

Heidi Olsen, Restoration Society - Buffalo

I am a service-connected Veteran with a mental health disability. In 2010 to 2016 I was inpatient at the WNY VA Health Care System inpatient unit and diagnosed with a mental health disorder. In 2016 while a student after a situation which involved the campus police I was put in handcuffs and taken to a hospital that had no experience working with Veterans with mental health issues.

I work with Veterans who currently do not have access to VA mental health care. In my experience as a Veteran and as a peer specialist there are some things that I would like to see in regards to ensuring that all Veterans regardless of era, time in service, and type of discharge see in the area of improving access to mental health care.

1) Funding and support for Peer Specialists who specialize in working with Veterans in the community. Expand Veteran mental health funding to include mental health agencies that does not have a primary focus of Veterans to provide for Veteran services within those agencies, or Veteran Services Peers or counselors within those agencies.

2) Continue to provide funding for the PFC Dwyer programs in New York State.

3) Provide training for all mental health providers in cultural competency in military and Veteran issues for all mental health agencies in New York.

I believe that these efforts will curb and further decrease the Veteran suicide rate in New York State, and promote resiliency in the Veterans who have served this country.