

Oral Testimony

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and Members of the Committee: Thank you for hosting this hearing today and for honoring all members of the Reserve Component. On behalf of the Servicemembers, Veterans, and families we represent, thank you for your commitment to our Veterans and the work you do every day to ensure that their service is not forgotten. The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States, EANGUS, is a non-profit organization that is dedicated to promoting the status, welfare and professionalism of Enlisted members of the National Guard. We do this by supporting legislation that provides adequate staffing, pay, benefits, entitlements, equipment and installations for the National Guard. EANGUS often partners with other associations that focus on the Reserve Component, such as the Reserve Officers Association (ROA), the Adjutants General Association of the United States (AGAUS), the National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS), and American Legion to pursue common legislative goals and outcomes. Our association has long believed the Members of this Committee have been instrumental in protecting, supporting and honoring the service and sacrifice of the National Guard by ensuring they receive the benefits they have earned, and that these benefits remain protected and we thank the Committee for that protection, support and honor.

Since the inception of the Servicemember Readjustment Act in 1944, which has come to be known as the first GI Bill, and throughout its many iterations, adequate benefits have made it possible for Veterans and those currently serving to transition back into society and thrive. Education and health benefits have made it possible for generations of Veterans to succeed in growing their careers, providing for their families, and has allowed them to continue to give back to their communities.

As education and health benefits have evolved over the years, so too has the role of the National Guard within the uniformed services. We are now at the fourth iteration of the National Guard, starting with its historical inception as colony-specific Citizen Soldiers. We evolved from an all-volunteer force in the 1970s as a Strategic Reserve, and further integrated with the Active Component, becoming a Ready Reserve during the Total Army initiative of the 1980s. After September 11th, the National Guard again changed to become an Operational Reserve, with larger and more frequent deployments. Today, with Guard 4.0, individual Soldier readiness has become paramount, with increased obligations for National Guard Servicemembers to maintain their health, knowledge, and training at a pace rivaling their counterparts on Active Duty.

As a result, members of the National Guard have been protecting our nation and our interests equally with the Active Components, and often at significantly less cost to our country. However, this comes with a significantly higher price to our Warfighters and the communities that support them. That price has been paid in the form of increased difficulty accruing benefits, difficulty in accessing mental health protections, and difficulty in navigating the bureaucracy and logistical restraints of the Department of Veterans Affairs. This includes the weakening of USERRA protections to secure their livelihoods, and not qualifying for SCRA protections when an emergency strikes and we are all called upon to serve.

Today we are here to highlight an idea that we whole-heartedly believe in: *Every Day in Uniform Counts*. Regardless of what orders you're on; regardless of whether you're drilling, or training, or serving on the border: if you are serving in uniform, you should be eligible for and accruing benefits just like our Active Duty counterparts.

Unfortunately, we hear from our members that parity issues are drastically impacting the force. As we speak, thousands of National Guard Servicemembers are fulfilling their duty and responding to a National Emergency declared by President Trump. These men and women serving on the border are responding to a federal call to action made specifically by the Commander in Chief, and still, the vast majority of these Servicemembers are unable to earn the same Federal benefits as their Active Duty counterparts even though they are performing similar duties in similar locations.

Servicemembers from various states around the country, and possibly districts you represent, are all working side by side to fulfill the *same* federal mission, but are being treated differently than their brothers and sisters in Active Duty. These men and women are serving our country, but current loopholes and inequities keep our country from serving them. Under the current law many will not achieve "Veteran status." Few will earn the GI Bill eligibility they deserve, and some will have no access to VA care. The definition and status of being a Veteran, regardless of what type of orders we serve under, must be addressed, *especially* as we deal with the epidemic of suicide amongst our Servicemembers.

Members of the committee, today 20 Veterans will commit suicide. Five out of the 20 will be from the Reserve Components, and three out of those five will have never been put on Active Duty orders, **but** all have served, all *have trained, every one of them wore the uniform with pride*; and yet, they *have no direct* access to mental health care that may have saved their lives...(pause) why? It's because they have been denied these benefits from the very start. Something has to change. We all wear the uniform with pride, and every day in uniform counts.

EANGUS implores the committee to effect change for National Guardsmen and women and solve some of these issues and make their service count. We thank you again for hosting this hearing and will be pleased to answer your questions.