

**Prepared Written Testimony of Vail W. Smith U.S.M.C.
House of Representatives Energy and Commerce
Health Subcommittee Hearing
Communities in Need: Legislation to Support Mental Health and Well-Being
Tuesday April 5, 2022**

Subcommittee Chair Eshoo, Subcommittee Ranking Member Guthrie, Chair Pallone, Ranking Member McMorris Rodgers, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing to share my experience of recovery and wellness living with a mental health issue and substance use condition. I am honored to share how SAMHSA and other government funded programs can make a difference in the lives of people living with behavioral health conditions. I will address issues that have not only affected me, but so many others as well.

As a participant of the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, known as DBSA, the leading national organization for people living with mood disorders, I have been directly impacted by many of the programs that Congress will reauthorize this year. As an instructor for the DBSA peer specialist course, I have been able to share with my students my own journey, which is one of turning confusion, despair, and grief to one of hope, understanding, and promise for the future.

After years in and out of psychiatric wards, institutions, treatment, or being a lost soul on the streets, I began a comeback that DBSA played an integral part of. I met a DBSA-trained Peer Support Specialist, an Army Veteran that showed patience, compassion, and empathy for me that created a bond that made me realize there were others out there who understood what was going on inside of me and who were willing to walk along side of me as I fought this war within me. I was shown skills and tools she had learned from DBSA to help me cope with my PTSD and depression. She, along with some outstanding mental health professionals and my faith in God, became the cornerstones of my supportive foundation. With their help I began to believe I could overcome and there was a use for me in life, that I had a purpose, and I was not just some broken thing to be thrown away callously by society.

I am grateful to now be a Peer Specialist Instructor, helping individuals learn how to use their own lived experience to help others in their recovery journey. However, we definitely need more Peer Support Specialists in America. The SAMHSA Behavioral Health Workforce report states that to fully support those receiving behavioral health care services, the country needs over 700,000 Peer Specialists, yet we only have 23,000 trained. Our position is spread so thin that even with maximum effort, we are only able to reach a portion of those who could greatly benefit from our services, which I believe would decrease the suicide rate and other related problematic mood disorder issues, as well as to help inspire those afflicted to become a more productive citizen of our great country. I encourage Congress to provide much needed funding to allow for the training of peer specialists by working with and supporting organizations, like DBSA, that have a long history in peer specialist training.

I also serve as a mentor for peers participating in the DBSA peer apprentice program. This program is a SAMHSA Project of Regional and National Significance and is funding a pilot to create a program providing individuals with a pathway to becoming a state certified peer specialist. Peer apprentices who participate in the program attend and facilitate DBSA virtual support group meetings for members of the Black Community. In these virtual support groups, I am able to share my own lived experiences in a therapeutic manner with others who also struggle with mood disorders. The ability to reach out for help from the comfort of my own surroundings increases my desire to seek help as well as give my support. These meetings comfort me immensely in various ways and also let me know that I am not alone. It is programs like this that are going to expand the number of peer specialists and ensure that they are well-qualified to provide support. However, for all Americans to have access to this type of assistance when they are in need, Congress must create and fund a program that focuses on making peer specialist apprentice programs a reality.

Like many things, COVID brought to light both the value and the barriers that exist to receiving care. Limited access to virtual meetings was a significant barrier for peers and individuals seeking support during the lockdowns and even now as we are trying to return to a sense of normalcy. Since the start of the pandemic, DBSA has seen participation in their virtual online support group meetings grow by 137% and there are wait lists for every single meeting. As someone who uses these virtual support groups to reinforce my recovery, I wish to tell you that it is extremely discouraging when I am unable to attend because of limited capacity. That is why I was so pleased to see that there is bipartisan support for H.R. 2929, the Virtual Peer Support Act. If it becomes law, this bill will provide funding to expand access to virtual peer support services. I hope Congress can pass it very soon to eliminate the wait list to join support groups.

Additionally, as we look toward full implementation of the 988 program, it is reassuring to know that certified peer specialists are recognized under the law and will play an important role to support increased capacity by staffing the phone lines and providing support and services to people in need. I have an intimate personal experience with the VA crisis line, which is similar to the new 988 program. Years ago, I was distraught, alone, and in abject dysfunctional misery. My spirit was weary of trying to deal with my mood disorder. The only person I was able to reach that day as the reality of suicide hovered nearby was a patient, understanding individual that picked up the phone. She talked to me for the better part of three hours and her selfless support persuaded me to give it one more try. So, gratefully, here I am today.

I also serve on the board of the Lake County Coalition for the Homeless. As a person who has experienced homelessness, I understand the unique challenges faced by people who are experiencing them and appreciate how to connect them with programs that can provide safe and supportive housing. I know that in trying to navigate my dual diagnosis successfully, housing gave me a safe refuge, a home base where I was able to plan the goals of my recovery. It also provided a case manager to assist me in reintegrating as I dealt with my mental health issues. The case manager was an individual I could turn to when things didn't go as expected instead of letting my depression drag me into a dark place where there was no hope and only suffering.

Another area where I fervently hope Congress could provide more support is enhanced funding for programs associated with law enforcement education and training programs. In 2014, during a particularly impairing episode of PTSD, I was shot multiple times by the Chicago Police resulting in multiple ostomy's simply because the officers had a lack of understanding concerning mental health issues. I believe a program such as the Crisis Outreach and Support Team (COAST) in my area, where police pair with a Peer Support Specialist and or mental health professional, would have prevented this from happening to me. As a reminder of these catastrophic events, I have a bullet lodged in my sternum, centimeters above my heart as well as one in my lower spine, which confined me to a wheelchair for months. The irony of this is that I made it through a war serving my country without being shot, only to be shot in my home country, stemming from mental health conditions originating from that war.

I also think highly of jail diversion programs, such as mental health court and Veterans court, which I have participated in, and gives the participants a chance to turn their lives around. The partnership between the legal system along with supportive services for mood disorders and/or substance issues help reintegrate participants back into society instead of just giving up on them and throwing away the key.

In closing, I would like to say, by no means am I a finished product. But, because of many of the programs I spoke of today, I am able to give back to society by sharing my lived experiences instead of being just a misunderstood burden to the Country I love. Thank you for listening to me, for the help you have implemented thus far, and for taking this time to contemplate how to improve our Country and its citizens rather than give up on those of us who suffer from within.