



Combat on Many Fronts: Latino Veterans and Families Written Video Transcript

[00:00.20.00] Hello, I'm Dr. Richard Carmona, the United States Surgeon General. It's an honor to welcome you to this program on Hispanic-American veterans and post-traumatic stress disorder. Like you, my military experiences continue to influence my life in [00:00.40.00] many positive ways. The military taught me accountability, responsibility, and respect. But I've also seen how the lives of our men and women in uniform can be profoundly affected by traumatic events. Trauma, and in its wake, PTSD can occur to anyone regardless of religion, race or ethnicity. It does not discriminate. [00:01.00.00] I served in Vietnam in a Special Forces unit. I'm also an ex-cop and I've worked as a paramedic and a trauma surgeon. I'm telling you all this because for generations people like me have been told that we have to act tough. Today we're saying that it's okay to talk to someone about what you're thinking or how you're feeling or if you're hurting. We're attacking [00:01.20.00] the stigma that tough men and women can't seek help. They can and they should. You and your family may be suffering your own war at home. Living with PTSD yourself or living with someone with post-traumatic stress disorder can be very difficult. Some veterans actually experience their emotional pain as physical pain. For others, [00:01.40.00] their emotional pain contributes to other medical problems. Many use drugs or alcohol in a futile attempt to manage their symptoms. Some receive care by PTSD treatment specialists. But many veterans continue to suffer unnecessarily in silence, avoiding treatment, afraid to trust the system or afraid that asking for help [00:02.00.00] will bring dishonor to their families or themselves. This is especially true in the Hispanic community. The reality is that every veteran can get the help that he or she needs. VA treatment providers want to help you heal the ravages of PTSD. To show that life can improve we asked Hispanic-American veterans and their families to share their stories [00:02.20.00] for this video. They were incredibly generous and open as is the tradition and the legacy of this great culture. This is just the start in helping you and your family to understand post-traumatic stress disorder. We hope it will strengthen you on the healing journey. I'll be with you in spirit every step of the way. Trust that you can heal and get back to living life [00:02.40.00] to the fullest.

I would wake up in the middle of the night. Sometimes I was crying because I saw a lot of my friends get killed [00:03.00.00] or wounded.

It got better, but I was still crying, really depressed. I mean just wanted to work all the time because I didn't want to spend the time by myself.

I couldn't move, I couldn't breathe. I couldn't—I was just stuck, like I [00:03.20.00] was frozen. I thought I was going to die. It's the worst experience that I had ever had in my life.



I really didn't know about PTSD. You know, I always knew something was wrong because you know just never felt like I fit in. [00:03.40.00]

[Spanish] [00:04.00.00] I'm (Reese Valdez), playwright, director, activist. And I want to thank all the [Spanish] for our freedoms. Gracias. Tragically many [Spanish] brave veterans continue to fight a war even after they return from military service. I'm referring to war that they feel within [00:04.20.00] themselves. A [Spanish] against a group of symptoms. You may be [Spanish], suffering, because of a traumatic event you experienced in the military. [Spanish], for example, you may have symptoms such as nightmares, uncontrolled rage, feel emotionally numb [00:04.40.00] or be totally withdrawn from other people and things you used to like to do. However, today, we know these symptoms are from post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. You may know me from some of the plays and movies I've directed, like La Bamba and Zoot Suit based [00:05.00.00] on the Zoot Suit riots in Los Angeles around World War II. These photos are part of the historical displays at [Spanish] Playhouse. This theater I founded was used in the 1960s to bring awareness to the plight of the California [Spanish]. As you may recall, the migrant workers suffered too until [Spanish] or people like Cesar Chavez, [00:05.20.00] myself and others gave them [Spanish], one voice. Today I'm here to voice there's [Spanish], or hope, for your war inside. And there's help for your symptoms of PTSD. Throughout history Latinos have contributed greatly to America's freedom [00:05.40.00] without much recognition. The Hispanic influence has been major since the founding of the missions in California and the Southwest in the 1700s. In the Revolutionary War, Spain helped the early patriots defeat the British. During the American Civil War, Latinos fought on both sides. In fact, [00:06.00.00] the Navy's first four star admiral from the Civil War, David Farragut, had Spanish roots. His father was from Spain. Hispanic-Americans have fought in all wars, many times fighting for freedoms that many of them did not experience here at home. In the military Latinos were denied [00:06.20.00] promotions they deserved and sometimes they were verbally harassed or subjected to violence just because they were Hispanic. In the past they were often assigned the worst jobs or the most dangerous combat assignments. And in the Vietnam War, Latino veterans suffered more casualties than any other group.

They've always [00:06.40.00] separated the discrimination that they may have faced or the stereotypes from the job that they had to do. And they're proud of their role as soldiers, and they're proud of what they've contributed to this country.

For most of us, Latinos, Hispanos, we have [Spanish] we're very proud of our service to country. And I think [00:07.00.00] that that focus, focusing in on the positive contributions to country and helping them with their issues is part of the treatment and part of the milieu that the VA should be providing to all veterans.

Today, the Congressional Medal of Honor has been awarded to over 3,400 Americans. Forty two of these [00:07.20.00] are Hispanic-Americans. It's time for American history to recognize Latino sacrifice in our nation's freedom. Many veterans of all backgrounds



develop post-traumatic stress disorder, also called PTSD, as a result of their traumatic military [00:07.40.00] experiences. It's the third most common problem in all our nation's veterans who access VA services. So, being diagnosed is nothing to be ashamed of and it is not a sign of weakness. It doesn't mean you're going crazy, or [Spanish]. Yet often out of fear, or just not enough information, many Latino veterans [00:08.00.00] avoid treatment through Veteran's Affairs, afraid to trust the system.

Do not let yourself fall back into the stereotypes. Do not victimize yourself. You've earned this right. It is not a privilege, it is a right. You've already paid your dues, like an insurance, to get services [00:08.20.00] from the VA. And the VA is willing and it's ready to provide the kind of help that you need.

We brought together Latino veterans who have reached out for treatment. Some endured years of hardship before getting help. [00:08.40.00] Often veterans will numb their pains of war with alcohol, prescription drugs or street drugs. It's a way to control the symptoms that often leads to more trouble. Leandro, a Gulf War and Desert Storm vet, knows this only too well. As a Marine, [00:09.00.00] his unit was the last one to come back. When he came home there was no welcoming parade, nothing to reconnect him with his community of East Los Angeles. After a while he felt lonely and felt that something inside him just didn't feel right. Back then he didn't know about PTSD.

I couldn't [00:09.20.00] really put my finger on it. I couldn't put my finger on what I was angry at. I'm really not angry at my ex-wife. I wasn't really angry at my son. I wasn't really angry at whoever I was around. You know, but it was just this anger kept building up.

Instead of seeking help he drank more because that's how he and his buddies handled stress in the [00:09.40.00] Marines. Last December, after a huge drinking binge, Leandro called a sergeant for help. That sergeant told him to come to the East LA vet center, where he joined a group.

And my heart starts to beat, and then I start to get sweaty. And that's when I start to respond to little things and start to get upset. [00:10.00.00]

They saved my life. Because they got me in touch with me again. And they got me back on the road of stopping drinking. I don't drink, I don't use. I talk about things, I go to counseling.

Leandro is pleased that he found his way to the VA. His treatment for PTSD [00:10.20.00] has allowed him to renew relationships with his father.

And coming close to my family meant a lot to me because I got back into the family business.



In Mexico they have what are called [Spanish], which are lively market places. Leandro and his dad are now planning [00:10.40.00] to open a new 21st century [Spanish] near East LA to help other minorities start new businesses.

Don't wait as long as I did. I waited several years. That cost, by waiting and not understanding what I was going through, not understanding the anger, the depression, the drinking, [00:11.00.00] the drugs, you know, trying to hide that pain. You know, don't wait. I got a new mission. You know, I'm back to that guy that sees tomorrow, you know, that plans for tomorrow. You know I take it still day at a time. It's still a fight. [00:11.20.00] It's still every day you get up, you know, you're happy you got up. I say prayers twice a day now. [laughs]

If left untreated, PTSD can harm your mind and your body. [Spanish] often try many different approaches to cope with their symptoms. [Spanish] have turned to traditional healing practices, such as religion, [00:11.40.00] pastoral counseling and family support. [Spanish] or some [Spanish] reach out to the primary care doctor to get help for physical problems, such as pain, high blood pressure, panic attacks, depression or sleep problems. [Spanish] other [Spanish] [00:12.00.00] seek help from a therapist for emotional problems. And a few turn to alternative healing practices such as [Spanish], folk healers and herbs, [Spanish] For many [Spanish] it's very important to connect our own [Spanish] with the symptoms called PTSD. [Spanish], Latino culture has a term called [Spanish], [00:12.20.00] attack of the nerves, or [Spanish] where you experience such fear or loss that your soul runs and hides. [Spanish], these symptoms, are very much like common responses to trauma. PTSD requires a history of exposure to or witnessing a traumatic event. [00:12.40.00] For example, in your combat experience you may have experienced or witnessed something that's life threatening or you may have experienced serious physical injury to yourself or others and your response at the time was one of intense fear, horror or helplessness.

Secondary to the traumatic events then develop serious symptoms [00:13.00.00] now which include, basically, symptoms of re-experiencing or reliving the trauma, you know. And that includes like nightmares or during the day they may have memories that come back to them, specific memories of the traumatic event. [00:13.20.00]

A third group has to do with avoiding reminders of the trauma. For instance, avoiding conversation, thought, feelings that have to do with the trauma, or avoiding situations or places that may remind you of the traumatic event.

It's very hard for the family to understand some things, like for example [00:13.40.00] the veteran avoiding relating to them or avoiding showing love to their kids or [13:51] because they're trying not to remember things and not to have those feelings of closeness and at the same time [00:14.00.00] they're trying to avoid also losing control sometimes.



It's important to not blame yourself for experiencing these symptoms, that these are symptoms very common to most people who have a trauma or an experience like you've experienced.

A fourth group has to do with symptoms of increased arousal. For example, [00:14.20.00] problems falling asleep, staying asleep, problems concentrating or being easily startled.

The result of that is symptoms like irritability, these people startle very easily, they cannot concentrate well, sometimes they have a sense of [00:14.40.00] my life is going to come to an end soon.

And these symptoms need to occur for at least a month following the event.

Vietnam veteran Rafael offers a unique perspective. [00:15.00.00] As a combat vet he knows PTSD. He received treatment for his PTSD through the VA. Then he became a social worker and began helping other veterans, including those suffering from PTSD. Rafael's own trauma began in combat. [00:15.20.00]

And I dove into a foxhole and that's—and then it hit me like shellshock or something and I couldn't move, I couldn't breath, I couldn't—I was jus stuck. like I was frozen, I thought I was going to die. It's the worst experience that I ever had in my life. [00:15.40.00] After I got discharged from the hospital I was there for 30 days. I went back out to the field and I couldn't function. I was totally—I (wasn't present), I was anxious, I was having panic attacks. I was just a mess.

When he returned from the war [00:16.00.00] his father, a former World War II vet, convinced him to go to the VA medical center. That began his healing and career to become a social worker. (One thing) with PTSD, the symptoms can be managed but never cured. In his own life Rafael has faced [00:16.20.00] the hardships of PTSD and its effect on his family. Often, family members have to alter their entire way of living to adjust to the veteran's PTSD.

My first marriage I was married for 25 years. And then after that she just, she just said, "Enough is enough. I just can't take all this numbness, this [00:16.40.00] isolation that we don't understand." So, it was difficult for them, and it hurts.

Like our family's really close. And he's just distanced himself and does his own thing and likes to be alone and read books. And to me I think that's a problem. And I think that's a [00:17.00.00] sign of depression because he doesn't really like to talk about things unless you really force upon him or if he really trusts you to talk about it or even want to talk about it.

What about you, are you going to spend more time with him now in the summer that you're home or?



I'm going to try to.

But lately his daughters, Monica and (Selena) have noticed [00:17.20.00] a few changes in their dad and appreciate his hard work.

The changes that I've seen in my dad is that he's made more effort to build a stronger relationship with me. And so it's like basically that he's making more effort to go to my softball games and just do family functions and [00:17.40.00] go to dinner, just the little things that matter the most. He's putting more effort into it.

Rafael recently retired from his therapy practice. Even though he's retired he has not lost his counseling gifts. After many years, Rafael finally convinced his long-time war buddy, Bernie, to [00:18.00.00] go for treatment. Bernie credits his friend, Rafael, with saving his life.

He kept insisting that I come seek help. And for some reason I always had something against the VA hospital. They were slow or whatever, that was just my perception. [00:18.20.00] Now I know different. They're real good. [laughs] I have been treated by everybody great.

Two war buddies, two very different stories. But one common thread is their friendship, their struggles with PTSD and treatment through the VA. [00:18.40.00] You've seen how other veterans and families have changed their lives through PTSD treatment. So, what do you expect? Most VA medical centers and vet centers have PTSD treatment specialists who are familiar with problems caused by military trauma. [00:19.00.00]

For the families that are watching this I really encourage you to direct your son or daughter to the VA or to the vet center. It is a place where they can get some assistance, they can get some help. Because we really do care but we can't help them unless we have a chance to meet them. [00:19.20.00]

Vet centers offer individual therapy, group therapy, marital therapy, PTSD groups. We offer educational assistance, referral to other agencies within the community for specific needs. It's a place that a vet can come in and hang out, have coffee. [00:19.40.00] It's a home away from home so to speak. And vet centers are there to serve the veteran in whatever capacity is needed.

Whether you choose vet centers, VA medical centers, or VA outpatients clinic, your PTSD treatment is planned with you and may involve: an evaluation of symptoms [00:20.00.00] to determine the best course of treatment, medications, individual counseling and group therapy, counseling and education to assist in coping with the stress of chronic medical problems, evaluation and treatment for alcohol or drug problems, educational classes for veterans and for families about trauma, PTSD and recovery, [00:20.20.00] educational and support groups for dealing with anger, depression, anxiety



and stress, one to one therapy and supportive guidance and specialized PTSD treatment centers. Check with your counselor for locations.

Post-traumatic stress disorder does not go away. [00:20.40.00] We can learn how to manage our symptoms and the medications that we might have to take can help us. But over time we might need less care or sometimes more care. It's important that you continue to come until these issues are resolved for you.

As you've learned, PTSD treatment can take a variety of forms. [00:21.00.00] Treatment type can also vary depending upon the type of situation that you and your provider think is best for you. For example, sometimes veterans enter what's known as the residential treatment program for PTSD. That's where veterans live together at the hospital while they are in treatment. It's rather intense and requires [00:21.20.00] a lot from each vet but is often life changing. There are separate residential programs available for both male and female veterans.

At the time I was still kind of feeling hesitant because I didn't really want anybody saying, "He's going to a psych hospital and [00:21.40.00] he's crazy," or whatever, you know. But it was really funny because when I got there I felt real at ease at first because a lot of the Vietnam vets there started greeting me, you know, like "Welcome home." And I had never heard that in my life.

(I came) to the vet center for maybe [00:22.00.00] over a year before anybody could even convince me about going to a program like (Menlo Park). And it's because I had that fear that maybe once I got there I wasn't going to be leaving there, I may never come back again. We all learned that PTSD is a mental illness that is not curable, because of the traumas we had, but it's a manageable illness that [00:22.20.00] if we all pay attention, work on our tools. And for myself I know I have times that I go back to my old ways. But I'm able to realize what's going on.

Even though you're only there for a month or two—which seems like a long time, but it goes by real quickly—you come back feeling changed and different [00:22.40.00] and renewed and like you've got a lot of energy again that you didn't have before and got hope.

When I went there I was still very much in denial, I think, because I self-medicated for so many years between 1984 and 1996. Relationship problems, having problems with my children, and all those other things. [00:23.00.00] But then when I went to (Menlo Park) things started slowly to improve because there I think they specified more of the tools that I could use in life that the only thing I had to do was make myself conscious that I had to use them.

One of the instructors (set out there) says, "You have [00:23.20.00] less years in front of you than you do behind you." So, I want to make the quality of life that I do have left, you know, a good thing. And so far it's going pretty good.



This is something that you want to do [00:23.40.00] not only for yourself, primarily for yourself, but also for your family.

Many female and male veterans have PTSD but it goes undiagnosed. The main reasons for this [00:24.00.00] are the veteran's lack of knowledge about PTSD and services available. Many have not shared details of their trauma or it's been overlooked. Because the physical, emotional and psychological symptoms of PTSD are so distressing many veterans also develop depression. That's what happened to Patricia, a female Army veteran [00:24.20.00] and mother of two.

And it got better, but I was still crying, really depressed. I mean wanted to work all the time because I didn't want to spend time by myself.

Patricia went into the service right after high school, but just after she began her Army duty she began dating a male officer. [00:24.40.00] He invited her to his home then he and his friend sexually assaulted her.

We started arguing about I don't know what, and then they both came into the room and did what they did. And after that I mean I wanted to go to the police but I thought it was, [00:25.00.00] you know, who's going to believe me? I mean who am I? I'm a private, you know, and here they are NCOs.

It took her several months to come forward and report it to police on base. When she finally went to authorities, she says, no one wanted to press charges.

We went to the police. And the police told me that [00:25.20.00] it couldn't be rape because it wasn't done in an alley or a dumpster. So, they dropped my case. So, then I really felt, I mean, worthless because nobody was trying to help me.

Patricia eventually left the Army and went home. She says it was too hard being so close to the officer that raped her. But even though she left [00:25.40.00] and went back home the emotional pain continued. Her PTSD and depression went on for eight years until her primary care doctor finally took notice.

I came to the doctor for a checkup. And she had asked me if I was depressed. I told her, yes, [00:26.00.00] I had had problems with depression before but they had never done anything about it. So, they sent me here to mental health. And here at mental health I had an appointment with one of the doctors and she asked me all kind of questions. And I got evaluated and they told me I had PTSD, [00:26.20.00] which I mean I had to ask what PTSD was, because I didn't even know what it was to begin with.

I don't feel like I do enough, like take them outside or go to the park or things that they want to do, but I just can't do it.



Patricia was diagnosed with PTSD and depression related to her sexual assault. That was over two years ago and today Patricia is involved [00:26.40.00] in a women's trauma group at the VA.

The treatment that I've received here at the VA has helped me a lot. It makes me—I stop and think before I react. And I do try to, you know, when I get caught in traffic or something, I get mad, I'm just like okay, it's going to be all right, it's going to be all right. So, I've learned a lot. [00:27.00.00]

And those two are the legs.

That would be weird, it's like this.

As a single mother of Simone and (Kira) some days are still very difficult.

Trying to be a good mother is very hard. There's days [00:27.20.00] when I don't even want to get out of the bed but I know I have to for them. They know there's something wrong with me. And they seem to understand but there's times when they don't. And I don't know how to explain it to them.

Through her treatment, Patricia is learning that she doesn't have to be [00:27.40.00] perfect to still be a caring mother. She's also accepting herself more these days.

It's hard but it will get easier as you learn more about the PTSD and what you're dealing with. So, I suggest that you get help because I have and it's helped me a lot. Without this treatment I don't think I'd be here today. [00:28.00.00]

I think it's important to realize that the VA is not just for men anymore, that there are clinics that are available to help you with your PTSD, that there are clinicians that are sensitive to some of the cultural issues [00:28.20.00] that may impact your PTSD and that there is state of the art services available to you.

[Spanish], another thing to keep in mind in treatment as a Latino veteran, male or female, is to talk about your experiences of being Latino in the military. Talk about whether or not [00:28.40.00] you experienced prejudice because you were Latino. If you did, those experiences can make your trauma reactions worse. This can be as important as sharing your combat experiences. Your treatment provider can work with you to help you talk about things that may have been upsetting or distressing or even traumatic. [00:29.00.00] Group therapy is often a part of treatment for PTSD and may involve family members. In groups veterans get a chance to talk about their symptoms and discuss the effect PTSD has on them and their family members. This group session was devoted to explaining how PTSD affects the family and what you can expect in treatment. [00:29.20.00]

I went all those years wondering how come he was so moody or didn't want to go anywhere. Everybody would tell me, (You mean you got) married, and I go, "Yeah, but



he never wants to go anywhere." He was always like isolated at home or just didn't want to be around crowds or nothing.

I had trouble [00:29.40.00] in accepting responsibility. I was in denial, denial as to did I have problems. First of all, problems that I was drinking too much and problems with taking responsibility as a father and as a husband. My wife basically raised the kids by herself.

Well, he started therapy very early after he returned. And I didn't know him before, so, I didn't know what the old Roger was like. But finally when he quit drinking and he started—that was the big change. Then he started going [00:30.20.00] to the classes. When he was really trying and the classes he's been attending here lately have really, really helped him.

My wife, if I broke up or whatever she knew already, she understood me. But I would have a tendency for no reason at all just jumping on either her or [00:30.40.00] my children. But now I think I know why, and that's why I got the help. And I'm glad I did. Now I wish I would have gone a lot earlier, a lot sooner.

Yeah, well he was in his hell in Vietnam. And I figured when we got married—well, it was you know maybe a honeymoon here and there. But after that [00:31.00.00] I felt I was going through his hell, you know. The kids and explaining to them, "Oh, leave that alone, he doesn't like to talk about this." Or, "Let's just go, let's leave that alone, you know."

One of the reasons that I took so long to come get help was all the rumors that I had heard about the VA. [00:31.20.00] But it's far from it. I have been treated great by all the providers, the nurses, the staff. It's a complete turnaround from what I had heard, that's why I've taken so long.

Oh, I would tell the wives [00:31.40.00] bring them in, the sooner you bring them in the sooner you get help you enjoy your life more. And it just takes time and patience, but bring him in.

Your husband he had the tools, and so you know, don't be afraid and that things are going to change. They are going to change. But they'll change for the better. [00:32.00.00]

You're not going to be cured. You're going to take this to the grave. I've been told this, and I understand that now what they mean. But I've come to an understanding I know how I can work with it, how to live with it is what it is. We've been living with it the wrong way. Now when we learn how to deal with it.

You know, the mind's a very complex thing and it needs help. If the body [00:32.20.00] needs a doctor the mind definitely needs a doctor.



So, don't let stress become a chronic problem for you. Don't let your life disappear. Come now while you're still young, while you still have an opportunity and benefit from your peers from the other wars who have given so much, [00:32.40.00] like you, that we've learned much about and we now know what to do.

The veterans and family members featured in this video shared their thoughts and memories with you in the hope that you might benefit from their experience. Some of the main points that we heard were post-traumatic stress disorder has to do [00:33.00.00] with reliving trauma. It has nothing to do with your intelligence or your racial, ethnic or cultural background. Common symptoms of PTSD include nightmares, sleeplessness, irritability, avoidances, being easily startled, difficulties with concentrating and memories, and having unwanted [00:33.20.00] memories of traumatic events. Other common related symptoms include depression, anxiety, panic attacks, substance abuse, chronic pain and medical problems such as high blood pressure and diabetes. In your treatment you may see a counselor for individual sessions and get extra support to group sessions. [00:33.40.00] Medications may be prescribed to help your symptoms. Your family has an important role in helping you as a veteran heal the wounds of PTSD. [Spanish], veterans and families, we're glad you're viewing this program. [00:34.00.00] Hopefully you know more about PTSD and understand how the VA and vet centers are here to help you receive the care you deserve. As you've seen [Spanish], you and your families, can take steps towards healing. But it will take [Spanish], [00:34.20.00] time, hard work and patience. [Spanish], seize this opportunity, this [Spanish], and take the next step toward [Spanish] or freedom from the war within.

If they're having PTSD, if they can get help [00:34.40.00] get it as soon as possible. Because you let it ride and it gets worse.

Don't let the dinosaur of the VA scare you. Make contact with one person. That one person within the VA can help you and—but don't think in terms of the hospital, [00:35.00.00] don't think in terms of VA, think in terms of one individual.

Family support is very important. So, if the family can get educated about PTSD it would be really good.

That's why I tell the young guys, don't waste seven years, don't waste ten years, don't waste that time. [00:35.20.00]

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