

January 13, 2025

Lori W. Locklear  
1631 McGirt Rd.  
Maxton, NC 28364  
(910-703-3157)

Re: Logan F. Willis' (mom) 1995-2022

Hello. I am Lori Willis Locklear. Thank you for your time and effort in this important matter.

I've been a Pharmacy Technician for 30 years until recently when I took an early retirement from the Department of Veteran Health Care System at the Fayetteville VA Health Care Clinic where I was employed for 12 years of my service. Prior to that, I worked for the State of North Carolina for almost 4 years. The first years of my career were spent at a local hospital, Scotland Memorial and then to a private pharmacy in Raeford, NC.

Let me begin by telling you a little bit about me. On August 27, 1988, I married Raymond F. Willis, who was an Army Veteran, and he was so proud to have served his country. On August 16, 1995 at 8:16 am, we had our only child, Logan F. Willis, and it was such a wonderful day for us both. On July 16, 2015 my husband died and I had to learn how to navigate life again as a single woman with a child in college. I have been a woman of great faith in God and in our Nation. I believed in the system but I knew that there were areas that needed to be improved upon. I gave all I had to my job and to all my veterans that I came in contact with daily because I was the wife of a veteran who loved his country and so do I. I was proud to serve our nations veterans but things changed for me when my son, **My Veteran**, died by suicide in my home because of the lack of support that he received from the very place that I had spent years as an employee. Not only was I disappointed in the Fayetteville, NC VA, but there was a part of me that was disappointed in myself because I truly believed in Veterans Affairs. As an employee and mother, I felt that I had failed because I believed the VA would take care of my son and at times it was hard for me to determine if I was speaking from a mother's perspective or that of an employee. I believed that Logan felt that I was only the employee and not his mother for he would share that the VA was not willing to help him but I kept telling him to return to the VA. I tried as much as possible to follow the proper protocol, yet, **MY Veteran** died by suicide in my home, from what I believe was a failure to follow the Community Care Act. I believed that our trust in the system was betrayed, promises were not kept, and **Logan's life** was not valued just like so many other veterans who have sacrificed so much for our country.

The year 2015 was a very difficult time for Logan and I because his father died of lung cancer. We were a very close knit family and Logan idolized his father. After his death, Logan and I received counseling and I struggled for a long time. Logan was in college at the time and he graduated from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. He enjoyed his time in school and wanted to further his education. So we thought the military was an option for him and he wanted to be a Veteran just like his dad because his dad always spoke so

highly of his service. He originally wanted to go to the Air Force, but the Navy talked him into going with them. I personally did not think that it was a good fit but Logan believed that he could do it. At the last moment, I tried to talk him out of it because there was something that did not feel right and I wish I had. Later, Logan told me that joining the Navy was the worst decision of his life.

Logan enlisted in the Navy in 2018 and his first duty station was in Sasebo, Japan where he served as an intelligence officer. Shortly after he was on board, he began to mentally deteriorate; I began receiving emails at 3:00 am from him stating that he couldn't do this, he could not stay on the ship. I constantly told him that things would get better but as the days went on, he became more insistent that he had to get off the ship. He complained the food was terrible, often there was no silverware, the sailors had to eat with their fingers, his computer was constantly down, so his intelligence reports would not be up to date which resulted in him getting in trouble. He was extremely disturbed about the fact that he had been photographed naked while he was in the shower. I believe he also became claustrophobic in his barracks, he had not experienced it to that extreme on board the ship. After some time, he was transferred to San Diego Medical Center. I hoped and prayed that while he was in San Diego and on land that he would get better. One day, the doctor called and requested that I fly to San Diego immediately. When I arrived, I was informed that Logan had attempted suicide while being there and that he was being released from the hospital. My stay was horrible because I did not recognize the man who was in front of me. My son had always been kind and humble, a young man with a gentle spirit but this person was angry, disappointed, and this was not my Logan. I also discovered later that he had attempted suicide while aboard the ship. Due to all that Logan was dealing with, the Navy gave him an honorable discharge.

Logan came home on December 31, 2018 but he was so different; it was so heartbreaking to witness the transformation that had occurred with my child. Logan was always a kind, loving person and would do anything to help anyone in need. During his younger years, Logan spent a lot of time at the Fayetteville, NC VA where he volunteered all through his high school years and worked at our local library for three years. He had an associate and a bachelor's degree. Another sad part of this story is that Logan was a support for a lot of individuals who had suicidal thoughts. So many have shared how it was Logan who talked them through their trauma and kept them from following through on their desire to commit suicide. Logan had a beautiful spirit but the man that returned was not the man that left home to serve his country. Logan felt that no one cared for him and that his life was not valued and sadly, this is a common theme among many who have served our country. The VA doesn't exist for the VA, it exists for our Veterans and their families and it should do everything possible to help those who are struggling mentally, physically, and financially. I believe my child would still be here if the VA had lived up to their promises that were made to him. Many promises are made to these young men when they enlist to serve their country. Some of these men are broken so much in training that they are never the same and that was my Logan.

In January 2019, I told Logan to go to the VA, get his VA card and request a mental health provider. He came back and he said he was told that they were unable to help him. It was at that

time, that he began to hate the very organization that he loved volunteering at during his high school summers; he lost all trust in the VA. The things he had experienced brought about his anxiety and depression but the way the VA treated him increased his mental illness. He was so angry and regardless of how I tried to defend the VA, the response he got from them led him to believe that the VA was not willing to help veterans. During this time, I felt like the worst mother in the world but I continued to encourage him to seek help but instead of seeing me as a support, Logan began to see me as part of the VA instead of his mother.

In June, 2019, Logan used his GI Bill and was enrolled in Wake Forest University in the Master's of Divinity Program in Winston Salem, NC. We all know what happened in 2020, Covid, and this really took a toll on Logan because he was beginning to feel a little better because he became a part of the college community. I thought things might be looking up. However, when all his classes were virtual, Logan became more and more depressed. He would stay inside for weeks and isolate himself from everyone. I became more and more worried about him. He struggled in school and later I learned that his professors noticed that he was struggling and several reached out to help him. He was able to graduate with their help and I truly believe that is why he lasted as long as he did.

I believe Logan felt trapped; in his mind, the Navy had taken his life and now the VA was taking from him as well. On one occasion he called me because he was running low on his medications and was worried about refills. I assured him that a pharmacy would help with his medication; however, I have receipts where he had to pay for his medications. I also have receipts where he had to pay \$300 for the multiple calls he made to his mental health provider. When he was in college, he had to pay for health insurance which was very costly. Needless to say, I was so upset to know the lengths that he went to in order to receive help from an organization that was created to protect those who served to protect us.

On May 14, 2022, Logan graduated from Wake Forest University and we were so proud to see him graduate after all the struggles he had been through. He seemed so happy that day and I prayed that day would be a new beginning for my son but little did I know it was the beginning of the end of my child's life. He tried to find a job and an apartment after graduation but was unable to find either. He was forced to return home so once again, he felt like a failure. I began to see him isolating himself again and I constantly encouraged him to seek additional help so he agreed to meet with our local VSO Office in Raeford. Officer Flagg was the officer who appeared to be helping him. I found out later, after his death that multiple mistakes were made on Logan's paperwork (i.e., wrong address). When I informed Officer Flagg of his death, he completed the paperwork for burial expenses and once again, mistakes were made. I informed his supervisor of the multiple mistakes so he decided to complete the paperwork himself. This is another example of why Logan didn't trust the VA and by this time, neither did I.

In September 2022, I felt more and more that his mental health provider was over medicating him. I was a pharmacy technician so I would ask our pharmacist about his meds and they would provide information. I asked Logan to visit the VA and let our pharmacist go over his meds with him. Afterwards, I sent him to check in and request to be seen or given a mental health

appointment. I was adamant about him being seen or provided an appointment. When he returned home that day, I questioned him, and he said I got an appointment but he didn't say when the appointment was and I never asked; that was my big mistake. I found out after his death, in March of 2023, that he was given a mental health appointment for February 2023 which was five months out from when he reached out to the VA in September 2022. I was told after Logan's death that our protocol at that time was, if a veteran asked for a mental health appointment, they were either to be seen or sent to community care within 20 days, my child died 60 days after that and was never called. Once again a promise not kept.

A few days after I buried my only child, I telephoned Washington DC to alert them that my child had died by suicide because he was 40% service connected for his disability. Upon returning to work on November 22, 2022, two weeks after my son's death, my service department was aware of Logan's death, but per protocol I knew I had a responsibility as an employee to report a death. Therefore, at the time, I felt the patient advocate's office would be appropriate but truly I was not thinking clearly and as I write this today, two years later it is still hard to think. They seemed very interested and shocked to hear of a suicide from our facility and was eager to get the information; yet, when they realized it was my son, things changed. I came in as an employee, one they knew, but then I became the mother. It was at that time, I felt that a cover up began to take place. Over and over, I tried to uncover the truth and it was during that time that I was treated as a whistleblower. They assured me they would get back with me but I was never contacted. Although I returned on November 22, 2022, it wasn't until February 2023 when I personally contacted Director Fryar about my child's suicide that had occurred in our home. She stated that she was totally unaware and sympathetic to what had occurred and that she would be in touch with me as soon as possible; yet, it was not until April 2023 that someone reached out to me. Based on what information was provide to me, it states that a suicide team was supposed to contact the veterans family as soon as they are made aware of the suicide but I guess that policy does not apply to employees of the VA.

After waiting for weeks just for someone to help me to understand what had happened, the first call I received from the facility's risk manager informed me that I had to come and fill out a tort claim which I did understand what a tort claim entailed. On the tort claim, I claimed negligence because I felt that the VA did not help my child. The VA denied my initial claim because they stated they did give him an appointment. A week after filling the claim, I requested his medical records and discovered that the VA had given him an appointment but it was five months from the day we requested help. Why would the VA wait five months when someone is struggling and needing help? When I asked, I was informed that the computer electronically gave him the appointment. Someone should have looked at the date and changed it. Due to the new knowledge, I filled out another claim with a different description but once again it was denied. When I asked why, they stated they were unable to talk with me. I continued to speak with countless people and I ran into roadblock after roadblock within the VA. At this time, I was mentally and physically deteriorating and I could not focus on my job; thus, I took FMLA to go home and try to heal. I felt that my healing would never come as long as I was working for a system that in my mind contributed to the death of my son. In order to bring some sort of closure and healing, I sought therapy and I am still in counseling today. My therapist helped me realize

that I have PTSD and every time I walked through the back door to the VA, I literally began to suffer because I blamed the VA for his death. I worked as best as I could to get to my minimum retirement age and then I left. I felt I had no choice because I could no longer do my job. I was holding up my department and causing a hardship. I simply could no longer function as I had prior to Logan's death. I was never processed out of the system as every other employee had been. When I asked my supervisor, she stated that she had not been informed and frankly she was as surprised as I was. Once again, another promise not kept. Another VA employee shared with me that I should seek disability because of my treatment from the VA after my son's death which brought on all the mental and physical issues that I now have. I have been sicker in the past two years since Logan's death than I have been my entire life. I'm almost 58 years old. I applied for disability in November 2023 and have not heard back from the Office of Personnel Management.

I called a local NC representative in January of 2023 for help and he was very instrumental in helping me. I have also shared my story with other state representatives. There is so much emphasis put on the Gold Star families for their sacrifice what about the families when a veteran dies by suicide. Personally, I think the least that could be done is the military or VA should have to lay these young people to rest and not their families who entrusted their well being to them when they enlisted to serve. I also think the sole survivors benefits rules should be revisited, how old exactly is this rule. What family can live off of \$35,000 a year to qualify for these benefits? I am my child's sole survivor, his father, an Army veteran, is deceased as well. Haven't I lost enough? So, I got remarried a year before my child died and so it disqualified me for this service? Really, I think it's the least that could be done for me! Not to mention, this entire last 2 years of my life has been debilitating because of everything that the VA did to me by treating me like a "whistleblower" because no one wanted to speak to me. I was finally given a meeting over a year later in January of 2024 and all of my questions were not answered to my satisfaction nor was I satisfied with the outcome of my tort claim. I hope my efforts will not only bring closure to me but will also help military families in the years to come and the VA will adhere to the Community Care Act which is the law. My hope is that no other veteran dies because the laws are not being followed. I do not want another mother to find their child in a bathtub with a plastic bag over his head with a helium tank inside. This was a total nightmare that never goes away.

In closing, thank you for the opportunity to share Logan's story, he deserved this; his life mattered. My hope is that by sharing his story, this will bring some healing to my broken heart, help me reclaim my life and my prayer is that one day I will be able to think clearly. Lastly, I hope that no other VA employee who has a deceased veteran will have to endure the hardships that I had to endure. I feel like I was labeled a whistleblower but if it brings positive change to a broken system then it was worth it. I will always wear the title of mother with pride, Logan, my son, you will always be. I also want to thank my husband, Ray Locklear, who has been my constant support during this horrible ordeal. Once again, thank you and God bless you all

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