

Executive Summary – South Dakota Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

Since the beginning of the War on Terror South Dakota has over **5,500 new veterans** of which over 2/3 are members of the National Guard and Reserves.

Readjustment Task Force established by the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to direct service member readjustment and transition in South Dakota. Along with the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs the Task Force includes representation from:

- State Division of Veterans Affairs
- South Dakota National Guard
- State Department of Human Services
- South Dakota Council of Mental Health Centers
- Veterans Administration
- Veterans Administration Vet Centers

Teams made up of representatives from each of the Task Force organizations provide assistance in the following areas:

- **Family Support Briefings**
- **Demobilization Station Briefings**
- **Welcome Home Briefings**
- **Welcome Home Packets**
- **Veteran's Forums**

Each of the past 4 years the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs has also hosted a **Veterans Summit**. Veterans Summit brings together representatives from all major organizations that work with the military in South Dakota. Information is shared and ideas are exchanged.

Results

In a report from April 30, 2006 by the Veterans Administration South Dakota had a total of 2,176 Global War on Terrorism Veterans registered in the VA System. This total is more than any state in VISN 23 which includes South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, and Nebraska.

State Legislation - Some recent initiatives include:

- Revising the definition of the periods of service which qualify for veteran's benefits to include Global War on Terror dates.
- Reestablishing the South Dakota Veterans Bonus program
- Offering free educational benefits for spouses and children of members of the South Dakota National Guard who have been killed or permanently disabled while serving on Active Duty.
- Prohibiting picketing at military funerals.

South Dakota Readjustment and Outreach Efforts to Global War on Terror Veterans

I would like to start by THANKING the Committee for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of Major General Mike Gorman, Adjutant General for the South Dakota National Guard and Secretary of the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs.

My name is Andy Gerlach. I am the Deputy Secretary for the South Dakota Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, a Major in the South Dakota Army National Guard, and a Veteran.

This morning I would like to share with the Committee information on our Readjustment Program to assist Global War on Terror veterans, their families, employers and South Dakota communities. South Dakota's Outreach Effort has been a partnership of State Government and the Federal Government, along with private sector organizations and individuals across South Dakota.

Since the beginning of the War on Terror South Dakota has over 5,500 new veterans and our overall veteran population is nearing its highest level since World War II. Of the 5,500 new veterans over 2/3 are members of the National Guard and Reserves who, after their mobilization, have returned to South Dakota to continue their lives.

Shortly after the first of our National Guard units was mobilized in late 2003, the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs saw the need to establish a Readjustment Program for South Dakota's returning National Guard, Reserve and Active Duty service members. In addition, we recognized the program needed to include the service member families, employers and the communities to which they were returning.

From this concept our Readjustment Task Force was established. The Task Force is headed by the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and directs all facets of service member readjustment and transition in South Dakota. Along with the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs the Task Force includes representation from:

- State Division of Veterans Affairs
- South Dakota National Guard
- State Department of Human Services
- South Dakota Council of Mental Health Centers
- Veterans Administration
- Veterans Administration Vet Centers

In South Dakota our Readjustment effort has been far-reaching and begins well before the service member returns home. Teams made up of representatives from each of the Task Force organizations provide assistance in the following areas:

- **Family Support Briefings** – Begin the process and are held prior to the unit returning home. Family Support Briefings utilize professionals to talk about

what to expect from a behavioral standpoint for everyone involved. They also provide benefit information and points of contact for the family.

- **Demobilization Station Briefings** - Conducted at the active duty post upon the unit's return. Teams from the Department of Military & Veterans Affairs, Veterans Administration, and National Guard travel to the demobilization station for personalized briefings with the soldiers.
- **Welcome Home Briefings** - Conducted 30-90 days after return at the unit's location. Follow-up information is presented to reiterate what was stated at the Family Support and Demobilization Station briefings. Close attention is also paid to specific readjustment issues within the unit.
- **Welcome Home Packets** – Sent to ALL returning veterans with printed information outlining State and Federal benefits and services. This information is also found on our Department website which has been a great resource for veterans of all ages.
- **Veteran's Forums** - Sponsored in communities throughout South Dakota in partnership with our Veterans Service organizations. These forums provide benefit overviews and service information to all members of the public.

In each of these venues the importance of Registering with the Veterans Administration is strongly stressed.

Each of the past 4 years the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs has also hosted a **Veterans Summit**. Our Veterans Summit brings together representatives from all major organizations that work with the military in South Dakota. Information is shared and ideas are exchanged. The Veterans Summit addresses a wide range of issues and, along with fostering a spirit of cooperation, gives the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs ideas for initiatives that can be worked into our Strategic Model.

Last month our 2006 Veterans Summit was held in Pierre. The theme dealt specifically with post-deployment Mental Health issues that are facing service members, their families, and peers.

Results

South Dakota's Readjustment and Transition Effort focused on returning veterans from the Global War on Terror has achieved tangible results. Our efforts have the State's new veterans registering for Veterans Administration services in numbers that outpace surrounding states.

As stated earlier, during Family Support Briefings, Demobilization Station Briefings, Welcome Home Briefings and Veterans Forums new veterans are strongly encouraged to enroll in the VA Health Care System.

In a report from April 30, 2006 by the Veterans Administration South Dakota had a total of 2,176 Global War on Terrorism Veterans registered in the VA System. This total is more than any state in VISN 23 which includes South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, and Nebraska.

Legislation – The Veterans Transition partnership has also involved our elected leaders in South Dakota. Governor Rounds and the State Legislature have supported the effort of our military in every way possible and have taken a proactive approach with State Legislation since the beginning of the War on Terror.

Some recent initiatives include:

- Revising the definition of the periods of service which qualify for veteran's benefits to include Global War on Terror dates.
- Reestablishing the South Dakota Veterans Bonus program, which goes back to WW I, and provides up to \$500 for South Dakota residents who serve on Active Duty in support of GWOT (Active, Guard, Reserve).
- Offering free educational benefits at South Dakota Regental Campuses and State Technical Schools for spouses and children of members of the South Dakota National Guard who have been killed or permanently disabled while serving on Active Duty.
- Prohibiting picketing at military funerals.

In Closing

I would like to re-emphasis that the success we have as advocates for Veterans is the result of cooperation among leaders, organizations and agencies and the sharing of ideas and resources.

Since our troops have been deployed, South Dakota has stood as a true national leader in developing innovative ways to serve our returning service members and their families. The Citizens of our State can be proud of this.