The Importance of the HONOR Act: Chris Dana's Story

At 23 years old, Chris Dana returned home with the 163rd Infantry Battalion, Montana National Guard. With an Iraq combat deployment and a world of experiences behind him, Dana was ready to transition from warrior to civilian. In November 2005, he came home to the peaceful town of Helena, Montana to rejoin his family, his friends, and his old job.

Like many before him, Dana honorably served his country and returned full of pride. Nevertheless, he began to struggle with the world around him, grappling with the inescapable memories of war. Chris' loved ones began to notice his distant behavior, a striking departure from his usual outgoing demeanor. Although Chris was never physically injured in combat and his uniform was adorned with multiple stacks of ribbons, his psychological injuries festered under the surface. One of his brothers, Matt Kuntz, said Chris seemed to be melting from the inside. His father noticed that his eyes had lost their shine, reflecting the slow withdrawal from the joys of living.

Too many of our returning warriors come home with the same obstacles and face large uphill battles. These invisible injuries manifest themselves from numerous traumatic events which are often exacerbated by the lack of effective treatment at home. Chris was no different. Struggling with Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD), he distanced himself from those closest to him, and his unit failed to reach out to him.

Today, many returning war fighters are unfamiliar with the mental and physical occupational hazards of war. In effect, military leaders struggle to grasp the toll that combat takes on the human body, and fail to reach out to their subordinates and those around them. All too often there exists an environment plagued by a stigma that punishes the returning service member for seeking help and rewarding those who "suck it up."

As a result, our Armed Forces continue to lose our most precious assets to suicide from PTSD and other psychological disorders. The spike in suicides is alarming, and the month of January 2009 solidified our worst fears. That month, suicide rates eclipsed combat fatalities from both Iraq and Afghanistan. The services have responded with audacious plans and resolute intensity to find a way to fix the suicide epidemic. A significant contributor to the inflated suicide rate is the inadequacy of mental health treatment for invisible injuries among service members, all too often compounded by a stigma that discourages seeking help. For example, in many units seeking mental health treatment is silently portrayed as a sign of weakness. One common phrase is that "our men and women knew what they were signing up for." Many cases of PTSD are never reported because service members are asphyxiated by the formidable impression of losing their job or more importantly, losing the respect of their colleagues.

Soon, Chris Dana drew further away from his family. He began screening his calls, he quit his job, and he stopped showing up at drill with the National Guard. Members of Chris' family felt that his unit failed to offer him an acceptable level of care, which ultimately pushed him further away. In the end, he was unable to be saved. Chris lost his battle to PTSD when he took his own life.

Chris' was buried with honors at a VA cemetery in his home state of Montana. The ceremony was filled with state officials, Montana National Guardsmen, and throngs of family. The National Guard honored Chris Dana's service by extending survivor benefits to his family. As a result, his brother was able to attend college and carry on the legacy his brother left behind.

Under current law, survivor benefits are not extended to former service members who commit suicide. The **Honor Act** introduced by Senators Bond, Boxer, Lieberman, Brownback, Grassley, McCaskill, Murkowski, Schumer, and Specter will extend survivor benefits to EVERY former service member who commits suicide and has a medical history of PTSD connected to combat. No military family should be left behind with nothing to honor and remember the legacy of their fallen loved one.