

FIRST LIEUTENANT TULSI GABBARD TAMAYO

STATEMENT BY
FIRST LIEUTENANT TULSI GABBARD TAMAYO
SENATE VETERAN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
“VA OUTREACH TO GUARD AND RESERVES”

AUGUST 25, 2009

Chairman Akaka, and members of the committee, thank for the opportunity to speak here today regarding the VA's outreach and services to Guard and Reserve Service members.

I am a First Lieutenant, Military Police officer, in the Hawaii Army National Guard. I enlisted in 2003, earned my commission in 2007, and have just returned from my second deployment overseas. My statement today reflects only my personal opinions and experiences as an individual.

As you are well aware, since 9/11, the VA has begun to see a new kind of clientele. Veterans are younger, a new generation who grew up in a different culture, and face new challenges. Also, the reserve component of the military has taken a role front and center like never before. The VA is now faced with hundreds of thousands of customers who are young combat veterans, but who also still actively serve in the National Guard or Reserves.

Between the period of September 2001 and November 2007, over 450,000 Reserve and National Guard Soldiers were deployed to either Iraq or Afghanistan. Thousands more have deployed since that time, many on their second and third tours.

My underlying message to you, the bottom line up front, is that the DOD and the VA need to work together to think outside the box, and find comprehensive strategies to reach, educate, and serve Guard and Reserve veterans.

The VA's presence in our redeployment process (from point of re-entry back to the US, to being released from active duty) has improved since 2006, when I returned from my last deployment. About a week and a half ago, as we went through demobilization at Ft. Hood, TX, we received a roughly 2-hour briefing from the local Texas VA rep, on all the various benefits available to us as veterans. He ensured that all 400 of us in the briefing tent filled out the enrollment papers, assisted those who wished to fill out disability claims applications, and passed out the application for VA Home Loan guaranty. It was informative, and I walked away learning a few new things. However, this should not be the end of the story.

1. DOD and VA cross-talk & coordination

I understand that the VA and DOD are two very separate agencies; however, for Guard and Reserve Soldiers, the idea of a clean and complete transition between the DOD and VA is no longer a reality. The Reserve component has hundreds of thousands of servicemembers who are dual members of both agencies, eligible for benefits from both. It is highly likely that a servicemember will transition between reserve and active status multiple times in his/her career.

A short personal example, I have been waiting 7 months for the VA to get confirmation from the DOD that I am indeed eligible for the GI Bill (even though I was deployed and sent the VA a copy of my mobilization orders). I have called at least once a month for the last 7 months, provided all the documentation that was requested, but am still being told that nothing can be done. I was told by the VA Case Manager that it takes a lot longer to get information from the

DOD when dealing with a Guard servicemember. Perhaps with a better system of coordination between the DOD and the VA, Guard and Reserve Soldiers who go back and forth between active/reserve status, would not get caught in this gray area of “in-between.”

2. Outreach to reserve component members

As members of the Reserve component, there are some specific limits to what benefits we are eligible for, as well as specific benefits we are entitled to. However, the outreach and education of Reservists does not seem to be focused and comprehensive.

Upon redeployment, the Guard/Reserve do not have the luxury of time, unlike the Active Component. Guard and Reservists have to take time off from civilian work to seek help. Therefore, connecting with this group of veterans, and ensuring education and access to all that VA has to offer requires a different strategy.

a. I could not easily find under any tab on the va.gov web site, a section that catered solely to Reserve component members. There are many questions our benefits, especially in the areas of health care, home loans, and education that could be answered in a specific section, rather than trying to sift through all the information and figure out what applies to us and what doesn't.

b. VA offices in each state could develop a partnership with the local Guard/Reserve leadership to coordinate and integrate VA outreach with the annual training/work schedule, and to find innovative ways to meet the needs of Guard and Reserve veterans.

This partnership should not be short-term, but rather a continuous conversation. VA's providing a face and continuous outreach to Soldiers and their families before, during, and after deployments, to include the break between deployments, would greatly improve availability and access. It would take away the common view that the VA is a big bureaucratic organization that is not user-friendly.

3. The best counselors are veterans themselves. Those who have been through what we have been through can provide the best understanding and support. However, many veterans do not have a 4-year degree or are not certified counselors. VA could channel those who are interested into a program that would give them the additional training needed, along a commitment from them to work for the VA, so that these veterans can become counselors.

4. There should be mandatory counseling – both one-on-one and in groups – for returning Guard/Reserve Veterans. If this is a DOD/VA mandate, local commands will find time for this to ensure it is executed properly. Soldiers may be too proud to seek assistance on their own. These one-on-one counselors should be trained to ask the right questions, encourage the Soldier to enroll in the VA system, provide focused information to the Soldier based on whatever benefits he/she find applicable, and then provide a name and phone number who the Soldier can follow-up with for any additional care that is required.

After my last deployment, we were required to come in 6 months after returning home for the Post-Deployment Health Re-Assessment. The VA was present and provided counseling to those who needed, and also had a table set up to enroll any one had not yet enrolled in the VA. I don't know if this has changed since then, but the VA should be front and center at these briefings,

since at this time Soldiers have had a chance to get through the excitement of being at home, have settled in, and had more time to think about what kinds of benefits the VA has to offer them.

5. A central 800 number for Guard/Reserves, which will automatically route the call directly to a local VA office, similar to how the phone company or Pizza Hut have their systems, will put a Soldier directly in touch with their local VA rep who is familiar with the Guard/Reserve. There are other concerns and issues that exist, as well as those we have not discovered yet. By working together and being creative in solutions, progress can be made. Thank you for the opportunity to share my experiences and thoughts.