

Kristine Arnold, Director of Seattle Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Benefits Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs

Statement of
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Senator Murray, I appreciate this opportunity to testify today on the Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA's) response to the needs of veterans returning from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF).

My testimony addresses three related topics: the programs that VBA developed to ease the transition of OEF/OIF veterans back into civilian life; the outreach efforts of both VBA and the Seattle VA Regional Office to the National Guard and Reserves; and the Seattle VA Regional Office's specific plans for recently returned Washington National Guard and Reserve units. Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are eligible for a full array of benefits offered through VBA. These include:

- ?X Disability Compensation and Related Benefits
- ?X Education and Training Benefits
- ?X Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment
- ?X Home Loan Guaranties
- ?X Life Insurance
- ?X Burial Benefits
- ?X Dependents' and Survivors' Benefits

In addition to providing this broad range of benefits, VBA is reaching out to OEF/OIF veterans with programs to assist them in readjusting to civilian life, and with information about our many benefits and services. I will briefly discuss some of these assistance programs and then talk about our outreach efforts. My focus will be on outreach to members of the National Guard and Reserves.

Programs to Assist Returning OEF/OIF Veterans

The Seattle VA Regional Office is actively involved in educating returning service members about VA benefits, in helping service members, soon to be released from active duty, with the processing of claims, and in ensuring a smooth transition from military duty back into civilian life. The Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program, the Transition Assistance Program, and the Seamless Transition Initiative all exemplify VBA's active participation in the readjustment process.

The Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program, or BDD, is in place at 140 military installations around the country and overseas. In Washington State, we have BDD programs at Ft. Lewis, which also serves McChord Air Force Base, at Bremerton, which serves all naval installations in the Puget Sound area, and at Fairchild Air Force Base. Under this program, active duty service members who are within 180 days of separation are encouraged to file disability compensation

claims with VA staff who are serving at military bases either on a full-time or itinerant basis. Service members can complete the necessary physical examinations and have their claims evaluated before or closely following their military separation dates. In most cases, disabled service members participating in the BDD program begin receiving VA disability compensation benefits within 60 days of their separation from active duty, which serves to ease the transition from active duty to civilian status.

Returning service members, including members of the National Guard and Reserves, may elect to attend the 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, service members are fully briefed on the VA benefits available to them and encouraged to apply for all benefits to which they are entitled. In FY2004, the Seattle VA Regional Office conducted 37 TAP briefings attended by 1,851 service members.

The Seamless Transition Initiative is aimed at helping returning veterans make a smooth transition back into civilian life. In 2003, VA began placing Veterans Service Representatives at key military treatment facilities (MTFs) where severely wounded service members from OEF/OIF are frequently sent.

Since March 2003, a VBA OEF/OIF coordinator has been assigned to each MTF. As of January 2005, over 4,500 hospitalized returning service members were assisted through this program at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Bethesda Naval Hospital, Madigan Army Medical Center, Eisenhower Army Medical Center, and Brooke Army Medical Center. Since March 2003, each claim from a seriously injured OEF/OIF veteran has been case managed for seamless and expeditious processing

Gene Finney, Seattle's OIF/OEF Coordinator, works with Veterans Health Administration (VHA) transition case managers at the Madigan Army Medical Center to ensure seamless transition for all service members, particularly those identified as being either Very Seriously Injured (VSI) or Seriously Injured (SI). Either Frank Pierce, the Assistant Director, or I contact injured service members to thank them for their service and review benefits and services available to them. We have identified 21 soldiers as either very seriously injured or seriously injured. Since October 2003, we have seen 915 injured OIF/OEF soldiers at Madigan, 826 of whom were either in the National Guard or Reserve. We coordinated with transition counselors from the local VA Medical Centers regarding 547 service members to insure seamless services; we processed 243 claims for compensation and 152 claims for vocational rehabilitation services.

Outreach to National Guard and Reserves

Outreach to Reserve/Guard members is part of the overall VBA outreach program. In peacetime, this outreach is generally accomplished on an "on call" or "as requested" basis. With the activation and deployment of large numbers of Reserve/Guard members following the September 11, 2001, attack on America, and OEF/OIF, VBA outreach to this group has been greatly expanded.

Outreach efforts to National Guard and Reserve members take on critical importance in light of the composition of our forces. Return and deactivation of Reserve/Guard units present significant challenges to VA because rotation is irregular and the service members spend extremely short periods of time at military installations prior to being released to their Guard or Reserve components. For this reason, outreach efforts are focused at the local armories or

reserve centers within two months of a unit's deactivation. Washington State is unique because Ft. Lewis is a major mobilization/demobilization point for Army National Guard and Army Reserve Units for the Western United States. Since March 2003, the Seattle VA Regional Office has conducted 345 briefings to 21,480 demobilizing OIF/OEF service members. In FY 2005 alone, we have conducted 158 briefings to 11,000 demobilizing service members. In addition to these briefings and our other efforts to reach out in person to returning veterans, all separating and retiring service members (including Reserve/Guard members) receive a "Welcome Home Package" that includes a letter from the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, a copy of VA Pamphlet 21-00-1, A Summary of VA Benefits, and VA Form 21-0501, Veterans Benefits Timetable, through the Veterans Assistance at Discharge System (VADS). Six months later similar information is mailed to service members following discharge with a follow-up letter. Finally, VA has created a new internet web page especially for veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq at <http://www.seamlesstransition.va.gov/>. Information specific to National Guard and Reserves is also included on this web page, along with links to web sites with information about other federal benefits that may be of interest to returning service members.

Seattle VA Regional Office Plans for the Washington National Guard

Beginning in March 2005, the 81st Brigade and its associated National Guard units returned from deployment to Iraq. They mobilized and demobilized through the Soldier Readiness Program (SRP) at Ft. Lewis prior to returning home. The Seattle VA Regional Office OIF/OEF Coordinator provided a Transition Assistance Briefing as part of their demobilization activity at Ft. Lewis. During this presentation, the OIF/OEF Coordinator reviewed VA benefits and services available and provided each service member with a packet of pamphlets and forms to assist the service member in applying for services. The following activities are already underway:

1. Coordination with VA Medical Centers: The Seattle Regional Office's (RO's) OIF/OEF Coordinator maintains regular contact with his counterparts in all of the VA Medical Centers (MCs) that support Washington's veterans. When OIF/OEF veterans go to one of these MCs for care, the coordinators refer them to the Seattle RO for benefits. Conversely, the RO refers all veterans who come there to the MCs.
2. Coordination with Madigan and the 654th Army Support Garrison (ASG): The OIF/OEF Coordinator maintains weekly contact with service members assigned to the 654th ASG. This unit includes approximately 400 Guard and Reserve service members who are recovering from illnesses or injuries, which have resulted in an extension of their mobilization. In addition, the coordinator maintains weekly contact with service members at Madigan and its associated Medical Hold unit. The purpose of these contacts is to counsel service members on VA benefits and services and assist them in the application process.
3. Coordination of Services: On November 5, 2004, the Seattle VA Regional Office signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Washington State Military Department, the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs, the Washington State Employment Security Department, the Veterans Health Administration, the U.S. Department of Labor, the Association of Washington Businesses, and the Governor's Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee. On May 26, 2005, the 70th Army Reserve Support command became an MOU partner, and on Monday,

August 8th, in a signing ceremony at the Bangor Sub Base, the Naval Reserve Command will become an MOU partner. The Seattle Regional Office and the other MOU signatories participate in Family Activity Days at their facilities that provide service members and their families personalized assistance in understanding and applying for Federal and State benefits and services. We currently have 27 Family Activity Days scheduled through November 6th in support of the Washington Army National Guard. We intend to revisit these units within one year of their return from Iraq or Afghanistan.

Senator Murray, I hope this testimony has given you and the Committee a better understanding of the VA benefits, services, and outreach being provided to veterans of the OEF/OIF conflicts. I also want to assure you that the Seattle VA Regional Office is ready and eager to serve the men and women coming home to Washington State. This concludes my testimony. I will be pleased to answer any questions you might have.