

**Statement of
William Fillman
Director, Central Area
Veterans Benefits Administration
Department of Veterans Affairs**

Before the
**Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

**Field Hearing
Ellsworth Air Force Base – Rapid City, SD**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the role of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) in providing transitional assistance to members of the National Guard and Reserves in the State of South Dakota. Today, I am accompanied by: Mr. John Smith, Director of the Regional Office for the Dakotas.

My testimony will address the current outreach efforts of the Sioux Falls Regional Office and the transition assistance provided to our service men and women in South Dakota.

Sioux Falls Regional Office

The Sioux Falls Regional Office provides a variety of veteran benefits and services including Disability Compensation, Pension, and Vocational

Rehabilitation and Employment services. The office is actively involved with outreach services and benefits counseling throughout the state.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has a long history of special efforts to bring information on VA benefits and services to active duty military personnel.

Returning servicemembers, including members of the National Guard and Reserves, may elect to attend formal 3-day workshops provided through the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) – a joint effort of VA, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Labor. At TAP workshops, separating servicemembers and their spouses are provided information describing the VA benefits available to them, and are encouraged to apply for all benefits to which they are entitled. Additionally, separating servicemembers and their spouses receive employment assistance, to include resume writing, skills marketing, job referral and other transitional services through the Department of Labor's employment workshops.

The Sioux Falls Regional Office actively supports the commitment to provide a seamless transition for returning military members. In FY 2005, the office conducted 12 TAP briefings at Ellsworth Base for 483 participants. To date in FY 2006, the Office has conducted 9 briefings for 203 participants.

The Sioux Falls Regional Office is working diligently to ensure members of the Guard and Reserve understand the VA benefits to which they may be entitled. So far in 2006, 60 South Dakota National Guard Recruiters and 74 members of the Navy Reserve received training on VA benefits.

Employees from the Regional Office also participated in the “Veterans Benefits Forum”, hosted in Aberdeen, South Dakota in July 2005. The office staffed an informational booth and answered questions concerning VA benefits. Also in July 2005, the office participated in the South Dakota Veterans Summit by providing an overview of VA benefits. Members of the National Guard and Reserves, County Veteran Service Officers, Veteran Service Officers, and congressional staff members were in attendance. The RO is working diligently to ensure South Dakota National Guard Members’ transitions are as seamless as possible and are doing whatever they can to ensure members and their families are aware of and know how to access VA medical care and benefits.

VBA has also assisted in training 54 newly hired Department of Defense State Benefit Advisors. These individuals are based at the State Adjutant General’s office and serve a coordinating function between demobilizing National Guard, Reserve units, and local VA facilities. There is a State Benefit Advisor located in each state, including South Dakota.

Mr. Chairman, we at VA are proud of our continuing role in serving this Nation's veterans. We continually evaluate and seek opportunities to improve the quality and scope of our outreach efforts to members of the military. I hope that my testimony today has provided you and the Subcommittee with a better understanding of the Transitional Assistance Program extended by the Sioux Falls Regional Office and its partners, the Department of Defense and the Department of Labor, to the veterans of South Dakota. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

This concludes my testimony. I would be pleased to answer any questions from the members of the Subcommittee.