



## **Kristina A. Smith**

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Testimony before the Senate Veterans and Public Safety Committee

Senate Concurrent Resolution 8

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Chairman Johnson, Vice Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Craig, and members of the Senate Veterans and Public Safety Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on Senate Concurrent Resolution 8.

I am Kristina Smith, I am the wife of a United States Marine Corps Veteran, The daughter of a Vietnam Era Army Veteran, The sister of a Rt Lt. Col Army Veteran (PH x2) and the Sister of a Medically Discharged SGT (PH) of the Army. Not only am I the Auxiliary President for my District, I also founded a peer group for spouses and family of Active Duty and Veterans with PTSD. I founded the St. Marys Silent Watch in 2021, a member of the Allen, Hardin and Auglaize County Suicide Coalition, the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation, a member of The Veteran Stakeholder Committee which is part of the VA Medical Center, and S.A.V.E. trained.

I have been confused for a few years on how the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) processes their claims for disability ratings of Veterans. I honestly do not see how the VA had a backlog of 378,000 in December 2023 and that the average time to complete disability claims was 149 days at this time. I agree with Senator Schaffer that it is completely unacceptable that a Veteran has to wait over three months to process a Veterans claim. The one thing I would love to know is how they decide which claim get processed next? My brother Retired Lt. Col. Simms, did not have much of a wait time for his claim to get processed. He had his 100% Disability very soon after retirement, I am sorry I do not know the exact amount of time. But, SGT Chaney who was medically discharged had to wait years for his Disability Claim to go through., which ended up in a huge sum in back pay when it finally went through.

My husband and I have been working on his claim with the VA for over a year. Right off the bat, he received a letter stating that they were not even going to send him to anyone about 2 of his conditions for a rating, I do not understand how they know enough to reject 2 without him being seen by a doctor? The second letter that we received about his disability claim was from "VES" Veterans Evaluation Services, stating that we need to give them day and times that will absolutely not be available for Chris to be seen by a Doctor for 3 of this issues. The Veteran does not get to talk to the office of the Doctor who will be doing the evaluation to set up the appointment! They make the appointment and send you another letter telling you when and where your appointment is. Back to his first and only visit so far. This one was in Lima, Ohio, we put the address into our GPS. We arrive at the destination, nothing on the sign at the road says anything VA or VES, we called the number on the letter he received to make sure we were at the right location, again this was not someone from the location we were going to. Finally I see a small sticker on their door that says VES. We go inside, this is an insurance agency.... When we get into the room with the doctor, she is not at a desk, she is in a hard chair and using a hospital bedside stand as her desk; (this does not look good on the VA). She was very friendly, knowledgeable, and is a Veteran herself. One appointment down, don't know the decision on it as of yet. But, we received another letter, the process is starting all over for 1 condition only..... Now he has to see a Doctor in Wapakoneta in March (this is over 1.5 months from the last visit) and is on a Saturday.

Why in the world does it take so long to process 1 Veteran? When our Government and Military told them to do something, it was done right now, not months or years later, that would not have ever been allowed for them to do, but it is alright for the Government to do it to them?

There are 10's of thousands of Veterans who were discharged from the military (their contract was up) during the 2003 Stop Move Stop Loss. These Veterans were not told to go register with the VA when they got out, they were not told that anything that happened to them medically within a certain time period was automatically service connected. They got back to the United States and was given their DD-215 right or wrong and told see you later.

We need to ensure that our veterans are getting timely responses and care. I and many others feel that Veterans Affairs as a whole does not care as much as they should, as it is not affecting them (the ones in charge) as much as it is others.

I understand that the VA is understaffed, but why have an outside company that does not even give their doctor a desk to use, to handle the Veterans Claim. The outcome of this goes back to what I said before. VES obviously does not care what you have to do to make it to

The appointment that they set up for the Veteran, does the Veteran have to miss work, does the Veteran have transportation to these VES appointments? VES states on page 2 of the letter they send the Veteran, bullet point 7 states "please do not bring any unnecessary persons with you to the appointment, especially children. Anyone that does attend with you must also adhere to the above guidelines." Bullet Point 8 states "Please note anyone in attendance with you may not be admitted into the examination room".

Many Veterans have that one person who is their rock and their advocate, these people need to be allowed into the examination with the Veteran.

Again I do not understand how it takes as long as it does to get a disability claim processed. If there are not enough providers, then the Government needs to get on the ball and hire more before the backlog gets even bigger.

I kindly ask that this Resolution gets passed and soon. This will get the VA going in the correct direction, but there will still be work ahead to get the care for our Veterans to level of care that they, like anyone deserves.

Thank you once again Chairman Johnson and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today. I am glad to answer any questions you may have, if not have a blessed rest of your day.