

**TESTIMONY OF THE
NATIONAL GUARD ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES**

Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Joint Hearing on Legislative Presentations

March 1, 2023

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano and other distinguished members of the Senate and House Committees:

Introduction:

On behalf of the almost 45,000 members of the National Guard Association of the United States and the nearly 450,000 Soldiers and Airmen of the National Guard, we deeply appreciate this opportunity. We also thank you for your tireless oversight to ensure accountability and improve services to our nation's veterans and their families.

The combined efforts of your committees have advanced critical policies which directly impacted the National Guard and I thank you for that hard work. From passing the PACT Act to expanding and improving access to mental health care, we continue to make progress toward enhancing the quality of life for our military and veterans.

The operational tempo for the National Guard has increased significantly over the past 20 years, and even more so in the last three. In addition to overseas deployments alongside the Active Component, the National Guard is there for our communities during the greatest times of need. Whether it be wildfires in California, flooding in Louisiana, or most recently shooting down unidentified objects threatening our national security, our service members are "Always Ready." In my testimony, I would like to focus on three specific areas key to recruiting and retaining a

National Guard force that remains prepared to protect our nation: consistent access to medical coverage, incentives for civilian employment, and increased benefit parity.

Zero-cost TRICARE

Our number one priority for the 118th Congress is the **Healthcare for our Troops Act**, which will be reintroduced soon in both the House and Senate. I ask that your committees do all you can to support this critical need. Affording zero-cost TRICARE coverage will dramatically increase readiness, solve turbulence moving on and off health plans, and ultimately save money by eliminating duplicative contracts.

Guard and Reserve units must be ready at a moment's notice, just as the Active Component. It is imperative all service members have access to the health care needed to meet medical deployability requirements. It is unthinkable that an estimated fifteen percent of Guard members currently do not have health care coverage. These are the same Soldiers and Airmen we sent into communities to administer COVID testing and vaccines. The same Soldiers and Airmen we sent down to Puerto Rico to help with hurricane aftermath, often serving alongside Active Component members who did have health care coverage. This is unacceptable.

The benefits of zero-cost TRICARE extend beyond medical readiness. As a key retention policy, this will help us keep a manned and ready force. Preventive care throughout our service members' careers will also reduce medical expenditures when transitioning from drilling Guardsmen to veteran. Furthermore, consistent medical coverage will allow those within our ranks to seek consistent mental health care. I cannot think of any better way to truly put our service members first.

Lastly, this is a significant employer benefit. When a company knows a service member won't require health insurance coverage it will be that extra incentive needed to make the hire. Time away from civilian careers continues to increase and we must find a way to better encourage employers. Without improved incentives, I worry companies will start to choose equally qualified non-military candidates over our service members.

This will revolutionize how health care is delivered to our Soldiers and Airmen. I am convinced it will not only provide better health results but will prove cost advantageous in the long run. The fact that we have men and women serving this nation in uniform who do not have medical coverage is a true shame and we need to do better. Again, I ask for each of your support on the **Healthcare for Our Troops Act**.

Strengthening Service Member Civilian Employment

As mentioned, the recent increase of the citizen-soldier construct has expanded well beyond the traditional 39-day annual training structure. While I cannot anticipate future operational demands, it is clear the era of "one weekend a month and two weeks a year" is over.

In the wake of this new reality, we ask the committees support continued efforts to assist Reserve Component service members and their employers. Specifically, we encourage the reintroduction and passage of the **RECRUIT Act**. This bill authorizes an annual tax credit for small business employers who employ Guard and Reserve members and would go a long way in supporting our communities.

Benefit Parity

At NGAUS we continually strive for benefit parity on all fronts. For the past several years, I have asked for your assistance in correcting numerous benefits not afforded to our members. Both the Forever GI Bill and the FY18 NDAA made advancements to close that gap. Now Guardsmen and Reservists are eligible for nearly all the same benefits as the Active Component, including tuition assistance, transitional healthcare access, and Post 9-11 GI Bill benefits. However, there is still more work to be done.

Of specific concern is full benefit parity for Post 9-11 GI Bill. Unlike our Active Component peers, Guardsmen serve in a variety of statuses and on missions that do not accrue GI Bill benefits. A day in uniform is a day in service to this country and it is past time this disparity is corrected. Examples of this uneven eligibility have been particularly acute in the past several years of increased domestic mobilization, as many of those missions did not count toward GI Bill eligibility.

Fortunately, Congress has made great progress toward correcting this. During the 117th, the House passed **H.R. 1836 - Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act** on a strong bipartisan vote of 287-135. This bill counted all days in service, including weekend drills, annual training and specific state active duties such as 502(f), toward the Post 9-11 GI Bill. This is a fantastic step forward and we strongly encourage the reintroduction of this bill in the 118th Congress.

Additionally, we thank the Senate for continued bipartisan efforts on their version of GI Bill parity, **the GRAD Act**. We are confident a compromise bill can be accomplished and are excited for the benefit this will offer to our service members.

Conclusion:

I thank you again for allowing NGAUS to testify. Your efforts are critical to the well-being of our service members and the success of our National Guard. I look forward to continuing our work together and sincerely appreciate the steadfast leadership from the members and their staffers in advocating for the men and women of the National Guard.

Biography of BG (Ret) Roy Robinson:

Retired Brig. Gen. Roy Robinson succeeded retired Maj. Gen. Gus Hargett as president of the National Guard Association of United States on March 13, 2017.

General Robinson serves as chief executive officer of NGAUS. He is responsible for the association's day-to-day operations in Washington, D.C., and a staff of 28 employees. He also oversees the National Guard Educational Foundation, which maintains the National Guard Memorial Museum, and the NGAUS Insurance Trust.

His principal duties include providing the Guard with unified representation before Congress and a variety of other functions to support a nationwide membership of nearly 45,000 current and former Army and Air National Guard officers.

He came to NGAUS after serving eight years as executive director of the National Guard Association of Mississippi, the nation's largest state Guard association with more than 2,500 members. He simultaneously served as NGAUS vice chairman-Army from 2014 to 2016.

General Robinson has more than 33 years in uniform, much of it while holding a series of full-time sales and marketing positions in the private sector, all of it in the Mississippi Army National Guard. He spent time in every duty status available in the National Guard: Traditional part time, as a state employee, federal technician and in the active Guard and Reserve.

He began his career in 1983 as an enlisted soldier, earning his commission as second lieutenant through the ROTC program at the University of Southern Mississippi in 1985. He retired in 2016 as assistant adjutant general of Mississippi-Army.

Among his military career highlights is commanding the 150th Engineer Battalion (Combat), 155th Armored Brigade Combat Team, during combat operations in Iraq in 2005. He earlier commanded Camp McCain Training Site in Grenada, Mississippi, for 18 months.

In addition to a bachelor's degree in speech communication from Southern Mississippi, General Robinson holds a master's in business administration from Jackson State University. He also completed a U.S. Army War College fellowship in logistics and acquisition at the Center for Strategic Analysis at the University of Texas.

The general holds several military decorations, including the Bronze Star, the Legion of Merit, the Meritorious Service Medal (with four Bronze Oak Leaf clusters), the Combat Action Badge and several Mississippi National Guard awards.

He is married to the former Susan Roth. They have three children and three grandchildren.