

# **ROA Oral Statement**

## **Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

### **Hearing on Pending Legislation**

**May 22, 2019**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Senator Boozman, Ranking Member Tester, and members of the committee; good afternoon.

ROA, the only national military organization that exclusively supports America's Reserve and National Guard, appreciates the opportunity to testify today on legislation that would affect members of the Reserve and Guard, their families, and veterans who served in the reserve components.

We commend the committee on proposed legislation that shows great commitment to ensuring these patriots – male and female – get prompt, attentive, and effective care, and that the challenges of the homeless and those considering suicide are addressed.

ROA's focus is on our reserve components, and so I will address certain bills that apply in particular to our reserve force.

## **BILLS**

The Deborah Sampson Act (S. 514) continues our nation's progress in providing services to women veterans. An essential component of this service is outreach to servicewomen to both explain VA's offerings and to assure them that they are veterans who qualify for care and benefits.

On the ROA staff is a woman who served more than fourteen years in the Air Force Reserve. Several medical events and conditions qualified her for VA disability and medical treatment. Yet, it took more than a decade for her supervisor to convince her to submit a disability application.

She finally confided that she didn't *feel* that she was a "real" veteran.

Well, she is; and she just recently got rated for her disabilities, promptly, we are pleased to say. She is now getting treatment from the VA medical center here in Washington and receiving her benefits.

A good ending, yes; but regrettably not an isolated situation.

The next bill ROA supports is the Care and Readiness Enhancement for Reservists Act of 2019 (S. 711) to expand mental health services from VA. The reserve components, unlike the active component, only perform duty on demand. They are on orders for the period of a deployment, for example, and then off orders until the next demand.

Behavioral and mental health issues, however, show no respect for the duration of a set of orders. Manifestation can and often does occur well after the reservist re-assumes his or her civilian life.

A reservist's medical documents can be scattered around various military and civilian health care locations. Getting copies of specific documents – for example to prove a service-connected condition – can be excruciatingly difficult. An electronic health record that consolidates all these records would represent an improvement in readiness and access to care, *because it would facilitate the right care.*

The last bill I will discuss is the Veteran Debt Fairness Act of 2019 (S. 805). As we have seen, reserve component service members get hit with repayment action from both DoD and VA, and debt collection methods can be very aggressive.

Members of the Guard and Reserve, largely unlike their comrades in the active force, can conceivably receive benefits, *while still serving*, from DoD, VA, and other federal agencies.

Thus, it is possible for debt collection to hit reservists from both DoD and VA, wreaking havoc in their personal finances, ravaging credit scores and depleting funds for a family's daily needs.

As we have also seen, overpayments can and do occur through no fault of the service member, yet our federal bureaucracy takes no notice as it claws back the money.

It's easy to blame the warriors themselves for accepting payments, and that's precisely what some bureaucrats tend to do.

But a GI busy with a war may be forgiven for failing to scrutinize an increase in pay and allowances, especially given the often-confusing array of deployment-related pay schemes and bonuses. Young warriors tend to trust the government to know what it's doing . . .

ROA appreciates that this bill will improve due process, government accountability, and basic decency; and we hope that DoD will take the same approach.

## **CONCLUSION**

ROA is committed to working with VA – and indeed with any and all – to enhance understanding of our reserve components. These citizen-warriors – which I think is a great name for them whatever their service affiliation – serve America in ways fundamentally different from their comrades in the active force; in many cases they need a correspondingly different approach to benefits and care.

The bills before us show that you understand that, and are committed to providing meaningful help.

Thank you for your support of our young women and men in the National Guard and the Reserve, their families, and veterans of reserve service.

Senator, I welcome any questions you and other Members of the committee may have.