

Statement of Tousha Paxton-Barnes

May 24, 2016

Good afternoon. My name is Tousha Paxton-Barnes. I am honored to be here today and I come to you wearing a couple different hats.

First, I am a veteran, formerly of the 82nd Airborne. When I returned home to Amarillo after being deployed to Afghanistan with the Army's 82nd Airborne Division, I was ready for a fresh start. Instead, I struggled with unemployment as symptoms of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder set in.

Prior to deployment, service men and women are trained in basic first aid so that we are equipped to address the physical wounds of battle. When the shooting stops, different challenges begin for many of us. We live with the emotional wounds of war. Tragically, many of us feel unable to reach out for help when we need it the most.

Due to the nature of our work, veterans are at particularly high risk of developing mental health problems. And some never get the help they need. Twenty-two veterans die by suicide each day.

The sense of strength and resilience that the military instills in those who serve can inhibit us from asking for help. We believe it's up to us to solve our own problems, and that asking for help is a sign of weakness.

Fortunately, through programs like Mental Health First Aid, people can learn how to reach out and start those difficult conversations.

I know firsthand how much it matters. It wasn't until a close friend of mine stepped in and, literally, took me by the arm to get the support I needed to recover. She knew enough to get me to the people who could help. That's all it took.

In addition to being here today as a veteran, I am also here as a member of the Military Veteran Peer Network Program with Texas Panhandle Behavioral & Developmental Health. Our community supports veterans and first responders. We work to connect Texas veterans and their families to resources, establishing camaraderie, trust, and hope.

In my work I have had the opportunity to be a Mental Health First Aid for Veterans trainer. I live in the Texas panhandle and many of our communities are rural and secluded. Many people don't really know much about mental illness, or where to go to access help. But Mental Health First Aid gives us the tools to educate everyday citizens – both veteran and civilian – how to recognize the signs of someone in need.

This is powerful stuff and it is saving lives. Just like CPR is mandatory in many settings, I absolutely believe that Mental Health First Aid should be required for our boots-on-the-ground community leaders like teachers and law enforcement officials to be able to recognize mental illness and substance abuse. So many people are out there, wishing for something better, hoping that help will show up. That's what

Mental Health First Aid is – it is help to get people connected to care and ultimately to get them to a better place. I am honored to be a part of this program, and I thank you for your interest in Mental Health First Aid.