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Polytrauma centers offer hope for TBI, PTSD

Jacqueline Klimas - Medill News Service
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On Aug. 31, 2006, Kevin Ivory was exposed to three roadside bombs in Fallujah, Iraq. The third blast left him unconscious for 26 hours, during which he had no memory of what was happening to him.

Ivory, a Navy petty officer third class, spent four weeks at Balad Air Force Base Hospital in Iraq before flying back to the U.S., where he worked on cognitive and speech skills while his migraine symptoms were controlled.

When he returned home to Scottsdale, Ariz., he entered care at the Department of Veterans Affairs polytrauma clinic in Phoenix. Doctors there set him up with a psychiatrist to treat his post-traumatic stress disorder as well as a speech therapist and a neurologist for his traumatic brain injury.

"They really allowed you to manage your own care and help the physicians help you," said Ivory, who recovered enough to stop full-time treatment in 2009. "I was given options and I was able to choose the best options that I felt fit me. The care was really perfect in my eyes because I had my hand in a lot of it."

A polytrauma center is a specialized rehabilitation center within a larger hospital that focuses on traumatic brain injury and combat exposure, as well as PTSD.

Seeking treatment at a polytrauma rehabilitation center rather than a more general VA hospital is especially important for service members with severe injuries, said Dr. Shane McNamee, the chief of physical medicine and rehabilitation service at the Hunter Holmes McGuire Medical Center in Richmond, Va.

"Somebody who has sustained multiple blasts and has severe psychological problems, or a severe blast and has multiple amputations and traumatic brain injury and all the things associated with that, they're going to do a lot better at a polytrauma rehab center than somewhere else," McNamee said.

Doctors told Ivory that he would receive the best treatment at the polytrauma clinic at the Phoenix facility because of the extent of his injuries. While Ivory felt VA cared for him well, getting to that care proved difficult.

"Sometimes it was a little bit hard getting appointments because there are so many people coming back with injuries" from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, said Ivory, now 26.

Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., introduced a bill in March that would build a new polytrauma center either at Fort Harrison in Helena, Mont., or at another site in the Northern Rockies or Dakotas. Veterans in that area now must travel to Denver, Minneapolis or Seattle to access specialized polytrauma care.

"Brain injuries take a toll on our veterans and their families, and that burden becomes even greater when troops have to travel long distances to get the traumatic brain injury care they need," Baucus said in a press release.

Almost 10,000 service members suffered traumatic brain injuries during the first five months of 2011, according to the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center.

At the Phoenix VA polytrauma clinic, Ivory was given the tools he needed to deal with his PTSD as well as ways to remember everyday tasks that might escape him.

"I used to forget to brush my teeth in the morning and stuff like that," he said.

Though he has improved, Ivory, who now works as a personal bodyguard, still struggles with memory loss and stutters if he speaks too fast.

"I can't say that I'm fully recovered," he said. "I could function the whole time, but it was definitely something I had to be conscious of as far as my speech and everything else. So yeah, it took a little bit of time."

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