

**TESTIMONY OF  
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BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
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Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

It is indeed an honor to appear before this committee today on behalf of the Director, James Miller, to update you on the efforts of the Arkansas Department of Veterans Affairs to provide Transition Assistance to veterans returning from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. With Service officers and support staff located in the Federal VA Regional Office at Fort Roots, North Little Rock, hospital representatives located in Little Rock's John L. McClellan VA Medical Center, and the Arkansas Veterans Home in Fayetteville, and most importantly, County Veteran Service Officers serving in each of the 75 counties in Arkansas, the Arkansas Department of Veterans Affairs offers expert assistance to our veterans.

Our County Veteran Service Officer Program is a major key to our success. In each county we offer professional advice and assistance free of charge. Not only do we advise our National Guard members concerning their VA Benefits, but we also provide information on special employment assistance through the Arkansas Department of Workforce Services, the Veterans preference in state hiring policy, and Homestead and Personal Property Tax Exemptions for those who meet the requirements.

Our County Veteran Service Officers live and work in the community that they serve allowing for a close personal relationship between the Veteran Service Officers and the people they serve. Our agency is somewhat integrated with the National Guard as evidenced by the fact that many of our County Veteran Service Officers are retired National Guard members from the local area that they serve. Several of our "Work Studies" are National Guard Members. Upon return from deployments, National Guard Units are visited by County Veteran Service Officers in order to raise the Units' awareness of the Service Officers availability and to provide benefit claims assistance. These close relationships allow National Guard Commanders to often refer troops by name to our Service Officers.

There are several great programs provided by the Federal Veterans Benefits Administration. The Post Deployment Health Reassessment program (PDHRA), which is the Department of Defense (DoD) mandated force health protection initiative is applauded by our department. This program has been very favorably received. These are outstanding programs that we use to educate the returning troops. In addition, one of our Department's major goals is to provide continuing support. Many Guard members returning from deployment are anxious to reconnect with loved ones and thus Veterans Benefits are not of an immediate concern. By having a County Veterans Service Officer available in each county, we offer a unique service to the veteran, allowing us to provide one-on-one assistance, alleviating the need for the veterans to return to the Guard Unit or to a Veterans Affairs Regional Office in order to receive assistance.

The mission of the Arkansas Department of Veterans Affairs (ADVA) is to provide dedicated service to the veterans of our state, their families and their survivors. Our employees are committed to excellence in assisting with the development of all benefits claims. Veterans are encouraged to take advantage of the professional expertise available through our staff. Our mission is to "Serve those who have served". The Arkansas Department of Veterans Affairs furnishes representation for veterans, widows and dependents.

Some of the many services we provide for all veterans and qualified dependents are:

- Access to the Arkansas Veterans Home, with cost based on individual ability to pay.
- Special Vehicle license plates such as Purple Heart, Prisoner of War (POW) and Disabled American Veteran (DAV), through the Arkansas Department of Finance and Administration.
- Homestead and personal Property Tax exemption for certain veterans through the Arkansas Department of Finance and Administration.
- Advice on Income Tax exemptions
- Veterans Preference in State Hiring
- Tuition Assistance and Fees at state supported institutions of higher education to certain dependents of members who were killed in action, missing in action or prisoners of war.
- Special employment assistance for veterans through the Arkansas Department of Workforce Services.
- Disability Hunting and Fishing License through the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.
- Counseling and Representation in applying for Federal Veterans Administration Benefits.

- Advice and assistance to bereaved family members of deceased veterans.
- Oversight and management of the State Veterans Cemetery, Veterans' Homes, and County Veteran Services Officers.

Our office consists of five major departments:

- The Arkansas Veterans Home in Little Rock, Arkansas
- The Fayetteville Veterans Home in Fayetteville, Arkansas.
- The Arkansas State Veterans Cemetery in North Little Rock, Arkansas
- The Arkansas Department of Veterans Affairs main office located in North Little Rock, Arkansas
- County Veterans Services Officers located in each of the 75 county seats.

Focusing on the Arkansas National Guard and the services that the Arkansas Department of Veterans Affairs provides for them, our first and most important point of contact is with our County Veteran Service Officers (CVSO's).

The County Veteran Service Officers provide a valuable first contact liaison because:

- Our CVSO's visit National Guard Units as the units return from deployment and go on to provide continuing support.
- Our CVSO's visit the National Guard Veterans, if need be, in the hospitals or homes. Our CVSO's are an enormously caring group who work diligently to meet the needs veterans.
- We bridge the gap for the Guard member who often resides a considerable distance from his/her Arkansas National Guard Unit and the Federal Veterans Administration Regional Office (VARO)
- Our County Veterans Services Officers, like the National Guard, "Live and Work Where They Serve".

Because we have one County Veteran Services Officer assigned to each of the 75 counties, our service and availability is unparalleled. The County Veteran Service Officer, conveniently located in the county seat, is only a phone call away. Each office has published office hours but routinely work outside those hours in order to meet the needs of the veterans. Working together with the County Veteran Service Officer, our service officers have filed an average of 807 claims per month in calendar year 2006. The average monthly rate was 715 during calendar year 2005 and only 654 in calendar year 2004. More

than 4,200 members of the 39<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade arrived in Kuwait in March of 2004 for the beginning of their combat tour in Iraq. Those troops arrived back in the states in April of 2005. Since the return of the 39<sup>th</sup>, we have experienced an average increase of over 150 claims per month. Even with the additional claims, our success rate for a favorable ruling on claims is still around 76% compared to a national average of 64%.

It is our desire to provide all veterans transitioning to civilian life with the resources and services necessary to succeed in the 21st century workforce. Our goal is for every Guard member to experience a seamless transition back to civilian life. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I thank you for this opportunity to testify.