

**TESTIMONY OF THE
NATIONAL GUARD ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES**

Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Joint Hearing on Legislative Presentations

March 4, 2026

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano and other distinguished members of the Senate and House Committees:

Introduction:

On behalf of the almost 45,000 members of the National Guard Association of the United States and the nearly 450,000 Soldiers and Airmen of the National Guard, we are grateful for this opportunity to discuss current concerns and interests. We appreciate the Committees' longstanding, bipartisan support for veterans and service members and for recognizing the vital role of the National Guard. We must ensure those who serve are treated with fairness, consistency, and respect.

Over the past two decades, the role of the National Guard has expanded dramatically. Once viewed primarily as a strategic reserve, the Guard is now an operational force, routinely employed across the full spectrum of missions. Guard members deploy globally in support of combatant commands, strengthen alliances through security cooperation, conduct cyber operations, and provide critical capabilities to the Total Force. At the same time, they remain the nation's first

military responder – protecting communities during natural disasters, supporting civil authorities, securing critical infrastructure, and responding to emerging domestic threats.

These increased responsibilities have come with sustained operational tempo and growing demands on Guardsmen, their families, and employers. As the Guard's mission set has expanded, it has become increasingly important that policies governing service, benefits, and veteran outcomes keep pace with the realities of how the National Guard is used today.

Today, I would like to focus on three priorities that directly affect our members both in service and after they transition into veteran status: Duty Status Reform, remaining gaps in GI Bill parity, and the development of a Reserve Component–specific track within the Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

Duty Status Reform

As of this week, more than 40,000 National Guard members are on orders, serving both here at home and abroad. In the aftermath of recent natural disasters, thousands of Guardsmen from across multiple states were activated to support lifesaving response and recovery missions. In many of these missions, National Guard members serve shoulder-to-shoulder with Active Component forces, performing the same duties, under the same conditions, and facing the same risks. Yet too often, they do so under duty statuses that provide significantly less pay and benefit protections.

This disparity is not accidental. It is the result of a complex and outdated patchwork of more than 30 distinct duty statuses, many of which were created for a different era. In practice, this system allows orders to be structured in ways that deny Guardsmen access to housing allowances, medical coverage, and education benefits—particularly when missions are

intentionally kept below 30 days. The result is a system where service is equal, but compensation and benefits are not.

For over a decade, Congress and the Department of Defense have recognized this problem. The FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act directed the Department to submit a Duty Status Reform legislative proposal. Since then, multiple iterations have been developed but have not advanced, largely due to interagency concerns about benefit alignment. While studies and discussions have continued, the operational reality has only intensified.

Duty Status Reform is not about expanding benefits indiscriminately. It is about aligning duty status authorities with how the National Guard is actually used today. It is about ensuring that Guardsmen receive fair treatment when they are mobilized to meet federal and state requirements, and about removing barriers that undermine morale, retention, and readiness.

From a readiness perspective, this matters deeply. Guardsmen who repeatedly accept missions without predictable pay and benefits face financial strain on their families and employers. Over time, that strain erodes retention—particularly in high-demand fields such as cyber, aviation, medical, and logistics. Readiness is not just equipment and training; it is people willing and able to answer the call.

Duty Status Reform would also have a positive downstream effect on veteran outcomes. Consistent access to benefits such as healthcare and education strengthens transition outcomes and ensures that Guard veterans are not disadvantaged by administrative distinctions unrelated to their service. The National Guard has proven, time and again, that it is indispensable to the nation's security. It is time for policy to catch up with practice.

The Duty Status Reform Act has support from both the Department of War and Department of Veterans affairs. We ask your support for H.R.6976 and for the introduction of a companion bill in the Senate.

GI Bill Parity

The Post-9/11 GI Bill is one of the most powerful recruitment, retention, and transition tools our nation has ever created. It reflects a simple principle—that those who serve earn the opportunity to pursue education and build a successful civilian future. However, for members of the National Guard and Reserve, eligibility has not kept pace with the way they are employed today.

Again, Guard and Reserve members routinely serve alongside Active Component forces, often under identical conditions and performing the same duties. Yet many periods of service still do not qualify for Post-9/11 GI Bill credit, particularly when members serve under certain Title 32 authorities or short-duration orders that fall outside qualifying thresholds.

This creates a disparity that is increasingly difficult to justify. Service is service. When a Guardsman leaves their civilian job, separates from family, and answers the nation's call under federal authority, the benefit earned should reflect that sacrifice—regardless of the duty status under which the mission was funded. This is not about expanding benefits beyond what has been earned. It is about ensuring that credit accrues fairly and consistently when members are performing federal missions.

It is also about strengthening the force. Education benefits remain one of the top incentives for recruiting and retaining high-quality talent, particularly in high-demand career fields such as

cyber, medical, engineering, and aviation. When Guard members perceive their service does not earn equivalent educational opportunity, it can undermine morale and long-term retention.

Parity also has significant implications for veteran outcomes. The transition from uniformed service to civilian life is one of the most consequential periods in a service member's career. Education benefits provide a bridge – enabling economic mobility, family stability, and long-term financial security. Ensuring equitable access to those benefits for Reserve Component members strengthens not only individual veterans, but the communities to which they return.

The Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act takes an important step to expand qualifying service. We are grateful to Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Congressmen Takano, Levin, and Kelly for leading this effort. We appreciate the Committees' attention to this inequity and ask for swift passage of S.649 and H.R.1423.

Reserve Component Track for the Transition Assistance Program

Lastly, NGAUS would like to address the importance of congressional oversight in the development of a Reserve Component-specific track within the Transition Assistance Program, or TAP.

The Transition Assistance Program has long served as a cornerstone for preparing service members for life after uniformed service. It provides critical instruction in employment readiness, financial planning, benefits awareness, and educational opportunities. For many Active Component members, TAP represents a structured and predictable process tied to a defined separation date.

For members of the National Guard and Reserve, however, transition is often fundamentally different. Most Guard members do not separate from military service at the same time they transition from active duty orders. Instead, they move from a period of mobilization back to part-time service in their home state while simultaneously reintegrating into civilian employment and family life. This dual-status reality presents unique challenges that the traditional TAP model was not designed to address.

Guardsmen frequently return home within days of demobilization, often to employers who expect them back immediately. Many do not receive tailored counseling that reflects their continued military affiliation, the nuances of Reserve retirement, TRICARE eligibility changes, or how fragmented qualifying service affects benefits such as the GI Bill. As a result, critical information can be missed during a narrow and high-tempo reintegration window.

Congress recognized this gap in the FY25 NDAA and directed the Department of Defense to develop a Reserve Component–specific track within TAP. We commend that action. However, continued oversight is essential to ensure that this requirement is fully implemented in a manner that meaningfully serves Guard and Reserve members.

A Reserve Component track should address several key distinctions: reintegration to civilian employment under USERRA protections; understanding of non-regular retirement calculations; continued service obligations; access to VA healthcare and disability claims processes; and the cumulative impact of multiple mobilizations over a career. It should also provide flexibility in delivery – leveraging virtual platforms and extended timelines to accommodate members who transition from federal orders but remain in uniform.

Without deliberate oversight, there is a risk that a Reserve Component track becomes a repackaged version of the Active model rather than a truly tailored program. The Guard's operational tempo over the past two decades has produced a generation of Reserve Component veterans whose service patterns differ significantly from their Active counterparts. Policy and program design must reflect that reality.

NGAUS respectfully requests an update from the Department on the status, implementation timeline, and evaluation metrics for the Reserve Component TAP track. We stand ready to assist in ensuring it meets the needs of today's operational Guard.

Conclusion

In closing, NGAUS thanks the Committees for their continued leadership and commitment to those who serve. Duty Status Reform, GI Bill parity, and improved transition assistance are not abstract policy concepts; they are tangible issues that affect readiness, retention, and the long-term well-being of National Guard members and veterans.

The National Guard stands ready to meet the nation's needs—whether responding to natural disasters, defending the homeland, or supporting overseas operations. In return, our service members ask only for fairness, clarity, and recognition of their service.

We look forward to working with Congress, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Veterans Affairs to address these issues and to ensure that National Guard service is treated with the equity and respect it deserves.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and we welcome your questions.