

October 22, 2019

Good morning distinguished members of the House Insurance Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you. My name is Mark Del Tosto. I have been employed with the City of Columbus Division of Fire for almost 25 years. I am currently a Battalion Chief in Emergency Services that serves the city's west side. This battalion constitutes approximately 65 firefighters, paramedics and officers in 5 fire stations. Parts of the Westside are the busiest in the state for fires, drug overdoses, medical calls as well as violent crime. All are potential situations that expose first responders to Post-Traumatic Stress, which expresses itself in the firehouse most commonly as short temper, sadness that more could have been done (when it could not) and denial.

I am here today to talk about a program that treats first responders for Post-Traumatic Stress. The program is called Save-A-Warrior. I first became familiar with Save-A-Warrior back in 2014. A friend of mine volunteers for a charity that raises money for veterans groups. He asked me if I wanted to help and I did and have been helping ever since. That year's event beneficiary was Save-A-Warrior. During the event a veteran spoke of how Save-A-Warrior changed his life, others have since repeated this same testimony as well. Some going as far as saying it saved their lives.

These testimonies peaked my attention. For a period of my career Columbus Division of Fire had 11 suicides in 13 years. They do continue with our last less than 6 months ago and just last week Dayton had a firefighter commit suicide.

Save-A-Warrior started in California. First responders out there heard about the success of this program from veterans that they knew and they wanted to be added to the program. Save-A-Warrior did, because they understood that Post-Traumatic Stress whether received on the battlefield or city streets is still Post-Traumatic Stress. The military has known about Post-Traumatic Stress and its' effects for decades it is time for states to catch up.

In September of 2018, Save-A-Warrior opened a new facility called "Warrior Village" right here in Newark, Ohio. I was invited to attend the ribbon cutting ceremony for the volunteer work I had done the previous years. It was at this ceremony when I decided I needed to go through the program. That night, I applied.

December of 2018, I was part of Save-A-Warrior Cohort 062. A cohort is made up of 10-12 participants. The mix varies from mostly veterans in some, to mostly first responders in others. A cohort lasts 5 and a half days. Beginning on Sunday and ending on Friday.

This past Sunday, the 85th cohort began in Newark. By the end of the year the 92nd cohort will have the 1,000th participant having gone through the program. One-third of those having gone through are first responders

Save-A-Warrior's treatment is a holistic approach, that provides a Peer-to-Peer model to help first responders and veterans heal. This peer group has the ability to break down walls faster because they share common experiences.

A big part of this approach is meditation. Meditation as you may know, quiets the mind and body. This is very important for people with Post-Traumatic Stress. First responders have a heightened sense of awareness to their surroundings. You are always surveying them for threats. This hypervigilance is a symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress

Equine Therapy is another aspect of this holistic approach. I saw tremendous healing effects during equine therapy. Including with myself. I saw hardened veterans and first responders open up and feel again. There are many other activities that you do over the 5 1/2 days at Warrior Village. Each unique and healing.

The final key that Save-A-Warrior addresses is the Continuum of Care. Your work is not done after you leave. You are given and agree to SMART goals and are held accountable. Some others may also be directed towards 12 Step programs to continue their work.

You are not left walking out the door by yourself. You have gained a community of peers that want you to succeed. Most importantly, they want to be there for you. Some first responders and veterans have not experienced this community in a long time due to the isolating effects of Post-Traumatic Stress.

I would like to say as a leader of firefighters, I can teach them to operate firefighting equipment, and they can be taught emergency medical procedures as well as strategy and tactics. What I cannot teach them is the ability to be present when they need to be. First responders are put in situations, because of their scope of employment, that cause Post-Traumatic Stress. There is a responsibility to help us when it does. By providing the resources in HB308 you are doing that.

Thank you,

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