

Testimony for the Commission on the National Guard and Reserve (CNGR)
Testimony by Mrs. Andrea Rollins
Key Volunteer Advisor for 2nd Battalion, 25th Marines Regiment
4th Marine Division, Marine Forces Reserve

OPENING STATEMENT:

Good afternoon. It is a privilege to address the Commission on the National Guard and Reserve regarding Reserve family concerns and support. My name is Andrea Rollins and I am the Key Volunteer Advisor for 2nd Battalion, 25th Marine Regiment. My husband, LtCol Geoff Rollins, is the Commanding Officer of 2/25.

Our family has been actively engaged in the Global War on Terror since Geoff's first activation in December 2001 when his unit was attached to 2nd Marine Division in support of OEF/Noble Eagle. In 2003, 2/25 was mobilized and sent to Iraq with I MEF in support of OIF. During those activations, I served as the Key Volunteer Coordinator for Company E, 2/25. The Battalion is currently anticipating another deployment in 2008.

I am joined today by Mrs Margaret Bergan Davis, our Marine Corps Key Volunteer Network Subcommittee Advisor. The Marine Corps utilizes the same family readiness programs for both active duty and Reserve units, so our KVN Subcommittee oversees the program for ALL Marine units and families, no matter what their status.

Within the Marine Corps, our family readiness programs actively involve family volunteers to ensure that the information reaches all family members.

The KVN is responsible for communicating with the Marine families, providing information and referral as needed, as well as passing official word from the Command to the families as directed by the CO.

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The need for active communication increases dramatically when news of an impending activation is passed. The success of the family readiness program during the deployment may depend on whether the communication structure was functioning properly before the deployment. Marines and families who feel they have a capable support structure in place will ask questions and seek out resources from a proactive, preemptive posture, before situations reach a crisis level.

During our Battalion's last deployment, the family issues that were voiced most often concerned lack of communication with their Marines, lack of preparation for dealing with such issues as TRICARE coverage and access, obtaining I.D. cards, installation support, resolving pay issues, and even casualty notification processes. Since that deployment in 2003, the resources and information available for our Key Volunteers to provide to the families has grown exponentially.

Now we have the Marine Corps' MotoMail program to supplement communications with deployed Marines. We have Military One Source to assist our families with resource searches, translation services, and even counseling services. We have programs offered by patriotic companies and organizations that provide free summer camps, free or reduced amusement park admissions, and care packages for our Marines. We have improved visibility and access to DoD programs such as Employers in Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR). And our Marine Corps units have embraced early family preparation through pre-deployment briefs, family days, and utilization of the KVN to spread word of new resources to the families.

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Our families still have needs, and the one issue we hear voiced the loudest is TRICARE concerns. The need to address the weaknesses in this program cannot be overstated. Adequate healthcare coverage is critical to Reserve families. They face the unenviable task of transitioning from their existing health care programs to Tricare and back again in a twelve month period. This is not a small task. Tricare is a difficult and unwieldy program even to active duty families. Yet our Reserve families are expected to navigate the Tricare maze with minimal access and assistance while also dealing with the stresses of deployment.

Tricare issues include:

- benefits and process problems such as denials for covered services, delayed referrals, and deduction waivers that are never applied,
- access issues including problems finding medical specialists who accept Tricare,
- or the frustration of finally finding a participating provider, just to find out they are not accepting new patients.

Additionally, the high cost of continuing coverage for families needs to be addressed. Reserve families may not be able to return to their previous health coverage if the Marine Reservist is unable to return to his or her employment due to business failures, etc, and transitional coverage beyond the 180 day TAMP period needs to be more affordable for those families.

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The stress of deployment on our Marines and their immediate, and extended, families is very real. But their resilience is nothing short of astonishing. They handle the disruption of their civilian lives, the stress and worry of deployment, and sometimes even financial difficulties caused by loss of income, and what they ask in return is simply communication and support.

My written testimony includes other concerns voiced by our families, along with some of the programs developed to help address them. As Key Volunteers, we will continue to do our part educating Marine Reserve families about the resources available to them. But for those military families who may not be fortunate enough to have a Key Volunteer to personally guide them to the right resource, they need your support in getting timely information about existing and new family support programs to all the Reserve families across America.

Thank you for listening and hearing their concerns.

Contact Information:

Mrs. Andrea Rollins
Glen Allen, VA 23060
Email: andrearollins@comcast.net

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In addition to the family concerns voiced in my opening statement, I wish to offer the following for the Commission's consideration.

SUCSESSES:

While looking at the path ahead, it can be useful to remember the issues our families faced in the early days of the Global War on Terror, and recognize how far we have come in resolving issues faced by our Reserve Marine families.

By order of [MCO 1754.6A](#) and accompanying [NAVMC 1754.6A](#), the Commanding Officer of each Marine unit is responsible for the Key Volunteer program and its functionality in support of the unit's mission and its Marines and families. Our Key Volunteers (appointed by the CO) seek to empower unit families with information and resources, so each issue resolved is a step towards reducing the stresses they and their Marines face as deployments approach. It is a joy to be able to offer families solutions to what once seemed overwhelming issues just a few short years ago.

STRESS AND COUNSELING OPTIONS:

Yet, as deployments mount, new concerns surface for our Marines and families. Many of our families are on their second or third activation. They have fears and concerns that mount with each goodbye. But few of our Marine Reserve families live near a Marine base where they would have access to counselors at the Marine and Family Services centers. So Reserve units must continually educate Marines and families on the services of Military One Source, including their ability to refer military families for six free sessions of counseling for any issues the family may be dealing with.

Military One Source is a key resource for Reserve families. The lack of proximity to a local military installation can be difficult, but with Military One Source, Reserve families have ready access to resources and services, such as: information on parenting skills, childcare options, child development, deployment coping skills, marital/couples coping skills, health and wellness, elder care information, tax preparation software, workshops, financial calculators, educational materials, and translation services.

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Additionally, our remote units have access to Military Family Life Consultants (MFLC) to support their Marines and families. These counselors travel to the units to assist at Pre-deployment Briefs, Return and Reunion Briefs, and even facilitate support groups as family needs arise.

Family Readiness Officers (FRO's) are assigned by the unit Commanding Officer, and provide oversight and coordination regarding all family readiness issues. As the primary military point of contact for unit families, they may sense mounting stressors (holidays, casualty reports, isolation, natural disasters, local emergencies, etc), and develop strategies to mitigate building tension within the unit families. Utilization of both MFLC counselors and Reserve chaplains at a mid-deployment briefing is an example of how Family Readiness Officers use available resources to assist unit families in dealing with the anxiety and apprehension of multiple stressors.

PROMOTING RESOURCES

Although these successes are not new, without sufficient advertising, Reserve families will continue to underutilize these programs that are perfectly structured for the reality of remote units and the families who serve. And advertising needs to utilize the national media, instead of just installation and web based promotions.

It has been suggested that a week or month dedicated to educating the public about military support programs would be helpful. This would simultaneously educate military families (active and Reserve), their extended family and friends, their employers, and the general public, many of which are unaware that these programs exist.

RESERVIST EMPLOYMENT CONCERNS (ESGR & SBA)

Support for deployed Marine Reservists and their families begins with the knowledge that the Reservist will be able to return to his/her civilian employment upon demobilization. The efforts of the Employers in Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) in educating employers and Reservists about their legal rights and responsibilities has had significant impact on reducing concerns about civilian reintegration.

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However, this stress is not so easily mitigated for those employed by small businesses or self-employed (partnerships or sole proprietor).

Currently a representative of the ESGR attends many Marine Reserve units' pre-deployment briefs. Having a representative from the Small Business Administration (SBA) available to provide information on the Military Reservist Economic Injury Disaster Loan Program and other similar programs could also be helpful to those struggling with that worry.

This concern for our Reservists is being taken seriously. Currently, OSD is convening a working group on Section 676 to address the Transition to Civilian Employment of National Guard and Reserve Members Returning from Mobilized Status in support of OIF or OEF, so this issue is being addressed for our Reserve families on many levels.

SPOUSE EDUCATION AND CAREER IMPACTS OF DEPLOYMENTS

Military spouses do experience negative impacts on their careers and educational pursuits due to deployments. When military families, especially Reserve families, have established a routine that sustains dual careers or continuing education, and the Reservist is activated, the burden of homelife demands is borne by the spouse who no longer has the Reservist's assistance with childcare, elderly parents, or other obligations. This may impact the spouse by requiring them to delay their educational pursuits, leave their jobs, or carry two jobs to make up lost income. And spouses who face these choices may not have understanding employers, or college programs that will reimburse partial term tuition or hold their place in a technical program.

Similar programs to those that protect activated Reservists, may be needed to protect their spouses in these situations.

PAY ISSUES - FISCAL PLANNING

Many Reservists face significant financial impacts when they are activated, and the family needs to be proactive in their approach to a deployment budget. However, this is not a simple undertaking, as the pay and entitlement process will fluctuate several times during the Marine's mobilization. And with the

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myriad of entitlement types and qualifying events during activation, it is no wonder that many Reservists and their spouses find themselves confused by, and ill equipped to handle, the changes.

This situation could be solved by developing a fiscal calendar or online program that clearly defines the service member's entitlements at each milestone and calculates net pay at each significant event on the deployment calendar, including choices related to split pay options.

INDIVIDUAL AUGMENTEES

Another issue that continues to challenge our families is the Individual Augmentee (IA) process. When units mobilize and deploy forward attached to a larger Gaining Force Command, the families bond together during the deployment and the KVN is able to provide timely feedback concerning deployment issues and news.

With an individual augmentee, it can be difficult to track the military member to their final command assignment, and the KVN usually loses visibility on the Marine. This leaves the family without information or support during the course of the deployment, and adds to the stress they face.

RESPIRE CHILDCARE DURING DEPLOYMENTS

Respite childcare programs designed to assist military families during deployments are a support program that active duty families depend on. However, Reserve families have had to rely on family members, friends or a supportive community for similar support. To address this concern, the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA) has developed several programs to assist military families who cannot utilize DoD childcare on installations. Details are on the NACCRRA website describing the programs and the assistance available for: Operation Military Child Care, Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood, and the Enhanced Child Care Referral Service.

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DEPLOYMENT COMMUNICATIONS

At the beginning of the ground war, communication issues were the primary concern voiced by families. As military infrastructure has been established, the communication issues declined dramatically. The result was a reduction in stress levels for families with Marines serving where email, phone service, and military postal facilities were readily accessible.

To address the concerns of those families whose Marines were not stationed with ready access to email and phone, the Marine Corps initiated a unique program called MotoMail. Accessed via the web at www.motomail.us, this communication process is used daily by families of deployed Marines, active and Reserve. Like email, it is a fast, simple communication tool, but unlike email, a MotoMail can be read and re-read by the Marine, even when there is no access to computers.

Delivery time is usually within 24 hours and there is no cost to the users. MotoMail is handled by designated USMC post offices, where a special machine receives the electronic mail, prints, folds, and seals the letter inside the machine, so that a private, confidential letter can be delivered to the Marine at the next unit mail call.

Family Readiness Officers introduce MotoMail to Marine families during Pre-Deployment briefs, and Key Volunteers remind their families that MotoMail is an excellent way to supplement their communication needs during deployments.

UNITS' REMAIN BEHIND ELEMENT DURING DEPLOYMENTS

Family support during deployments is an ongoing concern for both active duty and Reserve units. The Marine Corps Reserve has a unique approach to the Remain Behind Element (RBE) situation. The Peacetime, Wartime Support Team (P/WST) is a dedicated and trained RBE that provides a seamless transition upon mobilization and deployment of a Reserve unit.

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The benefits to the families can be immediate and far-reaching. Ideally, the P/WST is already part of the unit and has focused their resources on:

- family readiness, assistance and support,
- community outreach,
- mobilization/demobilization preparation and support,
- casualty assistance,
- Military Support to Civil Authorities (MSCA), and
- site facilities maintenance.

Family assistance is a very important function of the P/WST. The team works closely with Key Volunteers and the Family Readiness Officer to ensure that family issues can be handled quickly and efficiently. It is critical that lines of positive and effective communication between the family and command are open and functioning. In some cases the assigned Family Readiness Officer is called to mobilize with the unit and in those cases the P/WST stands ready to fulfill those duties to the unit.

Through this unique program, the Reserve command can focus on getting the SMCR Marines ready for war, while the P/WST focuses on home front issues before, during and after mobilization.

FAMILY READINESS PROGRAMS

As previously stated, the Marine Corps utilizes the same family readiness programs for active duty units and Reserve units. This continuity allows for stronger support structures, and encourages volunteers to continue assisting families even when their spouses transfer to new units. The three primary family readiness programs for our units are the Key Volunteer Network, L.I.N.K.S. (Lifestyles Insights, Networking, Knowledge, and Skills), and the Spouses Learning Series.

The Marine Corps Key Volunteer Network actively involves family volunteers (appointed by the Commanding Officers) to ensure that the communication flow and information reaches each Marine Reserve family. Experience shows that some Reserve families are not as comfortable calling the unit directly to ask questions concerning available resources or support programs, such as childcare information, but by assigning each family a trained Key Volunteer, that barrier is eliminated and information is referred by a peer.

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Key Volunteers belong to the same unit as the families they support, and are assigned by the unit Commanding Officer, who also designates a Family Readiness Officer for the unit.

SUPPORT OF EXTENDED FAMILIES

Family readiness is crucial to mission readiness. Therefore, Marine Reserve units include parents of Marines into the educational, informational and volunteer programs that serve unit family readiness. The better informed and supported the parents are, the more emotional and physical support they can provide to their Marine. However, due to Privacy Act issues, no parent or other extended family members are brought into unit family readiness programs without the written consent of the Marine. Appropriate involvement of parents can benefit the Reserve units, and the Marines' family readiness and support.

Additionally, the Key Volunteer Network for the Reserve community faces unique challenges. The families of a reserve unit are often geographically dispersed with varying access to military resources. The task of providing adequate communication and information and referral may require more volunteers than a unit whose families reside in one geographic area such as a Marine Corps installation. Because of this challenge, Reserve unit commanding officers may supplement the use of spouse volunteers by utilizing parents of Marines within the unit to be trained and serve as Key Volunteers. These parents often have more available time, and may bring additional insight into local resources and assistance available to unit families. Their efforts and involvement contribute to strong family readiness programs in many Reserve units.

SUMMARY

In summary, successful family readiness programs for Reserve units are the result of enthusiastic leadership by the Commanding Officer, strong family programs, dedicated volunteers within the Key Volunteer Network, support from Marine Corps Family Team Building and various DoD agencies and programs, and consistent community support.

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A Reserve Marine whose family remains outside the information and communication flow, will struggle with activations and deployments. By engaging and involving the Marines and families prior to deployments, the family can thrive, armed with the resources necessary to maneuver through the lifestyle evolutions that the current high deployment tempo requires.

The Commission's consideration of these family concerns and the road ahead for Reserve military families is deeply appreciated.

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