

Congressional Briefing
House Armed Services Personnel Subcommittee
Hearing on Medical Issues

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Introduction

Good morning Chairman McHugh and Doctor Snyder and distinguished members of the committee. My name is Stephanie R. Stretch, Specialist E-4 with the 233rd Military Police Company, Illinois Army National Guard.

Purpose

My purpose here today is to detail my experiences as a combat veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom while attached to the 3rd Infantry Division, through re-deployment and post deployment medical care.

Facts

The year I spent in Iraq was an experience like no other. The events I took part in and witnessed are virtually indescribable. What I did not know was how this deployment would forever affect me as a person. During the deployment, taking fire from enemy combatants, observing dead bodies in the streets was a part of everyday life. I had no time to worry about how scary it was to be shot at or how to emotionally take in seeing death every day.

As the months overseas wore on my experiences began to take their toll. Sleep became something of a luxury, we were either working or I was being haunted by nightmares. Everyday occurrences began to scare me more. I jumped at any loud noise; was constantly terrified the next piece of trash I drove over would kill us all. Or that the next shot fired, I wouldn't be so lucky and I would be hit. My lowest point was when I witnessed my Platoon Leader critically wounded by a roadside bomb. To see someone hit was horrific enough, but to witness one of your own is absolutely devastating. After this attack, I changed forever. The guilt I felt was enormous; even though I was constantly reassured there was nothing I could have done different. The nightmares became persistent now, but they were not even tremors of what might come of what had happened. The images I saw were like a movie playing over and over in my mind. To this day I can describe almost every detail of that day because it's a never-ending repeat in my mind. The problem was I had no one overseas to talk to. Granted, I could turn to my fellow soldiers to vent, but they were all dealing with the same problems. While my emotional and physical problems continued I maintained my composure knowing I had a job to do and that eventually I would get to go home to my family.

After doing a yearlong tour of duty we excitedly came home in April of 2004. Friends and family noticed a change in my behavior and suggested that I seek some help. I also noticed changes in myself. I finally became aware of where I could get help in October of 2004. After two months of calling and paperwork, I finally got into the VA hospital. What I didn't know was this was just the beginning of my frustrations with the VA system.

At my first appointment with a counselor I described how I was having nightmares and flashbacks, how I had lost motivation, how I had a hard time enjoying things, and how anxious I was at all times. After going through all of my symptoms and an evaluation by a counselor, I was diagnosed with PTSD. I couldn't get another appointment with a counselor until months later. I mainly wanted to get in to see a counselor to talk about my problems. This was nearly

impossible due to the high volume of soldiers seeking help. I had one appointment in February 2005 and wasn't scheduled again until June 2005. I didn't understand how going to a counselor every four months was going to help me with my problems. So I took it upon myself to seek help at a private doctor. I am currently seeing a psychiatrist and a counselor for my PTSD. Luckily, I am covered by my parent's health insurance; otherwise I would have no way to get the help I need, nor afford it. While it is nice to receive free care from the VA hospital, my problems however were not going to be solved by going every few months. Again without my parents insurance I would not the help I need, and many other soldiers do not have this option.

Most soldiers sit and wait months to receive help from the VA hospital. The doctors at the VA hospital seem knowledgeable and ready to assist; but getting access to them seems impossible. I am not the only soldier with problems. Almost 100% of my unit have some sort of medical issue from being overseas; ranging from PTSD, insomnia, miscarriages, skin problems, alcoholism, anger management issues such as violent outburst, depression, frequent illnesses, migraines, and nightmares. I know numerous soldiers who go to the VA hospital, or attempt to go to the VA hospital and find themselves in some sort of dilemma. The VA hospital is too far of a drive; appointments have to be made well in advance, only to have many appointments changed or canceled and no one calls before you drive all the way there. While I have the advantage of living ten minutes from a VA hospital that has skilled doctors, others have to drive two to three hours to find out the doctor does not know what's wrong, even after running several tests. If you come down with a bad flu you have to try and make an appointment with the doctor, which could take up to a week. So, the other option you have is to go to the emergency room. I once waited for four hours and then waited another hour and half in the doctor's room, but was never seen by a doctor due to time constraints.

It seems to be that a hospital that sees so many soldiers and wants to help needs to be better staffed and organized. Right now there are several soldiers who aren't getting help because they feel not important enough to be seen. Not only that, but many hospitals don't offer every type of doctor. Some VA hospitals don't offer a gynecologist. Quite a few females have had miscarriages, cancerous cells, and many other uncommon problems never experienced before. There is no help available to some of these females.

As to other medical issues, I was experiencing numbness and tingling in my arms and legs when I returned. This was due to the weight I had to pack day in and out. I learned that I had a compressed the nerve in my back. I found that many other soldiers were experiencing this same problem. I found that there are no available chiropractors to aid with my back problems. And when mention of going to see a civilian doctor who can help the VA simply says well no one will help pay for it. Another common answer at the VA hospital is "if it is an emergency you

can come in our office and wait to see if something opens up”, I know a soldier who spent her whole day in the VA waiting room for someone to pull her aching tooth. Again I would like to state the VA hospital that I have access to do have skilled doctors and is a satisfactory facility. It’s just saddening to see so many soldiers out there not receiving the care they deserve.

I feel this predicament can be fixed; hire more people to help, open more hospitals, or even set up smaller clinics in more cities. Make Tricare more affordable. While Tricare is not reasonably priced, single college students like me cannot afford this benefit. Try to make soldiers feel like there is help out there. Make them more aware of what is available, I didn’t even know about the VA hospital until about four months after I had gotten back from Iraq. We were given several re-deployment briefings that seemed to be unclear as to what benefits we were entitled. As many soldiers had similar questions, our unit conducted a briefing with VA personnel better inform the soldiers of their benefits and treatment options. Make sure soldiers are aware of what help is out there the day they arrive home.

I now see what happens when soldiers don’t get help, their problems have become monsters taking over their lives and affecting them forever. Something must be done to improve this before it’s too late.

Closing

In closing I would like to re-state that every soldier deserves adequate and efficient medical care. While the VA hospital is trying to help out soldiers they are not succeeding. I believe there are options to consider, soldier can and should be receiving better care. It’s time to take a look at this serious problem and do something to change it. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify, and I await your questions.