
August 1, 2023

The Honorable Don Bacon
U.S. House of Representatives
2104 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Bacon:

On behalf of the Reserve Organization of America, the only national military organization that solely and exclusively supports the Reserve and National Guard, I am writing to you on several matters for consideration by the U.S. House Armed Services Committee's Quality of Life Panel.

The matters addressed in this letter relate to the panel's focuses on healthcare, compensation, and support programs for military spouses.

Further, I ask you to include ROA in the panel's activities for the duration of its existence. ROA's value to you, your staff, and the panel is our subject matter expertise on issues impacting over 40 percent of the Total Force. Inquiries can be directed to ROA's legislation and military policy director, Matthew Schwartzman, at mschwartzman@roa.org.

Healthcare

➤ *Support H.R.4221, the Healthcare for Our Troops Act.*

ROA's *number one* priority for the 118th Congress is to provide sustained medical readiness for the Total Force.

Since Operation Desert Shield, the reserve components have shifted from an exclusively Strategic Reserve to a role encompassing operational reserve, making them essential to the effectiveness of the Total Force. To meet the increases in operational demands and tempo, the reserve components must maintain a rapidly deployable force, requiring an enterprise-wide focus on premobilization training and unit readiness.

Of significant importance to deployability (and by extension, unit readiness) is medical readiness, meaning servicemembers are free from health-related conditions that limit their ability to carry out their duties, whether in garrison or deployed.

However, DoD has encountered longstanding challenges in meeting Individual Medical Readiness requirements. The most effective way to overcome these challenges is to remove the discontinuities in TRICARE for members of the Reserve and National Guard.

By eliminating medical and dental care charges for all members of the Selected Reserve, the *Healthcare for Our Troops Act* ensures access to the healthcare services required to maintain readiness. ROA urges the Panel to support the inclusion of the *Healthcare for Our Troops Act* in the final version of the *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024*.

Compensation

- Allow reservists traveling more than 50 miles for drill weekends to deduct travel expenses on their annual taxes.

Although the nature of service for reserve component members has become more like the active component, differences still exist. These differences often arise from challenges in law and policy that reduce the incentive to serve, especially while members simultaneously forge a career in the private sector.

The most prominent example is that reserve component servicemembers are required to attend a Unit Training Assembly (also referred to as a “drill weekend”) one weekend of every month during the year.

Drilling reservists may be eligible to deduct mileage and other travel expenses associated with this requirement when they file their annual tax returns. However, the standard for eligibility was changed with Public Law No: 115-97, the *Tax Cuts and Jobs Act*. The deduction is now only provided to members traveling more than 100 miles to their drilling location. Before the act, it was provided to those traveling 50 miles or more.

In the 117th Congress, ROA supported H.R.9020, the *Savings for Servicemembers Act*, which amended Title 26 USC §62(a)(2)(E) to decrease the distance required for the deduction from 100 or more miles to 50 or more.

ROA urges the Panel to support the *Savings for Servicemembers Act*, which reduces the harmful impacts of inflation on financial readiness for members of the reserve components.

- Provide 100 percent back pay to certain eligible reinstated servicemembers.

With the Pentagon’s requirements that members of the active and reserve military be vaccinated against COVID-19 rescinded by Public Law No: 117-263, the *FY 2023 National Defense Authorization Act*, ROA urged President Biden to “immediately reinstate all servicemembers discharged for not receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, stop processing pending COVID-19 vaccine exemption waivers, and provide 100 percent back pay to eligible reinstated servicemembers.”

While ROA does not challenge the validity of mass inoculation campaigns in the military, ROA believes that reinstatement with full back pay is the right thing to do.

More than 95 percent of the Total Force is now vaccinated since the first mandate issued on August 24, 2021, reducing the threats that COVID-19 and unvaccinated personnel present to readiness. Further, the Total Force is currently experiencing the greatest recruiting challenge in the history of the all-volunteer force.

Replenishing the ranks with thousands of trained and qualified servicemembers will prove valuable in offsetting recent inabilities to meet authorized end strengths and successfully demonstrate the value of military service to those who “are on the ramparts.” Providing 100 percent back pay will further incentivize these servicemembers to rejoin the ranks and show the public that America does right by its military.

ROA urges the panel to support providing 100 percent back pay to all reinstated servicemembers that were discharged solely for not receiving the COVID-19 vaccine and has draft legislative language that achieves this.

➤ *Deliver parity in hazardous duty and aviation incentive pay between components.*

When it comes to Regular Military Compensation, basic pay and allowances are only one part of the picture. For example, DoD uses more than 50 Special and Incentive pay(s) to help recruit and retain individuals with specific skill sets that fill roles more difficult to replace.

However, despite performing the same duty and maintaining the same level of preparedness, reserve component members are often not compensated the same as their active component counterparts. This is because DoD caps the amount of pay reserve component members receive to a fraction of what the active component receives.

In the 117th Congress, ROA supported H.R.3626/S.1859, the *National Guard and Reserve Incentive Pay Parity Act*, which required the Secretary of Defense to pay the same Hazardous Duty Incentive Pay and Aviation Incentive Pay to both components.

This was “dropped” for an alternative proposal in the FY 2022 NDAA that required the Secretary to certify that HDIP and AvIP parity would not negatively affect the force structure of either component. Unfortunately, the certification has not been signed.

S&I pay(s) is vital for retaining qualified talent, which is less expensive than training new personnel.

This is exemplified by the 2019 RAND report, *Payment of the Full Rate of Special and Incentive Pays to Members of the Reserve Components*, which concluded that an increased AvIP would improve pilot retention and reduce overall costs to DoD.

It also concluded that “paying RC members the full rate of S&I pays could be feasible in terms of cost, given the cost would be quite small relative to the size of the RC personnel budget.”

ROA appreciated the broad bipartisan and bicameral support that HDIP and AvIP parity received in the 117th Congress, but urges the panel to support codifying the *National Guard and Reserve Incentive Pay Parity Act* as originally written.

Support programs for military spouses

➤ *Support H.R.1277/S.596, the Military Spouse Hiring Act.*

Military spouses often find themselves shouldering a large share of the burden that comes from service and sacrifice. This is especially the case if a military family relies on two incomes to make ends meet.

Maintaining employment and advancing professionally while relocating every few years (and taking care of children, often on their own) has historically been a difficult hardship for military spouses to overcome.

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Consistently, over the past decade, the military spouse unemployment rate has been higher than 20 percent.

We think you would agree there is no acceptable reason for military spouses to be stripped of opportunities for employment or career advancement because they are serving alongside their partner!

Military spouses are struggling to find and maintain meaningful employment, despite the hundreds of millions of dollars DoD has spent on a variety of programs, support, and initiatives. We must do better by our military spouses, and we must do better now.

Authorized until December 31, 2025 (under Public Law No: 116-620, the *Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021*), the Work Opportunity Tax Credit is available to employers who hire job seekers that have consistently faced systemic barriers to employment.

Currently, there are ten protected classes of job seekers under WOTC, including veterans. The WOTC has proven highly effective in incentivizing employers to make hiring decisions they may not otherwise consider. Since FY 2018, more than 10 million job seekers in any one of the 10 WOTC protected classes have secured employment.

But despite fitting the criteria to receive protection under the tax credit, military spouses are not included. H.R.1277/S.596, the *Military Spouse Hiring Act*, expands WOTC to include the hiring of military spouses. ROA urges the panel to support the swift advancement of this bill.

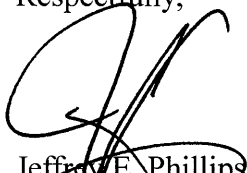
Conclusion

Thank you for considering these policy proposals.

All too often, military and veterans' law and policy are developed without an understanding of or appreciation for the important distinctions between reserve and active-duty service. The members of the Reserve and National Guard invariably lose out. And so, too, their families.

This is why ROA's focus and mission are of value to the panel. We look forward to closer collaboration with you, your staff, and the members of the panel in a non-partisan manner.

Respectfully,



Jeffrey E. Phillips
Maj. Gen., U.S. Army (Ret.)
Executive Director

Ain't High!