TRANSITION ASSISTANCE FOR MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL GUARD

FIELD HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON
VETERANS' AFFAIRS
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

FIRST SESSION

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TRANSITION ASSISTANCE FOR MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL GUARD

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2005

U.S. House of Representatives,
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity,
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 10:03 a.m., in 157th Air Refueling Wing's Maintenance Hangar, Pease Air National Guard Base, Hon. John Boozman [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Boozman, Michaud, and Bradley.

Mr. Boozman. The meeting will come to order.

Good morning. It really is a pleasure to be here today. Before we begin, I understand that Pease has an outstanding ceremony I don't ever get to do, I'm going to give the command to a military unit to post colors.

I want to thank the Color Guard very much for that, and then also I want to thank those of you that are here in attendance today.

This is a very special day for us on the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. In many ways, it is fitting that we hold our first field hearing on how we are assisting members of the Guard and Reserve to transition from active duty back to civilian life. It is also fitting that we come to New Hampshire, a state that has historically sent many of its sons and daughters to answer the Nation's call to duty not only in times of war, but also in times of disaster elsewhere in the Nation. I hope we will hear about both commitments from witnesses today.

Today, New Hampshire is not only known for its quadrennial place in the presidential campaign spotlight, but also that spotlight shines on the special efforts that state and federal agencies are making to provide TAP services and how New Hampshire is setting the standard for ensuring that returning service members transition as smoothly as possible to their life out of uniform.

As we set this meeting up, I asked the staff to find the area that did

the very best job of doing this, and so again, that's why we are here in New Hampshire, and you all can be very pleased that you've got a tremendous reputation nationwide for providing this service in a manner as well as anybody in the country is doing it.

I'm especially pleased that Congressman Jeb Bradley, a member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, has brought New Hampshire's TAP efforts to my attention, and I am very pleased that he has agreed to bring us here to his beautiful state and to a base that has a long history in the defense of America. Our thanks to him and his district staff for their help making this happen.

I also want to thank the 157th Air Refueling Wing for hosting us. I'm pleased that Congressman Mike Michaud from Maine is able to join us today. It shows that despite our occasional disagreements, that we, on the Veterans' Committee, are united in a mission, and that is helping veterans, and I think we are probably one of the most bipartisan committees on Capitol Hill, and again, all of us have chosen to be on the Veterans' Committee, not for partisan reasons, but because we are all very, very interested in helping veterans and the veterans' community.

We've got a full day here, as we will visit the V.A. Regional Office in Manchester, which I'm told that you all call “”Manch-Vegas,” for whatever reason, after we finish the hearing.

So again, I want to recognize Jeb Bradley for any remarks that he may have, and then Mike Michaud.

Jeb?

MR. BRADLEY. Thank you very much, Chairman Boozman. It is certainly a pleasure to welcome you here, as well as everybody that's going to participate in this panel this morning. I wish that you had the opportunity to come back in October when the foliage is so great, we were talking about the foliage in your state last night. We also have great foliage, the maple trees turn red.

Mr. Chairman, I also want to congratulate you and commend you on your steadfast support for veterans who are, not only -- and I thank you for, as well as the committee, selecting New Hampshire to hold the field hearing.

As you know, I wanted to sit on your Subcommittee, but it's certainly a pleasure to be here with you today. I look forward to continuing to work with you.

Let me also say what an honor it is to be here with members of the New Hampshire National Guard, the very brave men and women who have been in Iraq, and Afghanistan, and most recently on the Gulf Coast helping the President, another primary contribution.

In addition, we have here with us today some people who made the New Hampshire National Guard reunion and rekindling program so successful. As you probably can imagine, successful transition of a soldier home from active duty is not a simple measure. Chances

are even -- New Hampshire National Guard is not a solution for all things, but others at war, but -- National Guard indicates -- early support to soldiers, their family and the military.

When a soldier comes home from active duty, there are critically important administrative medical and family issues that have got to be addressed. Thankfully, the New Hampshire National Guard meets these needs with personal contact in individual --

Once processing is complete, the intention of the program is to get the men and women back to their families as quickly as possible. After some days off, the soldiers participate in a three-day process -- face-to-face transitional counseling is provided, and the VA performs medical and dental assessments. In addition service members -- combat -- on --

The New Hampshire National Guard takes the time to educate, not only soldiers, but the families and employers as well. Over 850 National Guard -- program, and I look forward to hearing a few of them today, and I'll submit --

Thank you.

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you.

We will now hear from Congressman Michaud, who is the Ranking Member on the Health Subcommittee, and is one of the most active members on the Veterans Affairs Committee.

MR. MICHAUD. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for arranging this hearing today on such an important and timely subject.

I also want to thank Representative Bradley for hosting us today, really appreciate that. Representative Bradley had mentioned if you want to come back in October you can see the foliage, well, actually, if you want to go in the northern part of my district in Maine you can actually start seeing the foliage right now, so you don't have to wait until October.

But, it is great to be here today. The brave men and women and their families who make up the National Guard and Reserve forces have earned a top quality transition and demobilization of process. These citizen soldiers sacrifice a great deal to serve our country, and they and their families deserve our best efforts in providing meaningful assistance as they return to civilian life and employment.

So, Mr. Chairman, I'm pleased that we are here today to learn more about New Hampshire's demobilization model, as I represent the neighboring State of Maine, which has a large number of National Guard and Reserve units activated in support of Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Additionally, not unlike my colleagues on the panel today, I represent a state where much of our Guard and Reserve forces are made up of citizens from rural areas. So, as you might expect, I'm very interested in any process that can improve transition and demobiliza-

tion services for these members.

So, to close, I want to welcome all the witnesses here today and to thank you. I am looking forward to your insight and observation, and once again, Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you and the Committee staff for coming here to New Hampshire today.

I yield back the balance of my time.

MR. BOOZMAN. Before we hear from the first panel, without objection all written statements will be made part of the official record, and I will ask the witnesses to summarize their written testimony during their allotted five minutes.

MR. BOOZMAN. Our first panel includes Major General John Young, Acting Director of the National Guard Bureau Joint Staff in Washington, D.C.; Colonel Deborah Carter, Human Resources Officer for the New Hampshire National Guard; and last, but certainly not least, Command Sergeant Major Michael Rice, the State Command Sergeant Major for the New Hampshire National Guard.

Will you lead us off, General?

STATEMENT OF MAJOR GENERAL RONALD YOUNG, ACTING DIRECTOR, NATIONAL GUARD BUREAU JOINT STAFF; ACCOMPANIED BY COLONEL DEBORAH CARTER, HUMAN RESOURCES OFFICER, NEW HAMPSHIRE NATIONAL GUARD; AND COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR MICHAEL RICE, STATE COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR, NEW HAMPSHIRE ARMY NATIONAL GUARD

STATEMENT OF MAJOR GENERAL RONALD YOUNG

GENERAL YOUNG. Chairman Boozman, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the Transition Assistance Program.

Today, the National Guard has over 75,000 soldiers and airmen mobilized around the world, over 225,000 since 9/11. That is why the Transition Assistance Program is such a vital component in our efforts to take care of service members and their families. The information received during these TAP briefings, and the opportunity to enroll in these vital programs, has long-lasting effects on the men and women of the National Guard, their families, and their communities.

I maintain that the effectiveness of the Transition Assistance Program will hold long-lasting implications on the long-term health of our entire organization. The Transition Assistance Program must be a comprehensive program, a continuum of care that begins before the service member deploys, continues while he or she is away, and follows through after their return.

TAP must provide for a seamless transition from active duty back

into the citizen/soldier environment and thereafter. That is why the National Guard supports the recommendations contained in the recent GAO Report, and why we support programs such as the New Hampshire Reunion and Reentry Program. The New Hampshire program is a shining example of how the Guard is a family, and how we truly work hard to care for our soldiers, airmen and their families. The New Hampshire model clearly demonstrates the need to have home station Transition Assistance Programs for the Guard and Reserve.

Many of the decisions made during the TAP process are family based, not individual choices. This necessitates that the service member consults with family members during the TAP process.

In addition to the pressing need for a delivery of TAP information at or near home station, there exists a need for a more effective follow through support, follow through support, in the period immediately following demobilization.

To be truly effective, the follow-on support requires close coordination by TAP representatives at the state and local levels. These are aspects of the New Hampshire program that have proven to be of great value.

Earlier this year, the National Guard Bureau and the Department of Veterans Affairs signed a partnership agreement, whereby each organization commits to an improved seamless process of taking care of our service members and their families. The National Guard committed to hiring a States Benefit Advisor for each state, and to place them at the Joint Force Headquarters. These 54 specialists, along with our over 500 family assistance centers and Air National Guard Wing Family Program Coordinators across the country, are there to assist our members to access the benefits that they have earned.

As I've stated earlier this year, I believe that TAP is a readiness issue. The way we take care of service members and their families today will have a direct impact on how well we recruit and retain them in the future.

Working with members of this Committee, I believe that the Guard, along with DoD, the Department of Labor, and the Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as state and local agencies, can dramatically enhance the effectiveness of the Transition Assistance Program.

Sir, I thank you for this opportunity to speak here today, and I look forward to your questions.

[The statement of General Young appears on p. 59]

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you.

Colonel Carter?

STATEMENT OF COLONEL DEBORAH L. CARTER

COLONEL CARTER. Chairman Boozman, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Colonel Debbie Carter. I'm the Human Resource Officer for the Guard, and I am honored to be here on behalf of the Adjutant General of the state, Major General Kenneth Clark, to discuss our Reunion & Reentry Program.

In December 2003, the New Hampshire National Guard deployed approximately 850 troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. At that point, if you came to one of our meetings you would have heard that reentry was, will it be a long ceremony or will it be a short ceremony? But, as the year went on and we started to see some difficulties with some soldiers and airmen coming back on R&R leave, they were the exception. One example, a young wife shared with us that her husband stayed in his bedroom for the two weeks, barely talked to her and their young child. Some time later, the Department of Health and Human Services came to meet with us and said that they had reviewed data after Desert Storm and they had seen increases in divorce, alcohol use, drug use, et cetera. They were there to lend a helping hand to be more preventative.

At that point, we realized that we needed to be more proactive in how we supported troops coming home from combat, and yet we were limited in our experience of combat in this organization, so we reached out to others that had multiple combat experience, like the 82nd Airborne, the Navy, the Marines. We didn't want to just brainstorm this, and we didn't want to start learning here, we wanted to learn from somebody else's learning, and that's what we did.

Using the learning, we developed a model that addressed challenges specific to the Reserve. A major obstacle is the fact that returning soldiers and airmen are geographically separated from battle buddies, from services, and from their command, a command that is normally there to assess the soldiers and seek out treatment if they need that.

Additionally, if a Reserve commander sees that a soldier is struggling, he or she has limited ability, almost no ability, to mandate any kind of treatment.

We began by training the full-time force and the families. We estimated that we trained 300 full-time members in the organization, and 50 percent of the families of soldiers returning home. We trained them in PTSD, suicide prevention, and other issues. Because of the limited access of commanders, we were convinced that these would be points of entry for soldiers that needed help.

Once the soldiers get to New Hampshire, they participate in a three-day program. Day one is an administrative review, and it also includes a safety briefing, where we actually bring state troopers in and they learn, or they get a better awareness, how to drive in New Hampshire again versus driving in Iraq. Day two is actually held at

the VA Center in Manchester, where they are enrolled in the VA and go through many processes, which I'll discuss in my results. Day two also includes a one-hour mandatory counseling session with the Vet Center, and day three is called the Chaplain's Day, which was based on the Navy and Marine Mandatory Warrior Transition Program, a program they developed after doing some research after Vietnam. This session is all about soldiers talking to soldiers. Soldiers talking to soldiers is something that we found that everybody that had multiple combat experience thought was a key element in healthy transition from combat.

Concerning the VA and the Vet Center, never in my career have I seen bureaucracies so flexible and accommodating. They provided thousands of hours of almost no-notice support. They didn't break any laws, but they definitely bent some local policies.

About 10 percent of the soldiers returning were unemployed. Before we called them, the Department of Labor and Department of Employment Security reached out to us. They were already supporting us with our mob and our demob briefings, and now they added one-on-one counseling on our reentry line during that three days.

The New Hampshire community outreach was limited to employees, I mean to employers. Internally, our ESGR program had an aggressive outreach statewide. Yet, with everything else we were doing, we didn't have the resources to do outreach beyond that. That's where Governor Lynch saw the gap, stepped in and established Operation Welcome Home. It was a cross departmental effort of state agencies. It included Department of Health and Human Services, Education, Corrections, Employment Security, Labor, Public Health and the Department of Safety. It was a statewide outreach to what they called, "natural helpers." Those in the community that people will naturally reach out for support, like primary care physicians, faith-based communities, school counselors, law enforcement, et cetera.

The overall result of the New Hampshire National Guard Reunion & Reentry Program has far exceeded our expectations. Here are some highlights. 100 percent who were enrolled in VA received dental assessment before their 90 days so they wouldn't lose that benefit, had safe medical screening so that they were comfortable disclosing, made VA claims during the process, set up appointments for future physicals, were provided emergency care on the spot if needed, and they learned one on one about their VA benefits, plus much more.

The mandatory counseling with the Vet Center, if this was the only result that we had we would still do this process. 5 percent of the folks who went through that counseling actually had acute mental health issues, and some needed to be placed on medications during that process. For our initial group that went through, that was 48 people.

All went through the one-hour counseling, and of that 48 percent

asked for follow-up support at that initial counseling. Units involved in the most frequent and severe combat had the highest rates of requests for follow-up care during that initial counseling, and Governor Lynch's Operation Welcome Home reached an estimated 10,000 "natural helpers."

I'm not saying that New Hampshire has found the magic pill, but we do believe in introducing services, breaking down barriers, and encouraging early support is important. The mandatory counseling through an organization like the Vet Center, which knows and understands veterans, is the most profound thing that we believe we are doing for reentry. It is about early support and not waiting 30 years like many Vietnam vets that have done so at great personal loss before reaching out.

New Hampshire's program is all about partnerships. Just the three-day process for the initial 850 that came through took 300 people. Two-thirds of them were outside the New Hampshire National Guard. We definitely have some strong partners.

The transitional support normally provided when leaving routine active duty is important to returning troops from combat, and yet it is important to remember, combat reentry requires other types of transitional support as well.

Chairman, I thank you for the opportunity to share our story.

[The statement of Colonel Carter appears on p. 64]

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you.

Sergeant Major Rice.

STATEMENT OF SERGEANT MAJOR MICHAEL F. RICE

SGT. MAJ. RICE. Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Command Sergeant Major Michael Rice, and I'm the State Command Sergeant Major for the New Hampshire Army National Guard, and it is, indeed, an honor for me to be here today to discuss with you the New Hampshire National Guard's ""Reunion & Reentry" from combat program. I will be addressing, primarily, the cultural aspects of the program and the third-day piece that Colonel Carter referenced.

My involvement and my interest in this program, and my knowing that it was a necessary program, dates back to much, much earlier in my career, as I grew up during the Vietnam Era, and I saw the way Vietnam veterans were treated when they came home. I've had the opportunity to work with many Vietnam Vets who later joined the Guard, and to see some of the reactions that they had, and how the war had affected them.

And so, when we sent over 800 soldiers off to combat in December/January, '03-'04, I knew at that time that we had to start looking at

how we would do a better job when they came back than had been done during the Vietnam Era. We had to work to give them as many tools as possible to assist them in getting back into civilian life.

Now, the two areas of greatest concern to me were Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, and the suicide issue, as these are not issues that the Reserve components normally deal with. We set out first to educate all of those that were involved, and this included the soldier, his or her family, and their employer.

The soldiers themselves started to receive briefs while they were still in theatre. They again received information at the mobilization stations, as they process off active duty. But, we were also very well aware that their main interest at the mobilization station was to punch whatever ticket necessary and to get home to their families, and that they probably did not pay full attention to what was going on.

During the out processing here in New Hampshire, each soldier that came through spent one day at the VA Hospital. We included many of the things that the Colonel just mentioned, but the biggest nugget in that whole process occurred when a soldier had an opportunity to meet one on one with a counselor for the Vet Center. These meetings served as a way for soldiers to get information on issues that they might face, along with a point of contact that they could reach out to if needed. It also provided them with an outlet to express some of their feelings at that time and to set up follow-on appointments.

I felt this piece to be so crucial that I personally briefed each group at their morning briefing about the importance of making sure that they took full advantage of that day's briefings. A piece of that was the medical, emphasized to them that no matter how small the incident may have been if it had not been documented this was their last opportunity to do that, and that this was not just for them, but it was also for their families.

On the mental health side, I informed the soldiers that they would be meeting with representatives from the Vet Center. I acknowledged to them the fact that many, if not most, probably felt as though they were fine, they didn't have any issues, and they didn't really need to do that. But again, I told them if nothing else they would have a chance to meet person to person, eyeball to eyeball, identify a Vet Center representative, get his or her phone number, how they could contact him, so that if at some point in time down the road, whether it be a week from then, a month, or a year, that they woke some morning and realized that they were, in fact, having some problems, they did, in fact, need to talk to somebody, that it might not be having to go to a perfect stranger, that they would have already had some contact with our Vet Center.

Another important piece to our soldiers was confidentiality. There

was a lot of concern out there because that's kind of our culture, or it has been our culture, that if they were to go for counseling they might get thrown out of the guard, or if their full-time employer found out about it they might lose their job. And, I assured them that this process was 100 percent confidential, that neither their leadership, nor the state leadership, would receive anything but statistical reports from the Vet Center. Those statistical reports you've already heard some on this morning. None of us know who those soldiers were or what the situations might be.

I did, during this time, also remind them, or gave them a caveat, that if during the process they indicated that they might hurt themselves or hurt somebody else that by law those counselors would have to report that, but that would be given to the authorities and still not to us.

I spoke with the soldiers about today's culture that has changed a little from years past, that the stigma once associated with a person who seeks counseling or put on some sort of anti-depressant is no longer the issue that it used to be. I mentioned to them that probably many of them sitting there had young children, who already in their young lives had been seen by a doctor for some sort of depressant type issue, may even be on some sort of medication. I further explained that even the military has eased their entrance requirements over the last few years. At one time, any history of counseling, mental health, depressants, would be an automatic disqualification when they try to get into the military, whereas today it's taken on a case-by-case basis, depending upon their current status, and how long that the person has dealt with a particular issue.

We were very fortunate during this time of this redeployment that few other states in the area were either welcoming soldiers home at the time, or had such a program, as we were able to get counselors from the Vet Centers throughout New England to assist us in allowing the opportunity for each of our 800 plus soldiers to be able to be seen by a counselor for up to one hour if that was necessary.

Since then, the small group of counselors that our Manchester Vet Center have definitely been tasked to the max, as well as those in White River Junction, Vermont, who have assisted many of our soldiers. One of the most difficult challenges we now face is in getting the counselors to the area of New Hampshire where there are none. If a soldier is on the fence trying to decide whether or not to ask for help, the proximity of a facility, or the availability of a counselor, could make the difference between him or her getting or not getting the help.

I truly believe that what we have done for our soldiers is the right thing to do, and the least that we should be doing for all military personnel returning from military combat situations. The sooner we get these tools and services to our soldiers the less time they, and their

families, and employers, might spend suffering. We must all do what we can to make sure that no soldier, no warrior, is left behind. This is both a caring issue, and it is also a serious readiness issue.

I would like to thank you all for your concern in this issue.

[The statment of Major Rice appears on p. 70]

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank all of you so much for your testimony. You know, there's just so many things that enter into a soldier that comes back that's unique to the Guard versus active duty. My Dad was in the military, and was a retired Master Sergeant after 20 years, and I just grew up expecting him to be gone, and yet, life went on, and then he came back, and yet he was still with his friends and things during the day, we still had our friends on the base. With the Guard, it's just a totally different deal, it's such a dislocation.

One of the things that's a real problem, certainly, is the financial aspect of it, and, if things aren't going well financially, whether you are in the military or not, certainly that's very hard on relationships, it's very, very hard on the family.

Is there any time to insert a module that deals with, preparing businesses as you go out, I mean, how do you take the steps to prepare your business, your private life to insulate against the financial stuff as best you can? Are we doing anything along that line?

COLONEL CARTER. We are not currently doing that. As we've been going through this process, though, what we've talked about is really the reentry, but it's been very clear to us that we need a full life cycle, and that there are some things on the front end that we need to address, and that would be one of those, the financial piece, maybe some marriage retreats at the beginning, instead of just at the end. So, I think that that would definitely be that case.

We haven't looked at the business piece on the other end, but I think we really need to look at that as well.

SGT. MAJ. RICE. I think a couple of things that we did do, though, to try to help a little bit, is we did have some financial consulting type work done at some of the family support meetings after the soldiers were deployed, to try and offer the family members some help.

And then, the other service, again, we talk about the various partnerships we had with the community, is that the Certified Public Accountants Organization within the state, their association, stepped forward and agreed to do tax returns for the family members at no charge for anyone that was deployed, and that helped some of our folks out in that arena.

GENERAL YOUNG. Mr. Chairman, my experience in Ohio, being Assistant Adjutant General there for about six years, is about the same. A lot of the financial type management discussions were conducted with the family support groups during the term of the deployment, where they would bring in some specialists.

On the outgoing phase, during the deployment phase, the ESGR Committee, and a couple of the organizations, SCORE, a Service Corps Retired Executives, works with our small business owners as they go outbound and offer assistance and expertise in that arena. There's also a National Association of Small Business Development Centers, that is part of SBA that works with some of our small business owners. But, I've read the stories about some of our small business owners that have been deployed, and that have lost their businesses, so there is still quite a bit of work to do in this arena.

MR. BOOZMAN. Very good.

You mentioned the soldier to soldier contact, how important that was, and the things that you are trying to do in that regard, and yet, the problems, being a rural state, not having the ability to provide the support in the different areas.

One of the things we found as we've gone out is the idea of the tele medicine type thing, where you've got a counselor that can counsel through tele medicine--being through video, and technology is so good these days, it is an inexpensive way to do those kind of things.

Another thing, kind of chat rooms set up, where these individuals can talk to each other on a regular basis, through the internet and things like that. I think that we found that a very high percentage of the individuals in this group are internet accessible.

Have we thought about any of those things or doing any of those things?

COLONEL CARTER. We are actually working the chat room piece. We have had some commanders that have had open armory nights, because soldiers will come into those and we expect to expand those.

We haven't thought about the tele conferencing piece, but we've just recently got some experience on the bridge capability that the Guard Bureau has, and it's a great opportunity to reach out to a lot of soldiers and have them be able to talk to each other once a week from their home.

SGT. MAJ. RICE. We did have a couple of the groups -- family groups during the deployment, that did have chat room types of things set up. Like anything like that, the advances in technology today were sometimes both a blessing and a curse, because it helps to fuel rumors and those types of things sometimes, and some of the chat groups sometimes got into some issues that, you know, needed to be kind of calmed down a little bit.

But, it worked, for the most part it worked very, very well. The families were very pleased with it, and it did give them that avenue to a website to be able to communicate better.

MR. BOOZMAN. Very good.

Thank you.

Congressman Michaud?

MR. MICHAUD. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

General Young, you had mentioned in your testimony that retention of Guard members following mobilization is a critical component for the overall strength and management, clearly making sure that they have services is going to be a key component to whether or not they are going to reenlist.

Have you heard any concern among the Guard members who are not reenlisting because they feel they are not getting the services they need, and, hence, they are not going to reenlist, or that they are having pressure from their business that the business no longer can really afford to let them go off to do the service for their country? I know in Maine, and elsewhere in the country, in the high 90 percentile of our businesses are small businesses, so, hence, there's a lot of pressure that will be put on the business as it relates to their employees.

Have you heard any complaints or problems with that?

GENERAL YOUNG. Congressman, that's a very good question. Obviously, there's lots of reasons why our soldiers and airmen do not reenlist. Some of them are the frequency of deployments. Clearly, there's -- even though we have a USERRA law, and guarantees of reemployment, but there is that subtle pressure on employees in many ways to not reenlist, and I'm sure it's there. I'm sure you could find lots of soldiers that probably did not extend their enlistments because they felt like that even though there are guarantees for employment, and they should get the promotion opportunities just like they would have got if they were there back with the company, but they felt like that they did not get them and it was going to, perhaps, lower their expectations of future promotions and those types of things.

And, there are family pressures, obviously, to not go and deploy again, or not -- getting to a point where we can have a predictability model, to where soldiers know that they are not going to have to return for at least an extended period of time, is vitally critically, and getting them and their families to understand that, that they will not have to.

I've talked to many soldiers that have deployed a couple of different times in a federal status, ones in the theatre, or ones here in the Continental United States, just to do missions for Operation Noble Eagle, and even though they've done two deployments since 9/11, and their possibility of being called up is quite remote here for the near future, they still think that in another year or so they are going to be called again. And, it's just hard to convince soldiers and families that, in fact, they are not going to have to go for an extended period any time soon.

MR. MICHAUD. Speaking of families, which are very important and we focus a lot on men and women who serve in the military, what are the Guard and Reserves doing? Do you encourage in the program here in New Hampshire, do you encourage the spouses to really par-

ticipate in every meeting that you have with the service men and women?

SGT. MAJ. RICE. Absolutely. And, we have our family support program, depending upon the unit deployed, was set up in a number of different ways, but we definitely encourage them to attend meetings. There were monthly meetings, and we had armories open for a period of time trying to keep armories open one night a week to see if we could get families to come in.

The goal was to get a phone call from either a lead volunteer or we've got some contractors, from the contractors to each family member at least once a month, check in on them, see how they are doing, you know, whether they were attending meetings or not we were trying to do that.

There were newsletters going out from each family support group. We tried to communicate with them as much as we could in all those venues, encouraging them to come into the meetings and get to be able to speak and talk to other family members that are going through the same thing they were and to get information that may be out there that would help them.

MR. MICHAUD. And, how has that encouragement been? Have you seen a large participation from spousal members?

SGT. MAJ. RICE. No where near what I would like to see, sir. I think if you get, you know, a third to a real good meeting once in a while, if you got 50 percent that showed up you were doing well.

GENERAL YOUNG. Sir, could I say something about that. One of the -- my experience has been that with any mobilization for the first three or four months the participation is much higher, and it kind of wanes off as you go through the mobilization, and then as you get closer to the end of the mobilization attendance will pick back up, wanting to know the real facts and when folks are coming home, when they are redeploying back to the demob station.

One of the strongest family support groups, and the strongest family support group meetings, are those when the commander in theatre, or the senior NCO in theatre can do a teleconference back at that meeting, you will have great participation from family members wanting to ask questions during the teleconference.

I've been to several of those, and just to be able to get the facts as they are from on the ground, from in theatre, from those people in a teleconference really adds great benefit to those meetings, and helps relay -- relieve a lot of the fears going on back home from the rumors and everything.

MR. MICHAUD. Great.

My last couple of questions are, and I've heard a lot about what you are doing here in New Hampshire, and I'm very appreciative of all the hard work, and reading some of the comments from Colonel Carter, as far as you are getting full-time people, and really getting

other people involved, healthcare providers, I think is great.

My question is, when you look at, for instance, I'll use the State of Maine for example, you can fit all of New England into the State of Maine. If you look at the clinics and the Togus Hospital that we have in Maine, we had the same number in New Hampshire. So, clearly, Maine is a rural state.

How do you make sure that the men and women in the Guard and Reserve, not only can get that quality assistance they need, but the access issue, which I think is extremely important -- it's good to have programs available -- but if you do not have access to it, it definitely is a concern.

What would you suggest, or how can we improve the availability of the services in a rural state such as Maine, to have a comparable program as you do down here in New Hampshire?

COLONEL CARTER. We had many soldiers that were not from New Hampshire when they came back on the reentry, and so to keep them there for the three days, some were actually out of state, we had them in hotels and their families stayed with them. So, we did have challenges there.

We are a small state, and so the VA Center that we have, or the VA Medical Hospital that we have, is pretty centrally located, and, you know, I think we really need to tweeze out what are those services that are critical that we need to have access to. And, I know, for example, in Maine you have five Vet Centers and they are pretty well distributed throughout.

We have less concern about our soldiers traveling two hours down to a medical facility to get them dental care than we do about them if they are, you know, going through some dark hours and need to get some counseling. So, we are more concerned with those, but I do think we need to tweeze those out and see where we need to provide those services, because, you know, a few issues could be taken care of if we need to, the right services, and the barriers, like what the Command Sergeant Major did, I think it has a lot to do with the response that we had from the soldiers, and actually seeking out support.

SGT. MAJ. RICE. The other thing I would add, sir, is the importance of getting, as I mentioned in my piece, more Vet Centers or satellite stations out there is extremely important. Yes, the soldiers will travel, but it comes back to, a little bit of it comes back to what we've also talked about with the issues with employers. If it was just them and they had to travel two hours to go for an hour counseling, they might do it, but in many cases if they've got to go that far it's going to mean taking additional time off from their jobs, where they are already possibly being given, you know, some grief because of the fact they've been gone for a year and a half. So, there's a number of reasons why if we can get more centers or satellite centers out there that we can better service our service members.

MR. MICHAUD. My last question, if I might, Mr. Chairman, in the testimony you talked about when the soldier comes home he has a very aggressive time frame, you know, three days they've got to go through, two days, three days, and they've got to go through this process, it's very intensive at the beginning.

After the initial month or two months have gone by, are the people who need the services able to get access, you know, the Vet Clinics in a timely manner so they can get in there and get what they need?

And, my second question is, as the Chairman had mentioned earlier, we are getting more into telemedicine, which is great, and in some cases it will be fantastic, but do you think telemedicine is going to be effective if someone has some mental illness or PTSD that they are going to be willing to do it looking at a TV screen? Is that really an effective way to treat our men and women?

COLONEL CARTER. I think it's probably unlikely that soldiers will reach out with the tele medicine for the counseling if they are really struggling, but I guess time will tell on that.

What we found with the Vet Center is that soldiers are surprised that they are not in white coats, and that they, you know, go to a home, and it's a very comfortable, friendly environment, and so it's more welcoming. And, they are accessing, but we are maxing them out as the Command Sergeant Major said.

It appears to me that the Vet Center and the VA are based on a passive funding model, and when you have the military start to proactively bring you the market, the VA and the Vet Centers are not going to be able to support those.

I know we've pretty much maxed out the dental clinics for the VA, and we are not even sure that our 800 folks will get what they are supposed to get done in the next two years, as much as they are trying to do that at the VA. But, we really need to look at those funding models.

MR. MICHAUD. Thank you.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

MR. BOOZMAN. Congressman Bradley.

MR. BRADLEY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I just have one question of Major General Young.

By all accounts, what the folks here in New Hampshire are doing is a model effort. How transferrable are some of the lessons learned here to other Guard and Reserve units around the country, and should that happen, and what can you take away from this, and what can we take away from that?

GENERAL YOUNG. Sir, this program is very transferrable around the whole country, and as a matter of fact, I was talking to Colonel Carter here earlier, I talk about their program at all my conferences, and I use it as the model for the country.

And, as I talk to the other personnel officers in each of the states, I

tell them that if you really want a model that works and does a great job you need to talk to Colonel Carter and the folks in New Hampshire.

There are some other programs out there, and each Adjutant General in each state is going to do their program just a little bit different, but this model of bringing back the soldiers to the state, and doing this TAP process at the home station with all the local agencies, the local employment agencies, the local Veteran service organizations, having all those folks involved in a process, and prepping it before they get home by working with the families while the soldiers are still in theatre, or at the demobilization station, so that when they get home the spouse says, we are going to those days of -- those three or four extra days, I think is of great benefit.

And, I know she has received a lot of phone calls from across the country, wanting to come and talk about their program, wanting her to come and talk at some of their different states. And, our states accept other great ideas, and I think this New Hampshire model is a great idea.

MR. BRADLEY. Thank you.

MR. BOOZMAN. I want to thank the panel so much for being here, especially General Young for traveling, I think this really shows the commitment of the Guard to this very, very important problem, and that we are not doing enough, but we are doing more than we ever have before, and looking for ways to do even more, and that's why the Committee is here. I know that's why General Young is here. It's not as if the Guard doesn't have a lot going on at this time with Katrina and Iraq and everything else, so again, I think it really does say a lot that somebody in your position is here to contribute and then also learn more of what's going on.

Again, thank you all so much. As the General said, you all truly have a national reputation for trying to get this thing as right as it can be. So, we do appreciate you all.

Thank you very much.

GENERAL YOUNG. Mr. Chairman, just one thing before I leave, the Chief of the National Guard Bureau, Lieutenant General Blum, sincerely would have liked to have been here today, but as you know with the Katrina response and everything that's going on, he just could not be here.

MR. BOOZMAN. Well, tell him we'd rather have you anyway.

GENERAL YOUNG. He sincerely thanks you for holding this meeting, and we will look forward to working with the Committee to improve this process.

MR. BOOZMAN. Well, thank you, sir. We appreciate it.

MR. BOOZMAN. Our second panel is composed of members of the Guard who are on the front lines when the Guard is activated, and we really appreciate you being with us today.

We have Captain Erik Fessenden, Commander of the 1st Battalion, 102nd Field Artillery, New Hampshire National Guard; Captain Mary Hennessy, Commander of the 744th Transportation Company, New Hampshire National Guard; and Staff Sergeant Mark Bright, of the 12th Civil Support Team, New Hampshire National Guard.

Captain Fessenden, would you lead off for us?

STATEMENT OF CAPTAIN ERIK FESSENDEN, BATTALION COMMANDER, OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM, NEW HAMPSHIRE NATIONAL GUARD; ACCOMPANIED BY CAPTAIN MARY HENNESSY, COMPANY COMMANDER, OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM, NEW HAMPSHIRE NATIONAL GUARD; STAFF SERGEANT MARK BRIGHT, CIVIL SUPPORT TEAM, NEW HAMPSHIRE NATIONAL GUARD; AND STAFF SERGEANT ROBERT SHEA, COMPANY TRAINING NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICER, NEW HAMPSHIRE NATIONAL GUARD

STATEMENT OF CAPTAIN ERIK FESSENDEN

CAPT. FESSENDEN. Yes, sir, good morning.

Thank you, gentlemen, for the opportunity to talk to you about the New Hampshire's Reunion Program. What I'd like to do is just give you a quick summary, I think, of my written testimony that I provided. Two main points, really, that I would like to discuss.

The first point is that, and it was in my testimony, I think whenever you introduce a program like this there is initial skepticism, especially among the soldiers that are over there on the ground. I know when I first heard about this program I was very skeptical, for a number of reasons, but I believed that it was very repetitive, that we were, basically, going through some of the same type of programs that we were doing in both Iraq and Kuwait, and then through the mobilization site. And, I think that it was an extra few days away from our families and would hurt both morale of the soldiers and hurt our retention efforts back here in the States.

I luckily was completely wrong about that, and what I found out when I got here was that this was a program that was completely needed, for a number of reasons. One was that the briefings and demobilization process that we received from Iraq and from the demob site probably wasn't as -- it wasn't sufficient, it wasn't what I thought my soldiers needed to prepare them to reenter civilian life. People trying to do the right thing, but it's a big process, especially at the demob site, a lot of soldiers going through there. So, I felt like there were issues that weren't addressed until we arrived back in New Hampshire, and I was completely surprised also with the number of emotional issues that soldiers brought back.

There were some people who I thought right from the beginning would need this sort of counseling when they returned, and then there were other people who I never would have guessed it as a Commander, and I commend them for getting that.

If they had asked me as a Commander, identify the people who you think need issues, it's an inefficient way of doing it, and actually, that's the first step back in Iraq, they asked me as the Commander, you know, please give us a list of the soldiers that you think need counseling. As a Commander, nobody ever tells the Commander that they need counseling. So, you ask how are you doing and everybody tells you I'm doing fine, I don't have an issue, and soldiers generally see that as a weakness, especially when they are still in that environment, in the combat environment.

What this program provided, especially for the emotional issues, was an opportunity to pull them out of that environment and to ask them one on one away from their peers what are truly your issues, and a lot of them starting sprouting up.

So, I think my first point then is that this is an extremely valuable program, that no matter what state your roll it out to there will be some initial skepticism, but the state that rolled this program out, if they stay committed to it, it will be successful.

The second issue, which is really -- it's very much related to that, is just as a Commander I think we owe it to these soldiers who have gone and given so much to their country, we owe them this to give them really, really, a small piece to try to address some of the issues that they have.

The combat or the deployment environment doesn't end when you get on the plane in Kuwait, and that's what you find out. You come back and some of the same thoughts go through your mind, that brotherhood, that closeness, is still there.

As you spoke about with the previous panel, what's difficult is that all of a sudden now you get in your cars and go home, and you take your uniform off and everybody separates, and, you know, for the first few days all you are thinking about is, you know, what are my platoon sergeants doing right now, where are my platoon leaders, are they okay? And, at the same time, you are trying to get reintroduced, you know, to your families and your friends, and it becomes a very difficult process.

So, I think it's just extremely critical that we provide our soldiers these avenues, both for their sake, and for their employers, and their families, and their friends that have also given up so much. You know, my wife and my kids sent out a somewhat normal person to go off to combat, and so they should get a somewhat normal person back, I guess, and the same with the employers. They have sent -- they have given up the employees for a year and a half, and they should get someone back who is able to handle the environment they've been

put through.

So, I just think we owe it as a country, we put these soldiers in the difficult environment, and we need to do what we can to ensure that they remain productive members of society.

But, thank you for the opportunity, and I look forward to your questions.

[The statement of Captain Fessenden appears on p. 74]

MR. BOOZMAN. Captain Hennessy?

STATEMENT OF CAPTAIN MARY HENNESSY

CAPT. HENNESSY. Good afternoon, Chairman Boozman, and Members of the Committee, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, my name is Captain Mary Hennessy. I guess I'm a little bit from a different spectrum as Captain Fessenden, I'm the over-worrisome commander, and there couldn't be enough mental health issues or dealing with to give the soldiers, as far as I'm concerned.

I experienced the same thing, just to summarize my testimony a little bit, we were a transportation company, and, yes, we were a typical transportation company that you heard about or you continuously saw on the news, getting shot at, blown up, unfortunately, we also lost a soldier. So, we had a lot going on on a continued basis, as others that needed continuous care in country, just as well coming back.

Needless to say, the bottom line was, it was a pretty quick recognition, and I think Colonel Carter recognized that from getting a couple e-mails back here in the States from me, that we weren't the same, and we weren't going to be the same after being in these conditions for an extended period of time.

I, unfortunately, came back a little bit earlier, I was ten months in country, I got diagnosed with cancer and I had to return a little bit earlier, hardest thing in my life, so I can speak personally from needing counseling myself, you know, because of not only dealing with that, but also dealing with the way that I came back.

When I came back, my focus, after I realized that my second in charge had it well under control, along with the NCOs in my company, and I could stop playing couch commander, I put all my focus on, okay, how are we going to welcome them back home, and how are we going to deal with this.

And, right away, I'm rattling off a list back to the state, we need to do this, we need to that, we need to this, we need to that, and my contact is one of the main organizers back in the States, and I said, hey, here are my thoughts and what we need to do. And, she was like, you know, she told me, relax, relax, Captain Bergner, at the time, we've got it under control, and I was like, yeah, sure you do. Okay. How can you understand what we are going through or what

we need? You know, you kind of get that mentality after a while of being in country.

And, she sent me the three block schedule, and I was pleasantly pleased. I was actually overwhelmed with just pride of being a Guardsman at that time, being from the State of New Hampshire, and just overwhelmed with the recognition of how much they realized that our lives were different and that we were going to need help once we got back to the States.

The program was outstanding. There was a numerous amount of things I referred to a lot in my written testimony, but there was a lot of things that I didn't hit on, to include, you know, ESGR, which did an exceptional job with our employers, recognizing them. You know, you asked earlier if they were helping financially, they help financially, and they help show and showcase the employers that we did have back here who did extra benefits for employers, or made up price differences, or salary differences, they gave them special recognition so the rest of New Hampshire, you know, maybe the employers who weren't doing that kind of stood up to be recognized of, well, maybe we could do something better for our employers. So, that was a huge piece.

Reentry was just wonderful, having the HR there, you know, from a full-time perspective, letting me know about my own full-time employment, my soldiers' full-time employment, and because we had a lot of soldiers coming back that either didn't want to go back to where they came from, where they were working from, because they had changed so much, or lost, you know, their job, which ESGR also helps with that, or they had a feeling they were going to lose their job. Whether all the legal things are in place or not, we realize that still happens, and they can legally do it. They were there to inform people of full-time opportunities within the National Guard, and a lot of soldiers took a serious look at that, and we've brought on a lot of soldiers that, you know, came back because they were so encouraged by the New Hampshire National Guard.

Also the State Police, they made a huge difference for us, because we were truck drivers, and we definitely drove a little bit different in country than you are supposed to drive back here. Some of us are still doing it, but the kind State Police, you know, will remind us that that's not the way to do it, and they also informed my soldiers, which made a huge impact, on the difference in laws, and being from a Commander's perspective, looking at my soldiers, I knew alcohol was more than likely going to be a huge equation, or could be a huge equation, if some of the soldiers, especially the younger soldiers, I've experienced the older ones really reach out and accept this, but it's a little bit harder to reach the younger ones. So, it's so important that it's there, but they let them know, okay, the cause and effects, that they began to realize over in Iraq, in other words, if you don't do your

proper planning ahead of time you could get killed, and they kind of sent that message to our soldiers back here, that, hey, these are now the DWI laws, and they did a great job in New Hampshire, you know, enforcing those and making those stricter while we were gone, and letting them know what they were, and I know it woke up a few of my soldiers. You know, and I'm sure when they thought about that, if they'd had a few drinks. So, that made a huge difference for us.

Also, just to share with you the main thing that like it's our major head on, with the Vet Center and the VA, that day was wonderful. The way that we were accepted everywhere first off was just amazing, but the Vet Center really made a difference because 100 percent of my soldiers did have to go through the counseling, or at least talk to the counselor, and I think that if they had the choice to do that, raise their hands, you know, they wouldn't have wanted to necessarily be picked out of the crowd. Some of them would, though, I'm the type that everybody told me everything, a little bit too much sometimes, so I heard a lot of concerns once they came off the plane and when I was at the demob station with them, a lot of -- a lot of issues, a lot of family issues, a lot of employer issues, a lot of transitional issues, that they were really looking at me during the demob process like, ma'am, this isn't giving us anything, how does this apply to us? And, I kept telling them, relax, you know, once you get to the States you are going to get face-to-face with the people who can make a difference in the state and all the partnerships that really has joined the National Guard while we were gone, are going to help provide services to you, and they kind of did the same thing, okay, ma'am. You know, okay.

So, they were pleasantly pleased to see, once we got back, all the partnerships from the fellow state organizations and faces of people who could help us in the state, that really made a difference.

Me, personally, you know, definitely changed by the experience. Do I know the depth of how I'm changed by the experience yet? Not completely. Am I very relieved that we have such a program in place and we possibly will grow our Vet Centers, make more counselors available, so that they can help me understand those depths of how much I changed? Very thankful for that, and I think you'll find a lot of soldiers now don't quite realize it until six months, you know, even a year, and a lot of my soldiers that I've talked to that were first coming off, oh, we are fine, we are fine, now are coming to me and saying, hey, this is going on with my family, this is going on with my employer, this is going on with my friends, and I just can't quite figure it out, and they do reference those three days that we had. They may not remember much from those three days, because they were ready to get back to their family, but they do remember that they were cared for, and they do remember somewhere there are resources out there to help us, and now we are starting to see them reach out for it.

Just one last note, the difference between Vet Center and profes-

sional therapists from outside, I think it's important when we kind of get our arms around this, and it seems like, you know, especially by so many important people being here, that this subject is being looked at and addressed, that it not to go off necessarily to a civilian professional counselors, because I tried that route, I tried seeing professionals, you know, therapists from outside of, you know, somebody who knows you, and it's hard for them to even get a grasp of what you've been through. It's hard for them to understand you, let alone for them to help you understand you, and that's something that the Vet Center and the counselors that have actually been through, you know, war deployment, have been through a situation like this, can really, really hit home on, and I thank all of the Vet Center counselors, all the state partnerships, and organizations. I know you've truly made a difference, you know, with us coming back, not only me, but my soldiers.

So, thank you, and thank you for being here and allowing them this opportunity, and I look forward to your questions.

[The statement of Captain Hennessy appears on p. 78]

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you.

Sergeant Bright.

STATEMENT OF STAFF SERGEANT MARK BRIGHT

SGT. BRIGHT. Good morning, Chairman Boozman, Congressman Bradley, Congressman Michaud, distinguished guests. My name is Staff Sergeant Mark Bright. I served for Captain Fessenden for 14 months as an MP squad leader in Iraq.

I'm here today to speak of, I've been deployed several times in my career, and just to speak of the differences between this return compared to my other ones.

My first deployment was to Desert Shield/Desert Storm. Upon my return from Desert Shield/Desert Storm, after being in the country for nine months of combat conditions, we arrived on an aircraft, disembarked the aircraft, had a small ceremony, and we were sent home. That was the end of it.

Shortly after that, I watched too many of my peers that were expected just to integrate back into their families and the like, different day-to-day situations, they weren't -- it wasn't happening. They would jump at loud noises, they would hear fireworks and jump underneath tables. They were fighting with their families. Their families had dissolved while they were gone, there were new babies. They had just no idea had to cope with these things, and there was very little in place.

There was counseling if you would step up and you would go to it, but at that time it held a stigmatism that you could be kicked out of

the military if that was there.

My second appointment was not too long after that into the Sinai Desert. Upon the return of that one, it was a little different, there was some counseling, but it seemed to fall more towards the basic counseling that we're all given yearly, op sec briefing, SIERRA, things such as that, very little on reintroducing you to your family and to your normal life.

When we were coming home from Iraq this last deployment, we had some counseling, very basic stuff, start in country, kind of, what kind of problems are you having, basic medical screening such as that, and we told everything else we picked up at the mob station.

Most of my soldiers and the squad leader, I listened to them, have quims and quams about it, they just wanted to get back and get to their families. I, myself, was afraid it was going to be very repetitive, and was kind of concerned at what I was being -- having the -- that I've had before.

When we got to Dix, Ft. Dix, it was better than I expected it to be, but there were a lot of loopholes. You watched them bringing in civilian contractors that weren't quite sure of their jobs yet, taking over military operations, a lot of things were falling through the cracks. And, it's the small things in my career that I found that really come back to bite you in the long run.

I, myself, while at Ft. Dix, not knowing it, was removed from the Dear system. My families benefits for insurance were cut off. I'm an AGR, I'm a full-time soldier, my pay was shut off. These were things as I left this mob station I wasn't aware of.

When we arrived in New Hampshire, we heard about the three-day program, again, my soldiers were -- we just did this, we want to go home. The program was incredible. We had representatives there from the SGR, from the Veterans Administration, from economic sources to help them find jobs, places to live. There were pay stations to go through where they caught my problem, it was a very quick, easy problem, they caught it before there was anything. The counseling from the VA, it's about the most relaxing I could have ever seen in my life. You are talking to soldiers most of the time, you are talking to vets or people that have worked with veterans enough that they know -- you are not just talking to a face that can't understand, they do understand.

I have soldiers of my own that are still going to this counseling, that are still part of this today, and this has been seven months since we've returned home. I can't say enough about the program. They were there, they supported us, they picked up and they tightened up all these holes that were in the system. I think it's vital that the states implement this, even if the soldier is protesting they don't want to do it, to have this counseling go on, and have it continue. I mean, to this day the program is still in effect. They welcomed us, they took

care of our families while we were gone. They had our families go to counseling and offered them, and tell our families what we were going through, so our spouses could understand that, on this day we'll be talking to the chaplains, and these things will be discussed, and they had a good idea of what we were going through.

I'd like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to speak today, and I'm looking forward to answering any questions that you may have.

Thank you.

[The statement of Staff Sergeant Bright appears on p. 83]

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you very much.

It sounds like you all are very appreciative as it was going on, but you've been gone a long time. I went over to Iraq, we had much of our state activated, the 39th Brigade, they were gone, and in the same manner you all were, and I went over to Ft. Hood when they came back in, and had this little ceremony, it was very nice, but you had many of these folks that had not seen children that were born while they were away and things like that, anxious to return back to normal life. So, there's the pressure of getting back as quickly as possible, and yet the military pressure of, hey, you know, we need to go through these steps to ensure that you can get back like you want to.

I guess with all that said, you all have a wonderful program, and it's maybe the best in the country. From your perspective, though, are there areas that we need to spend, as you go through are there areas that you need to spend more time, other areas that, perhaps, you need to emphasize less? I guess I'd like your comments concerning things like that.

CAPT. FESSENDEN. Yes, sir.

From my opinion, personally, I think when you look at the entire demobilization process, which means both the demobilization site, we went through Ft. Dix, and here, my personal opinion is that many of the administrative tasks could have been done here. If they were done here, they were done better, they corrected many of the errors that had been created at the demob site. So, I would almost prefer that those days be taken out of the demob site. I spent five days at Ft. Dix, and it was just a very long, crowded, a lot of soldiers going through. People there tried to do the right thing, but there were too many people going through to give people the personal attention that they needed.

So, I would prefer that those administrative days are taken out and done here in the state with the people that know us, who in the end corrected many of the issues, and then I would turn around and with the days that we could save I would dedicate more time to that third day that we talked about, I think the Sergeant Major talked about

it, because what you see, and I know Colonel Carter and myself have spoken about this, it takes a couple hours in the morning to get -- to break that ice, soldiers come in initially and say, you know, what the heck is this, people talking about suicide prevention and this other stuff, all this touchy-feely stuff, you know, and it takes a while to break the ice.

So, I would almost like to see that time expanded, and if you could do two or three days of that, because you can fill that time, and the soldiers will talk. So, I would personally like to see that, and I think some of the redundant areas, such as the administrative, finance, that sort of thing, that we went through at Ft. Dix, could be done one time, and it would be done right at the state.

CAPT. HENNESSY. I would concur with definitely the third day. A lot of issues got brought up, a lot of heated issues. It got a lot of, you know, emotions flowing, and it was kind of like, okay, now we have to be done.

Not only that, but on the third day if we could extend that for two to three days, also having more of the Vet Center counselors on, you know, standby in that, you know, piece, what the soldiers call touchy-feely piece of the reentry program.

In addition to that, what I would like to see, and I know we are working on it, is also follow-up continuum from that, so at the six-month mark, at the year mark, we are doing the same thing maybe for two to three days, we are bringing them back into like a block, what ours was called, the Block C, that touchy-feely piece, because like I said, a lot of soldiers are just starting to now realize that.

Another thing, you talked about tele meds or something like that, through teleconference and video, but I would love to see a video that could be put in place for the families, and maybe also for the employers, maybe two separate ones, because I know I didn't make it a big issue of bringing my whole entire family with me to the Block C, and now I wish I did, because to show them something, to show them that, yes, I'm changed, but it's not exactly abnormal. You know, this is going to be part of the process, and to have somebody giving that to them, and I'd love to pop in a tape right now and sit my in-laws, especially, down and say, okay, this is part of what's going on. You know, God bless them, but it's hard for them to not see the same Mary that they saw when I left, and I think the soldiers have expressed a lot of the same thing, and those are the main two pieces.

SGT. BRIGHT. I'd have to concur with what they said. I think one of the big parts is keeping the families involved with it, so they actually understand what's going on, and let the families know, they've done a great job of letting us know that because we are acting in a certain way doesn't necessarily mean that it's against them, it's just going to take us some time to adjust, just like it's taken them time to adjust to us.

MR. BOOZMAN. Congressman Michaud.

MR. MICHAUD. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

First of all, I want to thank each of you for your service to this country, really appreciate your service, as well as your family, to know that they are there, they give you their love, and I know at times it's not easy. So, I want to thank each and every one of you, and also everyone who serves in the military.

Just a couple of questions. Captain Hennessy, you had mentioned that 100 percent -- I think you said 100 percent of your soldiers went to counseling at the Vet Center, a couple of questions relating to that.

Number one, how far of a distance did they have to travel to get to the Vet Center, but also, not only at the beginning, but near the end, it's been a year since they left Iraq or Afghanistan, how has the waiting time been for them to get the services they need?

CAPT. HENNESSY. I apologize if I miscommunicated. What I meant in the 100 percent is, in part of our process, like the Command Sergeant Major was covering, they had to sit down with a counselor.

MR. MICHAUD. Okay.

CAPT. HENNESSY. So, I apologize, 100 percent of them went through sitting down with a counselor, and that counselor, you know, basically asking them, you know, how are you doing, they took care of some immediate needs that needed it, and then also asked them for a follow-up call.

And, I can say, hearing from the soldiers who asked for that follow-up call, myself included, the Vet Centers have done a great job providing those follow-up calls and making sure the soldiers are contacted, and I hope they continue that because now is the part where they are starting to recognize, and I guarantee if they call today they are going to have somebody that's -- they are going to get more, yes, I'll be in, I'm ready now.

And, I'm sorry, what was the second part?

MR. MICHAUD. As far as the distance, it sounds to me from what I've heard from the first panel, and from each of you, is that when they go for counseling, what have you, they are pleased with what they receive.

My second question is, how far do they have to travel in order to get that counseling, and do you think an individual, particularly, if someone has PTSD, or needs some assistance and they have to travel three or four hours, do you think that they would do that?

CAPT. HENNESSY. Right. Some of them, you know, definitely have quite far to travel, because I have three different detachments, Claremont, Hillsboro and Summersworth, so we are kind of spread across the state, and living in the different areas where soldiers are.

So, some of them quite far, especially if they are in the north country, there's not a lot of accessibility except for possibly going up to

Vermont and using that center, and I know that center is used.

As far as the time, like one of the panel members before pointed out, it's hard, you know, on the employers, and I think a lot of them are just trying to get back into the groove, and it's hard to ask for time, you know, to say, especially if somebody is having a hard time accepting counseling or admitting they are accepting counseling, to go to their employers and ask to, hey, I've got a VA counseling appointment, can I have three, four hours off work. I think if they were closer, if there was more satellite services, we'd see a much higher rate of return.

MR. MICHAUD. Now, when you say -- I hate to pinpoint, but when you say quite far, how far is quite far? And, the reason why I ask that, because I know when I was in the Maine Legislature, legislators from Portland had to travel 30 miles, that was quite a distance for them, yet, for those of us in the northern territory we'd be driving three hours, it's really nothing.

CAPT. HENNESSY. Right.

MR. MICHAUD. So, I was wondering what --

CAPT. HENNESSY. I would say about two hours on average, two and a half hours, and that doesn't seem like far, but whenever you are dealing with families, you know how that goes, it takes twice as much. So, two hours feels like four or five.

But, yeah, I apologize for not making that clear.

MR. MICHAUD. No problem. Thank you.

CAPT. FESSENDEN. One comment, sir, about that, is just what you'll find is that the people who need the help, though, are not -- they are not going to drive, and they are not going to call and make an appointment. What's going to happen, in fact, Sergeant Major Rice, we just had this experience two months ago, when out of the blue he called me, very involved with soldier issues, and said one of your soldiers is basically -- basically had a break down, and I think it was the girlfriend's mother who called and said, I'm concerned, I'm concerned whether he's going to get violent, and she's the one who called the Sergeant Major, who then called us, and I actually had Sergeant Bright call this soldier and spoke with him, and he got off the phone and said, yeah, this guy needs help, he's breaking down on the phone.

And then, it's great to have this resource then that we can turn it over to the Vet Center and say, help us. We are not the experts, help us, and they say great, give it to us and we'll run with it.

So, my point is, is that these Vet Centers work, and like a lot of things, it probably comes down to money and dollars, but they work, we need more of them, they have to be close and in the communities with the soldiers, because the soldiers who have issues will not raise their hand, you have to reach out into the communities and pull them out of their bedrooms and out of their houses, it's a pull system, rather than a push.

MR. MICHAUD. Do you think some of your soldiers who need help, because of PTSD, mental health issues, that telemedicine will be sufficient, or do you think that they'll need that one-on-one, face-to-face?

CAPT. FESSENDEN. Well, right, for mental health issues, it needs to be one on one, and it needs to start with the people that know them. The Sergeant Major called me, and I grabbed his Squad Leader, Sergeant Bright, who knows him. He called him and said, and at first he gets the typical, ""I'm fine, there's not a problem, I'm doing great," and Sergeant Bright says, cut it out, and they start talking about shared situations, and the guy broke right down. That's how you do it.

And so, you need to find the people in the community who know these people, and what you'll get from these Vet Centers, and, you know, if I'm pumping up the Vet Centers that's good, because that's what needs to happen, is that these Vet Centers are not just these guys sitting in an office, these Vet Centers, Sergeant Bright and I went on a motorcycle ride up to Laconia during Bike Week, the Vet Center put that on, and we had a group of, what, about 30, 40 of us on motorcycles.

Iraqi veterans wore the BDU bottoms, with tee shirts, and rode up to Laconia Bike Week. These guys, they took a group during the Boston Marathon and backpacked it, and it was just a point of bringing veterans together, who can share experiences, because no matter how much I talk, you know, to my wife, she doesn't understand that, and their spouses don't understand that. Sergeant Bright knows what went on over there, and they don't.

So, these Vet Centers work, obviously, they need to be funded, but they work.

SGT. BRIGHT. Sir, if I might add one thing to it.

And, Sergeant Major Rice has done this, as military leaders it's our responsibility to when these soldiers do reach out for help, the states put it into place, but we have the resources, we have the tools.

And, you are asking about how do they get to these places, how do we get them there, it's our duty and responsibility as non-commissioned officers and officers to make sure that we get them the means to get there. There is not a soldier in the New Hampshire National Guard, if they needed a ride to get to counseling, that there wouldn't be somebody in the system somewhere to help them.

So, as long as we keep those doors open, and hold up our responsibilities, and we know that there's problems, we can get them there.

MR. MICHAUD. Thank you all very much for your statements.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. BOOZMAN. What do you all do in civilian life?

CAPT. FESSENDEN. We now work full time for the National Guard. We like it that much. Before I was a Program Manager with Thompson Financial in Boston, but I came back, like a lot of soldiers, and said I can't go back to that. So, I now work for the 12th CST, I'm an

Operations Officer for the Civil Support Team in New Hampshire.

MR. BOOZMAN. Okay.

CAPT. HENNESSY. I'm the AGR Program Manager for the Human Resource Office with the New Hampshire National Guard.

I can say the same thing as Captain Fessenden, but I was dealing with, I didn't think I was going to be able to come back to the States, and I thought I was going to have to find a civilian job, and I did some serious reflection on, you know, because you are military, and not understanding, it may be a little bit harder than if it was a civilian employment. And, I can say that once again the Reentry and Reunion totally, totally switched my mind set, and said, I not only want to come back, but I am so honored and privileged that I can remain a full-time employer, and a lot of my soldiers started asking, hey, how do I get, you know, in the system as full time, because they are so encouraged.

SGT. BRIGHT. Sir, I'm a soldier full time, have been.

MR. BOOZMAN. Congressman Bradley.

MR. BRADLEY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and I'd like to join with Congressmen Michaud and Boozman in thanking you, both for your service overseas, but, perhaps, just as importantly, your service home, and trying to help your colleagues and people under your command transition back into civilian life.

A couple of questions. How difficult is it to deal with some of the resistance that some people would have to this type of, you know, the mental health counseling, and the one-on-one session with a counselor, and what do you do to deal with that?

CAPT. FESSENDEN. Well, I can tell you personally, it's very difficult. Colonel Carter and I had a phone conversation one night, as she called me because there was a lot of resistance from one of my platoons. It's difficult, I've found, because a lot of times it's the leadership, it's the leadership that makes incorrect assumptions about their soldiers. We assume as the leaders that the experience that we're having is the same that all of our soldiers are having.

So, you know, I generally had a good transition back. I didn't have major issues when I came back, but we have to remember that some soldiers come from different places in life than we do. So, there are a lot of issues out there, and there is still a mentality in the military that I am less of a soldier if I need some sort of counseling.

And, not only that, but every soldier, no matter what your mission is over there, every soldier says, well, I didn't have it as bad as X. I didn't have it as bad as those guys. So, if there were soldiers dying, then who am I to go get counseling when I come back alive. So, there's somewhat of a guilt factor, but you have to overcome a lot of that.

So, it seems, I know, sitting here it seems, well, why wouldn't a soldier go get help, but there's a lot of feelings of letting down your fellow soldiers, and the fact that you are going to be less of a soldier,

plus the realistic, not realistic, but some of the more just, you know, grounded issues that Sergeant Major talked about, about what if my commander finds out about this, what's going to happen.

I think what needs to happen is, the issues that I talked about before, as a Sergeant Major, as a Colonel, as a Captain, we can't be the ones selling the program. I mean, we have to set it up, but it needs to be the squad leaders, like Sergeant Bright, they are the ones who need to push this thing. They are the ones that need to say, because Sergeant Bright, you know, slept in that bunk bed right next to that guy, he went out on missions with that guy, and much more than I did, he knows those guys. So, those guys, you know, they look up to their officers, and senior NCOs, but it's those E6s that they are working with that they say, gee, if that guys accepts it than I'm going to accept it.

So, you need to filter it down, I think, from the top leaders, and you need to sell those E6s, E5s, those junior leaders, on the program.

CAPT. HENNESSY. I think I would concur with that. I know that a lot of people are close minded to it. I think my community maybe accepts it maybe a little bit better than Captain Fessenden's, just the nature of the type of units that we have.

And, I know what's helped is, I shared openly, I'm a very open person, you can ask anyone, I share openly what I've gone through, experiences, that it's okay, that it's expected, and then also, like he said, you are getting, you know, the one or two soldiers that are at that rank level, or that live in the trucks with my soldiers on a daily basis, the ones who are using the program, because there are a lot using the program, to talk to the other ones.

And, like he said, soldier-to-soldier selling. I know Colonel Carter has got a great story about, I think it was an E5, or an E6, handing another soldier a Vet Center card, and that's really the best sell, because -- open communication too, I mean, us even talking about it, even getting publicity, to the combat strike teams in Iraq, that them finding the importance of mental health issues even when we are in theatre. That mantra changing throughout the military is really how we are going to break down the barriers the most.

SGT. BRIGHT. I think one of the biggest things to do is, let them know that they are not going to be in problem, that it's okay. And, working with them every day, you know, you can talk to them and you can bring it down to their level, to their understanding, somebody is not going to think less of them, they are not going to think they are any less of a soldier, any less of a person, if they go and get this help.

Sergeant Major, again, you know, it's still out there that you go talk to somebody, it's going to end up on your military record, you are done, you are not going to get a security clearance, you are not going to be considered for a promotion, it's not true, but they don't realize that, and they don't understand that.

So, just talked about it, breaking that barrier down to start with is a good way to get theses soldiers in and get them talking.

And, I think also maybe taking their first line leaders, the people that are with them, immediately, not that I personally would want to go through 30 hours of training like that, but let's help teach those people that this is a sign, this is a real sign that this person needs to get help. So, as I'm talking to Private Snuffy, I can pick up on some points that, okay, he really has an issue, you know, we need to get him in to see somebody, we need to get him -- I need to maybe push him in that direction a little bit.

MR. BRADLEY. Thank you.

One of the other things that your testimony this morning has brought to mind is, the way the program is structured primarily has the three-day situation where, you know, there's an awful lot crammed into three days when you first get back to the States.

What happens in a situation where people get through that, everything looks fine, but over the course of time problems develop that aren't caught in that first three days, and how do you monitor that, and, you know, try to then get these people back into the situation?

CAPT. FESSENDEN. Yes, I can actually talk to that. Sergeant Bright and I were just mentioning it. We were sitting out there listening.

The key for this, and what needs to be, I think, really enforced, what makes it difficult for a lot of National Guard units, is that the chain of command needs to stay together. The leadership needs to stay together when you get back. It doesn't stop the day you get back.

And, it seems like a commonsense thing on active duty, because everybody comes back together, but my company came from four different units. We pulled them together to form my company. Capt. Bergner was the same, she had the same issue.

So, a lot of times with the National Guard you don't have one unit that deployed, you pull from all over. I had people, I had a soldier from Pennsylvania who came up and joined the Guard the day before we were getting ready to go. He joined to deploy with us. We had people from Maine, Connecticut, so you've got soldiers from all over the place. The chain of command needs to stay together.

Unfortunately, what happens is, these soldiers come back and they get split all back, and one of the things we learned is that those units have to stay together so that they can maintain that leadership and maintain the care of their soldiers.

The other point is that this three-day program is just the beginning of the process. So, we get back and we meet during drill weekend, I think throughout the state it's been generally accepted that the first goal of the first couple drills is just to get the guys back. If you do nothing else but get everybody together and just talk about their experiences, get them back in uniform, get them talking to each other again, even if we don't go to the field and train for that weekend,

that's okay, but get the guys back into uniform so they can start sharing their experiences again.

So, that's important. This is an ongoing process -- it's a process that's still going on with a lot of soldiers, it hasn't ended at the end of those three days.

CAPT. HENNESSY. I think how you reach out or you get that is, like I talked about, maybe creating a model over a period of time, so, you know, at that six months, at that 12 months mark, and also identifying, like I had seven soldiers from Vermont, 32, you know, from different units within New Hampshire, but the seven from Vermont were probably the hardest, because they are off into Vermont and I don't know what Vermont's program is, but from the feedback I've gotten in talking to a couple of the soldiers there's not a whole lot there. So, just making sure these soldiers are tracked, and we do a six month, 12 month follow-up, because a lot of them won't admit it until the six months. I've had those coming in, and I'm sure we'll see more at the 12 month mark.

CAPT. FESSENDEN. Going back to what we've alluded to earlier. In my eyes, it comes back to leadership checks. While you are in the theatre of operations, you constantly, as a leader, check on your men. If they are on night shift, you are on day shift, you make it a point, you get up in the middle of the night and you go out and you check on them and see how they are doing at the post. You make sure they are fed, make sure they are warm, you talk to them, you take a few minutes out of that.

I don't necessarily think it needs to be set down and put on to a timetable where at six months you make a phone call to everybody. I think it's important. They are my friends, and I miss them just as much as I hope that they miss me sometimes, and, you know, you always want to talk about things yourself. Pick up the phone, you know, every once in a while, go through you're all alert roster, give them a call and ask them how they are doing. You know, and if somebody says I'm busy with the kids, I'm changing diapers, I've got to go right now, you can probably tell that they have reintegrated into their life pretty good. You know, if somebody gets on the phone and wants to talk about, you know, for two hours about the time when a rocket hit our camp, it gives you a pretty good indicator that there may be something there.

But, I think just following up, being a leader, even though you have moved out of your unit, or moved off to different places, you can still keep in contact with them. You know, you may come to a point that one of these guys says, don't call me anymore, drive on with it, but, you know, you still do your part.

MR. BRADLEY. One last question. There's been, with the Guard and the Reserves nationwide, especially in light of the extended call-ups that so many of the folks such as yourselves have had to endure, and

the families, and the sacrifice that's involved. A number of individuals have chosen not to reenlist in the Guard, so my question is, you know, on a small basis that you have to have looked at the transitional programs, do you feel, number one, that it is helping to aid retention, and also for those that have stayed in how is it helping to improve the readiness of the units, in having, you know, this program, especially to get, you know, back to the question that I asked General Young about using this program as a model for other states, and the success in readiness and retention, I think, is something that, you know, the military leaders would look at as incredibly important for the country.

CAPT. FESSENDEN. I think everybody in the military, certainly the leadership, recognizes that the number one key to keeping a soldier is to keep his family happy, keep his family involved, and give his family the knowledge and the predictability of when that soldier will be done, because in the end it's that spouse, really, that I found that makes the decision as to whether a soldier stays in.

I've had soldiers that have not wanted to -- that have wanted to get out, and their wife has said, I enjoy the checks, they may enjoy the time away on the weekend when he's gone, I don't know, but they say you are not getting out, and I've had just the opposite, soldiers that come and say, you know, what, I love it, I love it, but unfortunately it's too much on my wife, and she's told me that I have to get out.

So, I think what this three-day program does is, as much as it takes care of the soldiers, it takes care of those family members, and it pulls those family members in, and it shows them that there's a caring organization that cares about them, that they are not alone. Not only that, you have these young families, a lot of them are not tied into their community, so their best friend, and sometimes one of their only friends, is their husband who has now left for a year. So, now all of a sudden, through the family support group and then through programs like this, you are able to introduce them to a bigger network of people that care about their well-being.

So, in the end, when that soldier comes back, you would have sold that spouse more on the importance of the Guard. So, I think that's the biggest thing about retention that it does.

I've completely forgotten your second question, sir, so I apologize.

CAPT. HENNESSY. I think retention, definitely, readiness, definitely, the bottom line, like Captain Fessenden, you can sum it up in one word, and that's caring, and, you know, if you have an organization that cares about you, and shows that they care about you and your family, you are going to have better retention and you are going to have better readiness, because if you show a soldier you care, they will do absolutely anything for you. It's amazing.

So, yes, on both.

SERGEANT. BRIGHT. It's definitely a necessity. When you leave the

SRPs and the three-day program that you've gone through when you come back from deployment, everything is in order, or is very close to being that way, and it's going to help it, and the retention, again, you know, if you have a soldier that comes back, and this is kind of reiterating what they said, that has pay problems, financial problems, home problems, and nobody is there to help them, they are not going to want to continue their career. They are just going to decide, I've done my time, this wasn't for myself and my family, and they are going to move on.

Just one other quick point, sir, is that, and I think this gets forgotten a lot, is that a lot of these soldiers have deployed are typical soldiers that show up on Friday night or Saturday morning and they deploy, they drill their weekend, and then they go home, and they don't -- some of them don't care a whole lot about their career, career management. They get their drill pay and they go home.

But, then you take them out and have them committed for a year or year and a half to something, and all of a sudden now the Guard becomes more important to them. So, they come back from -- they'll ask you questions that they never cared about before, what do I have to do to get promoted, and you say, the last five years I've been telling you, you know, do this, and you haven't cared. They care now, all of a sudden now they know who the leaders are, you know. A lot of them would not have known who the leaders are in the state, they know their platoon sergeant, platoon leader, their company commander, and that's it, but now all of a sudden they know the state leadership, and they feel like, and they are right, is that they are owed something now, this is as much their organization as anybody else.

So, when a soldier comes back, if you don't make them feel part of the organization, they say, I've just deployed and given a whole lot, and this is how I'm treated. So, the soldiers become much more demanding, rightfully so, I think.

So, it's great as an organization to have soldiers that care, but then it makes our challenge even higher. Now we need to provide them, you know, these type of services.

MR. BRADLEY. Thank you very much, great job.

MR. BOOZMAN. I think, Captain, with a wife and three daughters I can relate to the families where the females have a great deal to do with the decision-making process.

I want to thank you all so much.

Do you have anything else, Michael?

MR. MICHAUD. No, thank you.

MR. BOOZMAN. Again, we thank you so much for your service, for your willingness to go and do what you've done.

And, then as was provided by the rest of the Congressmen, your willingness to come back and then actually take care of the individuals that you went with.

And again, we truly do appreciate you all, and we appreciate the good job that you are doing. That's why we are here, is to try and model what you've successfully done here throughout the rest of the country.

So, thank you again.

Our final panel doesn't wear uniforms, but they represent many of the agencies that make TAP work. We have with us today Tim Beebe, Northeast Regional Manager, Readjustment Counseling Service, Veterans Health Administration; Mr. Dave Houle, Regional Administrator, for the U.S. Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service; Ms. Mary Collins, from the New Hampshire Small Business Development Centers, and the Association of Small Business Development Centers; Mr. Jim Whitson, Eastern Director of the Veterans Benefits Administration; and he is accompanied by Ms. Maribeth Cully, Director of the Manchester Regional Office.

We want to welcome each of you, and let's start out with Mr. Beebe.

STATEMENT OF MR. TIM BEEBE, NORTHEAST REGIONAL MANAGER, READJUSTMENT COUNSELING SERVICE, VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION; ACCOMPANIED BY DAVE HOULE, REGIONAL ADMINISTRATOR FOR VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF LABOR; MARY COLLINS, STATE DIRECTOR, NEW HAMPSHIRE SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CENTERS, ASSOCIATION OF SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CENTERS; AND JIM WHITSON, EASTERN AREA DIRECTOR, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, ACCOMPANIED BY MARIBETH CULLY, MANCHESTER REGIONAL OFFICE DIRECTOR, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION

STATEMENT OF Mr. TIM BEEBE

MR. BEEBE. Good morning, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today and discuss the activities --

MR. BOOZMAN. Can you flip your -- I think your -- or turn it.

MR. BEEBE. -- on the VA Vet Centers program and the role it plays in providing outreach and care to veterans returning from Operating Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. I'll also briefly describe the role of the Vet Centers in the recent New Hampshire National Guard Reverse Soldier Readiness Program.

I'd like to also mention here with me today is Mr. Charles Flora, Associate Director of the Vet Center Program, and he's here from Washington.

The Vet Center Program observed its 25th year serving veterans

this year. The program was originally established by Congress in 1979 to meet the readjustment needs of veterans returning from the Vietnam War.

From the outset, Vet Centers were designed to be community-based, non-medical facilities, offering easy access to care for Vietnam veterans who were experiencing difficulty in resuming a normal life following their service in a combat zone.

Vet Centers then, as they are today, were intended to be entry points for healthcare services and counseling services for veterans.

We would also provide readjustment counseling and job counseling, benefits counseling, and referrals to community agencies, and other services as needed in particular localities.

Additionally, and by design, most Vet Center staff are veterans themselves and serve as counselors and role models to veterans in need. One of the "firsts" of the program in 1979 was the eligibility of family members for assistance at Vet Centers also, and that exists today. I think we were one of the first services within VA to offer eligibility for families of veterans.

Twenty-five years later, following the grassroots popularity of the program, eligibility for Vet Center readjustment counseling services has expanded to include all combat veterans. We've seen veterans from World War II, Korea and current wars and conflicts. I think our oldest veteran in care at the moment is 91 years old.

The Vet Center program also provides bereavement counseling services for family members of those soldiers killed while on active duty in service to their country. In addition, the Vet Centers provide counseling to veterans who experienced sexual trauma while on active duty.

The program has grown from its original small number to 207 Vet Centers nationwide, located in all 50 states, and in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and the District of Columbia.

The Northeast Region is comprised of eight states, which is all of New England, New York and northern New Jersey, for which this regional office has administrative authority.

Last year, the Under Secretary for Health approved an additional 50 positions for the Vet Center program to provide outreach and assistance, specifically, to returning OEF/OIF returnees. The Northeast Region received eight original positions from this nationwide allotment, and filled the positions with OEF/OIF veterans.

This fiscal year, the region received another seven positions, and we have filled, or are interviewing for, seven veterans for these newly-created positions as well.

As part of the program outreach campaign, Vet Center clinicians began providing education and outreach information for families of deployed Global War on Terrorism soldiers soon after the first National Guard and Reserve troops deployed almost two years ago. Part

of this outreach effort was to inform National Guard leaders of Vet Center services, to facilitate early contact and a smooth transition for returning veterans.

Late last year, New Hampshire Guard leadership met with the Manchester, New Hampshire Vet Center's team leader to discuss the potential Vet Center role in developing their RSRP program, for soon returning New Hampshire Guard men and women. In addition to VBA and VA participation, the National Guard in New Hampshire was seeking an organization that understood the military culture and could provide hour-long, individual counseling and assessment sessions for each returning soldier.

Following extensive consultation, which we heard about today, with their active duty counterparts, the National Guard in New Hampshire concluded that, in order to de-stigmatize the soldiers asking for help, individual counseling would be a core component of this initiative for all returnees. Successive planning meetings between New Hampshire Guard leadership and Vet Center Northeast Regional Office staff reinforced the need for a collaborative effort to meet New Hampshire National Guard goals.

The Vet Center's 25-year history of working with combat vets to overcome the stigma associated with seeking professional help, plus the Vet Center program's understanding of military culture and experience, helped contribute to the inclusion of Vet Centers in the Reentry Program.

During the implementation period of January 20th to March 7, 2005, 31 Vet Center clinicians from 16 surrounding Vet Centers assembled at the Manchester VA Medical Center, over 18 work days, to provide individual, hour-long assessment sessions to over 810 New Hampshire veterans returning from duty in Iraq. Using an intake protocol specifically designed for this purpose, Vet Center counselors, many of whom were themselves combat veterans, assessed all returning veterans for depression, acute war stress reaction, suicidal/homicidal ideation, and any other readjustment issues to include emerging family issues.

Since completion of this primary phase of the project, the Manchester Vet Center has seen an additional 14 Afghanistan veteran returnees, and we continue at the Manchester Vet Center on a weekly basis to see small groups of returning veterans from the Global War on Terrorism who aren't part of the main group that returned. So weekly, there are weekly assessment sessions going on there still.

So, as of this writing, our most current information as of about 30 days ago was, a total of 838 New Hampshire Guard vets have been seen by Vet Center staff in individual, confidential counseling sessions. A service plan was developed for each veteran returning. It was reviewed with the soldier, during the course of the counseling session, to ask what their needs might be and how we could best help

them in the future.

Of the total number of veterans seen, 402 (or about 48 percent) asked for follow-up care within 30 days of being home. Most said, "I'm okay now, I'm not sure how I'll be in a month or so, so give me a call. I would appreciate a phone call from the counselors to see how I'm doing then, but I'm anxious to be home," and we did that.

Currently, there appears to be about 145 to 150 National Guard vets currently being seen on an ongoing basis at area Vet Centers (or about 17 to 18 percent of the returnees are currently in treatment), and we use the number three or more visits to quantify someone as being in treatment, as a vet in treatment, because there was an initial mandated visit that might have asked for follow-up call, which we completed, and we thought that three visits or more meant someone came back on their own to see us. So, the veterans we are seeing currently, the 18 percent or so, 17 to 18 percent, were folks with three visits or more at a Vet Center, the area Vet Center.

I want to say this publicly, because the roots of this, the origins of this, actually, the idea, came from the veterans that we see, the Vietnam veterans who implored us, as the soldiers were being deployed first in Persian Gulf I a decade ago, but now on the Global War on Terrorism. We at the Vet Centers, because the majority of us are veterans, hear it from the soldiers on what's best for the soldiers returning, and they want to know in no uncertain terms in soldier language what we are doing (or what we plan to do) for those vets returning from overseas now, and because the majority of the veterans we see are Vietnam veterans, who had no homecoming whatsoever, as we know, our feet are being held to the fire, so to speak, by the very veterans we treat daily in the Vet Centers. So, we are held accountable in 360 degrees here, I would say, in many ways, and the individual veterans said to us long ago, "plan to do something that wasn't available for us."

And so, within the Vet Center program, we started to do that. We are working on this individual counseling notion, I think it's by extreme good fortune that we met Colonel Carter, with her request for the National Guard. We are on that trail. We were thinking about doing that work, and it was fortunate for all of us, we think, most importantly for the returning soldiers, that we are able to work cooperatively to do this together, and it's both an honor and a privilege, and I mean that sincerely from the Vet Center side, to do this.

Thank you for your time.

[The statement of Mr. Beebe appears on p. 86]

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you, sir.

Mr. Houle?

STATEMENT OF DAVID HOULE

MR. HOULE. Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Michaud, Congressman Bradley, the mission of the Veterans Employment and Training Service is to provide veterans and transitioning service members services to succeed in the 21st Century workforce.

One of the ways that we meet that mission is by providing employment workshops to the active duty as well as Guard and Reserve service members. This really is a collaborative effort, as you've heard already. DOL works closely with our partner agencies, the Department of Defense, Department of Veteran Affairs, State Workforce Agencies, the Vet Centers, et cetera, in providing TAP. Our goal is to provide employment workshops at every location requested by the Armed Forces.

DOL facilitated workshops, a comprehensive two and a half days, three days, participants learned about job search, career decision-making, current occupational and labor market information, resume cover preps, interviewing techniques, et cetera. Participants are also provided an evaluation of their employability relative to the job market, to maintain the high quality of service delivery. To ensure uniformity between these locations nationwide, all workshops use a common workbook and program with instructions and all facilitators are trained by the National Veteran Training Institute in Denver.

In Fiscal Year 2004, approximately 133,000 separating military personnel went through approximately 3,397 employment workshops, both nationally and globally. In Fiscal Year 2005, we expect that we are going to raise that number to approximately 140,000 and about 4,000 workshops.

Our state directors work directly with National Guard and Reserve component commanders, as you heard Colonel Carter mention earlier, to make special arrangements following demobilizations to present a modified TAP employment workshop to Guard and Reserve service members. We also contacted each of the state adjutant generals to offer outreach assistance to returning Guard and Reserve members during that demobilization process, and we will provide any unit with a workshop upon request.

We presently have pilot initiatives underway in places like Oregon, Michigan, Minnesota, and Massachusetts will be standing up their mini TAP initiative for approximately 150 Guard members on October 1st and 2nd.

VETS has supported the New Hampshire Joint Initiative called the Reunion and Reentry from Combat Program. The VETS role in this joint initiative was to collaborate with the New Hampshire National Guard, both Army and Air, the Department of Veteran Affairs, especially the Vet Centers, the Employers Support of the Guard and Reserve, as well as a key player for us, the New Hampshire Employment Security Agency, to develop a program to provide employment-related information to Guard and Reserve forces returning from de-

ployment.

Information stations from each of these partner agencies are co-located in one central area during the demobilization process, to make information and services available, or to determine follow-up activity. These would include such areas as reemployment rights under USERRA, and in some instances complaints or forms are actually filled out at the time, guidance is provided. There's also, as you heard, recognition of employer through the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve and also informal mediation guidance provided by ESGR.

Employment-related services for those seeking jobs or seeking training, including spouses, is provided by the New Hampshire Employment Security Agency, as is unemployment compensation information, and in some cases claims can actually be taken at that site.

During a mini TAP such as this for Guard and Reserves, all demobilizing service men and women and their spouses are given an assessment interview by State Veterans Employment staff, that's our DVOP and LVERs. For job seekers seeking training opportunities an on-site assessment interview is conducted and follow-up interviews scheduled as needed.

DVOP and LVER facilitators are there, as well as our State Director, John Gonya, New Hampshire Employment Security Policy, as stated recently by the Commissioner, is that an employment-assistance workshop will be made available at any time and any location state wide to suit the needs of our returning troops.

And, Mr. Chairman, if I may offer just an aside, I believe after listening to the testimony this morning the success of the New Hampshire model is a reflection, I think, not only of the commitment and cooperation of the agencies that you've heard here this morning, that's a key role, but I think most of all it's a credit to the men and women who serve in uniform and who have once again stepped forward to acknowledge issues, to come forward and ask for the assistance that they need.

Coming from a generation where that was a little more difficult at times, I am ever so proud of the men and women who have done that and are doing that now.

That concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman. I'll be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

[The statement of Mr. Houle appears on p. 88]

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you.

Ms. Collins?

STATEMENT OF MARY COLLINS

MS. COLLINS. Thank you.

My name is Mary Collins, and I am State Director for the New Hampshire Small Business Development Center, and also I'm representing the Association of Small Business Development Centers.

I'm speaking this morning regarding access to business and people that are involved in business. I have submitted my written testimony, and I have to admit I am going a bit off track with my remarks, based on some of the things I have heard here today.

Looking back 30 years ago, I was the spouse of an Army Reserve person. I can't imagine in my home, having two young children at that time, what it would have done to us to have had someone deployed for the length of time that our Reserve units are going. I know that my husband was activated for a short two-week period, federally activated, and it made a huge difference in our life.

The New Hampshire Small Business Development Center offers confidential, one-on-one business counseling at no cost to the client. In the last year, we worked with more than 3,500 business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs in the state.

SBDCs provide full-time assistance. We spoke earlier of SCORE, our SBDC counselors are there full time to work with small business owners. In New Hampshire, more than 96 percent of our businesses are small businesses. We also work very closely with distance learning. We are activating many of our educational and training programs to be more tuned into that. In fact, it was at a National Guard Armory in Concord back a few years ago that I first learned about the distance learning network that is actually through the National Guard in New Hampshire.

The SBDC is part of a national program. Here in New Hampshire, we are an outreach program at the University of New Hampshire, and have offices located throughout the state. The Association of Small Business Development Centers represents SBDCs in every State of the Union, as well as the territories, Guam, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, American Samoa. I have a counterpart in each of those states, Arkansas, Maine, both being represented by those.

The SBDC network is the Federal Government's largest small business management and technical assistance program, with approximately 1,000 service centers nationwide, serving more clients than all over Federal management and technical assistance programs combined. The SBDC's network, last year approximately 8 percent of the clients served were veterans. This only counts the self-declared veteran. We serve between 50,000 and 60,000 self-declared veterans annually, and we know the numbers are larger because many of our clients who are veterans choose not to self-identify their veteran status. This would be on the Federal forms when they come in for counseling.

Last year, 12 percent of New Hampshire SBDC clients indicated

that they were veterans, 4 percent greater than the national network.

The impact of activation of self-employed individuals and their families can be dramatic to small businesses. Imagine you are the owner of a firm employing ten or 20 employees, and you are called to active duty along with another of your employees. That business could well have a difficult time staying profitable. Sales are likely to decline, other employees seeing the firm struggling are likely to seek other more secure employment. You return to either a firm that is actually on the edge or a firm that has collapsed. The economic impact is staggering for the individuals involved.

We have a difficult time even planning our training and educational programs on a regular basis to really accommodate our small businesses, because they can't be away for a great length of time during the day. So, imagine a small business owner who has left for ten months, 12 months, and what it may do to their business.

For employees who are called up, the Uniformed Service Employment and Reemployment Act of 1994, the primary statute governing service members' employment rights, assures they will be employed by their civilian employer after serving on active duty. However, this Act provides no protection to a self-employed person who finds his or her business has gone out of business during active duty.

The SBDCs are highly capable of working with small businesses and in preparing people for time away from their businesses. When essential business owners are activated, one of the things that is left behind most needed is training. SBDCs can provide a wide array of management, financial and marketing training to those in the firm who shoulder the responsibility of keeping the firm going.

The ASBDC, the Association of Small Business Development Centers, is considering a proposal to reduce all training fees for families and employees of small businesses whose owners or essential employees have been called to active duty. This could pose financial challenges for many SBDC service centers, many of whom have seen no increase in Federal funding or state funding since 1997. Here in New Hampshire, we try to serve from six regional locations. In the last three years we have reduced our staff of counselors by one half. The access to Federal dollars and state dollars, as all of us know, is much slimmer, but we are still serving those needs.

In an effort to try and prevent problems becoming even more widespread, we would recommend that the leadership of the Guard and Reserve units who have not been activated undertake a concerted effort to identify those in their units that are self-employed, and then work closely with those of us, the SBDC, and the SBDC network, to identify what we can do for these people.

When a small business appears to be having problems, the all-to-frequent reaction is that increased access to capital will solve the

problem. This is not necessarily the case. SBDCs have a long and successful history of helping small businesses gain access to capital, in fact, each week as State Director that is usually the phone call I take, someone looking for a grant, don't have grants, but dollars. However, when you work with these businesses, you find out that what they really need is a long-term sustainable plan for their business, and that would consider stepping outside of their business for a short time and being able to have someone to take charge for them.

This involves training. Right now, the New Hampshire SBDC is offering the Kauffman Foundation's FastTrac entrepreneurial training. Almost 14 years ago, I came to work for the SBDC right here out at Pease as a new person, I was hired with Department of Defense dollars that were for people transitioning out of the military, looking for new careers and entrepreneurship. Once again, we are looking at offering services to those of our military who are returning, and we can do this through many of our training programs.

Thank you all for allowing us to present our testimony, our written testimony, and I'm happy to take your questions.

[The statement of Ms. Collins appears on p. 93]

MR. BOOZMAN. Mr. Whitson.

STATEMENT OF JAMES A. WHITSON

MR. WHITSON. Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee.

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the role of the Department of Veterans Affairs in providing transition assistance for members of the National Guard and Reserve. I am accompanied today by Ms. Maribeth Cully, Director of our Manchester Regional Office. My testimony will cover the transition assistance VA provides to all service members, and then focus on the comprehensive transition assistance provided to members of the National Guard and Reserves by the Manchester Regional Office.

Mr. Chairman, I respectfully request that my written testimony be submitted for the record and I'll abbreviate my opening comments.

VA's seamless transition program includes the delivery of TAP and DTAP briefings, as well as our Benefits Delivery and Discharge Program, outreach to the Reserve and National Guard members is a part of this overall outreach program.

While TAP briefings primarily emphasize employment preparation, extensive effort is devoted to a discussion of all VA benefits, access to VA healthcare, compensation for service-connected disabilities, the Montgomery GI Bill, VA home loans, life insurance, and our vocational rehabilitation and employment services, can all play a role in a service member's successful transition to civilian life.

In 2004, VA representatives conducted more than 7,200 TAP briefings attended by over 260,000 active duty personnel and their families residing in the United States. Under an MOA, between VA and DoD, VA representatives provide benefits briefings overseas as well, at bases in Europe and in Asia. During FY 2004, over 600 of these briefings were conducted in foreign countries, attended by more than 15,000 active duty personnel.

In concert with the Military Services Outreach Program, VA continues our Benefits Delivery at Discharge program, through which service members can apply for service-connected compensation within 180 days prior to their discharge or retirement from service. The required physical examination is conducted, service medical records are reviewed, and a rating decision is made prior to separation. Upon receipt of the report of release from active service, benefits can be immediately authorized.

Currently, BDD is provided at 140 military installations, including two locations overseas at Landstuhl, Germany and Yongsan, Korea. In FY 2004, approximately 40,000 BDD claims were taken.

With the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, VA expanded its efforts even further within our Seamless Transition Program. Outreach to Reserve and Guard members is a part of the overall VA outreach program. During peacetime, this outreach is generally accomplished on an on-call or as-requested basis. However, with the activation and deployment of large numbers of the Reserve and Guard members following 9/11, outreach to these members has been greatly expanded.

VA has made arrangements with Reserve and Guard officials to schedule briefings for members being mobilized and demobilized. In FY 2004, VA representatives conducted almost 1,400 pre and post deployment briefings attended by over 88,000 Guard and Reserve members.

VA has also published a brochure, a Summary of VA Benefits for National Guard and Reserve Personnel, which is widely distributed to Guard and Reserve units. A special page on VA's main website is dedicated for use by Guard and Reserve members.

Now locally here in New Hampshire, since 9/11 more than 2,500 New Hampshire service members have been activated, all but approximately 265 are now home. The Manchester Regional Office has established contacts with the National Guard and Reserve units throughout New Hampshire, to ensure transition assistance is provided to returning service members.

When service members are due to return home, the Air National Guard and Reserve units contact the Manchester Regional Office's OEF/OIF coordinator, and I might point out she is here in the audience today, Sherry Gianetsis is our OIF/OEF coordinator for the Manchester Regional Office, she has contacted to set up TAP brief-

ings here at Pease Air Force Base. In 2004 and 2005, the Manchester RO conducted 50 TAP briefings, with a combined attendance of over 1,900 transitioning service members. Two hundred and five of these individuals requested and received formal interviews with our staff and assistance in processing their benefits applications.

The TAP briefings provide information on a full range of benefits, as well as benefits provided by the State of New Hampshire. While there, the OEF/OIF coordinator speaks to each individual service member and provides her business card to each participant.

Our VR&E counselors also extend their outreach to injured service members who are hospitalized or recuperating at home and cannot attend the TAP briefings. They inform them and their families about vocational and independent living services and help them complete an application for benefits. The counselors make eligibility determinations prior to release from active duty.

The Manchester RO's OEF/OIF coordinator maintains regular contact with her counterpart at VA's Manchester Medical Center. When OIF/OEF veterans go to the Manchester VA Medical Center for care, the coordinator refers them to our OIF/OEF coordinator for possible VBA benefits. Conversely, all veterans who come to our regional office are referred to the Manchester VA Medical Center.

In addition to the Air National Guard and Reserve unit TAP briefings, the RO also provides transition assistance to returning Army National Guard service members. The Army National Guard requires that all service members attend reverse soldier readiness processing, RSRP. An agreement between the Manchester VA Medical Center and the National Guard established that the Medical Center will be the New Hampshire site for this RSRP program. Service members are required, during their RSRP, to have a VA employee verify that they received information on VA benefits before they can be released from active duty. Since January, 2005, almost 900 returning Army National Guard members have received information through this process.

Mr. Chairman, we at VA are proud of our continuing role in the transition of service members from military to civilian life and seek to continually improve on the quality and breadth of our outreach efforts to active duty Reserve and National Guard members.

Thank you for allowing us to appear today, and I would be pleased to respond to any questions.

[The statement of Mr. Whitson appears on p. 97]

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you, thank all of the panel, we actually originally had another person that was going to testify, Sergeant Shea, and my understanding is that he's on deployment in the Gulf Region, and his testimony will be submitted into the record, so we'll be glad to do that.

[The statement of Mr. Sergeant Shea appears on p. 106]

MR. BOOZMAN. Ms. Collins, you said really very well the problems that these people face, 94 percent small business, so many of these people are involved in those entities, and going for extended periods, a year from, I guess, when your boots hit the ground, but the pre and the post and all that, and many, many months. Again, it does seem to emphasize the importance on really dealing with things that you just don't think about until you are deployed.

And yet, you mentioned also that there's a real problem. I mean, these people do have their own businesses, or employed in businesses where there's not a lot of extras there and so it's very difficult for them to get away.

Again, that does seem to indicate that it would be important if we could somehow, through your agency or, perhaps, a group of agencies, provide this sort of expertise to supply this type of support when they are drilling, that's when you've got kind of a captive audience, on the weekend or during their drill time.

Is there any potential for doing that?

MS. COLLINS. Absolutely. Our biggest drawback to anything new that we take on is our lack of resources, frankly, with our SBDC program. SBDC counselors, as I said, are full time. They are either MBAs, CPAs, have owned their own business for a number of years, they live in the state, they are local, and throughout the nation there's over 1,000 centers. This is something that absolutely SBDCs would be willing to work with the Committee or anyone on in developing a program. We are very interested.

We see many of these people in our centers anyhow. So, I think if we formalized it into a program, as you just said, in preparedness, ahead of time, so that you know how to sustain your business. I actually have a staff meeting going on in Concord right now, and we have some of our bankers in talking about the loan programs, and SBA loan programs as well. And, one of the questions we'll get from an entrepreneur or a statement will be, well, why do I need to really work on a business plan when they just do credit scoring anyhow.

So, you know, we always have to come back with just what we are talking about here today, how do you sustain long term that business, how can you step out of it and know that it will continue and somebody inside the business has the skills necessary to carry it forward, and I think that is the critical piece.

MR. BOOZMAN. I agree, I think that's excellent.

One of the things we are always interested in, in that this is the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee, is kind of what's going on in the States. I don't know what unemployment is in this particular part of the country, but maybe somebody can tell me a little bit about that, and then also, about the specific things that we are trying to

do to, specifically, put veterans to work, and for those, getting them employed, and then those that are under employed, improving their life.

MR. BEEBE. Mr. Chairman, it just so happens I have those figures for you. New Hampshire's unemployment in July of "04 was at 3.8 percent, July of "05 we are down 2/10s of a percent, 3.6. I understand the August figures just came out, but I didn't get those for you this morning. The U.S., over the same time period, was about 5.5 in July of "04, and we are down to about 5 in July of "05. New England as a whole was at about 4.8 in July of "04, we are down to about 4.6 in July of "05.

So, in terms of New Hampshire especially, we are looking at a tight labor market, 3.8, 3.6 below national averages. We basically work through, and certainly through VETS, through our grant program for the disabled veteran outreach program, DVOPs, local veteran employment reps, LVERs, with the State Employment Security Agencies, in providing outreach and dedicated assistance to veterans of all eras, in terms of employment and training assistance.

One of the pieces, though, that we are encountering, and I think is part and parcel of what we've heard here this morning, is the disruption, especially for Guard and Reserves. You know, when you are active duty and you go away for three, four, five years, you are part of that unit and you are gone, but when you are going back and forth there is a disruption, whether you an entrepreneur or an employee. And, those have -- and I think that by and large we've seen employers step up and do some incredibly generous things. Employers support of the Guard and Reserve have been a key player in recognizing employers that have stepped forward and gone above and beyond what the USERRA law requires, for example, and that's gone a long way.

But, into a second, and in some cases a third deployment since 9/11, this is becoming problematic, but we have -- we work through, also we work through the vocational rehabilitation and employment unit with the Department of Veteran Affairs, we work jointly with the Vet Centers, and just recently the Secretary has announced what we are calling real life lines, and that is an initiative that we've started within Labor to outreach to severely wounded returning Iraqi and Afghan vets. We have representatives at Bethesda and Walter Reed. We are tracking these individuals, and we are maintaining that contact.

There's a fine line between intervention and intrusion, and when a severely wounded individual is recovering, balancing that, and making that contact at the right time, is absolutely critical.

So, we have taken those initiatives as well.

By and large, I think that the DVOP and LVERs have done, especially in New Hampshire, as a native son and so on, I've watched them work very, very hard, and the State Employment Service, the commitment by the Commissioner to do whatever, whenever, recently

made publicly speaks to that kind of cooperation and commitment.

MR. BOOZMAN. Have we had an increase in USERRA cases? Is that a problem?

MR. BEEBE. I'm sorry?

MR. BOOZMAN. Increase in USERRA cases?

MR. BEEBE. What we've seen is, and I can speak region wide, what we've seen is a morphing, a changing of the issues that we're dealing with. You know, prior to even Desert Storm and 9/11, it often times was, I can't get time off to do my two weeks of annual training, or I can't go in for a Mood of 5 on a Friday night. Those days are gone. Now what we are seeing is issues with, and again, in some cases stop loss issues, or retention issues, where an employer is expecting somebody back and then suddenly they are extended. We are seeing different changes to the issues that are coming forward.

But, essentially, they are still how does the employer, you know, either stop gap that position, and how do they then bring them back, and I think part of this too, and Colonel Carter and I were talking about this last week, is how do you address that reentry process, how do you, for the individual who is shedding the uniform for a while and stepping back into his civilian role, how do you address that, and how are they made ready, how can you better make them ready for returning?

And that, I think, is where, you know, individuals like Tim Beebe and the Vet Centers just play a key role.

I was going to nudge Tim, but he was in the room in back, and I think that this was deja vu for us. Back in the early "80s we were discussing many of these same issues, the Vietnam Era. But, the key, I think, is the pieces that have been put together, and your soldiers have told you, it's one on one, soldier to soldier, it's one on one, veteran to veteran, just like the DVOP and LVERs and our State Employment Service, there's an instant credibility, there's an interest in instant trust factor when they come in and speak to one who has walked in their boots, and you can't get that anywhere else.

So, I think that the issues are changing. Some of the cases are becoming a little bit more complicated, from the standpoint of, again, the duration and the length, but we are seeing some increase overall, but again, I would look to the kind of complexity of the cases that we're now getting relative to their number.

MR. BOOZMAN. Congressman Michaud.

MR. MICHAUD. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

My first question goes to Ms. Collins. First of all, I appreciate all of the work the SBDC I know has done in the State of Maine, it's a great organization, and does a fabulous job. My question is, even though it's not directly dealing with SBDC, there is a Federal law that I believe that 3 percent of the procurement contracts are supposed to go to the Service Disabled Veterans small businesses. The Federal agencies

have come no where near close to meeting that 3 percent goal.

Has your association taken a position on trying to encourage them to meet that goal, is my first question. My second question, when veterans come to you for assistance, do you look at how, not only to help them run their business, but actually grow their business by matching them up with some of the Federal procurement programs that are out there?

MS. COLLINS. Good question, and thank you. Yes, we do these various things. We run procurement conferences on a regular basis. It's one of our goals this coming year, to provide access to all of our businesses for contract funding, anything that may be available through the Federal Government procurement system.

We also -- and that call comes to my office frequently from small businesses that may be veteran owned, I know that I am eligible for certain amounts of percentage that is set aside for us, how do I go about this? What I normally do, my process would be to put them in touch with the counselor in the region of the state where that business is located, they know all of the programs to then get in touch with, and make sure that each of these businesses has that opportunity.

So, yes, and I do know the State Director in Maine, he was actually just made Chairman of our National Board of Small Business Development Centers.

But, we do this on a regular basis. Many of the programs, as you know, after 9/11 there were a great number of small businesses that wanted access to some of that Homeland Security money and opportunities, and we ran, in conjunction with other groups in the state, the High-Tech Council and other groups of business and industry associations, we ran forums providing information to these businesses on all of these programs that we are talking about.

After 9/11, and I think one of the things that I think about now is, we had to work with businesses that had interruption of services for a variety of reasons, and we really came to hone in on our skills on what these businesses were facing at the time. It may be their market went away. It may be, as in this area of the country, many of our businesses were supplying the airline industry. They were affected. Some of the people that had food services, they were affected. Other companies that had to downsize because the market wasn't there.

So, we learned to work with these individuals when there was an interruption of service, and I look forward to assisting in doing that again.

One of the other points that I'd like to make was brought up a few minutes ago to the gentleman to the right here, about relationships. Relationships to a small business are key, and a small business owner has relationships. When you step out of your business for a year, many of those people that you have relationships with and the pro-

grams have changed, so you need assistance in getting back in step with all of these issues that are going on.

So, I think that's another way that we can help them.

MR. MICHAUD. Great, thank you.

MS. COLLINS. Thank you.

MR. MICHAUD. My next question is for Mr. Beebe?

MR. BEEBE. Beebe, yes.

MR. MICHAUD. Yes.

You stated in your testimony that the Under Secretary of Health has approved an additional 50 staff positions for the Vet Center program and outreach, and the Northeast Region received eight positions. My question is, since there are eight states in your Northeast Region, are each one of these positions in each of the states? And, my second question, are all 50 of these staff positions, as well as all staff positions, currently filled?

MR. BEEBE. Yes, sir, good questions.

The positions came to us in two groups of 50. Last year was our first group of 50, and our pressing need at that time, because the Northeast Region encompasses New York and New Jersey also, was to get Iraq vet returnees outreach workers to Dix and Drum right away, where hundreds and thousands of vets were returning.

So, some states were shorted an outreach clinician at that time, but the teams in Maine, in particular, the five teams there, assured me they had the outreach for the returning Guard and Reserves through Chaplain Gibson's office covered, that if other outreach folks became available they would be more than happy to take that position, but they would be doing the outreach in the meantime. They had those bases covered for us. So, we could release the early staff to Dix and Drum where we had thousands of soldiers returning.

Now, at this point in time, each state will have such a position, and just last week the Lewiston position was filled. So, nationwide the program received 100 FTEE for 50 states.

MR. MICHAUD. Great.

My next question actually is for both of you, Mr. Beebe, and actually, Mr., is it Whitson?

MR. WHITSON. Whitson.

MR. MICHAUD. Whitson.

We heard the previous panel talk about how very appreciative they are of these Vet Centers, and that the men and women are utilizing the Vet Centers and the counselors in them. And clearly, with the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the whole War on Terrorism continued to move forward, have you had discussions with the Department of Defense, the National Guard Bureau, as far as what is happening out there in the field at these Vet Centers, are the needs being met in these areas? Do they need additional counselors? Have you had any discussions with DoD or the National Guard Bureau, is my first ques-

tion. And, if so, I'd like to know what those discussions have -- what the results of those discussions were.

MR. WHITSON. With regard to outreach for Guard and Reserve, we do have a Memorandum of Understanding, as General Young pointed out, from the National Guard Bureau in Washington.

We also have templates that have been provided for an MOA at the local level. So, our expectation is, at the state level the Guard and VHA components, VBA components, and other critical players will enter into an agreement on these local relationships.

I would offer to you that our execution of those MOUs or MOAs has been somewhat uneven and, clearly, here in New Hampshire we have a best practice that we can look to and try to export.

We have those MOAs in place and we do monitor reporting. We have standardized briefing packages, so we try to standardize our delivery of this service as much as possible, but I would offer to you that there is uneven execution at the local level.

MR. BEEBE. If I may add to that response, the number referred to in the closing statement that I made of 18 percent of New Hampshire's soldiers currently in treatment centers, it's an interesting number and I'll tell you why. It's interesting because it's preliminary, but it's also interesting because about 20 years ago, 15 or 20 years ago, Congress commissioned the Research Triangle Institute, you might recall, to do the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study.

What that study was comprised of was the polling by Research Triangle Institute of thousands of Vietnam veterans who had been home ten to 15 years already from their war, and it was to ascertain, as best anybody could ascertain at the time, the PTSD or readjustment prevalence rate among Vietnam veterans. And, the study found two things. It found first of all, first and foremost, that lifetime prevalence rate of PTSD and readjustment issues among Vietnam veterans was somewhere between 30 to 50 percent overall, which was a large number, but distilled down over time, ten or 15 years of readjusting on one's own, that number became 17 percent.

So, most folks had a difficult time adjusting from war, but somehow found a way, but those left afflicted, to the point of, perhaps, chronic disorder, without treatment or early intervention was in the 17 percent range, 15 to 21 percent actually, 15 percent for White people, 18 percent for Black people, 21 percent for Hispanic people, and no one knows why there were cultural differences, but that's the number. So, 30 to 50 percent lifetime prevalency boiled to around 18 percent.

Last year, Colonel Hoge wrote in the New England Journal of Medicine, in the July edition, that the DoD was estimating that there would be a prevalence rate of somewhere around 17 percent of PTSD with troops overseas, and readjustment rate issues of 30 to 50 percent. Interesting numbers.

We arrived at the numbers we have in New Hampshire just by

that's what they are, but it seems to be lining up here.

So, the answer to your question, I think we are on the cusp presently with the New Hampshire model, perhaps, some projective tool here. We don't know yet. This is very early. So, we are looking at it closely.

I can tell you at the moment, no Vet Center anywhere has a waiting list. Any veteran in need is seen immediately, just walk in the door and a counselor will see you, and we will maintain that as long as possible.

MR. MICHAUD. Okay.

We heard from the previous panel that when you look at retention and what the men and women in uniform are concerned about, at least their commanding office and caring for them. I guess the follow-up question is, as far as it being unevenly executed in different regions, do you think that's a responsibility of the Adjutant General in each of the states, or should that be more of a responsibility for the National Guard Bureau to make sure that it's implemented fairly and equally all across the country?

MR. WHITSON. That's a difficult question for me to answer. I certainly could say that, as was pointed out in the earlier panels, when local leadership is involved and committed to this type of program, that's the difference.

Generally, the other providers are -- we provide access, we are there, we are available, both from a VBA, and a VHA, Vet Center, DOL point of view. All the players are present in each locale, but I think here what we are seeing in New Hampshire is, the local Guard and Reserve leadership is fully engaged in working and providing that communication with the providers.

MR. MICHAUD. All right, thank you.

If I might, Mr. Chairman, one last question, moving on to Department of Labor. On page two of your testimony you had mentioned that 133,000 separating military personnel were trained. What type of training are you talking about there? Is it training for another job?

And then, my second part of that question is, after the three days, as we heard what's happening here in New Hampshire, is there any type of follow up that's to occur if someone needs assistance, say, six months or a year down the road?

MR. HOULE. The training referred to, Congressman Michaud, really is the training that they get within the formalized TAP program, and that is job search, resume prep, interviewing skills, and even though it is for the three days it's a fairly intense process, and they learn about the resources, the other agencies that they can go to for help, and it's gearing them so that they can, once they have actually separated they know where to go, who to see, what to expect, in terms of those services.

Things such as priority of service in the local employment agency. The continuum becomes, once they've separated, at that point we try to link them up with the Disabled Veteran Outreach Program Specialist, DVOP, the LVER, the Local Veteran Employment Rep, so that when they are separated they can go to them and get one-on-one dedicated service. Those folks are funded by you to serve exclusively veterans and provide priority of service.

So, in that sense, hopefully, the TAP gives them the basic tools about knowing where to go, where to get those resources, and then how to apply them, and then once they are actually out looking they know they have a base headquarters, if you will, for job counseling, and many of the DVOP and LVERs will also act as screeners. They will -- if an individual, for example, went through the whole process, and indicated I'm fine, one of the things that our generation learned was that coping mechanisms work as long as they work, and when they stop you can crash and burn pretty quickly.

So if, for example, an individual is out for a year or two years, and suddenly they come into the local DVOP and LVER, and they are filling out -- they are updating information, and they find that they had four jobs in the last year, their address has changed due to a divorce, et cetera, et cetera, there may be at that point some intervention taken by the DVOP and LVER to make sure that they are put back to maybe a Vet Center counselor, maybe voc rehab, because certainly if they have PTSD that's a compensable disability, and if they are young, or old for that matter, and they are under voc rehab we can get them retrained through that process.

So, there is that continuum, but that first step is that TAP process, and that is a far cry from the separation briefings that some of us got at various times in our career.

So, I hope that that answers your question.

MR. MICHAUD. What does the Department of Labor do, for instance, in Maine where 16 percent of our population is veterans? We are near the highest percentage in the country, and I notice you had talked about some unemployment figures which don't tell the true story because it's usually always much higher than what's actually there, because if you fall off the unemployment roles you are no longer counted, what does the Department of Labor do as far as helping veterans?

For instance, a couple years ago there was a certain region in the state of Maine where unemployment rates in that labor market area, I believe, was over 35 percent. There's a paper mill that had shut down, and the big percentage was actually veterans, and that was before -- I'm not sure how many of those might have been in Iraq or Afghanistan, but in a situation where they are not veteran-owned business, but they are affected because their job is no longer there, what does the Department of Labor do as far as trying to help those veterans out?

MR. HOULE. In a situation where you have a large central employer in a small town that suddenly ceases, and you put a significant portion of that population on the street, there are other programs within ETA, Employment Training Administration. You can have things like the Dislocated Worker Program. We also fund the Veterans Workforce Investment program, VWIP, and those kinds of initiatives.

We have rapid response teams, of which the DVOP and LVERs are prime players that are sent out from the local employment office, really, in order to -- and they set up shop often times right in the mill, if it is a mill, and will, you know, provide expedited service.

The real key at that point becomes if their livelihood and a generational job, perhaps, has ceased, then it becomes a question of retraining. So, we would look through our DVOP and LVERs at what kind of -- if they, for example, if they have a service-connected disability they may be eligible for vocational rehabilitation through the VA. And, if their primary skill or trade has gone away, and there's nothing in the area, then they may, in fact, be ripe for a reassessment of that a rehab process again through the VA. We would look at that and, perhaps, provide a referral.

But, the intensive one-on-one services that the DVOP and LVERs would provide, they have access to the entire state, and actually they cross -- they often times will get job orders from the region.

So, if you are up in Presque Isle, and you need something that is going to be within that three-hour commuting distance, I know this because my State Director in Maine, John Gay, has one of the higher travel budgets in the region for that very reason, we will try to then cross borders on referrals and work with the DVOP and LVERs on just across a state border line.

So, we look at geographic, economic and the likelihood of employment scenarios in that area, and then try to do what we can to provide those kind of one-on-one intensive services. And, those are dedicated services, that's a one-on-one relationship with the DVOP or LVER.

MR. MICHAUD. Okay, thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. BOOZMAN. Congressman Bradley?

MR. BRADLEY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I have no questions at this time, and I'd just like to thank the panel for their compelling testimony and for all the help that you provide, not only to folks here in New Hampshire, but around the region, and look forward to continuing to work with you.

Thank you.

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you all very much.

Today we've heard a lot of testimony about how states take a very proactive stance towards our men and women coming back from war, and transitioning back into civilian life, and we've heard a lot of good things, and then some areas that, perhaps, we could even do even

better with our help.

So, I hope that General Young and our staff, the agencies represented here, will take those things back to Washington, and again, continue to make an improvement, that's why we are here.

I really want to thank Congressman Bradley for his hospitality. As a guy from Arkansas, I would say that we've had tremendous southern hospitality, whatever your equivalent is for that up here. You've beared with me, we haven't had to have an interpreter during this, so that's been good.

And then also, Congressman Michaud, for coming over again as Ranking Member on the Health Subcommittee, and both of these guys being some of the most active members on the VA Committee in general. We really do appreciate them, and all that they do.

So, do you guys have any other things?

MR. MICHAUD. No, I just want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for allowing this committee hearing to happen in the Northeast. I really appreciate it, and that southern hospitality that you all give us up in Northeast, we really appreciate that.

So, thank you.

MR. BRADLEY. Thank you again, Mr. Chairman.

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you.

Okay, then the hearing is adjourned, and I get to actually do my second command of the day, and we will retire the colors.

[Whereupon, at 1:00 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

Honorable John Boozman
Oversight Hearing on the
Transition Assistance Program for Members of the
New Hampshire National Guard

September 19, 2005

Good morning. Before we begin, I understand that Pease has an outstanding ceremonial unit and they are with us here today. So, for the first time in my life, I have the honor to give a command to a military unit:

"POST THE COLORS"

Posting the colors always makes me feel very proud of the nation and I thank the Color Guard for their attendance here today.

This is a very special day for us on the House Veterans Affairs, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. In many ways, it is fitting that we hold our first field hearing on how we are assisting members of the Guard and Reserve to transition from active duty back to civilian life. It is also fitting that we come to New Hampshire, a state that has historically sent many of its sons and daughters to answer the nation's call to duty not only in times of war, but also in times of disaster elsewhere in the nation. I hope we will hear about both commitments from witnesses today.

Today, New Hampshire is not only known for its quadrennial place in the presidential campaign spotlight. Today, that spotlight shines on the special efforts that state and federal agencies are making to provide TAP services and how New Hampshire is setting the standard for ensuring that returning service members transition as smoothly as possible to their life out of uniform.

I am especially pleased that Congressman Jeb Bradley, a member of the Veterans Affairs Committee has brought New Hampshire's TAP efforts to my attention and I am very pleased that he has agreed to bring us here to his beautiful state and to a base that has a long history in the defense of America. Our thanks to him and his district staff for their help making this happen.

I am also pleased that Congressman Mike Michaud from Maine is able to join us today. It shows that despite our occasional disagreements, veterans remain a bipartisan effort on Capitol Hill and one that crosses state boundaries.

We have a full day here as we will visit the VA Regional Office in Manchester, or as you locals call it, Manch Vegas after we finish the hearing. So, let me recognize Jeb Bradley for any remarks he may have and then Mike Michaud.

Before we hear from the first panel, without objection, all written statements will be made part of the official record and I will ask the witnesses to summarize their written testimony during their allotted 5 minutes.

Our first panel includes Major General ~~John~~ Ronald Young, Acting Director of the National Guard Bureau Joint Staff in Washington, DC, Colonel Deborah Carter, Human Resources Officer for the New

Hampshire National Guard, and last, but certainly not least, Command Sergeant Major Michael Rice, the State Command Sergeant Major for the New Hampshire National Guard.

Welcome and we are anxious to hear from each of you. General, please lead off.

Thanks to each of you and we appreciate your willingness to take a few questions.

Again, thanks to each of you. Clearly, the National Guard is busy these days and we appreciate your meeting with us today.

Our second panel is composed of members of the Guard who are on the front lines when the Guard is activated. We have Captain Erik Fessenden, Commander of the First Battalion, 172nd Field Artillery, New Hampshire National Guard, Captain Mary Hennesy, Commander of the 744th Transportation Company, New Hampshire National Guard, Staff Sergeant Robert Shea, 744th Training NCO for the Transportation Company, and Staff Sergeant Mark Bright, of the 12th Civil Support Team, New Hampshire National Guard. Captain Fessenden, would you please lead off and since my father was an enlisted man in WWII, we'll save the best for last and finish with the two staff sergeants

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Thanks to each of you. Let me pose a question and then I'll yield to my two colleagues.

Our final panel doesn't wear uniforms, but they represent many of the agencies responsible for making TAP work. We have with us today, Dr. Tim Beebe, Northeast Regional Manager, Readjustment Counseling Service from the Veterans Health Administration, Mr. Dave Houle, Regional Administrator for the U.S. Department of Labor's Veterans Employment and Training Service, Ms. Mary Collins, from the New Hampshire Small Business Development centers and the Association of Small Business Development Centers, Mr. Jim Whitson, Eastern Director of the Veterans Benefits Administration, and he is accompanied by Ms. Maribeth Cully, Director of the Manchester Regional Office.

Welcome to each of you and let's begin with Dr. Beebe.

Thanks and I'll lead of the questioning.

Today, we have heard how one state is taking a proactive stance in helping its returning warriors transition back to civilian life. We've heard many good things that I hope General Young will take back to DC and export across the nation. I also hope that the agencies represented here will take home some ideas on how they can better serve our returning service members.

Do the Members have any closing remarks?

This hearing is adjourned and I now get to make my second military command.

"RETIRE THE COLORS"

STATEMENT BY

MAJOR GENERAL RONALD G. YOUNG
DIRECTOR, NATIONAL GUARD BUREAU JOINT STAFF

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
UNITES STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

FIRST SESSION, 109TH CONGRESS

ON TRANSITION ASSISTANCE AND THE NEW HAMPSHIRE INITIATIVE

SEPTEMBER 19, 2005

STATEMENT BY
MAJOR GENERAL RONALD G. YOUNG
DIRECTOR, NATIONAL GUARD BUREAU JOINT STAFF

Chairman Boozman, distinguished members of the Committee. My name is Ronald Young, Director, Joint Staff, National Guard Bureau. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Today, we have 330,000 Army and 107,000 Air National Guard members of the National Guard serving our Country, States and Territories. During 2004 117,000 Reserve Component members were mobilized that met the minimum 180 days of active duty for full eligibility of benefits under the Transition Assistance Program.

Transition Assistance is a critically important component in our efforts to take care of Service members. We appreciate the opportunity to meet with you and review these programs. The information received during these briefings and the opportunity to enroll in these vital programs has long lasting effects on our men and women in the National Guard, their families and their communities. The effectiveness of Transition Assistance also holds significant implications for the long term health of our organization as a whole. The interest and concern by the President, Congress, Department of Defense and Senior Leaders within the Armed Forces for our men and women returning from difficult missions is reflected in these benefits and the timeliness of there receipt is critical to each member and their family.

Guard and Reserve personnel are entitled to participation in the Transition Assistance Program when they were mobilized The Transition Assistance Program was primarily focused on the transition of Active Component Service members to civilian life, but since more and more guard and reserve members have been mobilized of late, it has re-focused it objectives. It is very beneficial

to have these briefings, as some benefits require that the member apply before he or she leaves mobilized active duty status.
The need to spend effective time and limited resources in a comprehensive and efficient manner to determine the needs of service members during the course of their transition is critical. These types of programs are critical to ensuring our members and their families participate and help them determine the best next steps as they move back in to civilian life. As you are aware, there are really four components to TAP: the pre-separation counseling presented by the services; the VA benefits briefing; the Department of Labor's employment workshops; and the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP).The National Guard supports the initiatives planned or currently underway to improve the effectiveness of the Transition Assistance Program.

We face several leadership challenges as we execute the Transition Assistance Program for Guard members. While originally designed for the transition of Active Duty members to civilian life the program has evolved as more reserve and guard members are mobilized. There is an understandable interest both on the part of the Services and the members in demobilizing as quickly as possible in order that they may be returned to their families. As military leaders, we must work to educate our members about the availability and value of the Transition Assistance Program, which is currently administered at mobilization stations.

Transition Assistance Program managers must effectively educate National Guard members since the DoD compensation system depends, in part, on the use of benefits to leverage post-mobilization retention. As a result, the Guard leadership must ensure that our members fully understand that several important benefits are contingent upon continued service following demobilization.

The Transition Assistance Program briefings provide members with the opportunity to reintegrate with their families and avail themselves of all that Transition Assistance has to offer. In addition, the local Family Support Centers of the National Guard have arrayed a number of community based organizations and volunteer service organizations that create a significant synergy with the Transition Assistance Program. These organizations can compliment the VA, DOD and DOL programs.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has counselors that dissemination Veterans Affairs benefit information to members during the Transitional Assistance Briefings. It is especially important with regard to those members who have incurred disabilities during the course of their active duty. Of course VA works with disabled members while on active duty to help them apply for benefits that relate to disabilities incurred on active duty. Presently, the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) benefits are included as a part of the Transition Assistance Program at the various demobilization stations.

Several pilot programs are currently underway to improve the administration of the Transition Assistance Program and the Disabled Transition Assistance Program. Of particular note are VA and DoD efforts to deliver Veterans benefits briefings during weekend drill periods following demobilization -- greatly enhancing the effectiveness of this program. The Department of Labor's employment assistance pilot programs in Minnesota, Oregon, and Michigan are exploring several means by which employment assistance can be provided to Guard members.

As noted earlier, while enhanced Service-member participation in the Transition Assistance Program is important for a host of reasons, it is also of critical importance to the National Guard from an organizational perspective. Retention of Guard members following mobilization is a critical component of the overall

Guard strength management equation. Transition Assistance is a critical part of this effort, because the current compensation strategy bases many incentives upon continuing service member participation. For example, participation in TRICARE Reserve Select, which provides one year of TRICARE coverage for every 90 days of mobilized service, is available to members who choose the remain in a Selected Reserve status. Similarly, the Reserve Education Assistance Program, which provides up to 80% of the benefits enjoyed under the existing Active Duty Montgomery GI Bill, is available to service members who choose to remain in the Ready Reserve.

Taking care of National Guard members must remain a high priority. Leveraging the benefits available to National Guard members and their families through enhanced administration of the Transition Assistance Program represents a key component in our commitment to the welfare of returning veterans and their families.

Working with the members of this Committee, I believe that the National Guard, working hand in hand with the leadership in the Departments of Defense, Labor and Veteran's Affairs, as well as state and local agencies, can continue to dramatically enhance National Guard members' quality of life and our personnel retention.

Thank you.

TESTIMONY OF

COLONEL DEBORAH L. CARTER

HUMAN RESOURCE OFFICER
NEW HAMPSHIRE NATIONAL GUARD

BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

September 19, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee: My name is Colonel Deborah Carter, Human Resource Officer for the New Hampshire National Guard, and I am honored to be here on behalf of the Adjutant General of the NH, Major General Kenneth Clark, to discuss the New Hampshire National Guard's "Reunion & Reentry" from combat program. I will overview the program, the partnerships, the results, and further challenges.

In 2004, the NH Army National Guard deployed 850 soldiers to Iraq and Afghanistan. Early in the deployments, the NHNG's vision on reentry was mostly ceremonial. However, that began to change as individual soldiers returned home for their two week R&R leave. Although it was the exception, we began to hear of soldiers drinking too much and having difficulty reconnecting with family members. In one case, a soldier spent the entire two weeks in his room and rarely spoke to his young wife and child. In addition, the NH Department of Health and Human Services reached out to offer preventative assistance because their data after Desert Storm showed increases in divorce, alcohol use, drug abuse, spousal abuse, child abuse, etc. As an organization, we

began to realize that the war isn't over just because the soldiers come home safely. With that understanding, the NHNG became committed to playing a very active role in the support of soldiers returning from combat.

With limited combat experience in recent history, the NHNG reached out to others with "multiple combat" experience such as the US Army's 82nd Airborne, the US Marines and US Navy to hear their experiences. The NHNG did not invent; we listened and tailored their "lessons learned" to our reserve force.

The challenges a reserve force faces upon returning from combat are different than active duty. Our soldiers and airmen are, in most cases, geographically separated from services, the command structure, and their battle buddies. Our goal was to build a life-cycle model for reentry and reunion that ensured "no warrior was left behind."

The NHNG "Reunion & Reentry" Program began before the soldiers left theater. Reserve commanders have limited ability to observe soldiers and reinforce resources of support when they return home. We trained approximately 300 full-time people and 500 family members in suicide prevention, post-traumatic stress and resources available. We were convinced these would be internal points of entry for support for many soldiers, and indeed in many cases, that is just what is occurring.

Once soldiers returned to the United States, they processed through Fort Dix, NJ or Fort Drum, NY for approximately 3-5 days. Upon returning to NH, they participated in a short ceremony and a day off with their families. After the day off, soldiers participated in a three-day process to ensure benefits were secured, counseling was provided, VA enrollment with medical and dental assessments was completed, and assistance was provided to unemployed soldiers through the Departments of Labor and

Employment Security – all occurring within days from leaving combat. In addition, all attended classes on stress related combat issues, myths/expectations on reunion, strategies for success, and interactive sessions about returning to family life and the civilian workplace.

The NHNG didn't have the resources to do it alone, so we asked the Manchester VA and Vet Center for help. The efforts of the Manchester VA and Vet Center in supporting National Guard soldiers returning from war is, in my definition, nothing short of a miracle. We asked for thousands of hours of support from both organizations, but with one small catch -- we couldn't tell them when we needed the support until about 48 hours out. Yet the VA and Vet Center pulled it off for 850 soldiers – the Manchester VA provided thousands of hours of short notice staff time for medical reviews, dental assessments, benefit briefings, emergency support and much more. The Regional Vet Center, using staff from six states, provided about 900 hours of counseling, again on little or no notice.

This type of support for returning veterans is unprecedented, and the NHNG and its partners have raised the bar nationally. I am constantly getting requests from other states that want to learn about NH's partnerships and model reentry program.

But the story doesn't end there. Governor Lynch put on a full court press called "Operation Welcome Home" -- a cross-departmental effort in support of returning troops and their families. Led by the Department of Health and Human Services, the effort included support from the Departments of Labor, Safety, Employment Security, Education, and Correction. "Operation Welcome Home" focused on statewide outreach to physicians, law enforcement, clergy, school counselors, and employers on the issue of

combat transition and potential support needed. Following one of the three outreach workshops for these "Natural Helpers," Maj Gen Clark said: "I had no idea that the community was as aware of this issue as we were. We thought we would be educating them and found that they had much to share with us as well. This partnership greatly enhanced the effectiveness of the "Welcome Home."

The overall results of the "Reunion & Reentry" Program have far exceeded our original expectations. Here are some of the results:

- All soldiers are introduced to local services within days of returning from combat.
- All receive mandatory introductory counseling through the local Vet Center, with each soldier being allocated an hour of initial counseling.
- 48% of soldiers requested follow-up support after the initial counseling.
- Overall, units involved in the most severe combat had the highest rate of requests for follow-up support.
- All soldiers met with local VA providers to learn about benefits.
- All enrolled in the VA during the NHNG three-day process.
- NHNG soldiers enrolled in the Hospital Primary Care at the VA at a rate of twice the national average.
- Almost half of the soldiers filed VA claims during the three-day process.
- One in every 10 returning soldiers received acute medical care through the VA emergency room while processing.
- All soldiers were provided a safe environment to disclose medical issues; 2% actually needed to be returned to active duty for appropriate treatment.

- All soldiers completed dental assessments through the VA, securing dental benefits for the next two years.
- All unemployed soldiers were assisted one-on-one by representatives from the Department of Labor and the Department of Employment Security.
- Over 10,000 "natural helpers" became involved in Governor Lynch's "Operation Welcome Home" initiative.
- Soldiers felt cared about and consistently shared that fact with the NHNG leadership.
- Many soldiers experiencing difficulty were and are reaching out for support early.

Vietnam Vets, upon hearing of the NHNG's attempt to better support returning soldiers, called us one-by-one to share with us their difficult stories and offer their advice. Many veterans told us stories of 25 or 30 years of losses, big losses, i.e. my wife divorced me, my kids don't have much to do with me, I drank way too much, I lost five jobs, I was in jail, I've been married four times, etc. These veterans weren't sharing for sympathy, but to let us know that if they had known more back then and had reached out for support early, they might not have lost so much.

That's what the NHNG believes -- we are not suggesting we have found the magic pill to eliminate PTSD and other issues of war, but we are aggressively educating and encouraging soldiers who struggle to reach out early for support. We believe early, mandatory counseling through an organization like the Vet Center, which knows and understands veterans, is the most profound way we are assisting soldiers upon reentry. It is about early intervention and not waiting 30 years to reach out.

As a military officer with expertise in human resources, I am well aware of the implications of the losses I just described. They manifest in the workplace through ineffective behavior, decreased productivity, and economic losses, if not resolved in a reasonable time and manner. Transitioning from a routine active duty tour is very different than reintegrating from combat. If soldiers do not transition from combat well, emotionally and physically, they will not be ready to address economic opportunities. They will instead be struggling to prevent economic loss.

TESTIMONY OF

COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR MICHAEL F. RICE
STATE COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR
NEW HAMPSHIRE ARMY NATIONAL GUARD

BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

U. S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

September 19, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee: My name is Command Sergeant Major Michael Rice, State Command Sergeant Major with the New Hampshire Army National Guard, and I am honored to be here today to discuss the New Hampshire National Guard's "Reunion and Reentry" from combat program. I will be addressing the program from the Senior Enlisted perspective and the cultural aspects of the program.

From all that we had heard and read on the varying condition in which our soldiers might return home from theatre, a number of months before their scheduled return we started to look at what we could do to properly take care of them upon arrival, to give them as many tools as possible to assist them in settling back into civilian life.

Two areas of great concern were Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and suicide. As these are not issues the Reserve components normally deal with, we set out to first educate all those involved. This included the soldier, family and employer. To that end, we held mandatory training for those full-time employees who were not deployed, and many of the Unit Command element that also did not deploy. In addition, briefings were conducted at the various unit Family Readiness meetings. The soldiers started to receive briefs while still in theatre. They again received information at their

mobilization stations as they processed off of Active Duty. While recognizing that these soldiers would be more interested in getting home than listening to briefs, but also appreciating that repetition assists in the learning process, we felt we had to have something for each soldier as he/she processed out back here in New Hampshire.

During their out processing here in New Hampshire, each soldier received assistance during two different sessions. On what we called Day 2 of the process, soldiers attended presentations on PTSD from the Vet Center. They were briefed on what to watch for as far as suicide, and also met in group sessions to discuss the advantages/disadvantages of being deployed. The largest nugget in this whole process occurred on Day 3 of the process. Each soldier met one-on-one with a counselor from the Vet Center. These meetings served as a way for soldiers to get information on issues they might face, along with a Point of Contact (POC) they could reach out to if needed. It also provided them with an outlet to express some of their feelings at that time, and to set up a follow on appointment. This piece was so crucial that I personally briefed each group of soldiers at their morning brief about the importance of making sure even the smallest incident that occurred during the deployment was recorded in their medical records to help protect both them and their family in the future. On the mental health side, I informed the soldiers that they would be meeting with a representative from the Vet Center. I acknowledged the fact that many, if not most, probably felt that they were fine and didn't have any issues. They were told that if nothing else, they would come away with a POC--a phone number and some basic information--so that if at some point down the road, a month, a year or whenever, if they wake up some morning and realize that they have some issues and need to get some help, they will know where to go, they

will have had at least an eye-ball-to-eye-ball contact with a counselor so that they would not be dealing with a total stranger. I guaranteed them that this process was 100% confidential, that neither their leadership nor the state would receive any report regarding their dealings with the Center. They were told that all we would receive were statistics as to how many were interviewed and how many requested immediate appointments or follow up, but nothing else. I did add that if during the interview they indicated they were thinking of hurting themselves or someone else, that the counselor was required by law to report that to the proper authorities, but not to us.

I spoke with soldiers about today's culture, how, unlike a few short years ago, the stigma once associated with a person who seeks counseling or is put on some sort of anti-depressant is no longer there. I told them that I was quite sure that some sitting there had young children who may be seeing or have seen a counselor, and that it was more and more common for a doctor to prescribe medication as part of treatment than it ever was. I further explained that even the military had eased their entrance requirements over the last couple years. At one time, any history of counseling/mental health issues would disqualify a person from joining the military, whereas today, it is on a case by case basis depending upon the severity of the problem, its current status or how long it has been since a person has dealt with an issue.

We were very fortunate that during the time of this re-deployment there were few other states in the area that were welcoming returning soldiers home, as we had to get counselors from all the New England states to accomplish the mission. Since then, the small group of counselors at the Manchester Vet Center have definitely been tasked to the max, as well as those in White River Junction, Vermont.

It was a combination of a strong desire to care for our soldiers and the importance of the readjustment piece that made me want to personally get involved in this process. You hear what the Vietnam vets went through and how they were treated when they returned from service. There was a TAC officer who had gone to Vietnam; 15 years later on the parade field at Fort Edwards, he dropped to the ground after a canon was fired. He knew it was coming and he still dropped automatically. It comes down to really caring about the soldiers and doing what we can to help them continue with a full life like they had before they went to war.

One of the most difficult challenges we now face is getting counselors to the area of the New Hampshire where there are none. If a soldier is on the fence trying to decide whether or not to ask for help, the proximity of the facility and availability of a counselor could make the difference between him/her getting or not getting help.

I truly believe that what we have done for our soldiers is the right thing to do and the least that should be done for all military personnel returning from combat situations. The sooner we can get these tools and services to soldiers, the less time they and their families and employers might spend suffering. We must all do what we can to make sure no warrior is left behind.

TESTIMONY OF

CAPTAIN ERIK A. FESSENDEN
COMMANDER, 172ND FIELD ARTILLERY COMPANY
NEW HAMPSHIRE ARMY NATIONAL GUARD

BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

September 19, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for the opportunity to share my experiences regarding the New Hampshire National Guard's "Reunion & Reentry" program. My name is CPT Erik Fessenden and I served as the Company Commander of a 180-soldier company that deployed to Iraq with a Military Police mission. My unit left New Hampshire in January 2004, and after a six-week train-up at the mobilization site, we arrived in Iraq in February. While in Iraq, we performed a wide range of missions: local security around a large internment facility, guarding enemy detainees, convoy escorts, training the local Iraqi police force, and conducting convoy escorts throughout southern Iraq up to Baghdad. The unit redeployed to NH in February 2005, and was the first unit to transition through the state's "Reunion & Reentry" program.

I first heard about the state's program several months before we redeployed. Most of my soldiers, and even I, were very skeptical about the need for such a program for several reasons. First, we questioned how people who had not even deployed could possibly understand the issues and difficulties that we faced in Iraq. Secondly, we thought that the program would be needlessly repetitive, that we would be addressing the

same types of issues before leaving Iraq, while in Kuwait, and finally at our demobilization site. Finally, we believed that forcing soldiers to delay their leave and spend additional time away from their families would only damage morale and create rather than address problems. Not only did this bother me because we were obviously missing our families, but I also thought that it would make our retention efforts even more difficult upon returning to NH. I didn't want my soldiers to be wasting their time with a disorganized program after serving their country for over a year.

After going through the entire demobilization process, I now know how wrong my concerns were, and I am thankful that such a program existed for my soldiers. What changed my opinion? First, the demobilization process fell woefully short in taking care of my returning soldiers. At the demobilization site, I encountered an "assembly line" mentality where the goal seemed to be to get the soldiers through each of the process steps as quickly as possible. We brought up several administrative, pay and medical issues to the demobilization staff but were often told that our state would address our concerns when we got back to NH. There were also many untrained demob personnel who incorrectly filled out our paperwork. It quickly became apparent that the "Reunion & Reenty Program" would be an invaluable safety net to resolve the numerous problems that had not been addressed. In addition, many of my soldiers with legitimate medical and mental health issues did not report them at the demobilization site for fear of being held there and not returning to NH and their families with the rest of the unit. No matter how much the leadership encouraged soldiers to identify their problems, there was definitely a "get back to NH" mentality that would have hurt many of them in the long run. Finally, the state leadership proved to me that they had "done their homework" and

had a sincere understanding of the issues that needed to be addressed. For instance, the stations were staffed with enough soldiers to quickly process us through and get us home to our families. Soldiers were allowed to bring family members with them for several of the sessions. The number of participating military and civilian organizations was truly impressive. In fact, I believe that rather than hurting retention, this program actually helped--it showed my soldiers that their well-being is truly important to this organization and that the state will take care of their needs.

To any state that has not adopted a similar program, I can't overstress its importance in helping our soldiers transition back from a deployment, especially with regards to the emotional issues that can occur. One of the mistakes that military leaders make, myself included, is that we assume that our soldiers have feelings similar to ours. If I am not having emotional problems, then nobody has them; if I think our mission wasn't as tough as the next unit's (which is a common sentiment), then all soldiers must feel that way. What I've learned is if you go up to a soldier as a commander and ask the soldier if they are OK, you are always told "No problems with me, Sir!" If they are struggling with emotional problems, they will not raise their hands and ask for help, especially not when they've been to a war zone where soldiers have died. They downplay their issues and keep up a strong face, especially in front of their fellow soldiers. You won't see the emotional, physical, and financial problems when you first come back. Everyone is excited about being home and they do not have any problems – no marital problems, no money problems, no sleepless nights. But many soldiers will not handle the transition home well, and once they leave their fellow soldiers and go home, those unaddressed problems quickly surface. As leaders we owe it to our soldiers and

their families to do whatever it takes to help these heroes overcome their problems. In New Hampshire, this means ongoing briefings to reinforce the avenues for getting help. It means talking to soldiers one-on-one to encourage them to remove the "tough soldier" mask they wear. It means even the State Command Sergeant Major intervening to help a soldier who is struggling. The results in NH speak for themselves – there are many of my soldiers who are still receiving counseling today who I never would have guessed needed it, and I totally commend them for it. States that do not have a program like this one are doing a disservice to their deployed soldiers and military families who have sacrificed so much.

Unfortunately in my career, I have found that the military's "Taking Care of Soldiers" mantra can sometimes fall short in practice. I am grateful and proud that in this situation, the New Hampshire National Guard has taken care of those who served their country.

TESTIMONY OF

CAPTAIN MARY L. HENNESSEY
NEW HAMPSHIRE ARMY NATIONAL GUARD

BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

September 19, 2005

Good afternoon. My name is CPT Mary Hennessey. I work full-time for the New Hampshire National Guard, and I was deployed during Operation Iraqi Freedom II as the Company Commander for the 744th Transportation Company. I am here to testify to my experience and thoughts on the NHNG's re-entry program, "Operation Welcome Home."

As a soldier serving in Iraq, I was very excited to hear that New Hampshire had been working on a transitional program for soldiers returning home from combat. My Company was directly in danger on a daily basis. We are the ones you heard about on the news who were constantly getting shot at, getting hit with improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, that had been buried along side the roads, watching every car closely, worrying that it was a vehicle-born IED. There was no rest from the thought of danger. Coming back to base camp, we were stationed in one of the hottest areas that received mortar attacks on a daily basis. The bottom line -- life was not going to be the same again after running in this gear for an extended period of time.

During our first week in Iraq, my unit experienced the worse thing imaginable-- we lost one of our own soldiers. This loss was harder than anyone can imagine and changed our lives forever. This is the first exposure the soldiers had to mental health

providers in the military. The combat stress team came out to assist us and became a visible part of our team from that day on. A lot can be gained by the two worlds communicating; as a matter of fact, we may find these soldiers as Vet Center counselors or seeking employment as counselors elsewhere. As soldiers in Iraq, we saw and did a lot of things in the environment we were in that made us feel as if we were moving farther and farther away every day from the "real world" at home.

Unfortunately, my time in country was unexpectedly cut short. I was diagnosed with cancer 10 months into our deployment in Iraq. I was medevaced out of country to Walter Reed Army Medical Center to be treated. This, of course, was the hardest day of my life, leaving my soldiers. Thank God the impact of this move on the Company was minimilazed by my second in charge being a great leader and having a very similar leadership style.

After accepting the fact that there was not enough time in our deployment for me to make it back to Iraq, and realizing my soldiers had everything under control over there, I turned my focus to welcoming them home. I started thinking about and planning for all of the areas I was concerned about that we needed to address. I made contact with one of the primary organizers of the "Welcome Home" process, and was pleased to receive a three-block schedule that included almost everything that was on this worrisome commander's mind. The biggest relief was to see that not only was the mental health adjustment piece identified, but that it was focused on. It made me overwhelmed with incredible pride to be a member of the National Guard. Once again, I started to feel connected to those I had started drifting apart from, and I was sure the soldiers would feel the same way. It was obvious that we were thought about and the seriousness of what

we had gone through was not belittled. This concept alone made Operation Welcome Home a success. I'll be honest with you, it may be most or all of what a general soldier remembers from the process.

There was an incredibly organized approach to processing soldiers without losing the compassion or concern for them. The three blocks were broken up into an admin day, a VA day and a mental health day. The number of corrections to soldiers' records alone can talk to the benefit and success of the admin day. The percentage of VA claims and soldiers taking advantage of information that was disseminated gives you an idea of the impact our day at the VA made. The greatest thing to see was that everyone--all soldiers--had to check in with a counselor to be asked if they wanted to be seen or if they wanted a follow-up phone call. The impact of this alone--other veterans letting you know they are there, that they can be called--is tremendous. I'm not sure how many soldiers would have raised their hands if it was voluntary to talk to the counselors, or if they were not vets, but my feeling is the numbers and the connections would not have been as productive.

Mental health issues are a part of coming home, and there was and is an avenue to have these issues addressed. Having these services available is life-changing for many. We might not have to go through learning so much the hard way as past vets have had to. For myself, it was a welcomed concept, but I held off for a bit thinking I was strong enough and that I didn't need help. Then I started to be seen by a civilian professional therapist. After months, I finally stopped ignoring the fact that what I went through was affecting my behavior and I wasn't the same person. Col Carter put it best to me, describing these words from a Vietnam Vet: "I can't explain it but the colors just aren't

as bright as they used to be." That defines it for me. That also defined the need for me to seek a therapist through the Vet Center because an "outsider" was just not cutting it.

In dealing with these issues, that is exactly what it feels like, that people outside the military experience cannot understand. Frustration builds inside that makes you feel as if you are never going to be understood, let alone that you will ever gain the ability to understand yourself. I not only think back to that caring and concerned counselor at the VA, I think about the interaction I had in Block C and the information that was put out. The bottom line is this was "normal," these symptoms did not mean I was crazy or weak. These symptoms meant that I had gone through a major, life changing event and this is how the mind can react. I had the privilege to go though Block C, which most soldiers called the "touchy and feely" portion of the program, with one of my platoons and many spouses participating as well. The shaking of heads in agreement when Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and family transitional issues were discussed really showed that the program was working. To me it helped arm us (we like being armed), so that when these symptoms occur, we have an arsenal that can help us diffuse and possibly eliminate the issue/concern.

I have heard of several family problems from soldiers who have returned. These problems were discussed during the Reunion/Re-entry Program as things that might happen, and that helps me be able to talk to them about the issues. Families have been able to deal with some problems, some are still being dealt with, and others resulted in an unfortunate ending of a marriage.

All soldiers need to have someone available to help them when they return from a deployment. In the military community/family, there is no greater resource than soldiers

helping soldiers. This may come in formal and informal ways. The informal can be as simple as soldiers talking to each other while cleaning their weapons. The formal can be soldiers reaching out to someone who is in the "big military family" who has been through a war, has gone on living his/her life since then, and made the decision to be trained to help others, such as our Vet Center counselors. I thank all of them from the bottom of my heart, not only for myself, but for all those soldiers who are hurting.

TESTIMONY OF

SSG MARK O. BRIGHT
NEW HAMPSHIRE ARMY NATIONAL GUARD

BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

September 19, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee: My name is SSG Mark Bright and I am a member of the NH Hampshire Army National Guard. Thank you for the time and opportunity to speak about my unit redeployment process. When information started to come down the chain of command about our return date, we were all very happy, to say the least. We started many briefings before leaving Iraq, such as medical screening, combat stress briefings, general benefits, etc. Shortly after completion of the briefings in theater, we were informed we would be going through 4-7 days of the same type briefings at Ft Dix. As a Squad Leader, I watched my soldiers grow upset and angry over the prospect of waiting longer to see their families. I was afraid we would be there doing repetitive and redundant training. I am glad to say I was wrong!

I have been deployed three times in my career. My first deployment was during Desert Shield/Desert Storm. While we trained for our mission very hard and aggressively, there was very little emphasis at that time on our families or the hardships that might face us upon our return. I spent nine months in country on that tour. After flying home, we had a ceremony and were released immediately to resume our lives and pick up where we left off. I saw that for way too many of my peers, picking up where they left off was

almost impossible. Family situations had changed while they were gone. There were new babies and broken homes. There were soldiers who were angry and didn't know why. They would jump at a loud noise. They would feel sick and not report it.

My second deployment to the Sinai desert as an observer, not on a combat tour, lasted six months. Upon our return, the reception was not much different—there was a ceremony, then we were released to our families. This time, over the next few duty days there were some briefings. Some of them were the mandatory briefings soldiers receive every year, such as SAEDA, safety etc.

After arriving at Ft Dix from Iraq, I could see immediately this was going to be different and that we would be getting a lot more information. The days were not extremely long and there was time for the soldiers to decompress. The spouses were well informed and were going through briefings of their own in New Hampshire. We attended briefings that really applied to our lives and our families. Reintegration briefings focused on teaching soldiers, who had been in an extremely fast-paced, dangerous and uncertain environment, that life at home would be different. They briefed us that we would more than likely not be able to pick up right where we left off. There were some issues at Ft Dix, in my opinion, that could have gone better, but overall, it was a well put together operation. The NHNG was there by our side the whole time. They supported us administratively and did whatever it took to help.

Upon our return to New Hampshire, the state put together its own program. I have found in my military career that it's the small things that fall through the cracks that cause the most damage. This process eliminated almost all of this. They brought in representatives from the VA informing us of all the benefits available to us. Counseling

was made available for all soldiers and their families. There was good medical care and follow-ups were offered. State employment agencies were brought in to help soldiers find employment if needed. They even helped soldiers find places to live. Compared to the other deployments I have been on, this return has, by far, been the best. Genuine care has been showed to the soldiers, their families and their employers. Thank you very much for your time, and please feel free to ask any questions you may have.

Statement of
Timothy L. Beebe, M.A.
Northeast Regional Manager
Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS)
Veterans Health Administration (VHA)
Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Before the
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the activities of VA's Vet Center program and the role it plays in providing outreach and care to veterans returning from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). I will also briefly describe the role of the Vet Centers in the recent New Hampshire National Guard Reverse Soldier Readiness Program.

The Vet Center program observed its 25th year serving veterans this year. The program was originally established by Congress in 1979 to meet the readjustment needs of veterans returning from the Vietnam War. From the outset, Vet Centers were designed to be community-based, non-medical facilities, offering easy access to care for Vietnam veterans who were experiencing difficulty in resuming a normal life following their service in a combat zone and other stressful military situations. Vet Centers were intended to serve as entry points for disenfranchised veterans in need of VA health care, as well as to provide readjustment counseling, job counseling, benefits counseling, referrals to community services, and other services as needed in particular localities. Additionally and by design, most Vet Center staff are veterans themselves and serve as counselors and role models to veterans-in-need. Immediate family members of eligible veterans are also eligible for certain Vet Center mental health services.

Twenty-five years later, following the grass-roots popularity of the program, eligibility for Vet Center readjustment counseling services has expanded to include all combat veterans. The Vet Center program also provides bereavement counseling services to family members of those soldiers killed while on active duty in service to their country. In addition, the Vet Centers are used to provide counseling to veterans who experienced sexual trauma while on active duty.

The program has grown to 207 Vet Centers nationwide located in all 50 states, and in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, the District of Columbia and Guam. There are 33 Vet Centers in the Readjustment Counseling Services' Northeast Region, which encompasses

Executive Summary

Timothy L. Beebe, M.A.
Northeast Regional Manager
Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS)
Veterans Health Administration (VHA)
Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Before the
Committee of Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

During the period January 20 – March 7, 2005, 810 New Hampshire National Guard OEF/OIF returnees were provided confidential, individual counseling and assessment sessions by Vet Center readjustment counselors at the Manchester, NH, VAMC. Thirty-one clinicians (many of whom are veterans themselves) from sixteen surrounding Vet Centers participated over eighteen work days. Several months later, an additional fourteen NH National Guard Afghanistan veterans were seen individually by Vet Center counselors.

Of the total 824 NH National Guardsmen seen, over 400 (48%) requested follow-up care by Vet Center counselors within 30 days of homecoming. Of the total number of veterans seen, approximately 150 are currently receiving on-going Vet Center care (18%) and that number appears to be increasing over time.

Based on the number of NH soldiers seeking on-going Vet Center care following the mandated individual counseling process, preliminary results seem to indicate that the stigma associated with asking for help upon return from duty overseas has been reduced considerably as a result of this process.

TESTIMONY SUMMARY
DAVID HOULE
REGIONAL ADMINISTRATOR, REGION I, BOSTON
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, VETS
September 19, 2005

This summary will focus on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) at Pease Air National Guard Base in New Hampshire and their "Reunion & Reentry from Combat" program, along with other initiatives and pilot activity by VETS and its partners.

One of the ways VETS meets its mission is by providing employment workshops to separating active duty, Guard, and Reserve servicemembers as part of their transition to civilian life.

In Fiscal Year 2004, over 133,000 separating military personnel were trained in 3,397 employment workshops at military installations across the Nation and worldwide. In Fiscal Year 2005, VETS will complete approximately 4,000 workshops at military installations in the United States and overseas.

The VETS employment workshop is a comprehensive two and one-half day session where participants learn about job searches, career decision-making, current occupational and labor market conditions, resume preparation, as well as interviewing techniques.

We began collecting data in 2003 and from that date through May of 2005, 1,101 members of the reserve components have attended 24 employment workshops.

In New Hampshire, this has given rise to the joint initiative called the "Reunion and Reentry from Combat" program. VETS roles in this joint initiative has been to collaborate with the Employer Support of Guard & Reserve (ESGR) and NH Employment Security (NHES), in developing a program to provide employment related information to Guard and Reserve forces returning from deployment. Information stations from each partner agency are co-located in one central area during the demobilization process to make information and services available.

With regards to the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) in New Hampshire, all deploying service men and women, and their spouses, are given an assessment interview by LVER or DVOP staff. For job seekers or those seeking training opportunities, an on site assessment interview is conducted. Follow up interviews are scheduled as needed.

Another example of a similar New England initiative is in Massachusetts.

The Massachusetts State Workforce Agency and VETS staff have been working closely with the Massachusetts National Guard to conduct a Pilot of a Mini-TAP session on October 1-2, 2005. The Massachusetts National Guard is planning a mandatory drill weekend for one Battalion of 150 individuals who will attend the Mini-Tap sessions. They will also all attend a Job Fair the following day. The National Guard will allow any unemployed service members a drill day to attend on a volunteer basis, so the numbers may be larger than expected on the dates indicated.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my summary. I will be happy to respond to any questions.

TESTIMONY OF

DAVID HOULE

REGIONAL ADMINISTRATOR, BOSTON REGION
VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

September 19, 2005

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Herseth, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. It is my honor to appear before this committee today on behalf of Secretary Elaine Chao to update you on the efforts of the Department of Labor (DOL) to provide Transition Assistance Program services to returning members of the National Guard. I will focus on the activities at Pease Air National Guard Base in New Hampshire and their "Reunion & Reentry from Combat" program.

The mission of the Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) is to provide veterans and transitioning servicemembers with the resources and services to succeed in the 21st century workforce. One of the ways that we meet that mission is by providing employment workshops to separating active, Guard, and Reserve servicemembers as part of their transition to civilian life.

Employment Workshop Overview

DOL is authorized by Chapter 58 of title 10, U.S. Code, to assist the Departments of Defense (DOD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) in providing transition assistance services to separating servicemembers and their spouses. The role of VETS in this effort is to conduct employment workshops based on projections made by each of the Armed Services and the Department of Homeland Security for the U.S. Coast Guard. In the United States, Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVER) lead most employment workshops. In some cases, due to the distances from some State Employment Service Offices to the military installations, and to assist with the rapid growth of the program, contract facilitators were added in early Fiscal Year 1992 and Federal staff in Fiscal Year 1996. In overseas locations, contract staff leads most employment workshops.

To maintain a quality of service delivery and ensure uniformity between locations, all workshops use a common workbook and program of instruction. In addition, all

facilitators, whether DVOP/LVER, Federal staff, or contract, are trained and certified by the National Veterans Training Institute (NVTI).

In Fiscal Year 2004, over 133,000 separating military personnel were trained in 3,397 employment workshops at military installations across the Nation and worldwide. In Fiscal Year 2005, VETS will complete approximately 4,000 workshops at military installations in the United States and overseas.

The VETS employment workshop is a comprehensive two and one-half day session where participants learn about job searches, career decision-making, current occupational and labor market conditions, résumé cover letter preparation, and interviewing techniques. Participants are also provided an evaluation of their employability relative to the job market and receive information on the most current veterans' benefits. Components of an employment workshop include: career self-assessment; résumé development; job search and interview techniques; U.S. labor market information; civilian workplace requirements; and documentation of military skills.

Reserve and National Guard (RC) Employment Workshop

Our global military commitments have necessitated a mobilization of Guard and Reserve members that is unprecedented in modern times. The employment workshop is available for most separating servicemembers at one of the 215 transition offices located on military installations in the United States.

However, Reserve and Guard members usually transition at fewer locations, referred to as demobilization sites. Typically the demobilization process is rapid, taking a matter of days once the servicemembers arrive back in the United States from overseas. For example, the Army standard is to demobilize units in 5 days, and it is not uncommon for military installations to get two or fewer days advance notice before returning troops arrive. During demobilization, servicemembers may be expected to participate in as many as 18 separate briefings or activities such as physical examinations at various locations. This leaves little or no time for a full 2 ½ day employment workshop. Nevertheless, we have found that many Guard and Reserve servicemembers would benefit from such transition assistance. Our State Directors are working directly with the reserve and guard commanders to make special arrangements following demobilization in order to present a modified Transition Assistance Program (TAP) employment workshop to Guard and Reserve separating servicemembers.

The following represents some highlights of other initiatives and pilot activity undertaken by VETS:

- Our state directors have contacted each state Adjutant General to offer outreach and assistance to returning members of the Guard and Reserves during the demobilization process.

- The Massachusetts State Workforce Agency and VETS staff have been working closely with the Massachusetts National Guard to conduct a Pilot of a Mini-TAP session from October 1-2, 2005.

- The Massachusetts National Guard is planning a mandatory drill weekend for 150 individuals who will attend the Mini Tap sessions. They will also attend a Job Fair the following day. The National Guard will allow any unemployed servicemembers a drill day to attend on a volunteer basis, so the numbers may be larger than expected on the dates indicated. Additional sessions may be provided after determining the success of the October 1-2, 2005 event.

- In Oregon, 650 Army Guard members recently demobilized en masse. In preparation for this demobilization, NVTI provided facilitation training on employment workshops for 10 VETS/ State Workforce Agencies (SWA) employees and 10 Guard facilitators.

- In Michigan, we are planning four-day workshops to include after-hours employment assistance information. This will integrate separating active servicemembers, Guard/Reservist and case management clients in an employment workshop-like program.

- Minnesota is continuing to develop its program for Guard and reserve members in concert with VA. In the last two weeks, they have participated in two modified TAP workshops for Guard members. Unlike a standard TAP program, which provides a very good overview of the employment picture, this program is modified based on the specific needs of each unit. As an example, a returning combat unit may need additional information on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and available medical benefits and they will concentrate more in this area (using our partners in the VA as well). Another unit that is mainly transportation may need more emphasis in another area, so they will concentrate on their needs. This program remains fluid in order to provide each unit with what they, and their commanders, feel they need most. This also includes input and participation from the spouses so they are certain to cover their issues/needs. All of these presentations still include available services of VETS, DVOP/LVER, VR&E, the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) briefings, and job-search workshops.

VETS has supported the New Hampshire joint initiative called the "Reunion and Reentry from Combat" program. VETS' role in this joint initiative is to collaborate with the Employer Support of Guard & Reserve (ESGR) and New Hampshire Employment Security (NHES) to develop a program to provide employment related information to Guard and Reserve forces returning from deployment. Information stations from each partner agency are co-located in one central area during the demobilization process to make information and services available on the following:

- Reemployment Rights under USERRA information is provided by the VETS' State Director. USERRA complaints may be taken on site, if appropriate.

- Information regarding recognition of employers supportive of the Guard/Reserves (employer recognition program) and reemployment rights, mediation and assistance is provided by the ESGR, and, as required, referrals are made to VETS.

- Employment related services for those seeking jobs or training (including spouses) is provided by NHES.

- Unemployment compensation information is provided by NHES and claims may be initiated on site.

VETS also provides a Transition Assistance Program (TAP) in New Hampshire for Guard and Reserve members. All deploying servicemen and women, and their spouses, are given an assessment interview by state veterans employment staff. For job seekers or those seeking training opportunities, an on site assessment interview is conducted. Follow up interviews are scheduled as needed. A formal, three-day TAP workshop, modified to address the needs and concerns of the returning servicemen and women, is made available to anyone who expresses an interest. A DVOP or LVER facilitator, or the DVET, is available at each deployment or demobilization to explain the TAP agenda and promote participation.

New Hampshire Employment Security policy, as stated by the Commissioner, is that an Employment Assistance Workshop will be made available at any time and at any location statewide, to suit the needs of our returning troops.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I will be happy to respond to any questions.

Statement of Mary Collins
State Director, New Hampshire Small Business Development Center (SBDC)

Before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Committee on Veterans' Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives

Regarding Transition Assistance for Members of the National Guard

September 19, 2005

Executive Summary

The New Hampshire Small Business Development Center offers free, one-on-one, confidential business management counseling, low cost training, and access to information and referral to more than 3500 business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs each year. From 6 regional centers and several satellite locations the NH SBDC has provided management counseling and educational programs to more than 57, 000 businesses in the past 20 years. The New Hampshire SBDC is a member of the Association of Small Business Development Centers (ASBDC). ASBDC's members are the 63 State, Regional and Territorial Small Business Development Center programs throughout the nation, comprising America's Small Business Development Center Network. America's SBDC network serves between 50,000 and 60,000 self-declared veterans annually.

One of the most cost-effective steps that self-employed members of the National Guard and Reserves can take, to ease economic dislocations resulting from being activated, is contingency planning. America's SBDC network, with approximately 1,000 service centers nationwide, has highly capable counselors who are available to assist members of the National Guard and Reservists who are self-employed to develop plans to deal with the contingency of mobilization. Here in New Hampshire they can assist with strategic planning, access to capital, human resource issues, procurement, etc. SBDC consulting services are available at no charge. In addition, when a business owner or essential employees are activated, one of the things those left behind need most is training. SBDCs can provide a wide array of management, financial and marketing training to those in the firm who must shoulder the responsibility of keeping the firm going in the absence of the owner and essential employees. The NH SBDC currently offers the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation's FastTrac entrepreneurial New Venture training program for NH entrepreneurs and scholarships are available.

Guard and Reserve leaders should make a determined effort to ensure that small business owners in their units are aware of the services of the nationwide SBDC network, the NH SBDC and other SBA management and technical assistance programs. Every effort should be made to encourage small business owners who have not been activated to develop contingency business plans in the event of mobilization. In addition, we urge the Subcommittee to consider new funding for SBDCs to provide expanded management and

discriminating against individuals because of their service, and it mandates some continuation of benefits to those who have been called to active duty. However, USERRA provides no protections to a self employed person who finds his or her business has gone out of business during active duty deployment.

The Service Members Civil Relief Act provides important benefits such as reduced interest rates on mortgage payments, reduced interest rates on credit card debt, protection from eviction if rent is $1,200 or less. These are personal protections as I understand it. Perhaps there should be a review as to whether these protections should be extended to mortgages on business property and business credit cards.

SBA and VA have undertaken other actions as well to help address some of the issues of veterans who are small business owners. SBA Associate Administrator William D. Elmore and his staff have produced a publication entitled, ***Getting Veterans Back To Business.*** This is an excellent and useful publication. The Department of Veterans Affairs operates the Center for Veterans Enterprise ably headed by Scott Denniston. The CVE collaborates closely with ASBDC and SBDC service centers nationwide and does an outstanding job for veterans.

There are numerous efforts being made to help address the very real economic dislocations created by the activation of Guard and Reserve units. The question is, are they enough? And, if not, what are the most cost effective actions that could be taken to further assist small businesses and small business owners impacted by active duty deployment of the business owner or essential employees of the firm?

Many of the proposals being discussed involve direct financial assistance or tax credits. These have the potential to be beneficial.

However, one of the most cost-effective steps that self-employed members of the National Guard and Reserves can take, to ease economic dislocations resulting from being activated, is contingency planning. Members of the Subcommittee, your colleague from Missouri, Congressman Ike Skelton, states the issue very well on his website, and I quote, **"I encourage all small business owners and small businesses with essential employees who are members of the National Guard or Reserve to become familiar with SBA programs <u>and have a plan in place to work through any potential disruption that may result from military call-ups</u>."**

America's Small Business Development Center Network, with approximately 1,000 service centers nationwide, has highly capable counselors who are available to assist members of the National Guard and Reservists who are self-employed to develop plans to deal with the contingency of mobilization. They can assist with strategic planning, human resource issues, procurement, marketing, etc. etc. SBDC consulting services are available at no charge.

In addition, when a business owner or essential employees are activated, one of the things those left behind need most is training. SBDCs can provide a wide array of management,

financial and marketing training to those in the firm who must shoulder the responsibility of keeping the firm going in the absence of the owner and other employees.

The ASBDC is considering a proposal to reduce all training fees for families and employees of small businesses whose owners or essential employees have been called to active duty. This could pose financial challenges for many SBDC service centers, many of whom have seen no increase in federal funding since 1997, while others have experienced significant reductions in federal funding. Here in New Hampshire the SBDC program has not had an increase in federal or state funding since 1997, however our dedicated staff of counselors continues to meet the ever increasing demand for services. I personally came to the SBDC program in the recession of the early '90's through a Department of Labor grant to assist dislocated workers – right here at this Pease location - during the closing of the Pease Air force Base. My mission was to assist former base workers establish new careers in entrepreneurship. Today, 14 years later, many small businesses are experiencing hardship due to the call up of business owners or key employees and unusual actions may be required.

As members of the Subcommittee are aware, federal law currently allows veterans to use their Montgomery GI bill benefits to take non-credit entrepreneurial courses at SBDCs. This is an important benefit to our nation's veterans.

In an effort to try and prevent problems from becoming even more widespread, we would recommend that the leadership of Guard and Reserve Units that have not been activated undertake a concerted effort to identify those in their units who are self-employed. Guard and Reserve leaders should then make a determined effort to ensure that small business owners in their units are aware of the services of Small Business Development Centers and other SBA management and technical assistance programs. Every effort should be made to encourage small business owners who have not been activated to develop contingency business plans in the event of mobilization.

Some National Guard and Reserve members have also experienced pay problems when they are mobilized. Studies conducted at the request of the House Government Reform Committee have confirmed that these problems exist. It is important for members of the Guard and Reserves and their families to be certain that the activated Guards and Reserves receive the compensation due them in a timely fashion. Prompt access to capital in terms of earned pay and benefits should never be in question.

We urge the Subcommittee to consider new funding to SBDCs to provide expanded management and training assistance to members of the National Guard, Reserves and veterans. With additional resources, SBDCs could expand in a meaningful way the scope of their services to small businesses whose owners or key employees are members of the National Guard and the Reserves.
We are talking about my neighbors here in small towns in New Hampshire.

And it only makes sense for the Department of Defense to increase its interaction and initiate support for the SBDC program as it tries to assist members of the Guard and

Reserve who are small business owners. DOD should also look to assist the SBDC program in its efforts to assist members of the Armed Forces when they leave the military and seek to start a small business. A greater involvement by DOD with the SBDC program's assistance to members of the National Guard, Reserves and veterans could enhance DOD's recruiting efforts.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, when a small business appears to be having problems, the all too frequent reaction is that increased access to capital will solve the problem. That is not necessarily the case. Dunn and Bradstreet has repeatedly stated that management decisions are the major reasons small businesses fail. Small businesses, when they are confronted by the loss of a key employee or owner, may well need capital. And with a key employee or owner on active duty, a lender may be extremely reluctant to make a loan regardless of the past financial history of the business. SBDCs have a long and successful history of helping small businesses gain access to capital - in fact each week as state director I personally take calls from small business owners seeking information related to financial assistance.

When a small business is faced with the loss of a key employee or owner, hopefully it has in place a plan for that contingency. Unfortunately that is rarely the case. In that event, a serious analysis of the condition of the business needs to be undertaken and a strategic plan formulated for the situation as it exists. Securing increased capital may be just one of several strategic actions that need to be taken. . Contingency plans were proven essential after 9/11 – and we at the NH SBDC were first hand witnesses to that need

After a quarter of a century serving over 11 million small business owners, our nation's SBDC network is well qualified to assist a small business that has lost its owner or essential employees. SBDCs are willing and able to help address the serious business owner issues addressed by the activation of Guard and Reserve units. We pledge to this Subcommittee, to DOD, to our men and women on active duty who are small business owners, and to small business owners in the Guard and Reserve, that America's Small Business Development Center Network will do its very best, within the constraints of the resources we have, to continue to provide quality business management assistance when and where it is needed.

Thank you again Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Herseth, Congressman Bradley, Congressman Michaud and members of the Subcommittee, for allowing me to testify today. At this time I will be pleased to respond to any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.

Statement of
James A. Whitson
Director, Eastern Area
Veterans Benefits Administration
Department of Veterans Affairs

before the

Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Field Hearing
Pease Air National Guard Base, New Hampshire

September 19, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the role of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in providing transition assistance for members of the National Guard and Reserves. I am accompanied by Ms. Maribeth Cully, Director of the Manchester Regional Office. My testimony will cover the transition assistance VA provides to all servicemembers and then focus on the comprehensive transition assistance provided to members of the National Guard and Reserves by the Manchester Regional Office.

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) are designed to prepare retiring or separating military personnel for their return to civilian life. While the two and a half day TAP Workshops primarily emphasize employment preparation, one half day is devoted to a discussion of VA benefits. The Department of Labor provides the

employment workshop. VA heath care, compensation for service-connected disabilities, the Montgomery GI Bill, VA home loans, life insurance, and vocational rehabilitation and employment services can play a key role in a veteran's successful readjustment to civilian life following active duty.

DTAP is an integral component of transition assistance for servicemembers who may be released because of disability or who believe they have a disability qualifying them for vocational rehabilitation and employment related benefits and services. The goal of DTAP is to encourage and assist potentially eligible servicemembers in making an informed decision about VA's vocational rehabilitation assistance program and to expedite delivery of vocational rehabilitation services to eligible persons. DTAP briefings are the shared responsibility of members of the Public Contact Team of the Veterans Service Center and members of the Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment Division at the VA Regional Office.

While TAP and DTAP are central to VA's efforts to inform active-duty personnel about VA benefits and services, VA also provides briefings to servicemembers about military separation and retirement services programs, military medical facilities and Physical Evaluation Boards, special outreach to Reserve and Guard Units, Casualty Assistance Services, and various other military liaison activities.

In FY 2004, VA representatives conducted more than 7,200 briefings, including TAP and DTAP, attended by over 260,000 active-duty personnel and their families residing in the United States. VA personnel also conducted over 115,000 personal interviews with attendees. Through July 2005, VA representatives conducted close to 6,500 briefings for approximately 268,000 attendees and conducted more than 92,000 personal interviews.

Under a memorandum of agreement (MOA) between VA and the Department of Defense (DoD), VA representatives provide benefits briefings overseas as well, at bases in Germany, Italy, Japan, Okinawa, Korea, England, Spain, Iceland, Belgium, Bahrain, and Guantanamo Bay for nine months each year. During FY 2004, over 600 briefings were conducted in foreign countries, attended by more than 15,000 active-duty personnel. Through June 2005, close to 441 briefings were conducted in foreign countries, attended by over 11,000 active-duty personnel.

VA has provided TAP briefings aboard Naval vessels, including the USS Constellation, the USS Enterprise, and the USS George Washington, on their return from the Persian Gulf to the United States. VBA will continue to support requests from the Department of the Navy for TAP workshops aboard ships.

In concert with the military services outreach program, VA continues its Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program through which servicemembers

can apply for service-connected compensation within 180 days prior to discharge or retirement from active service. The required physical examination is conducted, service medical records are reviewed, and a claim is evaluated prior to or closely after separation from service. Upon receipt of the claimant's DD Form 214, Report of Release from Active Military Service, benefits can be authorized immediately. Currently, BDD is provided at 140 military installations, including two locations overseas - Landstuhl, Germany and Yongsan, Korea. In FY 2004, approximately 40,000 BDD claims were taken. Through August 2005, approximately 34,000 BDD claims have been taken.

VA also distributes information on benefits and services through the Veterans Assistance at Discharge System (VADS). New veterans receive informational brochures and an explanatory letter from the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

With the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), VA expanded its efforts even further with the Seamless Transition Program. In 2003, VBA began to assign permanent, full-time representatives at key military treatment facilities such as the Walter Reed Army Medical Center; Bethesda Naval Medical Center; and the Eisenhower, Brooke and Madigan Army Medical Centers, where seriously injured OEF/OIF returnees are hospitalized. VA representatives provide benefits information and assist in filing claims. They monitor patient progress and movement, and coordinate the

submission and smooth transfer of claims to VA regional offices. Each case is case-managed at the regional offices to expedite processing. From October 3, 2003, through the end of August 2005, VBA representatives assisted over 7,300 patients at the major military treatment facilities.

Outreach to Reserve/Guard members is part of the overall VA outreach program. During peacetime, this outreach is generally accomplished on an "on call" or "as requested" basis. However, with the activation and deployment of large numbers of Reserve and Guard members following the September 11, 2001, attack on America and the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, VA outreach to these members has been greatly expanded.

VA has made arrangements with Reserve and Guard officials to schedule briefings for members being mobilized and demobilized. In FY 2004, VA representatives conducted 1,399 pre- and post- deployment briefings, attended by 88,366 Reserve and Guard members. Through June 2005, VBA representatives conducted 1,454 pre- and post-deployment briefings attended by approximately 93,000 Reserve and Guard members.

Returning Guard and Reserve members can elect to attend the formal three-day TAP workshops. VA has also published a brochure, *A Summary of VA Benefits for National Guard and Reserve Personnel*, which is widely distributed to

Guard and Reserve units. A special page on VA's main web site is dedicated for use by Guard and Reserve members.

VA has an MOA with the National Guard Bureau (NGB) whereby the NGB will arrange opportunities for VA to provide information to Guard members returning from OEF/OIF. The Guard will report the demobilization of Guard units to keep VA apprised of where and when they will return to their local communities.

VBA Procedures for the Return of New Hampshire Guard and Reserve

Since September 11, 2001, more than 2,500 New Hampshire servicemembers have been activated. All but approximately 265 are now home. The Manchester Regional Office has established contacts with National Guard and Reserve units throughout New Hampshire to ensure transition assistance is provided to the returning servicemembers.

When servicemembers are due to return home, the Air National Guard and Reserve units contact the Manchester Regional Office's OEF/OIF Coordinator to set up TAP briefings at Pease Air Force Base. In 2004 and 2005, the Manchester RO conducted 50 TAP briefings with a combined attendance of over 1,900 transitioning servicemembers; 205 of these individuals requested and received formal interviews and assistance with benefits applications.

The TAP briefings provide information on the full range of VA benefits, as well as benefits provided by the state of New Hampshire. While there, the OEF/OIF coordinator speaks to each individual servicemember and provides a business card to each participant. Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) counselors also attend to explain rehabilitation and employment benefits available to transitioning servicemembers who are near their release dates. All servicemembers who are within six months pre- and 12 months post-active duty are eligible for vocational and educational counseling, as well as assistance with school and employment resources.

VR&E counselors also extend their outreach to injured servicemembers who are hospitalized or recuperating at home and cannot attend TAP briefings. They inform them, and their families, about vocational and independent living services, and help them to complete an application for benefits. The counselors make eligibility determinations prior to release from active duty.

The Manchester RO's OIF/OEF Coordinator maintains regular contact with her counterpart at the Manchester VA Medical Center. When OIF/OEF veterans go to the Manchester VAMC for care, the coordinator refers them to the Manchester RO for benefits. Conversely, all veterans who come to the RO first, are referred to the Manchester VA Medical Center.

Reservists and National Guard members serving in support OEF/OIF become eligible for home loan benefits upon serving at least ninety days on active duty. Those who were not activated must serve six years in the Selected Reserve to gain housing loan entitlement. At the TAP briefings, interested veterans can complete an application for a certificate of eligibility to obtain a VA home loan. The Regional Loan Center in the Manchester RO will process the applications locally instead of sending them to the Winston-Salem Eligibility Center. Manchester has assisted 230 veterans in obtaining their certificates expeditiously.

In addition to the Air National Guard and Reserve unit TAP briefings, the RO also provides transition assistance to returning Army National Guard servicemembers. The Army National Guard requires that all returning servicemembers attend Reverse Soldier Readiness Processing (RSRP). An agreement between the Manchester VA Medical Center and the National Guard established the Medical Center as the New Hampshire site for RSRP. Servicemembers are required during RSRP to have an RO employee verify that they received information on VA benefits before they can be released from active duty. Since January 2005, almost 900 returning Army National Guard members have received information through this process.

Special Adaptive Housing benefits are also available for veterans with certain permanent and total service-connected disabilities. Eligible veterans may

receive either a $50,000 or a $10,000 grant from VA to assist in either adapting their homes or acquiring new homes with adaptations made necessary due to the nature of their disabilities. The program is administered by VA's Regional Loan Centers. Manchester's Loan Guaranty Division maintains contact with every regional office within its jurisdiction to identify any OIF/OEF veterans who may be eligible for the grant. We have awarded one grant and contacted 13 other eligible OIF/OEF veterans.

Mr. Chairman, we at VA are proud of our continuing role in the transition of servicemembers from military to civilian life, and seek to continually improve the quality and breadth of our outreach efforts to active duty, Reserve, and National Guard members.

Thank you for allowing me to appear before you today. I would be pleased to respond to any questions from members of the Subcommittee.

TESTIMONY OF

STAFF SERGEANT ROBERT SHEA
TRAINING NCO, 744TH TRANSPORTATION COMPANY
NEW HAMPSHIRE ARMY NATIONAL GUARD

BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

September 19, 2005

Good afternoon. My name is SSG Shea, and I am the full-time training NCO for the 744th Transportation Company. I was deployed with this Company as the assistant truck master during Operation Iraqi Freedom II. I am also a veteran of the first Gulf War and was deployed with the same Company.

I am here to testify in favor of a process that is very important to me not only as a soldier but as one who takes care of the M-day (part-time) soldier every day. I am pleased to see how far we have come through the years. From my experience coming home in 1991, demobilization was handled quickly by the active duty Army at Ft Devens, Massachusetts. We were not afforded the opportunity of the "Operation Welcome Home" initiative. The process at Ft Drum was handled well, but due to the number of soldiers demobilizing, it left little time to address the individual needs of the returning soldiers. Operation Welcome Home has given me the tools I need to make the adjustment back into civilian life and full-time National Guard work back home in New Hampshire. The three-day process was broken into 3 blocks and was a well thought out, executed plan. This plan allowed soldiers to stay focused on one process at a time and did not overload them with information.

Block "A" dealt with our administrative files, ensuring every soldier's mobilization files were up to date. Educational benefits were also discussed in this block. For quite a few soldiers, the information they received was unmatched by Active Army. These benefits can be unique to each state, and having a knowledgeable representative on hand is a plus for the soldier.

For Block "B," the entire day is focused on veteran and medical needs of the soldier. Each soldier was taken care of on an individual basis. I felt the staff at the VA Hospital in Manchester truly cared about our needs and went out of their way to see that we received attention. We were afforded an opportunity to talk to a mental health counselor and discuss any problems that may have occurred during deployment. This is an outstanding way of taking care of soldiers. Hospital staff and counselors went out of their way to set up appointments or get soldiers much needed help on the spot. They later made follow up phone calls to ensure that all soldiers were getting the help they needed. ESGR made soldiers feel that the transition back to civilian employment would be smooth and also offered guidance in case unexpected problems arose.

Block "C" encompassed a family piece focused on what soldiers and family members can expect following a long deployment. The Chaplains Office assisted in this process. We were broken down into four small groups and given questions to answer that were relevant to our experiences during deployment. We were asked tough questions and gave honest answers. This made me realize the mixed emotions everyone was having. This would be an excellent forum in which to have outside counselors available to relate to the soldiers' needs.

In closing, having come home from the Gulf War in '91 and Operation Iraqi Freedom last February, the difference of having a program in place like "Operation Welcome Home" has made the transition to civilian life less complicated and more fulfilling, knowing that there are so many available resources and support structures available for soldiers.