

Testimony of LeighAnn Dodge
To the House Health and Government Operations Committee
March 11, 2009
HB 907--Public Safety - National Guard Deployment - Governor's Powers
SUPPORT

Good afternoon. My name is LeighAnn Dodge and I come from the Eastern Shore of Maryland, Talbot County, in the 1st Congressional District. Thank you for this opportunity.

I am speaking today as a mother of six young adults, all now in their twenties. My husband and I have spent the last fifteen years raising these teenagers, with varying degrees of success.

Guiding them through those years was not always easy, nor always appreciated. There were times when we wondered where the money and the wisdom and patience would come from. There were times, especially during later high school years, when we wondered if something other than a path directly to college might be better for a few of them.

We listened to stories from local families who had children who had enlisted in the National Guard or Coast Guard, who seemed to be acquiring some good skills and becoming more mature and responsible.

In Easton, the National Guard barracks are very close to the high school, and we passed their big sign daily promising "Military Adventure, With College First"; "Get the Life Skills You Need" it advertised.

Let me tell you, the idea of becoming a "weekend warrior", training one weekend a month, two weeks in the summer, and receiving help with college tuition sounded good.

As it turned out, none of my children enlisted, although two of them did visit recruiting offices and seriously consider it. Had they enlisted in the National Guard, I would be speaking to you today as a frantic, betrayed and enraged mother. As it is, thank god, I speak to you as a mother who has missed the bullet, but is still determined to speak for mothers who have not.

I want to speak for the mothers who have children serving our country as National Guard soldiers.

In Maryland, since Sept. 11, more than 6,000 mothers have seen their sons and daughters in the Guard sent overseas, mainly to Iraq. These parents, out of respect for their children's commitment to honor and duty, often feel that they cannot ask the big questions about their children's service. I want to do that for them.

I am scared and saddened and angry when I hear the news stories about the way the National Guard has been misused during our nation's war on terror, both in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Guard doesn't receive the same training as professional soldiers do before they are sent into combat areas and once in the field, their units are often unable to stay together, to fight as they were trained.

The equipment they receive is older, second rate and often not up to the demands of the fight. Remember the stories of parents attempting to send flak jackets to their children overseas because there weren't enough to go around, or the ones issued were not the best available?

Or the stories of units going through scrap yards for materials to alter their HumVees, to make their armor stronger? Or reports of the unexpected and repeated deployments of the Guard troops, returned again and again into the fight, leaving jobs and families not knowing when to expect them back.

And now we are learning of the stories of returning vets. The kids who are asked to change from warriors, exposed to the constant horrors of war, back into Joe-Schmos, picking right up with their old lives.

They have lived on a fifteen month adrenaline high at age 19, or 25, or 35, and then are expected to come back home and settle down into their old lives again. In the case of my community, to settle into rural Maryland, with very little debriefing (as the professional soldiers have), and with very little in the way of resources or facilities for returning traumatized vets.

And no way can we question this trauma, with more and more stories of astronomical PTSD rates, of alarming, rising suicide rates. With the stories of families falling apart from the financial and emotional strains.

While it has always been very hard for soldiers to return to civilian life, with what has been called "Soldier's Heart" or "Battle Fatigue", imagine how much harder it is now, to be a soldier in a war that was based on lies, one after another.

It is time that we realize that we were lied to, as a people, about this war, and that the time is long overdue to return our fine citizen-soldiers home to our land. To thank them profoundly, to care for them responsibly, and to make certain that they are not abused in this way ever again.