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Statement of
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Mr. Chairman, 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). I am accompanied by Jim Vance, Director of the VA Regional Office (RO) here in Boise.

My testimony addresses three related topics: the programs VBA has developed to ease the transition of OEF/OIF veterans back into civilian life; our outreach efforts, especially those directed at members of the National Guard and Reserves; and the specific plans of the Boise Regional Office for the return of Idaho National Guard units later this year.

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 array of benefits, VBA is reaching out to OEF/OIF veterans with programs to assist them in readjusting to civilian life, and with outreach efforts to inform them 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, which are of particular interest to you and to Idaho's returning veterans.

Programs to Assist Returning OEF/OIF Veterans

VBA is actively involved in educating servicemembers about VBA benefits, in helping servicemembers 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, Transition Assistance Program, and 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. Under this program, active duty servicemembers 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. Servicemembers can complete the necessary physical examinations and have their claims evaluated before or closely following their military separation dates. In most cases, disabled servicemembers 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.

In addition to the BDD program, VBA representatives conduct briefings overseas under arrangement with the Department of Defense (DoD). VBA provides two tours each year with six to seven VBA representatives providing this service for each tour. Each is home-based at a major military site and provides services at the site and in surrounding areas.

Returning servicemembers, including members of the National Guard and Reserves, may also 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, servicemembers are fully briefed on the VA benefits available to them and encouraged to apply for all benefits to which they are entitled. In FY2004, VBA conducted more 7,200 briefings attended by over 260,000 servicemembers and their families. VBA military service coordinators personally interviewed more than 115,500 servicemembers.

Seamless Transition is another important initiative 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. Representatives of the VBA Benefits Delivery at Discharge office in Germany work closely with the staff at the Landstuhl Army Medical Center to assist returning injured servicemembers who are patients at that facility and family members temporarily residing at the Fischer House.

Since March 2003, a VBA OEF/OIF coordinator is assigned to each MTF. Full time staff members are assigned to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., and the Bethesda Naval Medical Center in Maryland. Similar teams work with patients and family members at three other MTFs serving as key medical centers for seriously wounded returning troops: Eisenhower, Brooke, and Madigan Army Medical Centers. Itinerant service is conducted at all other major military treatment facilities. As of January 2005, over 4,500 hospitalized returning servicemembers were assisted through this program at Walter Reed, Bethesda, Eisenhower, Brooke, and Madigan. Since March 2003, each claim from a seriously disabled OEF/OIF veteran has been case managed for seamless and expeditious processing.

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 the onset of 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 presents significant challenges to VA because rotation is irregular and the servicemembers 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 deactivation. Last year VA representatives conducted 1,400 pre- and post-deployment briefings attended by 88,000 National Guard and Reserve members.

In addition to these briefings and our other efforts to reach out in person to returning veterans, VA has developed other methods of dispensing information. All separating and retiring servicemembers (including Reserve/Guard members) receive a "Welcome Home Package" that includes a letter from the Secretary, a copy of VA Pamphlet 21-00-1, A Summary of VA Benefits, and VA Form 21-0501, Veterans Benefits Timetable, through VADS (define). Similar information is again mailed with a six-month follow-up letter.

Outreach letters from the Secretary of Veterans Affairs have been sent to approximately 240,000 returning servicemembers who have separated/retired from active duty. Enclosed with the letters are copies of VA Pamphlet 21-00-1, A Summary of VA Benefits, and IB 10-164, A Summary of VA Benefits for National Guard and Reserve Personnel.

Finally, VA has created a new Internet Web page especially for veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq. Information specific to National Guard and Reserves is also included on this Web page, along with links to other federal benefits that may be of interest to returning servicemembers.

VBA Plans for the Return of the Idaho National Guard

The 116th Brigade Combat Team (BCT) and its associated Idaho National Guard units will return from deployment to Iraq in December. They will all process through Ft. Lewis, Washington prior to returning home. The Boise VA Regional Office is preparing for the return of the men and women of the 116th BCT and other National Guard units. The following are some of the activities already underway:

1. Coordination with VA Medical Centers. The Boise RO's OIF/OEF Coordinator maintains regular contacts with his counterparts in all of the VA Medical Centers (MCs) that support Idaho's veterans. When OIF/OEF veterans go to one of these MCs for care, the coordinators refer them to the Boise RO for benefits. Conversely, the RO refers all veterans who come there first to the MCs.
2. Coordination with the Seattle RO. The Boise RO is working with the Seattle RO to ensure that the Guard's liaison officials learn the VA claims process before the 116th arrives at Ft. Lewis. In addition, the Seattle RO's OIF/OEF Coordinator e-mails Boise pertinent information every time an OEF/OIF veteran with an Idaho home address files an application for benefits at either Ft. Lewis or Madigan Army Medical Center.
3. Coordination with the 116th BCT. The National Guard chairs a series of regular meetings of the Inter-Service Family Assistance Committee, or ISFAC. These meetings are attended by VBA, VHA, the Idaho Division of Veterans Services (IDVS), the Department of Labor, service officers, and others. Starting in July, the RO and other committee members accompany the Guard to weekend briefings for the family members of those deployed to Iraq. These briefings will continue until the end of October. A similar series of briefings for Guard members and their families will start after they are back in Idaho.

4. VET Net. VET Net is a committee chaired by the Department of Labor and made up of many of the same participants as the ISFAC. Its focus is to support the members of the Guard after their transition. VET Net will coordinate access to agencies that help with issues such as job security, education, financial concerns, and other post-separation matters. VBA will be an active participant.

5. Coordination with Service Organizations. The Idaho Division of Veterans Services and the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) have service officers located in the Boise RO. Both organizations attend the ISFAC and VET Net briefings, and are an important part of the plan for outreach to members of the Guard when they return in December.

6. Media Outreach. On July 4th, the Idaho Statesman printed a letter from the RO Director about veterans benefits and how to contact and locate the Boise RO. More media outreach is planned.

7. Coordination with the City of Boise. "The biggest party the city has ever seen" is how Boise's Mayor David Bieder describes plans for the Guard's December homecoming. The Boise RO has contacted the city and expects to play an active role in that party.

Mr. Chairman, I hope this testimony has given you and the committee a better understanding of the benefits, services, and outreach being provided to veterans of the OEF/OIF conflicts. I also want to assure you that the Boise Regional Office is ready and eager to serve the men and women coming home to Idaho with the National Guard. This concludes my testimony. Mr. Vance and I will be pleased to answer any questions you might have.