

April 21, 2023

Testimony to the Oregon Ways and Means Committee

By Jessica L. Lloyd-Rogers

Thank you, Co-Chairs Steiner and Sanchez and members of the Oregon Legislature's Joint Committee on Ways and Means. I am here today as a veteran, chair of the Roseburg Veterans Mental Health Advocacy Council, and a proud family member of someone with a traumatic brain injury to speak for the importance of considering SB 420 as a priority for the upcoming biennial budget.

A brain injury is a change in the brain resulting from a blow, bump, jolt, other head injury, or from other means such a stroke or lack of oxygen to the brain, for example, being strangled in an intimate partner violence situation. None of us is immune to a potential brain injury.

Brain injuries can trigger daily struggles with physical issues and increase the risk of mental health issues, in both the short term and long term. We now know that a brain injury can be a precursor to PTSD, increased depression and anxiety, homelessness, and suicide. According to a Danish Study, even seven years after the initial injury, patients still faced a 75 percent higher risk of suicide than people who had never had a brain injury. Another study found that more than 50 percent of people who are unhoused have experienced a brain injury. That percentage rises to 93 percent for veterans who experience homelessness.

It is general knowledge that many veterans suffer from both physical and mental issues. Research has shown that some of these impairments are delayed, sometimes for decades. For example, late-onset PTSD and physical injuries aggravated by aging. Here in Oregon, more than 60 percent of those getting treatment from the VA are 65+ with multiple chronic conditions both physical and mental. Veteran suicides in Oregon are significantly higher than the rate of Veteran suicides nationally and the national rate of suicides among the general population. When it comes to mental health issues, it is important to recognize that in our VA mental health catchment area alone – there are an estimated 12,000 + eligible veterans, many likely with brain injuries, who are not connected to the VA for treatment.

Brain injuries, direct or acquired, not only impact the individual and families involved but frequently increases state costs in other areas of concern and responsibility. There is obviously an impact on health care costs. Other resultant negative health indicators for the state include higher numbers of those who become unhoused and remain so, higher rates of suicide, more intimate partner violence, more neglect of children resulting in them being placed in foster care, increased numbers of those with substance use disorders, an increased number of individuals becoming judicially involved and other consequences.

As a veteran, a family member, and an advocate, I strongly urge you to consider the establishment of a Brain Injury Resource Navigation office at ODHS as proposed in SB 420. By doing so, you will not only be assisting brain injury survivors and their families to receive the support they need; I believe you will be making a good fiscal decision that may ease not only health care costs but also decrease the other negative health indicators mentioned above. I appreciate your consideration and support for SB 420. Thank you.