

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

April 9, 2014

Armed Services Committee

Chairman McKeon and Ranking Member Smith, thank you for this opportunity to testify on the FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). I would also like to thank the Chairman, Ranking Member and their respective staffs for all their work in preparation of bringing the NDAA to the House floor in the coming months.

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. 29,000 soldiers and their families call Fort Bliss and El Paso home. The City of El Paso and surrounding community go above and beyond in their steadfast support of our Soldiers and their families and I am honored to represent them here in Washington, DC.

The relationship that Fort Bliss shares with White Sands Missile Range (WSMR) and Holloman Air Force Base makes the area one of the most important for our armed forces. The three installations encompass more than 3.3 million acres and nearly 10,000 square miles of airspace. As the largest open-air test range in the continental United States, WSMR serves as the preeminent research, development, testing, and evaluation mission for the military. Concurrently, WSMR provides training opportunities for the F-16 and MQ-9 Reaper and MQ-1 Predator training missions stationed at Holloman Air Force Base while also allowing the 1st Armored Division at Fort Bliss to engage in live-fire weapons qualification, combat skills training, and off-road vehicle maneuvers. Together, Fort Bliss, WSMR, and Holloman Air Force Base provide an unrivaled strategic advantage to our military for its training and testing and evaluation needs, an advantage that cannot be replicated elsewhere in the nation.

I would like to testify about four things today: (1) the budget situation facing the Army beyond 2015 and the ability of Fort Bliss and the surrounding community to adapt to the changing needs of the Army; (2) the importance of the Fillmore Canyon land transfer to Fort Bliss; (3) ongoing construction of the new William Beaumont Army Hospital on Fort Bliss and the need to ensure the three remaining increments of the project will be completed; (4) challenges Service Members face as they transition from the Department of Defense to Department of Veterans Affairs.

The Budget Situation

The two-year budget deal eliminates some of the uncertainty associated with funding levels in FY 2014 and 2015 and brings partial relief to our military. However, mandatory budget cuts remain in effect starting again in FY 2016. These cuts will impact Army readiness and place the 11,000 civilian employees at Fort Bliss and thousands more around the country at risk of furlough or job loss.

Even if a long-term budget compromise rolling back sequestration can be reached, the reality is that the Army will continue to reduce its active-duty end strength. By 2015, the

Army will reduce its end-strength to 490,000 Soldiers and complete its Brigade Combat Team (BCT) Restructure plan, bringing the total number of active-duty BCTs to 32. This reduction 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 remain steadfast in 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.

During a time of difficult budgets, Fort Bliss offers the Army opportunities to adapt, innovate, and achieve its near term readiness priorities. Fort Bliss, in partnership with the community, built the largest in-land water desalinization facility in North America to meet the water needs of the installation for the foreseeable future. Building on that commitment to sustainability, the installation has committed itself to achieve “Net Zero” waste, water, and energy by December 31, 2018. Over the next four years, Fort Bliss is targeting to have up to 70 megawatts of renewable power. The installation will equip 4,700 homes with solar panels that will generate 13.2 megawatts of power by 2017 and has incorporated xeriscaping practices into its housing units. Fort Bliss is also investigating in other renewable technologies including wind turbines and geothermal wells that will provide the installation with additional power. The savings generated within the Operations and Maintenance (O&M) account as a result of Net Zero will provide the Army the added flexibility to direct those resources to other critical O&M needs such as training and equipment maintenance.

Fort Bliss has always responded swiftly when the needs of the Army have changed. In 2005, the 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 post also seamlessly received several brigade combat teams and numerous supporting units. This committee can be confident that Fort Bliss will continue to play a critical role in our country’s national defense for decades to come.

Fillmore Canyon Land Transfer

The Department of the Army has identified the Fillmore Canyon land transfer as a high priority “must have” in the NDAA. The proposal will ensure that Fort Bliss and WSMR are protected from encroachment and have the buffer necessary to continue their training missions in the area. This proposal would transfer the Fillmore Canyon to the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and withdrawal BLM land on the south and west boundaries of the Fort Bliss Dona Ana training areas and Firing Range Complex from disposal to a third party such as a private development company.

Noise analyses performed by the U.S. Army Public Health Command indicate that noise from the Dona Ana tank gunnery and artillery range complex will travel off the installation into the Chaparral, New Mexico area to the south. It will also impact areas to the west, especially during periods of increased operations tempo. Projected noise levels are expected to be reached roughly 300 nights a year and are therefore incompatible with most potential development of the area, which could occur if the BLM land were to be disposed of in the future.

In addition, the withdrawal of this land from disposal by BLM will also avoid increased traffic and safety issues on War Road (Highway 213), a two lane rural road used by Fort Bliss units accessing the ranges and White Sands Missile Range employees who commute from El Paso.

Disposal to a third party of the BLM land proposed for withdrawal would likely result in encroachment and could ultimately result in training restrictions and impacts to the mission if developed for additional residential or other incompatible land uses. This jeopardizes the \$300 million investment recently made by the Department of the Army in Fort Bliss ranges.

I urge the support of this Committee for the inclusion of this land transfer authority.

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 is now under construction and 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.”

A large amount of the infrastructure has already been completed, including grading, utilities, parking, and roads to include a new overpass with access to the highway. The hospital has three remaining phases of construction and the timely completion of the new hospital is critically dependent on the funding of future increments. Specifically, these three remaining increments include:

1. Increment 5 – \$100 million for FY 14
2. Increment 6 – \$131.5 million for FY 15
3. Increment 7 – \$84.366 million for FY 16

As a result, I urge this committee to continue to support this project and remaining increments so that our Soldiers and their family members can continue to carry out their mission.

Transition of Service Members from DoD to VA

The El Paso region is home to over 80,000 veterans, and that number continues to grow as troops have returned home from Iraq and continue to do so from Afghanistan. As a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, I am focused on resolving discrepancies that arise during the transition from active duty to veteran status. One of my top priorities involves resolving the backlog of claims in the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES). Other goals include finalizing an Integrated Electronic Health Record (IEHR); improving initiatives under the Transition Assistance Program (TAP); and implementing an Integrated Mental Health Strategy to increase continuity of high-quality mental healthcare.

Service Members transitioning under IDES currently wait for their ratings well beyond the program's stated goal of 295 days. At the Fort Bliss Warrior Transition Unit in El Paso, Service Members' claims languish, leaving them in limbo and unable to plan for their futures, seek jobs or attend college. While both DoD and VA share responsibility for the delays in IDES claims responses, Service Members transitioning in IDES wait an additional 185 days due to VA's failure to meet its benchmarks for the Ratings and Benefits phases of the process. I have asked VA to use any means available to prioritize clearing the IDES backlog immediately so injured Service Members waiting in limbo can move on with their lives, and hope DoD will similarly prioritize this crucial program.

I also urge this Committee to consider including in the FY15 NDAA a proposal I introduced this Congress that would further support Service Members as they transition out of DoD and into the VA. My bill, the Healthy Transitions for Veterans Act (H.R. 3045), would require the Department of Defense to perform two simple and common sense tasks:

1. Provide a comprehensive physical examination to all Service Members of the Active, Guard, and Reserve components who are separating from military service; and
2. Provide separating Service Members with a copy of their complete medical records electronically.

Service Members of the Guard and Reserve are currently not required to have physical examinations when separating from military service. As a result, Service Members of the Guard and Reserve who file disability claims with the VA are four times more likely to get an unfavorable decision than their active duty counterpart.

Until a fully functioning Integrated Electronic Health Record system can be implemented, giving all Service Members the ability to take ownership of their complete health record will allow them to transition from the military with the confidence that their health needs are expeditiously met in the VA.

H.R. 3045 has been endorsed by 14 Veterans Service Organizations, and is sponsored by six members of this committee- 4 Republicans and 2 Democrats. I encourage this Committee to consider this proposal for inclusion in the NDAA.

While I don't serve on the committee, I have a very keen interest in seeing these priorities carried out in FY 15. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.