

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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Good afternoon. My name is SSG Shea, and I am the full-time training NCO for the 744th Transportation Company. I was deployed with this Company as the assistant truck master during Operation Iraqi Freedom II. I am also a veteran of the first Gulf War and was deployed with the same Company.

I am here to testify in favor of a process that is very important to me not only as a soldier but as one who takes care of the M-day (part-time) soldier every day. I am pleased to see how far we have come through the years. From my experience coming home in 1991, demobilization was handled quickly by the active duty Army at Ft Devens, Massachusetts. We were not afforded the opportunity of the "Operation Welcome Home" initiative. The process at Ft Drum was handled well, but due to the number of soldiers demobilizing, it left little time to address the individual needs of the returning soldiers. Operation Welcome Home has given me the tools I need to make the adjustment back into civilian life and full-time National Guard work back home in New Hampshire. The three-day process was broken into 3 blocks and was a well thought out, executed plan. This plan allowed soldiers to stay focused on one process at a time and did not overload them with information.

Block “A” dealt with our administrative files, ensuring every soldier’s mobilization files were up to date. Educational benefits were also discussed in this block. For quite a few soldiers, the information they received was unmatched by Active Army. These benefits can be unique to each state, and having a knowledgeable representative on hand is a plus for the soldier.

For Block “B,” the entire day is focused on veteran and medical needs of the soldier. Each soldier was taken care of on an individual basis. I felt the staff at the VA Hospital in Manchester truly cared about our needs and went out of their way to see that we received attention. We were afforded an opportunity to talk to a mental health counselor and discuss any problems that may have occurred during deployment. This is an outstanding way of taking care of soldiers. Hospital staff and counselors went out of their way to set up appointments or get soldiers much needed help on the spot. They later made follow up phone calls to ensure that all soldiers were getting the help they needed. ESGR made soldiers feel that the transition back to civilian employment would be smooth and also offered guidance in case unexpected problems arose.

Block “C” encompassed a family piece focused on what soldiers and family members can expect following a long deployment. The Chaplains Office assisted in this process. We were broken down into four small groups and given questions to answer that were relevant to our experiences during deployment. We were asked tough questions and gave honest answers. This made me realize the mixed emotions everyone was having. This would be an excellent forum in which to have outside counselors available to relate to the soldiers’ needs.

In closing, having come home from the Gulf War in '91 and Operation Iraqi Freedom last February, the difference of having a program in place like "Operation Welcome Home" has made the transition to civilian life less complicated and more fulfilling, knowing that there are so many available resources and support structures available for soldiers.