

June 23rd, 2016

Statement of Cole T. Lyle before the House Committee on Veterans Affairs

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Brown, distinguished Representatives of the committee, thank you all for the opportunity to submit testimony. I request that my statement be accepted for the record.

“To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan”. One-hundred forty-one years ago during his 2nd inaugural address, President Lincoln gave us a profound and concise statement which would later become the Veterans Affairs’ motto. The spirit which drove Lincoln then is the same spirit that drove us to this chamber, pursuing discourse on how best to care for him who shall have borne the battle.

The Veterans Affairs Committee and its members meet among the spirits of those who have sacrificed for their nation. The altar of liberty, upon which these spirits lie, is being overshadowed by the dark cloud of suicides, which grows larger every day we as a nation and congress are not proactive. On this day, the committee meets not to live in past associations or treatments. Here and now we must admit, should we be worthy of those spirits which have borne the battle, we must find new fields for action. The P.A.W.S. Act, HR 4764, is that field.

I spent six years in the Marine Corps, deploying to Helmand Province, Afghanistan for most of 2011. Upon return to the states I took the post-deployment health assessment, which indicated a need to seek assistance for post-traumatic stress. I was prescribed medication and directed to use a local Veteran’s Center for appropriate counseling. After roughly two years pursuing those avenues of treatment, the symptoms were not subsiding, and were in fact exacerbated. Nightmares were more frequent; anxiety attacks and mood swings were more frequent. I wanted to stop, but I did not find that inspiration until a few friends I served with committed suicide as a result of the same cycle of prescribed drug usage. A friend and former Marine who was utilizing a service dog told me how well it was working for him. The only problem? The VA didn’t, and still does not, provide service dogs specifically trained to combat symptoms of PTS. Upon further research, I found most of the non-profit community providing free service dogs to veterans and filling the void left by the VA, had wait times over a year and oftentimes more. Not feeling comfortable waiting that amount of time, I obtained my service dog Kaya and had her subsequently trained through an Assistance Dogs International-accredited trainer. All told: roughly \$10,000, some of which I had to borrow. Many veterans do not have those financial resources, and thus the status quo of treatment for PTS has given us twenty-two veterans a day committing suicide. That statistic was procured from a study by the VA itself which only used 21 states to ascertain that number. Because of the limitations in the study, the number, tragically, is likely much higher.

Kaya worked wonders for me within weeks. She was specifically trained to recognize when I have a nightmare and jumps into bed, waking me up. Kaya recognizes anxiety attacks at the outset and intervenes at the attack’s early stages, preventing the anger or depression from

snowballing. I've remarked many times, that Kaya has also provided a sense of purpose that pills or therapy will never do. Many days I would lie in bed, in a fog of depression with no reason to get up or be productive. Kaya forced me to take her outside; to exercise her. This small amount of responsibility and purpose was something that gave me the confidence in which to expand my personal goals, bit by bit, until I got to where I am today. Such was the effectiveness of this treatment, I wondered why this option was not provided by the VA. Answers to my inquiries were less than satisfactory, to put it mildly.

"There is no better way to overcome a trickle of doubt than with a flood of naked truth". The excuses we are given by the VA as to why we have not pursued this option have centered around the lack of empirical data about its efficacy. One doesn't have to read an academic study to understand the therapeutic and healing effects untrained dogs can have, but a trained service dog that combats specific symptoms are exponentially more capable to be so. Moreover, we do actually have studies. These studies have been conducted by our friends at K9's for Warriors, and by the Human Animal Bond Research Institute in conjunction with the MAYO Clinic and Purdue University. We have the overwhelming amount of anecdotal evidence by veterans themselves. Even so, if we use a hypothetical with service dogs adding little or no benefits to countering PTS, there is absolutely no negative associated with them, and certainly not to the extent which we have seen with opioids.

George Washington once stated that, "When we assumed the Soldier, we did not lay aside the Citizen...". Having already obtained Kaya and being on a solid path to complete recovery, it would have been easy to continue life without giving this issue a second thought. But in youth, my heart was touched with the fire of service, and the Marine Corps taught me to scorn few things outside of indifference. I could not, in good conscience, leave this issue alone if I had the power to act. Since May of 2015 I've devoted copious amounts of time and \$10,000 of my own money advocating for the P.A.W.S. Act.

I've learned that my story is not an uncommon one. The war against PTS has been a long war; it's been a tough war. Heavily involving myself with many veteran-transition organizations like 1st CivDiv Warriors Foundation in Houston, TX, or GoRuck that operates nationwide, and subsequently setting up my own Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers Foundation, I've been exposed regularly to the both the personal and aggregate concerns voiced within the community. Our nations veterans have found in one another a bond, that exists only among brothers who have seen death and suffering together. This bond has proved to be the impetus for the stories I hear, and the messages I receive via social media from veterans and their families whom I've never met. They encourage me to continue my efforts. More sobering, I receive calls and emails from the family members of veterans I knew personally that lost their personal battles to PTS pleading, in fact begging me, to use what voice I have in Congress to relay this message: service dogs will save lives.

I'm not here for myself. I have only tried to be the voice in which my brothers and sisters can channel their desire for change, and the one and only success which is mine to command is to bring a mighty heart in this advocacy. With the current epidemic of veteran suicides, it's

unconscionable to keep the status quo and wait any longer to institute this change the entire veteran community knows is a viable solution to reduce the epidemic of veteran suicides.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony.