

Congressman Dan Kildee's Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee Regarding the Fiscal Year 2014 National Defense Authorization Act

Thank you Chairman McKeon, Ranking Member Smith, and distinguished members of the committee for holding today's hearing and allowing me the opportunity to share some of the defense priorities I hope you will consider in preparing the Fiscal Year 2014 National Defense Authorization Act. Although I do not serve on the Armed Services Committee, all Members of Congress have a responsibility to protect our nation, and your gracious invitation reflects that. It is an honor to be here.

I respectfully ask that you fully fund the National Guard to enable it to continue to play a critical role as a member of the total force. The National Guard provides a significant portion of the active duty services' capabilities. Since September 11, 2001, individual National Guard members have mobilized over 750,000 times in support of overseas operations – including over 17,000 individual deployments from my home state of Michigan. The Air National Guard supplies 35 percent of the Air Force's capability at a fraction of the active duty Air Force's budget. Moreover, the Army National Guard provides 32 percent of the total Army force, again with a significantly smaller portion of the active duty components' budget.

In addition to providing the military combatant commanders with fully deployable capability, the National Guard continues to fulfill its critical state mission. Last year, the National Guard responded to over 100 natural disasters, including deploying 12,000 personnel to assist with the Hurricane Sandy relief efforts. Further, the National Guard—particularly in my home state of Michigan—has started to take a leading role in strengthening our cybersecurity at both the state and national levels.

Finally, National Guard members serve as military ambassadors in our communities. As less than one percent of the population has served in the military, many citizens' largest connection to our service members, and their sacrifices, is via the citizen soldiers of the National Guard.

For these reasons, fully funding and supporting the National Guard is both sound fiscal and defense policy. I also ask that the committee consider some additional priorities particularly relevant to individual service members.

A smart and well-educated military is a more effective and adaptable force. Thus, I ask that you fully fund the military tuition assistance program. This program enables service members to pursue educational opportunities while serving. Members of the military use this critical program to advance their military careers as well as prepare for their transition back to civilian life.

Further, to address the significant veterans' unemployment rate, the Department of Defense must improve the assistance it provides to service members as they transition from the military. Improving opportunities to transfer military credentials and training to the civilian sphere, job training and assistance, and implementing programs to ensure that service members are aware of the support and benefits available to them would all be positive initial steps.

Finally, as the committee is well aware, military suicide and mental health issues are major problems facing service members and recent veterans. I ask that you continue to explore ways to address these issues and increase funding for programs that help treat and identify mental illness. In this area in particular, our service members deserve our nation's best.

Thank you again for this wonderful opportunity to testify before the committee.