

TESTIMONY OF
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NEW HAMPSHIRE ARMY NATIONAL GUARD
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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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 & Reentry 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.