

**STATEMENT OF
MAJOR GENERAL MATTHEW T. QUINN, ADJUTANT GENERAL
MONTANA NATIONAL GUARD (MTNG)
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
JUNE 19, 2019**

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee. I am Major General Matt Quinn, Adjutant General and commander of the Montana National Guard. I am here today to testify on actions the State of Montana has taken to protect our National Guard service members, their family members, and Montana Veterans.

I have been the Adjutant General for just over seven years and in that time, we have lost 11 Soldiers. We did not lose Soldiers to combat, rather every tragic loss was due to death by suicide. After each death we looked at the possible mitigating factors leading to the suicide and in nearly every case there was a concern by the Soldier that if they sought help for depression or emotional issues they were dealing with, they would either not be allowed to deploy, or worse yet, would be removed from the Guard. Over half of our losses to suicide had never deployed, nor did they have the qualifying amount of active duty service for Veteran eligibility. Only 33% of our current National Guard service members qualify for VA care, so this was and continues to be a challenge that we had to solve as a state.

At the direction of Governor Bullock, Montana military affairs and Department of Administration joined forces to determine potential resources available within Montana state government that could be used to support the National Guard women and men who serve our state and nation. We have a service member living in every one of the 404 zip codes of Montana and we needed a benefit that would be convenient and accessible by any service member across the state. Each employee of the State of Montana, through our state health insurance plan, is a participant in an employee assistance program designed to provide counseling services to the employees and their families or household members. The Department of Administration, working with our EAP provider, determined that the benefit could be expanded to include our National Guard service members. In the fall of 2016, the State of Montana enrolled every member of the Montana National Guard in Montana's Employee Assistance Program, or EAP for short. This benefit allows for in-person counseling services across the state for any issue the service member or family member is facing, from alcohol, to job, family, financial, or deployment stressors, any issue which can be helped with counseling. These visits are totally confidential; Montana National Guard leadership will not know who has sought counseling. I am encouraged by the number of Montana Guard men and women taking advantage of the benefit, but additionally encouraged by the number of spouses and children of service members seeking care.

After deploying the benefit, the first call received was from a former National Guard member who had served 30 years in the National Guard but did not have Veteran eligibility. So, another call was made to the EAP provider, and shortly thereafter we rolled out the Veteran Assistance Program, or VAP. VAP provides free counseling to any former service member or Veteran. Montana has the second highest per-capita percentage of Veterans and we are looking to not only provide support to those who had previously served our state in the National Guard, but also to augment the services provided by the Veterans Administration. Although the usage by former service members is not great, several did utilize the benefit expressing an intent for self-harm. If one Veteran or former service member is provided

assistance in a time of need, and is stopped from making a final, fateful decision thru this program, I will continue the advocacy, in spite of limited usage.

As a result of our work and the work of the Cities of Helena and Billings in a VA/DPHHS program titled the Mayors Challenge, Montana has been selected as one of seven state to participate in the Governor's Challenge. The Governor's Challenge is a collective effort with the Veterans Administration and the Department of Public Health and Human Services Administration's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to combat the loss to suicide of our Veterans, Service Members and Family members. The effort in Montana has three primary objectives; 1) Identify those citizens who have served or have family members who have served, 2) Provide Universal Screening to those individuals and 3) Connect Veterans through a peer – peer support network. This effort is in its early stages but we are encouraged by the progress made so far to bring all of Montana's communities together to better support our Veterans and their service members.

I will conclude with a thank you to Senator Tester and this committees work to allow for readjustment counseling services to our National Guard service members at the Vet Centers across the nation. Although a National Guard service member may not have served in a combat theater, many may be suffering from the traumatic stress of recovering neighbors from hurricanes, tornados, fires, floods, and landslides. When they leave a drill location at the conclusion of a weekend or annual training period, they return to their communities potentially without the blanket of care provided by our Veterans Administration. I would encourage this committee to recognize the service provided to our states and nation by your National Guard and continue to seek ways to care for those who serve.

Mr. Chairman that concludes my testimony.