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STATEMENT BY

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

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
UNITES STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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**ON TRANSITION ASSISTANCE AND DISABLED
TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS**

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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 106,000 Air National Guard members of the National Guard serving our Country, States and Territories. The Transition Assistance and Disabled Transition Assistance Programs (TAP/DTAP) are critically important components in our efforts to take care of Service members.

As the recent General Accounting Office (GAO) Report *"Military and Veteran's Benefits; Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard"* noted, TAP/DTAP's efforts have not been completely effective. Although, as the GAO report noted, Guard and Reserve personnel are entitled to participation in the TAP, these Service Members must have been in a mobilized status for more than 180 days, historically making the program unavailable to many mobilized National Guard personnel since many National Guard members are mobilized for periods less than 180 days. Because the TAP was primarily focused on the transition of Active Component Soldiers to civilian life, the program has not been entirely successful with regard to the transition of eligible Guard and Reserve Soldiers from a mobilized status. Many National Guard members remain unaware of many services available to them. Additionally, some benefits require that the member apply before he or she leaves mobilized active duty status, with the result that some members lose the opportunity to apply for these benefits entirely.

The reasons for the current challenges being experienced by the TAP for Guard members are manifold. As has already been noted, the TAP was originally

designed for the transition of Active Duty members to civilian life, and the structure and content of the program reflects that design. Secondly, 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. Unfortunately, this means that the time available for administration of TAP components is extremely limited¹.

Additionally, the TAP is administered at mobilization stations normally at a distance from the members' home stations, which results in a lack of familiarity with local conditions and regional issues on the part of personnel administering the program. One reason why the TAP is effective with regard to Active Component Service Members is that these personnel undergo a comprehensive program while enjoying the ability to return home to their families at the end of each day. Additionally, Service family members are available to participate in many of the critical decisions associated with issues like medical coverage, educational benefits and retirement benefits. As a result, Active Component personnel are far more likely to avail themselves of the opportunities provided by this program than is a National Guard member who has been away from his family for an extended period.

TAP is administered to Active Component personnel at 82 Air Force sites and 53 Army locations, whereas National Guard personnel receive their TAP information and counseling at one of the 27 demobilization sites. In effect, Active Component Army personnel receive their TAP briefings while at their home stations, while Reserve Component Personnel receive their information removed from the communities in which they live and work. It has become increasingly clearer, that our Service Members should receive TAP/DTAP while at home station whenever possible.

¹ As noted in the GAO report, the Army standard for the demobilization process is five days.

Employment counseling, for example, is far more useful to Service Members who can consult with their families during this process than those separated from their loved ones. Additionally, employment briefings and seminars delivered at the regional or local level benefit from a greater understanding of local employment conditions, which can vary widely from region to region. Assistance provided by Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) would also be enhanced through the use of home station Transition Assistance. While ESGR information, including reemployment rights under Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA), are always useful, many of the capabilities provided by ESGR would benefit from being administered regionally and locally. Presently, though ESGR information is included as a part of the TAP at the various demobilization stations, these briefings cannot always address issues specific to members' communities.

In addition to the other benefits of home station administration of Transition Assistance, delivery and effectiveness of Veteran's benefit information would also be enhanced. At present, Veterans Affairs counselors visit demobilizing units at their demobilization sites, but these personnel cannot be aware of many local and regional issues that affect the members of these units. Delivery of the Veterans Affairs portion of the TAP by regionally based Veterans Affairs personnel would greatly enhance the effectiveness of this important component of the program.

The timely dissemination of Veterans Affairs benefit information is especially important with regard to those members who have incurred disabilities during the course of their active duty. As noted in the GAO report, some actions regarding application for benefits related to disabilities incurred on active duty must be taken while in an active duty status. Delivery of this benefit information at home station in a mobilized status would significantly enhance understanding and participation in Veterans Affairs programs for our disabled members. The National Guard Bureau and Department of Veterans Affairs have already taken

steps to facilitate our Guardmen's transition to life as a veteran by signing a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) on May 18, 2005. This MOA provides definition of agreed upon requirements, expectations and obligations between the National Guard Bureau and Department of Veterans Affairs in setting upon a nation-wide coalition that will extend out to 54 National Guard Joint Forces Headquarters with a Health and Benefits Support Specialist assigned to each HQ for the principal reason of assisting Guard members and their families in accessing benefits entitled through their service.

The challenges facing TAP managers to effectively transition National Guard members have implications beyond the detrimental effects on the member and their family. The DoD compensation system currently in place depends heavily on the use of benefits and incentives to leverage retention following periods of mobilized service. As a result, several important benefits available to reservists are contingent upon the service member remaining a part of the organization following demobilization. Failure to properly inform service members of the benefits available to them, and of the service requirements associated with these benefits, represents a lost opportunity to retain members at a time in which retention of these experiences veterans must be the services' highest priority.

Critical to successful retention of these service members requires a more effective follow-through support in the period immediately following demobilization. Many of the programs offered as a part of the TAP require member participation both while on active duty and following transition to a non-mobilized status. For example, participation in TRICARE Reserve Select, which provides one year of TRICARE coverage for every 90 days of mobilized service, is only available to members who choose to 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 only available to service members who choose to remain in the National Guard. Additionally, every effort must be made to facilitate the flow of questions

and concerns that inevitably arise regarding member benefits in the days and weeks following demobilization. To be truly effective, follow-on support would require close coordination by TAP representatives at the state and local levels. Support for National Guard member participation in these programs must necessarily include support across the continuum of the mobilization-post mobilization experience, not simply during the five day window currently allocated to the demobilization process itself.

As noted in the GAO report, several pilot programs are currently underway that involve administration of the TAP/DTAP at the state and local levels. Of particular note are Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense plans to deliver Veterans benefits briefings during weekend drill periods following demobilization, which would greatly enhance the effectiveness of this program. Employment assistance pilot programs in Minnesota, Oregon, and Michigan are exploring several means by which employment assistance can be provided to Guard members, though in at least one case, the program would require policy changes resulting in mandatory participation for Guard members in the 30 days following their demobilization.

Additionally, the New Hampshire National Guard began a pilot program for five weeks from February through March, for its 800 redeploying Guardsmen, called "Operation Welcome Home". The program involved detailed coordination between numerous state agencies and private providers and was executed through the Joint Force Headquarters in conjunction with the states' Family Support and Recruiting and Retention Programs. NH is among the first to reach out to such a large number of returning service members early on at the initial demobilization stage. Indeed, all of the initiatives would enhance National Guard participation in the TAP.

Now more than ever, taking care of National Guard members must be our highest priority. Leveraging the benefits available to National Guard members

and their families through enhanced administration of the TAP represents a key component in our commitment to the welfare of returning veterans and their families. A tremendous step would be, allowing the National Guard member's spouse or family to be present during much of the Transition Assistance briefings and council would greatly assist the National Guard member make informed decisions. Our immediate goal is to provide a continuum of services and support before, during and after mobilization ensuring we give the best to those who sacrifice so much for America's security. Allowing the National Guard member's spouse or family to be present during much of the Transition Assistance briefings and council would greatly assist the National Guard member make informed decisions. Our ultimate goal is to provide a continuum of care and services before and after mobilization ensuring we give the best to those who sacrifice so much for America's security.

I look forward to working with the members of this Committee, DoD, DoL and VA on these issues. I believe that the National Guard, working hand in hand with the leadership in these federal agencies as well as state and local agencies, can dramatically enhance National Guard members' quality of life and our personnel retention.

Thank you.