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Commission Recommends Sweeping Change for Guard, Reserves

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 31, 2008 – A Congressional commission today recommended sweeping changes to the way U.S. military reserve forces have been structured and have operated for more than a half century.

The Commission on the National Guard and Reserves delivered to Congress and Pentagon officials its final report, which includes 95 recommendations on how to transition the reserves into a feasible and sustainable operational reserve.

Today's reserve components were designed as a strategic reserve during the Cold War era. "The Guard was part of that surge force that would be dusted off once in a lifetime," commission chairman retired Marine Maj. Gen. Arnold Punaro said today. "That is absolutely not the situation we have today."

Nearly 100,000 reserve troops are on active duty, according to DoD reports. In 2006, reserves forces provided 61 million "man days," or single days of duty, in support of the Defense Department.

It would not be feasible to add an equivalent number of forces to active duty, Punaro said in a news conference at the National Press Club. He called increasing active forces so significantly an "economically unaffordable option" that would cost "a trillion dollars."

Right now, for about nine percent of the DoD budget, the National Guard and reserves provide 44 percent of manpower available to the Defense Department, Punaro said. "You've got high quality. You've got great reliability and dependability. You've got significant affordability and availability," he said.

Six conclusions serve as the foundation for the 400-page report, which is based on 163 findings, 17 days of public hearings, testimony of 115 officials witness and 800 interviews and site visits by commission members. It is the most comprehensive, independent review of the Guard and reserves in 60 years, Punaro said.

The commission proposed changes in laws and regulations that govern the reserves, as well as how reserve forces train, equip and approach medical readiness. The commission proposed an “integrated continuum of service” between reserve and active forces, offering the same pay, personnel, promotion and retirement systems.

The changes would allow a seamless transition by servicemembers over the course of a military career to transition from active to reserve, and to even leave the service temporarily for child rearing or to pursue higher education.

Now, when reservists move from one duty status, such as from active duty to state duty, they sometimes face pay problems and delays. The commission recommended moving from the current 29 duty statuses to only two: active duty or not.

For health care, a hot-ticket item for activated reservists, the commission proposed more specific, targeted information geared to reservists and their families. Many of those the commission interviewed expressed frustration with trying to understand the medical healthcare system quickly once their spouses were mobilized, commission members said.

In personnel changes, the commission recommended a competency-based promotion system that recognizes civilian skills and recruits and retains accordingly.

Many of the changes could be implemented this year if supported by Congress and DoD, Punaro said. Some, though, could require years to debate and implement.

The commission also called for better support programs, funding and resourcing for families and defense officials to have an open dialogue with employers who suffer when employees depart on multiple employments. It also recommends expanding the role of the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, which advocates on the behalf of servicemembers.

“During the past few years, DoD has initiated the largest set of changes in policy and statute since the inception of the all-volunteer force. This is transforming the Guard and Reserve from a purely strategic reserve to a sustainable operational and strategic reserve,” Thomas F. Hall, assistant secretary of defense for reserve affairs, said today.

Defense Department officials said they are reviewing the report.

“We thank the Commission on the National Guard and Reserves for their diligence in preparing this important report,” Hall said. “We look forward to reviewing the entire document put forward by the commission and will carefully study the feasibility of each proposal contained within their report.”