

TESTIMONY OF
COLONEL DEBORAH L. CARTER
HUMAN RESOURCE OFFICER
NEW HAMPSHIRE NATIONAL GUARD
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee: My name is Colonel Deborah Carter, Human Resource Officer for the New Hampshire National Guard, and I am honored to be here on behalf of the Adjutant General of the NH, Major General Kenneth Clark, to discuss the New Hampshire National Guard's "Reunion & Reentry" from combat program. I will overview the program, the partnerships, the results, and further challenges.

In 2004, the NH Army National Guard deployed 850 soldiers to Iraq and Afghanistan. Early in the deployments, the NHNG's vision on reentry was mostly ceremonial. However, that began to change as individual soldiers returned home for their two week R&R leave. Although it was the exception, we began to hear of soldiers drinking too much and having difficulty reconnecting with family members. In one case, a soldier spent the entire two weeks in his room and rarely spoke to his young wife and child. In addition, the NH Department of Health and Human Services reached out to offer preventative assistance because their data after Desert Storm showed increases in divorce, alcohol use, drug abuse, spousal abuse, child abuse, etc. As an organization, we

began to realize that the war isn't over just because the soldiers come home safely. With that understanding, the NHNG became committed to playing a very active role in the support of soldiers returning from combat.

With limited combat experience in recent history, the NHNG reached out to others with "multiple combat" experience such as the US Army's 82nd Airborne, the US Marines and US Navy to hear their experiences. The NHNG did not invent; we listened and tailored their "lessons learned" to our reserve force.

The challenges a reserve force faces upon returning from combat are different than active duty. Our soldiers and airmen are, in most cases, geographically separated from services, the command structure, and their battle buddies. Our goal was to build a life-cycle model for reentry and reunion that ensured "no warrior was left behind."

The NHNG "Reunion & Reentry" Program began before the soldiers left theater. Reserve commanders have limited ability to observe soldiers and reinforce resources of support when they return home. We trained approximately 300 full-time people and 500 family members in suicide prevention, post-traumatic stress and resources available. We were convinced these would be internal points of entry for support for many soldiers, and indeed in many cases, that is just what is occurring.

Once soldiers returned to the United States, they processed through Fort Dix, NJ or Fort Drum, NY for approximately 3-5 days. Upon returning to NH, they participated in a short ceremony and a day off with their families. After the day off, soldiers participated in a three-day process to ensure benefits were secured, counseling was provided, VA enrollment with medical and dental assessments was completed, and assistance was provided to unemployed soldiers through the Departments of Labor and

Employment Security – all occurring within days from leaving combat. In addition, all attended classes on stress related combat issues, myths/expectations on reunion, strategies for success, and interactive sessions about returning to family life and the civilian workplace.

The NHNG didn't have the resources to do it alone, so we asked the Manchester VA and Vet Center for help. The efforts of the Manchester VA and Vet Center in supporting National Guard soldiers returning from war is, in my definition, nothing short of a miracle. We asked for thousands of hours of support from both organizations, but with one small catch -- we couldn't tell them when we needed the support until about 48 hours out. Yet the VA and Vet Center pulled it off for 850 soldiers – the Manchester VA provided thousands of hours of short notice staff time for medical reviews, dental assessments, benefit briefings, emergency support and much more. The Regional Vet Center, using staff from six states, provided about 900 hours of counseling, again on little or no notice.

This type of support for returning veterans is unprecedented, and the NHNG and its partners have raised the bar nationally. I am constantly getting requests from other states that want to learn about NH's partnerships and model reentry program.

But the story doesn't end there. Governor Lynch put on a full court press called "Operation Welcome Home" -- a cross-departmental effort in support of returning troops and their families. Led by the Department of Health and Human Services, the effort included support from the Departments of Labor, Safety, Employment Security, Education, and Correction. "Operation Welcome Home" focused on statewide outreach to physicians, law enforcement, clergy, school counselors, and employers on the issue of

combat transition and potential support needed. Following one of the three outreach workshops for these “Natural Helpers,” Maj Gen Clark said: “I had no idea that the community was as aware of this issue as we were. We thought we would be educating them and found that they had much to share with us as well. This partnership greatly enhanced the effectiveness of the “Welcome Home.”

The overall results of the “Reunion & Reentry” Program have far exceeded our original expectations. Here are some of the results:

- All soldiers are introduced to local services within days of returning from combat.
- All receive mandatory introductory counseling through the local Vet Center, with each soldier being allocated an hour of initial counseling.
- 48% of soldiers requested follow-up support after the initial counseling.
- Overall, units involved in the most severe combat had the highest rate of requests for follow-up support.
- All soldiers met with local VA providers to learn about benefits.
- All enrolled in the VA during the NHNG three-day process.
- NHNG soldiers enrolled in the Hospital Primary Care at the VA at a rate of twice the national average.
- Almost half of the soldiers filed VA claims during the three-day process.
- One in every 10 returning soldiers received acute medical care through the VA emergency room while processing.
- All soldiers were provided a safe environment to disclose medical issues; 2% actually needed to be returned to active duty for appropriate treatment.

- All soldiers completed dental assessments through the VA, securing dental benefits for the next two years.
- All unemployed soldiers were assisted one-on-one by representatives from the Department of Labor and the Department of Employment Security.
- Over 10,000 “natural helpers” became involved in Governor Lynch’s “Operation Welcome Home” initiative.
- Soldiers felt cared about and consistently shared that fact with the NHNG leadership.
- Many soldiers experiencing difficulty were and are reaching out for support early.

Vietnam Vets, upon hearing of the NHNG’s attempt to better support returning soldiers, called us one-by-one to share with us their difficult stories and offer their advice. Many veterans told us stories of 25 or 30 years of losses, big losses, i.e. my wife divorced me, my kids don’t have much to do with me, I drank way too much, I lost five jobs, I was in jail, I’ve been married four times, etc. These veterans weren’t sharing for sympathy, but to let us know that if they had known more back then and had reached out for support early, they might not have lost so much.

That’s what the NHNG believes -- we are not suggesting we have found the magic pill to eliminate PTSD and other issues of war, but we are aggressively educating and encouraging soldiers who struggle to reach out early for support. We believe early, mandatory counseling through an organization like the Vet Center, which knows and understands veterans, is the most profound way we are assisting soldiers upon reentry. It is about early intervention and not waiting 30 years to reach out.

As a military officer with expertise in human resources, I am well aware of the implications of the losses I just described. They manifest in the workplace through ineffective behavior, decreased productivity, and economic losses, if not resolved in a reasonable time and manner. Transitioning from a routine active duty tour is very different than reintegrating from combat. If soldiers do not transition from combat well, emotionally and physically, they will not be ready to address economic opportunities. They will instead be struggling to prevent economic loss.