

WASHINGTON OFFICE:
1213 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
(202) 225-2615 FAX: (202) 225-2154

SAN JUAN OFFICE:
157 AVENIDA DE LA CONSTITUCIÓN
ANTIGUO EDIFICIO DE MEDICINA TROPICAL
ALA DE ENFERMERIA 2DO PISO
SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO 00901
(787) 723-6333 FAX: (787) 729-7738

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-5401

November 26, 2014

General Frank J. Grass
Chief
National Guard Bureau
111 S. George Mason Dr.
Arlington, VA 22204

Major General Judd H. Lyons
Acting Director
Army National Guard
National Guard Bureau
111 S. George Mason Dr.
Arlington, VA 22204

Dear General Grass and Major General Lyons:

I write to urge the National Guard Bureau (NGB) to reconsider its plan to terminate funding for the English Language Center operated by the Puerto Rico National Guard at Fort Allen in Juana Díaz, Puerto Rico. The projected cost savings for the Army National Guard from closing the Language Center are modest at best, while the adverse impact on the Puerto Rico Army National Guard—and thus on the Army National Guard and the Army's total force—is likely to be substantial. I respectfully request a Member-level briefing on this issue as soon as possible.

The Language Center has been in operation in Puerto Rico, in one form or another, for 38 years. In that time, it has proven to be a vital recruitment, retention and training resource for the Puerto Rico National Guard, whose citizen-soldiers and citizen-airmen are often mobilized, including more than 17,000 times since 2003.

The Language Center provides otherwise qualified recruits with an opportunity to participate in a rigorous English-language instruction program. Instruction is provided by at least 10 experienced civilian ESL teachers from Puerto Rico. While enrolled in the program, the recruits live in quarters on post for up to six months. They are required to speak English at all times, even during family visits—which are permitted on a limited basis at the discretion of the Language Center's leadership for those students who have demonstrated improvement. Among the 54 state, territory and District of Columbia national guards, the Puerto Rico National Guard is unique in the following respect. Nearly all of its enlisted recruits are raised in Spanish-speaking households and are recent graduates of public high schools where classroom instruction is conducted almost exclusively in Spanish. Accordingly, the English-language immersion program provided at the Language Center is both challenging and essential.

While at the Language Center, recruits are also required to participate in a military conditioning program designed to prepare them for the demands of basic training. In addition to the 10 civilian teachers, the school employs about 20 uniformed personnel, about 60 percent of whom are traditional guardsmen and 40 percent of whom are Active Guard and Reserve (AGR) personnel. The traditional guardsmen perform a variety of roles, such as military instructors, health care providers, logistical planners, information technicians, and supervisors of the recruits when they are not in class.

According to information provided to my office by the Puerto Rico National Guard, between 300 to 500 Puerto Rico Army National Guard recruits enroll in the Language Center each year depending on the level of funding NGB makes available, which represents about half of the Puerto Rico Army National Guard's annual recruits. Indeed, as of the start of Fiscal Year 2014, over one-third of the non-prior service enlisted soldiers in the Puerto Rico Army National Guard had graduated from the Language Center. In total, since the Language Center was established in 1976, over 15,000 soldiers of the Puerto Rico Army National Guard have graduated from the Center.

Furthermore, statistics that I have been provided demonstrate that graduates of the Language Center are far more likely to remain in the Puerto Rico Army National Guard beyond their initial period of service than their counterparts who did not attend the Language Center, and this fact helps explain why—I am advised—the Puerto Rico Army National Guard regularly has among the best retention rates in the entire Army National Guard.

Parenthetically, it is important to note that it is not only Puerto Rico *Army* National Guard recruits who are served by the Language Center. Between Fiscal Year 2011 and Fiscal Year 2014, a total of approximately 70 Puerto Rico *Air* National Guard recruits also graduated from the Language Center.

In light of the Language Center's long and sterling record of helping to prepare Puerto Rico National Guard recruits—mostly on the Army side, but also on the Air side—to execute their federal and state missions, it is difficult to identify any *military* reason why the NGB would propose to terminate funding for the Language Center beginning in Fiscal Year 2016, and to do so without providing adequate notice to the Puerto Rico National Guard or any notice to my office.

Instead, the NGB's decision appears to be rooted solely in financial considerations. While I recognize and respect that the current fiscal environment requires difficult choices, it must be reiterated that the Language Center is not a new or experimental program established in the funding-rich years following September 11, 2001 that can no longer be afforded as we enter

leaner years. To the contrary, the Language Center has been in uninterrupted existence over the span of five decades, through years of both defense budget expansion and contraction.

As background, the NGB funds the Language Center through two accounts: (1) the National Guard Personnel, Army (NGPA) account, known as 2060 funds; and (2) the Operation and Maintenance, Army National Guard account, known as 2065 funds. From Fiscal Year 2012 to Fiscal Year 2014, total annual funding for the Language Center—as well as the distribution of funding between these two accounts—fluctuated substantially, averaging \$1.491 million a year.¹ The 2060 funds are used to pay the salaries of the non-AGR uniformed support personnel, while the 2065 funds are used to pay the salaries of the civilian English-language teachers, as well as to cover about one-third of the cost of operating a consolidated dining facility that is used by students and faculty at the Language Center, the 201st Regional Training Institute, and the Puerto Rico Army National Guard's Recruit Sustainment Program.

In Fiscal Year 2015, the Language Center is slated to receive between \$1.2 million and \$1.4 million in federal funds. However, all of this funding is being provided through the 2065 account, because the NGB hastily terminated 2060 funds for the Language Center effective October 1, 2014. I understand that, in order to keep the Language Center operating, the Puerto Rico National Guard has repurposed about \$433,000 in funding to partially compensate for the lack of these 2060 funds, a short-term solution that it cannot sustain.

Starting in Fiscal Year 2016, the NGB proposes to shut down the Language Center and, instead, to send all Puerto Rico National Guard recruits who require English-language instruction to the Defense Language Institute's English Language Center (DLIELC) at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland in Texas.

I am advised that the NGB computed the cost—to the Army National Guard, that is—of keeping the National Guard Language Center in Puerto Rico open, then compared that cost to the estimated cost of sending 300-500 Puerto Rico National Guard recruits to Lackland each year, and concluded that the cost savings from the latter course of action would be approximately \$2.125 million a year. However, I am informed that the NGB assumed that the annual cost of funding the Language Center was \$2.5 million, on the grounds that this was the level of funding that the Puerto Rico National Guard *requested* for Fiscal Year 2015. I respectfully submit that this is not an appropriate figure to use. Actual funding for the Language Center has not exceeded \$1.9 million annually and, as noted, has averaged \$1.4 million in recent years. Using \$1.4 million rather than \$2.5 million to represent the annual cost to NGB of continuing to fund the

¹ Specifically, in FY 2012, the Language Center received \$863,000 in 2060 funds and \$807,000 in 2065 funds, for a total of \$1.67 million. In FY 2013, the Language Center received \$903,000 in 2060 funds and \$0 in 2065 funds, for a total of \$903,000. In FY 2014, the Language Center received \$1 million in 2060 funds and \$900,000 in 2065 funds, for a total of \$1.9 million.

Language Center would seem more fitting, and would reduce the projected savings from \$2.125 million a year to about \$1 million a year.

Moreover, I am advised that the NGB computed the annual cost of sending Puerto Rico National Guard recruits to Lackland to be about \$375,000, which I am told represents the cost of airfare alone. (It is not clear whether this represents a one-way ticket or a round-trip ticket.) The NGB evidently determined that any additional cost of housing, feeding and teaching 400-500 Puerto Rico National Guard recruits at Lackland for several months would be paid from accounts other than those administered by the Army National Guard. This may be the case, but the reality is that *all* additional costs associated with providing Puerto Rico National Guard recruits with English-language instruction at Lackland—and not merely the transportation-related costs—will still be borne by the Department of Defense and, ultimately, by federal taxpayers.

In any event, even if one were to accept the NGB's cost-benefit analysis, which I believe has flaws, the estimated savings that will accrue to the Army National Guard from terminating funding for the Language Center are extraordinarily modest, and—in my view—are vastly outweighed by the irrevocable damage that will likely be caused to the Puerto Rico Army National Guard in terms of recruitment, retention and training.

Finally, National Guard leaders recognize the importance of having an inclusive military workforce whose members are linguistically, culturally and racially diverse, and thus able to operate effectively in different military environments. Accordingly, it would seem wise for the NGB to maintain and take full advantage of an institution like the Language Center, which has been so successful for so long. Puerto Rico has been a principal source of highly motivated, fully bilingual Hispanic recruits for the National Guard, and the NGB should seek to foster—not frustrate—that trend.²

In sum, I believe this is a risky decision that could have major adverse consequences—which are difficult to predict with precision, but are very real nonetheless—for the Puerto Rico Army National Guard, the Army National Guard, and the Army's total force. I have no doubt that the proposal was made by the NGB in good faith, but I respectfully submit that NGB planners did not sufficiently consider the potential impact this decision might have on military readiness. Recruitment and retention are the lifeblood of the military, and this decision could have a substantial negative effect on the size and quality of the Puerto Rico Army National Guard over

² Closure of the National Guard Language Center in Puerto Rico, apart from harming a principal source of Hispanic recruits for the National Guard, would eliminate a unique National Guard capability that could perhaps be utilized in connection with the NGB's State Partnership Program. Currently, state and territory national guards have partnered with the militaries of at least 15 Spanish-speaking countries in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. The Language Center is a resource that could be used by the NGB—in coordination with the Defense Language Institute—to provide English-language instruction to members of those military units under the auspices of these established partnerships.

the long term, all in pursuit of minimal budgetary relief in the short term. I urge the NGB to revisit its decision and to allow this successful Language Center to remain in operation in Fiscal Year 2016 and beyond.

I look forward to a full briefing on this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Pierluisi".

Pedro R. Pierluisi
Member of Congress

cc: Colonel Marta Carcana, Acting Adjutant General, Puerto Rico National Guard
Colonel José J. Reyes, Commander, 201st Regiment, Regional Training Institute (MF) and
Youth Programs Manager, Puerto Rico Army National Guard
Major Josué Mercado, Commander, Puerto Rico National Guard Language Center