

**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 13, 2024

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 thank you for this opportunity to come before you today. Your committees have dedicated significant time and energy toward substantial policies which protect and defend those who protect and defend our nation. We thank you for your continued efforts in support of the military and veteran community. Serving in the military will naturally come with some level of hardship, but the system itself should never add to that challenge. We look forward to continuing our work with each of you to implement the necessary policies to improve the quality of life for the National Guard, both currently serving and retired.

Our main goal at NGAUS is parity. Parity in the structure of our force, parity in the acquisition and modernization of our equipment, and parity in the benefits our members receive. The operational use of the National Guard has grown exponentially since 9/11. We now make up 39 percent of the total Army force and 30 percent of the total Air force. Our units deploy on a rotational basis similar to most of the Active Component, once every 2 to 3 years, in addition to

the frequent response to emergency, security, and disaster needs within the states. The weight the National Guard pulls in our National Security Plan is extraordinary. Yet, we continue to face the misconception that the National Guard is somehow a lesser component. While I know I am preaching to the choir in this room, many still fail to understand the depth of the National Guard's role in the defense of our nation. It is imperative we change that narrative and acknowledge Guardsmen and their families for their service to our country.

In my testimony today, 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: increased parity for education benefits, improved transition assistance, and consistent access to medical coverage.

Education Benefit Parity

When an individual joins the military, they invest in our national security. In return, as a small token of our gratitude, we invest in their future through education benefits. The GI bill has been the most transformational policy in American history. It greatly increased college and vocational school attendance and has provided generations of servicemembers with the education they otherwise may not have had the means to pursue. For the past several Congresses, your committees and staff have helped elevate the need for parity in how the Reserve Component accrues GI Bill benefits. Both the Forever GI Bill and the FY18 NDAA made positive advancements to close that gap and we applaud each of you for those wins. While Guardsmen and Reservists are now eligible for tuition assistance and Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits, there is still more work to be done.

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.

We are very pleased to see your two committees introduce the **Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act of 2024**. Every day in service should be counted, regardless of duty status, including weekend drills, annual training, and specific state active duty missions. This is an incredible step forward and we strongly encourage you to pass this bill in the 118th Congress. I know so much work has gone into this at the committee staff level and NGAUS is extremely grateful and appreciative. It is steadfast work such as this that makes for success.

Reserve Component Track for Transition Assistance

Throughout the last century, many programs have been implemented to ensure servicemembers have a smooth transition from military life to civilian life. Retiring from the military is a significant life event. This I know. The Transition Assistance Program was established to help prepare servicemembers for the next chapter of life once they come off orders. However, those in the National Guard come on and off Active-Duty orders multiple times throughout their careers. It is our very nature to move frequently from Title 10 to Title 32 service. And each time we come off a span of Active Duty, Title 10, we are required to complete the Transition Assistance Program as if we are ending our military service altogether rather than, more often than not, returning to our previous regular civilian employment.

Not only is this a waste of resources and time, but it creates a level of callous fatigue. It becomes a check-the-box activity. By the time a Guardsman actually needs TAP, at the end of their National Guard service, they have become immune and numb to the available resources. By

the end of a career in the Reserve Component, many individuals have gone through the TAP program 4 times or more.

The Transition Assistance Program is currently mandated to have three tracks. NGAUS asks that one of those tracks be rededicated and tailored to the Reserve Component. The National Guard and Reserve have unique needs when coming off Active orders and specific attention should be paid to the accrual and transition of benefits; how to choose a health provider, how to report health concerns related to their time on orders, and other benefits such as education, VA, and retirement. It is my understanding these committees are currently considering language to address this issue and we ask for your full support.

Zero-cost TRICARE and Dental

Readiness is our biggest concern and top priority when it comes to the National Guard. We must be ready to protect, defend, and respond at a moment's notice. In order to be "Always Ready," Guardsmen must maintain a perpetual state of readiness and a high level of skill proficiency. For the most part, the Department of Defense provides the individual tools to promote preparedness. We do not ask a Soldier to purchase a HMMWV or for an Airman to purchase an F-16. We do not require them to go to the range on their own dime, or even for enlisted to purchase their own uniforms. Yet for healthcare, the one thing that ensures they are physically able to deploy, the servicemember is required to purchase their own, out of pocket.

As a result, we currently have 130,000 Reserve Component members serving our country in uniform without any healthcare at all. As such, we have units with medical deployability rates far below the 75 percent goal set by DOD. With the state of current events around the world, we

cannot afford any percentage of our team to sit the bench. When it comes to a potential fight with Russia, China, or Iran, we will need absolutely every player out on the field. All components.

We ask you to fully support the **Healthcare for our Troops Act** (HR 4221) and the **Dental for our Troops Act** (HR 4220/S 2046). Healthcare and dental are critical for a ready reserve force, hands down. Affording zero-cost TRICARE and dental coverage will dramatically increase readiness, recruiting, and retention. However, the benefits extend far beyond the current force. A healthy Guardsman is a healthy Veteran. Preventive care throughout a servicemember's career reduces medical expenditures after retirement. Consistent coverage would allow those within our ranks to establish healthy habits for routine upkeep, develop care plans for long-term health issues, and address mental health concerns as they arise. There is no better way to truly put our servicemembers first. The fact that we have men and women serving this nation who do not have medical coverage is unthinkable and we need to do better. Again, I ask for each of your support on the **Healthcare and Dental for Our Troops Acts**.

Conclusion:

Again, thank you for inviting NGAUS to testify before your committee and share our policy priorities. 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 staff in advocating for the men and women of our National Guard.