VFW Unmet Needs Grant ‘Is Not a Hand Out, It Is a Hand Up’

With the VFW's help, Marine veteran Michael Aaron was able to balance managing finances and stay afloat

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Michael R. Aaron of Lebanon, Ore., joined the United States Marine Corps during his senior year of high school after the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Aaron served as a Machine Gunner in the Marines for over five years.

During his years of service, Aaron faced many physical and mental health challenges. While stationed in Iraq, he broke his wrist and suffered a burst fracture in his spine.

The horrific experiences of war followed Aaron home from Iraq and Afghanistan in the form of a Traumatic Brain Injury, Tinnitus and Post Traumatic Stress (PTS). He jumped from job to job, searching for a greater purpose, but nothing seemed to help.

Aaron felt like he was drowning under the weight of the PTS, and with the devastating news of the suicides of several of his brothers he served with, he could no longer stay afloat.

His mental health continued to decline. The strain on his wife, Whitney, and his two children, Henry and Laura, was immense and finally prompted Aaron to seek help.

Aaron sought treatment at an out-of-state VA inpatient center, which left his wife to cover the loss of finances and care for their children by herself. “We were in danger of losing our home, and other bills had gone into collections because of our declining income.”

Through a recommendation from a fellow service member, Aaron applied for a VFW Unmet Needs grant. “This was the first time that I had reached out for any kind of financial help,” said Aaron.

When Aaron and his family were approved for the grant, the news felt like a breath of fresh

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air. They were able to gain balance managing finances and stay afloat.

“It is a humbling experience to go from having a purpose, and a goal in life, to asking for help because you can't do it on your own.”

“The VFW understands what combat veterans go through on a daily basis, and this sort of outreach is not a hand out, it is a hand up to gain our place in the civilian world we now know,” Aaron concluded.

Veteran Michael Aaron’s story is all too common for veterans across the United States. Tragically, countless stories do not end with reaching out for help like Aaron; rather an astounding 20 veterans commit suicide every day. The VFW is committed to changing the narrative and stigma surrounding mental health in America with the VFW Mental Wellness Campaign. Learn more about this initiative and how to get involved.

Learn more about the VFW’s Unmet Needs program.