

SB112-Veterans Outdoor Terrain Restoration Grant Prog/Concerning an outdoor activity grant program for mental health therapy for veterans

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When I returned home from combat in Iraq as a sniper for the US Army 1st Infantry in 2005 I suffered from intrusive thoughts, night terrors, hypervigilance, moral injury, survivor guilt, depression, anger issues and more. My mother lived on the border of Pike National Forest on the foothills of Pikes Peak. I instinctively left to the mountains with a water purifier, sleeping bag and fishing pole, and didn't come back for 3 weeks. My appetite for fish was extinguished, but I also found that some of my severe mental health complications had also been diminished.

The outdoors offered me time for solace and reflection at a pace that was necessary for my individual healing. Without the distractions of smart phones, Netflix, and shopping malls, I was able to confront some of the hardest challenges in my transition home. Without that valuable time in our wilderness, I wouldn't be here today.

Since returning home I have lost more veteran friends to suicide, substance abuse, incarceration and homelessness. I am part of a demographic that is prone to self-destructive behavior and are too proud to seek traditional and institutional help. I started dedicating myself to getting more veterans outdoors to experience similar healing that saved my own life.

I watch with a relieved heart when a, 3 combat tour, stoic as hell, Marine turns into a child again skipping stones and running over logs. It is almost as if there is a transformation the moment you lose sight of the cars at the trailhead. I have seen more healing around a campfire than under the fluorescent lights of the VA.

Through Veterans Green Jobs I helped create the Veteran Green Corps with partnerships of 12 conservation corps around the country that paved the way for veterans to join service crews completing backcountry trail maintenance and wild fire mitigation. I could recount hundreds of personal

stories where the sense of service and exposure to nature had turned veterans from the edge, to finding careers in our land management agencies. I drive veterans to outdoor adventure programs knowing many will find the recover they need, whether summiting a fourteener compels them to overcome physical injury, or remote wilderness exposure triggers a breakthrough in self-reliance.

Last year a veteran took a handgun with him on an outing. He had told me that it was for self-defense and that he felt too vulnerable without it to join a 3-day backcountry hike. The group all agreed he could bring the weapon and under those conditions he joined the trip. On the second day the veteran handed me his handgun and told me he had brought the weapon out to kill himself somewhere beautiful. He told me he wasn't telling me these things as a cry for help, and he wasn't giving me the gun so he didn't have access. He just said, He no longer needed it and that I could get rid of it when we got back to town.

SB112 will give more veterans the opportunity to discover a unique connection to our outdoors, and I am convinced will save many of our returning warriors. We fought for the lands-of-the-free, help us gain access to them by funding this incredible grant program that will provide space for my brothers and sisters to enjoy and heal in the landscapes we swore an oath to protect.

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