

Donald L. Nelson Director, Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program

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Before the

Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

"VA and DoD Cooperation and Reintegration of National Guard and Reserves"

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Chairman Akaka and members of the Committee: Thank you for your invitation to discuss DoD and VA cooperation on the reintegration of our National Guard and Reserve veterans. As you know, Section 582 of the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act required the Department of Defense to establish a national combat veterans reintegration program to provide National Guard and Reserve members and their families with sufficient information, services, referrals, and proactive outreach opportunities throughout the entire deployment cycle. I'm pleased to tell you that the DoD Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program Office opened on March 17, 2008, in Suite 401, at 1401 Wilson Boulevard, in Arlington, VA. The office has a toll free number of 866-504-7092.

This office has liaison personnel from the National Guard, the Army Reserve, the Navy Reserve, the Marine Corps Reserve and the Air Force Reserve, serving as subject matter experts to assist in implementing the program. Veterans Affairs Deputy Secretary Gordon Mansfield has also committed to continuing and strengthening his Department's partnership with the Department of Defense by placing a subject matter expert from the VA on our staff. We are working closely with the VA Veterans Health Administration and the Department of Defense Outreach Office, which focus their efforts on outreach to National Guard and Reserve members and their families. We also work with the National Guard Transition Assistance Advisors, the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Defense Joint Family Resource Center and their Joint Family Support Assistance Program, as well as each of the National Guard and Reserve family program offices. Our purpose in doing so is to ensure that the Department of Defense is doing everything possible to make the best use of available resources in meeting the deployment support requirements of our returning military veterans, especially those that are geographically separated from military installations and dispersed throughout all 54 states and territories.

The Directive-Type Memorandum that implements the program requires the Services and their Reserve components to provide 30-, 60-, and 90-day reintegration programs for their returning members by the 4th quarter of this fiscal year. It also requires them to implement robust deployment support and reintegration programs beginning in the 1st quarter of fiscal year 2009. Our office will monitor and manage these programs at the strategic level and ensure that locally available resources are used to the maximum extent possible, while also making sure that the availability of these programs is shared between the components to allow members and families to access them at the location closest to where they reside.

The Department of Defense recognizes that support for families and employers is vital to success. The Department has devoted substantial resources and efforts toward expanding support for our families. The challenge is particularly acute for widely dispersed reserve families, many of whom do not live close to major military installations. Thus, we have developed and promoted web sites and electronic support for our military families, and the use of nearly 700 military family service centers for all Active, Guard and Reserve members and their families to provide personal reintegration contacts, and we have hosted and attended numerous family support conferences and forums. Reintegration training and efforts to support members and their families following mobilization, particularly for service in the combat zones, are vital. The reintegration program in Minnesota has proven to be an exceptional success and forms the basis for the DoD Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program with its Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Center of Excellence for all Guard and Reserve members. The Department is fully committed to implementing this program, which will provide Guard and Reserve members, and their families, the support that will help them during the entire deployment cycle—from preparation for active service to successful reintegration upon return to their community, and beyond. We will continue to work with Veterans Affairs, State Governors and their cabinet members, their Adjutants General, the State family program directors as well as with the Military Services and their components to ensure that an integrated support program is delivered to all Guard and Reserve members and their families.

The support for employers over the past six years mirrors the increased support and emphasis upon families. We doubled the budget of the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR). We developed an employer database that identifies the employers of Guard/Reserve members, and expanded the ESGR state committees and their support structure (over 4,500 volunteers are now active on these committees) and we are reaching out to thousands of additional employers every year. The Freedom Awards Program and national ceremony to recognize employers selected for this Award has become a capstone event, in which the President, in each of the past two years, recognized the annual Freedom Award winners in the Oval Office (15 recipients per year are selected from more than 2000 nominees from small business, large business, and the public sector). Never in the history of the Guard and Reserve have families and employers been supported to this degree, and they appreciate it, as this effort is critical to sustaining an Operational Reserve.

The Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs has always been very supportive of our National Guard and Reserve Forces. On behalf of those men and women, I want to publicly thank you for all your help in providing for them as they have stepped up to answer the call to duty. Secretary Gates and I are deeply grateful, our military personnel and their families certainly appreciate it,

and we know we can count on your continued support. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program on behalf of our Guard and Reserve.