



## **VFA's Preliminary Findings: the Alaska Army National Guard**

**October 2, 2008**

### **Introduction**

**The post-deployment challenges facing the Alaska National Guard are more daunting and widespread than any seen by Veterans for America's National Guard Program.**

Members of Veterans for America's National Guard Program recently completed a week-long trip to Alaska to assess the needs of the Alaska National Guard. The VFA team spent time in Anchorage, Wasilla, Fairbanks, and the Kenai Peninsula. VFA also visited the Hub Community of Bethel in rural western Alaska, as well as Kwethluk, a Native Alaskan village twelve miles upriver from Bethel.

Despite the dedicated and relentless work of the Alaska National Guard-led Family Support Programs, the Alaska Vet Centers, local Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), municipal officials, social service providers such as the Food Bank of Alaska, and leaders of community-based efforts, **VFA's findings indicate that the post-deployment needs of Alaska National Guard members and their families remain largely unmet.**

In addition, as a result of inadequate leadership from the Governor of Alaska, among others, the Alaska National Guard has an inadequate understanding of the full range of post-combat issues facing those who have served abroad from the Alaska Guard in recent years, as well as their family members who have been left to deal with the toll of unexpected – at times, repeated – deployments.

**The Alaska National Guard, which was originally designed primarily as a defense force against threats to Alaska, was deployed without programs and systems in place to care adequately for post-deployment needs. The United States should not continue to deploy the Alaska National Guard until this situation is remedied.**

Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, among others, should take steps immediately to address this pressing national security issue.

In the following pages, VFA's National Guard Program outlines its preliminary findings regarding the needs of the Alaska National Guard, with special focus on the needs of the Alaska Army National Guard.

VFA looks forward to continuing to work with leaders in Alaska and Washington, D.C., to ensure that the members of the Alaska National Guard receive the support their sacrifice merits.

## **PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED BY VFA IN ALASKA ARMY NATIONAL GUARD**

### ***Overall***

**The greatest challenge facing Alaska National Guard members is access to care.**

Guard members living in urban centers of Alaska have limited access to Veterans Affairs (VA) health care and Tricare (i.e., Department of Defense-sponsored military health care). When Guard members are deployed, their families are forced to switch to a very limited Tricare network. VFA was told that the Food Bank of Alaska in Anchorage has seen an increase of 400% of military families relying on their services.

Over one-quarter of Alaska Guard members live in rural areas, more than 60 miles from the nearest VA clinic or facility, and many live in such remote areas that they do not have access to Tricare providers during deployment.

For Guard members living in remote villages, it can cost over \$1,500 to travel to Anchorage for appointments. VA will reimburse this money; however, the soldiers need pay upfront. In Bethel, Alaskan Native Elders and local VSOs had to help Soldiers pay for their travel and lodging.

VFA met with Guard members living in a subsistence village where every able-bodied male of the community plays an integral role in hunting and gathering; deployment of such providers has created considerable difficulties at home.

The families of Guard deployed from rural Alaska were hit very hard. For instance, those on public assistance lost their food stamps and Medicare eligibility when their husbands were deployed because their household income had temporarily increased. Food is incredibly expensive in the remote villages of Alaska -- milk costs \$10 for a half gallon. Also, there are no Tricare providers in the villages so as a practical matter many rural Guard family members lost all health care when their loved one was deployed.

In addition to access, there is a pervasive lack of education regarding post-combat mental health needs at the Armories that VFA visited outside of Anchorage.

### ***Pre-deployment***

The Alaska National Guard had to pull Soldiers from across Alaska in order to mobilize units for the mobilization the 3rd Battalion, 297th Infantry Regiment in July 2005. Some Guard soldiers whose homes are not near the armory where their primary unit is based have had to sleep in the armory because they could not afford a hotel or other lodging nearby.

### ***During mobilization/deployment***

**Considerable leadership problems** during 3rd Battalion, 297th Infantry Regiment mobilization and deployment.

**Many Guard members across Alaska spoke about the difficulty that Native Alaskans had adjusting to the heat during training at Camp Shelby, Mississippi.** The Alaska Army National Guard spent the first 18 days of training living in open-air tents in extreme heat and humidity.

Numerous members of the Alaska National Guard reported anti-Native Alaskan racism among some Army National Guard leaders during training and deployment.

**State of Alaska benefits for state employees** who are deployed are paltry relative to other states—a fact worsened by the high costs of basic necessities in the state. The state of Alaska only provides military leave up to 15 days (for instance, California provides differential pay for all state employees when called to federal or state duty for up to 365 days).

### ***Post-deployment***

**Army-wide problem of poor post-combat screening;** causes are, among others, a) Soldiers anxious to return home after deployment; b) Soldiers moving through post-combat screening process in an assembly-line style after deployment; and c) stigma that discourages Soldiers to get post-combat treatment for psychological problems.

**Alaska Army National Guard does not have access to considerable post-deployment health data.** VFA was informed that this would be rectified soon but the absence of substantial post-deployment data greatly hampers post-combat health assessment and treatment.

**Lack of anonymity of mental health counseling,** inter alia, discourages many citizen Soldiers from seeking post-combat mental health care; for instance, VFA was told that some Alaska Army Guard aviators are afraid to seek counseling because they fear they will be grounded immediately; VFA was told that Military One Source works well because it provides anonymity.

**There are no Tricare (i.e., military health care) providers in rural Alaska and, as discussed above, difficulty in accessing Tricare for many in urban areas, as well;** for instance, recently there was a long wait for treatment for Guard members at Elmendorf Air Force Base as many active-duty Soldiers were preparing to deploy

**Alaska's Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program** – which aims to improve post-deployment screening and information sharing – is just getting started; concerns were expressed to VFA that some in Alaska National Guard leadership do not support steps such as more thorough face-to-face screening during the PDHRA phase (90 to 180 days after deployment).

**Warrior Transition Units (WTU's)** are slow to respond to the needs of National Guard members. One problem is that WTU administrative personnel on active bases know little about the National Guard post-deployment processes.

VFA was told that the 3rd Battalion, 297th Infantry Regiment experienced a dramatic rise in divorces, suicides, financial difficulties, and other problems post-combat; VFA was also told that retention and

recruiting had also declined post-deployment of the 3rd Battalion, 297th Infantry Regiment. (VFA recently submitted a request for more information in these areas to the Alaska National Guard.)

**Alaskan Natives:** VFA was informed that deployment pay for Guard members sometimes created money management issues for some Native Alaskan families. In addition, some Alaska National Guard members, especially those from rural areas, are not ready to go home after deployments.

**Employment issues:** Some Guard members with seasonal employment are deployed during the prime income-earning time of the year. In addition, some Soldiers have returned home to find that their job has been taken by someone else or that they are last on the list for upcoming union jobs.

**Veterans' advocates noted to VFA that there is essentially no outreach for women veterans post-deployment.**

## VFA PROPOSALS TO ASSIST ALASKA NATIONAL GUARD

1. Radical changes need to be brought about so that members of the Alaska National Guard from rural areas who have been deployed have easier access to affordable, quality post-combat health care. In short, more post-combat health services need to be brought to rural National Guard combat veterans and more rural National Guard veterans need to be brought to services provided in urban areas and/or Hub communities
  - a. Roughly one-quarter of Alaska Guard members live in rural areas, more than 60 miles from the nearest VA clinic or facility. The state of Alaska should ensure the timely travel and lodging reimbursement for veterans and servicemembers who must travel long distances to seek treatment.<sup>1</sup>
2. Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium should accept reimbursement from the VA to cover post-combat care for rural Guard members who have served overseas post-9/11
3. Governor Palin should make the face-to-face mental and physical screening mandatory as part of the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program.
  - a. For example, the almost 600 members of the 3rd Battalion, 297th Infantry Regiment who returned from Operation Iraqi Freedom in October 2007 have faced considerable post-deployment problems such as suicide, domestic violence, divorce, family issues, and financial problems. At least one-quarter of them have sought transition assistance.<sup>2</sup>
4. Steps need to be taken immediately to ensure that 140 members from the 1st Battalion, 207th Aviation Regiment are well taken care of, as well as their families, when mobilization begins in December 2008.
5. To have a better understanding of pre-deployment and post-deployment needs, two large steps need to be taken:
  - a. First, the State of Alaska, at the Governor's request, should conduct a very sophisticated pre-combat screening for the upcoming deployers from the Alaska National Guard. This baseline should then be used to compare to sophisticated post-combat screening.
  - b. Second, the State of Alaska, at Governor Palin's request, should conduct a comprehensive assessment of the needs of members of the Alaska National Guard who have deployed post-9/11, as well as their families; these findings should then be compared to programs in place; where necessary, new programs should be implemented. Such a study is already underway at a national level and in states such as New York.
6. National military leaders and Alaska state military leaders must ensure that citizen Soldiers have adequate time at home between deployments (i.e., dwell time). Department of Defense findings

have shown that inadequate dwell time is a key variable in markedly raising the rate of psychological wounds of war; for instance, as the Mental Health Advisory Team IV report found that the likelihood of a servicemember having a psychological wound rose by 60% with each subsequent deployment.

7. The state of Alaska must ensure that Alaska has an adequate number of geographically distributed Family Assistance Centers to ensure that the Alaska's National Guard members' 2,201 spouses and 4,138 children are adequately cared for.<sup>3</sup>
8. Governor Palin should expand the State of Alaska Grant Program that provides emergency financial assistance for Guard members and their families.<sup>4</sup>

## Alaska Army National Guard Background

The Alaska Army National Guard was among the last state Guard bureaus deployed post-9/11. As of May 2004, Alaska had the lowest deployment rate of any state National Guard—5%.<sup>5</sup> By the end of 2007, the deployment rate had risen to around 80%, or 1,600 members.<sup>6</sup> The bulk of this increase was as the result of three separate deployments from the 3rd Battalion, 297th Infantry Regiment to support Operation Iraqi Freedom : 175 in 2005, 575 in 2006-2007, and 180 in 2007-2008. These represented the first call-ups of Alaska Army National Guard infantry in more than 60 years.<sup>7</sup> In total, since September 11<sup>th</sup>, three members of the Alaska Army National Guard from Alaska have died while deployed abroad—all in a Blackhawk helicopter crash at Tal Afar, Iraq in January 2006. (A fourth Alaska Army National Guard member, who lived in Washington, also died in the Blackhawk crash.) These were the first wartime deaths by members of the Alaska Army National Guard since World War II.<sup>8</sup> In addition, two Alaska Army National Guard Soldiers were killed during training on July 20, 2006, when the Humvee they were in was hit by an 18-wheeler. Two other Alaska Army National Guard Soldiers were injured in the crash. All were members of the Alaska National Guard's 3rd Battalion, 297th Infantry Regiment, which was training at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, prior to its deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Like many other National Guard state bureaus, Alaska has felt the strains of its overseas deployments in terms of its personnel, equipment, and readiness. A leaked March 1, 2008 memo from Maj. Gen. Craig Campbell, the state's Adjutant General, to his Deputy, warned that the retention levels of the Air National Guard had "reached a crisis level," and that "missions were at risk."<sup>9</sup> Six months later, Maj. Gen. Campbell said that the situation had improved, but personnel and equipment shortages could still result in the "burnout" of troops in the Guard.<sup>10</sup> Consistent with other National Guard bureaus, Alaska has access to approximately one-half of its authorized equipment at any given time.<sup>11</sup> This puts great stress on the Alaska Army National Guard and the Alaska Air National Guard efforts in rural communities, including rescuing lost travelers and providing assistance during natural disasters.<sup>12</sup>

The State of Alaska's own readiness ratings demonstrates that the Alaska Army National Guard is poorly prepared to respond to a major domestic emergency. Under the "Training Capability Rating," each Alaska Army National Guard unit is assigned a rating or T-1—representing the best trained, to T-4—requiring additional training. For every quarter since FY 2005, the Training Capability Rating for the Alaska Army National Guard as a whole has been a T-4, with the goal of reaching a T-3 rating.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, "Field Hearing on Health Care for Alaska Native Veterans Returning from Kuwait and Iraq and Other Native Veterans Living in Alaska Native Villages: Access to and Delivery of Services," November 30, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> E-mail communication with Alaska National Guard Transition Assistance Program, September 12, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> National Governor's Association, *State and Territorial Support for Members of the National Guard, the Reserves and Their Families*, July 30, 2008, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>5</sup> Dawn House, "Returning Guard May Be Called to Fire Duty," *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 14, 2004, p. A1.

<sup>6</sup> State of Alaska, *FY2009 Governor's Operating Budget*, December 2007, p. 10; and George Bryson, "Palin's Military Command Limited," *Anchorage Daily News*, September 4, 2008, p. A2.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Porco, "Leaving For Iraq," *Anchorage Daily News*, October 3, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Army National Guard Bureau, "Some Gave All," webpage updated as of August 11, 2008 [<http://www.ngb.army.mil/features/somegaveall/index.html>]; and Robert Burns, "Helicopter that Crashed in Iraq, Killing 12, Was from Alaska National Guard," *Associated Press*, January 11, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Memo available at <http://www.andrewhalcro.com/files/AKANG%20Senior%20Promotion%20Letter.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Lardner, "Alaska National Guard Faces Personnel Crisis," *Associated Press*, September 4, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> "How Ready is Your State's National Guard," *USA Today*, June 14, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> "Deployment to end Alaska air ambulance service," *Associated Press*, February 12, 2008; and "Guardsmen Rescue Backpackers from Ice Floe," *Associated Press*, March 8, 2007; and R.A. Dillon, "Guard's Role Gets Bigger," *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, August 31, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> State of Alaska, *FY2009 Governor's Operating Budget*, December 2007, p. 7.