

**Testimony to SUPPORT SB550**  
**Lynne Hixson Hunter**

Dear Chair Kelley and members of the committee:

I would like to start in my support of Senate Bill 550 by sharing a little family history as to why this support of this Grant Program is so important to me. My mother, Sheila Hixson, was a single mother raising four children on her own, two girls and two boys. As a result, we were an extremely close family and very protective of one another. Some say too close. Considering what happened to my brother, I do not think so. My mother joined the Maryland House of Delegates in 1977 and life went on; it was a great life. Each of us went on with our own careers, a realtor, an accountant, an IT specialist and a Marine. We were all quite different but remained close. In 2000 we lost my older brother to cancer which was devastating enough only to lose my younger brother to suicide in 2010. I do not know how my mother withstood the pain of losing two children. But she remained strong and we followed her shining example. If she could stay so strong so could we.

My younger brother came home in 2010 after several tours in overseas, this time in Iraq ("Once a Marine always a Marine"). He had only been home less than a week before he died by suicide. From the moment he came home I knew something was wrong. He called five times a day, and that was so unusual. He was a private person and kept personal things to himself, however I knew he was a "softie." Yet he sounded so vulnerable and saying things that were so erratic and made no sense. I ask myself every day to this day. What could I have done differently? I knew something was seriously wrong. Why didn't I say something that may have changed his mind? We were so close after all. The moment I heard the depression and darkness in his voice, why did not I fly home to Maryland immediately. I will never know.

The one thing I know is we owe our service members, veterans, and their families support. I ask myself if Todd had had the support from such a program would things have turned out differently? If I had had the access to program like this, could I have helped Todd through his struggle in any way? I do know my experience and Todd's experience are not unique, unfortunately. It is so important that these organizations can treat our service members, Veterans and their families. It is equally important to have these conversations and develop these programs publicly. We need to give them access to such support as well as the knowledge that this kind of support will be available, especially in their own communities.

There was and still is a stigma associated with mental illness and asking for help (especially in the military). By passing this bill and creating this grant program, we might be able to help/reach people who otherwise feel alone and think they have no other options. The burden should not be on the military alone. We owe our members, Veterans and their families so much for their loyalty, sacrifice and love of country. We must do this for them. My mother continued her support for all our Armed Forces for her entire 42 year career in the House of Delegates. She continues to this day.

I thank you for your time and attention and urge the committee to submit a favorable report on SB550 to change and save the lives of more veterans, their families, and the families of active duty service members in Maryland.