

To whom it may concern:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify to the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations regarding "Access to Mental Health Care and Traumatic Brain Injury Services: Addressing the Challenges and Barriers for Veterans". My name is Brad Hazell I served in the United States Marine Corps from November of 1999 to June 2005. During this time period I served two tours in Iraq. The first tour took place during the invasion in 2003 where I was a Scout for the 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion. My second tour took place in 2004-2005 where I was an Infantry Squad Leader for 2nd Battalion 24th Marines. During the second tour my squad was hit by several IEDs, one of which killed one of my marines and wounded three (myself included).

Upon returning to the states I resumed my life and returned to my civilian job. I had already started to struggle with PTSD Symptoms. Within a year of being home I had gotten to the point where I was self-medicating with alcohol daily. Eventually I came to the conclusion that I could no longer deal with these issues myself and one night I called the Veterans' Crisis Line. The following day I went to the closest VA Clinic with was located in Alexandria Virginia. I was extremely fortunate, due to my desperation, a counselor at the clinic saw me that day even though I had not yet been enrolled in the VA Healthcare System.

I began weekly sessions with a counselor and had monthly appointments with a psychiatrist. Eventually I agreed to be treated at an inpatient facility located in Martinsburg West Virginia. First I was treated for alcohol abuse, then for PTSD. Unfortunately due to the intense emotions that accompanied the PTSD program I withdrew myself from the program to return to work. Within a year I decided to return to my home state, Arizona. I was given a three month supply of medications with instructions to enroll in the VA Healthcare System in Arizona so that I could continue my treatment for PTSD.

Upon arriving in Arizona I immediately began looking for work. I had two jobs, both of which last less than two months. I ran out of my medication and attempted to manage my PTSD on my own. After being without medications for over a month, I became emotionally distraught and finally enrolled in the Phoenix VA Healthcare System. When I attempted to make an appointment to be seen by a psychiatrist, so I could resume my medication, I was informed that I had to wait at least a month if not longer. I pleaded with the hospital to see if they could at least refill my prescriptions that I had been when I lived in the D.C. area. The Phoenix VA Hospital's solution was to treat me inpatient at their mental health ward. This only made matters worse. Within three days I demanded to be released and signed myself out of the hospital. The doctor refused to put me on the same medication stating the some of the medications were not on their formula.

After leaving the mental health ward in Phoenix I moved in with my mother in Casa Grande. Living in Casa Grande, I was now in the jurisdiction of the Southern Arizona VA Healthcare System (SAVHCS). My experience was much better with SAVHCS. I was seen within two weeks by a psychiatrist at the Tucson VA Hospital and started therapy with a counselor at the Casa Grande CBOC. SAVHCS fell under yet another formula and they were able to put me on similar medications that I was on while living in the D.C. area. Over several years my medication was decreased and I vastly improved.

Unfortunately PTSD hits in waves. I missed an anniversary date from an incident in Iraq during which several marines from my unit were killed. This sent me into a severe depressive episode. I canceled my appointments with my counselor and my psychiatrist. After several months of this depressive episode I eventually tried to take my own life by overdosing on a three month supply of sleeping pills. I awoke several days later in an intensive care unit and was then transferred to the Tucson VA Hospitals Mental Health Ward where I stayed for several weeks.

Prior to discharge a safety plan was implemented and I was placed on a "High Risk" list with the VA healthcare system. That being said when I called to make my first counseling appointment when I left the hospital the day after my discharge; I was told that it would be several weeks until I could be seen. When I informed the receptionist about my recent hospitalization, she saw the flag in the system and I was setup with an appointment within a couple of days. I remained on the high risk list for several months until my mental healthcare providers deemed that it was safe to take me off.

Since that time I began working as a veterans' advocate helping veterans navigate the Veterans Benefits Administration. To this day I am still treated by the Southern Arizona VA Healthcare System.

Respectfully,

Brad Hazell