatment options because no one has told or helped us battle PTS. The weeks and months of driving him daily to Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation treatments, physical therapy, and Cognitive Behavioral therapy sessions. I searched and applied for a scholarship for him to learn Transcendental Meditation. I became certified as a health coach just to gain the knowledge and to understand the way food, vitamins and minerals can heal his body and mind. I worked with doctors to get him off medications that were making him worse, not better. I make sure to be aware of loud noises and clutter in the home because I know those are triggers. I make him sit at a restaurant with his back to the door and tell him to relax because I'm keeping an eye out. I cry with him on anniversaries of friends he's lost in combat. I hold his hand as he answers yet another call that one of his friends he served with died from a rare cancer, or had a stroke at 45 years old, or has taken their life. No one tells you being a military or veteran spouse means you need to be a healer, a doctor, a therapist, a researcher, and a teacher but that's what's required. If you have an invested spouse in healing measures, you will most likely have an invested veteran. Spouses and caregivers need the tools to help their loved ones heal, to help identify signs of severe distress, and what to do in a crisis situation. We are left out here on the battlefield alone, no weapons, no armor, no training to fight this

unseen enemy. We suffer from Secondary PTS. We are tired, frustrated, angry, confused, and heartbroken too.

When a warrior gets help and the spouse does not, there is a greater chance for substance abuse relapse, there is a greater chance for divorce, there is more turmoil in the home in front of the children, and there is a greater chance for suicide. This is something we have heard and experienced with those we work with over and over and over again. The story is so similar we can play it back before it's even been said.

Why do so many veteran's commit suicide? The reasons are as many and as varied as there are people. This is not a one size fits all problem or a one size fits all solution.

How can we reduce veteran suicide? The answers are also as many and varied as there are people. This is not the government, the VA, the military, or any organizations task alone. This is an epidemic the country must address together and we need all hands on deck. No one answer alone is right or wrong. Not all treatments work for all veterans. It takes years to address and heal from PTS. There is no magic pill or cure. This is the long game and why it is critical for the veteran to have support at home.

Let me ask you then, what area of helping and healing can you tackle today? Not just the Senate Committee but you personally. Who will you call? What program will get the attention it deserves? How can you create policy or help to push one through that's been sitting on someone's desk for far too long? How can your voice and vote help the millions of American veteran families suffering at home who don't know who to turn to or how to get the help they so desperately need and deserve?

There are many places to start, like encouraging and funding the exploration and research of alternative methods of healing Post-Traumatic Stress, implement a training program for VA doctors and staff on alternative modalities of healing, or create a bill to allow our veterans to get coverage for those treatments and allow families suffering from secondary PTS to also partake and heal through alternative methods of healing. We have to dispel the myth that raising your hand for help while serving in an active duty role will mean a loss of security clearance or your job, you can set policy to help protect those that do reach out. The DOD needs additional funds to train military leaders, doctors, therapist, and social workers on how to get help for the war fighters and their families post-deployments. We have heard far too many times that there

was no help while in service, there was no one to turn to after, and that no one really cares about them anyway. Will you show our heroes you care? That as a country, we all care and their lives mean something.

Lastly, I ask for a minute of silence, not only to honor the thousands of veteran lives lost to suicide but to the more than 22 veteran lives that will be lost today at their own hands. America has failed them. We all have failed them. And after a moment of silence for our fallen veterans, I ask you to be anything but silent and leave no man, woman or child behind.

Thank you.

Jen Satterly  
All Secure Foundation  
Co-Founder