

Statement of Representative Beto O'Rourke (TX-16)

May 8, 2013

Armed Services Committee

Chairman McKeon and Ranking Member Smith, thank you for this opportunity to testify on the FY 2014 National Defense Authorization Act. I would also like to thank the Chairman and his staff for being accommodating in allowing me to testify in person.

I have the distinct honor of representing the 16th Congressional district of Texas, which is home to Fort Bliss and the Army's 1st Armored Division along with nearly 100,000 Soldiers and military families. I was reminded again this week of the incredible sacrifice these service members and their families make to our nation when five Soldiers from Fort Bliss were killed in an IED attack in Afghanistan. I am truly humbled by their service.

I would like to testify about three things today: (1) the current budget situation facing the Army and the ability of Fort Bliss and the surrounding community to adapt to the changing needs of the Army; (2) the importance of the new William Beaumont Army Hospital being constructed on Fort Bliss; (3) the vital role that the tuition assistance program plays in the lives of our service members

The Budget Situation

As many of you have heard from Secretary of the Army McHugh and Chief of Staff General Odierno, the Army's ability to field a ready and capable force to meet its mission requirements has been placed at risk by fiscal challenges in FY 2013. The combined effects of sequestration and the fiscal uncertainty caused by multiple continuing resolutions has impacted Army readiness and has placed 11,000 civilian employees at Fort Bliss at risk of furlough or job loss. Despite these challenges, the Army remains the best-trained, best-equipped, and best-led fighting force in the world. I urge this committee to use the National Defense Authorization Act to guarantee this remains true.

Congress needs to move forward with a plan to end the sequester in a responsible manner. Even if we do, the reality is that the Army will continue with its plan to reduce its active-duty force from 562,000 to 490,000 by 2020 while also looking at other possibilities such as eliminating a minimum of eight brigade combat teams. This reduction in Army end-strength should be carried out in a way that avoids a hollowing out of the force, while simultaneously enhancing readiness, balance, and flexibility. Fort Bliss is well suited to help the Army meet those objectives. And, as the largest power projection installation in the nation, Fort Bliss demonstrates daily its ability to deploy and redeploy Soldiers wherever they are needed. To echo the words of Former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta when he visited the installation, "let me be clear – Fort Bliss is the premiere post in America."

Additionally, the El Paso region and the entire Fort Bliss community continue to go above and beyond in their steadfast support of our Soldiers and their families, investing heavily in improvements to infrastructure, quality of life projects, and education. We invested over \$2 billion in highway projects, new schools, and a children's hospital alone. Recently we agreed to tax ourselves to pay for additional quality of life projects around Fort Bliss. The community's support of this Army post is second to none. The recent \$5 billion of federal investment into the growth and expansion of Fort Bliss will also ensure that both the Army and surrounding community continue to benefit from this relationship well into the future.

In the past, Fort Bliss has always responded swiftly when the needs of the Army have changed. In 2005, this post quickly adapted itself into a new, world-class home for "Old Ironsides," the 1st Armored Division, providing nearly 1 million acres of maneuver area for this division to train. This transition from an air defense mission to a heavy armor mission serves as proof that Fort Bliss is capable of training virtually any type of unit in the Army force structure. Along with the re-stationing of the 1st Armored Division, the Ft. Bliss post also seamlessly received several brigade combat teams and numerous supporting units.

Beaumont Hospital

Service members and their families depend on top quality health care from the Army. Thanks to the past work of this committee, the new William Beaumont Medical Center stands to fill this role. The hospital complex will have a seven-story hospital building with 135 private rooms; two, six-floor buildings with 30 specialty clinics; and a four-story administration building. Along with the generation of nearly 3,000 civilian and contractor jobs, the hospital is designed to last for the next 50 years. This timeline guarantees that the Army will have access to state of the art equipment and medical care well after we have all left Congress. The facility is expected to set a new bar in patient care through the combination of best strategies in hospital construction and patient care, including evidence-based design, the Leadership in Energy and Environment Design guidelines (or LEED), and the military's new gold standard for medical facilities, "World-Class design." As a result, I urge this Committee to continue to support this project so that our Soldiers and their family members can continue to carry out their mission.

Tuition Assistance

I also urge the committee to continue support for the Military Tuition Assistance program in FY 14. In the last year alone, this program has allowed Service Members to take 870,000 classes and earn over 50,000 degrees, diplomas, and certificates. In FY 2012, the Military Tuition Assistance program constituted only 0.1% of the Department of Defense's budget, or \$570 million. Current unemployment rates for post-September 11 veterans are at 9.4%, which is considerably higher than the national unemployment rate. Denying our brave men and women access to education programs will negatively impact their ability to carry out their missions while in service, and also make it harder for them to find jobs after transitioning out of the military. Recently, I led 68 of our

colleagues from both sides of the aisle in submitting a letter to the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee to support full funding of this program in FY 14. The overwhelming bipartisan support serves as evidence that Congress must continue to uphold its promise and support our Service Members in the classroom as well.

While I don't serve on the committee, I have a very keen interest in seeing these priorities carried out in FY 14. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.