



BARACK OBAMA: STANDING UP FOR OUR CITIZEN-SOLDIERS

"We cannot accept second-class care for the brave men and women of the Guard and Reserves. They fight in the same war as their active-duty compatriots. They must not slip through holes in our safety net when they return to civilian life."

[Speech in Waterloo, Iowa, October 3, 2007]

OBAMA'S PLAN TO HELP GUARDSMEN, RESERVISTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Improve Mental Health Services for Reserve Elements: Troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are coming home with record levels of combat stress. The problem is particularly acute among members of the Guard and Reserves. A recent military survey found that 49 percent of returning National Guard members report psychological symptoms, a higher figure than their active-duty counterparts. Relative to active duty troops, guardsmen, reservists and their families have limited access to military chaplains, family support programs, and other programs designed to support psychological health. Only three states (California, Texas and Pennsylvania) have a full-time National Guard psychological health coordinator to help their guardsmen get care. Barack Obama will improve mental health care at every stage of military service—recruitment, deployment, and reentry into civilian life:

- **Recruitment:** Recruiting more mental health professionals; improving screening; and instituting fairness by guaranteeing that if the military determines on the front end that an individual is fit to serve, that individual will not be denied benefits on the back end on the grounds of a "preexisting" condition.
- **Active Duty, Training, and Deployment:** Placing more mental health professionals with troops as they train, deploy, and return; fighting the stigma of psychological injury by enhancing training; and helping military families by offering more counseling and support to family members.
- **Return to Civilian Life:** Requiring individual, face-to-face post-deployment mental health screenings; increasing the VA budget to recruit and retain more mental health professionals; making PTSD benefits claims fairer and more accurate by providing better training and guidance to personnel; and expanding Vet Centers in rural areas so that veterans and their families can get the care they need where they live.
- **Support for Guardsmen:** Placing a mental health coordinator in each of the states' Adjutants General's office and giving the states the resources to provide better follow-up following a guard unit's return from deployment.

Give the Guard a Seat at the Table: Too often, top-level military decisions that impact the National Guard are made without their input. As a senator, Barack Obama cosponsored legislation to elevate the Chief of the National Guard to the rank of four-star general and make the chief a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the top military advisory panel to the president. As president, Obama will sign this legislation into law.

Replace Lost Guard Equipment: The Iowa National Guard has just 45 percent of the equipment it needs on hand, largely because of war losses and wear and tear. After returning from a year-long deployment, an Iowa

National Guard helicopter unit had accumulated 10 years of service on their aircraft. The constant pace of deployments has limited equipment available for training and has forced some personnel across the country to use vehicles dating back to the 1960s. Barack Obama will invest in an equipment reset for the military, including the National Guard, which has seen its readiness for homeland security missions decrease significantly.

Let Our Guardsmen and Reservists Train and Rest Between Deployments: Since September 2001, more than 580,000 reservists have been activated. These are numbers not seen since World War II. These uncertain and repeated deployments have strained Guard and Reserve families. Barack Obama would ease this deployment tempo by beginning an immediate redeployment of American troops from Iraq. The withdrawal would be strategic and phased, directed by military commanders on the ground and done in consultation with the Iraqi government. The drawdown would begin immediately with one to two combat brigades redeploying each month and all troops engaged in combat operations out by the end of next year. Barack Obama supports plans to increase the size of the Army by 65,000 troops and the Marines by 27,000 troops. Increasing our end strength will allow units to retrain and re-equip properly between deployments and decrease the strain on military families.

Help Military Spouses Cope with Deployments: When a guardsman or reservist is called away for active duty, their spouses have to make a tremendous transition and often struggle to balance work and family obligations. Currently, the Family Medical Leave Act requires employers to give their workers unpaid leave if an employee has a new child, has a serious medical condition, or has a severely ill family member. Barack Obama would expand Family Medical Leave to include reserve families who are facing mobilization. This will allow workers whose spouse is called to active duty to take time off from work and get their affairs in order.

Fight Guard/Reserve Employment Discrimination: The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) is supposed to protect guardsmen and reservists from job discrimination by employers who are afraid to lose their employees to activations. The current process of assisting reservists with employment discrimination complaints is disjointed, and managed by multiple federal agencies. This has led many guardsmen to not take the steps to defend their legal rights. A Defense Department survey showed that fewer than 30 percent of Guard members and reservists with USERRA problems ever sought assistance. A discrimination complaint can take months to investigate and resolve, potentially leaving veterans vulnerable and stuck between jobs. Given the growing number of reservists demobilizing and seeking reemployment, we must make a long-term investment in improving the timeliness and quality of resolving these cases. As president, Barack Obama will invest additional resources into enforcement and investigation in order to crack down on employers who are not following the letter and spirit of the law. He will also require the Pentagon, Labor and Justice Departments to work together more closely to ensure the rights of our troops are being protected.

Improve Transition Services for Guard/Reserve: As president, Obama will demand that the military and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) coordinate to provide a truly seamless transition for service members from active duty to civilian life. Obama's plan will be modeled in part on legislation he introduced to require that each service member receive his or her medical and service records electronically upon discharge and that the military and VA enhance their outreach to separating members of the National Guard and Reserves, who often receive fewer benefits than their active-duty counterparts. Given the amount of time required for a service member to adjust to civilian life, Obama would also extend the window for new veterans to enroll in the VA from two to five years. Finally, Obama administration appointees to the Pentagon and VA would place the veteran—rather than bureaucratic turf concerns—at the center of all care and recovery plans.

Strengthen Education Benefits for Reservists: Barack Obama will ensure activated reservists who fight bravely alongside of active duty forces in Iraq and Afghanistan can use their education benefits after they separate. Currently, reservists who enlisted after 9/11 and are activated become eligible for the Reserve Education Assistance Program (REAP). However, unlike their active duty counterparts who can use education

benefits up to 10 years after separating, once these reservists return to civilian life and separate they must forfeit all of the education benefits they have earned. As president, Obama would ensure that these education benefits for our guard members and reservists are portable, so that these heroes can expect benefits that are responsive to their needs and guided by principles of basic fairness.