

April 9, 2014

Rep. Andy Barr (KY-06) House Armed Services Committee Testimony

Thank you Chairman McKeon for providing me the opportunity to speak before the House Armed Services Committee today. Once again, I come before you in support of our Active Duty, Guard, and Reserve components, as well as our veterans to help ensure they receive the equipment and support they deserve.

I believe that the National Guard and Reserve Components are critical to our national security and in order to safely and effectively complete their missions they must be equipped with modern aircraft and the most updated avionics. I ask this Committee to continue to help provide support for the National Guard and Reserve Equipment Account (NAGREA) in order to help sustain accounts such as the Aircraft Modernization Program.

In addition, one of my priorities is preventing reckless reductions of our military troop levels, especially within the Army National Guard. I respectfully ask that this Committee postpone any decision that substantially impacts troop levels for the National Guard until the National Commission on the Structure of the Army publishes its final findings. This is too important to consider without the Commission's recommendation, given that the decision could have a lasting and harmful impact on our nation's readiness to engage threats to our allies and national security.

Several issues of concern have been raised by my Sixth District Veterans Coalition. I know this Committee remains committed to helping combat military sexual assault and provide the best care possible for survivors. Therefore, I encourage this Committee to consider incorporating legislation that I have introduced, H.R. 3775, Military SAVE Act. This legislation would allow victims of military sexual assault to choose treatment outside of the TRICARE or VA health care network that they feel would best fit their needs, so long as the care is in response to the assault. The TRICARE or VA system would issue the victim a voucher, which entitles the victim to seek care from a private provider and serves as a promise by TRICARE or the VA to reimburse the private care provider for their services. This legislation can serve as an important tool in our ongoing efforts to help the victims of military sexual assault.

I am also aware of the Committee's actions to help address mental health issues within the military. Tragically, the recent event at Fort Hood is a painful reminder of how important it is to continue to provide critical mental health services to our service members and veterans. As you know, the VA reported within the 2012 Suicide Data Report that an average of 18 to 22 service members and veterans commit suicide each day. Sadly, according to the latest report published in January 2014 by the Department of Veteran Affairs, their findings still indicate, "No clear changes in suicide rates in the total population of Veterans Health Administration users or in male Veterans overall."

While I believe that the DOD and the VA are doing the best they can to properly administer many of its new suicide prevention and support programs, I also believe it is up to Congress to continue to help provide these Departments with the tools and resources they need to do more.

I also continue to be concerned about the VA's medical claims backlog. In March 2013, the backlog reached an unacceptable level of 611,000 outstanding medical claims. Today, according to the VA, claims have been reduced by more than 44 percent. While I commend the VA on its efforts to reduce the claims backlog, actual reductions vary from facility to facility and more must be done to ensure this backlog is eliminated. I urge this Committee to commit additional resources to help ensure this issue is quickly resolved so our veterans can receive the timely care and benefits they need and deserve.

Finally, I ask this Committee's continued support in increasing public-private partnerships at all arsenals and depots. Public-private partnerships can play an important role in bringing long-term stability and jobs to communities while increasing revenue to the Army Working Capital Fund. This Committee has taken a leadership role in this regard in previous NDAA's, and I encourage this Committee to continue to take an active role in this area.

In closing, I would like to personally thank Chairman McKeon and this Committee for your leadership and working to ensure that our nation's military and veterans receive the care, equipment, and support they so richly deserve.

I look forward to working with this Committee to help address these matters I have raised today. Thank you.