

ROA urges reforms to deficient VA disability claims process for Reserve and National Guard

WASHINGTON, D.C., UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, November 9, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The U.S. Government Accountability Office in an Oct. 30 [report](#) validated the Reserve Organization of America's longstanding concern that members of the Reserve and National Guard face more obstacles to obtaining benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs than their active-component counterparts.



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ROA executive director, Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Jeffrey Phillips, U.S. Army

According to GAO, each year from 2012 through 2021, the VA approved 11 to 20 percent fewer initial disability compensation claims from members of the Reserve and National Guard – known as the reserve components – than those in the active components.

"It is an outrage that members of our Reserve and National Guard have a tougher time proving the service-connection of their disabilities than veterans of the active force," said ROA's executive director, retired Army major general Jeffrey E. Phillips. "These men and women are citizen-warriors, not

second-class citizens within their own military. Law and policy must recognize their essential contribution to national security with equitable treatment."

Qualifying for VA disability compensation can be difficult for Reserve and National Guard service members. One onerous burden is demonstrating that the disability is connected with the members' service. But some maladies only manifest later, such as those from [toxicity](#).

The GAO study cites "Long-standing questions . . . about whether reserve component members' injuries or illnesses that occur on duty are properly reported and documented. This issue not only affects their access to medical care, but it may have downstream consequences if they later seek VA benefits for disabilities that result from those health conditions."

Validating those long-standing questions, VA officials told GAO "that for reserve component members who have not served on active duty [in other words they suffered the issue during training], not only must the event that caused the disability happen during service, but the

member must show that the disability itself manifested during that service period. According to VA officials, this means that these reserve component members are generally not entitled to benefits for conditions that have a delayed onset or do not become disabling until after separation.”

It's bad enough that VA (and the senior military leadership) has for decades tolerated law and policy that impede equitable treatment; it's an outrage that VA officials by their own admission simply blow off the prospects of these patriots who risked all for our freedom. We remind them that 40 percent of the total military – which supplied about half the troops during the past two decades of war – is in the Reserve and National Guard.

GAO found that within every service, from enlisted through officer ranks, in peace and war, across race and ethnicity, real problems exist, and offered fourteen recommendations for action within both VA and DoD. One of the issues is that servicemembers are not well informed about the VA disability system, itself a long-standing problem that only commanders can correct.

In a January [statement](#) to Congress, Phillips addressed the issue of equitable access to VA health care and benefits and urged the creation of a reserve component benefits task force. The task force would:

- 1) Analyze the rationale for VA benefits eligibility criteria for reserve component service members.
- 2) Identify the root causes of systemic biases against reserve component service members.
- 3) Provide recommendations on how to eliminate systemic biases through modernizing benefits eligibility criteria.

As made clear by the GAO report, the need for this task force is real, if not quite grasped by VA officials, who told GAO “they were not aware of the difference in reserve component and active component approval rates or the reasons behind it.”

Another challenge identified by GAO is that members of the Reserve and National Guard do not have adequate access to resources that can guide them through the VA's disability compensation claims process. This is true not only for disability compensation, but for other requirements of service and retirement as well.

At a September congressional roundtable, ROA elevated the need to improve the Transition Assistance Program by establishing a separate reserve component curriculum. This curriculum would be administered solely for members of the reserve components and their families. The curriculum would focus on ensuring the successful navigation of DoD and VA transition assistance processes.

This ROA-spearheaded solution would help close the “knowledge gap” that exists for reserve component service members and their families, and eliminate longstanding disparities in

receiving service-earned benefits.

Members of the Reserve and National Guard cannot wait any longer for the VA to adequately respond to their unique needs. Somewhat encouraging, both DoD and VA “rogered up” to the findings; DoD concurred with the recommendations and VA hedged with concurrence in principle. ROA will continue to press the issue.

Congress is key to reforms, and we urge our lawmakers to establish a VA benefits task force and curriculum track within TAP to relieve reserve component members and their families of the burdens that come with their unique role in an American military that utterly relies on them but too often fails to accord them equitable support.

Matthew Schwartzman
Reserve Organization of America
mschwartzman@roa.org

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