

# The Salt Lake Tribune

## Veterans struggle with life outside the military

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He had three square meals a day, a steady paycheck, solid benefits and a job with purpose. Life in the Army wasn't perfect, of course, but Justin Youse was content with the path he had chosen.

Then he broke his back.

Today, the 29-year-old Iraq war veteran is in constant pain. He doesn't sleep well. He considers the Veterans Affairs medical system, which he relies on for health care, to be a frustrating, impersonal, bureaucratic behemoth. He has battled addiction, gone through a divorce and been laid off from a job.

And he's not alone in his struggles.

A new study by The Gallup Organization indicates that while military members are generally happier and healthier than other American workers, military veterans fare worse than the general work force when it comes to their emotional and physical health, work environment and access to basic necessities.

That came as no surprise to Youse, who injured his back when he dove from the back of a troop truck under fire in 2003 and has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder related to other combat experiences in Iraq.

"Once you become a veteran, you're still dealing with everything you were dealing with when you were active duty, but all the security and camaraderie is gone," Youse said.

If he was sick or injured in the Army, Youse said, he would simply walk into the base clinic for treatment. "Now," he said. "It's all about jumping through hoops. It's like being guilty until being proven innocent. You have to prove you've got medical issues before they'll give you a second glance."

The Gallup results come as the man responsible for improving the conditions of veterans in America, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, is scheduled to visit Salt Lake City to hear the concerns of veterans and veterans officials.

The former Army general — perhaps best known for his public criticism of the Bush Administration's plan for the war in Iraq — has been praised for his extensive agenda, which includes improving access to health care and mental health treatment for those returning from the nation's ongoing wars. Some have questioned, however, whether some of his goals — for instance, ending homelessness among veterans in the next five years — are overbroad and beyond reach.

The study indicates veterans' overall well-being may depend on a wide range of subtle factors. It might help chart a path for veterans officials to follow for helping those who have served in the military — by paying attention to what the active-duty military is doing to care for its troops.

The study's author, Dan Witters, noted military members have simple access to health care, dentistry, affordable food



Justin Youse, of Roy, an Iraq War veteran who suffers from mental and physical wounds, has struggled since getting out of the military. He has been laid off, divorced and struggles to navigate the V.A. medical system. A new study by the Gallup organization reveals that active duty military members have a general level of "wellness" that is significantly higher than civilians, but civilians are generally happier, healthier and more content with their lives than military veterans. Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune

and exercise opportunities.

Those guarantees, Witters said, might amount “to a situation where they have a better living environment inside of a military community than the one that they came from,” leading to a buoyancy in the way that they rated their lives to Gallup’s surveyors.

“The way I look at it, it’s like Maslow’s hierarchy of needs,” said Air Force Tech. Sgt. Terri Davis, referring to the theory that humans need to have their primary, physical needs fulfilled before they can satisfy higher-order needs like self-esteem and creativity. “The Air Force provides every one of those — food, shelter, safety security, love and belonging — because in the Air Force, we’re one big family.”

Davis, who works at Hill Air Force Base’s Family Readiness Center, has deployed six times in her 16-year military career. Her husband has completed seven deployments.

At one time, shortly after the birth of her first child, the rigors of military life made her consider leaving the Air Force. “Then I stepped back and took a look at the bigger picture,” she said. “I looked at the bigger picture, all of the benefits.”

Youse said he finds support and camaraderie among fellow veterans. “Almost all of my friends are veterans,” he said. “It didn’t start out that way, but I think that we really need each other.”

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