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### Reporter - The Long Road Home

**Veterans traumatized by war can find the transition back to civilian life difficult. But leaders are working to improve services and giving veterans who have gotten in trouble a second chance.**

By Ellen Liberman



Illustration by Adolfo Valle

Jason Nacci is thirty-one, clear-eyed and determined. In 2000, the Providence native enlisted in the Army. He was nineteen, a high school dropout and adrift. He saw the trajectory of his life, and he didn't like where it led. Nacci joined the infantry because he wanted to serve his country the best way he could: on the frontlines of battle.

In 2003, Nacci's unit was deployed to a small Iraqi town on Highway 10 between Ramadi and Fallujah, where they were attacked every day. In 2004, he was Medivac-ed out of the combat zone after suffering a broken elbow and a traumatic brain injury. Nacci earned a Purple Heart for taking shrapnel from a rocket-propelled grenade. In 2007, he retired from active service.

Nacci has seen life from inside and outside the military, from the heart of the War on Terror to its faraway fringes of everyday American life and, in his mind, there is no contest:

"Iraq was my easiest time in the service," he says. "Everything made sense. You did your job. In the service, you don't have to worry about you. The service takes care of you and you take care of

everyone else. If you're having problems at home, if they see you drinking, they throw you in a program," he says. "When it's over, you fly home. Everyone's excited to see you. Then you wake up Monday morning and you are unemployed. You have nowhere to go and no direction. When you get out, you have to worry about yourself."

The ideal of freedom, which motivates so many young Americans to join the military, can be tricky in practice. Nacci found a job, and lost it. He was plagued by nightmares, flashbacks, seizures, depression, sleep apnea and constant pain. Whiskey helped him tamp down the symptoms of his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For a while, that worked. Then, it didn't. In 2012, he was arrested for reckless driving. He got into a bar fight and was charged with assault. Nacci wanted to fight in District Court, but the criminal justice system had another idea. He was referred to the Veterans Court, where he was paired with a veteran-mentor and placed in treatment.

"My life was spiraling out of control," he says. "For the first time, I had someone who wanted to help me."

Nacci's story is not every veteran's story, but it is common enough. There are more than 2.3 million American veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Rhode Island's share has been disproportionate. More than 70,000 veterans live here. The state hosts twice the national per capita rate of veterans who have served in the Gulf Wars since the first, Operation Iraqi Freedom, in 1991. The Rhode Island National Guard alone has sent at least 10,000 of its members into those conflicts; it has the second highest active-duty call-back rate in the country.

Multiple, lengthy deployments, in some cases, have left deep, physical and psychological wounds and ripped families apart. Coupled with a crippled economy back home, a significant percentage of post-9/11 veterans have been stretched beyond their ability to easily snap back into civilian life.

"The vast majority have a resilience that gets them through," says Dr. Thomas O'Toole, national director of the Homeless Veterans Patient Aligned Care Team. "The stuff today's veterans are facing is very, very different. Not only in the context of what they experienced during the war, but in coming back, when we have lost our collective awareness that there is still a war going on. It creates a perfect storm that keeps us very busy picking up the pieces."

About 3,000 active duty troops have committed suicide since 2001 — a rising number. A recent study estimated that about 20 percent of the newest combat veterans suffer from PTSD; 19 percent, a traumatic brain injury. Unemployment is higher for post-9/11 veterans than for the general population. In 2012, the veteran unemployment rate hovered above 20 percent for veterans in their early twenties. The annual, non-seasonally adjusted, unemployment rate for Rhode Island veterans in 2012 was 15.7 percent.

Nationally, the Veterans Benefits Administration has more than 575,000 claims backlogged for more than 125 days, about two-thirds of its caseload. The Providence regional office, which serves 166,600 veterans in Rhode Island and southeastern Massachusetts, has the best record in the eastern region, with only 40 percent of its claims out more than 125 days. The Providence VA Medical Center has spent the past ten years ramping up its response.

"The first wave of vets from Afghanistan and early Iraq had very significant combat exposure and we weren't ready for that," says Jennifer Lambert, coordinator of the Returning Veterans program. "We didn't have all of the outreach programs we have in place now. We've come a long way."

In February, the state announced its intention to do more, with the release of "The Rhode Back Home," a comprehensive look at veterans' needs and the state and federal services offered. Rhode

Island's transitioning veterans can find scattered support: the Chamber of Commerce holds veterans job fairs; the Rhode Island National Guard offers its Yellow Ribbon program; the nonprofit Operation Stand Down runs six transitional and permanent housing facilities with social services for homeless vets.

But the report found little coordination and numerous gaps in education, jobs, mental health, access to benefits, criminal justice, homelessness, long-term care and child care. In response to its wide-ranging recommendations, the General Assembly passed a legislative package.

"The system needs improvement," acknowledged Senator Walter S. Felag Jr. of East Bay, chairman of the Senate Special Legislation and Veterans Affairs Committee. "What we hope to accomplish is to provide a smooth transition into civilian life and ensure an efficient delivery system."

Among the more significant initiatives was the creation of a group to develop a Veterans Services Strategic Plan to achieve that goal and a \$300,000 allocation to the Veterans Court. Modeled after the first veterans court in Buffalo, New York, Rhode Island's version began as a pilot program funded with a federal grant. By the year's end, it will have handled nearly 200 cases involving veterans charged with misdemeanor crimes with the goal of diverting them from jail. They are paired with a veteran mentor and required to undergo treatment for the underlying issues that got them there.

"It is not an easy program, and we are still a work in progress. But we are seeing some tremendous success stories," says District Court Chief Judge Jeanne E. LaFazia, who established and oversees the program. While it has not collected sufficient data to determine its impact on recidivism, she says, "statistics show that treatment courts save lives and save money."

In 2012, Governor Lincoln Chafee appointed Navy Chief Kim A. Ripoli as associate director of the Veterans Affairs division, and moved that office to the State House. The state is also stepping up by adding more benefit counselors.

More money would help, but there's much more the state could do for transitioning veterans, advocates say. For one, it could implement a 2011 law creating a director-level position for the head of the Veterans Affairs division.

"The state needs to do a better job coordinating services," says Erik B. Wallin, Operation Stand Down's executive director. "The director is at a higher level of representation. You have the governor's ear in a more direct way. The report is a terrific road map, and most of its recommendations do not require the taxpayers to come up with a lot of money: hiring preferences in state government, for example. There's a host of easy fixes, but who is really asking for it at the legislature?"

Jason Nacci's "Rhode back home" has been ruttled, but, with the help of the Veterans Court and his mentor, Mike Pickering, it is well-marked. He is now receiving treatment, finishing his undergraduate degree and making plans for graduate school.

"This was a wake-up call. Otherwise, I was going to end up in jail. And it has given me the motivation I needed to make the right decisions. My direction is a clean and sober life, out of trouble."

Ellen Liberman is an award-winning journalist who has commented on politics and reported on government affairs for more than two decades.