

Good afternoon, I am Brigadier General Thomas Katkus, Commander of the Alaska Army National Guard, speaking to you today on behalf of the Adjutant General of Alaska, Major General Craig Campbell. I am grateful for this opportunity to speak with you regarding the access and delivery of benefits and services to members of the Alaska National Guard and their families living in native villages throughout rural Alaska. Native members make up 17% of Alaska Army National Guard.

In the last 45 days, the Alaska Army National Guard demobilized the largest group of Soldiers from active duty since World War II. We are welcoming back hundreds of Soldiers and Airmen who have faithfully and voluntarily served this country in time of war. As we send them home to villages all across Alaska, we want to ensure necessary assistance and medical care is both available and accessible for these returning Heroes.

With so many only recently returned, we have yet to feel the full impact of the demands on the system. We are closely monitoring the support our Soldiers receive. Our Soldiers were predominantly stationed in the Kuwait Area of Operation (AOR). This is often confused with being a relatively safe assignment. However, two of these companies worked daily in Southern Iraq, providing route security, personnel security, and traffic control. Others were first responders to frequent traffic accidents, both minor and catastrophic, outside the wire all the while the stress of vehicle borne IEDs was a daily threat for all the Soldiers. Approximately 15% of these 575 Soldiers were from rural Alaska.

In anticipation of the many challenges these Soldiers would face upon returning to Alaska, the Alaska Veterans Affairs Healthcare System and Regional Office, the Anchorage Veterans Benefits Administration, and the Alaska Department of Military and Veterans Affairs signed a memorandum of Understanding on 12 September 2007. The MOU defines the mutually agreed upon requirements, expectations, and obligations of the organizations to meet the needs of our Veteran reservists as they return home. This was an initial step in initiating a comprehensive and practical approach towards improving access to the full spectrum of Veteran benefits while emphasizing healthcare.

Some program initiatives include a Home Station Reunion and Reintegration Workshop for returning Veterans. Within 90-180 days of returning from a mobilization, we conduct this workshop for our Veterans. This workshop will coincide with the Post Deployment Health Reassessments where the Soldiers individual case is reviewed and we provide the opportunity to enroll in the VA system.

We understand our combat Veterans will need continuing transition assistance beyond the reintegration. We have established a multi-disciplinary team which visits remote Alaska for ensuring continued availability of services and the successful reintegration of Veterans into the communities. A Mobile Outreach Team goal is that a visit will be conducted within 12 months after a unit's return from a combat zone at their respective Battalion Headquarters in Bethel, Nome or Juneau.

The National Guard Bureau has initiated several programs to support Soldiers and their families. They have assisted in funding a Transition Assistance Advisor, who provides information and advocates Entitlements and Benefits for the Soldiers and their families.

We also have two Military Family Life Consultants. These professionals are able to travel to all locations for individual and family counseling. This is a free program to all members of the National Guard. Additionally we are getting two additional full time counselors that will be located in the Fairbanks and Anchorage areas. They will be available in the community for ease of access. Our Family Programs unit is a team of over of 25 people ready to provide help to the families, whether it is direct assistance, counseling, or meeting financial needs. There are various services and programs available for all ages under the family programs umbrella. Our chaplains are available to travel throughout the state to provide training and assistance as needed.

The Troop Support Team consisting of numerous Veterans Service Organizations have teamed together to build a comprehensive plan of support to our Soldiers and family members. Specifically they traveled to Camp Shelby and ensured our Soldiers were briefed on benefits and processes to successfully navigate this complicated system. (According to Camp Shelby personnel, Alaska is the only state to do this.) The Soldiers were provided a health questionnaire which exposed various issues. Approximately 54 Soldiers remain in a Warrior Transition Unit today, 37 from 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion.

We in Alaska have more significant challenges than other states have, however, we are working diligently to make sure our program is supplemented through the National Guard Bureau Programs and that no Soldier gets left behind. We stand ready to assist our Soldiers with access to the benefits they are entitled.

I highly encourage the VA and the Native Health System to continue to partner together to provide ready access to those in rural areas. Transportation, travel expenses, access to facilities, and lack of understanding of cultural issues are hurdles which must be overcome.

We will continue to help our Soldiers. However, there is tremendous shortfall between benefits earned and current access for our rural Soldiers.

I would like to thank Senator Murkowski for this opportunity to appear before this committee.