

United States Senate
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Statement of Elizabeth Smith
Submitted for the Hearing,
“Independent Spirit: Veteran Health & Healing through Adaptive Sports”
February 4, 2026

Good Afternoon, Chairman Moran, Ranking member Blumenthal, and distinguished members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me here today. My name is Elizabeth Smith, and adaptive sports saved my life.

In 2017, while stationed aboard the USS Nimitz, I was diagnosed with medulloblastoma, a fast-growing cancer of the brain and spine that starts near the brainstem. I am incredibly fortunate that chemotherapy and radiation were successful, but surviving cancer came at a cost. When my treatment ended, I didn't feel like myself anymore. I had lost my strength, my motivation, and soon my identity. When I found out that I was being medically retired the reality that I would never serve my country the way that I had once dreamed left me feeling like the shell of a human being. Everything I had worked for was gone.

During that time, my Non-Medical Case Manager with Navy Wounded Warrior—and my mother—refused to let me give up on myself. They weren't willing to watch me fade away on the couch, and they insisted that I try an adaptive sports camp, even when I didn't believe it would help.

I attended my first adaptive sports camp in late 2018, and it was overwhelming. I couldn't move the way I wanted to; I struggled to hear what was going on around me, and I felt like I was failing at everything I tried. Then they put me in a pool. Suddenly, I was swimming the way I used to when I competed in high school. In that moment, I felt a spark of hope return—something I honestly thought was gone forever. That spark didn't disappear. It grew.

Before long, I was participating in seated field events, shooting, and eventually wheelchair rugby, which became especially meaningful to me. Through Navy Wounded Warrior adaptive sports, I slowly rebuilt myself. I gained confidence, reconnected with others, and for the first time since my diagnosis, I felt like I had a purpose again. But when I was no longer eligible to compete through the Department of Defense Warrior Games due to a two games limit, I could feel myself starting to slip back into the same dark place I had worked so hard to escape.

I went to my VA mental health provider in Buffalo, New York, to ask how I could get involved in the VA's Adaptive Sports & Arts program—something I had heard other veterans talk about. I was told that it would be difficult for me to get an appointment because I wasn't training to compete at a high level; I was simply trying to stay healthy. I was encouraged to rely on outside veteran organizations instead because they would be more accessible. I felt like a door had been pushed closed before I even got to peek inside.

That is when organizations like Wounded Warrior Project and the Semper Fi Fund stepped in. They didn't just fill a gap—they carried me forward. They supported my physical and mental health, helped me continue growing, and connected me with local nonprofits that gave me ways to stay active and involved in my community.

Although I haven't had much direct success with the VA's Adaptive Sports & Arts program, the grants provided to community organizations have made a real difference in my life. Through these grants, I participate in adaptive horseback riding and horsemanship at the EquiCenter, a small local nonprofit that provides equine therapy at no cost to veterans. Every week, it gives me a place to show up, connect with others, and feel like I belong.

It may not sound like much—just a few hours a week training for a sport or working with horses—but those hours matter the most. Those are the hours when the pain fades into the background, when relationships are built, and when veterans can feel proud of what they are capable of. They remind us that we still have value and purpose.

When I spoke with some of the legislative aides about what I should share today, there was one question that really stuck out: if I had a magic wand and could change one thing about the VA's Adaptive Sports & Arts program, what would it be? My answer was simple—make adaptive sports accessible to all veterans, not just those who live near major VA facilities. Giving the smaller VA clinics the ability to host group workouts, sports clinics, and informative sessions about what adaptive sports are and if you qualify would streamline their ability to communicate openly about the programming like the five national events that currently take place and open up dialogue of what is provided through the VA, who qualifies, and what other options might be potentially helpful.

When we make adaptive sports and fitness a priority, we do more than promote physical health. We create spaces for connection, trust, and healing. We give disabled veterans a safe place to let their guard down, build friendships, share resources, and rediscover joy. No matter where a veteran lives, what equipment they need, or the level at which they compete, every

eligible veteran deserves equal access to these opportunities—and the chance to live an active, purposeful life. It is through committees like this that you have the opportunity to not just focus on the health of veterans, but their wellbeing as a whole individual. It is my dream, that every veteran regardless of ability has equal access, equal support, and equal opportunity to the care and opportunities they deserve.

Thank you.