

Oral statement of Jeffrey E. Phillips, Reserve Officers Association

Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs hearing on pending legislation, May 13, 2015

Senator Cassidy and distinguished members of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs. Thank you for inviting the Reserve Officers Association of the United States to testify on issues that affect the National Guard and Reserve of our nation's armed forces.

From north to south, east to west, America's young men and women for more than two centuries have affirmed the wisdom of our founders in their willingness to engage boldly, selflessly, and with great fidelity in the defense of our way of life.

Among them are those in our reserve components, whose yearning for service finds outlet in a particularly demanding regimen: they must balance military service – always a consuming and uncompromising business – with the demands of a civilian work life and the care of their families.

They ask only for the opportunity, the requisite tools and training, and good leadership. It is the privilege of us in the advocacy community, such as ROA and our fellow service organizations, to look *past* official messaging, seek *beyond* official policy and existing law . . . and identify opportunities to improve both our nation's resourcing and support of these young patriots, and also their very employment in the furtherance of our national security.

The selected reserves contribute more than 820,000 members of our armed forces. Since 9-11, more than 900,000 members of the Guard and Reserve have been activated for service in this war.

These men and women serve us every day, in remote places, as well as cities in turmoil right here at home. Each act of service incurs personal risk voluntarily accepted.

Do you know that many of these members of the Guard and Reserve will never be veterans in the eyes of the law?

It is on behalf of these patriots, as well as a matter of sheer honor, that ROA supports S. 743, Honor America's Guard-Reserve Retirees Act of 2015. A friend of mine, Bonnie Carroll, founded Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, after her husband, an Army officer, was killed in a military plane crash.

TAPS is expert in the care of survivors; they focus on supporting those who have lost a loved one in military service, but provide expertise to all who ask.

Bonnie herself served 32 years in the military, in both the Air National Guard and the Air Force Reserve. Because of the requirement to have so many days on active duty, she is technically not a veteran. Bonnie is focused on others; she would never ask for anything for herself; ROA supports this legislation for her and the many others like her.

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Title 38, U.S.C 101, defines a veteran as “. . . a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable.”

Ladies and gentlemen, is there any doubt that reserve component members have met and do meet this definition?

S. 743 helps recognize the fidelity of service demonstrated by members of our reserve components. We urge its passage.

Another bill that supports equity is S. 681, the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2015. The Department of Veterans Affairs in 1991 extended presumption of Agent Orange exposure to Vietnam veterans. Yet, some veterans who were exposed to toxins such as Agent Orange while serving in trust and good faith have yet to be served in return.

Blue water veterans of the naval services were likely exposed to Agent Orange and the Institute of Medicine recommended these veterans *not be excluded* from presumption of exposure.

Air Force Reserve C-123 aircrews were also exposed to Agent Orange. They deserve inclusion for service disability in connection with Agent Orange exposure.

Many warriors since WWI have been exposed to toxins and related risks, be it mustard gas, asbestos, Agent Orange, and so forth. We must be accountable for this exposure and the resultant effects; we urge the DoD, working with VA, to maintain registries of toxic exposure that would help in identifying maladies and establishing connections, as well as treatments, and perhaps offer lessons helpful in the responsible future use of toxins.

Finally, S. 602, the G.I. Bill Fairness Act of 2015, will correct a disparity – likely one made unintentionally -- between active and reserve component members. A reservist placed on orders for medical care no longer earns education benefits. An active component service member placed in a similar medical status does continue to earn education benefits. ROA supports the reform offered in S. 602.

Mr. Chairman, my time is up and so we respectfully request our written testimony be submitted for the record.

ROA, chartered by Congress in 1950 to support our national defense and those who serve in the reserve components, appreciates the opportunity to respond to the proposed legislation today and looks forward to helping the committee in its vitally important work.

Thank you.