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Testimony

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I am grateful for your invitation to testify to the Veterans' Affairs Committee's meeting . I am the Controller at Golden Valley Electric Association and volunteer to support men and women serving our nation's National Guard and Reserve.

Members of our local Employer Support of Guard and Reserve (ESGR) met earlier this week to discuss my testimony and the message we'd like to share. ESGR is a Department of Defense organization that seeks to promote a culture in which all American Employers support and value the military service of their employees.

The nation's Reserve components (referring to the total of all National Guard members and Reserve forces from all branches of the military) comprise approximately 48 percent of our total available military manpower. The current National Defense Strategy considers the National Guard and Reserve as full partners in the fully integrated Total Force.

ESGR's mission focuses on building relationships between Guard Members and Reservists and their employers. We strive to educate employers about the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) while promoting the benefits of hiring military personnel. The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994 is a federal law intended to ensure that persons who serve or have served in the Armed

Forces, Reserves, National Guard or other "uniformed services:" (1) are not disadvantaged in their civilian careers because of their service; (2) are promptly reemployed in their civilian jobs upon their return from duty; and (3) are not discriminated against in employment based on past, present, or future military service. The federal government is to be a "model employer" under USERRA (38 U.S.C. § 4301).

Our experience with Fairbanks employers is excellent. Federal and State upper management are very well versed on USERRA, but mid and low-level managers do not receive training on the Act's requirements. This is an opportunity where the Veterans' Affairs Committee can help our returning soldiers.

When I first started with ESGR, our mission was to educate employers about their traditional National Guard and Reserve Employees who were gone for short periods of time. We informed employers about the importance of those missions.

The extended deployments now being experienced by our soldiers has created new challenges for our men and women returning to the workplace. I'd like to share the following experiences with you:

Deploying and returning service members are often put in situations that make the transition difficult due to their immediate supervisor's lack of knowledge. They are not provided authorized benefits, excluded from consideration for promotion and forced to provide written documentation to justify the rights they are granted under the law. Service members have to educate their immediate supervisors on their rights. The federal government is to be a "model employer" under USERRA (38 U.S.C. § 4301) and yet large entities like Federal and State agencies often have the largest number of inquiries and requests for assistance after a

deployment due to the lack of knowledge of mid and low-level managers. Co-worker relationships are challenging for many National Guard and Reserve service members. Deployed service members return to a work environment that sometimes is hostile due to lack of knowledge on the part of their co-workers. Co-workers had to pick up additional workloads or wonder why the deployed employee received the benefit of seniority when they were not at work. Co-workers hired while a service member is deployed often have the hardest time understanding the situation because they did not see the support the deployed worker received prior to deploying or the effort made by the deploying service member to help the employer prior to their departure. When service members return to this type of workplace negativity, it is hard to readjust to their jobs and their deployment can be seen as the cause of strife in the workplace.

When a local soldier returned to work with an employee that was temporarily promoted to backfill his position during his deployment, that employee enlisted the support of several other personnel in the office in an attempt to keep himself at the higher grade. This led to a very negative work environment until several months later when the temporary replacement was moved to another position in the Department.

Businesses and organizations have a difficult time temporarily replacing National Guard and Reserve members who are educated and trained for the jobs that need to be filled by other employees. Some businesses and organizations are unable to find temporary employees and will fill from within, offering a current

employee the opportunity to work temporarily in another position at a higher level, which still leaves the employer short of personnel.

The Veterans' Affairs Committee can help National Guard and Reserve members by rallying the support of mid and low-level managers for our soldiers. While this is an overwhelming task to educate all employers, you do have influence over our Federal managers and front-line employees.

Education will be the key to understanding and perhaps federally mandating supervisor training that includes USERRA would benefit the employer, employee and the co-workers. We have posters that identify basic USERRA rules directed primarily to the employer, we could use this same median directed towards co-workers to provide an understanding and to obtain their support rather than their disdain for the soldier/airman.