



## National Guard Association of Connecticut

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### **Testimony for the Select Committee on Veterans Affairs Supporting Senate Bill 901**

Good morning Sen. Maynard, Rep. Graziani and members of the Select Committee on Veterans Affairs. My name is Ralph Hedenberg and I am the President of the National Guard Association of Connecticut (NGACT) an advocacy organization for the members of the Connecticut Army and Air National Guards, our Veterans, Retirees and Family Members. I am also a 24-year member of the US Army and Connecticut Army National Guard who is still proudly serving and I am here to offer testimony in favor of Senate Bill 901.

We strongly support **Senate Bill 901, An Act Concerning Fees Paid by Members of the Connecticut National Guard at Community Colleges, The Connecticut State University System and the University of Connecticut.** You have heard or will hear personal stories today from several of our Guard members who have been affected by rising costs of fees.

I graduated from the University of Connecticut in 1989. Unfortunately, I was not a member of the Connecticut National Guard during my time at UCONN, so I did not take advantage of the Tuition Waiver. During my four years at UCONN, my National Guard classmates were called out maybe twice – Hurricane Gloria in 1985 and some flooding of the Connecticut River. I recently found a UCONN Bill for the Spring Semester of 1986 while helping my father clean up my mother's desk at their home. In 1986, the tuition costs were roughly \$2,800 and the student fees were below \$200. I'd like to compare those facts with what a Soldier or Airman in the CTNG can expect today. During a four year college period, a Soldier or Airman in the CTNG faces the strong probability of mobilization for up to 12 months in support of the Global War on Terrorism; they face the probability of being called out on State Active Duty at least twice – whether that is as a member of the Quick Reaction Force, supporting Emergency Shelter Operations, or a host of other Emergency Support Functions that the CTNG provides to the State; they can expect to pay tuition at UCONN of approximately \$9,500 and student fees of almost \$1,100 (with a 6.25% increase each year). This is quite a difference in the level of commitment that we are asking our Soldiers and Airmen to

make, yet the benefits of membership provided by the State of Connecticut have not made the same level of change over the past 25 years.

The National Guard has transitioned from a strategic reserve to an operational force. As this has occurred, the demands placed upon the individual Soldier and Airman has increased dramatically. These increases in demands require an increase in support. On the State side, this committee has been a champion for veterans and National Guard members. We are asking for your additional support for this legislation. On the federal side, retention bonuses and enlistment bonuses are being provided to offset these demands, but these bonuses do not offset regional inequities in benefits.

I have had younger Soldiers, who have been in subordinate units, leave the Connecticut National Guard to join the Massachusetts National Guard. Why? Because the Massachusetts National Guard offers a 100% waiver of tuition and student fees all the way through the Masters/Doctoral/Individual Fulfillment Programs for any member of the Massachusetts National Guard. There are at least nine other states that provide some combination of tuition and fee reduction (in all cases 100%) for undergraduate or graduate studies to mostly state schools, but in some cases, to private schools, also. Thanks to this committee, the graduate tuition waiver for National Guard members has offset some of the inequities, but there is still more to do.

The immediate argument against this bill will be that that State is in a difficult financial period and that the State can't afford the costs of this bill. I ask you and your fellow legislators, "How can we afford not to fund this bill?" The Soldiers and Airmen that would benefit from this legislation are the same men and women, who will be sitting in these seats in future decades. They have demonstrated the devotion to duty, their loyalty to their unit, their state, and their country, and the personal courage to do what is right. I ask you to bring this message to your colleagues in the legislature and convince them to do what is right.

We strongly urge passage of this bill to retain your highly trained and skilled Soldiers and Airmen.

I thank you for your time and careful consideration of all the legislation before you, and I will take any questions you may have of me.

Respectfully submitted,

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