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Testimony before the Senate Veterans and Public Safety Committee

Senate Concurrent Resolution 9

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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 9.

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.

I have personally witnessed members of my own family try to cope with their PTSD. I have helped/ tried to help many Veterans with PTSD from Vietnam to Current. Where they have nightmares, that effect them and their spouses tremendously. I have talked to many veterans that sleep with a pistol under their pillow. Can you imagine being sound asleep and being woke up in the middle of the night because your spouses is in the middle of a nightmare and has no idea what they are doing to you, but they hit you or knock you out of bed. This is reality that many are faced with every night.

There is a lot of us family members that are always scared, scared of what might happen in the night, scared because we never know when a “trigger” is going to happen around them that sets their PTSD into a whirlwind. Many spouses of Veterans with PTSD have Secondary PTSD because they are constantly reliving what their loved one did in war.

We have to do something and very soon to help all of the Veterans with PTSD or other Mental Disorders, by helping them we are helping many more, because it will help the spouses, the children, and their parents.

The suicide rate is higher than ever, and honestly 1 suicide is too many. When the number of Suicides among Veterans is over 4 times more than the service members who tragically died in combat in the same time frame. This should be an eye opener for everyone that something needs to be done. These numbers do not include the military members/veterans who had a slow suicide, this is a suicide by extreme alcohol use or drug use. In 2020, 26.2% or 5.2M Veterans had a mental illness (diagnosed) and a substance use disorder (diagnosed) .7 in 10 Veterans struggled with alcohol use in 2020; 4 in 10 struggled with illicit drug use. And, why?

I have been with my husband at all of his appointments through the VA and outside of the VA. The first time I went with him was to a VA Hospital in another state, they did not seem to care too much, it was a horrible looking hospital, we knew what was going on with Veterans that were around us. We talked and he stopped using the VA because they were not doing anything worth while. In 2016 we were back in the VA system and going to a CBOC for his care. It took over 6 months for him to get an appointment with a psychologist. We were in a tiny room with the doctor and his student. He hardly asked any questions, would not refill the prescriptions that my husband was on and had been on for a while. The Doctor told us that he would have to see him again before he would do anything with medication, well that was going to be another 6 months until the next appointment. So, my husband was supposed to go without medication or seeing anyone for another 6 months? At this point (right or wrong) my husband informed the doctor that it was because of people like him that Veterans Commit suicide in the parking lots everyday, because they are not getting the care that they need. Now we started at the VA again in the Fall of 2023 hoping that it is better this time. He goes to the Lima CBOC, our very first time there the Nurse Practitioner while talking to my husband realized the state of mind he was in and had a counselor there to talk to him in minutes. But this is not always the case. A cousin of mine who goes to the same CBOC for his care, has never met his Mental Health Doctor in person, it is always over video (she is in Indiana), then they mail him his medication; which 90% of the time, his medication arrives late, so he goes days without before receiving his refill or new medication.

The people who have defended our country deserve better than what they are receiving. They should never have to wait so long to talk to someone, to get help or to get the medication that they need. Not only are they treating the PTSD, but they have to treat other issues that go along with PTSD; taking care of the substance abuse-self medicating, the anxiety, and more. One way that I like explaining to the families that come to Restoring Hope, is that their loved one when they were in Basic Training, the Military re-wired their brains to become the soldier that they needed them to be, but when they are released they do not do anything to un-wire them. The Military just says thanks for your time and welcome back to the regular world. The Veterans are still "ON" and "Ready to Go".

We need more professionals in the VA fields who understand what our Veterans went through and what they need. Veterans Affairs needs to do something to recruit more professionals that are qualified for the VA. We need more councilors (many times they will do more good for the Veteran than the doctor will) in the VA as well, not just Doctors. Our Veterans Deserve the BEST . They signing that dotted line, willing to die for our freedoms....We need to do better!

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.