

**Statement of
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before the

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

**Field Hearing
Pease Air National Guard Base, New Hampshire**

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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 Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in providing transition assistance for members of the National Guard and Reserves. I am accompanied by Ms. Maribeth Cully, Director of the Manchester Regional Office. My testimony will cover the transition assistance VA provides to all servicemembers and then focus on the comprehensive transition assistance provided to members of the National Guard and Reserves by the Manchester Regional Office.

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) are designed to prepare retiring or separating military personnel for their return to civilian life. While the two and a half day TAP Workshops primarily emphasize employment preparation, one half day is devoted to a discussion of VA benefits. The Department of Labor provides the

employment workshop. VA health care, compensation for service-connected disabilities, the Montgomery GI Bill, VA home loans, life insurance, and vocational rehabilitation and employment services can play a key role in a veteran's successful readjustment to civilian life following active duty.

DTAP is an integral component of transition assistance for servicemembers who may be released because of disability or who believe they have a disability qualifying them for vocational rehabilitation and employment related benefits and services. The goal of DTAP is to encourage and assist potentially eligible servicemembers in making an informed decision about VA's vocational rehabilitation assistance program and to expedite delivery of vocational rehabilitation services to eligible persons. DTAP briefings are the shared responsibility of members of the Public Contact Team of the Veterans Service Center and members of the Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment Division at the VA Regional Office.

While TAP and DTAP are central to VA's efforts to inform active-duty personnel about VA benefits and services, VA also provides briefings to servicemembers about military separation and retirement services programs, military medical facilities and Physical Evaluation Boards, special outreach to Reserve and Guard Units, Casualty Assistance Services, and various other military liaison activities.

In FY 2004, VA representatives conducted more than 7,200 briefings, including TAP and DTAP, attended by over 260,000 active-duty personnel and their families residing in the United States. VA personnel also conducted over 115,000 personal interviews with attendees. Through July 2005, VA representatives conducted close to 6,500 briefings for approximately 268,000 attendees and conducted more than 92,000 personal interviews.

Under a memorandum of agreement (MOA) between VA and the Department of Defense (DoD), VA representatives provide benefits briefings overseas as well, at bases in Germany, Italy, Japan, Okinawa, Korea, England, Spain, Iceland, Belgium, Bahrain, and Guantanamo Bay for nine months each year. During FY 2004, over 600 briefings were conducted in foreign countries, attended by more than 15,000 active-duty personnel. Through June 2005, close to 441 briefings were conducted in foreign countries, attended by over 11,000 active-duty personnel.

VA has provided TAP briefings aboard Naval vessels, including the USS Constellation, the USS Enterprise, and the USS George Washington, on their return from the Persian Gulf to the United States. VBA will continue to support requests from the Department of the Navy for TAP workshops aboard ships.

In concert with the military services outreach program, VA continues its Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program through which servicemembers

can apply for service-connected compensation within 180 days prior to discharge or retirement from active service. The required physical examination is conducted, service medical records are reviewed, and a claim is evaluated prior to or closely after separation from service. Upon receipt of the claimant's DD Form 214, Report of Release from Active Military Service, benefits can be authorized immediately. Currently, BDD is provided at 140 military installations, including two locations overseas - Landstuhl, Germany and Yongsan, Korea. In FY 2004, approximately 40,000 BDD claims were taken. Through August 2005, approximately 34,000 BDD claims have been taken.

VA also distributes information on benefits and services through the Veterans Assistance at Discharge System (VADS). New veterans receive informational brochures and an explanatory letter from the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

With the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), VA expanded its efforts even further with the Seamless Transition Program. In 2003, VBA began to assign permanent, full-time representatives at key military treatment facilities such as the Walter Reed Army Medical Center; Bethesda Naval Medical Center; and the Eisenhower, Brooke and Madigan Army Medical Centers, where seriously injured OEF/OIF returnees are hospitalized. VA representatives provide benefits information and assist in filing claims. They monitor patient progress and movement, and coordinate the

submission and smooth transfer of claims to VA regional offices. Each case is case-managed at the regional offices to expedite processing. From October 3, 2003, through the end of August 2005, VBA representatives assisted over 7,300 patients at the major military treatment facilities.

Outreach to Reserve/Guard members is part of the overall VA outreach program. During peacetime, this outreach is generally accomplished on an “on call” or “as requested” basis. However, with the activation and deployment of large numbers of Reserve and Guard members following the September 11, 2001, attack on America and the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, VA outreach to these members has been greatly expanded.

VA has made arrangements with Reserve and Guard officials to schedule briefings for members being mobilized and demobilized. In FY 2004, VA representatives conducted 1,399 pre- and post- deployment briefings, attended by 88,366 Reserve and Guard members. Through June 2005, VBA representatives conducted 1,454 pre- and post-deployment briefings attended by approximately 93,000 Reserve and Guard members.

Returning Guard and Reserve members can elect to attend the formal three-day TAP workshops. VA has also published a brochure, *A Summary of VA Benefits for National Guard and Reserve Personnel*, which is widely distributed to

Guard and Reserve units. A special page on VA's main web site is dedicated for use by Guard and Reserve members.

VA has an MOA with the National Guard Bureau (NGB) whereby the NGB will arrange opportunities for VA to provide information to Guard members returning from OEF/OIF. The Guard will report the demobilization of Guard units to keep VA apprised of where and when they will return to their local communities.

VBA Procedures for the Return of New Hampshire Guard and Reserve

Since September 11, 2001, more than 2,500 New Hampshire servicemembers have been activated. All but approximately 265 are now home. The Manchester Regional Office has established contacts with National Guard and Reserve units throughout New Hampshire to ensure transition assistance is provided to the returning servicemembers.

When servicemembers are due to return home, the Air National Guard and Reserve units contact the Manchester Regional Office's OEF/OIF Coordinator to set up TAP briefings at Pease Air Force Base. In 2004 and 2005, the Manchester RO conducted 50 TAP briefings with a combined attendance of over 1,900 transitioning servicemembers; 205 of these individuals requested and received formal interviews and assistance with benefits applications.

The TAP briefings provide information on the full range of VA benefits, as well as benefits provided by the state of New Hampshire. While there, the OEF/OIF coordinator speaks to each individual servicemember and provides a business card to each participant. Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) counselors also attend to explain rehabilitation and employment benefits available to transitioning servicemembers who are near their release dates. All servicemembers who are within six months pre- and 12 months post-active duty are eligible for vocational and educational counseling, as well as assistance with school and employment resources.

VR&E counselors also extend their outreach to injured servicemembers who are hospitalized or recuperating at home and cannot attend TAP briefings. They inform them, and their families, about vocational and independent living services, and help them to complete an application for benefits. The counselors make eligibility determinations prior to release from active duty.

The Manchester RO's OIF/OEF Coordinator maintains regular contact with her counterpart at the Manchester VA Medical Center. When OIF/OEF veterans go to the Manchester VAMC for care, the coordinator refers them to the Manchester RO for benefits. Conversely, all veterans who come to the RO first, are referred to the Manchester VA Medical Center.

Reservists and National Guard members serving in support OEF/OIF become eligible for home loan benefits upon serving at least ninety days on active duty. Those who were not activated must serve six years in the Selected Reserve to gain housing loan entitlement. At the TAP briefings, interested veterans can complete an application for a certificate of eligibility to obtain a VA home loan. The Regional Loan Center in the Manchester RO will process the applications locally instead of sending them to the Winston-Salem Eligibility Center. Manchester has assisted 230 veterans in obtaining their certificates expeditiously.

In addition to the Air National Guard and Reserve unit TAP briefings, the RO also provides transition assistance to returning Army National Guard servicemembers. The Army National Guard requires that all returning servicemembers attend Reverse Soldier Readiness Processing (RSRP). An agreement between the Manchester VA Medical Center and the National Guard established the Medical Center as the New Hampshire site for RSRP. Servicemembers are required during RSRP to have an RO employee verify that they received information on VA benefits before they can be released from active duty. Since January 2005, almost 900 returning Army National Guard members have received information through this process.

Special Adaptive Housing benefits are also available for veterans with certain permanent and total service-connected disabilities. Eligible veterans may

receive either a \$50,000 or a \$10,000 grant from VA to assist in either adapting their homes or acquiring new homes with adaptations made necessary due to the nature of their disabilities. The program is administered by VA's Regional Loan Centers. Manchester's Loan Guaranty Division maintains contact with every regional office within its jurisdiction to identify any OIF/OEF veterans who may be eligible for the grant. We have awarded one grant and contacted 13 other eligible OIF/OEF veterans.

Mr. Chairman, we at VA are proud of our continuing role in the transition of servicemembers from military to civilian life, and seek to continually improve the quality and breadth of our outreach efforts to active duty, Reserve, and National Guard members.

Thank you for allowing me to appear before you today. I would be pleased to respond to any questions from members of the Subcommittee.