

Statement of Heather Simcakoski

“Tomah VAMC: Examining Quality, Access, and a Culture of Overreliance on High-Risk Medications” March 30, 2015

My name is Heather Simcakoski. I am the wife of Jason Simcakoski and mother of our 12 year old daughter Anaya Simcakoski.

Jason and I met 13 years ago, while both serving in the Marine Corps together in Hawaii. After the Marine Corps I moved from my hometown in Ohio to Wisconsin; Stevens Point is Jason's hometown and where he had dreams of one day taking over his family business - along with so many other dreams for our future!

Even when life seemed impossible and we questioned ourselves – we always found the strength and love to work through it. Neither of us could ever give up on each other or our marriage. Our daughter Anaya has been cheated out of every Father's Day, having a father at her soccer games, having her dad to walk her down the aisle one day, and most importantly she was cheated out of his unconditional love, support, and guidance in life.

Jason was not only my best friend and husband – he was my family. When my mother passed away three years ago; the same day I was diagnosed with cancer (leaving me with no parents) he was the one that was there for me during the most difficult times in my life – he was my rock, I could always count on his love. He drove 9 hours in the middle of the night to be by my side during emergency surgery. He is the person I called when I had something to talk about; whether it was good or bad – he was always the person I talked to – that has been taken from me. During treatment, I never had to question if he would leave, he loved Anaya and me unconditionally. Jason was a good person with such a good heart and was taken far too early from us - this is not how he deserved to lose his life.

Because of the treatment Jason received at the VA, the only family I had here – aside from our daughter was him and I still do not know that we will ever find peace; because, in my heart I know he should still be here with us today. Anaya and I lost more than a husband and a father; we lost part of ourselves – a part that I don't know if you ever get back.

With this, it is so heartbreaking to know that someone with such love and passion for helping others has been taken from Anaya and I – and I truly believe in my heart that he would be here today if he had the proper treatment.

I have so many questions, which I hope to find answers for.

I would like to understand why/how Jason's police reports "disappeared?" There are reports that were made to DR Houlihan, the Tomah VA, the Tomah City Police Department as well as the FBI – regarding patients selling their prescriptions back in 2013- making so much money that they had saved enough to put a down

payment on a house. Thankfully I have voicemails and text messages between Jason and the officers – otherwise I am not convinced anyone would be listening to this point today. I would like to understand who is responsible for these reports, where they are, and why no one did anything with the reports?

Additionally when you are managing someone with addiction to prescriptions – or anyone for that matter, once they are admitted into inpatient care – why do they still continue to receive medication by mail – the same medications they are receiving while at the facility?

I also have concerns about the way Jason was treated by the DR as a patient when he complained that his medication was making him uncomfortable one evening. He knocked on the physician's door and she opened it and slammed it shut in his face. He was not a prisoner nor was he in boot camp any longer – he is a veteran of who was willing to sacrifice his life every single day for each and every single one of us – including those treating him, and to know that this is how they treat their patients is devastating and completely unacceptable.

Also, living with Jason I was able to see the long term impact of all of the medication. I would see him falling asleep while he was eating, driving on the median, slurring his words, unable to work, sleeping 18+ hours a day. Jason did not even realize his behavior was so erratic at times that there were instances where I would have to video record it and show him later so he would see what I saw. I would like to understand how a DR can prescribe 14 different medications and know which ones are and are not working.

When you have that many medications in your system – your mind is altered. At that point, I question how a patient could even articulate to a DR what “normal” feels like anymore....Especially after mixing and matching (in my opinion) – experimenting with medication on our veterans – my husband.

I would like to also understand why alternative treatments were not tried for Jason? After years of prescription treatment he was not rehabilitated. Does the VA only believe in treating addiction by replacing one addictive medication with several others? I personally do not consider this success.

They did not just take away a person – they took away a hero, a friend, a husband, a father, a brother, and a son.

Everywhere we go and everything we do – there are constant reminders of Jason's life and it is so unfair to him and every single veteran out there to think that this is the type of treatment that is acceptable.

Veterans whom are willing to sacrifice their life for you (everyone in this room and country) – they deserve so much more than second class healthcare. They should be proud to walk into a VA medical center to receive care; it should be world class treatment – not a last resort for those with no alternate health insurance. This should be the last place cuts are ever made on spending.

I believe our family and every single veteran deserves answers and there should be significant strides made to rebuild the trust of all veterans – that they can trust that they will receive the highest quality healthcare from the VA – regardless of the cost. I also feel we all deserve to know how to push for change effectively. I say this with no sarcasm intended, but currently it seems the only way to get anyone to do the right thing is to involve the media. I ask myself today – if they had not reported on this story, would anything ever change at the Tomah VA? I would like to understand how processes can be put into place to ensure there is accountability without such extreme measures.