

The Needs of Military Families: How are States and the Pentagon Responding, especially for Guard and Reservists?

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State of Indiana
Governor

Testimony

Good Afternoon. I'd like to thank the Chairmen and Ranking Members of the two subcommittees sponsoring today's hearing for giving me the opportunity to discuss Indiana's efforts to support our active duty military members and their families, especially the men and women serving in our National Guard. I would like to also share some thoughts on what the federal government might do to further assist these families.

As you may be aware, previous rounds of federal base closures have left Indiana with only one major active duty installation -- Naval Surface Warfare Center - Crane. This base, which is over 100 square miles, is located in a rural area of southern Indiana. It is the U.S. Navy's third largest installation in the world. The U.S. Army is also a joint tenant and oversees one of the nation's largest ordnance storage facilities. We are very proud of Crane's capacity to develop, test, adapt, and produce high-tech weapons and other specialized equipment needed for both combat and force protection. Officials at Crane have multiple partnerships with industry, academia and state and federal governments. The latest example is the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the Military Department of Indiana to increase use of resources between Crane and Camp Atterbury in order to facilitate state of the art research and training that enhances our homeland security initiatives.

Since Indiana lost four major installations and thousands of active duty soldiers, our primary attention, in addition to strengthening NSWC-Crane's military missions, has been focused on support for our National Guard members and the facilities where they are based. We are extremely proud to have the 5th largest National Guard force in the country; 14,000 Hoosiers throughout our State volunteer as citizen soldiers. 7,612 Army and Air National Guard troops from Indiana have served on active duty in the global war on terror since 2001. And, last year, nearly 1,500 Indiana Guard soldiers served in the Middle East during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Indiana is home to the Grissom Air Reserve Base, the Defense Finance and Accounting Center -- Indianapolis, two Air National Guard Fighter Wings in Ft. Wayne and Terre Haute, as well as the Camp Atterbury Joint Manuever Training Center, a premier training

and mobilization center. More than 10,000 soldiers have been mobilized through Camp Atterbury after being called up for duty in Operation Noble Eagle, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom and other missions assigned by the Department of Defense including support missions in Bosnia and Afghanistan.

Having touched upon Indiana's role in America's military and what Hoosiers have been doing for their country, let me now talk about what the State of Indiana has been doing for our service men and women and their families.

Indiana Initiatives in Support of Military Families

Since Hoosiers value military service, our state has in place a number of laws and programs intended to support our deployed soldiers and their families, and give them a boost upon their departure from service. These initiatives are outlined in more detail on the attached chart and include the following:

- Limited leave without loss of time or pay for state employees;
- Hiring preferences for state government positions, including special preferences for those with service connected disabilities;
- Full tuition assistance for state colleges and universities;
- Full tuition and mandatory fee scholarships at our public universities for the children of military personnel with service connected disabilities or who have received a Purple Heart;
- Tax deductions for military personnel and special filing extensions for those outside the state or in a combat zone;
- Property tax deductions available to disabled Hoosier veterans who have at least a 10% service connected disability;
- Driver's license renewals for those serving abroad, with 90 day extensions upon discharge;
- A requirement for private employers to grant leave for active duty in accordance with the Soldiers and Sailors Civil Relief Act.

Indiana National Guard Family Program

We are especially proud of our National Guard Family Program, which has adopted a philosophy of "family readiness" in recognition of the growing role that Guard soldiers play in our nation's defense. We know that when our soldiers are being deployed, in a very real sense their families are being deployed as well. Focusing on making families ready for life in the Guard, including deployment, gives them more time to plan when things are calm and not confused with the emotions associated with deployment.

A strong volunteer network is the cornerstone of our service to Guard members and their families. The Guard is unique in the fact that its members are scattered throughout all parts of our state and sometimes in neighboring states. Because most of them are part-time soldiers and don't live within the confines of a military base, their families miss out on the camaraderie and support found on a base. The Family Readiness volunteer

network can become a lifeline to essential services such as child-care, employer support, counseling and other services, especially during a deployment.

Indiana's Family Program is made up of three components: Family Readiness, Family Assistance Centers, and Youth Services.

Family Readiness: Our Family Readiness Program has established a statewide network of volunteers to provide support and assistance to Guard members and their families. There are 147 Army and Air Guard units in Indiana. Each unit is served through a family assistance center that is staffed by at least three volunteers and more are added during a period of deployment. The mission of the Family Readiness Program is to "educate, inform and assist families, service members, and the community thereby improving readiness and retention." Typical services provided to Indiana Guard families through this network include:

- Information and enrollment into the Defense Eligibility Enrollment System (DEERS), a computerized data base that is the means of documenting eligibility for medical and other benefits for service members and their families;
- Information and referral to resources that provide legal assistance such as preparing wills and identifying guardians;
- Financial planning, including budgeting during deployment;
- Links to Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) representatives to facilitate relationships with civilian employers;
- Assistance to families as they deal with media inquiries; and
- Assistance to children of Guard families.

Once a unit has been notified regarding its deployment, the Guard's Family Assistance Program schedules a briefing covering each of these issues. Soldiers and their family members are encouraged to attend the briefing and volunteers are available to provide follow-up assistance.

Because the DEERS program is of such value to Guard families, our Family Readiness staff is working to build relationships with state and local businesses and organizations to make the card more relevant to the families' day-to-day lives. Examples of additional benefits might include discounts or special promotions.

While the family readiness program is of great value to military families, especially as they prepare for deployment, once the soldier is deployed communication with his or her loved ones back home becomes even more important. The "Armyknowledgeonline" email system is a terrific tool for facilitating family communication and Indiana's Family Readiness Program plans to help expand access to this system by partnering with local organizations to provide access to computers for family members who do not have computers in their homes.

While the challenges of a soldier's deployment are great, the return home comes with its own set of concerns. Often times after extended separation, families need assistance in "returning to normal." The Indiana Guard's Family Readiness Program provides

assistance and referral for families who wish to take advantage of those services.

Family Assistance Centers: Family Readiness services are often provided through Family Assistance Centers. Located throughout the state and funded by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), these centers, operated by contractors and staffed with volunteers, provide the structure through which help is provided to military families as they deal with issues such as enrolling into DEERS, TRICARE, and requests for legal assistance and financial assistance. From March to June 2004, nearly 15,000 Family Assistance Center contacts were made with military families.

Last year, a new fund, the Indiana National Guard Relief Fund, was established to provide financial assistance to Guard members and their families to help cover medical bills, funeral costs, emergency travel, food, utilities, and other expenses. The fund is supported entirely by private and nonprofit donations. Since its establishment, over \$20,000 has been distributed to Guard families. More information on this fund can be located at <http://www.inarng.org/relieffund.htm>

Another example of local partnership is a new initiative sponsored by the Lilly Endowment to provide additional financial resources to Guard families in need. The Endowment is making \$250,000 available to help families of Indiana National Guard soldiers meet expenses that they are unable to cover on their own. The funds will have oversight by a committee that will consider requests for assistance.

Youth Services: We also applaud the U.S. military's recognition of the importance of meeting the needs of the children of service members and we have taken the next step to enhance our own youth programs. The Indiana Guard has led in addressing the needs of these children by creating a position of Youth Coordinator. In November of 2002 Indiana's Family Readiness Program Youth Services coordinator – herself a volunteer – created a Youth Council. She selected five young people from the Guard's Youth Camp to serve on the Council. This council was established to help provide direction for the Family Readiness Youth Services component. Through the work of the Council, the Readiness program has been able to create brochures for parents and teachers with tips on how to help children remain resilient through tough times and recognize signs of fear or anxiety that children may exhibit. In the coming months, the coordinator will contact school superintendents throughout the state to help them understand the special needs of children whose parents serve in the military.

The Indiana Guard's Youth Council has also recently entered into a partnership with Indiana's 4H Extension program. Young people from both groups jointly attend a leadership camp and are working on joint initiatives. 4H regional youth coordinators will work with Guard Youth Service participants to provide more assistance to children of military families through the Guard's Family Assistance Centers and their volunteer network.

Federal Support for States

I greatly appreciate your subcommittees' interest in strengthening support for military families and your recognition that the demands being placed on state Guards by the war against terrorism may require additional federal action. I would like to offer several suggested steps that Congress and the Administration could take to help states.

First, I urge you to support the proposal included in the House version of the federal fiscal year 2005 defense authorization legislation that would formally allow the Secretary of Defense to fund the National Guard for the performance of domestic operations. This policy, which has been endorsed by the National Governors Association, would provide states with assurance they would be relieved of any burden to fund future deployments of Guard troops for homeland security purposes, as they were under President Bush's directive following the attacks of 9/11. This assurance will also help encourage states to continue and expand state programs that provide family assistance.

Second, I concur with Indiana's Adjutant General, Major General R. Martin Umbarger, who recently suggested at an issues forum of the House Armed Services Committee that the "boots on the ground" deployment of Guard soldiers be shortened from 12 to 9 months. Under the current policy, the total mobilization period lasts between 14-18 months depending on the amount of "train up" time and demobilization requirements. This puts a tremendous strain on Guard families and the small businesses that many of them independently own and operate and where many others are employed. Keeping the total period of deployment closer to 12 months will cause less disruption to our Guard soldiers and families, as well as our employers.

Third, I am hopeful that you will explore ideas for increasing federal health care assistance for families of deployed National Guard soldiers. Many National Guardsmen currently face serious challenges in switching from their employer-supported health care to the military TRICARE reimbursement system and often must travel great distances to see a participating provider. Either all Guard members should be made eligible for TRICARE, as the Senate recently voted to approve, or DOD should at least enhance its outreach to providers to increase access to TRICARE for all eligible military families.

Fourth, I support the National Governors' Association endorsed proposal to defer payments and accrual of interest on federally funded student loans for soldiers who are on active duty. I also support efforts to relieve students from penalties they may receive for withdrawing from schools as a result of their activation for military service.

Fifth, as outlined by the National Governors' Association, Congress should support efforts to address pay gaps for activated citizen soldiers who leave their jobs as a result of being deployed. This is especially important for members of the National Guard who juggle their service to our country with their commitment to their civilian careers.

Finally, I encourage you to consider expansion of the Family and Medical Leave Act to include activated National Guard families, as recommended by the National Governors' Association. This benefit would be of great assistance as families prepare for a soldier's deployment, especially during these times of extended deployment.

Conclusion

Following the events of 9/11, the men and women who serve in our nation's National Guard have been called upon as never before to maintain and strengthen our national defense. Today's hearing shows how much the members of your two subcommittees value the sacrifices they and their families are making for their country. It has been a privilege for me to share with you some of our family support initiatives in Indiana and my perspectives on additional actions the federal government can take to assist our military families.