

My name is Branden Ward. I served in the army from 2007-2012 as a combat engineer and a paratrooper. I have two deployments to Afghanistan with the 173rd Airborne Special Troops Battalion. The strain on my body from my service has left me with chronic pain among other issues. Some of the worst chronic pain is in my neck and lower back which locks up to the point where any movement can be painful and difficult, causes tension headaches, numbness in my hands and feet, and will prevent me from doing normal activities such as lifting my son up into his car seat or bending over to feed my dogs.

VA Community Care has been an invaluable resource in managing my chronic neck and back pain, which developed during my time in service. Their seamless and efficient process ensures that I receive the necessary treatments without missing work, unnecessary delays, costly expenses and long travel distances.

Living with chronic pain can be debilitating, but thanks to programs like VA Community Care, I have access to specialized pain management therapies that have significantly improved my quality of life. My massage therapist is close by and very skilled. I am able to receive care tailored to my specific needs. After a deep tissue massage, I am able to move my neck more with less pain, have reduced tension headaches, less muscle spasms, my mood improves and I am able to play with my son more.

The convenience of VA Community Care cannot be overstated. Instead of missing an entire day of work to drive to the closest VA, I have a local clinic that coordinates my appointments, ensures I receive timely care and is a short distance from my house. This has been crucial as my conditions will worsen over time and require regular sessions to manage the pain and prevent my muscles from tensing to the point I have to seek emergency care or take harsh medications like muscle relaxers which impact my ability to work or even drive and can have serious side effects when used regularly over a prolonged period of time.

For almost a year now I have been able to see the massage therapist once a month and will sometimes pay for another session if I have to. Although I was not able to find a chiropractor I liked within the VA Community Care system, I do see a local chiropractor I found that is not associated with VA Community Care because of the amount of effort required and complexity to stay current with the VA's system. I am only able to afford the chiropractic services every two to three months to realign my spine and another deep tissue massage occasionally. These two services combined help me function on a day-to-day basis and drastically improve my quality of life. These services are expensive and I would not be able to afford the regular sessions without the VA's assistance.

Recently my massage therapist expressed concern because many vets are not given additional referrals and cannot afford to seek continued care with her. Many veterans see major improvement to their lives through programs like this. It is frustrating to many of us when we see programs that help being limited or done away with through policy changes that may look good on paper but have major impacts on the veteran community. Myself and others would like to see programs such as community care expanded upon instead of reduced or stopped. In my case an appropriate treatment plan would be to see the massage therapist twice a month and my chiropractor once a month. These expenses are too much for me on my own and I can only hope to see policy changes add to programs like this in the near future.

Many Veterans also refuse to seek out care because of travel times, distances and the general inconvenience of dealing with the VA. "Suck it up and drive on" is our culture. We often ignore pain,

medical issues and avoid doctors like the plague. A trip to the VA takes up a majority of the day just to seek care. VA Primary Care doctors only have a short window to review medical records, talk with the patient, examine the patient, provide a treatment plan and update medical records. They often run over appointment times. They are under staffed and the over booked resulting in veterans being rushed and feeling unsatisfied with their care. Primary Care, Specialty Services, and Mental Health should be no more than 30 minutes from a veteran's home and made as convenient as possible for the veteran. This would increase the likelihood of veterans receiving quality care that they need and take some of the stress off of the already flooded VA facilities.