

‘A Lifeline When I Felt Like I Was Drowning’

After an unsuccessful back surgery, Air Force veteran Fernando Smith Jr. reached out to the VFW when he needed help making ends meet

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Living in his mother’s home in 2001, Fernando Smith Jr. was ready to make a change.

“All my friends were growing up, while I was living a sheltered lifestyle,” he explained. “I wanted to learn to be an adult, too.”

Smith realized the military could help him achieve his goals. For four years, he was stationed at Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho.

While serving, he experienced depression, anxiety and anger issues, which he struggled to cope with at the time.

“It wasn’t until I was older that I was diagnosed,” Smith, now 39, explained. “I can label those things now because I’m aware. But back then, I had no idea I was suffering from any sort of mental health condition. I was in my early 20’s, and I felt invincible.”

Additionally, Smith sustained a back injury on deployment and suffers from chronic knee and back pain. Recently, he developed neck and shoulder pain as well.

Following an unsuccessful back surgery in October 2020, Smith was told about the VFW's Unmet Needs program.

“The procedure was meant to relieve my chronic pain, but it made things worse — so bad that I haven’t worked in over a year,” he said. “I heard about the VFW through my veterans service rep, who’s always been there for me.”

Smith was relieved by the easy application process and timely aid.

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“I got behind on bills because it’s hard keeping up with everything on just a monthly disability payment,” he explained. “Words can’t describe how grateful I am for the assistance. It was a lifeline when I felt like I was drowning.”

Reflecting on his experience with the VFW, Smith said, “I’m fortunate to have met people who genuinely care about veterans.”

And to those considering donating, he urged, “Do it. What are you waiting for?”

Smith encourages everyone — veterans and civilians alike — to let others know about VFW's Unmet Needs program and other available assistance.

“The VFW’s great work is helping thousands in need,” he said. “But I’ve talked to a lot of my veteran friends, and they know nothing about these programs. Let’s try to get more exposure and spread the word as much as possible.”

Learn more about the [VFW’s Unmet Needs program](#).