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Prepared Statement

of

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?Back from the Battlefield,

Part II:

Seamless Transition to Civilian Life?

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#### Introduction

Mr. Chairman and members of this distinguished Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today. It is my privilege to discuss the transition assistance provided to separating members of the armed forces, particularly those who have sustained severe or debilitating injuries in the line of duty.

Congress deserves sincere thanks for its continued support of our efforts to ease the transition from military to civilian life for all our separating men and women in uniform. Your interest and assistance on this matter, both individually and as an institution, are very much appreciated.

#### Severely Injured

I will focus this testimony on the actions taken to assist our severely injured as they reintegrate into their hometowns across America. These troops and family members who sacrificed so much deserve nothing but our best effort to assist them on their return to civilian life. Each of the Services has initiated an effort to ensure that our seriously wounded Service members are not forgotten ? medically, administratively, or in any other way. To facilitate a coordinated response, the Department has established the Military Severely Injured Joint Support Operations Center. We are collaborating, not only with the military Services, but also with other departments of the federal government, nonprofit organizations, and corporate America, to assist these deserving men and women and their families.

A number of our severely injured Service members will be able to return to duty, thanks to their dedication and commitment, and the phenomenal quality of military medicine. Some, however, will transition from the military and return to their hometowns or become new members of another civilian community. These are capable, competent, goal-oriented men and women – the best of our nation. They represent all the components bravely serving our nation – the active ranks, the National Guard and the Reserve. We will ensure that during their rehabilitation we provide a “case management” approach to advocate for the Service member and his or her family. From the Joint Support Operations Center here in Arlington, Virginia, near the seat of government, to their communities across America, we will be with them. This will continue through their transition to the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the many other agencies and organizations providing support to them. Our goal is to provide long-term support to ensure that no injured Service member is allowed to “fall through the cracks”.

I have mentioned that the Joint Support Operations Center is a collaborative effort, both inside and outside the government. I recognize and appreciate the interest and expressed desire of the Congress to help ensure the success of this effort. As we identify the need for statutory changes, we will be certain to make you aware and seek your assistance.

The Center continues to provide a central point of contact for information and support through a toll-free hotline, available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Families are a primary focus. Since the Center's grand opening eleven weeks ago, our staff of care managers has fielded in excess of 1000 calls from injured personnel, their families or caretakers, and has placed in excess of 1000 calls in outreach efforts to find those same families who may have gone unnoticed or may require assistance. The contact numbers are growing. Callers reach the center with questions and concerns on topics that include immediate financial assistance, family support, lost promotion paperwork, employment after discharge, and healthcare. VA benefits and services remain the areas of greatest concern. Each new question or difficulty our staff is asked to address helps us to improve the service and may provide an opportunity for systemic improvements.

We remain committed to helping wounded Service members reintegrate into their hometowns. Moving forward, the center will seek to provide avenues to improve assistance with job placement and assistance, non-medical counseling, and financial support. We are also eager to do more for the spouses of injured personnel—who often become the primary breadwinners, or face career difficulties—as they cope with the difficulties of the reintegration process.

Of course, only a coordinated, multi-agency effort will ensure that those severely injured service members and their families who return to civilian life, receive the level of care and access to resources that they deserve. Through the Joint Support Operations Center and other programs and initiatives, the Department of Defense has partnered with the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Labor, the Department of Homeland Security, corporate America, and various levels of government to help ensure the myriad needs of our severely injured are met.

Particularly successful has been the Center's relationship with the VA in addressing and resolving specific VA benefits and health entitlement issues and concerns. We communicate through a hotline for emergency VA issues requiring immediate VA attention, and using special e-mail address to communicate non-emergency issues. In these instances, the VA has committed to a 24-hour turnaround. The Center has been able to facilitate the rapid resolution of many issues. The Department of Labor is assisting us in obtaining civil service and private sector jobs through its One-Stop Career Centers around the country and we are working closely with the Recovery and Employment Assistance Lifelines (REALifelines), which was announced by Secretary Elaine L. Chao on October 4, 2004. Similarly, to ensure facilitated and dignified security screenings of our

severely injured as they travel through our nation's airports, the Transportation Security Administration has stationed watch standers at the Center to do just this. When the Center receives word that a severely injured service member will be flying domestically, the TSA team will contact all airports on the itinerary to alert the appropriate offices at these locations. Not only have TSA folks around the country prepared for the expedited screening of these travelers, they have treated them like the heroes they truly are.

The DoD State Liaison office is also actively engaging with state and local legislatures to rally communities and help guide their efforts in support of not only the severely injured but all in-state military members and their families, to include the National Guard and Reserve. The office will be participating in the National Governors Association conference later this month and will be discussing many of these issues.

#### Service Support for the Severely Injured

The center, of course, would be nothing without the individual service and community efforts it coordinates. The centralized call center is designed to augment service programs, ensuring that, true to tradition and established practice, the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps are able to take care of their own.

#### Marine For Life

The Marine Corps, building on the organizational network and strengths of the previously established Marine for Life Program, has implemented an Injured Support Program to assist severely injured Marines after they are discharged. The goal is to impress on them that the Marine Corps will always be there for them and to help them bridge the often difficult and lengthy gap between military care and the care provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The key is to ensure continuity of support through their transition. Features of the program include advocacy within the Marine Corps and Navy for the severely injured and their families and assistance in getting over the hurdles of any external agencies with whom they interact.

Other extremely important features are pre- and post- service separation case management, assistance in working with physical evaluation boards, and an interactive web site for disability/benefit information. To improve Department of Veterans Affairs handling of Marine cases there is a Marine liaison officer embedded within the VA headquarters. The program began operations in early January.

#### Army DS3

On April 30, 2004, the Army established the Disabled Soldier Support System (DS3) initiative to provide its severely disabled Soldiers and their families with a system of advocacy and follow-up with personal support to assist them as they confront the stress of their wounds and to think through the difficult decisions of continuing to pursue a military career or transitioning to the civilian community. Working closely with the Joint Support Operations Center, DS3

incorporates and integrates several existing programs to provide holistic support services for severely injured Soldiers and their families throughout their phased progression from initial casualty notification to their return home and departure from the Service. The system facilitates communication and coordination between severely injured soldiers and their families and the pertinent local and national agencies and organizations, such as the Department of Veterans Affairs and the many commendable veterans service organizations. In addition, DS3 utilizes a system to track and monitor severely disabled soldiers for a period of up to five years beyond their medical retirement in order to provide appropriate assistance through an array of existing service providers.

#### Air Force Palace HART

If an Air Force Service member is wounded in action, the Air Force is committed to do whatever it takes to help them recover. Their Palace HART (Helping Airmen Recover Together) program follows Air Force wounded in action until they return to active duty, or are medically retired. It then provides follow up assistance for 5-7 years post injury. The Air Force works to retain injured Service members on active duty if at all possible; however, if unable to return an Airman to active duty, work to get them civilian employment within the Air Force. The Air Force also ensures counseling is provided on all of the benefits to which an individual Service member may be entitled within the Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs, and Department of Labor.

#### Navy Support For the Severely Injured

The Navy has a coordinated and tailored response for its men and women returning from Iraq, Afghanistan and other areas of conflict with severe debilitating injuries. These Service members, and their families are faced with very difficult long-term challenges, and the Navy team provides a strong, coordinated and unified approach to assist them and their families to recover and reintegrate.

#### National Support

The response from corporate America to our severely wounded veterans has been extremely positive. Many companies including those in the Fortune 500 have opened their arms to welcome the severely wounded into their companies through direct employment opportunities or internships for gaining invaluable experience and training. Corporations can post jobs on Military.Com for the severely injured or their spouses (Military.com/support). We are also developing an Adopt a Service Member program to enable communities, corporations, businesses, and even private citizens to sponsor severely injured service members and their families to help them with their respective needs.

Academia has been similarly supportive of our efforts. The Department has been approached by colleges and universities interested in honoring personnel wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some, like Ferris State University, are lowering their tuition charges for the severely wounded. Others, like Central Texas College (CTC), are developing special scholarships for the brave men and women who have been wounded. CTC has established twenty full scholarships, the CTC Iraqi Freedom Scholarship, for wounded personnel or for the spouses and dependents of those wounded or killed in action. Other institutions are stepping forward to help as well. We are establishing a web presence that will encourage and allow institutions from across the country to be placed on a list of schools that want to help in this regard. That site will be linked to website hosted by the Voluntary Education program, the Transition Assistance Program, and other agencies.

#### Transition Assistance For All Those Leaving the Military

As you know, the Department and Military Services provide outstanding transition assistance to both Active and Reserve Component Service members. Upon demobilization, Guard and Reserve members, like their counterparts in the Active Component, receive the mandatory pre-separation counseling. The pre-separation briefing explains the transition benefits and services that they are entitled to received as a result of their service. Topics covered include employment, relocation, education and training, health and life insurance, finances, and disabled veterans benefits.

With the support of our partners from the Departments of Labor and Veterans Affairs, we provide each Reserve Component Service member a Uniformed Services Employment and Re-employment Rights Act briefing as well as a VA benefits briefing. These are in addition to the

mandated preseparation counseling briefing.

In conclusion, on behalf of our Service members and their families, thank you to the committee for your support during these demanding times and thank you for the opportunity to thank the Nation for the support of its citizens for the noble service of America's sons and daughters.