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Nation must respect Guard's service

The following is a column by Governor Kathleen Sebelius

In recent years, our nation has turned to its military men and women time and again, asking them to make immense sacrifices on our behalf. Many of those called on to serve are members of the National Guard – true citizen-soldiers, committed to serving the people of their state and nation both at home and abroad.

In October 2005, I had the privilege of joining friends, families and well-wishers of 112 Guard members as those soldiers prepared for deployment.

We gathered at the Pratt Community College gymnasium to honor the Kansas National Guard's 1st Battalion, 161st Field Artillery, which was heading for Iraq. It was a bittersweet event, because while these soldiers had an opportunity to see how much their fellow Kansans truly appreciate their service, they also knew the ceremony was the first step down the road away from home.

Our Guard soldiers are proud to serve their nation, whatever the mission. As they left behind family, friends and jobs, they had the understanding that while the mission would be difficult, they would be returning home this March.

Recently, these soldiers received new orders to remain in Iraq for up to an additional four months. Because their nation is calling upon them, they will continue to serve, and serve with honor. But we must make sure this additional service is properly respected.

This week I wrote to the Secretary of Defense requesting that our National Guard soldiers receive hardship pay for the additional four months of duty in Iraq. Active duty soldiers who serve in Iraq for longer than one year also receive an extra \$1,000 per month, and it's only fair our National Guard soldiers receive similar compensation.

This extension of service will cause great hardships on the families, employers and communities of these citizen-soldiers, which is why I've also requested the Department of Defense provide additional resources to mitigate the impact of the extended deployment, and to provide additional help for soldiers when they return to civilian life.

Throughout our state's history, Kansans have willingly stepped forward to serve their nation. Those of us at home owe it to them to ensure their service is respected and their sacrifices honored.

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