

TESTIMONY OF
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NEW HAMPSHIRE ARMY NATIONAL GUARD
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Good afternoon. My name is CPT Mary Hennessey. I work full-time for the New Hampshire National Guard, and I was deployed during Operation Iraqi Freedom II as the Company Commander for the 744th Transportation Company. I am here to testify to my experience and thoughts on the NHNG's re-entry program, "Operation Welcome Home."

As a soldier serving in Iraq, I was very excited to hear that New Hampshire had been working on a transitional program for soldiers returning home from combat. My Company was directly in danger on a daily basis. We are the ones you heard about on the news who were constantly getting shot at, getting hit with improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, that had been buried along side the roads, watching every car closely, worrying that it was a vehicle-born IED. There was no rest from the thought of danger. Coming back to base camp, we were stationed in one of the hottest areas that received mortar attacks on a daily basis. The bottom line -- life was not going to be the same again after running in this gear for an extended period of time.

During our first week in Iraq, my unit experienced the worse thing imaginable-- we lost one of our own soldiers. This loss was harder than anyone can imagine and changed our lives forever. This is the first exposure the soldiers had to mental health

providers in the military. The combat stress team came out to assist us and became a visible part of our team from that day on. A lot can be gained by the two worlds communicating; as a matter of fact, we may find these soldiers as Vet Center counselors or seeking employment as counselors elsewhere. As soldiers in Iraq, we saw and did a lot of things in the environment we were in that made us feel as if we were moving farther and farther away every day from the “real world” at home.

Unfortunately, my time in country was unexpectedly cut short. I was diagnosed with cancer 10 months into our deployment in Iraq. I was medevaced out of country to Walter Reed Army Medical Center to be treated. This, of course, was the hardest day of my life, leaving my soldiers. Thank God the impact of this move on the Company was minimized by my second in charge being a great leader and having a very similar leadership style.

After accepting the fact that there was not enough time in our deployment for me to make it back to Iraq, and realizing my soldiers had everything under control over there, I turned my focus to welcoming them home. I started thinking about and planning for all of the areas I was concerned about that we needed to address. I made contact with one of the primary organizers of the “Welcome Home” process, and was pleased to receive a three-block schedule that included almost everything that was on this worrisome commander’s mind. The biggest relief was to see that not only was the mental health adjustment piece identified, but that it was focused on. It made me overwhelmed with incredible pride to be a member of the National Guard. Once again, I started to feel connected to those I had started drifting apart from, and I was sure the soldiers would feel the same way. It was obvious that we were thought about and the seriousness of what

we had gone through was not belittled. This concept alone made Operation Welcome Home a success. I'll be honest with you, it may be most or all of what a general soldier remembers from the process.

There was an incredibly organized approach to processing soldiers without losing the compassion or concern for them. The three blocks were broken up into an admin day, a VA day and a mental health day. The number of corrections to soldiers' records alone can talk to the benefit and success of the admin day. The percentage of VA claims and soldiers taking advantage of information that was disseminated gives you an idea of the impact our day at the VA made. The greatest thing to see was that everyone--all soldiers--had to check in with a counselor to be asked if they wanted to be seen or if they wanted a follow-up phone call. The impact of this alone--other veterans letting you know they are there, that they can be called--is tremendous. I'm not sure how many soldiers would have raised their hands if it was voluntary to talk to the counselors, or if they were not vets, but my feeling is the numbers and the connections would not have been as productive.

Mental health issues are a part of coming home, and there was and is an avenue to have these issues addressed. Having these services available is life-changing for many. We might not have to go through learning so much the hard way as past vets have had to. For myself, it was a welcomed concept, but I held off for a bit thinking I was strong enough and that I didn't need help. Then I started to be seen by a civilian professional therapist. After months, I finally stopped ignoring the fact that what I went through was affecting my behavior and I wasn't the same person. Col Carter put it best to me, describing these words from a Vietnam Vet: "I can't explain it but the colors just aren't

as bright as they used to be.” That defines it for me. That also defined the need for me to seek a therapist through the Vet Center because an “outsider” was just not cutting it.

In dealing with these issues, that is exactly what it feels like, that people outside the military experience cannot understand. Frustration builds inside that makes you feel as if you are never going to be understood, let alone that you will ever gain the ability to understand yourself. I not only think back to that caring and concerned counselor at the VA, I think about the interaction I had in Block C and the information that was put out. The bottom line is this was “normal,” these symptoms did not mean I was crazy or weak. These symptoms meant that I had gone through a major, life changing event and this is how the mind can react. I had the privilege to go through Block C, which most soldiers called the “touchy and feely” portion of the program, with one of my platoons and many spouses participating as well. The shaking of heads in agreement when Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and family transitional issues were discussed really showed that the program was working. To me it helped arm us (we like being armed), so that when these symptoms occur, we have an arsenal that can help us diffuse and possibly eliminate the issue/concern.

I have heard of several family problems from soldiers who have returned. These problems were discussed during the Reunion/Re-entry Program as things that might happen, and that helps me be able to talk to them about the issues. Families have been able to deal with some problems, some are still being dealt with, and others resulted in an unfortunate ending of a marriage.

All soldiers need to have someone available to help them when they return from a deployment. In the military community/family, there is no greater resource than soldiers

helping soldiers. This may come in formal and informal ways. The informal can be as simple as soldiers talking to each other while cleaning their weapons. The formal can be soldiers reaching out to someone who is in the “big military family” who has been through a war, has gone on living his/her life since then, and made the decision to be trained to help others, such as our Vet Center counselors. I thank all of them from the bottom of my heart, not only for myself, but for all those soldiers who are hurting.