

IS TRANSITION ASSISTANCE ON TRACK?

HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED FOURTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

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C O N T E N T S

DECEMBER 15, 2015

SENATORS

	Page
Isakson, Hon. Johnny, Chairman, U.S. Senator from Georgia	1
Blumenthal, Hon. Richard, Ranking Member, U.S. Senator from Connecticut ...	2
Rounds, Hon. Mike, U.S. Senator from South Dakota	25
Tester, Hon. Jon, U.S. Senator from Montana	27
Cassidy, Hon. Bill, U.S. Senator from Louisiana	42
Brown, Hon. Sherrod, U.S. Senator from Ohio	44
Boozman, Hon. John, U.S. Senator from Arkansas	46
Hirono, Hon. Mazie K., U.S. Senator from Hawaii	48
Tillis, Hon. Thom, U.S. Senator from North Carolina	50
Murray, Hon. Patty, U.S. Senator from Washington	53
Sullivan, Hon. Dan, U.S. Senator from Alaska	55

WITNESSES

Kelly, Susan S., Ph.D., Director, Transition to Veterans Program Office, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, U.S. Department of Defense	3
Prepared statement	5
Response to posthearing questions submitted by:	
Hon. Richard Blumenthal	58
Hon. Mazie K. Hirono	60
Coy, Curtis L., Deputy Under Secretary for Economic Opportunity, Veterans Benefits Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; accompanied by Rosye Cloud, Senior Advisor for Veteran Employment, Veterans Benefits Administration	10
Prepared statement	11
Response to request arising during the hearing by:	
Hon. Jon Tester	29,30
Hon. Mazie K. Hirono	49
Hon. Patty Murray	54
Response to posthearing questions submitted by:	
Hon. Richard Blumenthal	62
Hon. Mazie K. Hirono	63
Gerton, Teresa, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Veterans' Employment and Training Service, U.S. Department of Labor	15
Prepared statement	17
Response to request arising during the hearing by:	
Hon. Richard Blumenthal	24
Hon. Mazie K. Hirono	49
Response to posthearing questions submitted by Hon. Richard Blumenthal	66
Voticky, Elizabeth, Group Director of North America Talent Acquisition, The Coca-Cola Company	67
Prepared statement	71
Kress, Matthew, Manager of Veterans and Military Affairs, Starbucks Coffee Company	74
Prepared statement	76
Eversole, Eric, President, Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation	78
Prepared statement	80

IV

	Page
Smith, Daniel, Assistant Director, Veterans Employment and Education Division, The American Legion	88
Prepared statement	89
Zacchea, Michael, Program Manager, Entrepreneur Bootcamp for Veterans, University of Connecticut	92
Prepared statement	94

APPENDIX

Lorraine, James R., President and CEO, America's Warrior Partnership; prepared statement	105
Ilem, Joy J., National Legislative Director, Disabled American Veterans; prepared statement	112
Attachment	118
U.S. Department of Education; prepared statement	119
Beh Neas, Katy, Executive Vice President for Public Affairs, Easter Seals, Inc.; prepared statement	120
Carson, Barb, Acting Associate Administrator, Office of Veterans Business Development (OVBD), U.S. Small Business Administration; prepared statement	124
Morosky, Aleks, Deputy Director, National Legislative Service, Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States; prepared statement	129

IS TRANSITION ASSISTANCE ON TRACK?

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2015

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:30 p.m., in room 418, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Johnny Isakson, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Isakson, Boozman, Cassidy, Rounds, Tillis, Sullivan, Blumenthal, Murray, Brown, Tester, and Hirono.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JOHNNY ISAKSON, CHAIRMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM GEORGIA

Chairman ISAKSON. This meeting of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee will come to order, and we are delighted today to be having a hearing on probably one of the most important topics we could possibly talk about, and that is the transition of our veterans from active duty Department of Defense (DOD), to veteran status and all the different things that go with it. I am glad that we have two panels: first, from the VA and the DOD; and second, some of our Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), as well as some private sector folks who make great contributions to the hiring of veterans and the treatment of veterans.

I know from a State that has 840,000 veterans how important the transition is. General Schoomaker, whom some of you may remember, who was in the Army, did a great job on what he called the "warrior transition centers" at our bases when we had a lot of problems with veterans falling through the cracks after they would leave active duty to go to veteran status. General Schoomaker taught us a lot about making sure the veteran was prepared to be a veteran before he was a veteran, making sure DOD made it as a handoff not a wild Hail Mary pass, which is what we are all trying to talk about here today. And, I think each one of the witnesses here today to testify has got valuable information that will help us.

But, the most important thing we can do—every time a veteran leaves active duty with a plan, with a road map, and with a mentor or a support system, the better off that veteran is. Every time one leaves active duty status at DOD, becomes a veteran, and does not have a helping hand, does not have a mentor, and does not have the right platform of information, that is when you have homelessness. That is when you need veterans courts because of minor crime. That is when people whose lives have made a great contribution to our country are not able to make the contribution they would like to in their own private sector life.

So, as one who has a State full of veterans and is grateful for what they do for our country, I am very interested to making sure we are catalysts for a great transition for all the veterans from active duty to veteran status, and I appreciate they all are here to testify today.

Before we go to our panelists, I will introduce our Ranking Member for any comments he may have.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL,
RANKING MEMBER, U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT**

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. Thanks, Mr. Chairman, and I appreciate our witnesses being here. I want to particularly welcome our witness from Connecticut, Michael Zacchea, a veteran from Connecticut and the founder and program manager of the UConn Entrepreneur Bootcamp for Veterans and Disabilities, which he helped establish at the University of Connecticut. He made the trip down here to share his experience, and, frankly, there is no more important voice on this issue than the voices of veterans themselves.

I want to speak bluntly here because I think this Nation is failing to address the transition problems of our veterans coming out of the service, going into civilian life, and just this morning I questioned a number of nominees to key Department of Defense positions in the Armed Services Committee about this issue, because I think it is a shared responsibility involving both the Department of Defense and the VA, and the finger pointing and blame gaming I think really has to stop.

Over the next 3 to 4 years, approximately 1 million servicemembers are expected to transition out of the military and into civilian life. One million servicemembers. One million men and women. And here is the really staggering statistic. The VA has estimated that approximately 53 percent of these separating post-9/11 veterans will face a period of unemployment despite striving and working to find stable employment. That number, that prediction is simply—beyond unacceptable. It is simply an outrage if it comes to pass. We know that 1 million servicemembers will be leaving, and the question is: What is this Nation going to do to provide them with the skill training and education and job opportunities that they need and deserve?

I would like each member of the panel to specifically address how the Transition Assistance Program provides for women who serve, not only the men who are coming out of active duty but also women seeking meaningful employment. They are the fastest-growing population within the veteran community, and we must ensure that women are welcome and encouraged to fully utilize VA services.

Already this year VA demand for mental health care has exceeded 1.4 million treatment visits, and we know that a seamless transition requires getting it right the first time rather than waiting to reach out and inform veterans after they have returned to their home towns across America. I look forward to hearing testimony today from the agencies about concrete steps they are taking to ensure that veterans are provided with appropriate services. I also want to say how grateful and delighted I am that the private sector has chosen to participate in today's hearing, though more

important is that it is participating so robustly and significantly in efforts to expand employment opportunities. I particularly welcome representatives of Coca-Cola and the Starbucks company. Both have taken very, very important steps in this direction, and I look forward to hearing from them. I commend the efforts of all of our companies that are doing more in this area. We have some in Connecticut. I hope that we can showcase them in the future.

Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you, Senator Blumenthal.

On our first panel, we have three witnesses to testify and one assistant. If you would limit your comments to about 5 minutes, but if you need to go a little bit over, that is really fine. We look forward to hearing from you and look forward to having questions afterwards.

First is Susan Kelly, the Director of Transition to Veterans Program Office, Department of Defense.

Second is Curtis Coy, Deputy Under Secretary for Economic Opportunity, Veterans Benefit Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs, accompanied by a lady with the best name for a rosy hearing we could possibly have, Rosye Cloud. We are delighted to have you, Rosye. I hope you have something to say and are not just there to accompany. So, we will look forward to hearing from you as well.

And Teresa Gerton, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Veterans' Employment and Training Service, Department of Labor.

We welcome all of you for being here. We will call on Ms. Kelly first.

STATEMENT OF SUSAN S. KELLY, PH.D., DIRECTOR, TRANSITION TO VETERANS PROGRAM OFFICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Ms. KELLY. Good afternoon, Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished Members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to appear today to provide you an update on the Transition Assistance Program, TAP, redesign and our progress over the past several years.

In 2012, in collaboration with the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Labor, and Education, the Small Business Administration, and the Office of Personnel Management, we began redesigning TAP in accordance with the VOW to Hire Heroes Act. We focused on four core objectives: Career Readiness Standards, a robust curriculum, a culminating Capstone event, and a Military Life Cycle transition preparation model.

Today our servicemembers are better prepared as a result of the successful implementation of TAP through this collaboration. DOD is engaged with the services and our interagency partners at all levels, from the action officers who staff the TAP to Assistant Secretary level executives who provide guidance through our TAP Executive Council.

The foundation of TAP is for servicemembers to meet Career Readiness Standards (CRS). To prepare servicemembers to meet CRS, we created the Transition Goals, Plans, Success (GPS) curriculum to develop the skills necessary for post-military life and training tracks focused on three post-separation options: higher

education, technical training, and entrepreneurship. Transition GPS is taught at 206 sites worldwide and is available online, giving servicemembers access regardless of their geographic location and even after separation.

DOD and our partners conduct an annual curriculum review that allows us to be responsive to servicemember and stakeholder feedback to ensure effective instruction. Based on this feedback, we increased focus on using social media for employment and networking in the curriculum for 2016.

We have also built an interagency TAP evaluation strategy designed to provide accountability and measure customer satisfaction and program effectiveness. We conducted over 30 staff assistance visits in 2014 and 2015, verifying the quality of TAP delivery at installations. To monitor customer satisfaction, we implemented a voluntary, anonymous, online participant assessment which we asked servicemembers to complete after every course. And as an initial measure of effectiveness, we closely monitor Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) and Career Readiness Standards compliance data to ensure that servicemembers are meeting the requirements or are receiving a warm handover.

Compliance rates verified by the Defense Manpower Data Center were 94 percent for VOW and 89 percent for Career Readiness Standards in 2015. My colleagues from VA and Department of Labor (DOL) can speak to how they are monitoring success after separation.

We are providing strong working relationships with employers in the private sector and Federal Government who are eager to harness the talent pipeline developed by the profession of arms. In 2015, through Hiring Our Heroes, employers engaged with thousands of servicemembers at more than 30 hiring events at installations across the United States and overseas. The Departments of Agriculture, Energy, and Homeland Security are actively pursuing servicemembers to address workforce gaps.

A key focus on TAP is to build bridges from active duty to post-separation support from VA, DOL, and other community agencies. To that end, our installations are developing relationships with their communities to provide support to transitioning servicemembers.

There has been tremendous forward movement, boosted by unfailing support from the Chairman's office and the recently transitioned senior enlisted advisor, Sergeant Major Battaglia. But we must continue to work with the services, our Federal partners, and the private sector to gather lessons learned, instill a culture of planning for post-military life throughout a military career, and to develop pipelines into the national workforce.

This concludes my statement. I thank the Members of the Committee for your continued support and leadership, and I will be happy to answer your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Kelly follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF SUSAN S. KELLY, PH.D., DIRECTOR, TRANSITION TO VETERANS PROGRAM OFFICE, OFFICE OF THE UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR PERSONNEL AND READINESS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, distinguished Members of the Committee, Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

In 2012, in collaboration with the Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA), Labor (DOL), Education (ED), Small Business Administration (SBA) and the Office of Personnel Management, we began redesigning TAP in accordance with the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011. This redesign focused on four core objectives: adopting Career Readiness Standards for transitioning Servicemembers; developing a new TAP curriculum; implementing a Capstone event; and introducing a "Military Life Cycle" (MLC) transition preparation model.

While we have accomplished the four initial objectives, we continue to work closely with the military Services and our Federal interagency partners to gather lessons learned, improve the curriculum, and instill a culture of planning for post-military life throughout the Servicemember's career, and build relationships with partners eager to support our transitioning Servicemembers. These efforts require continuous collaboration at every level within the Department of Defense (DOD), across Federal and State governments, with employers, and with community-based organizations.

INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION

Our Federal interagency partners are committed to supporting our Nation's Servicemembers. They continue to provide their expertise to ensure Servicemembers are prepared to successfully pursue their career aspirations after separating from military service. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) details the interdependent roles and responsibilities for the Department and our five interagency partners. In addition to the MOU, all partners signed a Statement of Intent outlining initial shared objectives and establishing a TAP interagency governance structure.

The TAP Executive Council (EC), comprised of Assistant Secretary-level executives, monitors the execution, assessment, and modification of TAP. The lead for this governance structure has, as planned, smoothly migrated annually from DOD to DOL and now to VA. The EC membership also includes representatives from SBA, OPM, ED, each Military Department, and the Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Within DOD, the Transition to Veterans Program Office, under the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Readiness, oversees TAP and coordinates year-round governance activities. A TAP Senior Steering Group (SSG) includes Senior Executive representation from the interagency partners, each Military Service, the Coast Guard, Family and Employer Programs and Policy under the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, the Joint Staff, and the National Guard Bureau. The wide representation emphasizes providing the best transition assistance to our Servicemembers requires a multifaceted approach.

In addition to the senior-level SSG and EC, the governance structure includes a number of working groups tasked with the continuous assessment and improvement of specific functional areas. These groups are dedicated to performance management, data sharing, Information Technology, strategic communications, curriculum, and interagency policy coordination.

TAP educates Servicemembers on the abundance of available resources to support their transition before and after they separate. These include a nationwide network of approximately 2,500 American Job Centers under DOL; the Veterans Employment Center, an online job search tool utilized by employers and Veterans; and the Veterans Economic Communities Initiatives. My colleagues from DOL and VA can share their work on these efforts.

CURRICULUM

The heart of the redesigned TAP is the Servicemembers' Career Readiness Standards (CRS) requirement. To assist transitioning Servicemembers in building the skills they need to meet CRS, the Department, in collaboration with our interagency partners, developed a standardized curriculum with standardized learning objectives.

This curriculum, Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success), includes the DOL Employment Workshop and VA Benefit briefings required by the VOW Act, as well as modules in personal financial planning and translating Military Occupational Codes to their civilian equivalents.

Recognizing the challenges our Servicemembers face as they separate, we developed three additional career-building training tracks: Accessing Higher Education, Career Technical Training, and Entrepreneurship. Transitioning Servicemembers are encouraged to take advantage of one or more of these tracks if they align with their individual transition goals. The Accessing Higher Education track, provided by DOD, instructs Servicemembers interested in pursuing higher education and a degree. After completing this track, Servicemembers are informed educational consumers, prepared to apply to an accredited educational institution. In the Career Technical Training Track, provided by VA, Servicemembers pursuing a skilled trade receive guidance in selecting technical training schools or programs that will lead to a license, industry-recognized credential, or certification in their chosen technical career field. Servicemembers interested in pursuing self-employment attend SBA's Entrepreneurship Track, commonly referred to as the Boots2Business program, where they receive information about the benefits and challenges of starting one's own business. Upon completion, Servicemembers will have developed the initial components of a business feasibility plan. Graduates can enroll in an eight-week online, SBA-sponsored entrepreneurship course to develop a viable business plan under the instruction of renowned business educators. SBA also provides the option to match Servicemembers to successful business mentors for short- and long-term guidance.

Our Servicemembers have access to the Transition GPS curriculum regardless of their duty station or geographical location. We have converted all components of the "brick-and-mortar" classroom curriculum into a virtual curriculum hosted on DOD's Joint Knowledge Online (JKO). This instruction for transition preparation is located on the same platform that Servicemembers use for all joint computer-based training—a strong message that transition preparation is a normal and expected part of military training. Since the virtual curriculum was launched in October 2013, more than 100,000 unique users have completed over 300,000 online modules. The virtual curriculum is also posted in the public domain on the DOL and VA websites, as well as DOD's Military OneSource. Our intention is to make the rich curriculum available to all Veterans, military spouses, and family members.

INTERAGENCY TAP EVALUATION

In 2014, the TAP EC developed a comprehensive Interagency TAP Evaluation Strategy to address three overarching goals: (1) provide accountability to ensure the program is delivered on military installations in accordance with law, policy, and leadership intent; (2) measure and improve customer satisfaction; and (3) measure and improve program effectiveness. This strategy was approved by the Office of Management and Budget in May 2014.

To provide accountability, we implemented Staff Assistance Visits (SAVs) to verify the implementation and quality of TAP delivery at military installations. Thirty one SAVs were conducted in 2014 and 2015 to gather feedback from Servicemembers, staff, Senior Enlisted Advisors, and Commanders. These visits have shown that the military Services and Commanders are supporting TAP, including meeting new standards such as a limit of 50 students per TAP class, and providing access to government laptops or internet access for Servicemembers to use their own devices in the classroom.

To monitor customer satisfaction, we built and implemented a voluntary, anonymous online Transition GPS Participant Assessment. Servicemembers are asked for their feedback on TAP upon completion of each Transition GPS module and again at the end of the entire program for both online or classroom curricula. The most recent participant assessment data (fourth quarter of Fiscal Year (FY) 2015) shows 81 percent of respondents reported they gained valuable information and skills to plan their transition; 80 percent stated the training enhanced their confidence in transition planning; 81 percent said they intended to use what they learned in transition planning; and 82 percent responded they knew how to access appropriate resources. This assessment also informs our annual curriculum review and modification process.

We rely on VOW Act and CRS compliance to measure initial TAP effectiveness. DOD has developed an IT infrastructure that collects data on every separating Servicemember. In FY 2015, 226,111 Servicemembers separated from active duty. Based on data verified by the Defense Manpower Data Center, 94 percent of these eligible Servicemembers met the VOW Act mandate. Eighty-nine percent of eligible Servicemembers either met CRS or received a warm handover to appropriate partner agencies. These results speak to the incredible commitment of the Services and our partner agencies to prepare Servicemembers for civilian life.

DOD has gone one step further. The TAP redesign is a culture change for DOD and deliberate transition planning across the MLC is a shift. To monitor this culture change, we are using the DOD Status of Forces Survey to capture, for the first time, Servicemembers' attitudes toward post-military career planning and leadership support. This survey will enable us to gauge Servicemembers' awareness of TAP and their individual transition responsibilities, as well as the support they receive from leadership and peers in preparing for transition. It will take time to integrate MLC transition preparation, but of those Servicemembers responding to the 2014 survey, 62 percent indicated they had done some planning for their post-military career, 49 percent said Commanders or senior leadership were supportive of this career planning, and 65 percent indicated peer support. We have seen recognition among Servicemembers that transition preparation is important throughout the military career. In the 2013 survey, just 10 percent of Servicemembers said that transition assistance information should be provided at multiple points during the career. In 2014, this grew to 28 percent. We will be monitoring these yearly results carefully.

Our partners have proposed long-term outcome measures in the TAP Interagency Evaluation Strategy which will enable us to evaluate success after separation. These include Post-9/11 G.I. Bill Usage Rate, education Completion Rate, Percentage of Unemployed Post-9/11 Veterans, and Amount of Unemployment Insurance Payment by Branch. Additional long-term, outcome-oriented evaluations are also in development by the VA and DOL to further strengthen the interagency evaluation approach and ensure that TAP is continuously improved.

CURRICULUM REVIEW

DOD and our partners are committed to a relevant curriculum. The TAP Interagency EC has completed two review cycles of the Transition GPS curriculum, allowing for updates of resources, materials, and content. The updates are based on feedback provided by Servicemembers through the Participant Assessment, facilitators, subject matter experts, interagency partners, stakeholders, and Service representatives. This annual review process allows DOD and our partners to provide the most current and effective instruction to support the career success of our Servicemembers.

The Curriculum Working Group leads the annual review and modification process to identify necessary changes to strengthen learning outcomes. Recommendations for changes vary annually based on shifts in law, policy, and Servicemember needs. The working group leverages the talent of both interagency and Service subject matter experts and curriculum specialists to revise the curriculum. The revisions are presented to the SSG for review, approval, and forwarded to the EC for final approval. The revised curriculum is then implemented by the Military Services and our interagency partners.

During the FY 2015 review, several changes were made in response to Participant Assessment feedback. These include discussions and examples of Verification of Military Experience and Training (VMET) documentation and the Joint Services Transcript, which can help Servicemembers show qualifications or obtain academic credit for military experience. Information on healthcare and changes in taxes after transition were also added. Website resources were provided to accompany the curriculum. Feedback received from our interaction with employers has resulted in enhancing TAP to improve Servicemember skills in utilizing social media for employment, networking, and developing resumes. The revised DOD curriculum has been made available to the field. DOL and VA content is actively being piloted and complete implementation is forthcoming.

One addition to the available courses is an online course called "Higher Education Preparation," which launched in October 2015. This module, developed in response to high Service interest and feedback, is aligned with MLC transition preparation and assists Servicemembers in making informed decisions when using tuition assistance. It intends to help first-term Servicemembers understand the importance of aligning their education with future career goals, compare institutions of higher learning to find the best educational and personal fit, and effectively use tuition assistance to support their long-term educational goals.

COMMANDER ROLE IN TAP

Commanders play an integral role in TAP. Commanders must give Servicemembers sufficient time to attend TAP and verify that Servicemembers meet CRS during Capstone. If a transitioning Servicemember does not meet CRS, the Commander initiates a warm handover to one or more partner agencies to ensure the Servicemember receives the necessary support after separation. VA and DOL have increased resources to handle warm handovers from DOD. They can discuss their

procedures after receiving transitioning Servicemembers through the handover process.

Many Commanders have seized their role in TAP and are beginning to foster a culture of transition readiness, including encouraging honest discussions about post-military life in order to develop an environment in which post-military planning is the norm. In March 2015, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued a memorandum to Commanders at all levels about their role in TAP. The Chairman cited actions Commanders should take to support transitioning Servicemembers, including permitting them appropriate time and access to resources needed to meet CRS. The Chairman's memorandum underscored the unique role Commanders play in positioning Servicemembers to succeed in their post-military civilian lives. We continue to work with the Military Services to systemically educate leaders on their responsibilities to separating Servicemembers.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Over the past two years, private sector companies of all sizes, as well as Federal agencies, have recognized that transitioning Servicemembers comprise an incredible pool of talent and they seek increased opportunities to harness that talent.

DOD and our partners have received input from the private and non-profit sectors through advisory bodies such as the Defense Business Board, DOL's Advisory Committee on Veterans' Employment, Training, and Employer Outreach, and the MyVA Advisory Committee, to help provide the best possible assistance to Servicemembers and Veterans. The Defense Business Board, an advisory body of corporate executives to the Secretary of Defense, was given the opportunity to review the redesigned TAP. A primary comment was to provide employers with early access to transitioning Servicemembers. In collaboration with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Hiring Our Heroes Foundation, we have helped shape the environment in which employers gain this access. In 2015, thousands of Servicemembers, Veterans, and spouses attended over 100 Hiring Our Heroes events. These include 18 large-scale transition summits, including summits at overseas installations in Okinawa, mainland Japan, Germany, and Italy. In the latest assessment (August 2015), 94 percent of attendees who responded to a survey indicated they felt better prepared for transition after attending these events.

Through organizations such as Veterans Job Mission, led by JPMorgan Chase, employers have committed to hiring transitioning Servicemembers and Veterans. Companies such as those you will hear from today are not focused solely on hiring Veterans, but also on retaining them. Many have established Veteran affinity groups where Veteran employees can mentor each other through the corporate "culture change." These groups have become a helpful tool for employers to understand the interests and concerns of their Veteran employees, better positioning them to retain this workforce.

DOD also collaborates with Federal agencies to support transitioning Servicemembers and to fill workforce gaps. DOL (with its employer and labor partners) helps to ensure that transitioning Servicemembers are able to connect with Registered Apprenticeships. Currently, approximately 95,000 active Servicemembers are participating in apprenticeships through the United Services Military Apprenticeship Program—gaining valuable skills that translate to civilian occupations. The Department of Energy is launching initiatives to help Servicemembers train for and obtain critical-need jobs in the utility industry. The Department of Agriculture has recently launched a targeted campaign to make Servicemembers aware of opportunities in the agriculture industry. The Department of Homeland Security has been actively engaged at hiring events to recruit transitioning Servicemembers for law enforcement, border patrol, and national security positions. At the Honolulu Transition Summit in July 2015, Customs and Border Protection accepted over 300 applications from Navy and Air Force personnel. The Department and Military Services are engaged with the Department of Homeland Security to improve the processes through which Servicemembers are recruited, apply for, and obtain positions within Customs and Border Protection.

Private-sector employers have found innovative ways to employ transitioning Servicemembers through the development of on-the-job training programs authorized through SkillBridge, which is overseen by DOD's Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Readiness. Servicemembers meeting certain qualifications are allowed to participate in civilian job and employment training up to six months prior to their separation from active duty. This training must lead to a high probability of employment. Over 30 of these programs have been implemented at military installations.

It is evident that both industry and Federal agencies are starting to develop career pipelines for transitioning Servicemembers. The revised Career and Technical

Training track in Transition GPS will include an expanded discussion of apprenticeship and training opportunities offered by VA and DOL. However, we must acknowledge the military Services and Commanders are challenged with balancing unrelenting mission requirements and the workload on non-transitioning Servicemembers while giving these training opportunities to transitioning Servicemembers. We are committed to providing our Servicemembers access to training that results in industry-recognized credentials. We are eager to balance mission requirements with opportunities for transitioning Servicemembers to fill the most pressing workforce skills gaps in their communities. This is a new undertaking and we will learn and adapt along the way.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Many local and community organizations are eager to support our Servicemembers as they plan, prepare, and ultimately complete their transition from the military. In 2014, the Secretary of Defense signed memoranda granting Non-Federal Entities, Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), and Military Service Organizations (MSOs), access to installations to enable delivery of their support and services to Servicemembers and families. This included detailed guidance with recommended processes and procedures. We are in the process of issuing a DOD Instruction asking the Military Secretaries to encourage their installation Commanders to grant VSOs and MSOs access to transition assistance-related events and activities. We intend this policy to further serve to support installation Commanders as they balance mission and security requirements with leveraging the services that these organizations are able to provide to local installations.

A basic tenet of the TAP redesign is to build bridges from active duty to post-separation support from VA, DOL, and other community agencies. These bridges are apparent in the Transition GPS curriculum and in the final TAP component of Capstone. We applaud the requirement for DOL's American Job Centers to be embedded in the social support network of the communities where they are located. Likewise, VA's Vet Centers and the Department of Education's work to encourage universities and colleges to support Veterans on campus are getting stronger. SBA's SCORE volunteers reinforce our Veterans as they enter the world of entrepreneurship. VA's Veterans Economic Communities Initiative and policy academies aim to assist communities with coordinating Veteran support mechanisms. We are also heartened by another example of unexpected community support from the Sesame Workshop. Sesame Workshop is providing a suite of products to community agencies to educate agency staff on how to support transitioning military families with young children. The January 2016 launch of these materials will be just one more way that Sesame Workshop provides quality support to the military and Veteran communities.

CONCLUSION

The Department's intensified focus on transition preparation is being acknowledged across the Administration. In fact, many now recognize that preparing Servicemembers for transition is imperative to sustaining the All-Volunteer Force. The 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review noted that the strength of the All-Volunteer Force would be maintained by providing the best possible assistance to Servicemembers transitioning to civilian life.

Our Servicemembers are a vital component of our Nation's economic prosperity; their contributions last years beyond military service. We are working hard to increase the awareness of the valuable skill sets that Servicemembers bring to every industry. We are encouraging employers to develop training, credentialing, and career paths that create viable and enduring post-service options for Servicemembers.

Going forward, I believe we will see our Servicemembers succeed more quickly in their post-separation goals, whether pursuing a degree in higher education, immediately entering the civilian workforce, or launching an entrepreneurial endeavor. I credit our interagency partners and the TAP staffs of the Military Services for making this happen. This has been an unprecedented effort. Our collective dedication has never wavered.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I thank you, the Ranking Member, and the Members of this Committee for your outstanding and continuing support of the men and women who proudly wear the uniform in defense of our great Nation.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you very much, Ms. Kelly.
Mr. Coy.

STATEMENT OF CURTIS L. COY, DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; ACCOMPANIED BY ROSYE CLOUD, SENIOR ADVISOR FOR VETERAN EMPLOYMENT, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. COY. Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and other Members of the Committee, we appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the current status of the Transition Assistance Program. Accompanying me today is Ms. Rosye Cloud, Senior Advisor for Veteran Employment.

It is critical that our men and women leaving military service are informed of the benefits they have earned, how to fully utilize them, and can connect with communities to achieve positive economic outcomes. The VOW Act of 2011 set in place the framework for pre-separation counseling, benefits briefings, and employment workshops. To provide benefits briefings, VA has more than 300 benefits advisors in place providing transition support at more than 108 permanent military installations worldwide, which also serve another 195 itinerant sites and locations. These advisors are responsible for delivering VA benefits briefings, facilitating career technical training track, supporting Capstone and Military Life Cycle events, as well providing individual assistance upon request to servicemembers and their families.

Last fiscal year, 195,000 servicemembers and spouses attended over 7,500 VA benefits briefs. Another 7,700 attended over 850 voluntary Clinical Team Training briefings. VA, with our partner agencies, also developed a virtual TAP curriculum that enables access to the curriculum from remote locations worldwide.

This past year also included a significant review of our curriculum. Enhancements were made to the VA Benefits I and II briefings designed to align information into logical life planning categories to include education, training and upscaling, economic opportunities, estate planning, housing, and health care. Through the Capstone process, VA works with the interagency partners ensuring that servicemembers at risk for larger issues, such as homelessness, are connected to the right resources.

The governance charter established the Interagency Executive Council (IEC) and Senior Steering Group, overseeing the policy development of TAP. The Chair of that IEC rotates each year. Currently, VA has the helm after our DOD and Labor partners have done in the previous 2 years.

To complement TAP, and as part of Secretary McDonald's MyVA initiative, VA launched the Veterans Economic Communities Initiative, or VECI, in May of this year. VECI promotes local community collaboration, dialog, and partnerships among organizations that serve transitioning servicemembers, veterans, and their families.

VECI communities are based upon transitioning and post-9/11 veteran populations, unemployment and job growth opportunities, and education spending. We have already launched the program in 25 communities and hope to expand to another 25 this year.

VA is fully supporting the efforts of the administration and Congress to ensure transitioning servicemembers are ready for civilian life and to achieve strong economic outcomes. I would be remiss if

I did not also say that working with our colleagues at Defense and Labor has been a wonderful example of interagency cooperation and partnership. Dr. Kelly and Deputy Assistant Secretary Gerton are dedicated professionals and leaders whose passion for doing what is best for veterans cannot be overstated. We are also excited about the new leadership Assistant Secretary Michaud will bring to the process. Finally, the work of our Senior Advisor Rosye Cloud has accomplished is truly noteworthy.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other Members of the Committee may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Coy follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF CURTIS L. COY, DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION (VBA), U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and other Members of the Committee, We appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the current status of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Veterans Economic Communities Initiative (VECI). Accompanying me today is Ms. Rosye Cloud, Senior Advisor for Veteran Employment.

BACKGROUND

It is critical that today's Servicemembers are appropriately and adequately prepared to transition to civilian life and seek a meaningful and productive post-military career. In November 2011, Congress passed and the President signed the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (VOW Act), which included steps to improve TAP for Servicemembers. Among other things, the VOW Act made participation in TAP mandatory for all Servicemembers (except in certain limited circumstances). Mandatory components of TAP now include pre-separation counseling, two VA benefits briefings, and a Department of Labor (DOL) employment workshop. Under the auspices of a memorandum of understanding executed in 2014, VA, DOL, Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Homeland Security, Department of Education (ED), Small Business Administration (SBA), U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and other stakeholders coordinated on the implementation of the redesigned TAP to strengthen and expand information, counseling, and support to transitioning Servicemembers. Inter-agency cooperation is at all levels of the Performance Reporting and Management strategy. VA currently co-chairs the Executive Council (EC) and the Senior Steering Group (SSG). The EC meets on a quarterly basis to provide strategic guidance and discuss recommendations or concerns raised by the SSG. The SSG meets monthly, and the working groups meet as necessary.

Inter-agency working groups study issues pertaining to transition, employment, curriculum, education, training, strategic communications, technology, and overall performance. Environmental scans are often conducted to ensure employment trends and educational standards are current and relevant.

IMPLEMENTATION OF VA TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

In order to provide resources and expertise to develop and implement VA's portion of TAP worldwide, a contract vehicle was put in place where more than 300 VA benefits advisors were deployed to provide transition support at more than 300 military installations. As a testament to VA's commitment to Veteran employment, our current network of contract VA benefits advisors is comprised of over 86 percent Veterans and 11 percent military spouses. Notably, there is a large representation of Women Veterans in our cadre of benefits advisors (approximately 30 percent), which is almost double their representation in the Veteran population. The strong acumen Veterans and family members bring to the table is expected to be crucial as we work to increase warm handovers across agencies.

VA benefits advisors are responsible for delivering the mandatory VA Benefits Briefings; facilitating the Career Technical Training Track (CTTT); supporting Capstone and Military Life Cycle events and briefings; and providing individual assistance to transitioning Servicemembers upon request. They also conduct outreach activities to ensure Servicemembers are aware of VA benefits and services available to them, and provide support for local events such as transition summits, career/

hiring fairs, policy academies and other community events that benefit Servicemembers and their families.

To meet the needs of National Guard and Reserve members, VA deployed benefits advisors to all formal demobilization locations (Fort Bliss, Fort Hood, and Joint-Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst). In our last round of curriculum enhancements, we tailored our Benefits I and Benefits II briefings to meet the needs of our Guard and Reserve populations. In addition, VA rapidly responds to Service requests for briefings at Yellow Ribbon and community-based events, as well as to short-notice (same-day notification) demobilization events on installations worldwide.

VA Briefings

The original VA curriculum structure consisted of a four-hour VA Benefits I Briefing and a two-hour VA Benefits II Briefing, which provided an overview of all VA benefits, including eligibility requirements and the application process.

In March 2014, with input from our partner agencies (DOL, DOD, DHS, ED, SBA, and OPM), VA fully deployed the Career Technical Training Track (CTTT), an optional course designed for those seeking job-ready skills and industry-recognized credentials through short-term training programs rather than four-year degree programs. The initial CTTT curriculum guided Servicemembers through the decisions involved in identifying a technical career, determining credentialing requirements, researching and applying to training programs, exploring funding options (including VA benefits), and creating a plan for success.

As a result of a full review of VA's transition curriculum in 2015, enhancements were made to the VA Benefits I and II Briefings to include modules on education, training and upskilling, economic opportunities, estate planning, housing, and health care, as well as demonstrations of eBenefits and the Veterans Employment Center™. The 2015 revisions better align the information presented into logical categories, versus the previous alignment to VA business lines.

Additionally, VA enhanced the CTTT, in collaboration with our interagency partners, in 2015 to provide Servicemembers an opportunity to utilize assessment tools to determine possible employment/career direction; conduct labor-market research; learn about upskilling opportunities; and make a plan for a career.

Last fiscal year, 194,910 people attended over 7,500 VA Benefits I and II Briefings; and 7,745 people attended 858 CTTT briefings. VA attendance numbers are based on voluntary, non-personally identifiable information collection at the event site. The attendance database of record is maintained by DOD.

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VA Capstone Support

Capstone is intended to serve as a standardized and comprehensive end-of-career experience to validate, verify, and bolster the transition training and other services that prepare Servicemembers for civilian careers. As part of Capstone, VA assigns a benefits advisor to each military installation to receive warm handovers from DOD for those Servicemembers who do not meet career readiness standards or are at risk for homelessness so that VA can connect them to assistance, such as additional information on compensation, educational benefits, or career counseling. Career readiness standards are verified by the Military Services, and attendance is tracked by DOD and reported to partnering agencies on a quarterly basis. During the warm handover, the Services verify that Servicemembers previously completed the VA benefits briefings. Benefits advisors welcome Servicemembers to the VA community and provide local points of contact for future assistance and issues. Through the Capstone process, VA is working with its interagency partners to create appropriate synergies to ensure that Servicemembers who are at-risk for larger issues, such as homelessness, are connected to the right resources prior to separation.

VA Military Life Cycle (MLC) Overview

Currently, individual assistance is provided by VA in one-on-one MLC sessions. These sessions involve answering any specific questions that may arise after completing VA benefits briefings and assisting with online benefits applications. VA benefits advisors also connect Servicemembers who need additional support in filing their disability claims or accessing other VA services with a Veterans Service Organization or VA representative at one of our VA regional offices, VA medical centers, Vet Centers, or the National Call Center. Individual transition support also includes

services to Servicemembers who are wounded, ill, or injured, or who may not be physically capable of sitting through the entire six-hour VA benefits briefings.

The MLC transition model capitalizes on military training and development opportunities and leverages TAP offerings to ensure Servicemembers are successful throughout their military and post-military careers. MLCs will be expanded across a series of subject matter areas in the near future to best support the needs of military members and their families.

MEASURING THE QUALITY OF BRIEFINGS

The interagency TAP evaluation strategy is a year-round process that involves collaboration among all stakeholders, culminating in annual reviews of the TAP curriculum, evaluation methods, and processes. Interagency performance measures are reported monthly on a staggered schedule to the SSG, and interagency staff assistance visits are conducted throughout the year and briefed to the EC quarterly.

In addition to the interagency TAP evaluation strategy, VA is aggressively implementing a comprehensive quality assurance (QA) program to ensure the TAP curriculum and the performance of VA benefits advisors meet the highest standards. The QA program sets a framework for continuous monitoring that includes oversight visits conducted by VA to ensure evaluation of all activities carried out in support of TAP. In FY 2015, VA and its contractors conducted 145 QA visits at 89 sites. Of these 145 QA visits, contractors performed 91 evaluations and VA conducted the other 54. In order to improve the quality assurance program for VA delivery of TAP, VA is working multiple acquisitions in FY 2016. The work will be completed through two contracts to separate vendors: one for transition, employment, and economic impact, and the other to provide independent verification and validation, as well as performance management.

VA benefits advisors complete a rigorous training program before being placed on the briefing rotation. Through a "Train the Trainer" system, master trainers provide expertise, training, oversight, and assistance to new VA benefits advisors. VA Benefits I and II training consists of pre-requisite study of content knowledge and 80 hours of classroom-based instruction. VA benefits advisors are required to demonstrate their proficiency of the materials and delivery of briefings. To assess VA benefits advisors' performance, VA developed an evaluation rubric that measures proficiency, knowledge of content, facilitation and platform skills, professionalism, and classroom preparation. Additionally, the CTTT training is highly interactive and consists of 120 hours of content study and practice.

DOD currently collects feedback from Servicemembers through the interagency Transition GPS participant assessment. This assessment collects demographic data and includes questions assessing the quality of the course curriculum, course materials, facilitators, and facilities. Participants also answer questions for VA to gauge their intent to use the information learned, confidence derived from the modules/tracks, and self-assessed knowledge gain. In the Transition GPS participant assessments for the first and second quarters of FY 2015, several VA benefits advisors were personally praised for their efforts.

VA is listening to Servicemembers' needs and responding to feedback. Through Transition GPS participant assessment feedback, quality assurance visits, and direct feedback from our trainers, VA has an agile curriculum improvement process that allows us to make immediate and on-going enhancements to the Benefits I, Benefits II, and CTTT curricula and delivery.

THE VETERANS EMPLOYMENT CENTER™ (VEC)

VA, DOL, DOD, ED, SBA, and OPM collaborated to design, develop, and incorporate features of existing online employment tools into the VEC™. The VEC™ consolidates several job assistance tool sites, bringing together real job opportunities with technology to translate military skills into plain language and allow users to build an online profile that can be shared in real time with employers who have made a public commitment to hire Veterans. The VEC™ platform is not tied to any vendor, commercial entity, or service, but endeavors to integrate tools, resources, and programs from across Federal agencies and vetted public-private partnerships, at no cost to Federal agencies, employers, Veterans, military, or their families.

The site now averages over 1.2 million page views each month. Employers have made publicly displayed commitments to hire more than 740,000 individuals from the military community. These numbers reflect the national commitment by small, medium, and large employers across America. VA is continuing to work with its partner agencies and Veterans to identify ways to best use these tools and technologies.

VETERANS ECONOMIC COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE (VECI)

To complement the goals of TAP and as part of Secretary McDonald's *MyVA* initiative, VA launched the Veterans Economic Communities Initiative or VECI in May 2015. VECI's goal is to promote local collaboration, dialog, and partnerships among organizations that serve transitioning Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families.

Economic liaisons in each VECI community collaborate and partner with government leaders, businesses, policy experts, educational institutions, and nonprofit organizations to build an integrated network of support and resources and maximize impact to improve outcomes for Veterans and their families.

Although VECI is for Veterans of all eras, the program places emphasis on Post-9/11 transitioning Servicemembers. It is designed to connect economic liaisons into the benefits advisor network across the country. Additionally, economic liaisons work closely with their counterparts across agencies, including DOL, SBA, and DOD, to coordinate services with a unified approach to supporting Veterans and their families.

On September 30, 2015, VA announced expansion to 25 new VECI communities in early 2016, bringing the total to 50 U.S. metropolitan statistical areas. VECI communities were selected based on transitioning Servicemember and Post-9/11 Veteran populations, unemployment rates, employment opportunities and job growth, and education spending. The response to our VECI campaign from our Nation's businesses has been encouraging, and in many cases enthusiastic.

The VECI campaign launched two new innovative education initiatives for transitioning Servicemembers and Veterans: Learning Hubs and Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) pilots.

VA launched five Learning Hub pilots across the country in partnership with Coursera, the American Red Cross, and The Mission Continues, to offer no-cost learning opportunities to transitioning Servicemembers and Veterans. VA Learning Hubs offer the opportunity to learn online and in the classroom, listen to presentations from local subject matter experts, and network with leaders in the community. Upon successful completion of the program, participants may elect to receive one free verified certificate issued by Coursera. VA Learning Hubs will expand to 28 communities total this calendar year.

VA also launched an ALP pilot this summer, with seven courses focusing on building skills and certifications needed to begin or advance in careers in information technology (IT), as part of the President's TechHire initiative. ALPs are typically completed in fewer than six months; provide opportunities to learn online, in the classroom, or in a blended format; and lead to industry-recognized certifications. Under an innovative pay for success concept, the ALP pilots incentivize and compensate training providers based on graduation and career-placement rates. We are testing this model to determine if it could be used more broadly to train Veterans in other industries and sectors. Launched in August 2015, VA received more than 1,000 applications on the first day and approximately 3,500 applications in the first week.

As an important component of the VECI campaign, VA held its inaugural Policy Academy from September 29–30 in Orange County, California. The event had more than 450 registrants. Policy Academies serve as a forum for local, regional, and national partners to engage in dialog about Veteran economic issues; receive interactive training on national philanthropic and fact-based best practices; and hear from leaders in the field about emerging data, trends, and opportunities.

To measure the success of VECI, VA will leverage key strategies for improving economic outcomes. These include Veteran-focused community engagement activities, employment interest via the VECI™, and review of education outcomes such as VA Learning Hubs and programs that leverage the GI Bill®.

Each of these strategies helps VA to measure its progress toward achieving national goals for Veteran employment and education attainment, and as each VECI matures, will evolve into more granular core performance metrics.

Since its national launch in May, the VECI campaign has already placed economic liaisons in 25 communities across the country. Liaisons are deeply rooted in their local networks and based out of locations in the community. VA is aggressively pursuing additional innovative opportunities to increase public and private partnerships in communities via no-cost partnerships. VECI has also enabled VA to work with Veteran-focused foundations to identify and increase opportunities to ease reintegration for Veterans and their families nationally.

CONCLUSION

VA continues to work with partner agencies to assist with the transition of Servicemembers from military to civilian life. TAP is designed to give Servicemembers and their families an opportunity to learn more about the benefits they have earned, identify benefits that fit their individual needs, and equip them with a plan for success outside of the military.

VA fully supports the efforts of the Administration and Congress to ensure transitioning Servicemembers are ready for civilian life upon separation from the military and achieve strong economic outcomes, and we will continue to implement initiatives to achieve this goal.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other Members of the Committee may have.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you very much, Mr. Coy.
Ms. Gerton.

STATEMENT OF TERESA GERTON, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR POLICY, VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

Ms. GERTON. Good afternoon, Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and other distinguished Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing. As the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy at the Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) at the Department of Labor, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the implementation of the revised Transition Assistance Program, or TAP.

I would like to start off with some good news. In November, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the national unemployment rate for veterans was 3.6 percent, the lowest rate in the last 8 years and below the national unemployment rate for the 24th consecutive month. This points to the value of our combined efforts to help veterans obtain meaningful civilian careers.

Since the inception of TAP over 20 years ago, the Department of Labor has provided training and services through Employment Workshops to over 2.6 million separating or retiring servicemembers and their spouses. Last year alone, DOL conducted more than 6,400 Employment Workshops for over 180,000 participants at 206 sites worldwide.

The 3-day Employment Workshop uses modern adult learning techniques to actively engage transitioning servicemembers in critical career transition skills. On day one, participants develop their change management plan and identify overall strategies for transitioning into the civilian workforce. On day two, they learn how to analyze the job market and use social media and job searches and networking. On day three, instructors impart critical information about special veterans hiring authorities and how the Federal job application process differs from the private sector. Additionally, throughout the Employment Workshop, participants work extensively on their master job application, targeted resumes and interviewing skills, and they finish with a mock interview exercise.

DOL is pleased to report that this curriculum has been well received. Of the over 14,500 participants who most recently responded to the survey, 92 percent reported that they would use what they learned in their own transition planning and 90 percent reported that the employment workshop enhanced their confidence

in transition planning. Nonetheless, during the most recent annual curriculum review for fiscal year 2015, stakeholders identified two key shortcomings in our curriculum: too much material without enough time to cover it all, and confusing and less helpful content within the participant guide and workshop.

These identified shortcomings led DOL to redesign the Employment Workshop to promote mastery of four core competencies: developing and executing a job search plan; planning for success in a civilian work environment; creating resumes, cover letters, and other self-marketing materials; and engaging in successful interviews and networking conversations.

Stakeholder input also suggested that the Employment Workshop be modified to ensure the material is relevant for transitioning servicemembers of all grades. To accomplish this, DOL is including a range of model resumes, cover letters, and scenarios for the mock networking conversation and interview exercises.

Throughout the Employment Workshop, instructors discuss all of the Department's relevant employment services. All veterans receive priority of service in DOL-funded employment and training programs. Most of the department-wide programs and services are available through the nationwide network of nearly 2,500 American Job Centers. The Job Centers serve as the cornerstone for the Nation's workforce investment system and provide a range of services locally, including counseling, resume-writing workshops, job skill assessments, occupational and on-the-job training, and job placement services.

If a servicemember is assessed as not meeting Career Readiness Standards during their Capstone event, their commander can facilitate a warm handover of the servicemember to the public workforce system for a review of the employment services available through Job Centers and to facilitate access to appropriate services.

In addition to the classroom setting and job counseling at American Job Centers, VETS focuses on other aspects of transition, such as licensing and credentialing pathways for veterans. Through a contract with the National Governors Association (NGA), the Department explored accelerated career pathways for servicemembers and veterans in selected high-demand civilian occupations. DOL, with the support of NGA, will share the best practices identified through the demonstration project in a final report that will include a blueprint for other States to follow.

DOL also works to provide employment services to veterans and transitioning servicemembers with the VA through the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program. Working with the VA, DOL personnel around the country as well as our State and local workforce agency partners strive to ensure that DOL's programs are made available to provide needed assistance to veterans and transitioning servicemembers with disabilities.

The Department looks forward to working with the Committee to ensure that our separating servicemembers have the resources and training they need to successfully transition to the civilian workforce.

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, this concludes my oral statement. Thank you for the opportunity to be part of this hearing. I welcome your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Gerton follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF CURTIS L. COY, DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION (VBA), U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and other Members of the Committee, We appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the current status of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Veterans Economic Communities Initiative (VECI). Accompanying me today is Ms. Rosye Cloud, Senior Advisor for Veteran Employment.

BACKGROUND

It is critical that today's Servicemembers are appropriately and adequately prepared to transition to civilian life and seek a meaningful and productive post-military career. In November 2011, Congress passed and the President signed the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (VOW Act), which included steps to improve TAP for Servicemembers. Among other things, the VOW Act made participation in TAP mandatory for all Servicemembers (except in certain limited circumstances). Mandatory components of TAP now include pre-separation counseling, two VA benefits briefings, and a Department of Labor (DOL) employment workshop. Under the auspices of a memorandum of understanding executed in 2014, VA, DOL, Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Homeland Security, Department of Education (ED), Small Business Administration (SBA), U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and other stakeholders coordinated on the implementation of the redesigned TAP to strengthen and expand information, counseling, and support to transitioning Servicemembers. Inter-agency cooperation is at all levels of the Performance Reporting and Management strategy. VA currently co-chairs the Executive Council (EC) and the Senior Steering Group (SSG). The EC meets on a quarterly basis to provide strategic guidance and discuss recommendations or concerns raised by the SSG. The SSG meets monthly, and the working groups meet as necessary.

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IMPLEMENTATION OF VA TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

In order to provide resources and expertise to develop and implement VA's portion of TAP worldwide, a contract vehicle was put in place where more than 300 VA benefits advisors were deployed to provide transition support at more than 300 military installations. As a testament to VA's commitment to Veteran employment, our current network of contract VA benefits advisors is comprised of over 86 percent Veterans and 11 percent military spouses. Notably, there is a large representation of Women Veterans in our cadre of benefits advisors (approximately 30 percent), which is almost double their representation in the Veteran population. The strong acumen Veterans and family members bring to the table is expected to be crucial as we work to increase warm handovers across agencies.

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MEASURING THE QUALITY OF BRIEFINGS

The interagency TAP evaluation strategy is a year-round process that involves collaboration among all stakeholders, culminating in annual reviews of the TAP curriculum, evaluation methods, and processes. Interagency performance measures are reported monthly on a staggered schedule to the SSG, and interagency staff assistance visits are conducted throughout the year and briefed to the EC quarterly.

In addition to the interagency TAP evaluation strategy, VA is aggressively implementing a comprehensive quality assurance (QA) program to ensure the TAP curriculum and the performance of VA benefits advisors meet the highest standards. The QA program sets a framework for continuous monitoring that includes oversight visits conducted by VA to ensure evaluation of all activities carried out in support of TAP. In FY 2015, VA and its contractors conducted 145 QA visits at 89 sites. Of these 145 QA visits, contractors performed 91 evaluations and VA conducted the other 54. In order to improve the quality assurance program for VA delivery of TAP, VA is working multiple acquisitions in FY 2016. The work will be completed through two contracts to separate vendors: one for transition, employment, and economic impact, and the other to provide independent verification and validation, as well as performance management.

VA benefits advisors complete a rigorous training program before being placed on the briefing rotation. Through a "Train the Trainer" system, master trainers provide expertise, training, oversight, and assistance to new VA benefits advisors. VA Benefits I and II training consists of pre-requisite study of content knowledge and 80 hours of classroom-based instruction. VA benefits advisors are required to demonstrate their proficiency of the materials and delivery of briefings. To assess VA benefits advisors' performance, VA developed an evaluation rubric that measures proficiency, knowledge of content, facilitation and platform skills, professionalism, and classroom preparation. Additionally, the CTTT training is highly interactive and consists of 120 hours of content study and practice.

DOD currently collects feedback from Servicemembers through the interagency Transition GPS participant assessment. This assessment collects demographic data and includes questions assessing the quality of the course curriculum, course materials, facilitators, and facilities. Participants also answer questions for VA to gauge their intent to use the information learned, confidence derived from the modules/tracks, and self-assessed knowledge gain. In the Transition GPS participant assessments for the first and second quarters of FY 2015, several VA benefits advisors were personally praised for their efforts.

VA is listening to Servicemembers' needs and responding to feedback. Through Transition GPS participant assessment feedback, quality assurance visits, and direct feedback from our trainers, VA has an agile curriculum improvement process that allows us to make immediate and on-going enhancements to the Benefits I, Benefits II, and CTTT curricula and delivery.

THE VETERANS EMPLOYMENT CENTER™ (VEC)

VA, DOL, DOD, ED, SBA, and OPM collaborated to design, develop, and incorporate features of existing online employment tools into the VEC™. The VEC™ consolidates several job assistance tool sites, bringing together real job opportunities with technology to translate military skills into plain language and allow users to build an online profile that can be shared in real time with employers who have made a public commitment to hire Veterans. The VEC™ platform is not tied to any vendor, commercial entity, or service, but endeavors to integrate tools, resources, and programs from across Federal agencies and vetted public-private partnerships, at no cost to Federal agencies, employers, Veterans, military, or their families.

The site now averages over 1.2 million page views each month. Employers have made publicly displayed commitments to hire more than 740,000 individuals from the military community. These numbers reflect the national commitment by small, medium, and large employers across America. VA is continuing to work with its partner agencies and Veterans to identify ways to best use these tools and technologies.

VETERANS ECONOMIC COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE (VECI)

To complement the goals of TAP and as part of Secretary McDonald's *MyVA* initiative, VA launched the Veterans Economic Communities Initiative or VECI in May 2015. VECI's goal is to promote local collaboration, dialog, and partnerships among organizations that serve transitioning Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families.

Economic liaisons in each VECI community collaborate and partner with government leaders, businesses, policy experts, educational institutions, and nonprofit organizations to build an integrated network of support and resources and maximize impact to improve outcomes for Veterans and their families.

Although VECI is for Veterans of all eras, the program places emphasis on Post-9/11 transitioning Servicemembers. It is designed to connect economic liaisons into the benefits advisor network across the country. Additionally, economic liaisons work closely with their counterparts across agencies, including DOL, SBA, and

DOD, to coordinate services with a unified approach to supporting Veterans and their families.

On September 30, 2015, VA announced expansion to 25 new VECI communities in early 2016, bringing the total to 50 U.S. metropolitan statistical areas. VECI communities were selected based on transitioning Servicemember and Post-9/11 Veteran populations, unemployment rates, employment opportunities and job growth, and education spending. The response to our VECI campaign from our Nation's businesses has been encouraging, and in many cases enthusiastic.

The VECI campaign launched two new innovative education initiatives for transitioning Servicemembers and Veterans: Learning Hubs and Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) pilots.

VA launched five Learning Hub pilots across the country in partnership with Coursera, the American Red Cross, and The Mission Continues, to offer no-cost learning opportunities to transitioning Servicemembers and Veterans. VA Learning Hubs offer the opportunity to learn online and in the classroom, listen to presentations from local subject matter experts, and network with leaders in the community. Upon successful completion of the program, participants may elect to receive one free verified certificate issued by Coursera. VA Learning Hubs will expand to 28 communities total this calendar year.

VA also launched an ALP pilot this summer, with seven courses focusing on building skills and certifications needed to begin or advance in careers in information technology (IT), as part of the President's TechHire initiative. ALPs are typically completed in fewer than six months; provide opportunities to learn online, in the classroom, or in a blended format; and lead to industry-recognized certifications. Under an innovative pay for success concept, the ALP pilots incentivize and compensate training providers based on graduation and career-placement rates. We are testing this model to determine if it could be used more broadly to train Veterans in other industries and sectors. Launched in August 2015, VA received more than 1,000 applications on the first day and approximately 3,500 applications in the first week.

As an important component of the VECI campaign, VA held its inaugural Policy Academy from September 29–30 in Orange County, California. The event had more than 450 registrants. Policy Academies serve as a forum for local, regional, and national partners to engage in dialog about Veteran economic issues; receive interactive training on national philanthropic and fact-based best practices; and hear from leaders in the field about emerging data, trends, and opportunities.

To measure the success of VECI, VA will leverage key strategies for improving economic outcomes. These include Veteran-focused community engagement activities, employment interest via the VECI™, and review of education outcomes such as VA Learning Hubs and programs that leverage the GI Bill®.

Each of these strategies helps VA to measure its progress toward achieving national goals for Veteran employment and education attainment, and as each VECI matures, will evolve into more granular core performance metrics.

Since its national launch in May, the VECI campaign has already placed economic liaisons in 25 communities across the country. Liaisons are deeply rooted in their local networks and based out of locations in the community. VA is aggressively pursuing additional innovative opportunities to increase public and private partnerships in communities via no-cost partnerships. VECI has also enabled VA to work with Veteran-focused foundations to identify and increase opportunities to ease reintegration for Veterans and their families nationally.

CONCLUSION

VA continues to work with partner agencies to assist with the transition of Servicemembers from military to civilian life. TAP is designed to give Servicemembers and their families an opportunity to learn more about the benefits they have earned, identify benefits that fit their individual needs, and equip them with a plan for success outside of the military.

VA fully supports the efforts of the Administration and Congress to ensure transitioning Servicemembers are ready for civilian life upon separation from the military and achieve strong economic outcomes, and we will continue to implement initiatives to achieve this goal.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other Members of the Committee may have.

Chairman ISAKSON. Well, thank you for your testimony and thank you again for being here today.

In the second panel, The Coca-Cola Company and Starbucks are going to testify, and they are two good corporate examples of many corporations in America that are going out of their way to provide access to quality jobs for our veterans. Home Depot is another. Four out of the last 5 years has won the VA's award in terms of its employment of returning veterans.

In Coca-Cola's testimony—I want to read this question so I get it right—it suggests that in their written testimony the use of various contractors to carry out the TAP program causes issues for veteran-friendly companies wishing to develop relationships with contractors, in part because there is no central point of contact for a national company. Similarly, Coca-Cola's testimony reflects that without a central point of contact, they may have to contact each TAP office individually to provide them with a job listing.

Do you have any suggestions as to how we might address this problem? And I will ask all of you to comment on it, if you will, starting with Ms. Kelly.

Ms. KELLY. The TAP at the installations are staffed by Federal employees for the most part, and so I am not sure that I understand the disconnect between contracted staff and relationships with private employers. I am not sure I understand that.

Chairman ISAKSON. I think the question suggests—and the Coca-Cola person can certainly correct me if I am wrong here, but there is not a central point of contact for a national company to go to get all the TAP offices without going to each one of them individually. Is that correct? I am getting a lot of nodding heads back there.

Ms. KELLY. Yes, OK. Actually, the central point of contact within DOD would be the Transition to Veterans Program Office. We actually have a function, public and private engagement. But I would say that the Secretary of Defense, Secretary Hagel at the time, provided very detailed guidance to the service Secretaries and to the chiefs as well as to the Chairman to give them guidance about bringing non-Federal entities onto the installations, gave them very detailed guidance, and encouraged them very strongly to allow those non-Federal entities onto the installations. He even talked about space, equipment, et cetera. He sent a similar memo to those same folks in reference to veterans service organizations and military service organizations.

There has been a strong push by DOD leadership to allow those entities access to the installations, but it rests with those installation commanders, those garrison commanders, as to who they allow onto their installations. We honor their judgment in reference to security issues as well as what are the services that their particular populations on their installations need. Those vary across the board.

At the most senior leader level of DOD, that guidance was issued, but the final decisions do rest with the installation commanders.

At our level, we have established some very strong—we have a Memorandum of Understanding with the Chamber of Commerce Hiring Our Heroes, and we are working with other private entities in reference to SkillBridge to bring training to the installations. So, we would serve—TVPO serves as that first entry point to help anyone navigate through some of those issues.

Chairman ISAKSON. Is there a central contact where a national company like Coca-Cola or Pepsi-Cola or Home Depot or Starbucks can make one call and the information gets disseminated out to all the TAP offices?

Ms. KELLY. Yes, that would be my office. We would send that out to the services, which we do on a regular basis.

Chairman ISAKSON. I hope you will get with the Coke people who are here today so you all can clear up that difference so we make sure that—

Ms. KELLY. I would be happy to do that.

Chairman ISAKSON. Mr. Coy, do you have any comment?

Mr. COY. Just a couple of things to add, Senator. We would agree with Dr. Kelly that a lot of this, in terms of installations and getting on installations, goes through her office and the services themselves, recognizing—I think one of the comments in terms of contractors, unless I am mistaken, is our benefits advisors, the people that deliver the TAP briefings for VA benefits, are, in fact, contractors. And I do not know if that is what they are referring to. But they are there to deliver the benefits briefings.

The central point probably as far as the VA goes, I would suggest there are two things that are there. One is—or three, actually. One is our central office, and we certainly work with Dr. Kelly and Secretary Gerton a lot to make sure that we are all on the same page with some of these things. And we have the ability to get information out to all of our benefits advisors pretty readily and easily.

We also have the Veterans Employment Center, which is where employers can make commitments, public commitments, to hiring veterans and then track that commitment in terms of how many veterans they hire and placing their company and name onto the Veterans Employment Center.

Finally, as I mentioned briefly in my opening remarks, we have the Veterans Economic Communities Initiative, which is in part to help do this exact same thing—in other words, coalesce local businesses and companies as well as educators, State and local governments, and the like to begin that collaboration and make sure that our veterans in those communities are well served.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you. My time is up. I will go to Senator Blumenthal.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Kelly, as I mentioned, I think that there needs to be a particularly energetic focus on our women veterans. Over 280,000 women have served in the post-9/11 era, and women constitute about 20 percent of the new recruits going into our military. So, by 2020, about 10 percent of all our veterans will be women. I would like to know what actions the Department of Defense is taking to ensure that the Transition Assurance Program and other programs are taking into account the unique needs of women, whether you think, in fact, there are unique needs of women transitioning into civilian life and providing that kind of support for them that they need.

Ms. KELLY. We talked about this need extensively when we were conducting the task force, the Veterans Employment Initiative Task Force, with all of the Federal partners here as well as the service representatives. We started to go down that road of looking

at specific populations and specific issues, and we were cautioned and asked not to do that by the female servicemembers, the women servicemembers, as well as veterans. And their request to us was to “please do not connote us as having separate issues aside from our male counterparts. We are making headway in the military population and bringing our voices to bear in that military organization. Please do not connote that we have special issues that separate us from our male counterparts.”

We honored that because we heard that several times, in fact, rather emotionally at a couple of points. But we certainly understand that there are some skills that as women move into the workforce, particularly negotiating salaries, negotiating compensation packages, there may be some issues there. We are relying upon our partners with DOL to highlight those very same issues but in the DOL Employment Workshop as a whole.

We are not calling out that population and special issues. We do this as a military population across the board and allow—

Senator BLUMENTHAL. I understand that point. I am just—and I apologize for interrupting, but I get your point. I fully understand that women want to be treated equally and viewed as equal partners, both in the military and transitioning out of it. The hard fact is that very often there is discrimination based on a variety of factors. One of them is gender. Some of us feel, as was mentioned during our last meeting, that, in fact, there may be discrimination against veterans generally in the workplace by some employers. I am going to be advocating a measure, as I did last session, that forbids such discrimination. In terms of assisting women when they face such discrimination, what is the Department of Defense or the VA doing?

Ms. KELLY. I get I need some clarification on discrimination in what aspect, sir.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Well, the preconceptions or biases or gender-based stereotypes that may exist among some employers—and the military is trying to eradicate them within its ranks—may stymie women in achieving that kind of opportunity. The Department of Defense, it seems to me, can help prepare them and help eliminate that kind of discrimination if it exists.

Ms. KELLY. Well, certainly as we are moving them into transition and helping them prepare for transition, we are certainly looking across the scope in multiple areas, from employment to the use of their VA benefits to access to VA benefits to talking to them about how to apply their Military Occupational Specialties (MOSs) to that civilian labor market, helping them explore that civilian labor market. There are pieces of transition preparation that we are helping them address and giving them instruction, but, again, we are doing that across the board and not specifically identifying specific skills for women military members or male military members.

I do not know if my partners would like to expand in their curriculums.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Mr. Coy?

Mr. COY. I will just add one or two key points.

First, VA has a program office, and we would be happy to talk a little bit about that. But a couple of the other things that we have done just most recently is during our curriculum update this

past summer, we upgraded our curriculum, updated it to include specific issues that women face as well. Our Benefits I and II briefs are reflective of those changes, as well our benefits advisors. As I mentioned, we have over 300 benefits advisors; 86 percent of our benefits advisors are veterans, and of those veterans, 30 percent of them are women. We want to make sure that we have women at the forefront who are women veterans who can see and understand those particular issues.

The last thing I would probably mention is we have a couple of public-private partnerships that reflects very specifically on women. One is for women with children who are at risk of homelessness, and we are working with an organization that can help that. We are also working with the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors for those folks and helping them identify Fry Scholarships for the children and spouses of servicemembers who have died in the line of duty.

I do not want to steal any time from Secretary Gerton. She had probably a few things as well.

Ms. GERTON. I hope I have a minute.

Chairman ISAKSON. Just a minute.

Ms. GERTON. As a female veteran myself, I can appreciate your interest in this topic. DOL VETS has a number of programs focused on women veterans and employment. We also have a women veterans program office within our agency that focuses on the messaging an outreach to women veterans and women veterans support organizations. Our Federal Advisory Committee over the last 2 years has had us focus specifically on the information needs for the female veteran community, and we are looking specifically at focused content in the DOL Employment Workshop.

Our Chief Evaluator's Office recently completed a study that looked at the value of services provided through the Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG) program and discovered with significant results that women who participated—women veterans who used the JVSG services have a faster time to first service and a smaller gender wage gap than women who do not take advantage of those services. We also—

Senator BLUMENTHAL. The Chairman is going to reprimand me if I do not ask you to please, if you would, submit these responses in writing because I do not want to take up time from my colleagues, and include any statistics that you may have on different unemployment rates among women veterans compared to men. Again, I apologize for interrupting, but I want to give my colleagues a chance to pursue their questions.

[The information referred to follows:]

RESPONSE TO REQUEST ARISING DURING THE HEARING BY HON. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL TO TERESA GERTON, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

Response. Male and female veteran populations are too demographically different for practical comparisons of unemployment rates. Compared to the male veteran population, the women veteran population is younger, more racially and ethnically diverse, and more highly educated. Women veterans are more likely than male veterans to be in the civilian workforce at all, and to be in the subpopulations that have higher unemployment rates, such as veterans currently enrolled in school, veterans under 35 years old, and veterans who served in Gulf War II. While women veterans often experience the same transition challenges as male veterans, they are

otherwise very similar to women non-veterans in the workforce. Differences in the annual average unemployment rates for all women veterans and all women non-veterans were not statistically significant in 2013 or 2014. Many of the employment challenges women veterans face also affect the larger working women population.

In Program Year (PY) 2014 (July 1, 2014 through June 30, 2015), 14% of the veterans served through JVSG were women, an increase from 13% in PY 2013. A recent independent data analysis commissioned by the Department's Chief Evaluation Office found that JVSG services are associated with better outcomes, specifically for women veterans. Every woman veteran has different experiences and needs, and JVSG services are responsive to the diverse needs of each veteran. Women veterans who utilize these services experience higher entered employment rates and higher wages than their non-veteran female peers. The gender wage gap is also considerably smaller for women veterans served by JVSG than it is for non-veteran women, according to DOL research. It is critical that each woman veteran struggling with unemployment come to an American Job Center where she will meet one-on-one with a workforce development professional and receive personalized assistance, guidance, and support.

While the needs of women veterans are considered more today than ever before in history, inconsistencies in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) may be inhibiting the Federal Governments' full capacity to serve them. One example of such an inconsistency is the definition of homelessness in 38 U.S.C. versus 42 U.S.C. On May 20, 2009, President Obama signed the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009, which amended the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act with substantial changes, including section 103(b) (42 U.S.C. 11302(b)):

“Domestic Violence and Other Dangerous or Life-Threatening Conditions.— Notwithstanding any other provision of this section, the Secretary shall consider to be homeless any individual or family who is fleeing, or is attempting to flee, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions in the individual's or family's current housing situation, including where the health and safety of children are jeopardized, and who have no other residence and lack the resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing.”

This change, which disproportionately impacts women, was not included in 38 U.S.C. for Veteran's Benefits, enacted March 31, 2011. To correct this VETS has implemented policy to include 42 U.S.C. 11302(b) in the definition of homelessness for VETS' programs. Veterans fleeing domestic violence are now considered to be homeless for the purpose of qualifying for JVSG intensive employment services. According to a recent Department of Labor (DOL) Chief Evaluation Office study, women veterans who utilized Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG) services experienced higher entered employment and retention rates, higher wages, and smaller gender wage gap as compared to women non-veterans utilizing comparable services.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you.

Chairman ISAKSON. I thank the Ranking Member, and I think the more concise you can be in your answers, the more helpful it will be for us to get more questions from our Members.

Senator Rounds.

HON. MIKE ROUNDS, U.S. SENATOR FROM SOUTH DAKOTA

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Recognizing that this is an interagency project and an interagency operation, I am just curious, when it comes time to talk about—as I understand it, it is a 5-day review that is provided, and there are a number of items that you go over with an individual before they leave the service. How much time is actually spent during that time period on the health benefits and the differences between benefits as being active versus post-active duty? Could you share with me how much time and what is gone over during that time period?

Mr. COY. I will be happy to jump on that, and then Ms. Cloud can elaborate. Our Benefits II briefing is principally about health

care and health care benefits that they have earned and going through for veterans what exactly they are entitled to or not.

Anything else to add?

Ms. CLOUD. I think what we have focused on specifically is not only talking about their eligibility at that point in time, but ensuring that they have got the resources online and they are familiar where they can follow up, especially from a health care eligibility perspective. We have also bolstered our female veteran resources as well to make sure that those issues are also addressed and a warm handover to the Center for Women Veterans referral page as well to make sure that those opportunities are also made available.

Senator ROUNDS. Recognizing that there is a difference between the benefits provided for active duty versus post-active duty, is there any explanation made or a heads up given in terms of the differences in the expectations for those individuals leaving full-time service?

Ms. CLOUD. We focused very keenly in our revision of this last curriculum to discuss what are the decisions that need to be made before transition, whether it is transferability of GI bill benefits, whether it is ensuring that a health assessment is conducted in a timely manner, service-connected disabled benefits submission. We have bolstered that information and have been very fortunate to get to the left of transition with the Military Life Cycle support of the services.

We have also customized all of our training to the Guard and Reserve because, quite frankly, there is a tremendous amount of translation that does not necessarily go hand in glove to the Guard and Reserve community, and so we have completely revitalize Benefits I and II in our technical training track to meet the needs of the Guard and Reserve community.

Senator ROUNDS. So, there is a separate track for Guard and Reserve versus “regular” armed services, if I could use that term.

Ms. CLOUD. Correct. It is streamlined a little bit more, but it is primarily making sure that all the benefits we are discussing to the Guard and Reserve are relevant to them, and it was with their input that we revised that.

Senator ROUNDS. In a lot of cases, when an individual leaves full-time service, they are not only—they are leaving the location as well in many cases, and they are going to another part of the country, a different State. Is there any discussion about transitioning into different States and the different types of benefits that might be available from State to State or where to go to get information State to State?

Ms. CLOUD. I would defer to the Department of Labor who does, I think, a very good job of doing that. But in our Veterans Employment Center, we do highlight that their local is national or global and where they can find those resources, and then we make sure that they are familiar with the American Jobs Center opportunity.

Ms. GERTON. That is exactly one of the key points that we cover in the Employment Workshop, not only accessing employment support where they are in their military assignment, near that installation, but also connecting them to the Job Center that is nearest where they plan to relocate and can actually pass them across

those centers as they transition to make sure that there is no drop in support for their employment counseling and services.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you. Yes, sir?

Mr. COY. I would just add one other thing. We also have our Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) community, and what IDES does is put our counselors and VA employees on military bases such that when a servicemember is transitioning out and has a physical issue, that we identify that early on and whether or not it is in our voc rehab program or in our disability claims program. We also have that, just very briefly.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you.

Ms. KELLY. If I might add, in our effort to push transition preparation across the Military Life Cycle, at the first permanent duty station every servicemember now registers in VA's eBenefits, so they are already familiar with that web site and start to familiarize themselves with those benefits.

The other piece that I think you would be interested in is that one of the Career Readiness Standards is that every servicemember actually has a conversation with the Reserve recruiter, the Guard recruiter, and talks about those very things that you were discussing.

Senator ROUNDS. Very good. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ISAKSON. Senator Tester.

HON. JON TESTER, U.S. SENATOR FROM MONTANA

Senator TESTER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for having this hearing.

The first question is for you, Dr. Kelly. What percentage of servicemen go through the TAP program?

Ms. KELLY. The VOW compliance—

Senator TESTER. No, no, no. What percentage of military folks go through—if you do not know, you can get back to me.

Ms. KELLY. No; I do know.

Senator TESTER. OK. Then tell me.

Ms. KELLY. But I am just trying to clarify for you. The TAP program was mandated by the VOW Act, so we capture that data—

Senator TESTER. OK. Stop. Just stop. I am not—I love you, but—

Ms. KELLY. 95 percent.

Senator TESTER [continuing]. I have done the same thing you are doing.

Ms. KELLY. 95 percent of the eligible service—

Senator TESTER. OK. Thank you very much. Are they more prepared today than they were 10 years ago for the transition?

Ms. KELLY. Absolutely.

Senator TESTER. They are more prepared.

Ms. KELLY. They are, sir.

Senator TESTER. Where would you say the gaps are right now in the TAP program?

Ms. KELLY. Where the gaps are I think goes back to some of the discussions that were highlighted before. We have preparation in place. We have an evaluation strategy. We have pieces in place.

But the last piece that is still to be done is to institutionalize the pipeline into the national work.

Senator TESTER. OK.

Ms. KELLY. I think all of us are working on that.

Senator TESTER. OK. This is for your, Dr. Kelly and Mr. Coy. What is being done to bring families in the process to educate—now, what I am talking about specifically is things like TBI, PTSD, or you have issues of veterans coming out. What is being done to bring the families into the program? Who wants to start? Go ahead.

Mr. COY. I will start very quickly. We invite spouses into the benefits briefing to make sure that the spouses are also fully aware of those kinds of things as well.

Senator TESTER. And what kind of percentage participation are you getting?

Mr. COY. Right now—

Senator TESTER. With the spouses, I am talking about.

Mr. COY. How many spouses comes?

Senator TESTER. Showing up.

Mr. COY. We pretty much collect data with respect to the total number of people that are in the classroom and not so much who is a spouse and who is not.

Senator TESTER. OK.

Ms. KELLY. The spouse issue was one of the compelling reasons why we put the entire curriculum on the DOL web site as well as VA web site and on Joint Knowledge Online (JKO).

Senator TESTER. OK, good.

Ms. KELLY. We wanted them to have access to that.

Senator TESTER. I think it is absolutely critical that the spouses be brought in. I do not need to tell you the statistics on PTSD.

Ms. Gerton, you talked about 3.6 percent unemployment, which is outstanding. Do you have it split down by men and women?

Ms. GERTON. Yes, sir, I do. For women, it was 4.5 percent for all age groups compared to 3.5 percent for men. So, the total veteran population over the age of 18 was 3.6 percent.

Senator TESTER. OK. There is a percent difference, and some would say that is significant, some would say it is not. Have you checked to see why that is?

Ms. GERTON. Sir, we have spent a lot of time looking at this, and we believe that the most appropriate comparison for women veterans is actually to women non-veterans. They are more like their female non-veteran contemporaries than they are their male veteran population. The demographics of the group is that women veterans tend to be younger, more diverse, more likely to enroll in higher education. The male veteran population tends to skew very old, and so the most appropriate comparison for women veterans and how they behave relative to employment over their life cycle is to women non-veterans. And for the last 2 years, there has been no significant difference in the employment rates between those two groups.

Senator TESTER. OK. I want to turn to electronic medical records. This has been something we have talked about since I got here 9 years ago, so this is for Mr. Coy and Ms. Kelly. Where are we at on electronic health records and the transition between DOD and VA?

Ms. KELLY. Well, the transfer of the electronic health records from active duty into veteran status is part of the transition process. It is not part of the actual Transition Assistance Program.

Senator TESTER. OK.

Ms. KELLY. I will bring that to Health Affairs.

Senator TESTER. OK. Maybe you cannot answer this, but is there a seamless transition between the DOD to the VA with electronic health care records now?

Ms. KELLY. Mr. Coy?

Mr. COY. I am not versed in being able to do that. I have anecdotal data, but I would rather get back to you in writing, if I could.

Senator TESTER. I was just going to say, if you could get back to me with that, that would be great.

[The information referred to follows:]

RESPONSE TO REQUEST ARISING DURING THE HEARING BY HON. JON TESTER TO U.S.
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS PANEL

Response. VA is committed to improving the Veteran experience through health data interoperability with DOD. On April 8, 2016, VA certified to the Congress, along with DOD, that we have become fully interoperable, eight months ahead of the 2014 NDAA (713(b)(1)) requirement, which mandated VA/DOD Interoperability by December 31, 2016. Certification of VA and DOD interoperability documents the seamless integration of DOD and VA electronic health record data, achieving improved visibility of health status for Veterans, Servicemembers, and their dependents. Currently, the Joint Legacy Viewer (JLV) provides an integrated read-only display of VA, DOD, and private sector health data for both Departments in near real time, and is enhancing the experience for patients and frontline health care teams. Finally, it is important to note that while health data interoperability is important, it is only one aspect of having a full data profile to streamline and unify the Veteran experience.

Senator TESTER. One last question. American Indians serve in the armed services in a greater number than any other minority. Are there any efforts specifically to cater to that population when it comes to transition from DOD to VA?

Ms. KELLY. Not on the DOD side.

Senator TESTER. OK.

Mr. COY. Within VA we have an active program to help with tribal entities across the board. In our VA home loan program, for example, we have been growing our memorandums of understanding with tribal leaders. As you can well imagine, there are some unique circumstances with being on reservations and how to enter into the VA home loan program, and we are reaching out to do those kinds of things.

Senator TESTER. OK. And from a health care standpoint, do you do anything?

Mr. COY. I would have to get back to you on that. In terms of health care or—

Senator TESTER. In terms of health care and access for Native Americans.

Mr. COY. I would be happy to get back to you on that.

Senator TESTER. Actually, the point is more as coming out of the military, having that conversation.

[The information referred to follows:]

RESPONSE TO REQUEST ARISING DURING THE HEARING BY HON. JON TESTER TO U.S.
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS PANEL

Response. In FY 2015, VA networks and facilities participated in over 400 outreach events and efforts focused on American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Veterans across the country. These efforts impacted an estimated total of 34,000 AI/AN Veterans, and encouraged them, including the recently discharged, to access VA benefits and services. Examples include outreach “Stand Downs” where local VA facilities provide temporary targeted enrollment to rural communities, and VA participation in tribal gatherings.

Additionally, the Health Equity Environmental Scan conducted by the VHA Office of Health Equity (OHE) yielded 20 projects that specifically impacted AI/AN Veterans. OHE conducted a VHA-wide environmental scan focused on health equity, health disparities, and/or vulnerable Veteran populations. The purpose of the Health Equity Environmental Scan was to identify all health equity related programs, pilots, quality improvement initiatives, research protocols and/or resource materials underway at the VHA in 2015 or completed in the last year. 118 VAMCs and 26 VHACO program offices participated. Additionally, 11 VISNs had VISN-wide projects addressing health equity, disparities, and/or vulnerable populations. Among these, 20 projects specifically impacted Native American Veterans.

Please see the following list for more details.



Veterans Health
Administration
Office of Health Equity

The Office of Health Equity (OHE) conducted a VHA-wide environmental scan focused on health equity, health disparities, and/or vulnerable Veteran populations. The purpose of the Health Equity Environmental Scan was to identify all health equity related programs, pilots, quality improvement initiatives, research protocols and/or resource materials underway at the VHA in 2015 or completed in the last year. 118 VAMCs and 26 VHACO program offices participated. Additionally, 11 VISNs had VISN-wide projects addressing health equity, disparities, and/or vulnerable populations. **Among these, there were 20 projects that specifically impacted Native American tribal and Veterans - shown below.** For more details on the results of the scan visit the OHE Intranet - [VHA Health Equity Environmental Scan 2015](#)

1.Title	20150113112704-Black Hills HCS, SD HS and FM Campus
Form Name	20,150,113,112,704
Organization Type	Facility
VISN number	23
Facility Name	Black Hills HCS, SD HS and FM Campus
Station Number	568
Activities	True
Project Type	Program Initiative
Vulnerable Population	Socio-economic status; Race or Ethnicity
HEAP Area	Health System & Life Experience
Description	- Outreach project for enrollment of underserved Native American Veterans residing on four highly rural South Dakota reservations - Involves multiple outreach events at widely dispersed sites - Done in collaboration with other local, state and federal agencies
Veteran Impact	100
2.Title	20150603135727-Oklahoma City, OK
Form Name	20,150,603,135,727
Organization Type	Facility
VISN Number	16
Facility Name	Oklahoma City, OK
Station Number	635



**Veterans Health
Administration**
Office of Health Equity

Activities True
 Project Type Resource Material
 Vulnerable Population Race or Ethnicity
 HEAP Area Awareness
 Description Native American Nurse Navigator collaborates with Indian Health Service, Tribes and other organizations to improve access to health care for Native American Veterans, and also serves as case manager for NA Veterans. Collaborative efforts for FY15 include outreaches to health care facilities at benefit/enrollment events, health fairs, powwows, town halls, and conferences.
 Veteran Impact 5,000

3.Title 20150603135727-Oklahoma City, OK
 Form Name 20,150,603,135,727
 Organization Type Facility
 VISN Number 16
 Facility Name Oklahoma City, OK
 Station Number 635
 Activities True
 Project Type Research Project
 Vulnerable Population Race or Ethnicity
 HEAP Area Cultural & Linguistic Competency
 Description "Specialty Mental Health Needs Assessment for Native American Veterans" IRB#5239. One-year project to collect needs assessment data for specialty mental health using interview and focus group methodology. The product evaluation plan will consist of two phases: Phase I will consist of an expert review by key stakeholder; Phase II will include mental health in-services at OKC VAMC for all disciplines who address mental health issues with Native American Veterans.
 Veteran Impact 5,000

4.Title 20150603122116-Tucson, AZ
 Form Name 20,150,603,122,116
 Organization Type Facility
 VISN Number 18
 Facility Name Tucson, AZ
 Station Number 678
 Activities True



**Veterans Health
Administration**
Office of Health Equity

Project Type Resource Material
 Vulnerable Population Race or Ethnicity
 HEAP Area Awareness
 Description Gathering of American Indian Veterans is an annual outreach event that provides awareness, assistance, and outreach services regarding eligibility for VA benefits to Native American veterans and/or their families.
 Veteran Impact 300

5.Title 20150610134827-Ann Arbor, MI
 Form Name 20,150,610,134,827
 Organization Type Facility
 VISN Number 11
 Facility Name Ann Arbor, MI
 Station Number 506
 Activities True
 Project Type Program Initiative
 Vulnerable Population Race or Ethnicity
 HEAP Area Awareness
 Description Brighton Pow Wow for Native American Veterans
 Veteran Impact 100

6.Title 20150602095006-VA Hudson Valley HCS, NY
 Form Name 20,150,602,095,006
 Organization Type Facility
 VISN Number 3
 Facility Name VA Hudson Valley HCS, NY
 Station Number 620
 Activities True
 Project Type Program Initiative
 Vulnerable Population Race or Ethnicity
 HEAP Area Data, Research & Evaluation
 Description VA Hudson Valley Health Care System participates in a quarterly Native Veteran Initiative Inventory which addresses: Services & Benefits, Coordination of Care, Health Information Technology, Implementation of New Technologies, System



**Veterans Health
Administration**
Office of Health Equity

Level Agreements, Sharing of Process, Programs & Services, Payment & Reimbursement, Cultural Competency & Awareness, Training and Recruitment and Emergency & Disaster Preparedness for Native American/Alaska Indian Veteran in the Hudson Valley, New York.

Veteran Impact 263

7.Title 20150512101829-San Diego, CA
 Form Name 20,150,512,101,829
 Organization Type Facility
 VISN Number 22
 Facility Name San Diego, CA
 Station Number 664
 Activities True
 Project Type Program Initiative
 Vulnerable Population Race or Ethnicity
 HEAP Area Cultural & Linguistic Competency
 Description We are sustaining a partnership with Native American Tribal Health Clinics in San Diego County
 Veteran Impact 500

8.Title 20150603121419-Tucson, AZ
 Form Name 20,150,603,121,419
 Organization Type Facility
 VISN Number 18
 Facility Name Tucson, AZ
 Station Number 678
 Activities True
 Project Type Resource Material
 Vulnerable Population Geography; Race or Ethnicity
 HEAP Area Awareness
 Description Provide awareness, assistance, and outreach services regarding eligibility for VA benefits to Native American veterans and/or their families.
 Veteran Impact 300

9.Title 20150604133738-Tucson, AZ



**Veterans Health
Administration**
Office of Health Equity

Form Name 20,150,604,133,738
 Organization Type Facility
 VISN Number 18
 Facility Name Tucson, AZ
 Station Number 678
 Activities True
 Project Type Program Initiative
 Vulnerable Population Geography; Race or Ethnicity; Socio-economic status
 HEAP Area Awareness
 Description 25 Cities Initiative in partnership with the Office of the Mayor in Tucson, AZ is designed to help identify homeless Native American Veterans in the City of Tucson and impart knowledge of AI/AN culture(s).
 Veteran Impact 353

10.Title 20150603122116-Tucson, AZ
 Form Name 20,150,603,122,116
 Organization Type Facility
 VISN Number 18
 Facility Name Tucson, AZ
 Station Number 678
 Activities True
 Project Type Quality Improvement Project
 Vulnerable Population
 HEAP Area Cultural & Linguistic Competency
 Description Yearly staff retreat. The Southern Arizona VA Health Care System (SAVAHCS) Gathering of Healers program is a staff development program that empowers participants on multiple levels in order to improve care for all Veterans. It is based on a holistic Native American paradigm of spirit, mind, and body.
 Veteran Impact 20

11.Title 20150113112704-Black Hills HCS, SD HS and FM Campus
 Form Name 20,150,113,112,704
 Organization Type Facility
 VISN Number 23
 Facility Name Black Hills HCS, SD HS and FM Campus



**Veterans Health
Administration**
Office of Health Equity

Station Number	568
Activities	True
Project Type	Program Initiative
Vulnerable Population	Socio-economic status; Race or Ethnicity
HEAP Area	Health System & Life Experience
Description	- Outreach project for enrollment of underserved Native American Veterans residing on four highly rural South Dakota reservations - Involves multiple outreach events at widely dispersed sites - Done in collaboration with other local, state and federal agencies
Veteran Impact	100

12. Title	20150528145748-Muskogee, OK
Form Name	20,150,528,145,748
Organization Type	Facility
VISN Number	16
Facility Name	Muskogee, OK
Station Number	623
Activities	True
Project Type	Program Initiative
Vulnerable Population	Age; Geography; Mental Health
HEAP Area	Health System & Life Experience
Description	Have initiated a tele-psychiatry service at an highly rural Indian Health Service facility within our service area for the purpose of providing care to Native American Veterans who would otherwise would be without care, or would be required to drive up to two hours for an appointment in a VA facility. The initiative has been successful and is being expanded to a site within a Federal Recognized Indian Tribal facility.
Veteran Impact	25

13. Title	20150603135727-Oklahoma City, OK
Form Name	20,150,603,135,727
Organization Type	Facility
VISN Number	16
Facility Name	Oklahoma City, OK
Station Number	635



**Veterans Health
Administration**
Office of Health Equity

Activities	True
Project Type	Program Initiative
Vulnerable Population	Race or Ethnicity
HEAP Area	Leadership
Description	Tribal Relations Workshop was held in November 2015. Attendees included staff from OKC VA, Tribal Health Programs (THPs), Indian Health Service, and individuals from several tribes in OKC VA catchment. Quality Improvement project was formed using Lean Team format. Three workgroups were formed to address the following issues: Referral process between VA and its partners; Cultural Awareness/Customer Service; Identifying Native American Veterans at IHS and THP facilities. This project is ongoing.
Veteran I mpact	5,000
URL	
Status	Submitted
14.Title	20150529143545-Northern Arizona HCS
Form Name	20,150,529,143,545
Organization Type	Facility
VISN Number	18
Facility Name	Northern Arizona HCS
Station Number	649
Activities	True
Project Type	Program Initiative
Vulnerable Population	Geography; Age; Race or Ethnicity; Mental Health; Socio-economic status
HEAP Area	Health System & Life Experience
Description	Expands delivery of primary care/mental health services to Vets residing on the Navajo Nation (Kayenta, AZ). It expands on the unique characteristics of a VA team that is integrated within an Indian Health Service (IHS) facility. The fully integrated team has support services similar to a VA PACT team. Ancillary support services are provided by IHS and VA. A VA LCSW supports the team while others such as an IHS pharmacist, specialty services and Native American Healers provide support as needed.
Veteran Impact	200
URL	
Status	Submitted
15.Title	20150601165106-Captain James A Lovell (N. Chicago) FHCC
Form Name	20,150,601,165,106



**Veterans Health
Administration**
Office of Health Equity

Organization Type	Facility
VISN Number	12
Facility Name	Captain James A Lovell (N. Chicago) FHCC
Station Number	556
Activities	True
Project Type	Program Initiative
Vulnerable Population	Gender; Military Era
HEAP Area	Awareness
Description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LEAD Participants completed Leadership education project focusing on the Minority Veterans Program from Oct. 2014-May 19, 2015. Participants conducted outreach at a Military/Veterans Job Fair at Great Lakes Community Center and Cinco de Mayo Celebration at College of Lake County. Findings based on data and literature reviews were presented to the Director and guest Major General (RET) J. Mukoyama. Outreach conducted at two Pow Wows for Native American population. MVPC participates in quarterly public town hall meetings. • LGBT/A population specific staff awareness education conducted by Howard Brown HEALE Curriculum Education Series. • WomenHeart National Hospital Alliance Campaign initiated with MVPC and WVPM partnering to implement project at Lovell.
Veteran Impact	508
POC	Muhammad, Janice L. FHCC Lovell
URL	http://www.womenshealth.va.gov/
16. Title	20150217135716-N. California, CA
Form Name	20,150,217,135,716
Organization Type	Facility
VISN Number	21
Facility Name	N. California, CA
Station Number	612
Activities	True
Project Type	Research Project
Vulnerable Population	Gender; Geography; Other Characteristics; Mental Health; Sexual Orientation; Disability; Military Era; Race or Ethnicity; Socio-economic status
HEAP Area	Data, Research & Evaluation
Description	VA Northern California Health Care System (VANCHS) spans over 40,000 square miles and sixteen counties, ten of which are considered rural or highly rural. Approximately two thousand (2000) women Veteran enrollees reside in these rural counties. VANCHCS has 3 rural CBOCs in Yreka, Chico, and Yuba City that are between 55 and 270 miles distant from the Sacramento VA Medical Center (VAMC). There is a substantial rural women Veterans population in the VA Northern California Healthcare System. At the end of FY 12, rural and highly rural enrollees totaled 1,234 with users totaling 1,188. Compared to their urban peers, NCHCS rural women Veterans (including our rural homeless and Native American



**Veterans Health
Administration**
Office of Health Equity

women Veterans) are underserved in a number of ways. Geographic distance, lack of transportation, weather and frequency of appointments create access barriers for our women Veterans residing in these rural counties.

Rural Women Veterans also face different challenges in access VA services and community resources compared to non-rural Women Veterans. Homelessness, lack of Vocational Resources, domestic violence, lack of knowledge about VA disability benefits, job and life skill deficiencies and substance abuse are some of the issues that rural women Veterans are struggling with daily. For instance, female Veterans are 2.5 times as likely to be homeless as female non-Veterans. Female Veterans in poverty are more than 3 times as likely to be homeless as female non-Veterans in poverty. Across a range of studies, Veterans with histories of MST report more mental health problems, more physical health symptoms and conditions, and more problems readjusting after discharge.

Rural Health Women Veteran Need Assessment Project was funded by ORH since September, 2014. The goals of the Rural Health Women Veteran Need Assessment Project are listed as follows:

- o To identify ways to improve access to VA Women's Health Program Services.
- o To identify ways to improve existing VA Women's Health Program Services.
- o To identify new program/services and work on these program services at the local, state and federal level.
- o To identify the needs and life stressors of rural women in order to provide them with women health care services and social work services to meet these unmet needs.
- o To identify best methods to improve communication between veteran women and health providers.

In FY15, the Women Veterans Rural Health Needs Assessment project was expanded in a number of material areas. Although work on the core project only began in April 2014, a number of subgroups of rural women Veterans were identified that would benefit from targeted needs assessment work. These subgroups include rural women who are pregnant or recently pregnant; lesbian and transgender rural women Veterans; and rural women Veterans with a history of military sexual trauma (MST). The goals of the rural health women veteran sustainment project are to identify the needs of these three subgroups and improve women health program services and develop new program services to meet their needs.

The overall purpose of the Rural Women Veteran Need Assessment Projects is to identify the reasons why some women veterans do not use VA women health program services. By identifying the issues women report and then asking them how to resolve the issues, the research project will provide data to identify what the problems are and then make recommendations to VA Women's Health Program to improve the existing services and develop new program services to meet the unmet needs of women veterans. The rural health need assessment project report will be completed on 9/30/15, and the report will be submitted to the VA Women Health Program Medical Director and VA Administration for review. A resource directory of rural community resources will also be developed as one of the outcomes of the Rural Health Women Veteran Need Assessment Project.

Veteran Impact

720

17.Title 20150603135727-Oklahoma City, OK
Form Name 20,150,603,135,727



**Veterans Health
Administration**
Office of Health Equity

Organization Type	Facility
VISN Number	16
Facility Name	Oklahoma City, OK
Station Number	635
Activities	True
Project Type	Research Project
Vulnerable Population	Race or Ethnicity
HEAP Area	Cultural & Linguistic Competency
Description	"Specialty Mental Health Needs Assessment for Native American Veterans" IRB#5239. One-year project to collect needs assessment data for specialty mental health using interview and focus group methodology. The product evaluation plan will consist of two phases: Phase I will consist of an expert review by key stakeholder; Phase II will include mental health in-services at OKC VAMC for all disciplines who address mental health issues with Native American Veterans.
Veteran Impact	5,000
18.Title	20150603135727-Oklahoma City, OK
Form Name	20,150,603,135,727
Organization Type	Facility
VISN Number	16
Facility Name	Oklahoma City, OK
Station Number	635
Activities	True
Project Type	Program Initiative
Vulnerable Population	Race or Ethnicity
HEAP Area	Leadership
Description	Tribal Relations Workshop was held in November 2015. Attendees included staff from OKC VA, Tribal Health Programs (THPs), Indian Health Service, and individuals from several tribes in OKC VA catchment. Quality Improvement project was formed using Lean Team format. Three workgroups were formed to address the following issues: Referral process between VA and its partners; Cultural Awareness/Customer Service; Identifying Native American Veterans at IHS and THP facilities. This project is ongoing.
Veteran Impact	5,000
19.Title	20150604134226-Tucson, AZ
Form Name	20,150,604,134,226



**Veterans Health
Administration**
Office of Health Equity

Organization Type	Facility
VISN Number	18
Facility Name	Tucson, AZ
Station Number	678
Activities	True
Project Type	Resource Material
Vulnerable Population	Geography; Race or Ethnicity
HEAP Area	Cultural & Linguistic Competency
Description	American Indian Nurse Advocate Program: Provides support to Native Veterans by acting as a liaison between the VA, IHS, and other health and human service agencies. Assists Native Veteran with contacting tribal agencies for services. In addition, the Program has a Traditional Counselor/Healer that provides services quarterly.
Veteran Impact	54

20. Title	20150603135727-Oklahoma City, OK
Form Name	20,150,603,135,727
Organization Type	Facility
VISN Number	16
Facility Name	Oklahoma City, OK
Station Number	635
Activities	True
Project Type	Quality Improvement Project
Vulnerable Population	Race or Ethnicity
HEAP Area	Awareness
Description	Currently, OKC VA data shows that less than 5% of patients are identified as American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) although census area data for the catchment area shows a much higher percentage. Review of 200 charts of American Indian Veterans showed that only 36% were correctly identified as AI/AN. 30% were listed as "Race Unknown". Preventive Ethics Committee is addressing this problem, with the goal of decreasing the number of Veterans listed as "Race Unknown". Process ongoing.
Veteran Impact	5,000

Senator TESTER. I would just say one other thing, and hopefully the second panel will be able to address this. It goes to the Chairman's question. When he said there is no single point, everybody back there was nodding their head there is no single point. There needs to be a single point. And that is all. Thank you all.

Chairman ISAKSON. Regarding your question, Senator Tester, the compatibility of electronic medical records between DOD and the VA is limited at best. One of the things we are going to focus on in this Committee in the first 6 months of next year, as we talk about the consolidation of Veterans Choice, is also making sure the electronic medical records transfer from DOD to Veterans Affairs is as seamless and as accurate as possible.

Senator TESTER. Mr. Chairman, if I might, when Senator Murray was Chairman of this Committee, we had this same conversation. This is, I have got to tell you, ridiculous that we do not have seamless transition and seamless across-the-board electronic medical records between the DOD and the VA. I am telling you there is no excuse for this.

Chairman ISAKSON. Which is why we are going to continue to talk about it until they do something about it.

Senator Cassidy. Dr. Cassidy.

HON. BILL CASSIDY, U.S. SENATOR FROM LOUISIANA

Senator CASSIDY. Ms. Gerton, great statistics. I mean, if our concern is about veterans' unemployment rate, that is very promising, so thank you all for the work.

When I speak to veterans, though, it is really an interesting conversation. They are so alive in the military, and one fellow said, "When I was in, I was a battle commander. When I was out, I was an assistant manager." He actually attempted to commit suicide because there was kind of this loss of purpose.

Now, I think we can all relate to that. Purpose means as much as a job. I am a physician. You mentioned that. I am aware that those who are trained as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) in the military come out with a great skill set, but which a State will not necessarily recognize. Perhaps the adrenalin of a civilian ambulance job will never replace that of the military, but, nonetheless, it is a job with great meaning.

I have a vested interest in asking this. I have introduced S. 453, the Veteran Emergency Medical Technician Support Act, that would hopefully help these EMTs transition.

Mr. Coy, I guess my question is for you. My bill has not passed. Is there anything being done to help those EMTs—or anyone can answer this—to accelerate or facilitate their licensing and certification?

Mr. COY. I think there is a number of things, but I would like to defer to Secretary Gerton, who I know has taken a point on much of this.

Ms. GERTON. Thank you. The Department of Labor has just completed a 2-year study with the National Governors Association on exactly this point of recognizing veteran experience and training toward civilian licenses, and EMTs, in fact, were one of the categories that were studied. The report will come out probably at the end of this year, the beginning of next year, with road maps for

each State to follow and how to bring all of these resources together. We are working very closely with States to help them recognize the value and accreditation of DOD's training and experience so that servicemembers come out with their Joint Services Transcript that accredits actually in ways that States can recognize the military training and experience and assignments. We have also worked—and the report is great in laying out the steps to go through.

What States can do both with their community college programs and their licensing and credentialing boards to narrow in and identify the gaps so that servicemembers who have had a great deal of experience in particular skills—and EMT is a great one—can know exactly what the gap is between their military experience, regardless of when they separated, whether it is first term or career, understand that gap in the State, and then focus on their training so that they meet exactly those State credentials.

Senator CASSIDY. Let me ask, is there—obviously, this will to some extent involve State licensing boards.

Ms. GERTON. Absolutely.

Senator CASSIDY. Is model State legislation being drafted which different States could then adapt. As a former State Senator, I know model legislation is used in a variety of subjects.

Ms. GERTON. Sir, I am not aware at this point that we have drafted model State legislation, but we have worked with a number of the States who participated, and they are crafting legislation within their States, and we hope to broaden that through the NGA. And I know that Secretary Michaud is very interested in working with the National Association of State Legislatures on this as well.

Senator CASSIDY. OK. Dr. Kelly, we have heard previous testimony about the problem of substance abuse among veterans, and I know from employers, a leading reason why someone is not given a job is they fail to pass a drug test. Now, that is confidential, so I guess the substance of my question is: To what degree can we—and this can be, again, addressed to you, but perhaps to another: Is there any way to identify those veterans who for whatever reason are serially unemployable as potentially having the inability to pass a drug test as a reason why they are serially unemployable and using that as a means to intervene to hopefully help them with their issue, with their substance issue? Do you follow what I am saying?

Ms. KELLY. I would have to pass that question on for those veterans to both VA and my DOL colleagues also.

Mr. COY. I could not agree more that it is a vexing problem in terms of if you had a substance abuse problem certainly in the military and that being transferred over into your civilian environment. Some of the things that we are trying to identify during the transition process is you have heard things like “warm handover,” and so if there is a medical issue that the services believe they have identified with that servicemember—

Senator CASSIDY. Can I ask you a question?

Mr. COY. Yes, sir.

Senator CASSIDY. Upon separation, is there some assessment made of whether or not the veteran has an addiction problem? Is there a random drug screen of the veteran within a month—excuse

me, the soon-to-be veteran that currently—you see where I am going with that.

Mr. COY. Yes, sir. The short answer is I do not know if they do a routine drug test within DOD to servicemembers before they get out. What I do know is that during the Capstone event, that individual sits down with each of the servicemembers and identifies those kinds of things, and they are passed on to VA if, in fact, there is a specific issue that we can address or at least refer the individual to.

Senator CASSIDY. I spoke of separation from the military, but I guess intake into the VA would be the next opportunity.

Mr. COY. Absolutely.

Senator CASSIDY. Is it routine for a drug screen to be done at that point?

Mr. COY. It is not my understanding that there is, but I would be happy to get back to you on that; although it is my understanding that there is not specifically—

Senator CASSIDY. Well, intuitively—I am over time. I will just say intuitively we know that if substance abuse is, I think, on the order of 11 percent among active duty, we have a statistic there, that most likely it would continue over, and that would be a major cause of persistent inability to be employed.

So, Mr. Chair—and also, Ms. Gerton, it would also be nice if you all did get that model legislation, if you would share that with us, both to demonstrate that it has been done, but, two, for us to promote.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I apologize.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you, Senator Cassidy.

Senator Brown.

HON. SHERROD BROWN, U.S. SENATOR FROM OHIO

Senator BROWN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the comments earlier and kind of reemphasize them from Senator Tester and from Chairman Isakson about medical records. I came to this Committee the same day as Senator Tester in January 2007. Like other colleagues, I learned from Senator Rockefeller, actually, to sit with groups of veterans with no media around and listen to them, and I hear story after story of soldiers coming home on leave and getting sick, going to the Cleveland VA or the Cincinnati VA or a community-based outpatient clinic in Lima or Mansfield, and there are no medical records. Then I hear of soldiers or marines leaving the military, and they come home and their spouse calls because there are some problems, and the VA does not have the medical records.

I remember working with Secretary Principi about it with President Bush, then Secretary Shinseki. Each Secretary has said, “We have a commitment.” It has been literally 20 years, long before I came on the scene here, working on this. I just do not understand.

Then, you come in front of this Committee, and maybe it is not your responsibility, but you should have answers, a little better, or you should have answers period, I think, for both the Chairman and Senator Tester of what that is all about and why we cannot seem to have—we still have different electronic health care records. Those days should be behind us. I urge you to go back and in a

very large, complicated institution, which I defend always because of the incredible work you do and your colleagues do at some of the best hospitals and health care facilities in the world. So, thank you for that, but do better in that.

Secretary Gerton, a couple of things. First, thanks for the work you are doing transitioning servicemembers entering the workforce and what you are doing regarding discrimination. You discuss a pilot program with the Army's Warrior Transition Command to provide a modified Employment Workshop for wounded warriors. You received positive feedback on the new model. Are there plans to expand the pilot program to the Air Force, to the Navy, and to the Marines?

Ms. GERTON. We have presented the pilot program to all the services. Thus far, the Army has been the only one that has moved forward with implementation.

Senator BROWN. Why is that? Why do the others not see your work?

Ms. GERTON. I do not think it is that they do not see the value. I think it is that they have a much smaller wounded population.

Senator BROWN. But not non-existent.

Ms. GERTON. No.

Senator BROWN. Are they going to say yes?

Ms. GERTON. I have no commitment.

Senator BROWN. But you are continuing to try?

Ms. GERTON. We are, and we are certainly available at any point should they wish to implement it.

Senator BROWN. Let me ask you maybe a bit of a more pedestrian question. During the Employment Workshop, servicemembers draft resumes and cover letters. We who dress like this and interview people who have written resumes for years on these jobs move around from one job to another, perhaps more than some in the population, kind of know how to do this process, but there are a whole lot of people that come through your workshops that have never written a resume because they went from high school into the military in many cases.

Would it be possible to take information from a veteran's DD 214 service record and put it into a format like a resume which would be given to servicemembers upon their discharge to give them sort of a model so they know where to start and then can extrapolate that and maybe get into the workforce a little more quickly and with a little less effort?

Ms. GERTON. I am not sure that the DD 214 would be the source of that, but we are working with DOD on the Joint Services Transcript to be able to consider some of that for extraction, or at least in the workshop, when we work with servicemembers to draft their first resume, we ask them to bring all of these sorts of records together, and then work with them in the creation of what we call sort of a master resume so that all of their information is gathered in one place that they can then work off of that to tailor resumes for different job opportunities.

Senator BROWN. So, when they leave this Employment Workshop, are they prepared to do that as well as they should be?

Ms. GERTON. Well, they are as prepared as we can make them in 3 days. What we would like for them to do is then continue that

conversation on with a job counselor in a Job Center who can continue to work with them and continue to help tailor those resumes over time with the different applications. So, in the 3 days, we get them to craft that master resume and then to tailor it, but the continuing practice of that could be done with support through the Job Centers.

Senator BROWN. Well, the need is still there. A young gentleman by the name of Paul Bradley, who was in my office in Dayton, home of Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, and a huge not just Air Force but other branches of the military, a huge veterans population, his—I mean, he spends a lot of time talking to veterans, helping with job placement, working with Mayor Whaley and others in Dayton, but still feels that acute need that so many people leaving the military have not had the experience and developed the skills necessary, and you can play such a major role in that.

Ms. GERTON. As we move to our new curriculum design that we will implement in January, we got that very same feedback from a majority of our stakeholders. The new mode of delivery for that will be a lot more in-class preparation time and a lot more sort of over-the-shoulder support and guidance from the instructor. They will have more time in class to practice in the new version of the curriculum.

Senator BROWN. Thank you.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you, Senator Brown.

Senator BOOZMAN.

HON. JOHN BOOZMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM ARKANSAS

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

So, TAP is mandatory now? Are all the branches—do some branches do a better job than other branches?

Ms. KELLY. The pieces of the TAP that are mandatory is the DOL 3-day workshop, the VA benefits briefing, both of those pieces, as well as pre-separation counseling. The VOW Act mandated those three pieces. But there are other pieces—it is a standard curriculum, standard objectives, executed across all of the 206 military sites.

Senator BOOZMAN. Right. There are lots of things that are mandatory that kind of slip sometimes. Are all of the branches cooperative?

Ms. KELLY. Yes,

Senator BOOZMAN. The different branches of the service?

Ms. KELLY. And we have built in—

Senator BOOZMAN. The commanders are all cooperative?

Ms. KELLY. That is the reason why we built the IT infrastructure, to capture the data. Just—

Senator BOOZMAN. Are there exceptions if you are in a post that is really busy, you do not have to do it, or—

Ms. KELLY. No. It is a VOW mandate, and it is standardized across all of the services.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good. The wives component, or the spouses, is really important. Tell me about the efforts to make sure that they are involved. So many times when you are deployed in this kind of work, you know, the spouse tends to take care of business.

Ms. KELLY. That is exactly some of the experience that we had in our pilots that I was attending. It is the military spouse who takes care of the budget, and in that financial planning for—

Senator BOOZMAN. Exactly. Do we have night classes and things like that?

Ms. KELLY. We do not have night classes. What we found is that, of course, the spouses are always welcome to the Transition Assistance classes, to the Transition GPS classes. However, the concern to provide that curriculum to the spouses because they are working during the day and not able to attend the classes, as well as child care is sometimes an issue for them, that is, again, one of the reasons why we put the entire curriculum on three different web sites for the spouses to be able to access that.

Senator BOOZMAN. That would be a reason, too, to have it in the evening?

Ms. KELLY. Not that I am familiar with. That is not a standardized practice across all of the installations now. I am sure that the installations are accommodating the spouses. Some of them are actually even creating abbreviated programs for the spouses, but it is not a standardized practice. I can get you those installations, the names of those installations, if you would like. But it is not a part of the standard curriculum.

Senator BOOZMAN. You have got your different metrics for measuring. Do some installations do a better job than others as far as in your feedback?

Ms. KELLY. In the participant assessment?

Senator BOOZMAN. Yes.

Ms. KELLY. Yes, some installations do a better job of getting the servicemembers to fill that out.

Senator BOOZMAN. What do we do if you have an installation that perhaps the marks are not as high, the metrics are not as high? What is the feedback to them that they are not doing perhaps as good a job as another installation?

Ms. KELLY. Well, the first thing we focus on is getting the feedback by installations to the services so that they can talk to those installation commanders and get the feedback on the participant assessments. But the curriculum as far as attendance—

Senator BOOZMAN. If we get negative feedback on the assessment, how do we rectify the negative problems that are going on at that facility?

Ms. KELLY. We capture that data through the Defense Manpower Data Center. We compile that on a quarterly basis. We provide that to the services and our Federal partners, and that participant assessment feedback is a foundation for us evaluating the curriculum every year. That is reviewed every year, and that starts the foundation for revising the curriculum. That has been one of the main sources for the revisions that we have made in the Transition GPS for the last 3 years.

Senator BOOZMAN. At a particular fort, say Fort Whatever, the feedback was really good on the part of the participants, and at another fort it was not good, is there anything that we immediately do to try and—

Ms. KELLY. Well, some of the—

Senator BOOZMAN [continuing]. Rectify the situation—

Ms. KELLY. Yes—

Senator BOOZMAN [continuing]. Versus waiting for the curriculum and all—

Ms. KELLY. No, we do not. The participant assessment, the feedback from the participant assessment is available quarterly.

Senator BOOZMAN. Right.

Ms. KELLY. We actually have each one of the participants evaluating the facility that they are in, and, yes, we do get write-ins about air conditioning and heating and Web access, about the facilitators. Across the board the feedback from all of the facilitators has been outstanding. We have been very pleased with that.

Senator BOOZMAN. When I was in the House, I was the Chairman and the Ranking Member of the subcommittee that had jurisdiction over this. I have really seen it grow through the years. So, we have problems, you know, that we are always going to have in the sense of always trying to make things better, but we truly have come a long way in the last 10 years.

Ms. KELLY. Thank you.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you, Senator Boozman.

Senator Hirono.

HON. MAZIE K. HIRONO, U.S. SENATOR FROM HAWAII

Senator HIRONO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I have had roundtables with veterans on every island, basically six major islands, and they raise some really practical concerns as we talk about smoothing their transition from active to veteran status. Some of these veterans have been on veteran status for quite a while. On our neighbor islands, what we refer to as the “neighbor islands”—and I am sure this is the situation in rural areas in other parts of the country—there are no veterans benefits offices on these islands, and so the veterans have said to me why can’t somebody from the benefits office come and help them answer questions relating to their benefits or other questions that they may have.

It occurs to me that maybe one of the things that the VA should consider doing—and this is for Mr. Coy—is to set up a videoconferencing system whereby your advisors, most of whom are on the island of Oahu where the majority of people live, where they can have regular times and days of the week where the veterans can come to a place and have someone respond to their questions. Have you thought about doing that? Because I know that it is not happen in my State.

Mr. COY. The short answer is, Senator, we have thought about that. We will take that back and work on that issue harder.

One of the things we have also done is develop this virtual curriculum. We have also done TAP in a virtual way for folks that are out based in a rural or significantly out-of-the-way place, and we do that as well. But we will also get with our benefits office and our benefits advisors in Hawaii and also redouble our efforts there.

Senator HIRONO. Their preference would be for a warm body to show up on an island such as Lanai, for example, so that they can talk to somebody in person, but short of that—because some of these folks have been waiting for years and years and years, and

they are about to give up on that. But, I think that if we can provide some kind of a regular way that they could get their very specific questions about benefits and other programs answered, I think that would be very helpful.

You have already been asked a number of questions about the incompatibility of the medical records, and I note that the DOD just awarded a \$4.3 billion contract to upgrade the Armed Forces Health Longitudinal Technology Application. Is that medical health records? Or is this some whole other system?

Ms. GERTON. I am unable to answer that question, but I will bring it back and get the answer.

[The information referred to follows:]

RESPONSE TO REQUEST ARISING DURING THE HEARING BY HON. MAZIE HIRONO TO TERESA GERTON, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

Please see VA Response from Mr. Coy (VA) to the question regarding the \$4.3B DOD contract. This is a VA/DOD question, not a question Ms. Gerton at the Department of Labor could address.

Senator HIRONO. Well, my point is that the DOD just awarded a \$4.3 billion contract to what sounds like a medical health record upgrading of the system, and then meanwhile the VA is continuing to upgrade and evolve its VistA system. Once again are we seeing two big Departments who deal with the same group of people, active and then in the veteran status, are we seeing two Departments pursuing their own medical records again? Is that what is going on, even as this Committee and others have continued to push for the compatibility of medical records? Someone needs to—I would like an answer to that.

Mr. COY. Senator, we will be happy to take that concern back to VA. It is an entirely different entity that manages the medical health records issue, and I will make sure that they get back to you on that.

[The information referred to follows:]

RESPONSE TO REQUEST ARISING DURING THE HEARING BY HON. MAZIE HIRONO TO U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS PANEL

Response. On April 6th, 2016, seven months ahead of the deadline, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DOD) jointly certified that we have achieved the health data interoperability requirements defined in section 703(b)(1) of the 2014 National Defense Authorization Act. This is a major milestone for Servicemembers and Veterans, and is the first time the Departments have certified our ability to share all information required for clinical care in near real time.

The Joint Legacy Viewer (JLV), which had its origins in Hawaii as the Janus health record viewer, is available to 40,000 DOD users and over 56,000 VA users as of this week. JLV is a critical step in both Departments' efforts to modernize their health record systems, as it will ensure our ability to see a Veteran's or Servicemember's complete longitudinal electronic health record at the point of care. We are greatly appreciative of the work done by Native Hawaiian-owned businesses supporting the VA Pacific Islands Health Care system and Tripler Army Medical Center in developing all versions of the JLV technology.

As VA continues work on modernizing VistA, while simultaneously exploring options for our path beyond 2018, we will continue to leverage the data sharing capability underlying JLV in our follow on capability, the enterprise Health Management Platform. Our DOD colleagues will continue to leverage JLV as well as they roll out a new EHR system, and will share all health data generated by the new system in the same way all current DOD data is shared with VA today.

We would welcome the opportunity to demonstrate this capability to you and your staff, and answer any questions regarding compatibility and interoperability of our health records between VA and DOD.

Senator HIRONO. Of course, that is a very big part of the smooth transitioning from active status to veteran status, is whether their medical records are accessible and follow them. It is an ongoing issue, and we seem to continue to be befuddled by that.

One of the other areas that I wanted to find out about is at the Department of Labor you are apparently doing quite a lot to help the veterans have access to jobs. I would like to know what your experience has been in collaborating with the Small Business Administration (SBA), for example, because there are a number of veterans, maybe quite a few of them, who want to own their own businesses, start their own businesses. Do you collaborate with SBA? And how has that been, if so?

Ms. GERTON. We absolutely do collaborate with SBA, a great partner, along with all of the folks here. SBA is a member of our Transition Executive Committee and Steering Group. More importantly, I think, for us specifically with that, we do not control the training piece of that, but we do work with SBA to help veteran-owned small businesses understand how to use the workforce system to do their own staffing and to share the cost—basically pass the cost of having to startup a human resources function within a small company, to use the public workforce system to do that as they grow their own staff, to use the public workforce to do that. We know that the companies that are most likely to hire veterans are those that are veteran-owned. So, we see that connection as very important is supporting the veterans so that they can be successful in building their own staffs as their companies grow and also helping them find the right folks to fill those positions, especially veterans. So, it is mutually beneficial.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you, Senator Hirono.

Senator Tillis.

HON. THOM TILLIS, U.S. SENATOR FROM NORTH CAROLINA

Senator TILLIS. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Senator Hirono, you hit on a very important topic. Your question about the DOD project, the answer to your question is I do not know to what extent the \$4.3 billion is allocated to the medical record, but the Department has decided to buy a commercial off-the-shelf product to implement that is absolutely different from VistA, and the worst news with VistA is that VistA has been modified in some of the VISNs to be different from the baseline VistA, which was a state-of-the-art product when they did it.

How on Earth—and I am not faulting anybody here, but how on Earth we could be going and investing in a new medical record system for the DOD that is not absolutely architected to be downstream compatible with the VA—

Ms. KELLY. Exactly.

Senator TILLIS [continuing]. Defies logic and common sense, and it is something that I have asked some folks to look into earlier this morning.

I have a question that has more to do with, let us say, your key performance indicators. I will use a little bit of management consulting speak here. Can each of you within your respective areas of responsibility tell me what your top two or three key performance indicators are for you doing your part of the transition program right?

Ms. KELLY. Well, the initial input on our performance measures is the servicemembers meeting this suite of Career Readiness Standards, which are a completely new undertaking within DOD, all the way from having a 12-month post-separation budget to ensuring they have that conversation with the Reserve recruiter, to having a college application if that is what their personal goal is.

Senator TILLIS. Do you measure that and measure trends over time?

Ms. KELLY. We have been measuring that since 2013, the numbers—our servicemembers who are separating who meet those Career Readiness Standards, or receive a warm handover to one of our partners to provide post-separation support.

Senator TILLIS. How are you doing over time?

Ms. KELLY. We are doing well. The services have worked very, very hard in getting those processes in place because it requires commanders or the commander's designee to verify that for each and every servicemember and to record that, flow it into an IT system, flow it into a central database, et cetera.

Senator TILLIS. Thank you.

Mr. Coy?

Mr. COY. Thank you, Senator. There are two or three things that I would suggest that we are doing with respect to performance indicators. Probably the first thing is the participant assessments that we all ask of our TAP participants. Secretary Gerton mentioned her results. Our results are similar to hers. We are at 95 percent in terms of confidence and using the information and so on.

One of the other things that we do most certainly is we do site visits of our benefits advisors. We did 145 of them last year; 14 of those visits were interagency—in other words, we brought our partners from DOD and Labor with us to do those site visits as well.

We also follow up on key performance indicators in our Veterans Economic Communities Initiative, and we have a series of performance indicators for each one of those—in other words, how many employers have been outreached, how many people have you talked to, how many post-9/11 veterans have you talked to, what are the results of those kinds of things. So, we have a variety of performance indicators, and we are always passing that information back and forth.

I would suggest, if anything, you can see the passion from the folks on this panel that they all want to say this is what we are doing, this is what we are doing. When we sit down every quarter and every month in our governance body, we bring up all of these issues and talk about them.

Senator TILLIS. Ms. Cloud and Ms. Gerton, if you can be—and my apologies to Mr. Coy. If you could be very brief, I have got one final question I would like to ask. I would like to get close under the wire.

Ms. GERTON. Let me just report for Department of Labor VETS. Obviously, our overarching metric is the veterans unemployment, and we do sort that by generation and also by age demographic, focusing especially on the Gulf War II veterans. Within the public workforce system, we have three outcome metrics that we track:

The first is entered employment, for those who participate through the workforce system, do they actually get a job when they have completed services? Retained employment, which is are they still retained 6 months after that. Then, we look at their average 6-month salary for those 6 months. So, we track those month after month, year over year, within the veterans population, who gets services within the workforce center, and compare them to the other populations.

Senator TILLIS. OK. Ms. Cloud?

Ms. CLOUD. I would add a couple of things. One, we are also very interested in expanding public-private partnerships in communities. We recognize that we cannot be successful without collaboration with our community partners. Targeting the needs of those communities and partnering with the right nonprofits or service organizations.

Additionally, we also had a holistic economic report that looked at multiple dimensions and prioritized for the VA some significant gaps in education potentially for our service-connected disabled veterans and women veterans, and the progress on how we are closing that gap is an additional metric of success for us.

Senator TILLIS. Mr. Chair, I will not ask another question but maybe make a final comment. Last year, I was in a campaign and traveled all over the State, met with a lot of veterans organizations. One of the questions we would always ask is: How was your transition experience? There seemed to be a sense that there were like great points of information, but the handoff was a problem, which suggests that maybe there needs to be someone whose job is on the line for making sure the handoffs occur. I do not think that that really occurs today.

Then, the other piece—I wanted to get to this—the younger veterans—I know that when I was 24 years old or 25 years old, if I had been in a situation where I am just about to get released, I am probably the guy in the back with the headset on listening to music, getting that credit for the 90 percent, 95 percent participation, but really thinking about what I want to do with my life and all the excitement of the next job.

So, I think that we have got to figure out a way to come up with some sort of quality scoring to make sure that this good information that you all have is sticking and being used to their benefit. You hear about information overload. I just got a message from a Marine who was medically discharged, got the lump-sum payment, I am sure somewhere well documented in there was that as a result of that, your VA benefits are delayed until that lump-sum payment is drawn down. They do not remember that. I do not know where that is in the paperwork. Some do, some do not. If my wife were there, I probably would have. If she were not, I probably would not have.

We need to do a better job of taking all this good stuff and making sure it is being executed consistently, because I think that at

least in my case there is a number of constituent feedback that I am getting that you have got some good individual programs we have got to integrate, pass the baton more effectively, and make sure we are catching that group of people that are going through the motions but not necessarily fully benefiting from the good work and the good information you are putting forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you, Senator Tillis.

Senator Murray.

HON. PATTY MURRAY, U.S. SENATOR FROM WASHINGTON

Senator MURRAY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Kelly, your testimony actually covered many of the processes the Department is using, but there is very little information showing how effective those efforts are.

On the other hand, there was a Syracuse University study that showed that almost half of the veterans separating from the military leave their first job within the first year and 65 percent leave within 2 years.

When they were asked why they left, those veterans cited a number of issues, which are precisely what we expect the Department's transition work to address, including lack of career development and inadequate professional growth, work that was not meaningful or challenging, and positions that do not match the servicemember's skills or education level, which really raises the questions about whether transition efforts are accomplishing the goals that we expect. I wanted to ask you why the Departments continue to not track outcomes for servicemembers and veterans.

Ms. KELLY. I think we are working with our partners together, trying to put in place the most telling outcome measures for the long term, and I think Secretary Gerton talked to you about looking at those veterans and if they have employment and if they stay in employment. We have been very concerned about some of what we hear is the job hopping. I am looking to this more for the Millennials, so for our young folks, this 2-year changing jobs, 2 years, 2½ years, might not be any different than their peers, their non-veteran peers.

The other piece is that what we are saying—it is one of the many lessons learned that the private sector is providing to us—is that they are also interested in—once they delve into this talent pipeline of veterans and they bring them on board, how do they retain them? Looking for that purpose, looking for a promotion, looking for development, et cetera.

Senator MURRAY. You do not track at the Department, apparently, whether they have left the job within a few months or whether they leave within the first few years. Your Department—

Ms. KELLY. Within the Department of Defense, we would not track that. We are relying upon our partners within DOL and VA to look at those long-term outcomes.

Senator MURRAY. I would say we need to be doing that because if we are just putting people into a job and it is not effective because we are not doing it right, then the transition is not working the way we expect it to.

How many servicemembers do not meet the Career Readiness Standards?

Ms. KELLY. Right now at this point, for 2015 the number is 226,414 servicemembers separated in 2015; 95 percent met the VOW compliance and 89 percent met Career Readiness Standards or were given a warm handover.

Senator MURRAY. 89 percent met the Career Standards?

Ms. KELLY. Verified by the Defense Manpower Data Center.

Senator MURRAY. And how many of them actually received follow-up services from the VA or Labor?

Ms. KELLY. I do not have that data.

Mr. COY. Every single servicemember that is provided to us in terms of that warm handover that Dr. Kelly mentioned are talked to by our benefits advisors and provided the information as to, you know, how they can get help in those particular areas. For example, if they are at risk of homelessness, we will connect them with a homeless coordinator in various—

Senator MURRAY. Right, I know that, but I wanted to know how many actually got the follow-up once you determined they needed it. Do you know the percentage, the numbers?

Mr. COY. No, I do not have that, but I will be happy to get you that information.

Senator MURRAY. OK, if you could get that for me.

[The information referred to follows:]

RESPONSE TO REQUEST ARISING DURING THE HEARING BY HON. PATTY MURRAY TO
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS PANEL

Response. VA does not track how many veterans received follow-up services from the agency after not meeting career readiness standards.

Ms. KELLY. I also think that is the work that is still to be done. What we are doing is we are putting in place a form that allows that warm handover. It documents that warm handover.

Senator MURRAY. OK, because I think we need to know whether what we are doing is working. So—

Ms. KELLY. We are right there with you, and we are putting that IT infrastructure in place and building—

Senator MURRAY. What is the timeline on getting that done?

Ms. KELLY. I would say that the Department of Labor has already completed a business case. They are building that IT infrastructure to accept that personally identifiable information. The VA is going through that process right now with the Defense Manpower Data Center, and reviewing—

Senator MURRAY. All right. I have another question. I will follow up on this because this is, I think, an extremely important part of this program.

Ms. KELLY. We agree.

Senator MURRAY. Dr. Kelly, I am concerned by your testimony that, according to DOD's Status of Forces survey, only half of the commanders or senior leaders were supportive of preparing their servicemembers for transition into a new career. It has been 4 years since we passed the VOW to Hire Heroes Act and it was signed into law. I expect the Departments to do better than that. How do we get the support from the commanders? What are you

doing to get the support of the commanders so they are putting in place what we expect them to do?

Ms. KELLY. First, let me clarify that. Although the law was passed, we did not have the TAP redesign in place until the end of 2014. We had to find resources. We had to hire staff. We had to build the curriculum. So, it was not fully executed until 2014, and that is with all of our partners, including SBA.

We have the curriculum in place. Now we have the participant assessment, and we have actually built those same questions that you are trying to get to, that command support, we just put them in to that participant assessment and put in the infrastructure and reporting mechanisms so that the installation commanders can receive that data. We are as concerned as you are. Then, building—but building the Military Life Cycle transition preparation model is a culture change for the Department, and we have put in place the Status of Forces survey so that we can survey our servicemembers, the Reserve component in this coming year, and do that on an every-other-year basis to ask those very same questions so that we can track the culture change and if servicemembers are feeling supported by their commanders and their peers to do this Military Life Cycle transition preparation.

Senator MURRAY. Well, I would say that we need our commanders and our senior leaders to implement this, which is something we have to follow up on.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ISAKSON. And leadership comes from the top.

Senator Sullivan.

HON. DAN SULLIVAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM ALASKA

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to also thank the panelists for their focus on what is really one of the most critical issues I think we can be providing in terms of services to our veterans, because as you know, it relates to so many different things.

You know, the administration has been very focused on ending homelessness for veterans, but this obviously relates directly to ending homelessness. To me it is such a win-win-win opportunity here where we have veterans with tremendous skills and employers who need those skills, and I think the critical element here is connecting them. I want to thank you for all you are doing in that regard.

I just had a couple of specific questions that related to some policies, and I will just throw this out to any of the panelists. Are you familiar with the 85–15 rule?

Mr. COY. I am.

Senator SULLIVAN. Can you talk a little bit about that? I know that the main purpose is making sure that you do not have any kind of predatory schools that are taking advantage of veterans. At the same time, I think we should make sure that good, honest schools—and I have talked to some vocational schools in Alaska who seem a little bit hamstrung by the rule in that they want to help veterans. We have a huge veterans populations, as Senator Blumenthal mentioned, you know, with certain drawdowns, and there might be a whole new big influx. I think we want to make

sure—I understand the purpose of the rule, but we want to make sure that we are not limiting veterans’ opportunities or the opportunities of the vocational schools that are actually doing a good job and that are very committed.

Could you talk about how you balance that with the 85–15 rule?

Mr. COY. Absolutely, and thank you for that great question. The 85–15 was put in statute back in the 1950s for the exact reason that you mentioned.

Senator SULLIVAN. Oh, is that right?

Mr. COY. One of the—

Senator SULLIVAN. Is there a need to update it, do you think?

Mr. COY. Yes. We do not have the ability to waive, so if somebody is 86–14 or—I am being a bit overdramatic, but, yes. We do not have the ability to do anything along those lines.

Senator SULLIVAN. Would you think a waiver provision that was needed to make sure—obviously, again, I know what the focus is. You do not want abuse, and we certainly do not want abuse. On the other hand, if you have a good company, a good vocational school that is highly motivated to take care of a lot of veterans, should we provide some flexibility?

Mr. COY. The short answer is I believe we should. I would like to just mention very briefly, because I know you have several other questions, but we just started a pilot program called “Accelerated Learning Program,” and what that does is it is a \$5 million pilot program that we have eight contracts with eight vendors. They are all IT vendors, and they teach a very specific course. We structured the contracts such that they are incentivized to have people apply. They are incentivized for people to complete, and they are incentivized for people to get employment at the end. Many of these places have 95 percent placement rates at the end of this process.

None of these vendors probably would have been able to be leveraged with the GI bill because of things like the 85–15 rule. This pilot is out there to see if that is a viable option to be able to look at where, in fact, we could propose legislative changes.

What we found is we had a certain amount of slots that were available, we filled—we got applications—we got 3,500 applications in the first week for this program, and we only had about 800 or 900 slots for it. There is a need for that out there. We did not restrict it to any specific entity, meaning we did not restrict it to post-9/11. It was any veteran that was out there. So, we did not use—they did not have to use any of their GI bill benefits, nor were the programs likely eligible for GI bill benefits.

Senator SULLIVAN. Well, look, I would welcome the chance to work with you and this Committee on those issues, because I think they are important and I think they go to servicing our veterans in the best way, and the good occupational schools that can be helpful.

Let me just end by mentioning—you know, I went through the TAP program just a couple years ago coming off active duty as a reservist, and I do think one of the focuses—Senator Tillis made a really good point. You are kind of focused on getting out and doing your thing. My recommendation, just in my own personal experience, an emphasis on the benefits—benefits, benefits, bene-

fits—whether it is GI bill, whether it is what your opportunities are with regard to VA loans or things like that, is really important, because, you know, you get further down the road and you are like, “Holy cow, I forgot I had that opportunity.” Sometimes, as you know, those opportunities go away. To me that was very helpful.

I also think what Senator Brown was talking about, resumes are enormously important. I had a Marine sergeant, a couple deployments to Afghanistan, came to me, he was in infantry, a squad leader, and said, you know, he did not think he had the skills for the private sector. I was, like, “What? Are you kidding me? You have led men in combat? You have the best skills in the country.” Just the ability to put that down in a resume that can translated that skill set to the private sector is really helpful, and it is not always so easy.

Finally—Mr. Chairman, sorry for going over here. There was an article in the *Navy Times* recently. Are we doing enough, do you think, on helping military members with PTSD in terms of their transition? I mean, obviously, there can be additional challenges. What are we doing there?

Mr. COY. I will take that on very briefly, and then perhaps Secretary Gerton could add to it. She mentioned it a little bit in her oral testimony in terms of the voc rehab program that we have. The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program that we have is for wounded warriors and disabled veterans, and that, of course, includes those with post-traumatic stress. We have over 1,000 counselors across the country, and each one of them do case management for that specific veteran in developing a plan for employment for them, and whether or not it is for higher education, whether it is vocational training, whether it is a welding course, whatever it is that helps them get meaningful employment at the end of that process, that is what they are there for. So, we have folks that are doing that full-time right now in terms of that case management.

I know Secretary Gerton can talk about the American Job Centers and what they are doing for disabled veterans as well.

Ms. GERTON. For individuals with a service-compensable disability, we do have the Jobs for Veterans State Grants, the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program. Those counselors provide one-on-one employment support in terms of developing an individual employment plan, developing training programs, so they might not be in the voc rehab program, but they can certainly be there. That counseling can persist for as long as the individual needs it, until we find a way where they can be trained and enter employment.

We also do a tremendous amount of outreach to employers on how to handle an individual with PTSD in the workplace. We have on our web site the American Heroes at Work tool for employers to use so that they can be better acculturated to individuals with PTS in their workplace.

Senator SULLIVAN. Great. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

RESPONSE TO POSTHEARING QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
TO SUSAN KELLY, DIRECTOR, TRANSITION TO VETERANS PROGRAM OFFICE, U.S. DE-
PARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Question 1. I am concerned that TAP does not provide women with an understanding of the full range of benefits available to them. Please provide information on:

a. The extent to which DOD collects, analyzes, and reports data on TAP by gender—and uses that to make changes that will help women veterans.

Response. The anonymous Participant Assessment that Servicemembers are asked to voluntarily complete after each TAP module, including those modules taught by the Departments of Labor and Veterans Affairs, and the Small Business Administration, captures demographic information related to military service (e.g., Service, paygrade, installation). The DOD does not examine the results by gender as doing so would compromise the anonymity of the assessment once all demographic information for a respondent is combined. However, all Participant Assessment feedback is provided to the Services on a quarterly basis as part of the continual improvement process, and all feedback, i.e., gaps in information, requests for other topics to be addressed, quality of instructors, complaints, recommendations, etc., submitted by either men or women, is reviewed, addressed, and also considered during the annual Interagency curriculum review process. Additionally, the annual Status of Forces Survey, into which the DOD inserted questions about TAP, collects and examines demographic information, including gender. TVPO is in the process of coordinating with Defense Manpower Data Center to examine the TAP survey questions by gender.

b. How DOD has solicited information from women to inform the revamping of TAP.

Response. In 2012, DOD and its interagency Veterans Employment Initiative Task Force partners began redesigning TAP in accordance with the VOW to Hire Heroes Act. Early group discussions with female Veterans and Servicemembers made it clear to the Task Force members that women did not want transition instruction separate from their male counterparts. Feedback received through the online, anonymous TAP Participant Assessment, or the annual DOD Status of Forces Survey on improvements for, or concerns about, TAP that will help female veterans specifically, will be considered in the annual curriculum review process and by the Interagency TAP Executive Council.

c. Statistics on women's participation and satisfaction with TAP.

Response. Because the anonymous Participant Assessment that Servicemembers are asked to voluntarily complete after each TAP module includes demographic information related to military service (e.g., Service, paygrade, installation), DOD cannot identify satisfaction by gender without compromising the anonymity of the assessment. Results from the fourth quarter of Fiscal Year 2015, however, show that Servicemembers overall have a positive perception of TAP: 81 percent of respondents reported they gained valuable information and skills to plan their transition; 80 percent stated the training enhanced their confidence in transition planning; 81 percent said they intended to use what they learned in transition planning; and 82 percent responded they knew how to access appropriate resources. The TVPO is exploring future options with DMDC to gain insight into the data, by gender, in an aggregate form.

Question 2. The 2011 VOW to Hire Heroes Act mandated attendance at the Transition Assistance Program for National Guard and Reserve Component servicemembers demobilizing after 180 days or more of active duty military service. Members of the National Guard and Reserve have unique needs and challenges when it comes to accessing TAP. Because eligible members of the National Guard and Reserve demobilize at locations where they neither work nor live, and typically demobilize more quickly than active duty servicemembers, the location and timing of the TAP program delivery is not ideal.

a. To what extent has DOD used the results from participant assessment surveys to monitor feedback from National Guard and Reserve members participating in the TAP program?

Response. The Participant Assessment is provided to every Servicemember who completes a TAP module. The feedback from these assessments are examined by demographics (e.g., by Service, by component, including National Guard and Reserve separately, by installation) and provided to the Services on a quarterly basis to disseminate to their installations. Several changes have been made based on the Reserve and NG member feedback. For instance, the availability of TAP instruction for the RC was a compelling factor to place all 88 hours of the Transition GPS cur-

riculum on Joint Knowledge Online, the platform used by the entire DOD to deliver virtual training. The Transition GPS is also available to all Veterans, spouses, and dependents via DoL and VA websites. Distance from installations, time for training, stage of military career, and remoteness need not hamper transition preparation. Further, VA just released a VA Benefits Briefing specifically for NG and Reserve members. The Services also recently revised their timing for transition preparation, initiating the training when Reservists and Guardsmen are prepping for mobilization versus waiting until demobilization. By far, the most frequent and forceful complaint from Guardsmen and Reserve members was that, even though they were returning to their jobs after completing 180 days of active duty training, the VOW Act mandated their TAP attendance. Section 552 of the 2016 NDAA relaxed this mandate by directing that the 180 days of active duty must be continuous versus cumulative and by excluding time spent in full-time training, annual training, and military schooling. This provision should quell this ongoing concern.

Additionally, the Department inserted into the 2016 Status of Forces Survey of Reserve Component Members (SOFS-R) questions that seek to gauge the views of Reserve Component Members regarding the timing and location of the delivery of the Transition GPS curriculum. This biannual survey will allow DOD to systematically assess the culture change of military lifecycle transition preparation for both the Active and Reserve Components.

b. Please describe DOD's efforts to ensure that the content and delivery of the Transition Assistance Program is meeting the needs of National Guard and Reserve components including whether DOD has sought counsel and feedback on this issue from General Frank Grass, Chief of the National Guard Bureau.

Response. As mentioned, the Participant Assessment provides feedback that can be examined by Service demographics including Guard and Reserve status. In addition, DOD has prepared questions for the 2016 Status of Forces Survey of Reserve Component Members that are intended to gather feedback from Servicemembers on topics such as transition planning and support by peers and commanders. The results of this survey are expected in 2017 and can be compared with survey results from Active Component members—who are asked similar questions—to identify areas of concern for the Reserve Component.

The National Guard Bureau J-1, a Brigadier General, is a member of the Interagency TAP governance body, specifically the Senior Steering Group (SSG) alongside Service and interagency partner representatives. The SSG provides executive-level guidance and is responsible for monitoring and improving TAP operations. The Guard and Reserve Components of each Service are actively engaged in every Interagency TAP working group responsible for various functional areas of the TAP. Additionally, TVPO was fortunate to have a Sergeant Major from the Army National Guard as a Senior Enlisted Advisor. The SGM led over 20 interagency Staff Assistance Visits in 2015 that allowed DOD and the Interagency TAP governance to assess implementation of TAP and gather feedback from the field. Finally, the Director of TVPO meets regularly with the Services' Reserve Component Senior Enlisted Advisors to inform them of program and policy changes and to solicit their feedback.

c. Do National Guard and Reserve components not activated to active duty have access to TAP?

Response. Yes, members of the National Guard and Reserve Component can access the information available through Transition GPS at any time through a complete virtual curriculum. The virtual curriculum can be accessed on JKO, DOD's online training resource at <http://jko.jten.mil/courses/tap/TGPS%20Standalone%20Training/start.html>. Additionally, Guard and Reserve members can take advantage of services available in their communities, such as at over 2,000 DOL American Job Center affiliates nationwide if they are geographically separated from an installation.

d. How, if at all, are the reserve components providing elements of TAP throughout a Guards' or Reservists' military service under the Military Life Cycle Model?

Response. Members of the Guard and Reserve are required to complete TAP after completing 180 days of continuous active duty service. The Army and Navy have drafted policy specifically addressing requirements for Guard and Reserve members. Army Guard and Reserve members who will have completed at least 180 days of continuous active duty begin TAP just prior to mobilization and continue throughout mobilization so that they meet Career Readiness Standards no later than their release from active duty. In addition, Guard and Reserve members not on active duty can access the virtual curriculum online at any time from any location.

Question 3. DOD is responsible for administering the optional Accessing Higher Education Track of the Transition Assistance Program. This track is intended to prepare transitioning servicemembers to pursue educational opportunities and uti-

lize the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit that they have earned through their military service.

a. If a transitioning servicemember indicates his or her intent to use Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits during the transition process, are these servicemembers required to attend the optional Accessing Higher Education Track?

Response. All transitioning Servicemembers are required by the VOW to Hire Heroes Act to participate in VA Benefits Briefings I and II. These VA briefings provide information on education benefits available through the VA, including the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill. Additionally, all Servicemembers who indicate an interest in pursuing higher education after transitioning from active duty are required to meet the Career Readiness Standard (CRS) related to higher education. If they cannot verify that they meet the standard without attending the Accessing Higher Education track, such as providing a letter of acceptance from a college, then the track is required. Verification that the transitioning Servicemember meets the CRS related to higher education is the desired end state, not that the Servicemember attends a course.

b. Do you think this Track should be made mandatory for all servicemembers indicating their intent to pursue higher education? Why or why not?

Response. If a transitioning Servicemember indicates a post-separation goal of pursuing higher education, they are required to meet the related Career Readiness Standard (CRS). The Accessing Higher Education track is available to assist them in developing the knowledge and skills to meet the requirements of the CRS. However, if Servicemembers can verify they meet the standards, such as providing a letter of acceptance from a university or community college, then the member should not be required to attend the track. Further, many Servicemembers apply for college and attend college courses during active duty. Mandatory attendance may or may not "fit" these Servicemembers. All officers have already met college graduation requirements but many will still use their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for post-graduate or additional degrees. Again, mandatory attendance will not be efficient for such circumstances.

c. At what point during the transition process would the Accessing Higher Education portion of TAP be most beneficial for transitioning servicemembers and at what point do most servicemembers take this Track?

Response. There is no set time when Servicemembers should complete Accessing Higher Education or other components of TAP; they must meet Career Readiness Standards or receive a warm handover no later than 90 days prior to separation. In accordance with the Military Life Cycle transition preparation process, Servicemembers are encouraged to plan for post-military life throughout their career. A virtual curriculum is available to provide Servicemembers access to TAP materials at any time in their career.

In alignment with the Military Lifecycle transition preparation, DOD has recently launched an online course titled "Higher Education Preparation." This course is intended to inform Servicemembers about how to choose the best educational institution for their long-term education goals and start, while on active duty, to use tuition assistance for courses. The "Higher Education Preparation" develops many of the skills intended to be acquired through Accessing Higher Education. Used together, both modules will benefit our Servicemembers and make better use of tuition assistance funding.

RESPONSE TO POSTHEARING QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. MAZIE HIRONO TO SUSAN KELLY, DIRECTOR, TRANSITION TO VETERANS PROGRAM OFFICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS DURING THE TRANSITION

Question 1. As a Member of both the Senate Armed Services and Veterans Committees, I've particularly interested in and concerned about DOD/VA collaboration to prevent homelessness among transitioning servicemembers.

a. Please describe the extent to which the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs work to mitigate risk factors for homelessness among transitioning servicemembers.

b. What percentage of homeless veterans are recently separated servicemembers?

c. In what areas can we improve DOD/VA collaboration in this regard?

d. What do you see as the major challenges regarding veteran homelessness in the coming years and are there legislative proposals that would help in this regard?

Response. Through the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), DOD, VA, and DOL help provide Servicemembers with the skills necessary to avoid one of the greatest

risk factors for homelessness, unemployment. Under the VOW to Hire Heroes Act, all transitioning Servicemembers are required to attend the DOL Employment Workshop, a primary component of the TAP. Prior to separation, the Military Services verify that Servicemembers meet newly established TAP Career Readiness Standards (CRS) and that Servicemembers are prepared to pursue their post-transition personal goals, whether that is employment, education, or entrepreneurship. If the attainment of CRS cannot be verified, Servicemembers receive a warm handover to the VA, DOL, or other appropriate partner for additional post-transition support from the communities to which they relocate.

The verification process also specifically targets housing plans. Servicemembers are asked during the discussion that documents their CRS whether they have a post-transition housing plan. Not having a plan puts this population at risk for eventual homelessness. We are working with the VA to clarify the guidance that ensures that Servicemembers who do not have a post-transition housing plan are given a warm handover to a local VA Benefits liaison. The VA is establishing processes for the VA Benefits liaisons to refer such Servicemembers to VA Homelessness Coordinators across the Nation who can refer the Veteran to the resources that offer needed services.

In addition, many DOD installations collaborate with community-based non-profit organizations to provide a broad range of services to Servicemembers, Veterans, and families, including services related to unemployment and homelessness.

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness is closely tracking Veteran homelessness in cities and communities across the Nation. The most recent count of homeless individuals was conducted in January 2016, and the Council is the best source for current and trending Veteran homelessness data, as well as the demographics and challenges of this population.

DOD/VA ELECTRONIC HEALTH RECORD COLLABORATION

Question 2. In the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act, the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs were directed to implement “fully interoperable” electronic health records. Seven years later, the Government Accountability Program placed VA Electronic Health Records on its high risk list for mismanagement, waste, cost overruns and in most need of transformation. One of the problems cited by GAO was the continued lack of interoperability between DOD and VA Health Records, which inhibit VA’s ability to provide timely, quality health care to our Nation’s veterans. This is a problem that GAO has reported on for more than a decade, and a problem that is necessary to address in order to ensure a continuum of care for veterans. Recently, DOD and VA have both announced plans to upgrade their existing software system. DOD has announced that it will spend 4.3 billion to upgrade the Armed Forces Longitudinal Application, while VA is continuing to update VistA.

a. Please describe the current process whereby medical records of transitioning servicemembers are transferred from DOD to the VA? How long does this process take? What if any areas of improvement have DOD and VA identified to speed up the transfer of medical records?

Response. On January 1, 2014, DOD ceased the mailing of paper Service Treatment Records (STR) to the VA and instead began uploading STRs into the DOD Healthcare Artifact and Image Management System (HAIMS) for storage in a format that is usable by VA for processing in the Veterans Benefits Management System. STRs are currently a combination of electronic and paper records which VA now retrieves from HAIMS using an electronic systems interface. The DOD policy remains 45 business days to complete this upload to allow all late flowing documents, such as may come from TRICARE Service Providers, to be included in the STR so VA has a greater assurance of a complete record for use in processing disability benefit claims. Significant progress has been made toward more timely transfer of records. For instance, in August 2014, there were more than 7,000 late (over 45 days) VA STR requests; however, as of January 16, 2016, this number was down to 840 and has averaged well below 1,000 since May 2015. Most of what VA requests from HAIMS they are able to retrieve the same day as the request, and 98.5 percent of STRs requested to date have been successfully retrieved.

b. What is the current status of achieving the goal on DOD/VA health records set forth in the February 5, 2013 announcement by the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs that instead of building a single integrated electronic health record (iEHR), both DOD and VA will concentrate on integrating VA and DOD health data by focusing on interoperability and using existing technological solutions?

Response. In addition to awarding a contract in July 2015 for DOD's new EHR, DOD has also met the statutory requirement of interoperability defined in Section 713 of the 2014 NDAA. The NDAA requires that the electronic health record systems of DOD and the VA are interoperable with an integrated display of data by complying with the national standards and architectural requirements identified by the DOD/VA Interagency Program Office (IPO) in collaboration with the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC). DOD sent a letter on November 16, 2015, to stakeholder congressional committees, including the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, notifying them of DOD's progress.

c. To date what amount of appropriated funds has DOD and VA spent in its efforts to improve the interoperability of their electronic health record systems?

Response. From 2010 to 2013, DOD and VA executed a joint program called the integrated Electronic Health Record (iEHR) in an attempt to create a single next-generation EHR system. When DOD and VA decided in 2013 to pursue separate EHR modernization programs, DOD stood up the Defense Medical Information Exchange (DMIX) program office, which was tasked with providing technical solutions for seamless data sharing and interoperable EHRs. This included the development of the Joint Legacy Viewer (JLV), an integrated display of DOD, VA, and private sector data for clinicians. In FY 2014 and FY 2015, DOD's total cost for JLV was \$109.5 million.

d. Please describe the metrics DOD and VA are using to measure the extent of interoperability, the milestones and timeline associated with achieving interoperability, and the baseline measurements associated with interoperability.

Response. In the Government Accountability Office (GAO) report GAO-15-530 published in August 2015, the GAO called for DOD and VA to establish a timeframe for identifying outcome-oriented metrics and define related goals to provide a basis for assessing and reporting on the status of interoperability. DOD and VA concurred with the recommendations.

The DOD/VA IPO Fourth Quarter FY 2015 Report to Congress, which was provided to the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, details the progress being made toward these recommendations. The IPO has continued collaborations with the Departments in developing baseline health data interoperability metrics. As the Departments continue to enhance interoperability and modernize their respective EHRs, the IPO seeks to evolve baseline metrics into outcome-based metrics. The Data Sharing portion of this report further defines the health data interoperability metrics and provides statistics on the current status of data sharing.

At this time, DOD cannot determine when Servicemembers generally take the Accessing Higher Education track, only the percent of Servicemembers who meet VOW and CRS within 90 days of separation. As an enterprise IT initiative is implemented in FY 2017, the DOD will have more visibility of timeframes of Transition GPS modules.

RESPONSE TO POSTHEARING QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL TO CURTIS COY, DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Question 1. VA's testimony notes that to meet the needs of National Guard and Reserve members, VA deployed benefits advisors to demobilization locations and tailored TAP's VA benefits briefings to meet the needs of our Guard and Reserve populations.

a. Could you please address the transition needs that are most common among members of the National Guard and Reserve?

Response. Mobilized National Guard and Reserve members (Reserve Component) are not afforded the same amount of time for transition activities as their Active counterparts separating from military service. Additionally, most Reserve Component members are either returning to civilian jobs they had prior to mobilization, or continuing their educational pursuits interrupted by their mobilization. Some may require employment or educational assistance. As our departments have expressed in previous testimony to the Committee, the Veterans' Employment and Training Service operates within an integrated employment, training, and enforcement system, which is overseen and funded by DOL, and is coordinated with state and local governments. As a result of increased outreach to the Reserve Component, VA has responded to an increased number of requests to support events and activities. This includes training Reserve Component career counselors on the Veterans Employment Center™, the Federal Government's online tool for connecting transitioning Servicemembers, including members of the National Guard and Reserve, to meaningful career opportunities hosted by VA. Additionally, economic liaisons sup-

porting the Veterans Economic Communities Initiative engage state and Reserve Component leadership. VA also leverages public-private partnerships to provide additional resources and opportunities to Reserve Component members. Examples include LinkedIn which offers a one-year free premium job-seeker subscription and Coursera which offers a free verified certificate to over 800 available online courses.

Reserve Component members with Veteran status may need information on the benefits and services they are entitled to from VA. They may require assistance in understanding the eligibility requirements and how to access VA benefits and services. In response, VA developed in FY 2015 an alternate version of the VA TAP Benefits I and II briefings, specific to Reserve Component members' needs.

b. Please expand upon the kinds of modifications you made to the curriculum for this population to address these unique needs and accommodate their demobilization process.

Response. The modifications to VA Benefits I and II curricula include an explanation of the eligibility criteria for VA benefits and services based on law and applicable VA regulations for Reserve Component members. VA's modifications also placed emphasis on more specific benefits information, such as how the monthly housing allowance under the Post-9/11 GI Bill® is calculated for those participating less than full-time and for those with less than 100 percent eligibility. Other than these modifications, the current Active Component briefing required little or no other modifications to meet the needs of Reserve Component members.

c. Please describe how VA collects input from these Guard and Reserve members on the effectiveness of the VA benefits briefings and how VA plans to make changes as needed in the future.

Response. VA receives quarterly TAP activity feedback through the Department of Defense's Participant Assessment. Based on this feedback, VA updates curricula to better enhance the Reserve Component members' experiences and to provide relevant information to those who are demobilizing from a qualifying period of Active Duty. For example, based upon feedback received from Reserve Component audiences, VA has developed a more robust benefits curriculum that is specific to those Servicemembers who are demobilizing from a qualifying period of Active Duty. The curriculum can be provided on an as-needed basis or can be provided during scheduled Transition Assistance Program classes for Reserve Component personnel. VA has removed many of the redundant activities in the curriculum and replaced with more hands-on learning activities that further enhance the employment, and benefits and services knowledge of those separating.

Additionally, as part of the Department of Defense's Military Life Cycle (MLC) program modifications, VA will be able to design and introduce individual topics of interest that may be used independently or as part of a group of topics. These program modifications are designed to enhance VA's flexibility in providing quality benefits briefings during demobilization periods and upon Reserve Component members' return to their home stations. VA found that there were many participants who wrote that they had further questions about Post-9/11 GI Bill Transfer of Eligibility. As a result, VA created the MLC curriculum that talks specifically about this benefit.

RESPONSE TO POSTHEARING QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. MAZIE K. HIRONO TO CURTIS COY, DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

VBA ASSISTANCE TO HAWAII VETERANS

Question 1. For the last several years, I have heard from veterans in the state of Hawaii who live on our neighbor islands that do not have Veterans Benefits Offices. I have repeatedly heard that veterans living in the state's neighbor islands find it difficult to navigate the VA, understand the benefits process, and to access VA benefits because they do not have access to a benefits office.

a. Please describe the Veterans Benefits Administration's current and future outreach efforts by its staff to veterans residing on the islands of Kauai, Maui, Molokai, Lanai and Hawaii Island walking through the process of accessing benefits and services?

Response. Currently, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) utilizes outreach coordinators from the Honolulu Regional Office (RO) to provide information about VA benefits and services to Veterans and Servicemembers who reside in Hawaii. The RO schedules visits to the islands of Hawaii (Kona and Hilo), Kauai, Maui, Molokai, and Lanai on a regular basis. Benefit counselors from the RO travel to Kona, Hilo, and Kauai bimonthly; Maui monthly; and Lanai and Molokai quar-

terly. Outreach dates to these locations are posted on the RO's website and announced in the communities via flyers and media spots. The RO also conducts a town hall event on each of the outer islands every fiscal year. VBA intends to continue this robust outreach schedule for the foreseeable future.

b. Would the Veterans Benefits Administration consider holding benefits workshops in 2016 via videoconferencing on a regular basis that would allow veterans resident on Hawaii's neighbor islands to answer any questions that they may have about their benefits?

Response. VBA is working to expand the avenues of its outreach efforts through videoconferencing. VBA is piloting a program at the Cleveland VA Regional Office called TeleBenefits. TeleBenefits allows Veterans to communicate "face-to-face" with VA benefits counselors via a secure video line. This pilot program is testing the feasibility of using videoconferencing to connect rural or distant Veterans with benefits counselors who can answer questions regarding benefits such as disability pension, disability compensation, home loan guaranty, and education. Based on the results of this pilot, VBA will determine the feasibility of using videoconferencing to reach Veterans served by other regional offices, including the Hawaii Regional Office.

PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS DURING THE TRANSITION

Question 2. As a Member of both the Senate Armed Services and Veterans Committees, I've particularly interested in and concerned about DOD/VA collaboration to prevent homelessness among transitioning Servicemembers.

a. Please describe the extent to which the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs work to mitigate risk factors for homelessness among transitioning servicemembers.

Response. VA works closely with the Department of Defense (DOD) and our inter-agency partners to create appropriate synergies throughout the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) process to ensure transitioning Servicemembers at risk of homelessness are connected to the right resources prior to separation. Specifically, in response to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016, VA and DOD are working together to leverage the Capstone process (which is part of TAP) to identify those who may be at risk of homelessness and ensure they are connected to VA.

As the final step in TAP, Capstone is intended to serve as a standardized and comprehensive end-of-career experience to validate, verify, and bolster the transition training and other services that prepare Servicemembers for civilian life. During Capstone, a Servicemember's commander, or his or her designee, verifies that the Servicemember meets career readiness standards and has a viable Individual Transition Plan (ITP). If the Servicemember fails to meet one of these standards or does not have a viable ITP, DOD provides a warm handover to an appropriate partner agency, such as VA, or an employment and training program funded by the Department of Labor.

During a warm handover to the VA, the Commander or his/her designee will connect the Servicemember with a VA Benefits Advisor (either in-person, or telephonically) and the VA Benefits Advisor will acknowledge that the Servicemember requires individual counseling on VA benefits and services for which the Servicemember may be eligible. VA has benefits advisors assigned to each military installation to receive warm handovers from DOD. Once the TSM is connected to a benefits advisor, the benefits advisor will counsel the TSM on the VA benefits and services for which they may be eligible, such as disability compensation, educational benefits, or health care. Specifically, for those TSMs who are determined by DOD to not have an adequate post transition housing plan on their ITP, VA benefits advisors will ensure that the transitioning Servicemembers are connected with their local VHA point of contact to determine eligibility for homeless resources.

For those TSMs who are located near one of the 21 Military Treatment Facilities (MTFs) that have VA liaisons for healthcare, the VA benefits advisor will refer the transitioning Servicemembers to the appropriate local VA liaison for healthcare. VA liaisons for healthcare will coordinate initial healthcare for eligible transitioning Servicemembers, which will include a referral to address housing needs at the VA Medical Center (VAMC) closest to the transitioning Servicemember's home. This coordination will include the use of existing tracking capabilities for purposes of data capture. For those transitioning Servicemembers who are located outside of the 21 MTFs, the VA benefits advisor will contact the designated Homeless Program point of contact (POC) at the transitioning Servicemember's local VAMC to address current housing needs. The Homeless Program POC will ensure that eligible transitioning Servicemembers are given direct access to housing resources in the local area through the network of programs and services available, with an emphasis on per-

manent housing placement. Additionally, the POC will provide linkages to available supportive and prevention resources and programs within VA and the community, including local VAMC Transition Care Management Team members.

The interagency partners monitor TAP collaboration efforts to serve at-risk transitioning Servicemembers through the TAP governance structure. The TAP governance structure is a two-tier leadership model by which the Senior Steering group (SSG) reports to the Executive Council (EC). This structure allows for interagency problem solving, to include partnership and alignment in curriculum and policy issues impacting transitioning Servicemembers. The SSG allows working groups to tackle specific issues related to: Information Technology (Portal), Performance Management, Strategic Communications, Curriculum, Transition, and Data Sharing. Through this governance structure, VA, DOD, and the interagency partners are currently collaborating on the development of a post-transition survey and analysis of warm handover populations.

Additionally, VA, DOD, and the interagency partners collaborated in the development of the 2015 Veteran Economic Opportunity Report. The purpose of the report was to evaluate economic competitiveness of Veterans versus non-Veterans to inform policy, guide improvement strategies, and effectively communicate national priorities. This initial report focuses on baseline data and information that clarifies the landscape of current economic outcomes of Veterans and transitioning Servicemembers. To understand the success of ongoing initiatives and identify possible barriers to Veterans economic opportunity, this report provides an additional focus on Veterans of the 9/11 era in comparison with Veterans of all other eras, as well as the non-Veteran population.

b. What percentage of homeless veterans are recently separated Servicemembers?

Response. The attached chart below shows for Fiscal Years 2013–2015, approximately 19.1 percent (24,939) of Veterans assessed for services by one of the Homeless Programs has been separated five years or less. The assessments conducted by the Health Care for Re-entry Veterans (HCRV) and the Veteran Justice Outreach (VJO) programs are excluded as they serve non-homeless as well as homeless Veterans.

Year of first assessment:	FY 2013		FY 2014		FY 2015		All Years	
	N		N		N		N	
Number of Assessments	45,690		41,541		43,419		130,650	
	Mean	St Dev	Mean	St Dev	Mean	St Dev	Mean	St Dev
Average Years separated from military	25.2	13.9	25.3	14.3	25.4	14.9	25.3	14.3
	N	Pct	N	Pct	N	Pct	N	Pct
Years separated from military (categories)								
5 or less	8,710	19.1	7,826	18.8	8,403	19.4	24,939	19.1
6 - 9	2,736	6.0	2,487	6.0	2,820	6.4	8,043	6.2
10-19	5,079	11.1	4,712	11.3	5,110	11.8	14,901	11.4
20-29	9,825	21.5	8,447	20.3	8,129	18.7	26,401	20.2
30-39	13,389	29.3	11,900	28.7	11,422	26.3	36,711	28.1
40 or more	5,951	13.0	6,169	14.9	7,535	17.4	19,655	15.0

c. In what areas can we improve DOD/VA collaboration in this regard?

Response. VA and DOD continue to explore options for improving transition collaboration and are currently working on a TAP data-sharing agreement. DOD uses the Servicemember Career Readiness Standards/Individual Transition Plan Checklist (DD Form 2958) to indicate whether or not a Servicemember has an adequate post-transition housing plan. Currently, all DD Form 2958 data is stored through the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) and not shared with VA. Therefore, in the current state, VA is unable to retain personally identifiable information on those Servicemembers who are determined by DOD to have inadequate housing plans. If VA and DOD shared this information, the agencies could track the progress and status of individuals who are determined at risk of homelessness. Therefore, a VA/DOD TAP data-sharing agreement would allow for greater transparency and

tracking of Servicemembers who may be at risk of homelessness. It would also allow for better long-term data reporting on behalf of both agencies.

d. What do you see as the major challenges regarding veteran homelessness in the coming years and are there legislative proposals that would help in this regard?

Response. Between Fiscal Years 2010 and 2015, VA and its partners have reduced the estimated number of homeless Veterans by approximately 36 percent. Since 2010, over 360,000 Veterans and their families members have been permanently housed, rapidly rehoused, or prevented from falling into homelessness as a result of VA's homeless continuum of services and targeted community resources.

Despite these gains, there are still challenges regarding Veteran homelessness. Women make up approximately 10 percent of the Veterans served by VHA specialized homeless programs in FY 2015. Many of them resided with their minor children.

Interventions that address family needs will give VA the necessary flexibility to serve a changing population. The Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Transition in Place (TIP) Model is more conducive for housing women and/or women with dependent children. Should additional funding become available, TIP housing for women Veterans and/or women Veterans with dependent children will be given consideration.

As currently authorized by 38 U.S.C. Section 2031, the Health Care for Homeless Veteran (HCHV) Program may provide outreach as well as "care, treatment, and rehabilitative services (directly or by contract in community-based treatment facilities, including halfway houses)" to Veterans defined as homeless by the McKinney-Vento Act. However, that authority to provide the described services is limited to Veterans only and does not include authority to provide those services to accompanying immediate family members of eligible Veterans.

Although the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) provides authority to serve Veteran families through grants to community agencies, this program does not exist in all communities, and VA has found instances where provision of these services exceeds the capacity of the local grant provider.

VA does not have the legislative authority that would allow the HCHV Program to provide emergency housing and case management services to immediate family members accompanying eligible homeless Veterans. The HCHV Program could possibly be expanded to include this type of intervention by amending 38 U.S.C. Section 2031(a)(2).

RESPONSE TO POSTHEARING QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY HON. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
TO THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

Question. To what extent does the DOL Core Curriculum include counseling for National Guard and Reserve members on their employment rights under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994 (USERRA)?

Response. For separating servicemembers, and members of the Reserve/Guard, who are coming off of active duty, the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) is briefed to them by Department of Defense's Transition Assistance Counselors and members of the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) during their pre-separation counseling. ESGR Headquarters staff is responsible for training State Committee volunteers on how to perform as USERRA information resources and mediators between employers and members of the National Guard and Reserve.

While the Department of Labor's three day Employment Workshop (DOL EW) is specifically geared toward the mechanics of getting a good job, such as resume writing and skills translation, instructors also cover veterans' rights under USERRA on the third day of class.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you, Senator Sullivan.

I want to thank all our panelists for their very thorough and comprehensive testimony, and I thank the Committee for its active participation. I will welcome the second panel forward and excuse the first panel. [Pause.]

If our second panel will come forward and be seated, I will introduce everybody, and we will go straight to the testimony.

Let me welcome our second panel and ask them to be seated, and you have witnessed, by patiently waiting for your turn to come, what the Committee meeting is going to be like, so we will go straight to the testimony.

I do want to do a little personal privilege, if I can. I know we have got The Coca-Cola Company here and Starbucks here, and Starbucks has one of their representatives here—Jim Walsh. Where is Jim? He left? [Laughter.]

Well, I had all these nice things I was going to say about him. Jim is a former member of the U.S. House of Representatives. He served with myself, John Boozman, Sherrod Brown, and others. He is a fine contributor, I am sure, to Starbucks and was a great contributor to the Congress of the United States of America.

Ms. Voticky is from The Coca-Cola Company. Her official title is group director of North American Talent Acquisition, Coca-Cola.

Matt Kress is the manager of Veterans and Military Affairs at the Starbucks Company.

Eric Eversole is president of Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Daniel Smith is assistant director of Veterans Employment and Education Division, The American Legion.

And Michael Zacchea is program manager, Entrepreneur Bootcamp for Veterans, University of Connecticut. And you were bragged about recently by Senator Blumenthal, so we are delighted to have you as well.

We will start with Ms. Voticky, The Coca-Cola Company.

STATEMENT OF ELIZABETH VOTICKY, GROUP DIRECTOR OF NORTH AMERICA TALENT ACQUISITION, THE COCA-COLA COMPANY

Mrs. VOTICKY. Thank you. Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Blumenthal, members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and staff. For the record, my name is Elizabeth Voticky. I am group director for North America Talent Acquisition at The Coca-Cola Company. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on some of our best practices—as well as challenges—in facilitating post-service career transition and employment opportunities for those who have served our country.

Mr. Chairman, on behalf of our chairman and CEO, Mr. Muhtar Kent, and our nearly 700,000 associates across the country and globally, we would like to thank you for your leadership on this critical issue. As a Georgia-based company and constituent, we are proud to follow your example of maintaining an unwavering commitment to our men and women in uniform, both while they serve and afterwards.

We would also like to thank the many military and nonprofit partners who are represented here today. The positive strides that we have made in veterans recruitment would not be possible were it not for their tireless efforts and dedication. Public-private partnerships truly excel when all stakeholders align around a shared set of values and goals, and that is an integral part of our narrative today thanks to the productive relationships that we enjoy with many gathered here.

For historical perspective, The Coca-Cola Company's partnership with the United States military dates back to the USO's beginning in 1941. At that time, our chief executive officer, Robert Woodruff, proclaimed that every person in uniform would be able to get a bottle of Coca-Cola for 5 cents wherever he or she served and what

it cost the company. The Coca-Cola Company helped quench the thirst of soldiers who flocked to USO centers during World War II to socialize and enjoy some of the comforts of a home away from home. More than 74 years later, we remain prouder than ever of our continued partnership in support of U.S. servicemen and women both around the world and here at home.

We believe that a successful veterans recruitment and retention program must have, at minimum, three intertwined components: support from the top through senior leadership that recognizes and embraces the unique value of this cohort of individuals to any workforce; second, a comprehensive human resources engagement plan that encompasses the full continuum from job search to recruitment, hiring, on-boarding, and retention; and, third, a consistent emphasis on veteran integration into the organizational culture and ongoing support throughout their career progression. These elements are the cornerstone of our efforts.

One of our senior-most leaders, chief U.S. sales and operations officer Mark Rahiya, served as an officer in the U.S. Navy Submarine Force—he calls himself a “bubblehead”—and he captured the importance of senior leadership engagement in this effort at our recent Army PaYS Program MOU signing ceremony. He said: “The young men and women coming out of the military understand the value of hard work....We find they are high-integrity individuals because of what they have learned as part of that military culture, and they bring that with them...combined with MOS skills sets, whether they have been mechanics or one of any other number of amazing skills they learn. You can take advantage of that and get them into the right job and train them and you get fantastic employees—and very loyal employees as well. And that is a phenomenal opportunity for our economy.

The Committee Members have our full testimony for the record, and in the interest of time, I will abbreviate our comments somewhat regarding the extraordinarily productive partnerships that we have been able to forge with the military and civilian agencies represented here today, along with some nonprofits.

What are some of the key partnerships that have worked for The Coca-Cola Company? The Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP) sponsored by the Department of Defense enables us to engage directly on installations on recruiting and hiring efforts specifically for those spouses of active-duty members.

As you know, the MSEP works in conjunction with the Transition Assistance Program office on military installations for spouses and children to find employment locally. Coca-Cola proactively partners in this and other ways with various regional and local TAP offices to provide employment opportunities.

Moreover, this past September, Coca-Cola proudly joined the Army Partnership for Youth Success or PaYS Program, a strategic partnership between the U.S. Army and corporations, public sector agencies, and companies to assist exiting army personnel with job opportunities. The program guarantees PaYS soldiers a job interview and the potential for employment upon honorable discharge.

Aside from targeted relationships for hiring military veterans, Coca-Cola is also proud of our partnership with American Corporate Partners (ACP). Through our Military Veteran Business Re-

sources Group—which you will hear a little bit more about—Coca-Cola associates work with ACP by mentoring on job search, resume writing, and business acumen. The Coca-Cola Foundation awarded a \$50,000 grant in 2014 for programmatic funding of this partnership, this mentoring program. Since then, over 70 veterans have received one-on-one career development assistance from Coca-Cola associates who actually volunteer as career mentors in this program.

The MVBRG, our Military Veterans Business Resource Group, was established in 2012 and has 11 field chapters within our organization and over 1,000 members. I am honored to be joined in the audience by our MVBRG president, Mr. Patrick Haddock, who is a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve. Like Mark, who I mentioned earlier, Lieutenant Colonel Haddock brings a wealth of firsthand knowledge to the table through his leadership in support of our veterans recruitment and retention efforts. The MVBRG facilitates programs that focus on the primary pillars of workplace, marketplace, and community.

Workplace incorporates engaging our employees in programs that benefit our associates who are veterans or associated with the military, including guardsmen and reservists. This includes partnering with our Talent Acquisition team to help with veteran recruiting, mentoring veteran employees in career development, as well as assisting company leadership with USERRA compliance.

Marketplace incorporates our efforts to connect our veterans in military service with our business. This is done through partnerships with the USO, Wounded Warrior Project, and our military sales to installations globally.

Community involves our efforts to support local communities with events and programs which support the veteran population. These vary widely from sponsoring a race to support a veterans-related cause to helping with local programs for homeless vets.

Each year, the MVBRG also hosts a 2-day event for veterans and active-duty members in Atlanta at Coca-Cola Plaza. These events start with our annual “USO Stuffing Party” where our associates volunteer to fill 10,000-plus care packages for deployed troops around the world. Events also include an evening reception; a leadership panel discussion on veteran transition; and a full-day workshop on resume writing, interviewing skills, and job searches. We also announce an annual customer award called “The President’s Veterans Award” in recognition of a customer of ours who has demonstrated outstanding support to veterans and servicemembers throughout the prior year. Dunkin Brands is our 2015 award recipient. They made a financial donation of \$5,000 to the USO of Georgia.

Our MVBRG is a true example of a best practice in an organization dedicated to developing a culture of respect and understanding of our veteran associates. The team is entirely comprised of volunteers who take time out of work and home life to mentor, plan, and execute a variety of programs and events aimed at enhancing the work-life experiences of our veteran associates. Our leadership is dedicated to providing a culture where our associates are given the time—not only to serve but also to volunteer on company time—

to develop the programs that veterans so desperately need and want to facilitate their assimilation.

The VETLANTA Partnership was founded in 2014 with really our MVBRG—too many acronyms. It is a partnership of 20-plus Atlanta-based Fortune 500 Company veterans groups focused on improving veteran homelessness and challenges, providing mentoring and helping with veteran employment. More than 70 veterans have received this one-on-one career development assistance from associates, as I mentioned earlier, and the VETLANTA program, which is not in the testimony because I only found out on Monday, is actually starting up a web site and will also include a job board.

Coca-Cola also has an internal training program for our TA team to help them translate military job descriptions typically found on veterans' resumes into the civilian workplace context. Recruiting military veterans is successful when we have properly trained our recruiting teams to interpret and translate military experience and skills into relative business skills within our organization. Our plan is to expand upon this best practice and launch leadership knowledge courses to assist our current non-military leaders in better understanding the skill sets brought to our organization by veterans.

While working with the TAP program has many advantages, we would agree that there are some areas of opportunity where updates could make it an even stronger and more robust partner. So the idea of the administrative process currently underway versus the single point of contact is really all about technology and implementing a technology solution that would allow us more easily to reach out to exiting veterans through the TAP program.

The task of translating military nomenclature regarding job skills and roles into terms that the civilian workplace can understand remains a constant challenge—even in a perfect world. In the TAP model currently, there is not enough or does not seem to be enough coaching and mentoring that goes along with the resume writing to make sure that the context is applicable.

We talked earlier about a central point of contact. Every TAP office—and I can use a recent example. In September, we were 500 drivers short across the country. We knew that the CDLs were easily obtained by drivers exiting the military, and we ended up being able to physically contact 20 TAP locations and post our job manually at their sites. We only received 12 resumes.

One example of where technology has been leveraged with some effectiveness can be found in the eBenefits tool. Although it is a great new way of getting jobs out to military personnel through a scrape of our job site, it is receiving considerably less traffic than on commercial sites such as the Monster.com military job board, for example. We believe this is due, in large part, to a lack of targeted marketing, if you will, to transitioning military personnel that would drive traffic to the site specifically—

Chairman ISAKSON. I hate to interrupt, but you are going to have to wrap up so we have time for everybody. Thank you.

Mrs. VOTICKY. Sorry. OK. You know, I think will go right to my closing.

In closing, we would like to once again thank you, Mr. Chairman, and HON. Members of the Committee and staff for your leadership.

We would like to applaud all of the nonprofit partners assembled here today. In particular, to our military partners, the branches, and men and women in uniform whom you represent, the Coca-Cola Company would like to say thank you for your service and reaffirm our commitment to supporting your post-service careers.

[The prepared statement of Mrs. Voticky follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MRS. ELIZABETH VOTICKY, GROUP DIRECTOR FOR NORTH AMERICA TALENT ACQUISITION, THE COCA-COLA COMPANY

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman, Members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs and staff. For the record, my name is Elizabeth Voticky, Group Director for North America Talent Acquisition at The Coca-Cola Company. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on some of our best practices—as well as challenges—in facilitating post-service career transition and employment opportunities for those who have served our Country.

On behalf of our Chairman and CEO, Mr. Muhtar Kent, and our nearly 700,000 associates across this country and globally, we would also like to thank the many military and nonprofit partners who are represented here today. The positive strides that we have made in veterans recruitment would not be possible were it not for their tireless dedication and efforts. Public-private partnerships truly excel when all stakeholders align around a shared set of values and goals and that is an integral part of our narrative today thanks to the productive relationships that we enjoy with many of those gathered here.

For historical perspective, The Coca-Cola Company's partnership with the United States Military dates back to the USO's beginning in 1941. At that time, former Coca-Cola Chief Executive Officer, Robert Woodruff, proclaimed that "every person in uniform will get a bottle of Coca-Cola for five cents wherever he or she is and whatever the cost to the company." The Coca-Cola Company helped quench the thirst of soldiers who flocked to USO centers during World War II to socialize and enjoy some of the comforts of a "home away from home." More than 74 years later, we remain prouder than ever of our continuing partnerships in support of U.S. service men and women both around the world and here at home.

We believe that a successful veterans recruitment and retention program must have, at minimum, three intertwined components: (1) support from the top through senior leadership that recognizes and embraces the unique value of this cohort of individuals to any workforce, (2) a comprehensive human resources engagement plan that encompasses the full continuum from job search to recruitment, hiring, on-boarding and retention and (3) a consistent emphasis on veteran integration into the organizational culture and ongoing support throughout their career progression. These elements form the cornerstone of our efforts.

One of our senior-most leaders, Chief Customer Officer Mark Rahiya, served as an officer in the U.S. Navy Submarine Force, and captured the importance of senior leadership engagement in this effort at our recent Army PaYS Program MOU signing ceremony where he said: "The young men and women coming out of the military understand the value of hard work," he said. "We find they're high-integrity individuals because of what they've learned as part of that military culture, and they bring that with them . . . combined with MOS skills sets, whether they've been mechanics or one of any other number of amazing skills they learn. You can take advantage of that and get them into the right job and train them and you get fantastic employees—and very loyal employees as well. That's a phenomenal opportunity for our economy."

I. THE COCA-COLA COMPANY: VETERANS RECRUITMENT AND HIRING PARTNERSHIPS BEST PRACTICES

Coca-Cola is currently engaged on various installations with the Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP), sponsored by the Department of Defense (DOD). The MSEP works in conjunction with the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) office on military installations to assist spouses and children of active duty members to find employment locally. Currently, Coca-Cola is actively engaged with MSEP in Florida providing employment opportunities. Coca-Cola proactively partners in this and other ways with various regional and local TAP offices to provide employment opportunities at all levels of the organization.

Additionally, this past September, Coca-Cola proudly joined the Army Partnership for Youth Success (PaYS) Program—a strategic partnership between the US Army and corporations, companies, and public sector agencies to assist exiting army per-

sonnel with job opportunities. The Program guarantees PaYS Soldiers a job interview and the potential for employment after honorable discharge or completion of required active duty training.

Aside from targeted relationships for hiring military veterans, Coca-Cola is also proud of our partnership with American Corporate Partners (ACP). Through our Military Veteran Business Resources Group (MVBRG)—which you will hear a bit more about momentarily—Coca-Cola associates work with ACP by mentoring on job search, resume writing and business acumen. The Coca-Cola Foundation awarded a \$50,000 grant in 2014 for programmatic funding of the mentoring program. Since then, 70+ veterans have received one-on-one career development assistance from Coca-Cola associates who volunteer as career mentors.

A. The Coca-Cola Company Military Veterans Business Resource Group

The Coca-Cola Military Veterans Business Resource Group (“MVBRG”) was established in 2012 and has 11 field chapters and 1,000+ members. I am honored to be joined in the audience by our MVBRG President, Mr. Patrick Haddock, Lt. Col., US Army Reserve. Like Mark, who I mentioned earlier, Lt. Col. Haddock brings a wealth of first-hand knowledge to the table through his leadership in support of our veterans recruitment and retention efforts. The MVBRG facilitates programs that focus on three primary pillars; Workplace, Marketplace and Community:

1) WORKPLACE incorporates engaging our employees in programs that benefit our associates who are veterans or associated with the military including Guardsmen and Reservists. This includes partnering with Talent Acquisition to help with veteran recruiting, mentoring veteran employees in career development, and assisting company leadership with USERRA compliance.

2) MARKETPLACE incorporates our efforts to connect our veterans in military service with our business. This is done through partnerships with the USO, Wounded Warrior Project, and our military sales to installations globally.

3) COMMUNITY involves our efforts to support local communities with events and programs which support the veteran population. These vary widely from sponsoring a race to support a veterans-related cause, to helping with local programs for homeless veterans.

Each year, Coca-Cola’s MVBRG also hosts a two-day event for veterans and active duty members in the Atlanta area at Coca-Cola Plaza. These events start with our annual “USO Stuffing Party” where our associates volunteer to fill 10,000+ care packages for deployed troops around the world. Events also include an evening reception; a leadership panel discussion on veteran transition; a full day workshop on resume writing, interviewing skills and job searches. We also announce an annual customer award, The President’s Veterans Award, in recognition of a customer who has demonstrated outstanding support to veterans and servicemembers throughout the prior year. Dunkin Brands is our 2015 award recipient and they made a financial donation of \$5,000.00 to the USO of Georgia.

Our MVBRG is a true example of a best practice in an organization dedicated to developing a culture of respect and understanding of our veteran associates. The team is entirely comprised of volunteers who take time out of work and home life to mentor, plan and execute a variety of programs and events aimed at enhancing the work-life experiences of our veteran associates. Our leadership is dedicated to providing a culture where our associates are given the time—not only to serve—but also to volunteer on company time to develop the programs that veterans so desperately need and want to facilitate their assimilation into corporate culture.

B. VETLANTA Partnership

The Coca-Cola MVBRG founded VETLANTA in 2014 as a partnership of 20+ Atlanta based Fortune 500 Company veterans groups focused on improving the veteran homeless challenges, provide mentoring and helping with veteran employment. Through a partnership with American Corporate Partners (ACP), VETLANTA and our MVBRG, Coca-Cola associates provide mentoring and career development support to transitioning service men and women on job search, resume writing and business acumen. As noted earlier, more than 70 veterans have received one-on-one career development assistance from Coca-Cola associates who volunteer as career mentors.

C. Internal Training for Talent Acquisition & Internal Non-Military Leaders

Coca-Cola also has an internal training program for our Talent Acquisition team to help them translate military job descriptions typically found on veterans’ résumés into the civilian workplace context. Recruiting military veterans is successful when we have properly trained our recruiting teams to interpret and translate military experience and skills into relative business skills within our organization. Our plan

is to expand upon this best practice and launch leadership knowledge courses to assist our current non-military leaders in better understanding the skillsets brought to our organization by veterans.

II. OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVED PUBLIC/PRIVATE COLLABORATION ON VETERANS TRANSITION EFFORTS

A. Need for Improved Administrative Structure

While working with the TAP Program has many advantages, we would agree that there are some areas for improvement where updates could make it an even stronger and more robust partner. As you may know, the TAP Program largely relies upon a contractor-based administrative model. Such a structure poses a barrier to establishing solid relationships due to different contractors and/or points-of-contacts changing on a regular basis. There is no central point of contact for companies like ours that are national in scope.

Frequent changes in contract entities and personnel prevent these critical players from developing critical institutional relationships and memory with their military and civilian partners. For example, changing contractor contacts mean that new personnel often have to navigate a learning curve to assist transitioning candidates with the crucial task of translating military experience and its unique language into business terminology. To be certain, the task of translating military nomenclature regarding job skills and roles into terms that the civilian workplace can understand remains a constant challenge—even in a perfect world. But this contractor-based model makes it even more difficult to have points-of-contact who have successfully mastered that and other skills.

These types of structural issues—and their resulting inefficiencies—are also mirrored within the Veterans Administration (VA) context at the state level. State-run DVOP and LVER programs through the VA are isolated and, as such, companies like ours are unable to leverage fully the programs offered to veterans through these offices as they stand alone and vary from state to state. Improved coordination could exponentially increase the effectiveness of these resources.

B. Better Use and Integration of Technology

We are all constantly working to better understand and leverage technology in our organizations—civilian and military alike. TAP offices continue to rely upon hard copy to a significant degree. For example, requiring a paper copy of a job posting which is then manually posted on a job board is just one such illustration. The result is that only those who physically walk into the TAP office see our postings. Without a central contact list, every TAP office would have to be called and contacts made prior to emailing or, in many cases faxing, a job posting to the site. These added steps all serve to burden and slow down the process when we are hiring across the country.

One example of where technology has been leveraged with some effectiveness can be found in the e-Benefits tool. Although it is a great new way of getting jobs out to military personnel through a scrape of our own job site, there is considerably less traffic via this channel than on commercial sites such as Monster's military job board. We believe this is due, in large part, to a lack of a targeted marketing campaign, if you will, to transitioning military personnel that would drive traffic to the site specifically for careers. It does hold potential, however, and we believe it could be more fully leveraged to drive employment opportunities.

C. Inability to Promote Specific Jobs w/ Specific Employers

Aside from the aforementioned opportunities, TAP's ability to realize its full potential is further inhibited by the limitation on promoting a specific job with a specific employer. Within the TAP context, transitioning personnel are often unable to formally discuss what job opportunity would constitute the best fit and which companies offer that type of job. Tailoring inquiries to specific individuals can help to not only improve the overall job search experience but also increase the chances for a successful match between candidate and prospective employer.

D. Syncing the Military Transition Timeline & Private Sector Hiring Cycle

It must be emphasized that the need for continuing innovation does not solely rest on the public sector/military side of the ledger. The private sector must also continue to come up with creative ways of resolving obstacles to the effective facilitation of veterans recruitment and hiring. In that vein, a major challenge for the private sector continues to be misalignment between the timeline for a transitioning candidate's search and the timeline for a company's hiring process. Most companies post jobs for immediate needs, and exiting service personnel are often weeks or months from an exit date when they begin to search. Our organization and others

like ours need to find a way to pipeline more effectively and better structure the contact management of qualified personnel.

There are several private agencies that attempt to fill this gap but, while free to service personnel, they charge fees for private sector use of their services. This is an uneven fix that requires more collaborative work between all partners in this effort. Our view is that they capitalize on the gaps in the current government model for assisting in hiring veterans and are successful because there are few other options. We would like to see the government programs fill in the gaps and bridge the barriers that prevent or challenge organizations focused on hiring vets, from achieving this objective.

III. HOW CAN VETERANS BETTER PREPARE?

Where can veterans themselves assist in this effort? Where we see an area of potential improvement is in the emotional preparedness for the change in environment. Veterans are accustomed to a plan, a direction, and seldom work well in ambiguity—it's not their culture or experience in the military to be left with little or no direction. In the corporate world, barring a controlling leader, most mid-management and frontline associates are left to do the job. This is something that although they are advised of, they haven't experienced as military personnel. Training in how a real world organization works and what they expect from their teams would be a very valuable addition to the transition experience.

A successful transition for our organization is when we are able to translate a servicemember's skills and experience into a role that is not only well suited, but provides both personal and professional fulfillment through a challenging and growth-oriented opportunity for the veteran. Through our MVBPRP, we assist veterans with their assimilation into our organization and culture through a variety of ways. Having a veteran find the right role for them within our organization, learning and developing a career that is satisfying and productive and growth with the organization—that is truly a successful transition.

IV. CLOSING

In closing, we would like to once again thank you, Mr. Chairman, and the honorable Members of the Committee and staff for your leadership. We would also like to applaud all of the nonprofit partners assembled here today for their work. In particular, to our military partners, the branches and men and women in uniform whom you represent—The Coca-Cola Company would like to say thank you for your service and reaffirm our commitment to supporting your post-service career plans. This commitment is based not only upon the belief that it is the "right" thing to do . . . but also upon the understanding that a company in today's complex global economy cannot effectively compete without leveraging the unique skillsets and experiences of veterans.

As we have done since 1941, when thousands of men and women were sent to military bases around the world at the outset of WWII, Coca-Cola rallied behind our men and women in uniform. Today, we continue to rally behind you as we work to create even more rewarding and challenging employment opportunities for veterans. Thank you.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you, Ms. Voticky.

Mr. Kress, welcome. Before you start, I want Mr. Walsh to stand up. I just bragged about you when you left the room. This is the Jim Walsh who made such a great contribution to the U.S. Congress from the great State of New York. We are glad to have you today. Thank you.

Mr. Kress.

STATEMENT OF MATTHEW KRESS, MANAGER OF VETERANS AND MILITARY AFFAIRS, STARBUCKS COFFEE COMPANY

Mr. KRESS. Thank you. Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the Starbucks commitment to hire and honor 10,000 veterans and military spouses. As a post-9/11 veteran combat veteran, your action on behalf of veterans and military families is much appreciated.

With a desire to serve something greater than myself, I spent 22 years in the Marine Corps, enlisted and commissioned officer, active and reserve. After a special operations deployment to Iraq in 2004, I left active duty to be a firefighter in Southern California and remained in the Reserves. During this time, I used the post-9/11 GI bill to earn a master's degree from the University of Washington and an MBA from UCLA.

Like many who have served, I have seen more than my share of sacrifice and valor, and I am here today as a proud veteran. I am grateful for the support of my Government and honored to help Starbucks and this Committee to make successful transitions the norm.

Long before I joined Starbucks, the company was listening to its veterans, partnering with the Government and veteran service organizations, and receiving guidance from an incredible group of leaders like former Secretary Robert Gates, who sits on the Starbucks board, General (Ret.) Peter Chiarelli, and many others as we continue to deepen our commitment to veterans and military spouses.

I would like to share with you today some of the ways Starbucks is supporting the transition of veterans.

The commitment began with our veterans hiring initiative. With the support of organizations such as Hiring Our Heroes, we are more than halfway to our goal of hiring 10,000 veterans and military spouses by the end of 2018.

Many companies hire veterans. What makes Starbucks' commitment unique is that we are not just hiring, we are honoring and creating career opportunities for veterans, their spouses, their families, and connecting servicemembers with their communities.

Let me talk for just a moment about honoring. We made it clear from the beginning that we welcome veterans and military spouses, not out of a sense of obligation or patriotism, but because we need them. They reinforce our values of service, community, and responsibility. Our CEO, Howard Schultz, often says, "We hire them because they make us better."

Starbucks is equally committed to hiring military spouses and retaining them as they move from one duty station to another. We are proud to work with Blue Star Families because we know nothing will support a military family more than hiring talented military spouses who are growing their own careers.

We believe we are in a unique position with our national footprint in 7,000 communities to address the core reason why veterans struggle in their transition. There is a cultural divide that separates the 1 percent that have voluntarily served from the 99 percent who have not.

Let me briefly mention two ways we are bringing communities together to bridge this divide.

The first way is through Starbucks' Military Family Stores. Working with military and veteran service organizations, Starbucks has dedicated 16 Military Family Stores with plans to have 30 across the country by the end of 2018.

A second way we are bridging the divide is through an unprecedented meeting of the minds. Starbucks recently brought together the Nation's leading advocates for veterans and spouses, including

officials from the DOD, DOL, VA, the head of the USO, and Secretary Gates to talk about how we can address this cultural issue at the root of transition problems.

We called the meeting the “Muster” because it took an honest accounting of our national state of readiness when it comes to our veterans. We resolved to make a list of recommendations to you and the White House when we muster again here in Washington, DC, in April.

Starbucks has many other initiatives to support transitioning veterans and spouses in the community. I have more details in my full testimony that I would like to have submitted for the record. These initiatives include the recent expansion of the Starbucks College Achievement Plan. Now it is enabling a veteran to give their Starbucks-funded, tuition-free education through Arizona State University to a spouse or child.

Starbucks has learned a lot on its journey, and we are just getting started. We have learned every veteran is different. The stereotypes, positive or negative, do not benefit vets. Each one has a different experience, aspiration, capability, and motivation. We need to treat veterans as individuals and human beings, not as superhumans or victims.

We also know a company’s effort to help transitioning veterans must be led from the top and the bottom. We depend on our Veterans Employee Network to help advise and guide our corporate efforts and mentor new hires. At the top of our company, our CEO has made this a priority. I call on more CEOs to follow this example and embrace these challenges or, in his words, “make it personal.”

Finally, I want to thank the leadership of this Committee and its members for your efforts and the opportunity to work together. Starbucks knows that you have also made it personal.

I look forward to answering any questions you may have. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Kress follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MATTHEW KRESS, MANAGER OF VETERANS AND MILITARY AFFAIRS, STARBUCKS COFFEE COMPANY

Good afternoon Chairman Isakson, Senator Blumenthal, Senator Murray, and Members of the Committee. As a post-9/11 veteran, it is an honor to share with you how Starbucks Coffee Company is supporting the successful transition of veterans, and how our efforts are augmented through collaboration with a broad group of companies, public agencies, non-profits and veteran/military service organizations. I am also pleased to offer some thoughts on our policies and programs that we believe are critical to improving this experience.

To give some personal context to my remarks, I spent 22 years in the Marine Corps, in both active and reserve service as a commissioned officer and an enlisted Marine. After deploying to Iraq in 2004 with Marine Corps SOCOM Detachment, the initial USMC Force Contribution to USSOCOM, I left active duty to become a firefighter in Southern California. During my time in public safety, I took advantage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill to earn a masters degree in strategic planning from the University of Washington and an MBA from UCLA. When I then turned to the corporate world, I was surprised to learn that, despite my advanced education and years of leadership and management experience in very challenging environments, I had a difficult time translating my value and experience for potential employers. If I had a hard time sparking interest, even with my graduate degrees and background as an officer, you can imagine the challenges other servicemembers face when they speak with companies. Fortunately, I was helped by veterans in the corporate setting, who were generous with their time and opened their networks to me. Through these connections, I landed at Starbucks—in a role where I can continue

my career serving others at a company that cares tremendously about our military members, has the leadership and humility to incorporate an effective veteran hiring program into the culture, and is pushing others to join the movement.

In November 2013, Starbucks made a groundbreaking commitment to hire at least 10,000 veterans and military spouses in five years. In less than two years, our company has already hired over 5,600—more than half of our goal. Throughout this process, we have recognized that serving our veterans and military spouses is about much more than simply providing jobs. Starbucks recognizes the value of the unique skills, experiences and knowledge that veterans and their spouses have gained through their service. Our goal, therefore, is not only to hire 10,000 veterans, but also to create a work environment and corporate culture that fosters their personal and professional growth. A steady paycheck is important when shifting jobs, but veterans and their families are not just shifting jobs when they leave the service. They are leaving an environment where they had a clear sense of purpose and worked closely with others toward goals that were much bigger than themselves. I am proud to say that Starbucks provides that environment.

Driven by a passion and dedication that starts with our chief executive and chairman, Howard Schultz, and extends to the rest of our partners (employees), Starbucks is committed to creating a workplace and a culture where our military members and their spouses can succeed.

Our journey started with engaging leaders at all levels of our organization on the tremendous untapped value and experience of veterans and military families. As a socially conscious company, we understood the moral imperative of hiring veterans and military spouses. We also recognized that with less than 1 percent of our population serving in the Armed Forces, there is a basic lack of understanding of our servicemembers throughout America. Acknowledging that we were not vet-ready when we began our hiring initiative, Starbucks set out to prepare our organization, specifically hiring managers with training and resources to help them understand and engage the military talent pool. With a high level of buy-in and support throughout the company, we created a dedicated military recruiting team that focuses on more than finding talented candidates; they also help managers and recruiters in specific business units translate and leverage the unique experiences and skills that each veteran candidate brings to us. To ensure a long-term positive experience for the veteran and the employer, companies must have human resources personnel who understand veterans. Doing so will enable veterans to translate their unique skills, find a meaningful career path, and enjoy a successful onboarding, training and development experience. The result will be a win-win: veterans will find rewarding jobs and companies will retain talent, maximizing their return on investment.

We have also listened to our partners and developed or improved several programs and policies that are unique to our military and veteran populations. For our military spouse partners who are regularly relocated, we are streamlining a system for transferring them to new Starbucks locations. For current reservists, we provide 80 hours of flexible leave to facilitate military participation. Finally, our veteran partners can now gift their College Achievement Plan, which is a fully funded remote bachelors degree at Arizona State University, to their spouse or child.

We also recognized the need to build a corporate environment that not only understands and values veterans but infuses their values into the company's culture. For Starbucks, this started with the recognition that much of what has made the company incredibly successful parallels military values. Commitment to excellence, a strong sense of ethical and moral principles, camaraderie, and empowerment of our partners are among the values that make Starbucks a special place to work. In turn, the presence of more veterans at Starbucks has prompted many of our non-veteran partners to embrace our veterans' commitment to service, becoming more engaged and involved in volunteer and community programs. Another internal cultural piece is the growth of our military affinity group, Armed Forces Network (AFN), which has chapters throughout the country. The AFN provides a source of mentorship, camaraderie and connection for our veteran partners. It is also a forum and focal point for building our veteran cultural competence. In return, our veteran partners pay it forward by engaging in community volunteer activities and represent the best of Starbucks.

While these efforts have not been flawless, we continue to learn from our mistakes and drive forward to serve those who have so selflessly served our Nation.

We also have sought to collaborate among a diverse, cross sector audience to promote veteran hiring and achieve a broader recognition of the unique skills, values and commitment to service that our post-9/11 veterans possess. This started last year with the Concert for Valor in Washington and the bestselling book *For Love of Country*, which called attention to the sacrifices and contributions of our veterans

and their families. In October of this year, we gathered more than 160 representatives from corporations, all levels of government, the military services, non-profits and foundations for an event called the Muster. During that two-day gathering, we discussed the urgency of addressing the military-civilian drift and how to work collectively to reverse it. Utilizing the best practices and lessons learned from our experiences, as well as those of the other attendees, we are moving forward to impact the transition experience for military members and their families. In April, 2016, we will come together again in Washington, DC, with a diverse group of decision-makers and influencers to propose specific actions that will impact the national conversation on transition and restore the understanding and true appreciation for our servicemembers and their families.

At a local level, Starbucks is using our scale to create connections to bridge the military-civilian divide. Utilizing our Military Family Stores, which are situated in communities near military installations, we are working with a range of our partners such as the USO, Blue Star Families, and the Hiring Our Heroes to provide needed transition programming and services such as resume counseling, interviewing skills and family cohesion counseling. A very successful example of this is Military Mondays, which was developed in conjunction with the law school at the College of William and Mary, to provide free legal counseling to servicemembers at our stores. Military Mondays is now scaling nationally and growing to include other critical services such as financial literacy training and investment counseling. Our stores are also a hub for organizing community service projects, driven by our partners, and in conjunction with the veteran groups Mission Continues and Team Rubicon.

Moving forward, our ambition is to change what it means to support our troops. While being thanked for their service is appreciated, military members and their spouses want to be given the opportunity to demonstrate the incredible leadership, experience and talent that they bring to the workplace. We will continue driving and refining this effort through our policies, storytelling and partnerships. And we will continue sharing our model and lessons with others.

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. After serving our country for 22 years on several levels, it is my honor to discuss the Starbucks veterans program, which is making a difference in the lives of our military members and their families. Howard Schultz and our Starbucks partners look forward to working with the Senate Veterans Committees in the months and years to come on these efforts.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you for your testimony.
Mr. Eversole.

STATEMENT OF ERIC EVERSOLE, PRESIDENT, HIRING OUR HEROES, U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION

Mr. EVERSOLE. Good afternoon, Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Blumenthal and the members here today. My name is Eric Eversole. I am the president of Hiring Our Heroes. I am also a vice president at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

I really want to thank the Committee for taking this issue up and exploring the transitioning aspects of our servicemembers and how well we are doing, because I think it—you know, it is not only important for our veterans and their families; it is absolutely critical for American business. These are tremendously talented young men and women who have tremendous experience, and from an American business perspective, we need to get this right. The Chamber started this effort a little over 4 years ago, and we did so with an eye toward a veteran population that was struggling tremendously and a spouse population that was struggling tremendously. We had high rampant unemployment, and we started out with an area that we do well, which is connect local Chambers of Commerce, the businesses in those local communities, with the veterans in those populations and those population centers. We started out the first year with 100 hiring events. The next year we did 200. The year after that we did 400. Now, a little over 4½ years

later, we have done this week 960 hiring events throughout the country to help transitioning servicemembers, veterans, and their families find meaningful employment opportunities.

But, the one thing that rings true with respect to our efforts over the last 4 years is that none of those efforts would we have been able to accomplish but for the tremendous support of a lot of local and national partners, and those local and national partners include the Federal agencies that testified before us, DOL, DOD, Veterans Affairs, the SBA—a lot of great companies as well. Starbucks has been a great partner of ours, as has Capital One, Toyota, and USAA. We have also had a lot of great local partners, like The American Legion helping, supporting in those local communities are absolutely critical in those efforts.

I think that, you know, from an organization perspective, those partnerships are going to be one of the long-term keys to our success, because I think one thing that most people in this space recognize is that not one organization, not one agency, not one company, not one nonprofit organization is going to solve the challenges of veterans on their own. It is going to take a community effort both at a national and local level, and we are proud to be a part of that effort.

The other aspect of what we have seen that is so critical is we have to get left of transition. We have to talk to these young men and women well before they get out. It cannot be simply a decision of, do I stay put in my last duty station or do I go back to my home of record where there may not be good job or career opportunities? We need to help these servicemembers understand that they need to start planning early.

We also have to understand, I think, a very important question that has come up to some extent today. You know, the unemployment rate is an important indicator of some success, but the sole basis of success should not be whether it is a job, did we get a servicemember a job. The real question should be: Did we get him the right job? Did we get him the right career opportunity utilizing their vast experience and skill sets to their fullest?

The fourth point I will make before I end is let us not forget about military spouses in this equation. We have to get it right for military spouses. The military spouses over the last 4½ years and longer have continued to struggle with high unemployment rates, and we have to get it right, because it is not only important for that servicemember and his or her family member, but it is important from a national defense perspective because a lot of young servicemembers are getting out because their spouses are giving up career opportunities. That is what we are looking forward to in 2016, is to create those opportunities.

I look forward to your questions, and thanks again for having us here today. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Eversole follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF ERIC EVERSOLE, PRESIDENT, HIRING OUR HEROES, U.S.
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION



U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION

**Statement
of the
U.S. Chamber
of Commerce Foundation**

ON: Is Transition Assistance On Track?

TO: U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

**BY: Eric Eversole, Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce
Foundation**

DATE: December 15, 2015

The Foundation's mission is to strengthen America's long-term competitiveness by addressing developments that affect our nation, our economy, and the global business environment. USCCF presents a broad range of programs that promote a greater understanding of economic and public affairs issues.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation (USCCF) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce dedicated to strengthening America's long-term competitiveness by addressing developments that affect our nation, our economy, and the global business environment. USCCF presents a broad range of programs that promote a greater understanding of economic and public affairs issues.

The Foundation conducts research and produces events on issues facing business now and in the future. Through its initiatives, the Foundation builds skills, drives innovation, and encourages growth.

**BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS OF THE
U.S. SENATE**

"IS TRANSITION ASSISTANCE ON TRACK?"

**Testimony of Eric Eversole
President, Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation**

Good morning, Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished members of the Committee. My name is Eric Eversole and I am the president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes program.

Founded in 2011, Hiring Our Heroes is a nationwide initiative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation which assists transitioning service members, military veterans, and military spouses in finding meaningful employment opportunities in a 21st century workforce. The program accomplishes this goal in a number of different ways, which include hiring fairs, multi-day on-base transition summits, campaigns in partnership with sponsor companies and nonprofit associations, and a robust suite of online digital resources.

We are proud to announce that, since our program's launch, we have held more than 950 hiring events in the United States and around the world, and from those hiring events alone, we've confirmed more than 28,000 military veteran and spouse hires in the civilian workforce. This does not include the hundreds of thousands of other meaningful connections that our program has made for job seekers through our various other resources, such as workshops, training programs, our online properties and more.

The past several years have been a time of tremendous growth in the military hiring community, as private sector companies have admirably stepped up their hiring efforts for veterans and military spouses. When Hiring Our Heroes was first started more than four years ago, the employment outlook for veterans and military families was challenging. However, with the business community meeting the challenge of finding jobs for this population, the unemployment rate for them has continued to drop precipitously.

This has resulted in what is currently the lowest unemployment rate yet for military veterans at approximately four percent. There are, however, military populations that continue to struggle. For example, post-9/11 veterans under the age of 35 face an unemployment rate that is higher than the national average. Military

spouses also face a high unemployment rate of approximately 25 percent. Couple that with the fact that more than one million service members are expected to transition off of active duty in the next five years, and we realize that there is still a great deal of work to be done moving forward.

We know that hiring veterans is not just the right thing to do for the country, but it makes good business sense. Veterans bring tremendous value in both the hard and soft skills to companies who hire them, from extensive training backgrounds in their military occupational specialties to the intangibles such as loyalty, discipline, and a work ethic that is not rivaled elsewhere in the economy.

We also recognize that this is not solely an economic issue for our country, but a national security concern. The military has long been a pathway to a better life for young Americans. If we cannot deliver that better life through better job opportunities, it will be much more difficult to recruit the next generation of the all-volunteer force.

Background on Hiring Our Heroes

When our program began, we had a very simple mission – host hiring fairs, and connect with local chambers to find opportunities for the military job seeker population. It was a straightforward way to address the challenging economic landscape for veterans and military spouses.

Although we know that some veterans and their families are still struggling, that landscape itself has changed, and we have had to adapt our operations in accordance with that change to continue our effectiveness in what we do. We've become more strategic in our approach and programs, and more focused on not only finding jobs for these individuals, but ensuring that they are finding the right jobs.

Knowing that part of this strategic approach encompasses a broad-based effort to engage the private sector, in 2012, together with Capital One, we launched the “Hiring 500,000 Heroes” campaign to secure half a million commitments by various employers to hire veterans and military spouses. Once businesses who joined this program committed, we worked with them to translate those commitments into hires. We're proud to say that in June of 2015, we surpassed the 500,000-hire mark for veterans and military spouses who were hired as a result of this initiative.

Hiring Our Heroes also developed and continued to improve our robust array of digital tools and online resources for both job seekers and employers. With support from our generous sponsors, including Toyota and USAA, we provide tools such as the Personal Branding Resume Engine, My Career Spark for military spouses,

the Employer Roadmap, Fast Track, and others free of charge for all users, whether job seeker or employer. All of these online tools are designed to ensure that our target audiences have easy access to the most up-to-date information and best practices when they enter into this unique and often challenging environment.

Lastly, we know that the military spouse population faces its own unique set of challenges when searching for employment. While a service member will typically only transition off of active once in his or her career, military spouses make multiple transitions while serving alongside their service member, making it all the more challenging to find stable and meaningful employment. Our Military Spouse Program, which has been in place since 2012, is incredibly active in the spouse community, engaging spouse-specific hiring fairs, networking receptions, roundtable discussions, workshops, and more. All of this is made possible by the generous donations of the companies on our Military Spouse Employment Advisory Council, to complement its counterpart, the Veteran Employment Advisory Council.

Partnerships

Creating and maintaining valuable partnerships for our program has been crucial to our success. Hiring Our Heroes is in a unique position in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation to have influential connections to thousands of state and local chambers, which provides us with tremendously effective grassroots teams across the country to engage with military job seekers in their communities. The enormous impact that we have seen at every level has been extremely beneficial to our mission.

Our program has also been able to develop key partnerships with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the U.S. Department of Labor, the U.S. Department of Defense and many of its services, as well as the Small Business Administration, in order to expand our messaging base and reach the service member and military spouse population, connecting employers to them wherever they are in the world.

The relationships that we maintain with other nonprofit organizations within this military hiring community have been integral to our success as well. Our work with groups such as the Institute of Veterans and Military Families, Student Veterans of America, Blue Star Families, Got Your 6, and many others has furthered our reach and strengthened our ability to provide networking and training opportunities for job seekers, and make valuable connections for them with employers who are hiring.

Of significant note, earlier this year, we partnered with the George W. Bush Institute's Military Service Initiative as well as a broad array of public, private, and nonprofit partners to create the Veteran Employment Transition Roadmap, a

comprehensive guide for transitioning service members and military veterans to help them become better equipped to navigate the complex landscape that they will encounter when leaving the military to pursue meaningful work. This document, which is available in hard-copy as well as digitally online, is unique in that there is nothing else like it that exists in this military employment space, and outlines best practices and checklists for job seekers to consider, as well as an overall list of resources that are available to them from across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors that are available to them when making this transition.

Moving “Left of Transition”

One of the key lessons we have learned over the last four years is that many of the challenges that military veterans face when transitioning off active duty is primarily due to a lack of preparation. Far too many service members have traditionally viewed transition not as a continuing process but as a single point in time when they simply pick up their DD-214 papers and leave the military. Not surprisingly, in recent years, more than 50 percent of service members were unemployed within 15 months of leaving the military, with no clear pathway to economic success.

In 2014, a key effort of Hiring Our Heroes was our aggressive work to address this problem, by helping service members focus on moving left of transition, and starting the job search process earlier. When interfacing with service members, we compare this process to any evolution that they would encounter in the military. It is a process that requires a clearly-defined mission, preparation, execution, and ability to adapt and overcome as circumstances evolve.

Working with our public, private, and nonprofit partners, we launched a series of multi-day, on-base transition summits aimed at reaching and empowering service members long before their last day on active duty. These summits are essentially one-stop-shops for service members as they learn what economic opportunity looks like for them in today’s workforce, with panel discussions from industry leaders, breakout workshop classes, networking receptions, and ultimately a hiring fair to conclude the event.

We continued this innovative effort throughout 2015, hosting 20 summits in the United States and internationally, providing job seekers with best-in-class resources for their transition process, and connecting them with employers (sometimes numbering in the hundreds) at each event that are searching for top military talent.

Over course of the last two years, in 2014 and 2015, we have seen tremendous success resulting from these summits. In the span of those two years, more than 20,000 service member, veteran, and military spouse job seekers attended these summits, connecting with well over 2,000 employers who were present as well.

As we close out 2015 and move into the New Year, a newer emphasis will be placed on a particular type of event which complements our transition summits: professional sporting event expos. This series of events was launched in 2014 in conjunction with major professional sporting events, such as NBA basketball or Major League Baseball games. All military job seekers receive free admission to the hiring events and tickets to attend the game and/or special event. We have seen great success with these as a means to attract attention to our program, capitalizing on the high-profile nature of the athletic teams or host organization to further our messaging reach with job seekers and employers.

Lastly, we have critically important training programs which truly set us apart in this hiring community. Our Corporate Fellowship Program is a 12-week evolution that prepares service members for separation from the military through corporate education, extensive on-the-job training, and networking opportunities. At the completion of the program, service members have increased their marketability tremendously, giving them an added edge in an increasingly competitive job market.

In our Higher Veterans initiative, student veterans who are within two years of graduation from school are able to participate in the program and obtain part-time employment with a company, and complete a four-month curriculum to prepare them to enter into the business community. This program has been made possible through key partnerships with Starbucks and the Pat Tillman Veterans Center at Arizona State University.

Most importantly, it is incumbent upon job seekers to own their transition. There is a sea of goodwill that exists for transitioning service members and military spouses, but ultimately, it is their responsibility to start far enough in advance and dedicate the time and effort necessary to have a successful transition.

What Employers Can Do

As mentioned previously, the current unemployment rate for veterans is far and away better than it has been in the past when the country was in the midst of a deep recession. This may lead some companies and employers to assume the problem has been solved and ask: "What else is there for us to do?" Conversely, Hiring Our Heroes is also approached constantly by employers who are interested in hiring veterans and military spouses, but they may not know exactly where to start.

In addressing the first question, it is worth revisiting that while great strides have been made in this area over the last several years, the struggle remains for key segments of the veteran population. For companies who have been engaged in this effort recently, considerations should be made to start veteran and military spouse hiring programs and affinity groups within their organizations. What we have seen is that mentors, resource groups, and military relationships within companies are key to breaking down barriers to success and instrumental in retaining veterans long-term. Some companies are new to this, while others, like Coca-Cola, have veteran affinity groups and hiring programs which date back decades.

For employers who themselves may have trouble navigating the vast landscape of the military hiring community, we have a number of different resources they can utilize. Our online tool Employer Roadmap is a wide-ranging resource which gives companies a customized experience based on their experience level to help them learn best practices and programs for recruiting, hiring, and retaining veterans and military spouses. Information on how to develop military hiring strategies, military-friendly job descriptions, and understanding what the veteran and military spouse bring to companies in the way of experience is readily available through this multi-faceted web site.

Our combined effort to focus on both the job seeker education as well as the employer side will continue as our program evolves in the months and years ahead. And we will continue to position ourselves as leaders in this community to the further benefit of all of our target audiences.

Conclusion

Looking ahead to 2016, our program continues to grow in ways that we did not think would be possible when starting this endeavor in 2011, and we are continuing to adapt to the evolving landscape that is the 21st century economy.

Building upon our successes and constantly making important improvements to our program, Hiring Our Heroes, working with our strategic partners, will continue to bring our resources and tools directly to where transitioning service members and military spouses are when they need them the most. We are proud to serve our military community and of the work that we have done over the past several years, and we know that not losing sight of our mission and goals will become all the more important in the years to come, as we will serve as a key catalyst in bringing the right people together.

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and members of the

8

Committee, I thank you again for the opportunity to testify and look forward to answering your questions.

9

**Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you, Mr. Eversole.
Mr. Smith.**

STATEMENT OF DANIEL SMITH, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, VETERANS EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION DIVISION, THE AMERICAN LEGION

Mr. SMITH. Good afternoon, Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished Members of this Committee. On behalf of our National Commander, Dale Barnett, and the over 2 million members of The American Legion, we thank you for the opportunity to testify before this Committee regarding the Transition Assistance Program and The American Legion's experience and interests.

Before getting started on the substance of TAP and the Legion's experiences, we would first like to thank the Members of this Committee who voted in favor of passing the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act. The NDAA included a critical measure making TAP GPS mandatory. Prior to this new measure, our servicemembers were required to attend a 5-day block of instruction prior to separating from their respective branch of service, and if they personally desired to attend the additional GPS courses, they first needed to seek approval from their leadership. The NDAA made it mandatorily available for the servicemember, making it a requirement for the leadership to allow the requesting individual to attend the training. Thank you.

Leaving the military environment and transitioning back into the civilian sector is a task that many servicemembers find to be an unfamiliar battle. Fortunately, TAP was created with the intention to ease the transition for our Nation's veterans. The American Legion had the opportunity on several occasions and in numerous sites to observe both the 5-day mandatory portion along with the optional specialized GPS courses.

We believe that part of the solution to veteran unemployment lies in a collaboration between Government entities and the private sector. As such, The American Legion has responded by bringing employment workshops and hiring events to transitioning servicemembers with support from the U.S. Chamber's Hiring Our Heroes. Our Employment Empowerment Summit is a 2-day event that ends with a job fair. We host this summit in various cities and provide transportation and lodging to the servicemembers going through the TAP. Before the Veterans Opportunity to Work, or VOW, Act of 2011, companies in the private sector were included in the transition process of TAP, meaning they were invited to come speak and instruct the transitioning servicemembers. In the modern-day TAP, that is, sadly, not the case. The American Legion certainly believes having the private sector present to assist in conveying what it takes to be successful in their realm is vital for the veterans because many servicemembers will be seeking work in the private sector and would benefit greatly from this.

The American Legion recognizes that one of TAP's main roles is to be an introduction to the services and programs available to the veterans and to provide a warm handoff to the agencies that administer those programs. We feel that TAP does provide the appropriate material, and from the veterans that we have spoken with, they express that they are happy with the knowledge gained after 5 days of curriculum. The main issue that we feel needs to be ad-

dressed in regard to the transitioning is what happens after the TAP course.

Furthermore, another point of contention that is under the current operating procedures with DOD does not share the contact information of the separating servicemembers with the Department of Labor. If the Department of Labor had access to the servicemember's contact information, the Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program representatives, or DVOPs, and Local Veteran Employment Representatives, LVERs, could initiate a conversation post-separation to ensure the veteran is adequately employed or is away of the services available to them. The Department of Labor would also be able to guide the veteran to their local American Job Center to ensure continuity of services provided.

Bluntly stated, we are disappointed with the Department of Labor's administration of Title 38 employment services. During the spring of 2014, the Department of Labor fully integrated a directive creating a hard distinction between DVOPs and LVERs which are funded by the JVSG grants and are located at Department of Labor job centers across the country. Essentially, this disallows DVOPs from seeing non-service-disabled veterans, even if they have the time. The Department of Labor's self-imposed restrictions undermine the flexibility required to best serve veterans who are in need of employment services. These restrictions are contrary to the Federal statute and have generated negative feedback from the field. The American Legion is adamant that regulatory or legislative change instituting the roles of DVOPs and LVERs by the Department of Labor would provide a significant improvement to the JVSG program.

Looking forward in regards to TAP, The American Legion would very much like to see a new GAO report conducted on the program as a whole. The last GAO report was conducted in 2014, when many new elements of TAP were still in the process of being implemented. Ergo, the report would not have assessed the effectiveness of the program in its entirety.

In addition to requesting a new GAO report to be conducted, which simply makes sense, The American Legion firmly believes there should be a metric for success to ensure that TAP is working and successful after the servicemember has taken the course. We strongly feel that between a new GAO report and the implementation of a success metric, only then the Department of Labor would be able to attain a genuine knowledge of how effective TAP truly is.

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished Members of this Committee, again, we thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today, and I thank my counterparts on this panel for their efforts in hiring our Nation's veterans, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Smith follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF DANIEL SMITH, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, NATIONAL VETERANS
EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION DIVISION, THE AMERICAN LEGION

Good afternoon Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal and distinguished Members of the Committee. On behalf of our National Commander, Dale Barnett, and the over 2 million members of The American Legion, we thank you

for the opportunity to testify before this Committee regarding the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and The American Legion's experience and interests.

Leaving the military environment and transitioning back into the civilian sector is a task that many servicemembers find to be an unfamiliar battle. Fortunately, The American Legion was instrumental in the creation process of TAP, a program created with the intention to ease the transition for our nations veterans. The American Legion had the opportunity on several occasions and in numerous locations to observe both the 5-day mandatory portion along with the optional specialized courses known as Goals, Plans and Success or (GPS).

In addition, The American Legion has begun hosting bi-annual hiring events and employment workshops near various military installations in the hopes that we can be the nexus between the private sector employers and transitioning servicemembers. The American Legion also finds that many separating military members desire to still continue their government service, and obtain a position working for the U.S. Government. Because of those desires, The American Legion has also implemented a Federal Resume Workshop, something TAP should highly consider as well.

What we present today, is a culmination of our observations over the last three years.

Positives of the Program:

OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

The American Legion believes that the new TAP represents an important step toward providing transitioning servicemembers with the information they need to become gainfully employed. While there exist some shortcomings that require attention, the program overall appears to be heading in the correct direction for the betterment of the veterans.

The amount of worthy information being put out was impressive and the delivery was excellent. It was evident the contractors from both DOL and VA really understood the material, which is a solid benefit to the servicemember. The student interaction was massively improved from what we've previously observed in the pilot phases of TAP. Most of this is likely due to the smaller class sizes—the attendees were far more interactive because of the intimate setting.

TAP GPS

The American Legion would like to thank the Members of this Committee who voted in favor of passing the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The NDAA included a critical measure making TAP GPS mandatory. Prior to this new measure, our servicemembers were required to attend a five day block of instruction prior to separating from their respective branch of service and if they personally desired to attend the additional Goals, Plans and Success (GPS) courses, they first needed to seek approval from their leadership. The NDAA made it "mandatorily available" for the servicemember; making it a requirement for leadership to allow the requesting individual to attend the training. This is a recommendation The American Legion frequently sought in testimony, so we appreciate Congress recognizing the importance these capstone courses play in the Servicemember's transition.

Recommended Improvements:

OFFICE INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

It is no secret that employers seek the perfect blend of skills and experiences that pertain to their industry. There is also no argument that a veteran meeting the qualifications for a job vacancy brings an ample amount of skills and experiences to the table that a civilian may not possess. However, on many occasions, being a functional expert is not enough, and making it past the initial filter of human resource staff remains a difficult task. To complement their core-competencies, there are certain basic relationship skills that every company looks for in a potential hire. These skills include personal qualities, habits, attitudes, and social graces that can make a person a valued employee.

Before the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) Act of 2011 companies in the private sector were included in the instruction process of TAP; meaning they were invited to come speak and instruct the transitioning servicemembers. In the modern day TAP, that is sadly not the case. The American Legion certainly believes having the private sector present and assist in conveying what it takes to be successful in their realm is vital for the veterans.

The vast majority of the junior enlisted personnel leaving the service after their first or second enlistments have not had the same educational training or significant working experience in the private sector as their civilian peers. They can sometimes lack the soft skills that are most commonly learned by spending a substantial part of their adult lives in the civilian workforce.

So, in discussing the “seamless transition” TAP would be more effective if:

- 1) TAP was accompanied by a program allowing the veteran to gradually assimilate to the civilian office environment, or
- 2) TAP added a module to bring in the private sector to discuss the office culture.

While TAP briefings focus on the transferring of military skills and experiences into core-competencies in the private sector, we believe more importance should be placed on soft skills. The American Legion cannot stress how crucial it is that more time and instruction be provided to the servicemember on this matter.

INTERAGENCY COOPERATION

The American Legion recognizes that one of TAP’s main roles is to be an introduction to the services and programs available to veterans, and to provide a “warm handoff” to the agencies that administer those programs. We feel that the TAP class does provide the appropriate material, and from the Veterans that we have spoken with, they expressed that they are happy with the knowledge that is gained after the 5 days of curriculum. The main issue that we feel that needs to be addressed in regards to transitioning is what happens after the TAP course.

Under the current operating procedures, DOD does not share the contact information of the Veteran with the Department of Labor (DOL). If DOL had access to the servicemembers contact information the Disabled Veteran Outreach Program representatives (DVOPs) and Local Veteran Employment Representatives (LVERs) could initiate a conversation post-separation to ensure the Veteran is adequately employed or is aware of the services available to them. DOL would also be able to guide the Veteran to their local American Job center to ensure continuity of services provided.

IMPROVING TRANSITION IN GENERAL

Transition does not end when a servicemember exits the classroom. As previously stated, TAP’s effectiveness is intimately intertwined with the performance of Title 38 veterans employment services.

The American Legion has become aware of an issue affecting veteran employment services that are funded by the Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG) and administered through the Department of Labor’s (DOL) Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS). Three years ago, DOL issued a directive creating a hard distinction between the Disabled Veteran Outreach Program representatives (DVOPs) and the (LVERs), which are funded by the JVSG grants, and are located at DOL job centers across the country. Essentially, this disallows DVOPs from seeing non-service-disabled veterans, *even if they have extra time in which they could do so*. The DOL’s restrictive regulation undermines the flexibility that is needed to best serve veterans who are in need of employment services.

In one instance, a blind veteran was escorted out of an American Job Center after he became upset that he no longer qualified to meet with the DVOP he had been working with; all because under the new DOL directive, his disability was not service-connected. The American Legion believes a disabled veteran has significant barriers to employment regardless of whether the disability was resultant from service. The categories imposed by the JVSG restructuring of veterans eligible to seek DVOP services, are too restrictive. Some DVOPs have noted to The American Legion that in the aftermath of this misguided JVSG restructuring, the majority of veterans now receive a ‘priority of greeting’ by employment services staff but not the ‘priority of service’ mandated by law.

The American Legion has organized meetings and roundtable discussions with the majority of the stakeholders. There is a consensus in the veteran community that this regulation is problematic, and should be changed. Requiring this regulatory change by DOL would, in the opinion of The American Legion, provide a significant improvement to one of the major transition services available to veterans: the JVSG program.

Looking forward in regards to TAP, The American Legion would very much like to see a new GAO report conducted on the program as a whole. The last GAO report was conducted in 2014 when many new elements of TAP was still in the process of being implemented, ergo the report would not have assessed the effectiveness of the program in its entirety. In addition to requesting a new GAO report be conducted, which simply makes sense, the American legion firmly believes there should

be a metric for success. Meaning the Dept. of Labor, much like any company, university or parent, needs to create a method or rubric to ensure that TAP is working and successful after the servicemember has taken the course. As it stands now, at the end of the 5 day course, the attendee is encouraged to take a survey reviewing their time in the program. DOL needs to connect with a percentage of veterans at several timeframes or thresholds post-TAP to assess the effectiveness of the TAP program. We strongly feel that between a new GAO report and the implementation of a success metric, then DOL will be able to obtain a genuine knowledge of how effective TAP truly is.

THE FUTURE OF JVSG AND HVRP

The American Legion has recently changed its position regarding the rightful place for JVSG and HVRP within the Federal Government. The American Legion “support[s] legislation that calls for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the state workforce agencies to share responsibilities for all Title 38 veterans employment services” and “that VA be fully funded to administer the Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG), establish standards and collect performance data, and the state workforce agencies administer the programs and report directly to VA.”¹

Historically, The American Legion has supported DOL-VETS and its place in DOL, because we believe that when it comes to employment no one has more expertise and experience. For our efforts, we were rewarded with decades of program management problems, a lack of accountability, a lack of programmatic oversight.

Within the last few years, VA has designated significant resources on veterans employment resources that is generally the responsibility of DOL. The American Legion has noticed VA gaining market shares in the realm of veterans employment services and demonstrating a record of success. The American Legion believes that the best way to ensure TAP lives up to its potential, is to transfer the JVSG and HVRP to a new administration within VA. These grants administered by VETS would improve if they were consolidated within the agency whose singular focus is on the well-being of veterans.

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal and distinguished Members of the Committee, again we thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today, I thank my counterparts on this panel for their efforts in hiring our nations veterans, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you very much.
Mr. Zacchea.

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL ZACCHEA, PROGRAM MANAGER, ENTREPRENEUR BOOTCAMP FOR VETERANS, UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

Mr. ZACCHEA. Good afternoon, Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the various veterans’ entrepreneurship and business support initiatives we have undertaken in the State of Connecticut. My name is Mike Zacchea. I am a combat-wounded, medically retired Marine lieutenant colonel. I am the director of the University of Connecticut Entrepreneur Bootcamp for Veterans.

In 2010, I started a nonprofit organization sponsored by the university’s School of Business called the “Entrepreneur Bootcamp for Veterans.” We help post-9/11 veterans start businesses. We are essentially a franchise of the National Entrepreneur Bootcamp for Veterans program, which is offered by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University.

In just over 5 years, we have started more than 96 businesses. These businesses employ more than 180 Americans and have pro-

¹Resolution No. 13: *Expanding Veterans Employment and Homeless Services Within the Department of Veterans Affairs* OCT 2014.

duced more than \$27.5 million in gross revenues to date. I am very proud of our 19X return on capital.

Our EBV graduates are having a statewide impact, including starting the U.S. Coast Guard Museum in New London, Connecticut, producing a veterans' benefits concert at Mohegan Sun this past Veterans Day, and holding a veterans' legal symposium for the Connecticut Bar Association at Quinnipiac Law School.

This work led me to start the Connecticut Veterans Chamber of Commerce, a nonprofit 501(c)(6) organization representing more than 42,000 veteran-owned businesses which produce about \$20 billion worth of product in the State of Connecticut. We have successfully advocated for a number of laws which improve business conditions for veterans, including a tax concession that relieves more than 13,000 military retirees from paying State income taxes on their military pensions.

We also were instrumental in getting the Military Occupational Specialty Act passed, which has been instrumental in reducing Connecticut's veteran unemployment by more than 50 percent.

Our next legislative objective is to include veterans among the protected class of business entities for State contracting purposes.

I helped found the Military Veterans Support Council, an ad hoc organization of almost 100 employers and organizations that have organized Veterans Employee Resource Groups. Our members include the largest veterans employers in the State, such as Sikorsky, United Technologies, and Electric Boat, among others. Our members now represent almost 30,000 veterans in our workforce. We surface and identify issues around veterans hiring, retention in the workforce, promotion through the workforce, and workforce disability management issues. Our objective is to promote Connecticut as a pure leader among the States by 2021 by creating a favorable legal and policy environment and a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem.

I offer the following recommendations to encourage veteran entrepreneurship as part of a comprehensive national veterans economic reintegration initiative:

Number 1, articulating a national policy to create a minimum 500,000 veteran-owned businesses by 2032.

Number 2, a veterans benefit for starting businesses through the post-9/11 GI bill. I, therefore, endorse and encourage the Committee to favorably consider Senate bill 1870, the Veteran Entrepreneurial Transition Act of 2015.

I also endorse and encourage the Committee to favorably consider S. 1400, Veterans Small Business Enhancement Act of 2015. The companion bill in the House is H.R. 2221, which is cosponsored by my own Representative, Elizabeth Esty of the Connecticut 5th District.

Further, I also endorse H.R. 3945, Improving Opportunities for Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Businesses, which addresses the dual veteran-owned business contract and certification between the VA and the SBA which causes all kinds of contracting messes.

Number 3, creating an incentive program for the States to create veteran business incubators.

Number 4, creating incentives for the disintermediation of capital by angel investors and venture capitalists specifically to veteran-owned businesses.

Number 5, creating certified Veterans Business Incentive Companies modeled along the SBA's certified Small Business Investment Companies.

Number 6, creating a nationwide network of nonprofit Veterans Chambers of Commerce.

Number 7, despite the encouraging trends for veteran unemployment, I endorse consideration of H.R. 501, Veterans and Servicemembers Employment Rights and Housing Act of 2015, also co-sponsored by Representative Elizabeth Esty.

In closing, I believe that veteran business ownership is a net gain for our Nation. Veterans' business affairs are broadly middle-class economics. Veteran entrepreneurship creates economic, social, and political capital. Bottom line, veteran-owned businesses contribute more in tax revenues to State and Federal Governments than veterans extract in benefits.

I believe that veterans' economic reintegration issues are as important today in the 21st century as they were to the Continental Congress in 1776. For me, getting veterans economic reintegration issues right in the 21st century is central to our shared project of creating a more perfect union.

I would like to leave you with this quote I discovered in my research. George Washington wrote this to the first Governor of Connecticut, Jonathan Trumbull, on 28 June 1781, and it has served as my guidestar in my advocacy for veterans, and George Washington wrote:

“Permit me Sir to add, that Policy alone in our Present Circumstances, seems to demand that every Satisfaction which can reasonably be requested, should be given to those Veteran Troops who, through almost every Distress, have been so long and so faithfully serving the States...”

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee, thank you again for this opportunity. I look forward to answering any questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Zacchea follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MICHAEL ZACCHEA, LT. COL. USMC (RET.),
ENTREPRENEUR BOOTCAMP FOR VETERANS, UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

Good afternoon Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished Members of the Committee. My name is Michael Zacchea. I am a combat-wounded and medically retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel. I am the Director of the University of Connecticut Entrepreneur Bootcamp for Veterans. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today about the various veterans' employment and entrepreneurship and business support initiatives we have undertaken in the state of Connecticut.

I would also like to thank the many military and nonprofit partners represented here today for your commitment to being part of the solution for the post-9/11 generation of combat veterans.

In 2010, I started a non-profit organization sponsored by the University of Connecticut School of Business social entrepreneurship center called the Entrepreneur Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities. The organization runs a program that helps post-9/11 veterans with service-connected disabilities start businesses. We are essentially a franchise of the National Entrepreneur Bootcamp for Veterans program, which is offered by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University.

The program of instruction is a competitive, year-long program that teaches, supports, and mentors service-disabled veterans starting businesses. We bring together academic subject matter experts from UConn as well as successful entrepreneurs, innovators, tech entrepreneurs, financiers and venture capitalists, accountants, and lawyers (some, but not all, veterans themselves) who provide both instruction and mentorship for the veterans starting businesses. In addition, we have graduate students (primarily MBAs) who support the veterans with market and industry research and help with writing business plans and creating financial statements and projections. Our graduates have access to the UConn Law School legal clinics for pro bono legal advice to start businesses, obtain help with intellectual property rights, and manage tax matters.

Through the EBV we have started more than 96 businesses in just over five years. These businesses employ more than 180 Americans, and have produced more than \$27.5M in gross revenues to date. About a quarter are veterans starting IT businesses, and a quarter are veterans starting contracting businesses. I am very proud of our 19x Return on Capital. In addition, we have helped 18 veterans find full-time, career-track employment, and 13 gain access to career-oriented educational opportunities, primarily masters' degrees and professional credentialing. Our EBV graduates are having a state-wide impact, including starting the US Coast Guard Museum in New London, CT, producing a veterans' benefits concert at Mohegan Sun, and holding a veterans' legal symposium for the CT Bar Association at Quinnipiac Law School.

This work led me to start the CT Veterans Chamber of Commerce in response to market demand from thousands of veteran business owners, who asked for a voice in the state general assembly. My state is particularly fertile ground for veteran business opportunities because of the large defense industry presence, as well as a significant agri-business base, and maritime industries, among other industries. There are more than 42,000 veteran-owned businesses in CT out of a veteran population of about 220,000—about a 5:1 ratio. Since our inception, we have been instrumental in advocating for a number of laws passed which improve business conditions for veterans, including the Military Occupational Specialty Act, the Stolen Valor Act, and most recently, as part of the 2016 budget, we obtained a tax concession that relieves the more than 13,000 military retirees from paying state income taxes on their military pensions, saving them some \$5M per year. This coming year, we are working hard to include veterans among the protected class of business entities both for state contracting purposes and for hiring discrimination purposes.

In addition, I was one of the founding members of the Military Veterans Support Council. It is an ad hoc organization of almost 100 employers and organizations that have organized Veterans Employee Resource Groups. Among our members are some of our largest veterans employers, including Sikorsky, United Technologies, Electric Boat, GE, Pratt & Whitney, Aetna, Cigna, Prudential, The Hartford, Deloitte & Touche, KPMG, Bank of America, Liberty Bank, People's Bank, Webster Bank, among others, and virtually every four year college in CT. Our members now represent almost 30,000 veterans in the state's workforce and student veterans. Through this council, we surface and identify issues around veterans hiring, retention in the workforce, promotion through the workforce, and workforce disability issues. A happy side-effect of this organization is that it has created a direct pipeline from colleges to our largest employers through the Veteran Employee Resource Groups.

Most recently, a coalition of veterans organizations produced the largest veterans' event in the history of the state of Connecticut. It was called Vets Rock! We held it at Mohegan Sun Resort and Casino in Uncasville, CT, on Nov 11. During the day, we brought together 66 employers and 85 veterans service organizations to provide wrap-around service and employment, reintegration, and housing solutions for veterans. We had almost 1,300 veterans in attendance, with almost 130 veterans receiving business suits, more than 137 getting on the spot interviews, more than 100 getting follow-on interviews, and 5 on-the-spot hires. In the evening, we held a concert hosted by Tony Orlando, and headlined by Trace Adkins. We had over 6,300 veterans in attendance for the concert. I should note that the US Chamber of Commerce was a partner in this event. We hope to build on this success in future years.

We are having a positive effect. The unemployment percentages for CT's veterans has been reduced from over 9% to just over 4% since 2013. We are putting CT on a competitive economic basis with our larger neighboring states—NY, MA, PA, and NJ for veteran business owners. We are staking out a leadership position for reintegration centered around the Three E's—Education, Employment, and Entrepreneurship; and Three S's for housing—Safe, Secure, and Stable. My objective is to propel CT to a peer leadership position for holistic reintegration of post-9/11 veterans among the states by 2021 by creating a favorable legal and policy environment and thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem.

As effective as it is, our multi-pronged effort in CT is very small. CT accounts for about 1% of the total national veteran population. There are already some 3.5 million post-9/11 veterans, with about 66% of that number having deployed to combat theaters in Asia and Africa. In the next 5 years, approximately 250,000 veterans will leave active service every year. Beginning in 2021, post-9/11 veterans will begin to be eligible for a 20-year military pension. By 2031, virtually all post-9/11 combat veterans will begin to be eligible for a full 30-year military pension.

I am convinced there is pent-up market demand for entrepreneurship opportunities among veterans. I see a need to expand opportunities for veteran entrepreneurship in the next 5 years. I believe that given access to entrepreneurship training and opportunity, the post-9/11 generation of veterans would produce businesses at a rate of about 5:1—that is, some 500,000 or more veteran-owned businesses by 2032, which will be a Census Bureau Survey of Business Owners year.

To that end, I believe a prescription to encourage veteran entrepreneurship as part of a comprehensive national veterans reintegration initiative could include:

1) Articulating a national policy to create minimum 500k veteran-owned businesses by 2032, including production metrics. Metrics could include the impact of veteran business ownership on gross revenues, Federal tax receipts, and full-time and part-time employment.

- I recommend breaking these metrics out both by state and by congressional district.

2) A veterans' benefit for starting businesses through the Post-9/11 GI Bill. We acknowledge and agree that education is the single most decisive factor in determining economic attainment over a career in the 21st century global knowledge economy. However, it makes sense and is perfectly in keeping with the original intent of the 1944 Serviceman's Readjustment Act to include such a benefit for veterans starting businesses or working farms and ranches, particularly for veterans who have used GI Bill benefits to pursue an education in those areas.

- I therefore endorse and encourage the Committee to favorably consider S. 1870 Vets Act of 2015 introduced by Senators Moran and Tester.

- I also endorse and encourage the Committee to favorably consider S. 1400 Veterans Small Business Enhancement Act of 2015 introduced by Senator Vitter, which would give certified veteran-owned businesses access to Federal surplus property and equipment.

- The bill has a companion bill in the House, H.R. 2221 Veterans Small Business Enhancement Act of 2015, co-sponsored by my own Representative, Elizabeth Esty of CT's 5th district.

- I also endorse Rep Mike Coffman's bill H.R. 3945 Improving Opportunities for Service-Disabled Veteran-owned Businesses Act of 2015. This Act would reform, streamline, and simplify the process for certification as a SDVOB, which currently includes important contradictions and inconsistencies in certification between the SBA and the VA.

- The bill is co-sponsored by Representatives Jeff Miller, Steve Chabot, Nydia Velazquez, Gerry Connolly, Richard Hanna, and Seth Moulton.

3) Creating an incentive program or Federal grants for the states to create veteran business incubators, particularly in information tech, high-tech manufacturing, and other tech industries.

- One such model is Bunker Labs, consisting of a network of 11 incubators around the country.

- In CT, I am working with the state Commissioner of Veterans Affairs to create a Vet Center of Excellence which would include a veteran tech business incubator.

4) Creating incentives for the disintermediation of capital by angel investors and venture capitalists specifically to veteran-owned businesses, through tax policy, with accompanying metrics. Two such funds are:

- TCP Venture Capital, which started the Veterans Opportunity Fund
- StreetShares, a peer-to-peer lending initiative jointly funded by Direct Lending Investments, Community Investment Management, and Eagle Bank Corp.

- One such potential source of private investment capital would be from immigrant investors using EB5 funds through EB5 centers or other disintermediation channels.

5) Creating certified Veterans Business Investment Companies modeled along the SBA's certified Small Business Investment Companies.

6) Creating a Nation-wide network of non-profit Veterans Chambers of Commerce that will create a mutually supporting community of veteran business owners that

can represent veteran business owners in their respective state legislatures and in their communities.

7) Despite the recent success of post-9/11 veterans re-entering the workforce, anecdotally there continues to be a strong perception of anti-veteran bias in hiring.

- I endorse consideration of H.R. 501 Veterans and Servicemembers Employment Rights and Housing Act of 2015, co-sponsored by Representative Elizabeth Esty of the CT 5th District.

In closing, I believe that veteran business ownership is a net gain for our Nation, and in terms of net flow of money, for the Federal Government. It is my thesis that veteran-owned businesses contribute more in taxes to the state and Federal Governments, than veterans extract in benefits. I believe veterans reintegration issues are as important today, in the 21st century, as they were to the Continental Congress in 1776, which included a pension for veterans in the very first law passed in our Nation's history. Getting veterans reintegration issues "right" in the 21st century is central to our shared project of creating a more perfect union.

I would like to leave you with this quote I discovered in my research. George Washington wrote this to the first Governor of CT Governor Jonathan Trumbull on 28 June 1781, and it has since served as my guidestar in my advocacy for veterans:

"Permit me Sir to add, that Policy alone in our Present Circumstances, seems to demand that every Satisfaction which can reasonably be requested, should be given to those Veteran Troops who, thro almost every Distress, have been so long and so faithfully serving the States..."

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee, thank you again for this opportunity to testify and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Chairman ISAKSON. Well, thanks to all of you for your testimony. It was extremely valuable, and I am glad Ms. Kelly, Mr. Coy, and the others stayed over to listen, because we got—you all provided the answers to a couple of questions. In fact, Coca-Cola's commitment to their program—you said in your testimony that you all were committed to three guiding principles in terms of hiring vets:

First, support from the top, and that means Muhtar Kent. It does not mean somebody down the line.

Second, corporate human relations plan for search and recruitment and ongoing employment. I can tell you I know you do that because Mark Rahiya grew up two doors behind me in Marietta, Georgia, and I helped recommend him to The Coca-Cola Company, and you all have kept him on post through that ongoing mentoring, which I have seen before.

Then last is ongoing support, which I think, Mr. Kress, is something you referred to in your comments about the goal to hire 10,000 veterans at Starbucks. If you said that your commitment was to honor the veteran and provide career opportunity for that veteran and to address the cultural divide between the 1 percent who have served and the 99 percent who have not. I would like for you to address that cultural divide for just a moment and expand on what you said in your testimony.

Mr. KRESS. Thank you for the opportunity, sir. As a few of my colleagues up here have mentioned, the answer to this really is a collaborative effort. We cannot solve this ourselves because this is pervasive throughout American society. We feel very strongly, as do many of our fellow veteran advocates, that the country has become so disassociated from the veteran population for a number of reasons that it is time that we address this issue very closely.

Within our culture, we are doing a number of things, both formally and informally, to build a very strong veteran culture and to bridge the divide. When we bring in our veterans to Starbucks, we

have something called a “field guide,” similar to a military publication. This helps our field managers both understand the veterans that they are receiving as new employees and also connect to the veterans in the communities.

In our Military Family Stores, which, incidentally, exist in 6 of the 12 States represented by this panel, it is a place where we both have a lot of outreach efforts with the community to reintroduce them to our military population as well as whole transition training with a number of our veteran service organization partners.

Chairman ISAKSON. Well, I think you make a very good point, and it points out a responsibility we have in the

U.S. Senate and the Congress, because part of that bridging of that cultural divide is for us to promote within our own country as Members of the Congress, the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House, the value of those veterans and the support they need from the community and make it a cultural event when the veteran comes home for the entire community, not a divide as they exist today. I think that is everybody’s responsibility.

I want to congratulate our entrepreneur promoter from Connecticut, but I have a question for you. You are at the University of Connecticut. Is that correct?

Mr. ZACCHEA. Yes, sir.

Chairman ISAKSON. You know, I was a small business man, and two of my children have started small businesses. I know how difficult it is to sustain a small business. In fact, it used to be that nine in ten failed within the first 5 years. A lot of that was because of the lack of ongoing support once the business got started.

What are you doing at the University of Connecticut or what would you recommend be done to support veterans who start their own businesses to keep them from being failures?

Mr. ZACCHEA. Yes, Mr. Chairman. We find that to be the case. Out of the 96 businesses we have started, 86 are still going concerns, so we have a failure rate now of, you know, basically one in nine, which is going to happen, but—

Chairman ISAKSON. Which is the opposite of the national trend, which is nine in ten.

Mr. ZACCHEA. Yes, correct. We do provide ongoing services. I have helped people buy businesses. I have helped people sell businesses. I have helped people expand businesses. One of the things that they need is a landing place so that is why the veterans business incubators are so important.

The other thing that is very, very important is legislative support. Talking to literally hundreds of veteran business owners in our State, they wanted a Veterans Chamber of Commerce to represent them in the General Assembly. Our members who have come through the bootcamp find that having support through a Chamber-type organization where they can network and they can meet other veteran business owners has been very, very important for them.

Chairman ISAKSON. Do you incubate some of those businesses at the University of Connecticut? Or do you have a place for them to incubate?

Mr. ZACCHEA. We do have a place for them to incubate, but right now I am working with the Commissioner of the Department of

Veterans Affairs in Connecticut to start a Vet Center of Excellence, which would include a specific veterans business incubator.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you very much for your testimony.

Senator Blumenthal, thank you for bringing your guest from Connecticut.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. I am very proud to have him here. Thank you so much for making the trip. I appreciate your broader testimony about the other needs of our veterans and about the entrepreneurial challenges that all small businesses and small business people face and the remarkable record of success of your educational program.

I want to ask you, because I think I know your views on this topic, but I think the Committee should hear them, do you feel there is a need to protect veterans from discrimination in the workplace?

Mr. ZACCHEA. Senator Blumenthal, yes. In a word, yes. Anecdotally, what we are finding is that veterans are telling us that they are basically being given the stiff arm by human resource managers, many of whom do not know or do not understand military service. I can give you an example. We had one woman who retired from the Air Force. She was a Pentagon 9/11 survivor. She was in the building when it got hit. A 20-year career in the Air Force. When she retired, she was unemployed for 2 years, could not get a job. We helped her start a business and eventually helped her get a full-time job as well.

One of the things that has been very, very effective is the Military Veteran Support Council that we started, which brings together all these veteran employee resource groups, and it has basically created an informal pipeline between the colleges—the student veterans organization at the colleges in Connecticut to these organizations which have a proclivity to hire veterans. They are able—the veteran employee resource groups are able to help those veterans direct their resumes to the appropriate person. It has also been very helpful in defusing or educating the corporate side of the house about veteran workforce issues. It is not just about hiring. It is about how veterans fare in the workforce.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. And that leads me to my next question to other members of the panel. By the way, I want to just say, Mr. Smith, thank you for being here today. You and I go back to your days in Connecticut when I saw you at the West Hartford events that you attended, and I appreciate your being here. I want to thank the Chamber of Commerce. You participated in our job fairs in Connecticut very constructively and importantly.

I want to say to Mr. Kress and Ms. Voticky, I really admire and thank your corporations. You obviously have a commitment as an organization, not just as a few individuals within the management structure but as an organization, which is what it takes, I think, to make a veterans program work, and a special thanks to Howard Schultz, who I think is a leader in American business today in this effort.

Let me go then to the point that Mr. Zacchea was making. You have talked a little bit about the challenges of recruiting and hiring. There also are challenges—which Mr. Eversole alluded to—in providing opportunities to advance. After all, it is not just about

providing a job. It is about providing an opportunity to advance from barista to whatever managerial positions may be available.

One of the facts here that is unappreciated is the challenges of veterans who may suffer from post-traumatic stress or from other combat-related invisible wounds who may have needs or even disabilities. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about your corporate approach to, number 1, the opportunities for advancement and, number 2, the challenges of being flexible. I think one of you used that word. Mr. Eversole, if you want to weigh in on this topic, I would welcome your comments, and any of the other members of the panel.

Mrs. VOTICKY. I talk the longest. OK. I would say that when it comes to advancement at Coca-Cola, we have a culture of owning your career. We provide so many tools and so much communication through our human resource business partners, through our online communications, weekly call-outs to managers to remind them to speak to their associates about whether it is midyear check-in or performance review, driving people to create their own professional development plan so that they can utilize the tools that are available to them, and then holding them accountable for truly growing and developing themselves. It is one of our core leadership behaviors, which is developing yourself and others.

In terms of advancement, that is something that we watch very carefully and make sure from a talent management perspective that we are driving those behaviors.

I am sorry, the second part of your question was about?

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Post-traumatic stress.

Mrs. VOTICKY. Post-traumatic stress. We also have extensive benefits within our organization, an employee assistance program that is free to all of our associates. If an associate chooses not to identify themselves as someone who is in distress, they can confidentially use the employee assistance program to get the kind of counseling and help that they may need in order to help them through whatever situation it is that they are facing.

Does that answer your question?

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you.

Mrs. VOTICKY. Great.

Mr. KRESS. Senator, we have a very strong management training track within our organization. Ninety-five percent of our positions in the entire company exist within our stores. I would like to use a few of our employees as an example.

We have a woman named Amy Quesenberry. She is a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force Reserve. She came to us to work in one of our stores, and she is now on the management track. She is managing a store south of Seattle. My peer on the Veterans Military Affairs Team was a Marine Corps officer. When he left, he knew he wanted to be part of Starbucks. He started as a barista. He ended up as a district manager in the field. He now works in our headquarters. We have a long history of growing our employees through our leadership ranks.

As far as PTS, we work very closely with General (Ret.) Peter Chiarelli and his One Mind organization. He has devoted significant efforts and resources to studying PTS and finding solutions. We work very closely with him.

We have a formal employee assistance program, but what we have also found very helpful is our employee mentor network. We have what is called the “Armed Forces Network,” which is a veteran infinity group within Starbucks. It is extremely strong. We have 12 chapters throughout the United States. This serves as more of an informal mentoring and counseling source. If our employees do not want to use the formal process of EAP, they can always turn to their peers in the Armed Forces Network.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you.

Mr. Eversole?

Mr. EVERSOLE. I will be very quick. A little over a year ago we created with USAA a web site called “employerroadmap.org.” It is a digital program that allows human resource and hiring managers to self-assess and then deliver best-in-class practices to become better at hiring and retaining veteran talent. I think that is part of it. I think there is a communication gap that really exists on both sides of it. We are seeing a lot of young servicemembers who simply do not know what economic opportunity looks like in this country anymore. They are tied to their grandparents’ perceptions of what jobs and careers and opportunities look like; so, a very aggressive aspect of what we are doing is working with companies throughout the country to help them shape and sell their opportunities, not only just a job but long-term opportunities. Truck jobs are one of them that we really have to work aggressively on. They think it is “B.J. and the Bear,” and they are going to be, you know, taking the big rig or taking bootleg beer from Colorado to somewhere else in the country. The fact is, that is not the case. These are great paying jobs. They will never be outsourced, and they create tremendous long-term opportunities for these families.

I think part of what the business community needs to do is sell their opportunities to these young men and women.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. I want to thank all the members of the panel. This has really been an excellent panel, and there are a lot more questions that I would have. We probably will send you some of them in writing. I want to apologize, Mr. Chairman. I am way over my time. I could go on for much longer, but I will yield the floor. Thank you.

Chairman ISAKSON. No apology necessary.

Senator Tillis.

Senator TILLIS. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I thank you all for being here, and I thank those of you who have served as well.

I would like to start maybe with Ms. Voticky and Mr. Kress. Do you all do much in the way of tracking in terms of retention and career progression for the veterans population as compared to the population as a whole? Do you have any data on that?

Mrs. VOTICKY. We just started that this year. In 2012, we made a commitment to hire 5,000 veterans in 5 years, so by Q2 2017. We have actually done it effective today. We have currently hired 5,000 veterans.

Senator TILLIS. Congratulations.

Mrs. VOTICKY. Thank you. We want to take that and grow from that. We are really in the infancy stage. Pulling data out of a variety of systems—and I heard that earlier today about the challenges of a variety of systems—has been a little complex. We do have it

nailed down now, I believe, and we will be able to pull the turnover data.

We are able to pull that hiring data, the multicultural data, the gender differences. We have got that all buttoned down, and we are incorporating it from an enterprise perspective so it encompasses our bottling operations, our brand operations, our venturing and emerging brands and so on is really the direction that we are heading. We do not believe at this point from any indicators in the veterans group that we have anything above the norm as far as turnover from our military versus our non-military, but it is a piece of data we need to get our hands wrapped around.

Senator TILLIS. Mr. Kress?

Mr. KRESS. Yes, sir. When we started this effort in 2015, we were starting from a baseline. We have learned a tremendous amount in the last 2 years that we have been going at this, and similar to Coca-Cola, we have had tremendous success in hiring veterans. We are more than halfway to that 10,000 goal, and really, that number does not mean anything to us anymore because we know we are going to go way past that and continue to grow our veteran culture and our veteran leaders within the organization.

Part of our learning lesson as we constantly talk to our employees and assess our program is the need to track that data, so we have started in the last 3 months—I cannot say that we have extensive figures yet, but in the next few years, as we collect that data, we will have more to share.

On the retention piece, I will just say quickly that the majority of the people actually in the military are obviously first termers. They are 22, 24 years old, and I know from commanding hundreds of marines and sailors that at this point in their lives they are still trying to figure out what they want to do, where they want to be.

We are committed to those employees who come to Starbucks who both are going to stay with us for a career or who may be with us for a short time. We are committed to growing our future leaders in Starbucks, but we are also committed to growing those veterans who are going to be with us from a short time to have a successful transition wherever they may go.

Senator TILLIS. Mr. Smith and Mr. Zacchea, in the first panel I was talking a little bit about how well the different programs are working together, and from your outsider's perspective, is there any advice or feedback, constructive feedback, or "atta boys" for the programs, the things that we talked about in the first panel, just constructive feedback, things that we can do to do better to make sure that we are transitioning the veterans into these opportunities and given them the best possible opportunities?

Mr. ZACCHEA. Yes, Sen. Tillis. There is actually a model that I use in Connecticut called the "Sea of Goodwill." It is based on a white paper that was published in 2010 that came out of the Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff. Colonel David Sutherland wrote it. What we are trying to do is bring together both Federal and State government agencies and offices at the table, as well as the educational institutions, as well as nonprofits, as well as for-profits and private businesses through the Military Veterans Support Council to create holistic solutions for veterans. I do have metrics. I do keep end-state metrics, which I think are much more

important than starting-state metrics. You know, I want to know what the bottom line is and what is the final effect.

You know, I actually have and have articulated a vision in our State that we will have zero veteran unemployment in our State by 2021. No veteran who is capable of working will be without a job, and that is one of the goals that we are working toward by creating this Sea of Goodwill. To answer your question, that is what we do, and that is how we are doing it.

Senator TILLIS. Thank you.

Mr. Smith?

Mr. SMITH. Yes, Senator, thank you for that question. When you mentioned programs, I am assuming you are speaking of the Transition Assistance Program.

Senator TILLIS. Yes.

Mr. SMITH. The 3 days at the Department of Labor and 2 days with the Veterans Affairs. The American Legion feels that the material that is provided in those 5 days is adequate and is preparing the servicemembers for transitioning. The issue is after they transition out, when they are no longer—

Senator TILLIS. When I was making my comments, I thought I saw a couple of head nods. How are you really mobilizing getting the information and making sure it is fully exploited?

Mr. SMITH. We feel that there is a loss of contact. It is up to the servicemember to reach out to the American Job Centers. If the servicemember reaches out to the American Job Centers, then, you know, they are receiving the services provided that they need.

The issue with the DOD not sharing the contact information, the American Job Centers have no way of knowing when they have a veteran in their area. That program in The American Legion mind is failing.

If that contact information was shared, when the servicemember transitions out, like, say, San Diego, and then they move back here to Washington, DC, when they go through the TAP program in San Diego, that is the American Job Center that is reaching them. When they move here to D.C., there is no real live information. The sharing of DOD to the DOL would be a key improvement to the programs.

Senator TILLIS. Thank you. Mr. Eversole, thank you for the work you are doing with Hiring Our Heroes at the Chamber. The Chamber is a large organization. I would expect that Coca-Cola and Starbucks are members of it. But, I sometimes wonder if the opportunity as a whole is dwarfed by the number of small businesses that we may not be making contact to, maybe small businesses where you gain some experience that lays the groundwork for you going off and creating your own small business.

One thing I like about this job is the diversity of the conversations that I have back in the State. One day I could be at Coca-Cola Consolidated or Pepsi on the other side of the State.

Mrs. VOTICKY. Who?

Senator TILLIS. It is the Diet Pepsi/Coke Zero battle for me. [Laughter.]

You know, but I will have a discussion that goes from a large business to a goat farmer in western North Carolina, and interestingly enough, in small agricultural operations, they may actually

see a retired veteran who has business experience that they can apply to the business operations.

To what extent is the Chamber actually going beyond the corporate presence as the corporate employers to that large base? Eighty percent of the jobs in North Carolina are created by small businesses. How do we get out and take advantage of that opportunity? Or is that an appropriate consideration for a program like the Chamber has?

Mr. EVERSOLE. It is absolutely critical. I mean, 70 percent of veterans are going to return to small businesses. We know that. It is part of the reason when we set up this program, you know, our job was not to come in as a national voice and simply dictate how local communities hired veterans and reintegrated them back in. It was truly a partnership. It was a partnership with those local chambers, those local employers, those local nonprofit organizations, the local technical schools, because they know in those local communities what those transitioning servicemembers and their family members are going to need. Really, from my perspective, we are simply an entity that helps bring that community together, provides some resources to make that happen. We want to be good partners and work with those—again, local American Job Centers are an important part of that, the local VA, the hospitals. We really want to simply be a part of that smaller and larger community to help deliver the best jobs for those servicemembers, whether they are in big corporate settings or they are in the small local businesses.

Senator TILLIS. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chair, for having this hearing. Thank you all.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you, Senator Tillis.

I thank all our witnesses who testified. I think this has been one of the best hearings we have had this year in terms of outreach for a program that is so important to transitioning. You have given me an idea which I am going to work with the Ranking Member on. I am not going to discuss it right now because sometimes my first thoughts are not my best thoughts. [Laughter.]

I will sleep on it for a day or two, but there is a role that we probably could play that is unique in terms of this cultural divide as Members of the Senate, in terms of public service announcements and other information we could get out to the general public that would help in terms of vet hiring and also support those private sector companies who are reaching out and hiring our veterans. If nothing else, it has been very helpful to learn that, and it has been very helpful to learn of what you are doing, and we appreciate very much your willingness to hire America's best, and that is our veterans.

We will keep the record open if anybody has anything. Your testimony will be included in the record, and with no other comments, this Committee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 5 p.m., the Committee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JAMES R. LORRAINE, PRESIDENT AND CEO, AMERICA'S WARRIOR PARTNERSHIP

Introduction

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, distinguished members of the Committee, my name is Jim Lorraine and I am the President and CEO of the America's Warrior Partnership (AWP). Thank you for allowing me to testify on behalf of AWP and its affiliated communities today. My goal here is to outline critical areas essential to warrior transition success and to seek and urge favorable support for three things: creating community-focused solutions, greater access and collaboration among federal agencies serving warriors, and a streamlined authority to act within those agencies.

AWP is a national nonprofit supporting six regional communities, five states, seventeen municipalities, and more than 600,000 veterans. The regions supported are Augusta, Georgia; Greenville, South Carolina; Charleston, South Carolina; Panhandle of Florida; Buffalo New York; and Orange County California. These communities are the nation's leading coordinators of community services for military, veterans, their families, and their communities. They focus on all who serve and have served. We call them warriors. In just eighteen months of effort, our affiliated communities have developed a relationship with more than 17,000 unique warriors.

It is important to note that this success is the result of a focus by these communities on proactive outreach and engagement with the intent of developing a relationship with all warriors in their community, not just the wounded, the unemployed, or the homeless ones. This approach includes those Warriors who want to give back to their community and their brothers- and sisters-in-arms. It has been widely successful and sustained due in large part to coordinating existing programs toward a known issue. Through this approach, we have maximized the impact of partners such as Wounded Warrior Project, Goodwill Industries,

Veteran Treatment Courts, Team Red White and Blue, Team Rubicon, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and hundreds of other local and national community partners. I applaud the leadership of the Committee, as well as the Armed Services, and Labor Committee, for focusing on the existing transition assistance program in place for our military and veterans. I look forward to sharing with you our perspective on the current environment, including ways that such programs can be strengthened to improve transition and enhance effectiveness of government and non-government partners in this complex mission. With the collective leadership of this Committee as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs, Defense, and communities throughout the nation, I *know* that we can have a strong and vital national veteran network that can not only strengthen its communities, but can also improve our military for tomorrow.

Is Transition Assistance on Track?

In stark contrast to this success, is the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). Four years ago I testified before this committee regarding the integration effort of state of Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs. At that hearing, I testified that the question, “Is Transition on Track?” was incomplete because in order to achieve success, communities must be part of the calculus for long-term success. I said that understanding the veteran at the community level is the only way to be effective and to achieve success. Since then, not much has changed. The current transition program is not focused on the individual *veteran*; instead, its focus is on the *process* where impact is measured not by the long-term outcomes for veterans, but by the outputs of attendance and post-class evaluations at a time when the Service member’s life is nothing but unknowns.

We believe the time for transition assistance is not at the Service member’s separation from service, but occurs over time in the community when the Service member is confronted with the opportunities and barriers of transition. We have had success by providing proactive, holistic, and longitudinal engagement of veterans throughout transition in each of our six affiliated communities.

I cannot emphasize enough that in order to provide this high-level of support, the community must *know* the veteran who has joined their community. Our communities use different approaches to connect with veterans to include outreach media campaigns, the use of social media such as the RallyPoint® website, and of course, direct connection at the military installation prior to discharge. Following connection, our model is to educate the veteran about opportunities, then advocate on their behalf should they hit a road block toward their goal. This engagement creates both hope and purpose for the warrior. To reiterate, none of this would be possible if communities do not *know* the veteran.

Challenges of Public/Private Collaboration on Veterans' Transition

I cannot overstate the importance of seamless collaboration with federal agencies such as the Veterans Affairs, military bases, and other potential federal partners. Community agencies provide the boots on the ground, but such federal agencies must provide their designated benefits and services in an accessible manner for both warrior and community success.

Our communities are making the best of the government partnerships they've established with some having more access than others. Three (Augusta, Buffalo, and Panhandle) of our six communities have a Veterans Affairs partner focused on outreach and engagement with our Veteran Economic Community Initiative (VECI) through a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Veterans Benefit Administration. VECI's are responsible for helping connect communities to veterans seeking assistance with economic mobility. The VECIs are successful when they work in unison with our community groups. Such collaboration must be encouraged and expanded.

Additionally, many of our affiliated communities also have organic relationships with local Department of Defense installations. Augusta Warrior Project has the greatest access to their local installation, Fort Gordon, where their on-post presence enables their inclusion in transition services. This relationship with Fort Gordon is very unique and a credit to their Garrison Commander who initiated a relationship with Augusta Warrior Project through a formal memorandum to provide services to Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine service members stationed on his installation. Of those Warriors that are transitioning from Fort Gordon, it is estimated that 33% will stay in the Augusta, GA area while another 33% are unsure if they will stay or move.

Lastly, research indicates that the remaining 33% will leave the Augusta region to return home or to a job and are referred to other community programs regardless of their affiliation with America's Warrior Partnership. Augusta Warrior Project's goal is to support the 33% who choose to remain in Augusta and encourage the other 33% who are on the fence to remain in Augusta by connecting them to resources within the community that work to improve their lives and provide stability after they have transitioned from the military. In this case, the community has access to support those who are transitioning and recognizes the value veterans bring to the community. Recognizing veterans' societal contributions is ideal, but, unfortunately, inconsistent across the nation, thus community involvement varies drastically by site.

Ideally, our other five communities would like this level of relationship with their co-located military installations, but there is little consistency across the Department of

Defense. Two of our six communities have limited access to transitioning Service members as presenters at transition assistance programs where they provide information about their programs to veterans who choose to remain in the area. These organizations are not embedded within the installation as Augusta Warrior Project is, but hope to move toward that end-state as they continue to foster the relationship between their organization and the installation leadership. Our communities of Charleston, SC and Panhandle of FL have only episodic access to their local Air Force and Navy installations for transition briefings. Two of our affiliated communities (Buffalo, NY and Greenville, SC) do not have active duty installations and transition assistance programs for their local National Guard and Reserve component, which are not well established. Our sixth community, Orange County, CA borders Camp Pendleton. However, despite their continuous efforts, they have not had success of being included in the Camp Pendleton transition program.

Comparing these communities without embedded access to on-base transition activities to communities where such interaction is practiced shows the benefit of such collaboration. We see success as a warm hand-off from the military installation to the veteran's community of choice, where housing, employment, education, childcare, spousal support, and necessities of life can be secured before leaving military service. We know - from years of experience - that no single organization (government or non-government) can alone improve the quality of life for veterans in our community. It takes everyone working collaboratively around a single objective to succeed. We feel the community is the best connector with the greatest vested interest in their veterans' success. I do not believe we will ever get to a point, or even should get to the point, where the government is providing separating Service members' contact information to communities. However, I do believe that when communities are successfully assisting with transition, the word will get out and veterans will seek community assistance. To reach the level of success where veterans seek out community organizations for transition assistance, the communities must have a collaborative relationship with the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Defense, and Labor.

I retired from the military after twenty-three years. The only transition I made in my seven duty station moves where I did not have a sponsor at the other end was when I retired and became a veteran. We need the government - we need you - to partner with community organizations to help smooth the transition turbulence for all veterans - past, present, and future.

Major Issues Veterans Face in Transition.

For the last fourteen years as founder of the United States Special Operations Command Care Coalition, as Special Assistant to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff for Warrior and Family Support, and serving as CEO of America's Warrior Partnership, I've assisted

thousands of military members transition to civilian life. Regardless of the obstacle facing the veteran, the two greatest issues facing veterans today are the need to find hope and purpose in their lives. Hope is a powerful emotion. Without hope life seems unachievable, obstacles are unsolvable, and the future is dim. But with hope you have a way forward, solutions to achieve your objectives – you have a plan. What I’ve learned is that people are hopeful when someone is invested in them, can relate with their situation, and empowers them with education or advocacy. This is true for all veterans, young and old. With greater hope our oldest veterans may not have the highest rate of suicide than any generation of veterans. For a transition assistance program to be successful there must be a person who is knowledgeable and vested in the veteran’s success in order to give hope. Communities are best positioned to provide hope to veterans as they are the most knowledgeable of the environment and are vested in the success of their fellow citizen.

Communities and non-profit organizations are also best positioned to provide purpose to a veteran after they’ve transitioned. Last week I met with a friend and Special Forces officer who had just returned from combat in Iraq. He felt that he had lost purpose in his life. While he had a wonderful job working for a private organization that improved the lives of others, he felt purposeless. In his words, “after advising and supporting 20,000 Kurds in the fight against ISIS, I don’t think I’ll ever be as important again.” After a long pause, I reminded him that he could be even more purposeful in life by giving back to his community through volunteerism and servant leadership. This story is common, and is the reason Team Rubicon, Wounded Warrior Project, and Team Red White and Blue have been so successful – because they bring purpose to a veteran’s life. Developing purposeful opportunities during transition without community involvement is difficult, if not impossible, because it is in communities where veterans find purpose in their lives based on opportunities that are presented to them by their communities.

While hope and purpose are not as concrete as housing, employment, and education they are the foundation by which we thrive and this cannot be discounted. A vast majority of veterans return home to little contact with others who understand military service; they have difficulty accessing programs presented to them in Transition Assistance Program. Plus, they return to an environment that is foreign from their military life. In these scenarios, veterans can quickly find themselves disconnected and hopeless and without satisfying purpose.

America’s Warrior Partnership’s Community Integration program addresses hope and purpose by knowing the veteran, understanding their situation and assessing them holistically on an eight-point spectrum of housing, education, employment, relationships, access to earned benefits, health/behavioral health access, spiritual, and recreational needs. Our objective is to empower the veteran and to find a balance in these holistic

components by leveraging local and national government and non-government services to provide opportunities. The other unique aspect of our model is that our outreach is also not just to those in need. Our program focuses on building a relationship with every veteran in the community. Those seeking assistance (hope) are supported by those seeking to give back (purpose). The veteran develops hope through trust in our competence and finds purpose by connecting with others in their community who are like them.

The Veterans Affairs Secretary has initiated his My VA Community program to encourage communities to come together and support all veterans including those who are transitioning. We see this as a great step to encouraging local Veterans Affairs leadership to become more involved in their community by becoming involved with regional groups seeking to have a positive impact on veterans. Our affiliated communities are leading this effort to set up My VA Community boards, but we feel these boards need to take a step further and measure their impact on the outcomes of the veterans in their communities. We would welcome a partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs to assist in establishing a truly impactful My VA Community program to provide hope and purpose to all veterans of a community.

Partnerships

When I served in Special Operations, the focus during operations was not who had the funds, the resources, or the vision, but who had the *authority* to act. As a community leader, the partner needed is the organization that has the authority to provide services. In the veteran space much of this authority resides in the government programs where lower-level employees can move mountains in a single action because they have the authority. As mentioned previously, America's Warrior Partnership is fortunate to have strategic partners that enable our affiliated communities to focus on the veteran engagement. Our Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Veterans Benefit Administration's VECI program has provided our community leaders with another partner who has the authority to act. Under this MOU the VECI has immediate authority to act in the community. They connect training and leading programs from national level to local. By leveraging TAP benefit advisors, the VECI could bring outreach efforts directly into the community where millions of veterans actually live. This would be an appropriate use of authority and would improve veterans' lives. We see partnerships such as My VA Community as a venue to bring those with authority to act together with those organizations identifying the needs to be met. We recommend consolidating community-facing efforts and improving access to information technology. Additionally, in order to ensure consistent participation at the Veteran Integrated Service Network (VISN), we support the sharing of nonprofit data.

Three months ago our Orange County affiliated community hosted a Veterans Affairs Policy Academy which enabled Veterans Affairs to highlight a community's efforts while bringing Service providers, leaders, and funders together. In the end, these partnership helped bridge the military-civilian divide.

The Department of Defense is an equal partner, but like Veterans Affairs, the approach is fragmented and inconsistent. We recommend an initiative that enables local Commanders to partner with community-coordinating organizations to improve community transition for all Service members. We have seen this work effectively in Augusta, GA, but because there is limited standardization and continuity of services, the relationship is highly dependent on leadership, which changes often. Additionally, we recommend Department of Defense partner with Veterans Affairs as co-presenters at regional policy academies where local and national public, private, and government organizations focused on veterans can meet to inform and share. The absence of the Department of Defense at these policy academies is a sign to communities of the disconnections within the Transition Assistance Program.

Lastly, we are fortunate to partner with national and local non-profit partners who seek to provide services to the military and veterans who live in our communities. By holistically addressing community outreach with our local and national partners, we have encouraged them to focus not only on the 20% of Warriors with critical needs, but also on the 80% of Warriors who either could use some advice or want to give back. Through these efforts, of the 11,488 post-9/11 Warriors our partner communities know they've empowered 176 of the 302 homeless Warriors to become permanently housed; assisted 1,350 of the 2,638 unemployed to find meaningful employment; encouraged 2,948 to use their GI Bill; and helped 99% of those warriors to stay on-track or complete their studies. Additionally, by focusing on improving access to veteran benefits, the communities have ensured 76% of their Warriors are enrolled in Veterans Affairs healthcare and 64% are enrolled in eBenefits. Using the community coordinating information system WarriorServe® our communities are able to coordinate services and volunteer opportunities with other partners throughout the community. We are confident that this tool will enable other communities and their partners not only to measure their impact, but also to quantify their outcomes within their regions so our nation can be stronger because of the continued service and value our veterans provide.

Conclusion

Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Blumenthal, thank you for affording me the opportunity to provide the Committee an overview of the importance of holistically approaching military and veteran transition back to our communities. We know that no

single government agency or program, no single company or no single non-profit organization can ensure a Warrior and their family are successful in their return to civilian life. It takes everyone working together, transparently and consistently in concert with each other for the individual veteran to successfully transition. However, the definition of success is as varied as the personalities of those who serve in the military. Defining success of transition cannot be set or measured within the Washington D.C. beltway; it must be measured at the community level where the veteran returns to live the next chapter of his or her life. The Special Forces officer I referred to above will not measure success by the things he has such as his job, education, or his housing. He'll measure success by the purpose he has found in life.

The government must assist communities through encouraging the creation of community-based programs, collaboration with effective community-based programs, by using their authority at the community level in order to provide hope and purpose to all veterans.

I appreciate the opportunity to outline these critical areas and look forward to working with you on these issues in the context of community solutions for veterans. We look forward to seeing our communities having a greater role in transition from military installations; we hope to continue to work closely with the Department of Veterans Affairs on their MyVA Community and Veteran Employment Community Initiative; and we look forward to participating in refinement of the Transition Assistance Program. Collectively, with the leadership of Congress, as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs, we have made significant strides, but there is much work ahead. Our veterans depend on your support.

Thank you. I would be glad to answer any questions that you may have.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOY J. ILEM, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR,
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS

Thank you for inviting DAV (Disabled American Veterans) to submit a written statement for the record at this hearing focused on the challenges and issues veterans face as they transition from military service to civilian life. Although this hearing is focused on programs and services to help male and female veterans make a successful transition. I will focus this statement on the unique issues women veterans face in this process. Gaining equal access for women to transition services, benefits and health care post military service is a top legislative priority for DAV. We want to ensure these services are tailored to meet their needs and provided to the same degree and extent that such services are provided to men.

In 2014, with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan winding down and women turning to VA in record numbers, DAV commissioned a special report on women transitioning from military to veteran status. *Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home* presents a comprehensive assessment of the existing programs and services women veterans are provided by the VA, and the Departments of Defense, Labor, and Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

The report highlights that despite a generous array of government-provided benefits to assist veterans with transition and readjustment, serious gaps are evident for women in nearly every aspect of current Federal programs.

The vast majority of these deficiencies result from a disregard for the differing needs of women veterans and a historic focus on developing programs to meet the health care needs of men, who are prominent as veterans in both numbers and public consciousness. Although we have seen dramatic growth in the number of women coming to VA, for the foreseeable future women will remain a statistical minority of veterans. For example, VA has an estimated 6.6 million users; of these, women

represent only about 6.8 percent of the patient population.¹ This reality poses a number of specific and ongoing challenges for VA—but the challenges can and must be resolved.

The following text, findings and recommendations are from DAV's report—*Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home*. We hope these findings will add to the discussion on transition and related issues before the Committee.

EMPLOYMENT/EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

For men and women alike, a key requirement for a successful transition away from military service is the ability to establish satisfying, stable employment as a civilian. Most military members make this transition successfully, but some struggle. With the United States facing a significant draw-down of about a million servicemembers by 2020, it is critically important that employment programs and services are effective at helping men and women in the military make this transition smoothly.²

Employment data makes it clear that recent veterans have struggled to make the transition from military to civilian life. While the unemployment rate for all veterans throughout the economic downturn was better than that for the civilian labor force as a whole, Post-9/11 veterans had persistently higher rates of unemployment than other veterans and it took longer for that trend to peak at 12.1 percent and start to decline after 2011.³ This trend was even more pronounced among women veterans, with unemployment among Post-9/11 women climbing to 12.5 percent through 2012.⁴ The latest data show gains for Post-9/11 women veterans, with an unemployment rate declining to 9.3 percent in 2013.⁵ However, this rate is only slightly below peak unemployment reached by the country overall in the depth of the recession in October 2009.⁶ Indeed, as a whole, women veterans have struggled with unemployment following the recent recession, lagging behind all men and non-veteran women.⁷ With almost 200,000 or so women ready to leave the military over the next four to five years, it is imperative that we improve our support for women veterans' employment.

The reasons underlying this persistently higher rate of unemployment are not definitively known. However, characteristics such as a younger age, being unmarried or divorced, lower educational attainment and having children at home are associated with a higher rate of unemployment and are also prevalent among women veterans.

AGE

Younger workers have a higher rate of unemployment than older workers⁸ with 18–24 year olds experiencing the highest level of unemployment among adults. Both male and female Post-9/11 veterans in this age cohort have a higher rate of unemployment than their civilian peers and the highest rate among veterans overall.⁹

¹U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs, "Sourcebook: Women Veterans in the VHA, Vol. 3." Feb 2014.

²U.S. Government Accountability Office (2014). *Transitioning Veterans: Improved Oversight Needed to Enhance Implementation of Transition Assistance Program*. Washington, DC. GAO-14-144

³U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013). *Unemployment among veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces declines in 2012*. TED: The Editors Desk. Washington, DC. Accessed 14-08-22 www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2013/ted_20130322.htm

⁴Ibid.

⁵U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). *Economic News Release: April 04, 2014. p. o. s. Employment Status of the Civilian Population 18 years and over by veterans' status, sex, not seasonally adjusted*. Washington, DC.

⁶U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). *Labor force statistics from the current population survey*. Washington, DC. Accessed 14-08-22 http://data.bls.gov/pdq/SurveyOutputServlet?request_action=wh&-graph_name=LN_cpsbref3

⁷U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013). *Unemployment among veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces declines in 2012*. TED: The Editors Desk. Washington, DC. Accessed 14-08-22 www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2013/ted_20130322.htm

⁸U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013). *Employment Situation of Veterans 2012*. Washington, DC.

⁹U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). *Economic News Release: April 04, 2014. p. o. s. Employment Status of the Civilian Population 18 years and over by veterans' status, sex, not seasonally adjusted*. Washington, DC.

MARITAL STATUS

Marital status correlates with employment. Married women have lower rates of unemployment than divorced, separated, widowed or never-married women.^{10 11} After age 35, women veterans are less likely to be married than their civilian counterparts due to more separation and divorce in this population. Indeed, in all age cohorts, women veterans are more likely to experience divorce.¹²

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Younger women veterans, 17–24 years old, have a lower level of attainment of a bachelor's degree (5.2 percent) than non-veteran women (9.7 percent) of the same age. This difference persists among 25–34 year olds, with only 29 percent of veteran women attaining a bachelor's degree compared to 36 percent of non-veteran women of the same age.¹³ Analysis of veteran data show that poverty and educational attainment are linked. Only 3.2 percent of veterans with a bachelor's degree live in poverty compared to the 6.9 percent of veterans without a bachelor's degree who live in poverty.^{14 15}

MOTHERHOOD

Single mothers have higher rates of unemployment than married mothers (12 percent vs 4.8 percent, respectively).¹⁶ Eleven percent of women servicemembers are single parents compared with four percent of men. Women veterans are slightly more likely to have children than non-veteran women (58 percent compared to 52 percent).¹⁷ Among younger veterans this difference is pronounced with 29 percent of women veterans 17–24 years of age having children while only 13 percent of age-matched civilian women have children. Women veterans are more likely to have children under the age of 18 at home which correlates with poorer employment outcomes.¹⁸

MEDICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS

According to the VA, women veterans have higher rates of medical and mental health concerns than do male veterans, and one in five women veterans who use VA health care have experienced military sexual trauma (MST).¹⁹ Overall, women veterans have a higher rate of trauma exposure than their civilian counterparts when pre-enlistment, during-service and following-service experiences are taken into account.²⁰ One recent survey of veterans²¹ indicates a significant difference in women veterans' perception of the impact of war on their emotional and mental health with 43 percent of them stating they are worse now than before serving in Iraq or Afghanistan, which is higher than the 30 percent of men who feel the same way. Mental health needs and diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and the effects of MST as well as physical

¹⁰ Hartmann, H., Hayes, J. (2011). Women and men living on the edge: Economic insecurity after the great recession. Institute for Women's Policy Research. Washington, DC. C386

¹¹ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). Employment Characteristics of Families 2013. Washington, DC.

¹² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2011). America's Women Veterans: Military Service History and VA Benefits Utilization Statistics. Department of Veterans Affairs, Washington, DC.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee Chairman's Staff. (2011). Broken Promises: The need to improve economic security for veterans. Washington, DC.

¹⁵ U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee Democratic Staff. (2013). Building job opportunities for returning veterans.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). Employment Characteristics of Families Summary. Economic News Release, Washington, DC. Accessed 14–08–22. <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/famee.nr0.htm>

¹⁷ U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee Democratic Staff. (2013). Building job opportunities for returning veterans.

¹⁸ Cooney, R.T., Segal, M.W., Segal, D.R., Falk, W.W. (2003). Racial differences in the impact of military service on the socioeconomic status of women veterans. *Armed Forces & Society* 30(1): 53–85.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Task Force on Women Veterans (2012). Strategies for Serving Our Women Veterans. Washington DC.

²⁰ U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau (2011). Trauma-Informed Care for women veterans experiencing homelessness: a Guide for Service Providers. Washington, DC.

²¹ DiJulio, B., Deane, C., Firth, J., Craighill, P., Clement, S., Brodie, M. (2014) After the Wars: Survey of Iraq & Afghanistan active duty soldiers and veterans. Kaiser Family Foundation. Personal communications DiJulio, B.

health concerns have all been noted as risk factors for poor employment outcomes in veterans.^{22 23 24 25}

Even when these factors are controlled, Post-9/11 women veterans and National Guard women veterans have higher rates of unemployment than other groups.²⁶ Given this constellation of factors working against employment success for some women veterans and their demonstrated higher rates of unemployment, it is important for all of the partners working on veteran transition challenges to identify the specific needs of women and institute specialized programs and outreach for them.

TRANSITION ASSISTANCE

The challenge of making the transition from military service to civilian employment has been widely discussed.²⁷ For many in the military, seeking civilian employment may be the first time they have developed a résumé or interviewed for a job. For most, it can be a challenge to translate the skills, knowledge, and experience gained in military assignments into language accessible to a civilian hiring audience. In particular, specialized training and certificates gained during service do not generally translate into certification or licensure requirements for an equivalent position in the civilian sector. Finally, military members who move frequently or have been absent on deployments may not have a robust local network of civilian contacts who can help identify employment opportunities where they live.

There is no direct evidence that this transition is any different for women than it is for men. Yet, women veterans' unemployment rate remains stubbornly high and women have voiced frustration with the transition process. For instance, women veterans were less likely than men (32 percent compared to 47 percent) to believe the military was doing enough to ease transitions to civilian life, and more women (18 percent) than men (7 percent) doubt their military skills will be useful in the civilian job market.²⁸ Other studies found that women felt they had been led to believe that military training would be more valuable than it is in their search for employment.^{29 30}

Employment sector data appears consistent with the idea that women veterans find their military experience to be of less value in the job market. The data indicates that women veterans' employment patterns appear much more like that of civilian women than male veterans. Although women are filling technical positions in the military, they don't appear to be able to capitalize on that experience in the private sector in the same way as men.^{31 32}

In recognition of the need to help servicemembers to transition effectively to civilian life, Congress established the original Transition Assistance Program (TAP) in 1991.³³ The new DOD program, called Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success) covers all servicemembers and incorporates career readiness and transition preparation into the entire span of a military member's career. The revised program covers all departing servicemembers. It is intended to help servicemembers identify their post-

²² Horton, J. L., Jacobson, I.G., Wong, C.A., Wells, T.S., Boyko, E.K., Smith, B., Smith, T.C. (2013). The impact of prior deployment experience on civilian employment after military service. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 70(6): 408–417

²³ Ostovary, F. D., J (2011). Challenges and opportunities of Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans with disabilities transitioning into learning and workplace environments. *New directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 132: 63–73.

²⁴ Humensky, J. L., Jordon, N., Stroupe, K.T., Hynes, D.M. (2013). Employment status of veterans receiving substance abuse treatment from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. *Psychiatric Services* 64(2): 177–180.

²⁵ U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2014). VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment. GAO. Washington, DC.

²⁶ Vow to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (VOW) (P.L. 112–56 Title II 125 S 711, 712).

²⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Business Board (2013). *Employing our Veterans Part II: Servicemember Transition*. Washington, DC.

²⁸ DiJulio, B., Deane, C., Firth, J., Craighill, P., Clement, S., Brodie, M. (2014) *After the Wars: Survey of Iraq & Afghanistan active duty soldiers and veterans*. Kaiser Family Foundation. Personal communications DiJulio, B.

²⁹ Business and Professional Women's Foundation. (2007). *Women Veterans in Transition*. Washington, DC.

³⁰ Thom, K. B., E (2011). *Chicagoland female veterans; a qualitative study of attachment to the labor force*. American Institute for Research National Center on Family Homelessness.

³¹ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). *Economic News Release: April 04, 2014. p. o. s. Employment Status of the Civilian Population 18 years and over by veterans' status, sex, not seasonally adjusted*. Washington, DC.

³² U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). *Employment Characteristics of Families 2013*. Washington, DC.

³³ Transition Assistance Program 1991 (P. L. 101–510) S 502 (a)(1)

³⁴ U.S. Government Accountability Office (2014). *Transitioning Veterans: Improved Oversight*

separation education, financial and employment goals. After participating in the structured program, servicemembers are expected to have clear goals for employment or education and will know where and how to access the services that can help them achieve those goals.

According to a recent review of the program by GAO,³⁴ comprehensive data on participation rates and information on the effectiveness of the training is not readily available and post-transition outcome data is limited. The data that is gathered has not been publicly released with an analysis of outcomes and satisfaction by gender.

Commanders are the lynchpin of the military's integration program. They must ensure that transitioning servicemembers attend the various trainings and they are responsible for ensuring an appropriate review of the servicemember's employment plan and directing any needed follow up as part of the program "capstone." GAO recognized that without uniform data gathering and accountability to ensure all commanders fulfill this responsibility, the impact of the program may be limited.

Finding:

The effectiveness of the TAP program cannot be assessed in the case of women.

Recommendation:

Data on participation, satisfaction, effectiveness and outcomes for TAP should be collected and analyzed by gender and race and returned in real time to commanders for their assessment and corrective actions.

Finding:

TAP does not offer elements targeted at women or their needs.

Recommendation:

TAP partners should conduct an assessment to determine needs of women veterans and incorporate specific break-out sessions during the employment workshop or add a specific track for women in the three-day session to address those needs.

Finding:

While the warm handoff for transitioning servicemembers who have not completed an acceptable transition plan is laudable, the proof of success is whether every plan has been successfully implemented six months to a year out from separation. The hallmark of adult learning is that adults seek out and absorb information when they perceive that they need it, not necessarily when it is presented. Some transitioning servicemembers may not be primed to absorb TAP training pre-separation but would be more receptive once they are actively seeking employment six months later.

Recommendation:

DOD should transfer contact information and data on all TAP participants to VA and the Department of Labor (DOL) who should be responsible to provide gender sensitive follow up with all servicemembers 6–12 months after separation to offer additional support and services, if needed.

Recommendation:

To judge the success of TAP, employment outcomes and educational attainment should be tracked and reported on a rolling basis, analyzed by gender and race, for all separated servicemembers.

DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

The DOL is responsible for providing the employment workshop during the TAP program and they run a variety of programs and services that help support veterans in their search for employment. This includes the Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) that provides employment resources and expertise, and the Gold Card which can be used by unemployed Post-9/11 era veterans to receive enhanced intensive services at DOL American Job Centers and the associated website, Career One Stop (www.careeronestop.org).³⁵ This support is individualized to the needs of the veteran and includes six months of follow-up with a case manager. In addition, DOL sponsors My Next Move for veterans, a job search portal that allows them to use their military occupation code to browse jobs and career information and to take

³⁴ U.S. Government Accountability Office (2014). Transitioning Veterans: Improved Oversight Needed to Enhance Implementation of Transition Assistance Program. Washington, DC. GAO-14-144

³⁵ Careeronestop: Pathways to success. Accessed 14-08-22. <http://www.careeronestop.org/>

an assessment to find out about careers compatible with their interests. A similar portal from DOD, Hero 2 Hired,³⁶ targets National Guard and Reserve members.

Importantly, DOL has a visible and strong focus on women veterans and their needs³⁷ and uses specific messages and images of women veterans that provide an inviting entry portal. However, the employment resources offered are the same for women as for men and one limited study indicates that women are unlikely to use these veteran related services.³⁸

JOINING FORCES

Launched by the White House in 2011, Joining Forces is a government initiative to promote employment for military members and their families.³⁹ The effort brings together Federal agencies, state government, educational institutions and the private sector to promote and support employment and training for military families and veterans. Through the initiative (and supported by tax credits for veteran hiring), private businesses and non-profit organizations have pledged to hire or train more than 800,000 veterans and their spouses.

Working with state licensure and certification processes, the initiative has also made progress in bringing attention to the need to streamline the translation of military training and certification to private sector equivalents.^{40 41} While all of these efforts are tremendously positive and have raised national awareness of the skills and talent of former military members, the initiative is broad based without specific outreach to women veterans. In some instances, the private sector has done well to appeal to and welcome women veterans, using images and messages that include women veterans, while others have focused only on telling the stories of military men, giving the appearance that these occupations are closed to women. In addition, the Work Opportunity Tax Credit to encourage industry and non-profits to hire veterans expired December 31, 2013. With unemployment among Post-9/11 women veterans still high, and given the anticipated drawdown of strength at DOD, this tax credit should be made permanent.

TWO INNOVATIVE TRANSITION PROGRAMS FOR WOMEN VETERANS

There are two transition programs worth mentioning that seem to be having a positive impact for women veterans. First is a pilot program of women veterans retreats through VA's Vet Center Program—Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS). Public Law 111–163 included provisions that required VA to conduct a pilot program of group counseling in retreat settings for women veterans newly separated from the Armed Forces. VA reports that a total of 134 women were served in FYs 2011–2012 in six retreats coordinated by VA's RCS, or Vet Center program. RCS worked with the *Women's Wilderness Institute* to develop the locations and agenda for the retreats. Feedback from women veterans participating in the retreats has been very positive. In May 2013, the RCS staff provided a report to Congress on the outcome of the pilots and retreats and noted that they were beneficial for this cohort of war veterans. Statistically significant positive outcomes measured from the retreats were reduced stress, improved stress coping skills, and overall improvement in psychological well-being among participants. Most notably—73 percent of the women veterans who participated in the retreat showed improvement in scores in PTSD severity. Seventy-eight percent of the participants with scores qualifying for a PTSD diagnosis at pre-retreat, no longer qualified for a diagnosis 2 months post-retreat.⁴²

Second is an innovative private sector program, the Woman Veterans REBOOT Workshop (see attachment), designed to meet the unique needs of women veterans

³⁶ U.S. Department of Defense. Hero2Hired. Accessed 14–08–22. <https://h2h.jobs/>

³⁷ U.S. Department of Labor Veterans Employment & Training Service. Women Veterans. Accessed 14–08–22. <http://www.dol.gov/vets/womenveterans/>

³⁸ Boraas, S., Roemer, G., Bodenlos, K. (2013). Assessment of the workforce system's implementation of the veterans' priority of service provision of the Jobs for Veterans Act of 2002. Mathematica. Washington, DC.

³⁹ White House. Joining Forces. Washington, DC. Accessed 14–08–22. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces>

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Business Board (2013). Employing our Veterans Part II: Servicemember Transition. Washington, DC.

⁴¹ Executive Office of the President (2013). The fast track to civilian employment: Streamlining credentialing and licensing for servicemembers, veterans and their spouses. White House. Washington, DC.

⁴² Department of Veterans Affairs Report on the Pilot Program on Counseling in Retreat Settings for Women Veterans Newly Separated from Service in the Armed Forces Pursuant to the Requirements of Public Law 111–163, Section 203. May 9, 2013.

as they transition from military to civilian life. This unique three week program builds upon the participants' military training, skills, and experience and addresses the personal, social, and professional aspects of military-to-civilian life transition. The workshop is aimed at employment, career and educational opportunities.

CLOSING

In order to better understand the experience of women in the military, data needs to be routinely collected, analyzed and reported by gender and minority status. Therefore, DAV recommends improved data collection on women and minorities for health care, disability compensation, justice involvement, education, transition assistance, sexual trauma, employment, and housing programs. Congress, policy-makers, program directors, and researchers need this information in order to monitor and appropriately enhance services for women veterans.

Millions of women have answered the call of duty and put themselves at risk to preserve our Nation's security and our way of life. They served this country faithfully and many with distinction. This is a transformative moment for the VA—Secretary Robert McDonald is leading an ambitious effort to change the culture at the VA and to direct resources where they will ensure that VA health care and benefits services can meet the needs of every veteran. That cannot happen for women veterans without a strong focus on their differences and their needs, met with a detailed, action-orientated plan.

DAV appreciates the opportunity to provide this statement to the Committee on this important topic and urges Congress to legislatively address the known and expected needs of women as documented in DAV's report, as well as our prior testimony on the report. I would be pleased to address any questions the Committee may have on these topics.

Attachment for DAV

ALL-WOMAN VETERANS REBOOT WORKSHOP

Studies show that women veterans face greater challenges than their male counterparts. Yet there are very few programs to help them re-assimilate into civilian life—and many feel left behind. To answer the call, National Veterans Transition Services, Inc. (NVTSI) also known as REBOOT, launched the Women Veterans Initiative. The program is designed to meet the unique needs of women veterans as they transition from military to civilian life. The REBOOT Workshop™ is the Nation's only transition program of its kind that provides women veterans with the tools they need to succeed.

“We need the tools in our toolboxes to succeed and REBOOT gave us those tools. Veterans need to go through this workshop.” *Maria Orozco, REBOOT Class 62*

The project is funded by the Ford Motor Company. REBOOT is also partnering with Soroptomist International to engage community leaders in providing mentoring for the veteran graduates.

WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

The REBOOT Workshop™ is based around how we think and how our thoughts impact every facet of our lives. It demonstrates how we let habits, attitudes and beliefs stand in the way of releasing our inner potential. It also reveals how our beliefs and expectations about ourselves, our families, and our futures are directly related to our current realities. The REBOOT Workshop™ is designed to build awareness of how your mind works, how to control the way you think and how to achieve success in any part of your life. The program also shows how important it is for those that have suffered a traumatic experience in particular, as well as their families, friends and caregivers, to lock on to the power of the mind, and focus on a productive and contributive future.

The 15 day REBOOT Workshop™ is divided into three parts:

- Week I—*Military-to-Civilian Personal Transition*. Developed by The Pacific Institute®; addresses the Transition Domains of personal effectiveness and wellbeing.
- Week II—*Military-to-Civilian Lifestyle Transition*. Developed by Operation Legacy; addresses the Transition Domains of living situation and community-life functioning.
- Week III—*Military-to-Civilian Career Transition*. Addresses the Transition Domains of employment, career and education.

Supplemental Support:

- Mentoring: In addition to peer support from other graduates, interested participants who complete the workshop will be matched with mentors that will support their efforts by providing advice guidance and leadership.
- Job placement assistance is available to graduates through our partner network.
- Connection to community resources will be made available through various channels and orchestrated through NVTSI.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The U.S. Department of Education (ED), along with our federal agency partners, is committed to supporting our nation's transitioning service members. Since 2012, in collaboration with the Departments of Defense (DoD), Veterans Affairs (VA), and Labor (DOL), the Small Business Administration (SBA), and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), ED has supported efforts to redesign the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) in accordance with the VOW to Hire Heroes Act.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) executed in 2014 details specific roles and responsibilities for ED and our federal agency partners regarding interagency coordination to implement the redesigned TAP. Although ED does not administer any specific part of the redesigned TAP, ED plays a key role in the implementation of TAP as a consultative agency. ED is a member of the TAP Executive Council (EC), and the TAP Senior Steering Group (SSG). Additionally, ED participates in a number of working groups focused on issues such as performance management, data sharing, participant assessments, strategic communication, and curriculum evaluation. ED provides expertise in areas such as postsecondary access and affordability, Federal financial aid, and adult learning strategies. ED also participates in TAP training site assistance visits to provide subject-matter expertise and recommendations for enhancing curriculum content and instruction.

A critical component of the redesigned TAP is the Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success) curriculum, designed to ensure that transitioning service members meet career-readiness standards. ED has contributed to the development and evaluation of components of Transition GPS, including DoD's Accessing Higher Education (AHE) and VA's Career Technical Training (CTTT) programs. Of the five components of the Transition GPS curriculum, the DOL Employment Workshop and VA Benefits briefings are required by law for the roughly 250,000 service members (including members of the Guard and Reserve) who transition out of the military each year.

The supplemental Accessing Higher Education (AHE) track supports the Administration's goal to address college access, affordability, quality, and completion for our service members. Because many transitioning service members will enroll at America's colleges and universities, ED believes that it is important that all transitioning service members be encouraged to participate in training that will prepare them to be informed educational consumers. Through AHE, transitioning service members receive tools and resources such as an overview of the postsecondary landscape and the various financial aid options available to them; an understanding of how to protect themselves from the actions of some predatory for-profit colleges; and how to prepare for meeting the application deadlines and securing funding for many colleges and universities. Considering the significant impact that obtaining a college education has on employment and earning potential, all service members who document interest in educational outcomes are required to meet the related educational career readiness

standards. Individualized attention and counseling, combined with educational instruction, resources and services, are used to build the skills necessary for each service member to meet these standards and their post-military education goals. Recognizing that some service members will not express an interest in the education track at the time of transition but will later have a need to attend college either to change careers or expand their skills, ED will continue to work with its agency partners to address that population and ensure that they make sound educational choices.

In addition to supporting the development and implementation of TAP, ED is also working with the VA on updates to the GI Bill Comparison Tool, which draws on ED postsecondary data to provide potential students with estimates on costs of attendance and available post-9/11 GI Benefits, overall and veteran-specific data on retention and graduation rates, and information on average salaries and loan default rates at institutions of higher education. ED's Federal Student Aid Awareness and Outreach Group has continually participated with DoD and its partners to heighten the military community's awareness of federal funding programs.

To improve veterans' transition into postsecondary institutions and to foster success for veterans on campus, ED, VA, and DoD have encouraged colleges and universities to affirm support for the "8 Keys to Veterans' Success" (8 Keys) — a voluntary effort to promote best practices that foster postsecondary environments that support veterans' success, and help ensure that veterans have access to the information they need to make informed decisions concerning their Federal educational benefits. As of December 8, 2015, ED has facilitated the registration of 1,963 schools affirming support for the 8 Keys. We believe that veterans are benefitting, and are more likely to be successful, when colleges and universities provide the supports outlined in 8 Keys.

As part of our outreach efforts, in collaboration with the private and nonprofit sectors, ED has conducted several 8 Keys presentations at national and regional conferences, including: California Community College Veterans Summit (12/5/14); Student Veterans of America National Conference (1/8/15); Council of College and Military Educators (1/27/15); American Legion Credentialing Summit (4/28/15); and the Western Association of Veterans Education Specialists Annual Conference (7/27/15). ED maintains ongoing communication with these and other veteran service organizations in order to increase our awareness and understanding of the veteran student experience on our nation's campuses.

As service members and their families transition to civilian life, successful reintegration is paramount. We remain committed to doing all that we can to support our service men and women as they navigate postsecondary education, find jobs, or start businesses. ED will continue to work with our agency partners to strengthen ladders of opportunity, so that all our veterans and service members can reach their educational and career goals.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF KATY BEH NEAS, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT FOR
PUBLIC AFFAIRS, EASTER SEALS, INC.

Dear Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal and Members of the Committee: Thank you for holding this hearing to discuss the transition assistance available to transitioning servicemembers and veterans. I am pleased to share Easter Seals' perspectives on veteran transition, which are based on our experiences in working with veterans through the Easter Seals Dixon Center for Military and Veterans Services and our national affiliate network of community-based affiliates. My testimony will include background on Easter Seals and our commitment to America's veterans, our appreciation for the numerous improvements to the transition assistance program (TAP) made by Congress and the relevant Federal agencies, a description of a growing public-private, pre-separation best practice to improve transition success, and the identification of the essential ingredient for all successful veteran reintegration—community—and our recommendations for investing in community-based solutions.

EASTER SEALS' COMMITMENT TO AMERICA'S VETERANS

Easter Seals is a leading non-profit organization that assists veterans, military families, and others to reach their potential and succeed in their communities by providing and connecting them to local services and supports. Founded in 1919, Easter Seals began serving veterans after World War II to help address the unmet needs of servicemembers returning home with service-connected disabilities. Through our national network of 74 community-based affiliates and Easter Seals Dixon Center for Military and Veterans Services, Easter Seals continues to fill the gap between the services veterans need and the services currently available through government or other entities.

Easter Seals was selected by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to develop and administer the National Veteran Caregiver Training Program that provides self-study workbook, online, and classroom caregiver training to eligible veteran caregivers. In addition, numerous Easter Seals affiliates provide employment, respite, adult day health, child care, and other ongoing reintegration services to veterans and their families through programs funded through private foundations and donors as well as Federal grants, including the Department of Labor's (DOL) Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program and the VA's Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot. Recognizing emerging unmet needs of America's veterans and military families, Easter Seals developed the Easter Seals Dixon Center for Military and Veterans Services, under the leadership of retired U.S. Army Colonel David Sutherland, to expand and better coordinate community-based veteran services across Easter Seals' affiliate and partner network. Annually, Easter Seals provides direct services to about 165,000 veterans and military families.

TRANSITION GPS—A MAJOR IMPROVEMENT OVER “DEATH BY POWERPOINT”

Easter Seals appreciates the opportunity to discuss the improvements made to TAP, the primary tool available to transitioning servicemembers to help them prepare for their transition from military to civilian life. My colleague, Col. Sutherland, testified before a U.S. House panel in January 2015 about the great strides Congress and the Administration have made to make TAP more useful and meaningful for transitioning servicemembers. Easter Seals applauded President Obama's announcement in 2011 of a major reboot of the transition program and we supported the changes Congress made to TAP through the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011.

The previous TAP was often referred to as “death by PowerPoint” because it didn't accomplish much more than check-the-box on the responsibility. Based on personal accounts from veterans who have participated in TAP and on available evaluation data, the new Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success) represents a marked improvement in both relevance and helping exiting servicemembers achieve career readiness standards (CRS) for their next step, whether finding a job, starting a business, or pursuing additional education. Easter Seals is most familiar with the Department of Labor's Employment Workshop, the three-day instruction to help servicemembers translate their military skills, develop a resume, research job and labor market information, and practice their interview skills. Easter Seals also appreciates the availability of the optional tailored tracks with more focused, in-depth instruction for those individuals who want to pursue a college education, seek an industry-recognized credential, or start a business. Easter Seals welcomed DOL's testimony that it plans to update its workshop to include more hands-on opportunities for TAP participants to develop their resumes and related materials.

Easter Seals Recommendation: Easter Seals urges Congress to continue its aggressive oversight of the TAP program, including seeking and making available TAP evaluation and assessment data, to ensure the improved program remains relevant and doesn't, over time, face the similar challenges Transition GPS was developed to fix.

SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION STARTS WITH A JOB BEFORE MILITARY SEPARATION

While it didn't receive the headlines of a bill signing, congressional action, or Presidential speech, the U.S. Department of Defense's release of a December 23, 2014 memorandum may, long-term, represent one of the more significant actions toward improving transition success. In the memo, former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel further clarified and encouraged installation commanders to allow nonprofit non-Federal entities (nonprofit NFE's) on military installations to help facilitate the delivery of transition services to servicemembers and their families. The memo made clear that installation commanders should seriously consider requests from nonprofit NFE's for access to the installation, including the use of space or logistical

support to deliver transition support such as “career opportunities for transitioning servicemembers.” Easter Seals understands how critical employment is to transition success and has long encouraged more supports and job-matching for servicemembers prior to them leaving the military to foster greater transition success.

My colleagues at Easter Seals Dixon Center have been working to forge partnerships between interested installation commanders, employers, and credentialing organizations to give transitioning servicemembers the opportunity to develop job-ready skills and industry-recognized credentials that are connected to a real job—all while still on active duty. Easter Seals Dixon Center advises the International Brotherhood of Teamsters on best practices in transitioning active duty personnel to successful transportation careers through their commercial driver’s licenses (CDL) credentialing program. The Teamsters have partnered with a major transportation employer, ABF Freight, and the U.S. Army—at bases in Kansas and Oklahoma—to provide their six-week CDL training, free-of-charge, to interested transitioning servicemembers. Graduates of the program have a guaranteed job with ABF Freight once they leave the military. A 14-year Army Sergeant who recently graduated from the program in Fort Sill in Oklahoma said the program was a great opportunity to go from one job straight into another. “I can actually start making money. That’s a good feeling to have something to go to from leaving the military.”

A young Marine Lance Corporal named Gary who had a similar employment goal when he exited the military in 2013 could have greatly benefited from a training-straight-to-job, pre-separation program like the one offered through the Teamsters. Gary participated in the redesigned Transition GPS program and gave it fairly high reviews, other than its lack of localized job market and community support information for where he was going (Cincinnati) rather than where he was stationed (North Carolina). That said, Gary and his young family had a plan and were ready for their next stage in life. But his thoughtful plan for a seamless transition quickly unraveled. A payment glitch delayed his final military paycheck, which was to cover his relocation bills, including the first month’s rent and living expenses during his job hunt. That one payroll mishap—which was out of his control—left Gary and his family homeless and their lives nearly spiraled out of control.

Gary’s story ends in success thanks to a community prepared to respond. Gary called a local helpline, which connected Gary to the Easter Seals in the region that specializes in employment services. With Easter Seals’ help, Gary quickly found a temporary job and received other community supports to help him secure an apartment for he and his family. The temporary job turned full-time, which helped him get his life back on track. But Gary wanted more than a job. He wanted a career. So he studied for and earned his CDL license in the summer of 2014, nearly a year after his initial military transition. While Gary was counted as a Transition GPS success—having earned his career readiness standards signoff at his Capstone event—Gary’s transition was far from smooth due to the payroll glitch. Gary’s situation could have been avoided if he had the opportunity to earn his CDL training and secure his chosen job as a truck driver before he separated the military.

Congress recently recognized the importance of the DOD memo and how non-profits and veteran service organizations have stepped up to deliver meaningful, pre-separation supports and services to transitioning servicemembers and their families. In its committee report (114–102, Part 1) for its Fiscal Year 2016 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the U.S. House Armed Services Committee described how “some installations have partnered with local non-profit and community based transition support organizations to enhance the Transition Assistance Program curriculum with great success, especially for those leaving the service and remaining in the local area.” The report goes on to direct the Secretary of Defense to brief Congress “on the feasibility of expanding this model of partnering with local community based support organizations department-wide to enhance the Transition Assistance Program.”

Easter Seals Recommendation: Easter Seals urges Congress to encourage and promote continued use of public-private partnerships on military installations to help connect existing servicemembers to credentialed training and meaningful careers. In particular, Easter Seals urges Congress to seek and release the DOD feasibility report, which was required for March 1, 2016, and to take other appropriate action to encourage or even incentivize installation commanders to allow and develop similar training-straight-to-job, pre-separation programs.

ONGOING REINTEGRATION NEEDS BEST ADDRESSED LOCALLY

In Gary's story, his community became the final catchall to help put him on a road to successful reintegration. No matter how well-meaning transition programs and government systems are designed and implemented, the community—and the welcoming, coordinated support it provides—continues to be the essential ingredient to transition success. The point of greatest transition impact on veterans' transition to civilian life occurs at the local level, where there are boots-on-the-ground to meet their individual needs and to connect them to available local resources and supports. The Center for a New American Security concluded, in its *Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities* report, that the most effective veteran reintegration programs “are those that base operations at a credible, local nonprofit organization that coordinates and deploys both public and private resources and stakeholders to address the needs and recognize the skills of servicemembers, veterans, and their families.”

That is the role that Easter Seals plays in a number of communities to assist veterans. Most recently, Easter Seals described its role in assisting female veterans during reintegration in a major policy white paper, *Call to Action: Support Community Efforts to Improve the Transition to Civilian Life for Women Veterans*. The paper highlighted the unique and growing needs of female veterans and how public and private investments in community-based reintegration services can lead to successful transitions. Women veterans often do not identify as veterans or feel comfortable within government systems. Instead, women veterans may access the transition supports they need, initially, through a community partner, which then reconnects them to the VA or other social service supports.

The Easter Seals *Call to Action* paper identified a lack of community-based reintegration supports and resources that are focused on crisis prevention rather than just crisis intervention. Easter Seals recommended expansions of early-intervention models that include five core components:

- Veteran-centered approach to focus on the unique and evolving needs of each veteran;
- Care coordination to holistically address reintegration through a coordinated team approach;
- Community connection to link veterans to VA and other key Federal and local supports within their communities;
- Emergency financial assistance to meet unexpected, temporary financial barriers to successful reintegration; and,
- Ongoing preventative and follow along supports to recognize that reintegration challenges can surface throughout a veteran's lifetime.

Many publically and privately funded programs focus on resolving challenges, such as homelessness and long-term unemployment, rather than staving off these challenges before they occur through early access to local reintegration services and supports. Easter Seals applauds Congress for investing in public-private solutions through programs such as the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program, Supportive Services for Veterans Families, and the Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot. In addition, Easter Seals applauds the early-intervention, public-private partnership goals of H.R. 1843, a pilot proposal introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives that would provide veterans with disabilities with access to care coordination and local supports. These programs and legislative proposals represent models of effective public-private partnerships that can help meet the needs of veterans and transitioning servicemembers.

Easter Seals Recommendation: Easter Seals urges Congress to fully fund existing public-private reintegration programs, including the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program and Supportive Services for Veterans Families Program; to reauthorize and expand the Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot to include other, non-rural underserved veteran communities; and to enact H.R. 1843 and other legislative proposals that recognize the ongoing reintegration needs of veterans and that promote local, preventative access to care coordination supports and direct services that help promote reintegration success.

CONCLUSION

Easter Seals applauds the Committee for its leadership in holding this hearing and in its past efforts to increase the transition assistance and supports available to America's servicemembers and veterans. The improved Transition GPS and the growing number of pre-separation, training-straight-to-jobs programs are examples

that separating servicemembers are better equipped for their initial transition. However, more can and must be done to help expand community-based services and coordination of local supports, particularly in situations where challenges surface weeks or years after the initial transition. Easter Seals looks forward to working with this Committee to help expand crisis intervention reintegration supports. Thank you for the opportunity to share Easter Seals' view on transition assistance and our ideas for promoting reintegration success of all veterans.



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Written Testimony of
Barb Carson
Acting Associate Administrator
Office of Veterans Business Development (OVBD)
U.S. Small Business Administration

For the
U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs
*Empowering Veteran Entrepreneurship through
Transition Assistance*

Submitted, December 22, 2015

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on the U.S. Small Business Administration's (SBA) continuing efforts to empower veteran entrepreneurship and small business ownership through the Department of Defense's (DOD) Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

The mission of Office of Veterans Business Development (OVBD) is to empower Veteran entrepreneurship by formulating, implementing, administering, and promoting policies and programs to equip veteran, servicemember (active duty, National Guard, Reserve), and military spouse owned small businesses with counseling, training and education, access to capital, and contracting opportunities. Our programs and policies that target our nation's heroes and job creators are well supported by the Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and we are grateful for the opportunity to share our successes with this committee. We look forward to receiving your input and earning your support and confidence.

As small business owners, veterans continue to serve our country by creating critical employment opportunities and driving economic growth. They possess the skills, discipline, and leadership to start and operate successful businesses in their communities. In fact, veterans over-index in entrepreneurship and are at least 45 percent more likely than those with no active-duty military experience to be self-employed.¹ Nearly one in ten small businesses are veteran-owned. These

¹ "Factors Affecting Entrepreneurship Among Veterans," Office of Advocacy, U.S. Small Business Administration, March 2011.



**U.S. Small Business Administration
Washington, D.C. 20416**

businesses generate over \$1.1 trillion in receipts annually and employ over 5 million Americans.²

Remarkably, the proportion of participation of veterans in business ownership was persistent from the 2007 to the 2012 Census Survey of Small Business Ownership while, during the same period, the overall number of veteran owned small businesses increased at a faster rate than non-veteran owned small businesses. We also note that between 2007 and 2012 the number of women veteran-owned firms increased from 97,114 to 383,302³⁴. All of this data indicates strong entrepreneurial activity among the Post-9/11 era of veterans. The inclusion and continued support of the entrepreneurship track in TAP – known as Boots to Business (B2B), ensures we empower this next greatest generation of veteran small business owners.

TAP PROGRESS

In 2012, in collaboration with the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs (VA), Labor (DOL), Education, and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), SBA began participating in the redesign of TAP through the interagency governance structure created subsequent to the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) to Hire Heroes Act of 2011. Our goal was to formalize and expand our support to transitioning servicemembers, which we have had provided over the years at the local level on a much smaller scale.

We piloted the (B2B) entrepreneurship track in summer of 2012 and launched the program across U.S. installations on January 1, 2013. We received our first appropriation to support the program in January of 2014, at which time we began building infrastructure to support program operations, outcomes evaluation, and outreach. Notably, in 2014 we expanded the program to include to offer the program to servicemembers and spouses transitioning overseas – where it has been exceptionally well received. To date, B2B has trained over 33,000 servicemembers and spouses, and it is offered as part of TAP on over 180 military installations worldwide.

Working through the interagency governance of TAP, we are extending Boots to Business to all active

²“Survey of Business Owners – Veteran-Owned Firms, 2012” U.S. Census Bureau, Department of Commerce, November 2015

³Ibid.



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Washington, D.C. 20416**

duty Servicemembers and spouses through the Military Life Cycle (MLC) transition preparation model. We are specifically targeting military spouses to ensure they are afforded every opportunity to access entrepreneurship training. While the Administration has made significant progress on reducing the unemployment rate for veterans, the unemployment rate is still estimated to be 25% for military spouses, and many more military spouses are underemployed. Surveys show this population is highly interested in self-employment and entrepreneurship as a means of improving their economic situation and creating a transportable career to facilitate their families continuing military service.

In addition to our efforts to support MLC and with support and active participation from private sector, non-profit and SBA resource partners, we have extended the program to veterans of any era and their families, which we call B2B: Reboot. SBA's innovative private partnership framework enables our effectiveness - and more importantly - our efficiency.

B2B is critically enabled by SBA's partners. Our network of 15 Veterans Business Outreach Centers (VBOCs) is the cornerstone of our delivery model. VBOCs are statutorily directed to participate in transition assistance and serve as B2B instructors and follow-on providers and integrators of business assistance. They also maintain expertise to refer veterans to other federal and local service providers. In many cases, VBOCs are extensions of SBA's district offices and assist SBA employees assigned as Veteran Business Development Officers (VBDOs).

Our 15 VBOCs extend their services nationwide by collaborating extensively within SBA's network of resource partners which include Small Business Development Centers, Women's Business Centers, and SCORE. Our partnership model extends to other veteran services centers of excellence, such as the Institute of Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University (IVMF). IVMF is a grantee of OVBD that provides curriculum development, overseas B2B instruction, program outcomes assessment assistance, and wholly offers as part of B2B an eight-week follow-on entrepreneurship education course for free to all who complete the two day introductory TAP course.

TAP OUTCOMES

SBA tracks and reports on several performance metrics through the TAP governance structure as part of the overall interagency TAP evaluation strategy. These metrics include the participation numbers



U.S. Small Business Administration
Washington, D.C. 20416

and trends in the entrepreneurship track, the graduation rate from the follow-on eight-week course offered by IVMF and for the first time in 2016, we will report the number of business formed by B2B participants. This will be reported after the completion and analysis of a B2B specific outcome assessment survey. The survey will be conducted from a sample of the population of B2B participants since the program launch in January of 2014.

Multiple projects were completed over the past two years to enable this assessment including putting in place SBA's first veterans specific system of record to cover the required data collection and developing and clearing the survey instrument via Paperwork Reduction Act and Privacy Act procedures. This survey will focus on B2B participant's business formation activity and on their intent to form businesses in the future. SBA seeks to understand the gestation period from intent to form a business to action for the transitioning servicemember, as well as any patterns in types of businesses formed and markets and industries pursued. SBA also seeks to understand the degree to which B2B contributed to the business formation decision and ultimately its success, as well as what other SBA or partner resources are utilized over time.

Challenges remain with data sharing between SBA partners and other federal agencies, and the longitudinal tracking required to measure outcomes in the entrepreneurship domain, but this first outcomes survey will establish a baseline, contribute to our knowledge base, and guide future program refinements.

It is important to realize that successful outcomes and performance evaluation for B2B should not overly emphasize business formation and any associated individual and macro-economic benefits. The most important outcome of B2B is its contribution to the successful transition of servicemembers and their families to civilian life. The most heavily emphasized learning objective of the course is enabling participating servicemembers and spouses to understand the opportunities and the challenges of business ownership as a post-service vocation. B2B often illuminates reasons why a servicemember or spouse should seek employment as a more suitable alternative to a near or long term pursuit of business ownership.



U.S. Small Business Administration
Washington, D.C. 20416

SUCCESS STORIES

The B2B partnership produces success stories like Mr. Timothy Page. After serving 27 years on active duty in the U.S. Army, Tim attended B2B at Ft. Meade, MD as the first step of his transition mission to pursue small business ownership. His idea was to create eco-friendly car washes he calls “auto spas”. Through the facilitation of Mr. Mark Williams in SBA’s Baltimore district office, Tim was introduced to Ms. Melissa Dent, a counselor at Maryland’s Small Business Development Center, who helped him develop a business plan. In May 2015, Tim competed in a business plan competition privately funded for B2B graduates where he won first place and \$30,000 in seed capital. His first auto spa will open in Forestville, MD in the spring of 2016. There are many similar stories among the ever growing legion of B2B graduates.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

While Tim’s story is a great example of how our programs and partners integrate to empower veteran entrepreneurship, it also highlights a gap we must address – access to capital. We can and must do more to get capital, and in particular start up or “seed” capital into the hands veterans like Tim. One proposed piece of legislation, The Veterans Entrepreneurial Transition Act of 2015, would pilot the use of GI Bill funds for business startup. This limited pilot would test giving servicemembers that do not wish to use the GI Bill for education the choice to instead use the earned benefit as seed capital. The pilot would be administered by SBA with the assistance of OVBDs Federal Advisory Committees.

To sustain and grow our efforts, SBA must also strengthen and modernize its information technology infrastructure to improve our ability to track long-term outcomes of businesses started by veterans. This may lead to additional data sharing and collaboration internally with our private and non-profit sector partners, and between federal agencies, such as the Departments of Labor, Defense and Veterans Affairs, to further synchronize our efforts, connect veterans and military spouses with the resources they need, and report essential performance outcomes such as business formation, capital acquired and creation of jobs.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony to your committee that highlights our mission and support to TAP. Your support of our work and our mission helps to ensure the American dream of business ownership to those that fought and continue to fight every day to protect it. We look forward to your input.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF ALEKS MOROSKY, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE, VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee, on behalf of the 1.7 million members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and our Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to present our organization's view on the military Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

The VFW currently has 20 professional staff members who serve 20 military installations, helping servicemembers access their earned Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits in a timely manner through the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program. Though the primary purpose of the BDD program is to provide transitioning servicemembers with free assistance in filing claims for VA benefits, the VFW works very closely with military transition managers, agency officials, and contract facilitators to ensure that each servicemember is properly informed of all their options and benefits prior to leaving military service.

Over the past two years, the VFW Washington Office has worked closely with the agencies of jurisdiction—specifically the Department of Labor (DOL) and Department of Veterans Affairs—to ensure that the curriculum provided to transitioning servicemembers remains relevant. Since the newly-designed Transition Assistance Program was deployed, the VFW believes we have seen a significant improvement in the way we prepare separating servicemembers for post-military life. However, nothing is perfect, and the VFW believes there is still significant room to improve this experience.

To ensure we provide the best service we can to transitioning servicemembers, the VFW commissioned a voluntary online survey for our BDD clients. Through this survey, the VFW not only evaluates the performance and reputation of our BDD representatives on military installations, we also are able to evaluate servicemember perceptions on TAP.

Since our survey launched in 2014, more than 1,400 transitioning servicemembers have participated, offering substantial feedback on their transition experience. Earlier this year, DOL reached out to the VFW for our feedback on the Transition Assistance Program redesign. The VFW was able to lean on our data to provide DOL with informed qualitative feedback on their program.

The VFW's survey indicates that servicemembers who seek out our services are generally satisfied with the new curriculum and that they feel confident going into their transition. However, more than half of the VFW's clients reported that they did not have an opportunity to participate in any of the voluntary transition tracks. This is a worrisome trend for the VFW, as we believe that most transitioning servicemembers would benefit from exposure to these in-depth courses—particularly the Accessing Higher Education track, which includes practical exercises designed to encourage veterans to make responsible choices on how to use their earned education benefits.

When asked what they would like to share about their transition experiences, many clients said that the training was too short and did not focus enough on practical exercises. In discussing the current TAP curriculum review with DOL, the VFW is encouraged to hear that the curriculum set to launch in January 2016 will focus less on conveying information and lean heavier on practical work.

Though the VFW's survey gives a good snapshot of how veterans feel going into their transition, we recognize two critical liabilities to our data set. First, our clients fill out this survey before they take off the uniform. This means that they have no reasonable way to anticipate the challenges they may face in civilian life. To correct this, the VFW is looking at ways to encourage our clients to take the survey once they have received a VA rating decision, which usually occurs several months after separating from service.

Second, the VFW's average client is older and has served longer than the average transitioning servicemember. Based on our internal reporting, the majority of VFW BDD clients are more than 35 years old with more than 12 years of service. What worries the VFW is that this means that many younger transitioning servicemembers, who are more likely to need the kinds of transitional services offered by the VFW, do not seek out our services, and more likely than not, do not seek out other available transitional assistance.

In the past year, the VFW has made a concerted effort to target younger transitioning servicemembers by creating new collateral materials and publishing targeted op-eds and articles to encourage utilization of our services. But the VFW believes that information and awareness are not a silver bullet to solving this dilemma. Instead, the VFW believes that our data could serve to reinforce anecdotes that younger servicemembers still are not afforded proper time and support from small unit leaders to complete their transition tasks.

Last year, the VFW testified about this issue before the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, noting that it is neither senior commanders nor senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) who seem to be discouraging young servicemembers from seeking transitional services, but instead small unit leaders, junior officers and junior NCOs who likely have no concept of the transition at hand, and may even view with derision those seeking to leave the military after a short stint.

The VFW has also acknowledged in the past that combatting this mentality would be nearly impossible, which is why we have consistently supported the Military Lifecycle model to deliver transitional services. What this means to the VFW is that the capstone program that we now refer to as TAP would no longer be viewed as the only critical intervention point at which servicemembers start to plan for their post-military lives. Instead, servicemembers will be exposed to civilian skills-attainment opportunities earlier in their military careers, and begin planning for post-military life according to a practical career development plan that focuses on both military and civilian objectives.

To the VFW, the Military Lifecycle model is an encouraging proposition, but one that will also require a shift in military thinking. Thankfully, it has already started to take root on certain installations where servicemembers are afforded educational and professional certification opportunities long before separation. In the long run, these kinds of opportunities will make it easier for the military to partner with private entities to foster successful transitions. It will also make it easier for servicemembers to develop professional networks long before they complete their military service.

Next, while the VFW could opine on best practices for recruiting and hiring veterans in the civilian workforce, the VFW believes that these resources are already in place through programs like the Jobs for Veterans State Grant (JVSG) program and the Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve program, among others. At this point, if employers still struggle to find veteran employees or still fail to understand the value of veteran employees, then they really are not interested in hiring veterans.

If we examine how companies actually recruit and hire the talent they seek, we just need to replace "veteran" in the discussion with "Ivy League graduate." If a company wants to hire an Ivy League graduate, they meet the candidates where they are. They get to know the schools; they get to know the professors; they even go so far as to evaluate the curriculum of their potential talent pool. They become visible on campus and in the community. They actively solicit for the caliber of candidate that they need. The military and veterans' communities offer similar opportunities. Employers can speak with local veterans' groups; they can reach out to the National Guard; they can get to know the transition managers on base. In communities where this happens regularly, we have seen tremendous results. For example, on Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Microsoft and Starbucks have worked to become ingrained in the transition process, building a quality talent pool of veterans who are employment ready in careers ranging from entry level to executive. We do not need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to veterans' employment. We just need to take advantage of the opportunities that are already available.

Fortunately, the VFW believes the transition experience is improving for servicemembers. Veterans' unemployment is below the national average and at its lowest point since 2008; more companies are legitimately hiring and retaining veteran employees; and most importantly, the agencies responsible for transition training are heeding the advice of the veterans' community. The VFW is encouraged by the plans to annually review and update the TAP curriculum with stakeholder input. We are encouraged that the Department of Defense, VA, and DOL have worked to make the curriculum publicly available after military service. We are also encouraged that the military is offering servicemembers an opportunity to prepare for their transition early on.

Upon separation, veterans have several possible paths to achieving a successful transition. While the path of higher education and training is supported by programs like the GI Bill and the Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment program, and the path to immediate employment following service is supported by DOL programs like JVSG, considerably fewer resources exist for veterans seeking to start their own businesses. The VFW strongly believes that veteran entrepreneurs should be supported during the startup phase, and has suggestions how to achieve this.

One possible solution could be to reauthorize an improved version of the Patriot Express Loan program, which would include proper oversight and training to review veteran business plans prior to participation. By providing such oversight, we ensure that the Small Business Administration can mitigate the default problems experienced during the Patriot Express Loan pilot program, as identified by the Sep-

tember 2013 report by the Government Accountability Office. Another solution could be to support veteran-centric business incubators that provide veteran entrepreneurs with education and mentorship, as well as helping them to obtain startup capital. These models already exist in several locations across the United States and have been proven valuable in creating peer-to-peer environments that allow veteran entrepreneurs to mutually support each other to achieve their business goals, similar to the way on-campus veteran resource centers allow them to support each other to achieve their educational goals.

The VFW is greatly concerned, however, by an idea that has been circulated through the veterans' community by a small but vocal minority of its members to allow veterans to "cash out" their GI Bill benefits for one or more lump sum payments that would be used to start businesses. In agreeing to receive these payments, veterans would be required to forfeit their entitlement to education assistance under the Post-9/11 GI Bill an unrelated benefit that they have already earned. While this may sound appealing to some, we believe that the idea is deeply flawed and would inevitably hurt a significant number of veterans, while simultaneously setting a dangerous precedent for the GI Bill.

Supporters of the concept rightly point out that the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly referred to as the GI Bill of Rights, included a small business loan program. This is used as a premise to assert that the Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Act of 2008, commonly referred to as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, should be amended to provide startup capital for veteran entrepreneurs as an alternative to education and training. The VFW does not believe this is an appropriate comparison. The GI Bill of Rights was a suite of benefits which included low-interest home loans, business loans, and educational assistance, among other things. Veterans were entitled to all these benefits, and did not lose eligibility for one by accessing another. For this reason, veterans were able to gain valuable skills and knowledge through educational assistance benefits, potentially increasing their chances of success in business. Likewise, any future grant or loan program designed to support veteran entrepreneurs should not require them to forfeit their earned education benefits.

Additionally, this concept seems to ignore the unfortunate but undeniable fact that some businesses do not succeed. As an overarching philosophy, the VFW cannot support any new program that helps some veterans and harms others. New programs must at the very least be neutral to veterans who are not helped by them. Veterans whose businesses succeed will arguably be helped by this idea, even though they will forfeit their GI Bill eligibility. Veterans whose businesses fail will be indisputably harmed when they are left with no business, no GI Bill, and most likely a large amount of debt from any additional loans they may have incurred from operational costs. In that situation, veterans must have an education benefit to fall back on. If they do not, we have truly failed them. While the VFW would support establishing a grant program for veteran entrepreneurs, we stand firmly opposed to requiring them to forfeit their educational assistance benefits as a condition of program participation.

The VFW will continue to monitor the implementation of TAP, working with the agencies of jurisdiction to constantly improve the product. The VFW will also continue to monitor policy issues related to veterans' economic opportunity, and seek ways to refine veterans' policies to improve outcomes in the workforce. We look forward to working with this Committee on ways to continually enhance transitional services for today's veterans, and we would be happy to take any questions you may have for the record.