

2.26.16

Senator and Senate Committee On Finance and Revenue Chair Hass, Senator Boquist, Senator Edwards, and Senator Chuck Riley:

My name is Amber Stevens, I joined the Army two weeks after my high school graduation, serving from 1999-2002. Just one month after I completed my enlistment, stop loss went into effect (service members who have completed their term and not re-enlisting are not allowed to separate from the military). Thus, the bridge building engineer unit I had belonged to deployed overseas several times.

I have been employed by The American Legion Department of Oregon state administration office for 3 years. Each and every day, we receive inquiries of assistance for a wide variety of needs, but the most frequent requests are for housing, and help with a disability claim. With just one service officer on our payroll working 60 hours a week, there is a huge demand for more service officers throughout the state to help veterans file disability claims and to testify on their behalf, if they were denied. County service officers do an extraordinary amount of work in their respective offices. But this is not enough-the missing piece is outreach. Being visible and having a presence in the community, connecting veterans to their earned benefits. Helping them realize that they are a veteran.

Almost 10 years after my time in uniform, I did not self identify as a veteran. Because I did not see combat. After realizing that I was a veteran, I sought health care services through the VA (only because I did not have health insurance).

At the 15 year mark of being a veteran, and a new (less than a year) employee with the Legion, I sat down with a veterans service officer at their request. I thought it was a silly thing to do, as I felt like a healthy person and didn't think anything was wrong with me. Turns out, there was. But I hadn't realized it until that conversation. The bad stuff (Military Sexual Trauma/MST) that I had buried for so long crept out of my mouth. I volunteered to serve for love of our country, in return my direct supervisor violated my being. The repercussions have been challenging like no other. With the help of a veterans service officer who met with me in an environment where I was comfortable, I was able to file a claim for MST and Post Traumatic Stress service connected disability. This was a very difficult process to go through mentally, and navigate wading through the bureaucracy of the federal VA system. Luckily, I did not receive a denial almost a year after filing. But so many veterans are denied, to then have to fight the system to have access to the earned benefits.

As with any issue people have, generally the human nature of pride is to not ask for help. Today, we who have survived serving our country are asking for help. The state that shows support to their veterans will have a stronger economy that all Oregonians can benefit from.

Thank you for listening, I was able to be present this morning with HJR 202, but not this afternoon.

5.20.10



Amber J Stevens

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