

09 June 2015

The Honorable Patty Murray
United States Senate
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Murray:

It was an honor for ROA to provide testimony at the hearing before the Committee on Veterans Affairs on May 13, 2015. ROA advocates for a strong reserve component capable of fulfilling its expanding role in our nation's security. Our responsibility includes advocacy on behalf of the men and women in our reserve components and their families; ultimately our responsibility also includes our veterans. We deeply appreciate legislators such as you who take this responsibility to heart, asking the tough questions and forging law, policy and oversight that ensures the promise is kept.

At the hearing you asked me whether the structure of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) adequately meets the needs of RC members. This letter supplements my initial answer.

TAP has improved over the years to better address the specific needs of RC servicemembers. However, gaps still exist between their needs and the program's delivery. Specifically, the timing and location of TAP is suitable for service members but is not suitable for reserve members whose schedules are substantially different from service members.

Second, the proposed language for TAP should differentiate between active service members and RC servicemembers. Treating AC and RC as the same sort of entity, an approach embodied in the current language, exacerbates the problems experienced by members of the RC.

This position is supported last year by the GAO, which found that TAP needs to focus on the challenges of reserve members to meet their needs (*TRANSITIONING VETERANS, Improved Oversight Needed to Enhance Implementation of Transition Assistance Program*, GAO-14-144).

One change that could be considered is to have TAP add RC servicemember-focused questions to the online assessment; we believe that the structure of the program could be more accurately determined by their responses. Specifically, if the online assessment asks questions regarding the timing and location of TAP, the Department of Defense would likely discover, as we have, that the effectiveness of the program for the Reserves diminishes as the member's distance from the transition service increases.

Finally, a comment on your question to a veterans' group representative who said that VA's culture is changing. Perhaps it is. My personal experience belies claims of improvement: in

January a good friend and Korean War veteran suffered a stroke and was initially taken to the VA medical center in Washington, DC. On one memorable occasion there, sitting by Ed's bedside with his daughter and others present, we watched flies buzz around, his breakfast still in the room on a neglected cart well after lunch had been brought, bits of trash scattered on the floor. Getting staff's attention was often a challenge. His daughter soon moved him to the excellent Sitter & Barfoot Veterans Care Center, operated in Richmond by the state of Virginia. The move to the state nursing home brought relief for Ed and those of us who loved him; he died at Sitter & Barfoot on May 4, well cared-for. I never did see a fly there . . .

It's always dangerous to draw conclusions from anecdotal experience, yet anecdotes represent real experiences; they tell a story. This particular story does not fit within any narrative of culture change.

Thank you for your heart for veterans, your efforts on reserve matters, and for your continued support to those who serve. Susan Lukas, ROA's legislative director, is always available to respond to your staff, at 202-646-7713 or e-mail at slukas@roa.org with any questions or issues you would like to discuss further. I would look forward to any opportunity to be of service.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeffrey E. Phillips', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Jeffrey E. Phillips
Executive Director