

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

BREWER: Good afternoon and welcome to the Government Committee. I'm Senator Tom Brewer, representing the 43rd Legislative District, and I serve as Chair of this committee. Our committee will be taking up bills in the order they are posted on the agenda. Our hearing today is your public part of this legislative process. This will be your opportunity to express your position on proposed legislation or issues before this body. Committee members may come and go during the hearing. It's just part of the process. They have bills to introduce in other committees. We just ask that you abide by the following procedures. Please silence or turn off cell phones or any other electronic devices. When the time comes that you're going to testify, we just ask that you move forward. The two chairs either side of front are kind of the, the next ones up after the person is in the, in the hot seat. If you're planning to testify today, please pick up one of the green sheets and fill that out. We'd ask that you print legibly and complete the form. Again, this will go into the official record, so we need to have it all accurate and correct. That way we won't have to hunt you down and find out what you wrote. If you do not wish to testify today but you want to have a record that you were present here, there are the new gold forms over there. Fill that up, then that will put you officially as at the hearing today. If you have handouts we ask that you have 12 copies. You give those to the pages when you come up to testify. If you don't have 12, let the pages know, they can make copies. When you come up to testify, we're going to ask you to do the following. State your name and then spell both your first and last name. This is so that it goes into the record correctly. We're going to be using the light system today because I don't anticipate long marathon speeches except from the general. We're going to, we're going to go with three minutes. If you need more, we'll negotiate that. So get to your point, we'll be just fine. Let's see, there'll be a yellow light that comes on, so you get your green light initially, then your yellow. When the red light goes, you're out of time. There'll also be an audible alarm, so in case you're not paying attention to the light, you're still done. No displays of support or opposition to the bill, vocal or otherwise, will be allowed in the audience. Our committee members are here with us today, will introduce themselves, starting on my right with Senator Raybould.

RAYBOULD: Good afternoon everyone. I'm Jane Raybould, I'm from Legislative District 28, which is the center of Lincoln.

SANDERS: Good afternoon, Rita Sanders, District 45, which is the Bellevue-Offutt community.

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Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

AGUILAR: Hi, I'm Ray Aguilar, District 35, Grand Island.

LOWE: John Lowe, District 37. Kearney, Gibbon and Shelton.

HALLORAN: Good afternoon, Steve Halloran, District 33, which is Adams, Kearney and Phelps County.

HUNT: Megan Hunt, and I represent District 8 in the northern part of midtown, Omaha.

BREWER: We have our legal counsel to my right, Dick Clark, and on the corner over there, the person you give the green sheets to, is Julie Condon, and she is our committee clerk. All right. With that, we're going to get-- oh hold it, I got to introduce our pages today. Let's see, Kristen, raise your hand over there. And the other one is Carmen?

CAMERON LEWIS: Cameron. No worries.

BREWER: Cameron. All right, Kristen, you're from North Platte, and let's see. Cameron, you're from Omaha?

CAMERON LEWIS: Yes, sir.

BREWER: All right. Got my notes right. All right, now to our first hearing of the day. General Strong, you want to come up? So what we have now is the appointment of Craig Strong, Major General Strong, to the position of Adjutant General of the Nebraska National Guard. And so what I've done is ask General Strong to kind of give us a little background on himself, and then give us an opportunity to maybe ask him a few questions. So, General, whenever you're ready.

CRAIG STRONG: All right. Thank you very much. Good afternoon, Senator Brewer, and members of the Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee. I'm Craig Strong, C-r-a-i-g S-t-r-o-n-g, the adjutant general of the Nebraska National Guard and the agency director of the Nebraska Military Department, Agent 31. Agency 31. I am honored to have been appointed by Governor Pillen as the 34th Adjutant General of the Nebraska National Guard, and I'd like to thank you for this opportunity to participate in this hearing and confirm my appointment. Let me again say that it's truly an honor to serve as, as a lifelong Nebraskan, to be asked to serve my home, the state of Nebraska. I'm a fifth generation Nebraskan, born in York and raised in Silver Creek. It's from my small town upbringing that I learned the importance of family, hard work, and community service. I currently live in Lincoln with my wife, Jen [PHONETIC]. She's been my wife for over 30 years.

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Rough Draft

Jen is currently the director of operations at the Dialysis Center of Lincoln, and we have been blessed with two children. Jack [PHONETIC], 24, who is a defense contract specialist at Offutt, and Claire [PHONETIC], 22, who is just starting her nursing career at Nebraska Medicine in Omaha. I began my own military service nearly 38 years ago and have provided on this-- and have provided you my biography, biography detailing my career accomplishments. After graduating from Silver Creek High School in 1986, I enlisted in the Navy Reserve, and I served for seven years as a Navy Seabee, S-e-a-b-e-e, construction battalion assigned to the Lincoln detachment of Navy Mobile Construction Battalion 15. In 1995, I transferred to the Nebraska National Guard, completing an officer candidate school at Camp Ashland, where I was commissioned a second lieutenant in July of 1995. My civilian profession is an attorney, but I left legal practice in 2002 and accepted a full time officer assignment with the Nebraska National Guard. At that time, I was-- in that time, I have commanded at the company level, which is approximately 100 soldiers, at battalion level which is approximately 350 soldiers, and a brigade level of over 1,200 soldiers. I've deployed to Iraq twice, once as a company commander in Tikrit in 2004 and 2005, and then as a battalion operations officer in Baghdad in 2008. In the fall of 2017, I served as the Joint Task Force Commander with operational control over 1,000 National Guard airmen and soldiers from across the United States engaged in hurricane recovery operations in the Virgin Islands, following-- following the devastating Hurricanes Irma and Maria. In the last four years prior to my appointment as the Adjutant General, I served at the Pentagon in Washington, DC, first as a colonel, starting in July of 2019, serving as a senior advisor to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Global Threats. Following my promotion to brigadier general in October of 2020 at the-- I was assigned as the National Guard Bureau's Vice Director of Programing, Budgeting, and /comptroller. While my assignments at the Pentagon rewarded me with insights on national defense at some of the highest strategic levels, I can honestly say that coming back home to Nebraska to serve my fellow Nebraskans is the highest award-- reward I've ever, ever received. Nothing fills me with greater pride and joy than circulating around Nebraska to engage with the extraordinary soldiers, airmen, and emergency management professionals who are the heart and soul of the Nebraska Military Department. The Nebraska Military Department consists of the Nebraska Army National Guard, the Nebraska Air National Guard, and the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency, or NEMA. I was extremely-- I'm extremely dedicated to leading the approximately 4,500 Nebraska Air-- Army and

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Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

Air National Guard service members assigned to the armories and bases throughout the state of Nebraska, as well as the approximately 275 civilian employees of the Nebraska Military Department supporting the Army National Guard, the Air National Guard, and NEMA throughout the state. At, at the National Guard, we refer to the state of Nebraska as Fort Nebraska, as we have a presence in 22 communities throughout the state. You can refer to the Fort Nebraska map that I provided as an exhibit showing what communities we are located in. Fort Nebraska consists of facilities located in Beatrice, Bellevue, Offutt Air Force Base, Broken Bow, Chadron, Columbus, Gering, Grand Island, Hastings, Kearney, Lincoln, McCook, Meade, Norfolk, North Platte, Omaha, Scottsbluff, Seward, Sidney, Silver Creek, Wahoo, Wayne, and York. Additionally, what I always like to say is the Fort Nebraska is from the Missouri River to Chimney Rock. Additionally, through our Community Partnership program, which I will address in a moment, we will-- are revitalizing our engagements in the communities because we are a community based organization throughout the state, and we want to foster those positive relationships in the community, sustain open lines of communication, and recruit talented Nebraskans into the Nebraska National Guard. The map also shows the Air National Guard is primarily based in Lincoln at the airport on what was formerly the, the Lincoln Air Force Base, inheriting those runways. And we have a president-- a very strong presence on Offutt Air Force Base as well in Bellevue. The Army National Guard has three large training sites highlighted in the green boxes, Greenlief Training Site near Hastings, Camp Ashland near Ashland, and the Mead Training Site in the vicinity of Mead-Yutan. There are two Army aviation facilities that support the Army Guard on helicopter missions, one in Lincoln and one in Grand Island. The majority of our locations are what we call readiness centers, or commonly referred to as armories, some with maintenance facilities co-located with them as well. NEMA is located at our Joint Force Headquarters building on the Lincoln Air Base. While-- and with all the resources, with all these resources, we are able to accomplish much, and in our long history of serving Nebraska. I could spend the entire day telling the com-- the committee how proud I am of the operational history of the Nebraska National Guard from our early engagements in the American Civil War, through our deployments in support of the War on Terror. However, I want to focus on a few recent local civil support achievements of the Nebraska National Guard and NEMA supporting the state of Nebraska by responding to the Covid 19 pandemic, flooding, and wildfires. In January 2020 through 2021, the Nebraska National Guard assisted the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services in providing Covid 19 vaccinations to 67,328

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

individuals across Nebraska, conducted 99-- 99,822 mobile Covid 19 tests and provided over 2,500 vaccinations to Nebraska veterans. In March through April 2019, we responded to historic flooding in Nebraska by providing over 2,000 sandbags, executed 113 missions, and rescued 112 citizens. In April 2023, we deployed multiple helicopters and dropped approximately 168,000 gallons of water to combat wildfires in Nebraska. Please see the NEMA 22-- 2022 annual report that further provides information on some of the Nebraska Military Department's recent achievements responding to emergencies in our state. Our achievements would not be possible without the financial backing of the Nebraska Legislature and our federal funding. I've given you a copy of the budgetary information we provide the Nebraska Commission on Military and Veterans Affairs in November 2023 for their annual report to the Legislature. The report shows the Nebraska Military Department receives approximately \$2 million in state funding and \$13 million in federal funding to support maintenance and sustainment of those facilities infrastructure that I discussed earlier. You will also notice in this report we are detailing some of our ongoing military construction initiatives to include those for which we are receiving state funding, such as the soon to be open Bellevue Readiness Center, which we expect to be completed, completed in the fall of 2024. I'm truly grateful for the continued financial support of this committee. I have spoken today about where we are located, some of the money-- some of our many operational achievements and our budget. But the heart of what we do is our people. Therefore, my priority effort is recruiting from the number one resource in our state, the talented people of our state, and retaining that talent in the Nebraska National Guard. Why is that my priority effort? As I stated earlier, we have approximately 4,500 service members in the Nebraska National Guard. When I accepted this position, I announced my intent to look at the recruiting needs within, within our formations. We're currently at about 90% of our authorized strength in the Nebraska Army National Guard, and 96% in the Nebraska Air National Guard. One of the initiatives I mentioned during my acceptance speech was Operation Monster Blitz, which has since transformed into a Community Partnership Program initiative. This program will encompass building deeper relationships with Nebraska community leaders, signing a community partnership agreement, and speaking with the talented people about the many benefits and personal fulfillment of serving in-- serving the state of Nebraska and our nation in the Nebraska National Guard. I'm confident the-- these innovative initiatives, like the Community Partnership Program, will help fill the gaps in our units and build trust in our communities, even before we're called to

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

serve the community in future state emergencies, which will solidify the Nebraska National Guard and NEMA as community partners of choice. My priority effort is increasing the number of soldiers and airmen within our ranks, which is completely aligned with our enduring principle and promise of the National Guard, to be always ready and to be always there whenever we receive calls to support and defend our state and our nation. Let me close by saying that my watchword since day one is strength and honor. By strength, I mean the inner strength of the Nebraska soldiers, airmen, and emergency management professionals who are answering the call to serve. This, this strength is amplified by the strength of our families who sacrifice for us, and the strength of our employers who support us by enabling the majority of our ranks to serve as true citizen soldiers and airmen. By honor, I mean the proud and honorable history of the Nebraska National Guard dating back to 1854, the founding of Nebraska as a territory. From the battlefields of Shiloh in the American Civil War to the hedgerows of France in World War Two to the desert sands of Iraq. As well as that honor, that personal honor within the Nebraska National Guard and the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency from supporting and protecting our fellow Nebraskans when disaster strikes our state. Simply put, this sums up my commitment today and always to serve Nebraska with strength and honor. Senator Brewer, Committee members, that concludes my testimony. I greatly look forward to working with you and the rest of the Legislature as we move forward. I would be glad, and I'd be pleased to answer any questions that you might have. Thank you.

BREWER: All right. Thank you, General Strong. We're going to run around the table and see if I don't have some questions for you. All right. Well, I need to, I need to share a little with the committee. You know you're old when, when you were a major, the guy who now wears two stars in front of you was a new lieutenant. And so I kept an eye on him as he went through his career. Because his career path and mine were very-- well I didn't get a chance to watch him as much as I want to. But what I did get was a lot of reports from those who worked with him. And really, that's a better report card than about anything you can have. So I was excited when I heard that the Governor had selected you because I think you're probably the most rounded Adjutant General that we've ever had in the history of Nebraska, if you look at as far back as you want. And you have probably as much combat time as anyone clear back to General Greenlief. Now, not that combat time is a, is a factor. But what I hear from those who served in combat with you is like many officers, it's a process that you're going to go through and you're going to do the best you can and all, but sometimes we get too

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Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

focused on our next job and our next mission, and sometimes the troops get fro-- forgot about. The one thing that everyone that worked with you always said is that you always took care of the soldiers. And that's, that's huge. And your ideas of how you want to move the Guard forward, outstanding. And I think that's a fresh look that we need right now so that, you know, there's that energy to want to be part of the Guard, whether it be Air or Army. And, you know, I think the barometer to determine how you-- because you're, you're kind of at the peak of your career now. But you look back on everything you've done and what got to this point. If, if someone wants their son or daughter to serve and you be that person who was their commanding officer, I think that's a pretty good benchmark of that you've done things right. And I got to tell you that I'm excited that both my children have served and are serving and wear the uniform and you can send them to war and I feel that you'll make sure that they're ready to go. So thank you.

CRAIG STRONG: Well, thank you for that. Senator. You know, I still come to attention in your presence.

BREWER: Oh, OK. Yes. Right.

AGUILAR: I just want to share also. I live in Grand Island. Just, just outside east, east direction, outside of town, on a small lake. And that's not very far from your helicopter facility there. So I get to watch them fly, do flyovers every so often. It's very reassuring to see them. Let me tell you that.

CRAIG STRONG: That's a fantastic facility, the Grand Island Army Aviation Support Facility. It's ideally located. It's a perfect spot for what they do. And the fact that they're part of the Grand Island community, it is meaningful. It's one of our newer facilities. It's state of the art. And our Chinook aircraft fly out there as well as we have a medevac capability as well with the Lakotas, which, Senator Brewer, can you still fly a Lakota? I'm not sure--

BREWER: I, I, I can fly anything. That's can't fly it very well.

CRAIG STRONG: But, no, we're-- we, we really enjoy the partnership with Grand Island. We do intend to have one of our community partnership engagements with Grand Island.

BREWER: All right, Senator Halloran.

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

HALLORAN: Thank you, Chairman Brewer. Good afternoon, General. Good to see you.

CRAIG STRONG: Great to see you again.

HALLORAN: I have to echo Senator Aguilar. I live just a half mile north of your facility in Hastings. And, I can say the same about the Chinook helicopters going over, the house vibrates. But it's a reassuring, you know vibration that assures us that we're being defended. So quick question. How's recruiting?

CRAIG STRONG: Recruiting efforts. Right now, we are meeting our mission for the first quarter of this fiscal year, 2024. I used to do medevac and understanding the triage and how you would triage a patient. I would consider, between the Air Guard, the Army Guard, the Air Guard, it's recruiting is still a priority. It's a priority. Their numbers are closer to where they need to be, about 96%. The Army Guard is really-- we need to give a lot of focus. We're at 90%, which I'd call it urgent surgical. So we need to up our game in that respect. To put it in terms of size, it's, it's about 30-- delta, about 350 soldiers, which is almost a battalion. Now, it's not one battalion. It's, it's like a salami slicing, if you will, just a little shaved off of each unit. But it does, at the end of the day, to maintain our-- we are always able to maintain our capabilities, to be always ready, always right there. But we have vacancies that we're excited to fill. And, some of the, the, the trajectory where we're going is some of the best trajectory we've had in four years.

HALLORAN: Are there what are the age requirements?

CRAIG STRONG: I can-- we can sign waivers. And actually, this legislative-- this body has the ability to change statutes, so--

SANDERS: She said [INAUDIBLE].

BREWER: We also want to win the war, so--

CRAIG STRONG: Field commissions.

BREWER: There you go.

Speaker 1: All right. Senator Sanders.

SANDERS: Thank you, Senator Brewer. I-- really just more of a comment. I want to thank you for your service. You have a long list of, of jobs

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

that you've had in the service, and, and we are lucky to have you with all of that background. And I sleep better at night knowing there's also an attorney in the house, someone I know. We greatly appreciate that on this committee. So thank you for everything that you've done and continue to do.

CRAIG STRONG: Yeah. The point I make on fourth-- on our command group that that we just need more attorneys, sometimes they look at me funny, but-- No, I appreciate that ma'am, and also the relationship with Bellevue's one of our-- well, they're all very strong, but very special relationship, especially with our Air National Guard capabilities. And the Bellevue Readiness Center is going to be-- it's an exciting project as well, so-- And our-- and we're expanding actually. From a recruiting standpoint, it's a really a hotbed of potential recruiting for our Air Force folks that serve at Offutt, going into our 170th operations-- our 170th Group at Offutt as a tenant unit, and it will be doubling in size from 80, approximately 80 assigned personnel to 160 assigned personnel at Offutt. So there's a lot of growth potential there.

SANDERS: Thank you.

BREWER: Yes, Senator Raybould.

RAYBOULD: Thank you so much for being with us today. And I can say it was really my honor and pleasure of serving with you on the Lincoln-Lancaster County Board of Health. And I am so grateful that we got you back in Nebraska, so we can apply your many talents and expertise to, to our state. So thank you for coming back to Nebraska.

CRAIG STRONG: Yeah, it was an honor to serve back in, back in that period. It was about a four year tour, another four year tour. And then, it was just the point that I depar-- I remember I had a farewell address to the Board. And then Covid hit. And so I was t-- I was like--

RAYBOULD: Good timing.

CRAIG STRONG: Yeah I timed it, so-- But, no, thank you for that, ma'am.

BREWER: All right. Any other-- yes, Senator Lowe.

LOWE: Thank you, Chair and General. Thank you for serving and everything you've done for the state of Nebraska and for our country.

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

My comments are more toward the Chairman. Look what you could have accomplished if you'd only stayed in the military.

CRAIG STRONG: I'm glad this position wasn't based on marksmanship skills. Because Senator Brewer would be-- he'd be the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs if that was the case. So. And also I'm excited about-- I'll be flying to Kearney on Friday, spending the day there, and then Saturday night in Kearney is the greater Nebraska Ball, Military ball. So--

BREWER: All right. Any other comments for the general? All right. Thank you for your coming in today. We will exec on this today, and, and you will know in the very near future, but I think the odds are very good.

CRAIG STRONG: Thank you, Senator.

BREWER: All right, thank you. All right. Well, we'll have a quick transition to our first bill. Oh. OK. It has been pointed out that part of that process-- Yeah, hold it just a second. As far as the appointment on General Strong, if there are folks here that want to speak on his behalf as a proponent, you can do that now. OK, good. I mean, not good, but-- is there anyone here who wants to speak as an opponent? Is there anybody here in the neutral? All right, then we'll close our hearing on General Strong's appointment. It's what I have a staff for, is to catch my mistakes there. Senator, Senator Sanders, welcome to your Government Committee.

SANDERS: Thank you. Good afternoon. Chairman Brewer, fellow committee members. For the record, my name is Rita Sanders, R-i-t-a S-a-n-d-e-r-s, and I represent District 45, which includes much of the Bellevue-Offutt community in eastern Sarpy County. I am introducing LB895, which will update existing law authorizing the Adjunct [SIC] General to allow payments for, for enlistment and re-enlistment into the Nebraska National Guard. Nebraska has constantly ranked as one of the top states for retaining military personnel. However, they lack success in recruitment. The federal government has a number of programs that provide for enlistment and retention bonuses. Likewise, there have been officer, officer bonuses available for those choosing to go through Officer Candidate School or Reserve Officer Trainee Corps, ROTC program. Unfortunately, these programs often have not been successful in Nebraska, nor in a multiple other states. In response, multiple states have created a state level recruiting program, which vary depending on which state. For example, Minnesota offers a state

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

level \$20,000 bonus for joining its National Guard. Indiana offers referral payments to individuals such as existing service members, teachers, coaches, and others for referring individuals who signed up and shipped to basic training. Such programs are new and rapidly developing. The efforts in these two states have been proven successful. In fiscal year 2023, the Nebraska Army National Guard was only able to recruit 230 of its goal of 433. The Guard is on track for similar results in fiscal year 2024, LB895 does not have a cost associated with it at this time. This bill merely expands an existing statutory authority to allow the adjunct general to study what is being done in other states. Yet, if the Adjunct [SIC] General sees fit to initiate program in Nebraska, he has the authority to do so.

BREWER: OK. Thank you. All right. Now, questions for Senator Sanders on LB895? OK.

SANDERS: I think those following me could answer those questions if you have any.

BREWER: And you'll stick around for close. All right. So what we'll do is start with our proponents. So the first proponent on LB895, come on up. And I, I need to read this into the official record that there were no letters submitted on the appointment for General Strong. That's not a bad thing. That's just. I wasn't aware of that. With that, please, whenever you're ready.

SARAH MEYERS: Good afternoon, Senator Brewer, committee members. My name is Sarah Meyers. S-a-r-a-h M-e-y-e-r-s. I am here today on behalf of the National Guard Association of Nebraska, which includes approximately 450 currently serving commissioned officers, warrant officers and retired officers in the Nebraska Army and Air National Guard. Today, the Nebraska National Guard is nearly 5,000 members strong. I've been a proud member of the Nebraska National Guard for over 17 years, and a member of the National Guard Association for eight years. The Nebraska National Guard is an amazing organization, and I am honored to be representing the association today. Our association brought this issue to Senator Sanders after studying innovative programs being implemented across the country to improve recruiting and retention in the National Guard. This bill merely updates existing statute 55-157.03, one that has existed since 1978, to allow greater flexibility to the Adjutant General to design such a program for Nebraska. It does not create any program or mandate any program. As such, it should not cost the state of Nebraska anything at this time. First, the bill expands the existing authority to officers

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

as current law only applies to enlisted personnel. Second, it allows payments to third parties. Other states have used referral programs to allow incentive payments to fellow soldiers and airmen, coaches, teachers, veterans, or other centers of influence within the state. Last, it eliminates outdated language establishing payments of \$100. The National Guard Officer Association continues to have a growing concern of current recruiting numbers in Nebraska, as the association is comprised of both Army and Air National Guard officers and warrant officers. Many of those who commission begin their career as an enlisted soldier or airman. If we don't support recruiting efforts across the state, we will continue to see a decline of personnel available to support the state mission of the National Guard, as well as see a decline in membership with an important associations such as the officer and enlisted associations of the Nebraska National Guard. Recruiting shortcomings in Nebraska National Guard can be attributed to many things. One example in recent years relates to the health and safety restrictions following Covid 19 that limited recruiter access to high school students across the state for an extended period of time. That prolonged lack of direct interaction created a significantly negative change in the recruiting environment. Specifically, of note, during fiscal year '22 and '23 the Nebraska Army National Guard only achieved approximately 50% of its assigned enlisted accession mission. Recruiting is starting to see initial improvement thus far in FY '24. However, they will need multiple years of improvement to reach strength goals. Referrals are hands down the best source of leads for interested applicants. The passage of this bill would be a stepping stone to improving the recruiting environment across the state. In recent years, as early as 2020, a number of states have launched state funded and administered referral bonus programs, known as Joint Enlistment Enhancement programs. Senator Sanders mentioned a couple, and these states also include Alabama, Indiana, Montana, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Virginia, and Wyoming. The list of states implementing referral enhancement programs continue to grow, as low recruiting numbers are a national trend, and states continue to seek out ways to enhance the recruiting efforts. In the attached enclosure, you will find website links to examples of state referral programs. We ask that you support LB895 and urge the committee to pass it to General File. Thank you for your consideration and support today. Sarah Meyers president, National Guard Officer, Association.

BREWER: All right. Thank you, Sarah, let's see if we get any questions for you. Questions? Questions. Yes, Senator Raybould.

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

RAYBOULD: Thank you, Ms. Myers, for being here today to testify. I'm, I'm kind of curious. How did you get involved with the, the National Guard? Were you recruited and--?

SARAH MEYERS: Yes. So I began my journey in Dunning, Nebraska. I was recruited by Sergeant Hanson [PHONETIC], he was my recruiter back in 2001. I was enlisted prior and then commissioned as an officer in 2008. So, yes, 2001, right before 9/11. It was April of 2001.

RAYBOULD: OK. Thank you.

BREWER: And you went through the Ashland program?

SARAH MEYERS: I did actually go through an accelerated program, started my time in Ashland, and then when accelerated up in Fort Meade, South Dakota.

BREWER: OK. All right, any other questions? All right. Thank you for your testimony.

SARAH MEYERS: Thank you.

BREWER: All right. Any additional proponents for LB895? Oh, fake us out, stand up and then [INAUDIBLE]. OK. Are there any opponents? Anybody here in the neutral? All right, Senator Sanders, you want to-- oh. Yeah. Well, we'll call this a proponent neutral.

CRAIG STRONG: I don't--

BREWER: You can't testify as a proponent, right?

CRAIG STRONG: Correct.

BREWER: OK. Because we don't want to get you in trouble.

CRAIG STRONG: Good afternoon again, Chairman Brewer, member of the Government, Military, and Veteran Affairs Committee. I'm Craig Strong, C-r-a-i-g S-t-r-o-n-g, the Adjutant General of the Nebraska National Guard and director of the Nebraska Emergency Management Department. Thank you again for this opportunity to be at this hearing in a neutral capacity regarding the increased recruitment/retention issues in the Nebraska National Guard. Not an incredible amount to add to what's been said, but just as a revisit to the statute in question, is Nebraska revised statute 55-157.03. And it does currently allow the Adjutant General to au-- indeed, to authorize payment, to encourage

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

individuals to enlist or re-enlist in the Nebraska National Guard whenever the strength level of such units is so, so low as to adversely affect the ability of our units to meet our state or federal missions. However, these payments and the language of the statute are restricted to enlistment-- enlisted persons who have less than 12 years of total military service and may not exceed the rate of \$100 per year of service. And the current law also limits the advances and incentive payments to \$300. LB895 could possibly enhance the Nebraska National Guard's existing recruitment and retention incentives. It would increase the pool of eligible recipients of these incentives in two ways. First, it would permit the Adjutant General to establish a program that creates incentives for both our enlisted and officer corps instead of just the enlisted force. Second, this legislation would remove the statutory disqualifications of members of having 12 years or more of service from receiving the incentive. Next, this bill would eliminate the statutory limits in place since 1978 of incentive payments not exceeding \$100 per year of service and no advancement exceeding \$300. Finally, the bill affects the Adjutant General-- it affords the Adjutant General flexibility, subject to the amount appropriated for this purpose, to develop the program, a program that maximizes the effectiveness of incentive payments to recruit and retain talent in the Nebraska National Guard. Such innovative ideas, such as the referral program that was, mentioned earlier. Currently, I just have one caveat. We do not-- I do not support at this time the creation of an additional cash fund to support that legislation as there's no need to increase numbers of cash funds to implement the legislation. Committee members, this concludes my testimony, and I'll be glad to answer any questions. Thank you.

BREWER: And thank you, General Strong. So if you were to use this in conjunction with recruiting, would the bonus that you would give for bringing someone into the Guard would be one of the primary things you looked at?

CRAIG STRONG: Well, speaking with my fellow adjutant generals who have used it for that purpose where, third parties, for example, there's different ways to, to customize the program. Some states have gone so far to almost any third party can make it referral and be eligible for the, the bonus. I think we would tailor it more toward military members that are, you know, buddy referrals if you will that could be done. And that does-- that actually, you know, you were asking for, you know, origin stories, how we've gotten to the military. That was my story was, myself and two other high school buddies. And, I think

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Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

that really has a, an effect, if you have someone that you know and trust that's entered and it's easier to jump in the pool.

BREWER: No. Well, we all remember the, the good old days when they had the bonus programs that were pretty lucrative. You could pretty much stay busy recruiting folks and, and getting the bonuses for that.

CRAIG STRONG: Yes, yes.

BREWER: OK. Questions for General Strong? All right. Thank you for your testimony again.

CRAIG STRONG: All right. Thank you, sir.

BREWER: All right. So we are on neutral testimony on LB895. Any additional-- all right, Senator Sanders, you wanna wrap it up?

SANDERS: Thank you to the Government Committee for hearing this bill. And thank you to the testifiers for your report on this issue. It is crucial that we as state-- as a state, recruit and retain-- it is crucial that we as a state recruit and retain our military personnel as they do not only serve and deploy overseas but also serve the state when in crisis. For example, the Nebraska National Guard was a huge asset when Covid 19 hit, civil unrest in 2020, and the floods in '21, 2011 and 2019. The decline in the Nati-- the Nebraska National Guard is one of concern that must be looked into and-- in order to maintain our infrastructure and security. Are there any questions?

BREWER: Questions. All right. Thank you. And as we wrap up our testimony on LB895, we have to read in zero proponents, one opponent, and zero neutral. That will close our hearing on LB895. I'll hand the gavel off and go to work.

SANDERS: Welcome, Senator Brewer.

BREWER: Thank you, Vice Chair Sanders, members of the Government Committee. My name is Senator Tom Brewer, it's the rules. T-o-m B-r-e-w-e-r. I'm here to introduce LB848. This bill is pretty simple. It changes the maximum age for the Nebraska Adjutant General from 40-- 46, 64 to 66. Right now Nebraska law provides the qualifications for the National Guard members for enlisted personnel. Maximum age to serve is minimum of 18, and a maximum age of 60. For warrant officers it's 18 and 62, and for commissioned officers is 18 a maximum of 64. This bill would change the maximum age for the Adjutant General, Adjutant General, Commanding Officer of the Nebraska National Guard

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

from 64 to 66. I believe General Strong and maybe some of his staff will follow me and be available for more questions. Do you have any questions for me? All right.

SANDERS: Seeing none.

BREWER: Slide out of the way for a little bit.

SANDERS: Are there any proponents who would like to testify? Welcome back.

CRAIG STRONG: Thank you ma'am. Good afternoon, Chairman Sanders and th-- acting, acting Chairman Sanders and the members of the Government, Military, and Veterans Affairs Committee. Again, I am Craig Strong, C-r-a-i-g S-t-r-o-n-g, the Adjutant General of the Nebraska National Guard and the director of the Nebraska Military Department. Thank you for this opportunity to testify at this hearing to support the updating the maximum age of the Adjutant General from 64 to 66 years. Nebraska Revised statute 55-136 currently allows officers of the Nebraska National Guard, including the Adjutant General, to hold their positions until the maximum age of 64 years. However, in 2006 federal law changed. Federal law under 10 U.S.C. Section 14512 was changed to increase the maxi-- maximum age of adjutant generals and certain other senior officers. Federal law now permits adjutant generals, the Director of the Army National Guard, the Director of the Air National Guard, among others, to serve until age 66. This bill just simply harmonizes the state law with the federal statute by allowing the Adjutant General of the Nebraska National Guard, to serve until the maximum age of 66. It would authorize the Nebraska National Guard Adjutant General to serve until the same maximum age as our other Adjutant Generals across the country, as well as other senior Federal National Guard officers. This bill would not affect the maximum age of service of 64 years for other Nebraska National Guard officers, and there is-- would be no fiscal impact to this. Committee members, that concludes my testimony, and I would be glad, glad to answer any questions you might have.

SANDERS: Thank you. General Strong. See if you have any questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

CRAIG STRONG: This is the only bill we needed for your last question.

LOWE: I think it's way, way too low.

CRAIG STRONG: Have to ask my wife about that.

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Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

SANDERS: Welcome.

RYAN MCINTOSH: Thank you. Good afternoon, Chair Sanders, members of the committee. My name is Ryan McIntosh. R-y-a-n M-c-I-n-t-o-s-h. And I appear before you today on behalf of the National Guard Association of Nebraska in support of LB848. We, of course, support harmonizing federal and state law, and I have nothing else to add. If there's any questions, I'd be happy to answer those.

SANDERS: That was short and sweet. Any questions for Ryan McIntosh?

HALLORAN: Brevity's the soul of wit.

SANDERS: Seeing none, thank you for your testimony. Are there any other proponents? Any opponents? Any in the neutral? Senator Brewer, do you have a close?

BREWER: Sure. If you look through Craig's background, you can see the number of schools, number of assignments, all the things that he had to go through to attain the position he has. In order to do all that, it takes a long time, as you heard, 38 years. If you get someone who has the skills and is able to lead the organization, I hate to see that number be the reason why you have to send him down the road. And I think we're very blessed to have him. And I think this is a very reasonable ask to change from 64 to 66. Thank you.

SANDERS: Thank you. Are there any questions from Senat-- for Senator Brewer? Seeing none. And for the record, a summary report. We have a Brian Hanson that submitted a letter in the neutral and zero proponents and zero opponents. Thank you. That takes us to LB847.

BREWER: Change my card here. All right, Vice Chair Sanders, members of the Government Committee, my name is Senator Tom Brewer, T-o-m B-r-e-w-e-r, and I'm here to introduce LB847. Our state emergency management agency, NEMA, often works with counterparts from other states to respond to disasters. Sometimes the Nebraska National Guard is deployed to assist in disaster response operations. These disasters mostly include weather related events like floods, tornadoes, fires, hurricanes, and earthquakes. Since the early 1970s, Nebraska has been part of a interstate compact called the Interstate Civil Defense Disaster Compact, ICDDC. I don't expect you to remember that. The compact set the rules for how we coordinate with the other states during emergency response to a disaster. However, in the 1990s, there were certain deficiencies identified in the Interstate Civil Defense

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Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

Disaster Compact. A new compact called the Emergency Management Assistance Compact was created in 1996. All 50 states, the District of Columbia, and United States territories have all now joined what we call EMAC. This bill simply recognizes that the old IDDC is obsolete, and the new EMAC is now the interstate agreement that we will comply with. I believe that a representative of NEMA will follow me, and we'll have more details if you need them. Thank you.

SANDERS: We'll check, are there any questions for Senator Brewer? Seeing none, thank you. Are there any proponents? The floor is yours.

CRAIG STRONG: Hello again, Senator Sanders and members of the Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee. Again, I'm Craig Strong, C-r-a-i-g, S-t-r-o-n-g, the Adjutant, General of the Nebraska National Guard and the director of the Nebraska Military Department, Agent-- Agency 31. Thank you for the opportunity again to participate in this hearing regarding a need for Nebraska to withdraw from the Interstate Civil Defense and Disaster Compact, the ICDDC. A bit of history. Nebraska entered into the ICDDC in 1953. The purpose of the compact at that time was, quote, to provide mutual aid among the states in meeting any emergency or disaster from enemy attack or other cause, natural or otherwise, including sabotage or subversive acts and direct attacks by bombs, shell fires, and atomic, radiological, chemical, and bacteriological means and other weapons, end quote. Despite having been law since 1953, the ICDDC has never been utilized in Nebraska or any other member state. Only 22 states and the District of Columbia originally even passed the ICDDC, some of which have subsequently withdrawn from the compact and replaced it with the modern Emergency Management Assistance Compact, the EMAC. ICDDC was later incorporated into the Nebraska Emergency Management Act, EMA, EMA, in 1996, which was an update to the Nebraska Civil Defense Act of 1954. The EMA changed the emphasis from civil defense to more comprehensive emergency preparedness and recovery focus. The Emergency Management Act referenced the ICDDC in 1996, since it was the only interstate compact in which Nebraska was a member at that time. Subsequently, the IDDC [SIC] was for practical purposes superseded in 1999, three years later by Nebraska passing the EMAC to provide for comprehensive emergency management. Since that time in 1999, Nebraska has been a member of the EMAC along with every other state in the Union, the District of Columbia, and most U.S. territories. The EMAC is routinely used by member states in response to state emergency declarations and to-- the-- and it is the only nationwide interstate emergency compact in existence. Nebraska has responded to EMAC requests from other states for requested assistance through EMAC, from

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

other states over two dozen times since joining in 1999, including as recently as just a few weeks ago to respond to blizzard conditions affecting much of Nebraska. EMAC fits the purpose of the Emergency Management Act much better than the ICDDC. LB847 is a long overdue update to the Emergency Management Act, withdrawing from the ICDDC and replacing the ICDDC language with the emergency management-- within the Emergency Management Act with EMAC reflects the reality of the current nationwide emergency management network, of which Nebraska is an active member. Furthermore, LB847 removes confusion on which Interstate Emergency Compact is actually being utilized by Nebraska and strengthens the state's ability to respond to, or request assistance for, emergencies when-- the Nebraska and Nationwide. EMAC, as I mentioned earlier, has been recently utilized. Just a few weeks ago, on January 11th, 2024, and contin-- and continuing, a severe winter storm and blizzard produced exceptionally hazardous winter conditions, causing significant accessibility, management difficulties for agriculture producers and production facilities due to impassable-- passable local public highways. This required an emergency response beyond the resources of those affected counties in Nebraska. With the emergency declaration by the Governor, the Nebraska Department of Transportation was authorized by the state highway sy-- to go off of the state highway system and provide assistance to counties that were unable to clear roads for public safety and agricultural producers ingress and egress. NEMA initiated an EMAC, and a request was responded to by the state-- at our request was responded to by the state of South Dakota, which responded by providing large snowblowers and support crews against-- to assist the Nebraska Department of Transportation. Once all costs are determined, the South Dakota will invoice NEMA, which will reimburse South Dakota through the Governor's emergency fund. Nebraska's Department Transportation will invoice NEMA for the cost of going off the state highway system and helping those counties. That cost will also be paid for by the Governor's emergency fund. The Nebraska Department of Transportation provided assistance to multiple counties, including the following: Wheeler, Lancaster, Thayer, Valley, Sherman, Greeley, Gage, and Holt. Nebraska Department of Transportation also assisted the Omaha, Sant-- Santee Sioux, and Winnebago tribes. In the last two years, NEMA has aided Kentucky and Tennessee through an EMAC. Oh, and, Kentucky and Tennessee requested assistance and reimbursed Nebraska for those costs of providing such assistance. Those preceding examples show the effectiveness of an EMAC system, which has become the common, routine way to respond to emergencies and disasters. And on a personal note, when I mentioned in my bio that I went to the Virgin Islands to do

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Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

hurricane recovery, which is not routine for Nebraska officers to go to the Caribbean and support hurricane response. It was because of an EMAC that the Virgin Islands submitted to Nebraska. And at the time, Governor Ricketts authorized and the Virgin Islands did compensate us for that, for that support. So with that, I'm open to any questions that the committee may have.

SANDERS: Thank you, General Strong, for your testimony. Are there any questions for General? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

CRAIG STRONG: Thank you ma'am.

SANDERS: Are there others who'd like to have a testimony, any proponents? Any opponents? Anyone in the neutral? Seeing none, Senator Brewer, do you have a closing?

BREWER: Well, I think it's pretty common sense. We're just updating things. Nebraska has been tapped a lot, mostly because we kind of have a reputation of arriving ready to go and accomplish the mission. Personally, I was on Katrina for about 45 days, and it was refreshing to see the Nebraska teams arrive with everything they needed to sustain themselves and do the mission, where others would arrive and they'd become a burden to the situation because they didn't bring what they needed. So proud of the home team. And just ask that you support this bill so that we can update our regs.

SANDERS: Thank you. Let's see if there's any questions? Senator Ribar.

RAYBOULD: Yes. [LAUGHTER]

SANDERS: It's Ribar now. Raybould.

RAYBOULD: It's Senator Raybould. Senator, you know, I should have asked this question before. So when the National Guard reports for duty on the southern border, is that only at the request of, say, Texas or Arizona? And do we get reimbursed for that?

BREWER: Well, the process--.

RAYBOULD: They evoke EMAC?

BREWER: Yes. Yes, they're reimbursed for it. It's usually at a request because it's usually identifying the particular skill sets that's needed because in some cases, it's aircrafts. Sometimes, it's engineers. It just depends on what the need is. And usually duration

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee January 24, 2024
Rough Draft

is somewhat limited because you don't want to burn those individuals out in a location like that and then not have them when you need them. But normally that's kind of agreed between states who would pick up the requirements, and then that requirement goes there and then they're reimbursed. But yeah, pretty much if you leave the state of Nebraska and you're going somewhere, someone else is writing a check for that. It's not the state of Nebraska.

SANDERS: Good question.

RAYBOULD: All right. Thank you very much.

SANDERS: Thank you. Are there any other questions? Seeing none. Thank you, Senator Brewer. There-- by the way, for the record, there were no online submissions. Thank you. This closes our hearing on LB847.

AGUILAR: Motion to go.