

Wounded Warrior Project Participates in 2015 Brain Injury Awareness Day

Capitol Hill Event Furthers Education and Awareness of Brain Injury

Washington, D.C. (March 18, 2015) – On October 15, 2004, over a decade ago, Army Specialist Matthew Drake's life changed in an instant. The blast from a suicide car bomb in Al-Qaim, Iraq, killed the four passengers in his vehicle and left him with life-threatening injuries to his brain and skull, and serious injuries over his entire body. The injuries were severe. The damage from this attack, especially to his brain, would require critical medical care and intensive rehabilitation, but the uncertainty about his future was worse. Would he be able to walk? Would he talk? Could he care for himself? What quality of life would he have? What would happen in the future, when he would still need treatment and support, if his family could no longer be there?

Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) is on Capitol Hill today for Brain Injury Awareness Day to encourage lawmakers, healthcare professionals, and the public to consider the questions that warriors with traumatic brain injuries (TBIs), their caregivers, and their families face every day. TBIs, which occur when a sudden trauma or head injury disrupts brain function, are one of the signature wounds of this generation of injured service members. An estimated 320,000 warriors have experienced a TBI during service to their country. WWP joins the bipartisan Congressional Brain Injury Task Force, comprised of over 80 members, to further education and awareness of brain injury – including its incidence, prevalence, prevention, and treatment.

WWP's Independence Services programs – the Independence Program (IP) and the LongTerm Support Trust (LTST) – focus on providing long-term support to service members and veterans living with moderate-to-severe TBIs, spinal cord injuries, or other neurological conditions. The Independence Program helps warriors design their own path from surviving to thriving, and the Long-Term Support Trust was established to ensure supplemental services including life-skills training, home care, transportation, and additional resources can remain available to the most seriously wounded, ill, or injured warriors in the event their caregivers are no longer able to provide care and support.

For warriors like Matt, community-based support and rehabilitation are critical on the road to recovery. After years of rehabilitation, relocations, and dedicated hard work, Matt was able to enter a supported living rehabilitation program near his family in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The program was designed specifically for him and his specific needs as he pushed to adapt to his injuries. He had been living successfully in this supported living facility for six years, with the funding covered by a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) pilot program that provided assisted living services for veterans with TBIs (AL-TBI pilot program), when the facility notified him that it was unable to continue participating in the pilot program. Without the funding that VA provided to the facility through the AL-TBI pilot program, Matt was at risk of being uprooted from a program that had been vital to his recovery progress due to his inability to afford the same level of care on a self-pay basis.

“Despite my reassurances that I was going to do everything possible to keep him right where he was if that's what he wanted, he was worried, and he was angry,” said Lisa Schuster, Matt's mother. “I was worried as well, knowing how hard moving would be for him, how much ground he would lose in both his emotional stability and daily life skills. I feared his anger would lead to depression, a path he's been down before and one we've worked really hard to keep him from repeating.”

A chance encounter with a WWP staff member introduced Lisa to the Independence Program. She learned that the program is specifically designed for WWP warriors living with a moderate-to-severe TBI, spinal cord injury, or

other neurological condition. The Independence Program is a partnership between WWP and the warrior and their family, uniquely structured to adapt to their ever-changing needs. It pairs warriors who rely on their families or caregivers with a specialized case manager to develop a personalized plan to restore, or sustain the support of, meaningful levels of activity and purpose into their daily lives.

“What they described sounded like the answer to so many prayers, but there had been a lot things that sounded good over the past ten years since Matthew had been wounded, and that’s where many of them ended,” said Lisa. “I had no idea then how very, very thankful I would be for that introduction to this life-changing, life-enhancing program. People call him a hero. They don’t realize he needs heroes, too.”

WWP’s Independence Program provided Matt and Lisa with case management support to focus on goals that provide a future with purpose at no cost to Matt or his family. Because of this support, Matt and his support team were able to establish an individualized plan that allowed him to stay in his supported living facility and continue the rehabilitation that has helped him make tremendous strides in his recovery.

“A gap currently exists between the support structure available to these seriously injured warriors and what they will need long-term,” said Mike Richardson, executive vice president of Independence Services and Mental Health at WWP. “For many warriors returning home from conflict, they discover the help they thought they would receive doesn’t begin to cover what they will really need throughout their recovery process. These individualized services can and should be provided in the homes and communities in which these warriors live; WWP is committed to helping this generation of injured veterans get the care and the support they deserve, not just today or tomorrow, but for a lifetime.”

In the last 18 months alone, WWP has invested over \$64 million in our Independence Services programs to help provide long-term support for our most seriously wounded, ill, or injured veterans. This funding, which was made possible by donors from across America, serves as the model for the decades of support WWP is preparing to provide these warriors to ensure they are able to live as independently as possible, with the highest quality of life. By 2017, WWP will be serving 1,150 warriors through the Independence Program and 1,040 through the Long-Term Support Trust.

Warriors, caregivers, and family members are seeking options for support within VA that are flexible enough to meet the unique, long-term needs of someone living with a brain injury. While Matt and Lisa initially benefited from the AL-TBI pilot program, they needed a viable, long-term care option when the pilot program was threatened. Because brain injuries are not healed in three-year increments, WWP is also on the Hill today to ask Congress to exercise oversight of the AL-TBI pilot program and to evaluate its efficacy and impact on veterans, their caregivers, and their families. The needs of veterans living with cognitive and physical challenges due to a brain injury reach far beyond those that meet the AL-TBI criteria. Veterans, caregivers, and families need to know that long-term health problems have long-term solutions.

The mission of Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) is to honor and empower Wounded Warriors. WWP’s purpose is to raise awareness and to enlist the public’s aid for the needs of injured service members, to help injured servicemen and women aid and assist each other, and to provide unique, direct programs and services to meet their needs. WWP is a national, nonpartisan organization headquartered in Jacksonville, Florida. To get involved

and learn more, visit woundedwarriorproject.org.

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