

**Testimony for the Senate Committee on
Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee
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MAJ Ladda Tammy Duckworth, Director, Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Mr. Chairman, Members of the committee, it is a pleasure to testify before you today on behalf of Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich and the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA). This Committee is to be commended for drawing attention to the issues and challenges that our veterans face when returning to the civilian workforce.

In Illinois, as in many parts of the nation, we have found that employment, healthcare and housing are the top concerns facing our Veterans today. This is especially true of our younger Veterans returning home from service in Iraq and Afghanistan. These young Veterans often come home after a tour on active duty military service or as a deployed national Guardsman or Reservist and find themselves unable to reintegrate into society because of a lack of jobs or affordable housing. In 2007 alone, the State of Illinois has launched nearly \$50 million in State programs to help our Veterans find employment, obtain mortgages and access state-provided healthcare. Unfortunately, due to an unwillingness of the federal VA and DoD to share information with individual states, many of our returning Veterans never find out about our state programs until they are in trouble. Often, and tragically, the first time my agency finds out about a returning service member is when we get a call from a homeless shelter or the local jail. We would like to reach them before they start self-medicating for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) with alcohol, or before they lose their homes. However, without help from the federal USDVA or DoD, this is a major challenge for states to overcome.

In Illinois, we are committed to providing our veterans with the best possible services and resources available to make a smooth transition into employment. For instance, the Illinois Department of Employment Security launched six Veterans Job fairs last year to connect employers with veterans throughout the state. Participating organizations included the American Legion and AMVETS. We have also designated November 2007 as "Hire a Vet Month," and are currently conducting state-wide Veterans job fairs throughout the state. Finally, Illinois is also the only state in the nation to offer a \$600 per employee state income tax credit to employers in exchange for hiring Veterans of Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

To help Veterans prepare and develop new job skills, Illinois has the Illinois Veterans grant, which grants each qualifying Veteran 128 credit hours (tuition and fees) at any State of Illinois institution of higher education. Veterans can use this in conjunction with the federal GI Bill, allowing them to attend school for degrees ranging from technical training programs like Commercial Truck Driver to PhD studies. Unlike the GI Bill, the Illinois Veterans Grant does not expire and can be used for additional programs throughout the Veteran's lifetime. This combination makes for an attractive package for future employers who know that the Veteran employee will be able to take a lower-

paying training position while having his retraining paid for by the state and his living expenses supplemented by the GI Bill.

The US Department of Labor, through Assistant Secretary for Veterans Employment & Training Ciccolella, implemented the “2007 National Hire VetsFirst Job Fairs,” requesting that each state conduct a Statewide Veterans Job Fair during the month of November. This year, Illinois has expanded its job fair to 10 sites throughout the state with 345 employers currently registered to participate. The job fair will also include the “First in the Nation” Virtual Job Fair in partnership with Illinois Department of Employment Security (IES), the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), and Illinois workNet, an online employment tool for veterans. I am pleased to report that at the national level, our report to the USDOL-VETS was well received.

In addition, our Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity strongly supports the Jobs for Veterans Act and encourages eligible veterans to participate in all appropriate training and assistance programs managed by the department’s Bureau of Workforce Development. Illinois is divided into twenty-six Local Workforce Investment Areas (LWIA). Services are provided through what are currently referred to as One Stop Centers and their affiliate sites in each of these LWIAs. Our Bureau of Workforce Development works closely with our Department of Employment Security, a WIA program partner, and their Veterans’ Employment and Training Staff (VETS) at the local One-Stop Centers to provide comprehensive services to veterans seeking employment.

According to the 2006 annual Current Population Survey (CPS) special report on Veterans' labor force status, 804,000 people aged 20 and over in Illinois were civilian veterans, or 9% of the State’s civilian population. Of these civilian veterans, 431,000 were in the labor force (7% of the total labor force) and 410,000 were employed. Thus, it was estimated that 21,000 were unemployed for a rate of 4.9%. The Illinois unemployment rate for veterans (4.9%) was higher than that for nonveterans (4.1%). [The national unemployment rate for veterans (3.8%) was lower than the unemployment rate for nonveterans (4.1%).]

To determine why veterans in the 20-24 age range have a higher unemployment rate than non-veterans in the same age group, our IDES undertook an additional special study last year, “An Examination of the High Unemployment Rate for Young Veterans: Based on the Labor Market Experience of Illinois Veterans Discharged from 2001-2006.” The available data supports the hypothesis that the potential for unemployment of a veteran would be at its highest within months after discharge. Among the study’s results:

- The largest proportion of military discharges is in the 20-24 age group. **45.9% of the Illinois veterans that were discharged in 2001-2005 were between 20 and 24** as of the last day of the discharge year. However, only 2.1% of the national veteran labor force falls in the 20-24 age range.
- **31.7% of those IL veterans discharged in 2001-2005 fall into the 25-34 age group**, compared to 12.0% nationally.

- Veterans exiting from the Reserve/Guard have a lower proportion filing new Unemployment Insurance claims than those veterans who are exiting from the regular services, holding age group constant. Thus, the **Reserve/Guard discharges demonstrate the easiest transition to civilian employment after military discharge**, most likely because of their prior employment history.
- For many of the **veterans discharged from the regular services**, enlistment may have been their first full-time job, their first time away from home, and they are now eligible for unemployment compensation and education benefits. The availability of education benefits decreases the likelihood that veterans will transition directly to work, particularly with regard to the 20-24 age group.
- After a discharged veteran finds stable employment, the probability is high that they will remain employed as long as they continue to be part of the labor force.

As the Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, I see every day the struggles of families as they help their loved ones drive long distances to a health care facility for the necessary treatments and therapies of wounded veterans, including treatments for physical, mental and emotional injuries. These struggles impact spouses, parents and children. And, given the intermittent and often lengthy treatment schedules, the needs of veterans must be recognized and understood by employers. In my position, I also see the case work that is required to help our Veterans find jobs and training that may be required if one cannot return to their prior employment.

More personally, as an injured Veteran I've seen first hand what it is like to try to reintegrate after a deployment and service-connected injury. Since I am older and my husband and I own our own home, we only had a dual challenge of finding jobs while trying to receive care in our VA system. In particular, I want to highlight the stresses of traveling to get care as well as the impacts that these stresses have on the families of Veterans. I can attest to the hardship on my family and employer. I live in suburban Chicago. To access my VA hospital basically takes an entire day off from work because of the long drive times as well as the common experience of long waiting times to see medical professionals, obtain pharmacy services, etc. Now, I'm the Director of a state Veteran's agency. I would not be surprised if I routinely receive more conscientious service than most. I can only imagine the challenges faced by a 20-year old Veteran, trying to get time off from work to attend day-long appointments at his VA medical clinic. In fact, since the USDVA is so overburdened, many Veterans, especially in rural areas, find that it can take multiple days to obtain a single doctor's visit. One such example is the Danville VA hospital in central Illinois that routinely denies Veterans access to their local physicians for procedures as simple as a chest x-ray. The veteran is instead forced to take once-a-day shuttles to pick up points for a second shuttle. If one misses any of the shuttles, one must stay overnight, out of one's own pocket, to catch the next day's shuttle. When they finally reach Danville, it is a common experience for a Veteran to wait 4 hours to see a medical professional, followed by another three-four hour wait for pharmacy services. In the end, it is not unheard of for a Veteran to spend three or four nights away from home for a single doctor's visit.

Despite our progress, we clearly must work harder as a State and a Nation to better re-employ our Veterans. I recommend the committee to consider:

- 1) Helping establish an information sharing agreement between states and federal agencies so the states and territories can be notified when a Veteran has left federal service (either through the DoD or the VA medical system) and is returning home. This will allow states to immediately make contact with the Veteran to extend services ranging from employment to housing, medical care, and advocacy services in filing USDVA compensation claims.
- 2). Provide legislation that would protect Veterans' right to take time off from work to obtain medical care resulting from their military service.
- 3). Monitor the USDVA reemployment and Vocational Rehabilitation program for consistency across the nation. These awards for educational and vocational rehabilitation are subjective and vary disparately across the nation. A Veteran's right to such funding should not be dependent on where he lives.

I commend this panel for asking these very important questions about accommodations for our veterans, and your efforts to make sure our Veterans are able to return to work and have the information they need to do so. We should all demand that our Veterans have access to care that is commensurate to their dedication to our country.

I would be happy to take any questions.