

Dirk Harkins, Staff Sergeant, United States Army—Retired
Proponent Testimony
Ohio Veterans Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation Program
SB 153
Workforce & Higher Education Committee

Chair Johnson, Vice Chair Cirino and ranking member Williams, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of veterans across Ohio who could benefit from the use of transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS).

My name is Dirk Harkins and I am a retired SSG of the U.S. Army who proudly served with the 82nd Airborne Division at Ft. Bragg, N.C. Today I would like to thank you all for giving me the privilege to talk to you about a pilot program we have in the State of Ohio called the Neuromodulation Operation Wellness (NOW) Program that has helped save my life. It has giving me back some hope in my life, it has helped me regain my sense of purpose and value that I once had prior to being deployed. It has allowed me to be able to be part of a veterans helping veterans program that recruits and fully supports other veterans through the same process I went through. To be fully engaged with these veterans for at least a year and watch as they get to experience the same life changing events as I did.

In order to give you the full understanding of what this program has done for many others, and me I must take a little time to share my story. My story is not unique and there are many others out there just like me trying to figure out a battle in our heads we will never win. The staggering number of 22 Veteran Suicides a day is real. I was nearly one of those suicides myself because I slipped through the cracks of the VA. Thankfully, I was very fortunate to have a couple veterans come to my rescue and get me the help I needed.

Because of (TMS) Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation, which I will talk about in a moment, and the Ohio Veterans NOW program I get to stand before you and hold true to two promises I made to the individuals who helped me and that is 1.) Help as many veterans get the same treatment and benefits I did from TMS and 2.) get a degree in Social Work and that's exactly where I put forth all my efforts today.

When I was deployed to Iraq in 2007, I was part of a Personal Security Detachment Team and was on a combat patrol in Tikrit when my vehicle was engaged with a stack of Improvised Exploding Devices. As a result of the explosion, I suffered several neck injuries, spine injuries, and traumatic brain injuries. I was diagnosed with severe Post Traumatic Stress (PTS) and was dealing with severe migraine headaches on a regular basis. Upon being medevac'd home I was given opioids and other medications that were highly addictive. Before long I was addicted to those pills but I also started abusing them because I had slipped into a cycle of depression and addiction—a rabbit hole I never thought I could get out of.

All through my military career I was trained to persevere and drive on. This approach worked well for me in many situations on the battlefield, but not when I returned to civilian life. I was

having thoughts of suicide and did not really know why. My anger and suicidal thoughts were growing out of control as I slipped more into self-medication mode, and I tried to suppress these thoughts and feeling. I wanted to forget.

My brain never slowed down and I was always on the edge and the people closest to me walked on eggshells because of my outbursts. I would drink until I blacked out. I would not remember events from the night before, and I contemplated the way I would end my life.

I finally broke down and went to the VA Hospital on a Wednesday to try to get help with my drug and alcohol problems and to get help with my suicidal thoughts. I took my backpack with a few clothes and a personal hygiene bag because I thought for sure I would be staying somewhere safe for everyone after our conversation, but that wasn't the case.

My doctor sent me home and told me to come back the following Tuesday and she would have my help lined up.

Sending me home to come back the next Tuesday was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the worst decision the VA could make is to send someone home who is dealing with suicidal thoughts. But, as it turned out, that decision forced me to find another path—TMS. I started my healing process with TMS in Texas and completed it here in Ohio with the Ohio Veterans NOW Program.

You see two days after the VA sent me home, I tried suicide by cop and fought with several of the local Sheriff's and by the Grace of God they did not shoot or kill me. At that time I was angry that they didn't kill me and I made phone call to a close friend who happens to be a veteran himself. I asked him to get me out of jail. I wanted to finish what I had started and take my life.

He recognized that I needed help and he was able to get me to Texas, the only place I could go to get TMS at the time. I was very skeptical that a non-painful, non-evasive magnetic pulse was going to do me any good but at the time I could either try TMS, or I could kill myself.

Amazing things started happening after my fourth treatment when I woke up for the first time since May 2007 and did not have a headache. I started to regain focus and mental alertness instead of constant hypervigilance. I couldn't read a book since 2007 because I couldn't remember what I just read on the previous page or my migraines would kick in after a page or two. After a couple weeks of TMS I read a book from cover to cover without a headache, and I retained the information. My sleep patterns became better as I began to get more deep sleep in the night. I became less angry. I became a better person. I realized that my life has value, and that my new mission is to help others out of the same darkness I lived in for years.

In short, TMS gave me my mind and my life back. An even better outcome is that upon completing my treatments with the NOW Program I get to be part of helping educate other veterans about our project and watching them get some hope and excitement back into their lives for the first time in a long time.

I could go on for days but let me share a two brief stories about a couple of veterans we have watched transform as they went through the TMS process.

A male veteran 52 years old spent over 20 years of his life serving and protecting our country had several issues coming into the program as he was injured by IEDs as well. This man could not engage in a conversation with more than one person at a time. He would walk with his back to the wall so that no one could get behind him. After two weeks of TMS treatment this man was walking around the hospital with confidence and was able to sit in a room full of people and carry on a conversation.

The other example is a Vietnam Veteran who was relieved of the migraine headaches he has suffered since he served 50 years ago. We have doctors saying they have never seen anything like the results we are getting with the TMS treatment and how the veteran to veteran part of the program gives everyone a sense of comfort and ease as they go through the process. Veterans trust we will help them with their needs. We are seeing it reduce cravings in veterans with drug and alcohol abuse. We have had complete success with the program. Every veteran who has participated in the Ohio Veterans NOW Program has had positive results in one way or another. Almost all report having noticed better sleep in the first week. One asked the question after his 9th treatment “Do people really feel this good all the time?” and he said, “I don’t want to lose what I got from the treatment”.

With the success we have seen from the Ohio Veterans NOW Program so far, I urge the legislature to continue and expand this program. We as veterans are very fortunate to be the first to receive TMS treatment. We see the potential expanding the program could have for first responders as well. The Ohio legislature has an opportunity to make this grow well beyond the Ohio Veterans NOW Program. We will continue to educate veterans about our program and to expand to first responders and others who can benefit from TMS.

I would like to close by expressing my thanks for letting me share some of my personal experiences that I have felt and witnessed with the Ohio Veterans NOW Program. I am grateful and blessed to have the opportunity to work with veterans everyday and am looking forward to the future as we continue to help others along the way.

I am happy to answer questions.