

**Statement of Michelle Comeau-Dumond before the Veterans' Affairs Committee,  
Subcommittee on Benefits Hearing on the Department of Labor's Administration of  
the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act  
July 24, 2003**

Good Morning Ladies and Gentleman,

My name is Michelle Comeau-Dumond. I am a disabled veteran from Operation Desert Storm, a wife of a Maine National Guard member currently serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and a mother to two beautiful little girls. I am here before you today as a person who has been on both sides of the uniform. I have seen the affects of combat and the affects on military families torn apart by deployments. I have watched hundreds of hours of TV concerning various stories about the war on terrorism, but what I want you to see today is the affects it is having in our own back yards of the United States of America.

My story and family are not unique. My girls and I are but one of some 200,000 Guard and Reserve families effected by this current situation in the world, and not just in Iraq but Kuwait, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, and several other countries and locations where Guardsman and Reservists are deployed, stateside and abroad. Much like what happen to us happens to most military service members. They get a call at any hour night and day, and are expected to respond. The families rush around to wash cloths, pack bags, wives hold back their own tears and wipe away those of their children's. We do our best to do our jobs, give'em a big hug & kiss and put our best face foreword as we watch them roll down the road. We proudly send them off to war, while dealing with emotions of anxiety, confusion, uncertainty, and overall stress and concern about how our family will survive.

Our family life style is now drastically changed without our loved one and breadwinner, as I found out first hand the day I returned home after the send off. . It was February, in northern Maine and we had been hit with one the worst blizzards in many decades; Aroostook County had been declared a disaster area. I arrived home to find 6 feet of snow in my driveway, and 10 feet on my garage roof. I could not open the garage door to get any shovels out because the beams were buckling. The snow blower would not start, and I couldn't find any one to immediately repair it. My girls and I dug out our door with our hands to get into the house and I started to make phone calls for help. We had not had a family support briefing yet so I did not have the phone numbers needed to reach them and I could find no other help!!! I managed to haul our suit case through the snow bank, and drove the car into the bank in front of the drive way, hoping no one would hit it.

The next day I got a path dug to the house, the temp had dropped to 45 deg. below zero. The day after that I was taken by ambulance to the hospital with Pneumonia. I forced the doctor to release me from the hospital after promising I would not shovel, as I had no one to take care of the girls now.

It took me a week and a half to clear snow and had to pay people to do work my spouse would normally have done. The snow blower was easily fixed but cost me \$50.00 when my spouse always fixes those items. Now that the snow is removed it has revealed that the deck on top of the garage needs to be repaired and the siding on the house needs to be replaced. These are things my spouse would do for cost, but now I have to pay

someone to do them. These things cannot wait for my husband to return, because winter is coming again and things will only get worse, yet I have no help and not enough money to have the work done.

In March, my spouse temporarily returned to his home unit in Bangor, to train with their aircraft and fly them to their port of departure. He made arrangements to stay at a local hotel in Bangor, a 4 hour distance from our home. My husband was told his military credit card could be used for the room, and to save all receipts for travel and food for reimbursement. When he checked out of the room the card would not work, we were forced to use our personal money to pay for the room, food and travel. A cost of almost \$1700.00 to the family which put a huge financial burden on us...

As a result, I fell behind on monthly payments on every bill and ran out of heating oil during the coldest winter in northern Maine history. We had purchased a heating oil plan but this was the first year we did not make it through the winter. I was forced to beg for oil, when two months earlier I had perfect credit and had never missed a payment. I knew the family support program was there to help, but knew there were families even worse off than us, knew they were very limited on the funds and staff available. After all, we still had food, a roof and now heat, at least for now. But it wasn't long before I was forced to go to the church and ask for food. On two occasions they assisted me with food for my children.

It seemed like every day something was breaking down; the driver's window in the truck, an oil leak in the car, the screen door was falling off, the faucet in the sink has been replaced with a pair of pliers. Just when I thought I could not take any more my grandfather passed away. I had no way to get there. I had no money and no cloths because I had lost 40 pounds from stress and was working on my third bout of pneumonia. I had reached my breaking point. I picked up the phone and asked our state family support coordinator, who is located in Augusta, 6 hours away, for help. I told her I needed just enough money to get there and back; a 500+ miles trip, plus meals on the roads one way. Once there I could stay with family and borrow cloths. The state family support coordinator asked if I had enough money to get to Augusta. I had a gas card that was not quite maxed yet, and 6 hours later my girls and I were in her office where she gave me \$200.00 for travel and a new outfit to wear to the funeral. I never thought I could be so happy to go to a funeral, but now I would be able to say goodbye to my grandfather and my children's great grandfather.

We returned home thinking things were looking up to find out my husband was loosing his job because of this little known clause in the USERRA Law. This clause say's you can leave your employer to defend your country, leave your family to fend for themselves, and there is no job protection if the employer has a company wide layoff. Yes, you heard me correctly; when my husband returns home from Kuwait he will be unemployed. How will he be able to seek employment in Northern Maine while he is honorably defending his country and the freedom of others in Iraq? The paper mill he works for is laying off 100+ employees, two of which are currently deployed; do you not think the other 98+ will have a head start in filling all the available jobs in the area where they live? If they wait till they return home, what kind of luck will we have in selling a house in a community where high unemployment exists? There must be a way to protect our country's protectors! I have a few ideas; Schooling for new trades, job placement

when at deployment station and Real Estate opportunities for ones who are forced to relocate.

My stories seem comical now and perhaps they are small compared to others, but in Maine alone we have felt the pains of the war on terrorism. Many spouses and families have suffered. Many spouses left behind have been fired, or quit their jobs because their employer would not accommodate them with shorter hours to care for their families special needs, or simply to manage the day to day matters of home.

Why are the families of the Guard and Reserve fighting just as hard at home to support their spouses and yet have no legal protections themselves? There are spouses who can't drive due to visual handicaps and live in rural areas away from central commands and no way to help them. They are left to the wolves, why do we not have special provisions set aside for these special needs people when their spouse is called away to serve our country. If provisions were set aside they could arrange for extra help with there children and rides to get grocery. I am not asking for tickets to Disney World, I am simply asking for basic life provisions.

You're probably thinking, but we pay your spouse for military service. Yes, you do. But here is a fact I don't know if you realize. In my family alone we have lost \$12,000.00 for one year's time while my spouse is serving. In a family that makes under \$50,000.00 a year that is a large reduction in our income. Families need protection as well as soldiers. My children were chastised at school and teachers singled them out, simply because their father went to war. My 8 year old desperately needs counseling and the support group did try to find us some in the area but to no avail. There are no qualified civilians to deal with children and real war problems.

Guard and Reserve families need more family support during deployments; they are the only ones that know what each other is going through. Words can not say what family support coordinators and Family support programs do for those left behind. But Maine has only one coordinator that does the work of 10 people, 24/7 with very little money, and assistance. Often times they rely on local donations. Out reach to all the families is difficult too. The state of Maine alone has 417 miles of interstate, and another 120 miles north of that from north to south. With several guard and reserve units activated overseas and abroad, some 1,000 citizen-soldiers from Maine alone. We are a very rural state and our coordinator does her best with what she is given. What must be done is to protect and provide both our soldiers and their families support and protection by federal law. Without that many other families will suffer and struggle through many of the same problems that can be avoided.

Family Assistance centers have been set up during this mobilization. It consists of a person on the other end of the phone to refer us to outside sources. They do a fine job with what they have, but are not established until war and are only equipped to refer. We need is inside resources, trained professionals. They do not have the training to deal with what we have been exposed to. We need professional staff on hand like an active duty base would have. The family program should be staffed like an Army Community Center with counselors for both child and adult, financial counseling services, job placement help, legal counseling and more.

The family program schedules dinners and informational meetings through out the state at different times and locations. They try very hard to reach us all. They also schedule events for the children and adults so we may socialize and just be together.

Being able to talk to people who are in the same situations having the same feelings make a huge difference for me emotionally and physically. The family program would be able to reach more of us with more funding and assistance. I live 1 ½ hours away from the closest meeting and can not always make it due to financial reasons, that one trip could mean two weeks of gas in my car at home. I am the only one in this part of our county so it would not make sense for them to change the meeting. However, if they could help with gas I would be fine, and I know other families are in the same position.

I stand before you as a proud spouse and American. I will continue to stand behind my husband and my country. I appreciate the opportunity to address you today and I ask you to stand also for the issues that are affecting our military families.

Thank You