

Statement by Emma Jouenne

Chair Takano, Ranking Member Bost, members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I appreciate your leadership to foster better cooperation on ensuring the wellbeing of the veterans' community.

My name is Emma Jouenne, I am the Director of Programs & Research at Parents for Peace and I am honored to speak to you today about our organization and our work to support the veterans' community.

To understand the purpose of P4P, one must know its origin.

On June 1st, 2009, Carlos Bledsoe, committed a terror attack in Little Rock, Arkansas. Years before, Carlos was groomed on campus by teachers and clerics and had traveled to Yemen to train with a Salafi group. After being arrested by the Yemeni police, Carlos was deported back to the United States. Soon after, he carried out his attack.

After Carlos's arrest, his father, Melvin Bledsoe, an African American small business owner from Memphis, decided to break his silence and talk about what happened to his family. Opening up, he realized that he wasn't alone and could, through his misery, bring together other parents of extremists and survivors. From there, he created Parents for Peace (P4P), a support network for families who had been devastated by the grooming of their loved ones into extremism.

Since then, the organization has evolved.

Today, Parents for Peace is an organization aiming to provide a public health solution to domestic radicalization in the United States. For the last decades, most counter violent extremism approaches have taken a law enforcement or criminal justice approach, falling short of successes. The necessary efforts led by the criminal justice system have failed to address the root causes for radicalization.

Parents for Peace came to fill this gap.

Through hundreds of interviews with families of extremists, former extremists and individuals still grappling with extremism, P4P was able to recognise patterns of radicalization.

There are complex factors that lead individuals into radicalization. One correlating factor is a major disruption to one's sense of self, the appearance of such strong self-doubt leading to a desperate need for clarity, belonging or purpose.

Everyone experiences identity crises, but some people are more likely to find extremism appealing. The presence of unaddressed grievances and vulnerabilities in individuals leave them exposed to violent extremist ideologies.

These vulnerabilities can wear different masks: it can be unhealed trauma (such as childhood sexual abuse, bullying); a history of addiction (alcohol, drugs, gambling); or mental and neurological problems (such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, or other forms of learning disabilities).

When unaddressed, these vulnerabilities create shame, guilt or pain so buried they become unrecognizable. To be able to bear the burden of their suffering, individuals use alternative pathways to channel anger and resentment.

Extremism provides a superficially appealing solution by offering an opportunity for numbing and a sense of belonging. It makes for a seductive short-cut solution that ultimately proves destructive.

I stand here in front of you, not to stigmatize and point fingers, but to shine a light on a reality. Because of their life experiences, some people are more vulnerable to radicalization.

Some veterans are part of this vulnerable population. Men and women who have served in the military have a higher prevalence of adverse childhood events (ACEs), suggesting that enlistment may be a way to escape adversity for some.

Through a necessary process, service members are trained in order to effectively complete missions of combat. While undergoing training, service members experience complex mental, emotional, and visual tactics which allows them to perform effectively under high stress and high tempo situations.

Hyper-vigilance remains even after returning home from combat, and the psychological impact of sustained exposure to trauma and violence leaves a lasting mark. In a survey done in 2021, about 75% of U.S. veteran and active service survey respondents stated they have experienced PTSD as a result of their military service after 9/11.¹

When properly understood, the same vulnerabilities that were exploited by extremist groomers can instead become openings for healthy engagement. Our strategic approach involves guiding families and other potential mentors to find these openings and begin to redirect the individual, replacing the unhealthy influence of the traffickers/groomers.

Parents for Peace founded and designed two main programs to achieve its goal: a helpline, and a trauma & recovery program tailored for law enforcement personnel and the military community.

The Helpline

Launched in 2017 with a unique intervention protocol developed in conjunction with global experts, P4P's helpline (1-844-49-PEACE) has helped hundreds of people exit extremism – and in the process prevented potential acts of violence.

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1202701/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-during-service-after-911-by-problem-veterans/>

Family members, friends, loved ones, law enforcement, and college professionals call our helpline to seek assistance about someone close to them who has shown traits of radicalization. First responders answer their calls, undertake an intake process, and refer the callers to in-house clinicians who conduct interventions to help through the deradicalization and rehabilitation process. Our intervention effort is about de-escalating the individual from the ‘shortcut’ path back to a place where the core issues driving the initial turn to extremism can be addressed.

P4P’s interventions can be divided into five phases: the intake process, the educational phase, the “toolbox” phase, the intervention of former extremists (in this case, Chris Buckley and Mubin Shaikh) and the stabilization phase. The goal of these interventions is to ensure that the callers, acting as mentors, are best equipped in order to intervene directly themselves to limit engagement with extremist content. This is done through explaining the neurology of extremism, how the brain acts “on hate”, the psychology of vulnerability, motivational interviewing techniques but also providing activities, role plays or exercises for families to practice self-care and better interact with one another.

Our clinicians as well as Chris and Mubin also provide direct interventions with the individual of concern, when possible, where they apply those skills and tools first handedly.

The Trauma Recovery Program

Our other program initiatives, the Trauma and Recovery Program (TRP), builds upon that experience to design effective prevention protocols – with the goal of ensuring intervention is not needed in the first place.

Through Parents for Peace’s hands-on experience, we have found that trauma and stress left unresolved, can lead to grievances that exacerbate vulnerabilities which could lead individuals to develop overvalued belief systems shared by extremist groups. Law enforcement officers and service members are particularly at risk of being exposed to trauma, making them a prime target population for this program.

TRP utilizes a moral cognizant approach to understanding, identifying, and coping with stress and/or trauma, hate, and overvalued belief systems to avoid bias and polarization. By way of a practitioner approach through critical self-reflection, we facilitate individuals and bystanders to identify, isolate, and recover from any stress and/or trauma they encounter in their profession.

The goal of TRP is to provide service members with positive coping skills, tools, and resources to maintain a balanced healthy mental, emotional, and physical lifestyle, while reducing the number of service members participating and/or being groomed into extremist groups and ideologies.

Our program was piloted at the Aurora police department back in March 2021 with Sammie Wicks, Targeted Violence Prevention Officer, and showed tremendous success. Local officers, despite being initially skeptical, engaged with the module and quickly saw the benefit in discussing what trauma looks like and how to limit its negative consequences.

This is what Parents for Peace does, we look at an issue from an angle aiming to destigmatize the population affected by it.

Everyday, we work tirelessly to provide services to individuals who have fallen ill to extremism. Ignoring widespread risk factors would be detrimental to the safety and prosperity of the United States of America.

We need to create alleys of cooperation between organizations providing support to veterans and organizations specializing in addressing the prevention of extremist violence. Investing in such educational resources and programs will allow the risk to be reduced.

Thank you for your attention,

Emma Jouenne