

**Statement of
Alison Perry, Founder
Central Oregon Veterans Ranch
Before the
United States Senate Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration,
and Related Agencies
April 5, 2016**

Introduction

My name is Alison Perry and I'm here today to speak to you about some of the challenging realities facing our nation's combat veterans, and how innovative programs like Central Oregon Veterans Ranch are integrating agriculture and changing veterans' lives.

I am a Licensed Professional Counselor and family member of three combat veterans spanning WWII to Iraq, and the Founder of the nonprofit Central Oregon Veterans Ranch. I began working for the Department of Veterans Affairs two years after my brother deployed for the invasion of Iraq as an Apache helicopter pilot. I worked for six years as a trauma therapist within the VA, treating primarily veterans diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress, in both urban and rural settings. It was these years of intensive clinical work that compelled me to influence our current methods of veteran healthcare by developing innovative ways that veterans can heal and continue to positively serve our nation.

Givens

By now you are aware of the unacceptable statistics of 22 veteran suicides a day, and the grim reality that we lose a veteran to suicide in this nation every 19 minutes. Currently our veterans come home from war, are discharged from the military, and face an existing healthcare system that deems them disabled, wounded, unable to work, and is limited in its scope of diagnosing and treating solely the symptoms of combat trauma. Based on these ongoing alarming statistics, and the years of direct clinical experience of therapists like myself, it is evident that we are at a critical juncture in identifying innovative approaches that address the complex dimensions of combat trauma, including moral injury, identity issues, disillusionment, lack of meaning and purpose, and confusion about how to move forward. The New York Society for Ethical Culture states, "Alongside the renewed attention on complementary therapies for post-traumatic stress, there is a growing understanding that treating acute trauma is only the first stage of treatment. Any effective invention must also incorporate structures for reintegrating veterans back into their families, workplaces, and communities."

All across the US today, priority is placed on agriculture whether within urban settings or rural America. Emphasis is placed on utilizing land in ways that optimizes food production while enhancing our environmental health. I am here today to tell you that

there is a third dimension to our focus on agriculture – as a valuable tool to heal our combat veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress, help them find peace, and help them to re-enter civilian life successfully.

Solutions

Veteran Health Benefit

Agriculture is proving itself to be a viable therapeutic option for veterans, effectively assisting in their transition into civilian society. Veterans benefit from being outdoors, being engaged in physical activity, strengthening themselves through work with purpose, and interacting with the natural world.

Growing and caring for living things is curative for those who have participated in war. The pace on a farm, built around the growing seasons, is a contrast to the high-speed atmosphere of deployment. The completion of concrete tasks in agriculture is be empowering and therapeutic.

Additionally, agriculture provides a vehicle for meaning and purpose for veterans in the local community. Agriculture is a means for veterans to contribute to their communities and environment as stewards of the land. Agriculture can preserve one's sense of autonomy and empowerment. Veterans are aligned with the military values of survival and self-sufficiency that agriculture requires.

Agribusiness entrepreneurship supports veteran self-sufficiency and promises to help decrease dependence on outside help and lessens the need for continual therapy, interventions, and medications. Self-sufficiency is important in a veteran's healing journey for strengthening internal resources and a healthy sense of autonomy.

Economic/Environmental Benefit

Veterans recognize that small businesses and entrepreneurship are important to the fabric and strength of small towns across the US. To many veterans, helping revitalize communities through local economic development is just as important a purpose as growing healthy food for the community.

US soldiers are adept at adapting and improvising. Using existing skill sets from military training to enlist veterans into successful agribusiness endeavors will strengthen our veterans, food systems, and local economies.

Social/Community Benefit

Through the investment of veterans in agriculture, social capital is increased as communities become safer and healthier. The alarming rate of suicide, Post-Traumatic Stress, and related issues let us know that innovative community-based approaches must

be in place. Reducing dependency on social services and providing realistic support to re-enter society through new models of care is critical.

In Oregon we are developing an innovative model of healthcare that is changing veterans' lives. Central Oregon Veterans Ranch is a 19-acre working ranch that implements agriculture for both vocational and therapeutic benefit. A unique component of our program will be the integration of specialized end of life care for up to five veterans in an Adult Foster Home on the property. Thus far, the model's success is rooted in its focus on peer support, inter-generational healing, and a system of strategic community partnerships. Veterans coming out to work at the ranch find the community and camaraderie they treasured while serving in the military, and relief from social isolation and the intrusive thoughts and images that often haunt them. They find meaning and purpose through contributing to the development and management of a place that has become their own. The ranch also serves as a hub; a safe haven and non-stigmatizing environment that provides support and resources for veterans who may not reach out directly for help. In the words of one veteran, a 38-year retired female Army COL with five deployments, the ranch is a "touchstone", and "just knowing it is there is therapeutic". More strikingly, I have heard from at least three veterans, a female combat flight nurse, a six tour Marine veteran, and an Iraq combat veteran, that the ranch has "saved their life". The message I would like to impart to you today is that innovative programs like this, that incorporate agriculture, are working to save and improve our veterans' quality of life and our local communities.

Thank you.