

Natalie Pantalos, Volunteer
National Veterans Memorial and Museum
Proponent Testimony
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President Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Senate Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of the National Veterans Memorial and Museum. My name is Natalie Pantalos and I am a volunteer for the National Veterans Memorial and Museum (NVMM) and have participated in their resilience and wellness programming for over a year.

As a currently serving Army Reserve Soldier, I witness many forms of resilience. Sometimes through physical challenges, sometimes at a graduation ceremony, and sometimes simply in a Soldier's ability to embrace life each day. However, the challenges and support that I have experienced at the NVMM through their Brazilian jujitsu classes have made a significant impact on me as well as so many of the other team members.

Through this programming, I have become much more confident in myself and my ability to overcome challenges—physical, mental, and emotional. It has taught me immeasurable resilience, patience, and grit while deriving great joy from incremental accomplishments and my connections with others. It has pushed me to show up for myself and my team, resulting in an incredibly supportive community.

The practice of jujitsu requires complete mental focus in each moment. You can not allow your mind to wander into other concerns or stresses that may be weighing on you or you will soon find yourself in a choke or submission. This mental reprieve throughout a training session provides a great sense of optimism and fortitude when you leave the gym. The physical and mental gymnastics dedicated on the mat translate to so many other challenges in life. There is no better way to start a day than a jujitsu class with team members you love and trust.

Being a member of the NVMM team gives me hope that I can continue to find the sense of purpose and unity that I currently find as a service member when my time comes to hang up the uniform. For many Veterans, there is a significant void when they leave the service. Whether Active Duty, National Guard, or Reserve, we dedicate much of our time, energy, and mental capacity to being the best Service Member possible whether you are on duty or not. Through the NVMM, I have witnessed dozens of Veterans reignite that internal flame and flourish as they once again find a home as a part of a tight-knit and welcoming team that challenges them each day to be the best version of themselves. My prayer is that one day all Ohio Veterans can light that flame in some way.

One of the unique aspects of the NVMM resilience and wellness program is that around half of its participants are civilians. This provides an opportunity for civilians to train side by side with Veterans and begin to understand their experiences a bit better. The modern Veteran population is very diverse and there are many stereotypes prevalent in society about Veterans, some positive and some negative. Through this program, civilians build personal relationships with Veterans and learn about their struggles, their strengths, and the value that they bring to our community. For Veterans and Service Members, this sense of belonging and acceptance is extremely valuable and often difficult to find after our military careers.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide support for the National Veterans Memorial and Museum. Investing in mental health is critical to supporting Veterans and building stronger communities.