

Testimony of Matthew Brown, United States Army Veteran and
Amputee

For a Hearing in the Subcommittee on Health

“Life After Limb Loss: Examining VA Amputee Prosthetics Care”

House Veterans Affairs Committee

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Thank you Chairman Miller Meeks and Ranking Member Brownley for inviting me to testify on my prolonged and frustrating experience with VA Prosthetics Services and specifically the Fayetteville, North Carolina VA Medical Center. I am a U.S. Army veteran who enlisted in 2009 and sustained two Traumatic Brain Injuries and spinal fractures due to

airborne training operations at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I left active service in 2011 and transitioned to the Maryland National Guard. I was honorably discharged from military service in 2015. I have always been very active physically, running, doing martial arts, and scuba diving. I was diagnosed with bone cancer in May of 2021 and my life was forever changed in ways I do not wish on anyone. I was still a young man with a family and a thriving business and much of my self-worth was derived from my physical abilities. Due to the extent of the cancer and my concerns about having the surgery done at a VA hospital, I was cleared for a Community Care referral to Duke Medical System in Raleigh, North Carolina in summer of 2021. My left leg was amputated above the knee on August 1, 2021 at Duke. After the surgery, I used a wheelchair for seven months. During those seven months I was unable to communicate with the prosthetics department because the phones were not functioning properly at my local VA center in Wilmington. I had to load my wheelchair in my truck and drive to the VA, where I would wait in the lobby to see the prosthetics person and ask them the

status of my prosthetic. In the interim, I was cleared for follow on VA care on November 10, 2021. My first VA treatment appointment was on November 18, 2021. The VA will tell you I was given a martial arts protective socket within 28 days and a state of the art prosthetic leg system within 53 days of that appointment, but neither of these systems worked for me because they would not stay on my residual leg. I have since been told that getting out of a wheelchair and beginning to use a properly fitting and safe prosthetic within weeks, not months, of an amputation is optimal and can be essential to a positive overall physical and mental recovery. At that time in early 2022, I had no idea it would take VA another two years to get me that proper prosthetic and that I would have to advocate vigorously for myself at every turn, eventually seeking help from Representative Rouzer, Senator Tillis, and The Independence Fund to advocate for my health and well-being to the VA.

My experiences with the VA over those two years were nothing short of bewildering and demoralizing. It seemed the staff at the local VA hospital consistently failed to communicate well about my care, follow through on my care coordination, and expedite requests for prosthetics. During that period, I worked with three different VA network private prosthetists in my local area of Wilmington, North Carolina. Although I was initially told I could select any provider, the one I selected for their reputation was not in the VA network so the VA selected another vendor for me at the onset.

All of these vendors over time responded to VA requests to produce a proper fitting leg socket. On more than one occasion they told me the acquisition approval process at VA was often slow and sometimes they would not be paid promptly by VA for their services. I complained to VA about the poor communication from VA to these local vendors multiple times. While all of this was going on, VA denied my travel claims for the trips I took to Duke in 2021 for my cancer treatment and the surgery. I

am still working with Congressman Rouzer to resolve this. Meanwhile, I have been contacted by bill collection agencies. This only added to the stress of not being able to resume my normal activities outside of a wheelchair.

In October of 2022, I heard from a fellow veteran amputee about a special socket the VA had provided him, called the Quattro variable volume socket. Given my level of physical activity and the changes in blood flow within my residual limb, I thought this system could be the answer to my ongoing search for a proper prosthetic. I indicated this to VA and requested they obtain one for me. I found out some time later that VA placed a requisition order for that socket, but never followed through to acquire it. The requisition sat idle while I repeatedly asked for this socket. The purchase order eventually expired and I had to start all over advocating again for the proper socket.

I continued to work with a local vendor to obtain a properly fitting socket and during this period of months I was using a prosthetic ankle. I

visited the vendor for routine maintenance in September of 2022 and the vendor told me they had to repossess this item because VA hadn't replied to their requests for payment. I left the vendor that day without that ankle and had to use an older ankle that was not as flexible.

For the next year, VA continued to pursue the same types of sockets and I continued to tell VA that I needed a different type of socket, basically the Quattro. This "ground hog day" process was extremely frustrating for me and my family. During this period, I was stuck in a wheel chair for six months. I missed out on so many personal activities.

In October of 2023, I was preparing to travel overseas and was still waiting for a socket to be delivered that fit properly. I let VA know I had a time limit on how long I could wait before my travel and VA directed a local vendor to provide me with a socket, but the vendor was concerned it wouldn't fit well and when it wouldn't I had to travel using my old, poorly fitting socket. That socket failed during my trip and it was very painful to walk and I came home with an infection. Upon my

return, I was so frustrated that I let my contact at Congressman Rouzer's staff know about this. They assisted me further with VA, but progress was slow. After almost two months of Congressional inquiry, I reached out to The Independence Fund's Casework Team in Charlotte. Their team and Congressman Rouzer's staff partnered to press VA for answers on the continued delays in my care and obtaining a properly fitting prosthetic. In December of 2023, after calls and emails between Representative Rouzer's staff and the team at The Independence Fund with VA staff at Fayetteville and Washington DC, VA finally agreed to shift my prosthetic care from Fayetteville, North Carolina to Richmond, Virginia. My prosthetic doctor in Wilmington had left her practice at VA in 2022, so I was consequently assigned to a prosthetic doctor in Richmond as a result of the outreach to VA. That new doctor looked into my medical conditions and spent significant time assessing my needs for a different type of socket so I could get out of a wheelchair, travel more easily for my business, and finally participate in sporting activities with my wife and friends for personal and family wellbeing.

The Richmond VA doctor worked with me and a third local vendor to get me an interim socket that fit well and allowed me to travel for business in January of 2024. It would not be until May of 2024 when VA finally purchased and delivered the Quattro socket I use today. Since then I have lost thirty five pounds due to my increased activities and feel like a new person today. This only happened because of continued pressure on VA from Representative Rouzer, Senator Tillis, and The Independence Fund.

Looking forward, it's clear to me that VA needs a major rework or reform of how they address and process everyday amputee's needs for prosthetics, especially ones like mine, and deliver them timely. The entire experience can be overly bureaucratic, sluggish, and often impersonal, sometimes uncaring. I know VA has testified that the costs of these special recreational limbs is a concern, but very honestly these experts don't realize what it's like to be confined to a wheelchair for months, unable to swim or run, and they are ignoring the other unseen

costs the long delays I experienced can cause, like the mental anguish I went through with my family and the related financial costs VA paid for with additional mental health visits I needed over those two years.

There are also lifelong future cost savings for VA when veterans obtain the prosthetics they need to live active and fulfilling lives and don't have to rely on VA for more medical care. The VA has also testified that all these services are already being provided, yet I and other amputees are proof that commitment is not being uniformly honored or followed by local VA staffs and supported by a responsive acquisition system. We are not looking for special treatment, we just want to live our lives as independently and actively as possible.