

## **Testimony of Ellen Barfield**

**To the House Health and Government Operations Committee**

**March 11, 2009**

**HB 907--Public Safety - National Guard Deployment - Governor's Powers  
SUPPORT**

My name is Ellen Barfield. I am a veteran of the US Army, and the co-founder and director of the Baltimore Phil Berrigan Memorial Chapter of Veterans for Peace.

I am concerned about the problems that our National Guard members face when they return from a tour overseas. Some of these problems are specific to the National Guard and do not typically apply to service members in other branches of the military.

First, there are economic difficulties. Unlike the regular military, Guard members live in the community and hold regular jobs. Veterans for America did a report on the Pennsylvania National Guard,<sup>1</sup> and their findings most likely apply also to the Maryland Guard—although such a study has not been done in Maryland by anyone.

The law requires companies to keep a Guard member's job for him or her, but the Pennsylvania study found that small businesses were finding it difficult, if not impossible, to retain the same position vacated by employees who are deployed with the National Guard. In addition, Veterans Affairs and congressional staffers reported instances of some businesses avoiding hiring Guard members because of the great likelihood that they will be deployed abroad and the possibility that they could "freak out" on the job. Both of these actions are a clear violation of federal law. That said, a poor economy compounded by repeated deployments creates great stresses for small business owners and their employees. Thanks to excessively long and repeated deployments, many employers are simply incapable of keeping those positions open. In the current economic environment, this is a particularly difficult problem.

With civilian jobs on hold, and possibly lost for good, many families are forced to get by on severely reduced incomes and oftentimes lose employer-based health insurance.

The Pennsylvania study also found that many Guard members in that state had trouble getting their service-connected disability ratings and/or discharge records challenged and corrected when they were wrong. Some Guard members received other-than-honorable discharges for behavior believed to be linked to PTSD and/or other post-deployment readjustment issues. As a result of this type of discharge, some Guard members couldn't get access to certain levels of health care, benefits, or pensions. Nor could they receive VA-funded counseling and other necessary services.

As Veterans, National Guard members receive inferior health benefits. Since the VA is inadequately funded, it must ration care, and eligibility is based on active-time served. Federal military "active-duty" equals time of enlistment, even while serving non-combat duty. National Guard "active-duty," on the other hand, is solely that time spent in combat-duty. Therefore, Guard Veterans are always at the end of the line for health benefits.

Another problem is that Guard members are twice as likely to have a veterans' disability claim denied as other veterans of the same operations, even though they are only half as likely to file claims in the first place.<sup>2</sup> It is unclear why this is so.

And finally, the regular military comes home to a base where they are surrounded by people in the same situation. And of course, they come home to a job on base. National Guard members, on the other hand, being in the community, have little access to support services, medical care, and mental health care because of physical distance.

The stresses of being uprooted from the community, with very little forewarning; possible job loss; absence from family; and repeated deployments take a toll on family life, too. One in five Maryland Guard members expects to separate or get divorced within a year of return to civilian life.<sup>3</sup>

It is time to stop using our National Guard as a backdoor draft.

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<sup>1</sup>Veterans for America, The Pennsylvania National Guard, October 27, 2008.

<sup>2</sup>Rick Maze, Army Times, VCS in the News: National Guard and Reservists' Disability Claims from Iraq and Afghanistan Wars More Likely to be Denied by VA," Sept. 29, 2008.

<sup>3</sup>"Begging and Borrowing to Help Our Soldiers," *Baltimore Sun*, January 14, 2008, Pg. 1, by David Wood.