

BRADLEY G. MAYES DIRECTOR, COMPENSATION AND PENSION SERVICE  
VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

STATEMENT OF  
BRADLEY G. MAYES  
DIRECTOR, COMPENSATION AND PENSION SERVICE  
VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION  
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE

July 23, 2008

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to be here today to speak on initiatives and outreach efforts undertaken by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to National Guard and Reserve members returning from theaters of combat operations and demobilizing from active duty. We are committed in our efforts to see that the nation's Citizen Warriors and their families are honored for their service to our country and receive the VA services and benefits they have earned.

As the number of National Guard and Reserve members serving on active duty has increased, VA has aggressively expanded its outreach efforts to inform deactivating members of the many services and benefits available to them. From the beginning of fiscal year 2003, through June of 2008, VA has conducted more than 8,650 briefings and provided information to approximately 510,000 combat OEF/OIF veterans.

#### Benefits Information at Time of Induction into Service

VA initiates outreach to National Guard and Reserve members at the beginning of their military career. Since November 2004, everyone inducted into the five military branches receives a VA benefits pamphlet at the military entrance processing station. This pamphlet provides inductees with basic information on VA benefits and services at the start of their military active service. We want service members to know that VA will be there for them in the future.

#### Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

One of the formal pre-discharge outreach programs in which VA participates is the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), which is operated in conjunction with the Department of Labor. TAP is conducted nationwide and in Europe and Asia to prepare retiring or separating military personnel for return to civilian life, and VA provides benefits briefings as a part of the program. At these briefings, service members are informed of the array of VA benefits and services available, instructed on how to complete VA application forms, and advised on what evidence is needed to support their claims. Following the general instruction segment, personal interviews are conducted with those service members who would like assistance in preparing and submitting their applications for compensation and/or vocational rehabilitation and employment benefits.

#### Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP)

As a part of TAP, service members leaving the military with a service-connected disability, or those who think they may have a service connected-disability, are offered the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP).

DTAP is an integral component of transition assistance for service members who may be released because of disability incurred on active duty. Through VA's DTAP briefings, VA advises transitioning service members about the benefits available through the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program. The goal of DTAP is to encourage and assist potentially eligible service members with making informed decisions about the VR&E program and to expedite delivery of these services to those who qualify.

#### Other Benefits Briefings

In addition to TAP and DTAP briefings to separating and retiring service members, VA conducts other benefits briefings at the request of DoD. One example is a presentation conducted at "Commanders' Calls." Military commanders routinely have unit meetings with their assigned personnel. These meetings are referred to as "Commander's Call." During "Commander's Call," the commander usually informs personnel of on-going and future events, hot topics, and personnel issues. Sometimes guest speakers are invited to provide informational briefings. VA is typically asked to cover material on VA's Education and Loan Guaranty Programs.

Outreach briefings to demobilizing National Guard and Reserve components are generally one among a series of presentations scheduled for a returning group. The briefings may be conducted at the military base where administrative demobilization activities occur or later at the unit's home base once the members have returned to their local community. Briefings at the demobilization site are generally abbreviated because National Guard and Reserve units are there for only a few days, with much out-processing to accomplish before returning to their home locations. Briefings to returning units at their home locations are generally part of a "Welcome Home," "Family Activities Day," or "Job Fairs" weekend drill session.

At all briefings, the attendees are provided with written informational materials that include the VA handbook Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents, VA Pamphlet 20-00-1, A Summary of VA Benefits, and an insurance information folder.

#### Other Outreach Efforts

Along with face-to-face outreach efforts, VA seeks to ensure that a "Welcome Home Package" is sent to all returning National Guard and Reserve members. DoD provides the names and addresses of these returnees based on active duty separation records. The Veterans Assistance at Discharge System (VADS) then generates a "Welcome Home Package" for recently separated veterans, including Reserve and National Guard members. The mailing itself

contains a letter from VA and a summary and timetable of VA benefits. In addition to the VADS mailings, a separate personal letter from the Secretary, along with benefits information, is sent to each returning OEF/OIF veteran. VADS also sends separate packages that explain education, loan guaranty, and insurance benefits. A six-month follow-up letter with the same general benefits information is also sent to each returning member. VA is currently working with DoD to update the electronic transfer of this information.

#### Partnerships

In the past, outreach to Reserve and National Guard members is generally accomplished on an "on call" or "as requested" basis. With the onset of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) and the activation and deployment of large numbers of Reserve and National Guard members, VA's outreach to this group has greatly expanded. VA has made arrangements with Reserve and Guard officials to schedule briefings for members who are being mobilized and demobilized.

In order to facilitate these outreach efforts, VA entered into joint agreements with the Department of Defense (DoD). These agreements provide for the sharing of information so VA knows when and where a presentation may be given to an assembly of returning National Guard or Reserve members.

VA and the National Guard Bureau (NGB), which represents National Guard units nationwide, have entered into a memorandum of agreement to establish the requirements, expectations, and obligations of each organization with respect to assisting National Guard members with demobilization issues. Among its provisions, the agreement calls for NGB to provide VA with timely and appropriate data on when and where groups of demobilizing service members will return to their local communities. It also calls for NGB to establish opportunities for VA personnel to provide information to returning National Guard members and their families in all the states and territories. In addition, the agreement promotes regional or local "Family Activity Days," where VA presents health and benefits information to assembled groups within three to six months of demobilization.

VA has also reached agreements with individual National Guard state military departments to facilitate outreach efforts. An initial memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed by VA and the Washington State Military Department. This served as a model for 47 other state and territorial military departments, which currently have an MOU with VA. Agreements with other states have been initiated and will be finalized in the near future. These agreements include the participation of other organizations within the states, such as state veterans organizations, state employment agencies, and state business associations, which contribute to the transition of National Guard members back into their local communities. Through the communication

channels established by these state agreements, VA is informed of the time and place for presentations, and returnees are identified for informational mailings. Communications are enhanced by VA military services coordinators, who remain in contact with the state National Guard headquarters.

As a part of this partnership, the National Guard Bureau employs 60 Transition Assistance Advisors (TAAs) for the 50 states and 4 territories. The TAAs' primary function is to serve as the statewide point of contact and coordinator. They also provide information regarding VA benefits and services to Guard members and their families and assist in resolving any problems with VA healthcare, benefits, and TRICARE. VA and the National Guard Bureau teamed up at the beginning of the program in February 2006 to provide training to the TAAs on VA services and benefits. VA has participated in subsequent annual refresher training, as well as monthly TAA conference calls.

Procedures for outreach presentations to demobilizing Reserve components are less formally established. Communications generally flow between a Reserve unit liaison and the VA regional office military service coordinator. There is currently an agreement pending between VA and the Army Reserve Headquarters which, when completed, will serve as the model for agreements with other military Reserve branches. It is anticipated that the terms of these agreements and the lines of communication established by them will be similar to those between VA and the National Guard.

Another partnership between VA and DoD is designed to assist those National Guard and Reserve members who are seriously wounded while on active duty or develop a condition that

causes them to be unfit for the military. VA and DoD are working closely on efforts to evaluate the disabilities of service members still on active duty. Our goal in this process is to smooth their reintegration back into civilian life, with a focus on employment or independent living, should discharge from service become necessary. These efforts include services and outreach programs to regular military personnel, activated guard and reserve personnel, and inactive but drilling reserve component military personnel who may become unfit for duty. These efforts are coordinated through a Senior Oversight Committee (SOC) comprised of both VA and DoD representatives. One of the major projects being implemented is the pilot of a new Disability Evaluation System (DES). This process involves determining the extent of the service member's disability from a wound or other condition causing unfitness and determining a course of action based on medical examinations and an in-depth interview conducted by an experienced military services coordinator, who also assists the member in filing any claims. If the member is determined to be unfit by the military, the military services coordinator provides additional information and services to the member during his/her transition. VA has supported the DES process by providing information and assistance to DoD for the creation of a "benefits book" given to service members and their families involved with DES.

#### Outreach Improvement initiatives

##### VADS Process Improvements

In recent years, VA has made great strides in expanding and improving the outreach programs. Because this is a critical component of the VA mission, we continue to seek improvements in the delivery of information on VA services and benefits to those separating from active duty. One major improvement initiative involves the Welcome Home Package sent to recently separated individuals. During fiscal year 2007, VADS generated approximately 188,000 outreach packages. The current VADS method, traditionally used to generate and mail these outreach packages, is scheduled to be replaced by a modern and more efficient system referred to as the VA/DoD Identity Repository (VADIR). One of the drivers for replacement of VADS is that deficiencies in the system caused a number of individuals not to receive their outreach package. When VA learned of this, a help team was immediately sent to the VADS location in Austin, Texas. The system was analyzed and corrective measures were taken. As a result of this, it became clear that the newly developed VADIR system was superior and should replace VADS. VADIR can provide VA with detailed electronic information directly from DoD on separating service members that will replace the current paper-document-based method used by VADS. This interagency data sharing will eliminate error and facilitate a timely mailing of the outreach packages.

##### Relationship Building

VA also continues to develop a closer relationship with National Guard and Reserve units in order to be available for in-person outreach briefings. Regardless of whether a briefing is needed at the demobilization site or the units home location, or whether it is a complete TAP presentation or a condensed time sensitive presentation, VA has made it known that we are always on call to help those who have served our country.

##### Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, VA outreach programs provide wide dissemination of information on the array of benefits and services available to National Guard and Reserve members. Our employees are dedicated to ensuring veterans receive the benefits and services they have earned through their service to our Nation, and we work diligently to provide information and assistance in a timely,

thorough, accurate, understandable, and respectful manner.

This concludes my summary of the outreach efforts undertaken by VA to provide returning National Guard and Reserve members with information on the VA services and benefits available to them. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.