

**BEST PRACTICES IN VETERANS EDUCATION AND
TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITY**

OF THE

**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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BEST PRACTICES IN VETERANS EDUCATION AND TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE

Friday, November 17, 2017

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
U. S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:00 p.m., at the Texas Tech University System Office Building, Room 104, 1508 Knoxville Avenue, Lubbock, TX, Hon. Jodey Arrington [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Arrington and O'Rourke.

STATEMENT OF JODEY ARRINGTON, CHAIRMAN

Mr. ARRINGTON. Good afternoon, everybody. The Subcommittee will come to order.

I thank everybody for coming out today. I see a lot of friendly faces and a lot of the veteran community here. I can't tell you how proud I am to represent West Texas. I want to say from the outset that my greatest honor in the United States House as a new Member is to serve on this Veterans' Affairs Committee and serve those who have served us so bravely and well.

So, this is a special treat for me, Mr. Ranking Member, to have this hearing. I think this is the first VA hearing in this district ever, and it is the first time we have had a hearing in 15 years. The last time was for a farm bill. But I can't think of a better reflection of the heart of West Texas than the love for our troops and our veterans.

So this is truly a great day and a beautiful day to be in love with Texas and on the campus of Texas Tech University. I want to recognize our Chancellor of Texas Tech University System. I don't know if he is still here.

There he is.

Ladies and gentlemen, Robert Duncan.

[Applause.]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Don't be bashful, now. Give him a hand. It is a tough job.

[Applause.]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Before we introduce our panelists and get into the formal proceedings, I want to get this kicked off the West Texas way, the right way, and with prayer. I want to consecrate our time together in prayer.

I am going to ask and it is my honor to invite a World War II veteran, Chaplain Phil Crenshaw, to the podium to lead us in prayer. Mr. Crenshaw was enlisted in the United States Army in 1943

when he was 21 years old and that same year was sent to Okinawa, Japan.

Sir, it is an honor to have you here this morning. Thank you for your service and all you have done with your colleagues in every theater to keep us safe and free. The podium is yours, sir.

Mr. CRENSHAW. A privilege and an honor.

[Prayer.]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Thank you, Mr. Crenshaw.

Now we will ask the Members of the Texas Tech University ROTC to come forward and present our Nation's colors.

[Presentation of Colors.]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Ladies and gentlemen, representing Gold Star families, as they say, all gave some, some gave all, but Gold Star families gave all. They gave the most precious gift in their family member. We want to honor them, so I am going to ask Ms. Christie Garza if she would come up here and join me and my colleague and lead us in the Pledge of Allegiance. We recognize her father, Santiago.

Sir, we appreciate your sacrifice for our country. Our prayers and thoughts are always with you guys.

[Pledge of Allegiance.]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Okay. Finally, I would like Ms. Carly Porterfield to come forward and sing the National Anthem. I would ask that our Chancellor not sing while she is singing.

[Laughter.]

[National Anthem.]

[Applause.]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Everybody, you may be seated. Now you can all be seated.

Carly, that was a beautiful rendition of our National Anthem. Ted Mitchell doesn't sing that well in the shower, I guarantee you.

[Laughter.]

Mr. ARRINGTON. I wouldn't know, but—

[Laughter.]

Mr. ARRINGTON [continued]. Are we on the record? I hope not.

[Laughter.]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Okay. Well, I have some opening remarks, and I will try to keep them brief because we really want to hear from our panelists and get into the meat of our hearing.

I do have the privilege, as I said, of representing District 19, and because of Dr. Phil Roe I also have the distinct pleasure and privilege of chairing this Subcommittee on Economy Opportunity. The Subcommittee that Beto O'Rourke and I have the responsibility to lead and to facilitate oversees programs that provide for a seamless and productive transition for our veterans, from the military to their civilian life. We want to ensure that our veterans have the education and the training and the other tools to maximize their employment opportunities and to maximize their quality of life.

These programs include the GI Bill, the Transition Assistance Program, the Home Loan Service Program, vocational training for disabled veterans, and other services that assist our veterans in achieving economic success in their civilian lives.

I am extremely pleased with my experience on the VA Committee and on this Subcommittee. I know that there is a great deal

of frustration in this country on account of Congress not working, not working for the people. I can tell you that as our veterans have fought so hard for this country to keep this Union together, they are still keeping the Union together, because when we walk into the VA Committee, it is not about red states and blue states and partisan this and that. It is about our veterans. It is about our country. I can report back to you guys that that is, in fact, the case, and I can tell you that the results tell that same story.

Twenty-eight bills have been passed, veteran-related bills, out of the United States House of Representatives. Eight of those have become law. We have worked together in a bipartisan way to enhance the educational opportunities with the Forever GI Bill, which is the new GI Bill; for example, taking away that arbitrary timeframe and saying you earned the GI Bill benefits, you have them for the rest of your life, you choose when you are going to make use of them.

A recipient of the Purple Heart would have had to wait the 36 months to avail themselves of the GI Bill. If you take a bullet for our country, you get the GI Bill. You don't wait in line. You don't wait for 36 months. That is the right thing to do, and those are the kinds of reforms we have been working on.

The Veterans Accountability Act has been worked on now for several years, and that, I think, goes to the heart of many of the problems with the VA. It is just a broken system—not bad people, broken system. And that VA accountability is another sweeping reform that was passed in this Congress.

Beto, Representative O'Rourke, the Ranking Member and I have worked on other initiatives together and introduced laws that will—they may not be as broad and sweeping and seemingly bold, but they add up to a real difference in our veterans' lives. Whether it is the recent bill that passed the House that we co-introduced to help provide better services for our disabled veterans with respect to home modifications, and rural veterans—we are in rural America—this is a great slice of rural America, very representative of rural America, not just the values but also the challenges. We have introduced a bill that I know will become law that will allow for our rural veterans to access the capital for home ownership.

There are a number of them, guys, and I am telling you, it is working, not because you have a great representative in Beto O'Rourke out of El Paso and this great state, or me. It is because our veterans bring out the very best in all of us. So I just want to make note of that.

Speaking of my Ranking Member, he is the Ranking Democrat Member on the Subcommittee. But I will tell you, he had to be my training wheels and has held my hand through the transition of my own civilian life to public service in the United States Congress, and he has just been a great friend. I cannot say enough about him. The best thing I can say about him is that he sincerely and deeply cares about our veterans, and he comes to the table every time with an openness and a willingness to work with me and with our other colleagues to solve the problems that face our veterans.

So, Beto, I just want to recognize you and honor you in that way. You deserve it, and it has been a lot of fun, too, just to get to know you, and I do consider you my friend. Thanks for making the trip.

Let's give it up, guys, for our Ranking Member.

[Applause.]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Kristina Butts and Texas Tech and the Texas Tech officials who are here, and those who are behind the scenes with Christina making this happen, thank you very much. These things don't just happen, and I know they are a lot of work, and so I want to recognize you guys.

I think I am going to skip through this. Today we will focus mainly on one of our most important missions, which is assuring our veterans get the highest quality of education and the support that they need as non-traditional students, and even unique challenges within the non-traditional student population.

We have some best-in-class programs. I would like to think we have some best-in-class people that I would like to show off today and highlight, because when we say we love our veterans, I don't know that I have met anyone that wouldn't say the very same. The question is, what are we doing to love them?

At Texas Tech, they are putting their money where their mouth is, at Angelo State, LCU, and other places in West Texas, and that is what makes me so proud, and we are going to dig into that today.

I think I am going to save my speech. Now I am just going to cut it short because we need to jump in here.

Let me, before we get into the panel discussion, ask Dr. Tim Perrin—he is here today representing Lubbock Christian University, and I know he is in my notes somewhere.

Veterans of Faith—is that the name of the program?

Dr. PERRIN. Yes, that is right.

Mr. ARRINGTON. I know I have the name of the gentleman who is with you somewhere here.

Dr. PERRIN. Felix Longoria.

Mr. ARRINGTON. Felix Longoria. He is the President of that organization. We have an awesome higher education community, and it is not just public universities. It is two-year colleges, it is private schools.

Anyway, tell us about this program, and thank you for being here today, Mr. President.

Mr. PERRIN. Well, thank you, Representative Arrington, and thank you, Members of the Subcommittee, for giving us the chance to share a brief word and for holding this hearing. We thank you for your service, for all you are doing, your leadership here in the United States. It is wonderful to spotlight higher education and enhanced educational opportunities for our veterans.

At Lubbock Christian University, we support our veterans and seek to ensure their success in college and beyond. With fewer than 2,000 students, we are able to give personal attention to all of our students. That certainly includes our veterans. We offer support for our veterans in every aspect of their lives—academically, socially, spiritually, emotionally, socially, and in every regard.

Counseling and tutoring services are available as needed to assist our veterans in making the adjustment to civilian life. Today, Representative Arrington, you have given us a chance to highlight our Veterans of Faith, a student group, and I am thrilled to have here with me Felix Longoria, one of our students, a math major at

Lubbock Christian University who is the president of our Veterans of Faith organization, which serves and leads so beautifully within the LCU community, and I am really pleased to give him a chance to share a word about his experience at LCU and through the Veterans of Faith student organization.

FELIX LONGORIA. Good afternoon. Thanks, Representative Arrington, for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the veteran community of LCU. I also want to thank Dr. Perrin for his support of our organization.

My name is Felix Longoria. I am a veteran of the United States Marine Corps, and I am also the president of the Veterans of Faith there at LCU.

Attending Lubbock Christian University has been one of the greatest challenges of my life. As a veteran, you see a lot of things, but transitioning into that setting, it definitely poses some challenges. So on the same note, it has also been one of the great experiences of my life.

It wasn't too long ago that I was working in a machine shop, a 9-to-5 job, manual labor. It is a trade that I had learned as a young man growing up in a farming community.

As many veterans do, I reverted back to what I was familiar with because I found the transition to civilian life just a bit difficult. When my physical limitations overcame my ability to stand for an 8-hour work day, the Veterans Administration advised me that I would qualify for a program called vocational rehab, and it was through this program that I was able to attend LCU.

I chose LCU due to its proximity to where I live. It is pretty close. In my faith, I feel that I landed exactly where the good Lord needed me to be. It took some time acclimating to college life, but the community at LCU made sure I had all the tools and things that I needed to be successful.

After a time, I joined the Veterans of Faith. I found it to be an organization of like-minded individuals. We have a lot in common. Over time we have formed a bond, a brotherhood. It is something that we have been missing since our time in the military. Again, that is one of those challenges that you have coming from such a scripted organization to something that is not that. It makes things very difficult.

To me, when I am away from my family, we attempt to foster a sense of belonging and brotherhood, not only to members but to all veterans on campus. In addition to creating a strong community for veterans at LCU, the VOF, as it is referred to, is also a service organization. We take advantage of opportunities to aid the veteran community in various ways throughout the year, and it is through these activities that we are able to give scholarships within our organization. A chance to serve together creates an even stronger bond for our group. Serving a cause greater than our own fosters a sense of community.

So I do want to thank you, Representative Arrington, for the opportunity, on behalf of the veteran community at LCU and for your advocacy on behalf of veterans, for giving me a chance to share today.

I do kind of want to go off script a little bit and speak about the vocational rehab program that I am currently going to school on

now. Without that, I wouldn't be at LCU. It has changed my life. It has changed who I am.

I know the VA gets a lot of bad press for certain things, but this is something that they have gotten right.

Thank you.

Mr. ARRINGTON. Thank you, Felix, so much. That was heartfelt, and thanks for that personal testimony as to the success of the program. I know I beat up pretty hard on the VA, so every now and then it is nice to hear a positive story about what they are doing right, and I know they try.

Dr. Perrin, thanks for your leadership at LCU and for loving on our veterans and making sure they have a great environment over there to succeed.

Felix, God bless you, man.

Dr. PERRIN. Thank you.

Mr. LONGORIA. Thank you.

Mr. ARRINGTON. You bet.

Now I am going to ask my friend and Ranking Member to make any remarks and to take as much time as he would like.

STATEMENT OF BETO O'ROURKE, RANKING MEMBER

Mr. O'ROURKE. Mr. Chairman, thank you for organizing this. It is a huge honor to be here with you in Lubbock, which, of course, in El Paso we refer to as East Texas.

[Laughter.]

Mr. O'ROURKE. Always when we are here, we are made to feel so welcome and so at home. While the people of Texas generally distinguish themselves by how friendly they are, I think the people here in Lubbock really take the cake. We have felt that in every interaction in every part of town and are just very grateful and very touched by how we have been received. So, we just want to begin by thanking the people of Lubbock.

I want to thank Chancellor Duncan and Texas Tech. When I was first sworn into office in 2013 and served on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, El Paso, Texas had the worst wait times to access mental health care services for veterans in the country. If there are 141 mental health care clinics or parts of the VA system, we were ranked 141st. We set out to change that and worked with Texas Tech Health Science Center and El Paso, with other public and private providers and turned that around, including with some terrific leadership from the VA, and we have gone from worst in the Nation to many months being right at the national average, and some months exceeding it, with the goal to clearly be the best in country. And I think with Texas Tech's help, President Richard Lane and the entire system based out of here in Lubbock, we have a chance to do that. So I am very, very grateful for what Texas Tech has provided.

I want to congratulate Chairman Arrington on his leadership so far, everything that he has accomplished in not even a year on the Committee, including last week being able to bring to the Floor of the House of Representatives a bill that he lead on, that he wrote to ensure that veterans that are transitioning into civilian life have the adaptive housing necessary for them to be able to succeed, and I believe that bill passed 435 to zero, which is a rare feat on the

Floor of the House, and I think is indicative of his leadership and, as he mentioned, pursuing it on a bipartisan basis, and very encouraging for the work before us.

Just some brief comments, and then I am very eager to hear from the panel and to learn from what they have to share with us today.

We clearly are not getting the job done in ensuring that we have a successful transition from service and Active duty to civilian life and being a veteran in this country. We need to look no further than the fact that we are losing 20 veterans a day, every day, in this country by their own hand, the majority of whom choose not to or are unable to access services at the VA, many of whom are unable to find purpose or function in their lives. I felt like Mr. Longoria's testimonial was so powerful in the function and purpose that you have been able to find. Thanks to those that you referenced.

We have a role to ensure that that transition is better, more seamless, and more effective towards allowing that veteran to contribute to their full potential to their own success in their lives, but to the success of this country, to the communities in which they live, and to their families.

Now, one of the things that Jodey and I have worked on together is ensuring improved mental health care access across the VA, and specifically for veterans who have what is known as an other-than-honorable discharge. These veterans previously have been precluded by law from being able to go to the VA to see a provider, including a mental health care provider, despite the fact that tens of thousands of these veterans who have a bad paper discharge have PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, military sexual trauma connected to their service to their country. They were diagnosed with these conditions before they separated. And yet once they are in civilian life they are unable to go to the VA and get the care that they need, and their suicide rate is twice that of those veterans who have an honorable discharge. We are losing these veterans unnecessarily.

We were able last week to also pass a bill that opens up mental health care to those veterans who have an other-than-honorable discharge. That also passed 435 to zero. The Senate companion is set to pass as well. That will be on the President's desk, we hope, by the end of the year, opening up mental health care to more veterans who we need to serve in this country.

I want to build on this bipartisan success that we have been able to be a small part of and ensure that we are fully able to integrate these returning veterans successfully back into civilian life. Very often, Jodey speaks with extraordinary pride about the success that Texas Tech and West Texas generally have had in doing that, our pride that we have for our servicemembers and our returning veterans, and our focus on ensuring that they are successful once they are back in their communities.

So I am really eager to learn from you and what you have been able to do, what you can share with us, and how we then apply that to Federal legislation to ensure that the West Texas model is the path forward for more communities across the country.

So I am very grateful, Chairman Arrington, for your organizing this hearing, to the panel for coming out, and to the staff, the majority and minority staff who have done all of the important underlying work to make sure that today is a success.

With that, I yield back. Thank you.

Mr. ARRINGTON. I want to thank the Ranking Member.

For just a few minutes of informal presentation before we get into the panel, I have asked Dr. Ted Mitchell to talk about, Mr. O'Rourke, this unique partnership between the Health Sciences Center and the VA to build a community-based outpatient clinic on the campus and just why that is important, what is unique about that, what is the value proposition to this community, to the veterans, and even to your own students.

So could you just take a couple of minutes, a few minutes, and talk about that? Then we will jump right into the panel.

Dr. MITCHELL. Certainly, Mr. Chairman. This is something that impacts not only the Health Sciences Center in Lubbock but also greatly impacts the Health Sciences Center at El Paso.

When you have a partnership that you can develop between an academic health center, like the Health Sciences Center here, with a veterans' clinic or a veterans' hospital, there are unique opportunities on both sides with that. From the veterans' perspective it gives them an opportunity to be in a vibrant academic health setting where you have access not only to primary care folks but to multitudes of people in specialty areas, so the care they get is far more comprehensive when you do that.

On the other side, for the students and for the residents that are participating from the Health Sciences Center over on the VA side, it gives them an opportunity to have two things. Number one, a very rich patient base. In the military of today, you have the older folks that have fought in previous wars, and their injuries and their issues are related to a lot of older citizens. You also have a very large young population of folks, both men and women, who have multitudes of problems that you see in young people. So it is a very rich environment.

In addition to that, both of you have referenced the mental health area, and that is something that from the provider side becomes extraordinarily helpful in their own training and how to deal with some of these issues that they otherwise may not see.

From the patient side, from the veteran side, it is also giving them an opportunity again to have access not just to generalists but also to psychiatrists and people that really focus on PTSD, on brain trauma, on other things that are so prevalent in that population. So it is a perfect marriage when you can have the veterans in a facility co-located with an academic health center.

For us, both here and in El Paso, this is an extraordinarily exciting proposition for us.

Mr. ARRINGTON. That is great.

If you don't have any questions—thank you, Dr. Mitchell.

Obviously, Dr. Mitchell is part of the panel today.

Mr. Carl Chapman is also going to join us, a former Marine and veteran liaison for the TTU Health Sciences Center School of Nursing. Glad that you are here.

Colonel Lou Ortiz, a good friend, retired Air Force, and the Director of Texas Tech University's Military and Veterans Program, the MVP program. Glad that you are here.

Ms. Nicole Meyer, former Air Force and currently a student at Angelo State University pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing. We welcome you.

Mr. Kai Iuta, former Army and currently a student here at Texas Tech, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology. We welcome you. Thank you for coming and participating.

And finally, my friend Colonel Dave Lewis, the fighter pilot, retired Air Force, and the Director of VetStar, and a guy that taught me a lot about the importance of the community organizations partnership, the guys that are on the front lines. So I am excited to hear from you.

Thanks for being here, folks.

Dr. Mitchell, let's start with you.

You get 5 minutes apiece. You see the yellow light. Where is the yellow light? You see the yellow light. When it comes on, that means it is time to wrap up. It is going to be very difficult for President Mitchell, but I just hope he can set the right tone for the rest of the panelists.

So, with that, Dr. Mitchell, we recognize you for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF TEDD MITCHELL, M.D.

Dr. MITCHELL. Perfect. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member O'Rourke, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, my name is Dr. Tedd Mitchell. I am the President of Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, one of four component institutions within the Texas Tech University System. It is an honor to be a witness before your Subcommittee on the very important topic of best practices in veterans' education and transition to civilian life.

We pride ourselves in the Health Sciences Center on our commitment to veterans and their families and its recognition of their service to our country. Last week, we held our annual Veterans Day ceremony honoring the men and women at the Health Sciences Center who have served our country. As a member of the Council of College and Military Educators, the Health Sciences Center strives to ensure that veterans have a successful transition into the college setting and, once there, receive the support that they need to be successful.

For the fall semester of 2017, our university has student veterans in all five of our schools: Nursing, Health Professions, Medicine, Pharmacy, and the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences. These students are located throughout West Texas on all six of our campuses: Abilene, Amarillo, Dallas, Lubbock, and the Permian Basin. The Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center at El Paso also has a total of 21 veterans in their enrolled programs. These students are in the Paul L. Foster School of Medicine as well as the Hunt School of Nursing.

This oversight hearing is entitled "The Best Practices in Veterans' Education and Transition to Civilian Life," both of which we take very seriously. We try to take the stress off our veterans by

ensuring all the necessary documents are submitted to the VA to certify student enrollments. In fact, Sarah Henley serves as our Veteran and Military Advisor and is a veteran herself. Our Veterans and Military Advising Office and Sarah's dedication have produced phenomenal results for veterans interested in enrolling in the Health Sciences Center but who may find the proposition to be a little bit daunting.

This office continues to be the primary point of contact and resource for veterans after they have enrolled and have begun their degree program. One of our most innovative programs is the accelerated Veteran to Bachelor of Science in Nursing, VBSN, track. This is a nursing degree completed in 12 months specifically designed for veterans with prior military medical training. The program allows veterans to receive competency-based college credit and to earn their BSN in far less time and with far less cost.

This program is unique in that our faculty developed the curriculum with the folks at the Medical Education and Training Campus, METC, at Fort Sam Houston at the Joint Services Base in San Antonio, Texas. Our faculty collaborated with METC personnel to review their curriculum for medics. The medic curriculum was examined to determine which courses offered key elements similar to our nursing courses. The program then created a competency-based examination to award college credits by recognizing prior learning. Veterans have the opportunity to be given college credit for several of the courses.

It is important to understand that the State of Texas has also put skin in this game. Back in 2015, the Texas Workforce Commission College Credit for Heroes program gave us \$200,000 in a grant to help develop this program. We also receive support from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services through HRSA. This is an important part of making this program successful.

This program has been phenomenal. Our pilot group of seven students graduated in December of 2016, and they all passed the nursing licensing examination on their first test. The second group coming through has a total of 12 students. The group for 2018 will have 22. The group for the following year will have 45. Our plan is to increase our numbers annually by 50 percent. We offer this program in seven locations: Lubbock, Amarillo, Odessa, Abilene, Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio.

As a result of this success—and this is really important. As a result of the success of this program, our School of Pharmacy and our School of Health Professions are looking at similar programs to expand opportunities for veterans in those areas.

So with that, I would say that there are only a couple of things that we would recommend that you consider. First is to continue the funding through HRSA for the program. The next is to look at the military housing allowance to make sure that as we grow more into distance education, that we give the students housing allowances for where they live, not for where the university is located, and you have already done that a great bit with the last expansion of the GI Bill. And then finally is to look at the VA 85/15 rule. That rule was put in place to ensure that the veterans are receiving quality education by making sure 15 percent of folks that are civilians are in there with them. We would ask that if you have entities

and agencies like our university that have accreditation through the Department of Education, that that be considered enough.

Thank you very much.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF DR. MITCHELL APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Excellent testimony. Thank you, Dr. Mitchell. And now we will recognize Mr. Chapman for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF AARON KYLE CHAPMAN

Mr. CHAPMAN. Good afternoon, Chairman Arrington and Ranking Member O'Rourke. Thank you for inviting me to appear before your Subcommittee.

I will just give you a brief story about my journey as a student at Texas Tech and how that looks like today.

I am Kyle Chapman, and I served in the United States Marine Corps. I served in the 3rd Battalion 5th Marines. I served with them in the initial invasion of Iraq back in 2003, and then I served with the 2nd Battalion 4th Marines in Ramadi, Iraq.

Once I left Ramadi, within a month's timeframe, I was a civilian. I then came back to school in 2005 at Tech, and it was very difficult to even find the appropriate office or the right person to talk to, to even get my benefits up and started. At that time specifically as well, I started a very messy period in my life and started coping with varying unhealthy ways, pretty much became a full-blown alcoholic out of things that I was struggling with from my time in the service.

That went on for four years. Then in 2009, through different sets of interventions, I went to the Amarillo VA rehab program with other veterans who were dealing with much of the same things that I was.

Once I returned I put a plan in place to get back to school, and I was able to do that in 2011. In 2013, I transferred into Texas Tech. That was from 2005 to 2013 when I walked into the MVP office, completely night and day. Bernice Fled, who was there at the time, set me down and walked me through how to fill out my Hazelwood documentation appropriately, my VA documentation. That was very helpful.

Then a year into the process I had a chance encounter with somebody who was working in the MVP office at the time, and I was about to run out of my Montgomery GI Bill, and he had the insight to ask me, well, do you have a disability? Yes, sir, I do. What's your percentage? I told him, and he said, well, you are eligible for rehab.

To this day I am pretty sure I don't know that I ever would have known that that benefit was there for me to take advantage of had it not been for the Military and Veterans Program office and the knowledge they have.

I graduated in 2015 with the Human Development and Family Studies degree, and I minored in Addictive Disorders and Recovery Studies with the specific intent to help military veterans and their families with resources, PTSD, and substance abuse. Today I serve as the School of Nursing Veteran Liaison at the Health Sciences

Center for the veterans program, and it really is an invaluable program.

As mentioned by President Mitchell, those courses that we allow them to cap out of acknowledges the skill sets and the knowledge that they have already gained while in service, and it is proving more than effective.

My piece is the very first phone call, email, whatever the case may be, and I then become their one-stop shop. I will walk them up through the process. That may be two years that may be a week. It will start with an evaluation, then the application process, and then I will follow-up with anything that needs to be taken care of while they are in our program, any issues or concerns that pop up. I will reinforce the training.

And just to put it into perspective, San Antonio, it is \$1,811 currently. We have students there at that site. Here it is \$1,097. That is a \$714-a-month difference in a place where the cost of living is much higher, and we are asking them to take that cut.

To basically wrap this up, I really believe through my own journey that there is no better way for us to honor our military and veterans than through their career and educational endeavors. So I would like to leave you with a quote from one of our current students whose unit was recently activated for Hurricane Harvey relief. And I quote, "The situation in the military are uncontrolled field settings. That training has helped me stay in the correct mindset while I work in more controlled environments. The best part of TTUHSC is that they have acknowledged all of my training in the Army. A lot of places say they are military friendly, but TTUHSC really backs it up. They stand by their military students. When they say it, they mean it."

Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MR. CHAPMAN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Well said, Kyle. Thank you for your personal story. And congratulations for the success that you are having. Look forward to drilling down with you.

And now I recognize Mr. Ortiz for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF COLONEL LOU ORTIZ

Colonel ORTIZ. Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke, thank you so much for coming to Texas Tech today.

After high school, I grew up locally here in the West Texas region. I decided I wanted to not be a cotton farmer, so I joined the Air Force. I had the privilege of serving the next 30 years affiliated with the Air Force, retired in 2011. I am proud to be here at Texas Tech because I get to work with the veteran community here both on campus and off campus, and that is something that is very special to me, a very special group of folks.

I appreciate the opportunity here this afternoon to describe our Texas Tech programs that directly support the education of our military veteran students who have served and sacrificed for our Nation.

Texas Tech Military and Veterans Programs was created in 2010 as a department solely dedicated to helping veterans and their

families succeed. We currently serve more than 2,200 veterans and family member students on the Texas Tech University main campus and have developed a veteran support structure and culture that serves their needs.

Behind me are two of our staff Members. We have five full-time staff: Debbie Crosby, who has been with us since the inception of the program and helped us stand it up; Eric Washington, one of our program coordinators; Kyle mentioned Bernice Flet. In addition to that we have 10 VA work studies, VA-funded students that work for us. We couldn't do our job without them.

We serve undergraduate, graduate, and law students on our main campus and satellite locations across the state including Waco, Dallas, Junction, Fredericksburg, and Marble Falls.

Our core mission, of course, is to assist veterans with the benefits that they have earned by virtue of the service, both Federal and state. We administer Federal benefits for veterans and Reserve component members most commonly post-9/11 GI Bill. Beyond core benefits, our Military Veterans Program serves as integration of resource office for all military veteran-related organizations, activities, events on the main campus. We work hand in hand with the Student Veterans of America chapter, Veterans Association of Texas Tech, Tech Law Military Association, Faculty and Staff Veterans Association, Army and Air Force ROTC, and the Military Veterans National Alumni chapter. We also partner and coordinate with key veteran support organizations and resources throughout the local community.

As a preface to outlining our veteran support system, I must tell you that the vast majority of our military and veteran students are emotionally mature, goal oriented, mission driven, and self-sufficient role models on campus. Academically they perform equal to or better than our general student population.

However, based on their unique military experiences that may include combat, some veterans do experience social, administrative, financial, and physical and mental health challenges. Military Veterans Programs provide a support environment and culture by instituting programs at three key stages.

First of all, we want to help veterans in their transition to campus. We have programs for that. We also want to provide a support system while they are on campus to ensure they earn their degree, and we want to help them in their job search and employment pursuits as they approach graduation.

In our transition from military to academic life, our goal is creating a welcoming environment here at Texas Tech for the veterans and their families. We have a program entitled Vet Tech Boot Camp. Our two-day Boot Camp is designed to help veterans transition to college life by providing best practices in study skills, time management, writing, and money management. A special guest to the training program is the Brain Performance Institute. This program is a great way for veterans to socialize. We start this program two days before the actual semester starts so they get to transition through this program to the campus.

As non-traditional students, that peer-to-peer interaction with other veterans is vital in establishing the social connections in their new academic setting.

Our support structure on campus, our number-one goal is degree completion for veterans that attend Texas Tech. As a starting point for campus support, there are over 300 faculty and staff Members who are veterans at Texas Tech. These faculty members serve as role models, advisors and mentors for current student veterans.

We have another key component, which is our Green Zone training program. It is a comprehensive program that incorporates seven distinct training modules. Our unique multi-module approach incorporates training by subject-matter experts in key support areas on campus, allowing our faculty and staff to gain a more comprehensive understanding of veteran challenges, how to recognize them, and where to refer veterans for assistance. Over 700 faculty and staff have attended this training.

We also have over 35 volunteer veteran liaisons within the colleges and staff support functions that are dedicated to veteran success. They provide frontline support for veterans who have questions or need assistance in their respective colleges. Liaisons meet with us in our office quarterly to share information or report specific veteran-related information.

The final stage is making sure that once our veterans graduate or are approaching graduation, they have career search assistance and employment assistance. Veterans earning their degrees, career preparation begins before they complete that. The University Career Center has developed a veterans' career program for veterans to receive the assistance they need to be successful in preparing for their future careers. In spring 2017, Military Veterans Program partnered with the University Center to develop a pilot Camo to Corporate program. It is really based on the Boots to Suits concept, but much more expansive in that this program is for graduating veteran seniors to prepare them. The students sign an agreement to participate in evening sessions, including a strong interest inventory, resume, cover letter writing, networking, interviewing, proper etiquette and dress for a professional setting. Veterans who complete all the sessions acquire their valuable job search skills, employer connections, and a tailored business suit at the end of the process.

In May 2006 we stood up our Military and Veterans National Alumni Chapter. We recognize the value of a broad network of military veteran alumni across the state and Nation. One of our primary goals of the chapter is to connect students and graduating seniors with alumni who are leaders in business, corporations, government, and the military. We work to connect those employers with our students for internships, mentoring, and employment opportunities. The career center program does a great job of doing that.

We are very proud of our Texas Tech veterans and do our best to recognize them at every opportunity. One way we do this is our unique camouflage stole. You've seen these, yes. So this is the way we recognize them. We do a special ceremony two days before graduation, unique marker at graduation. Leadership will make a special effort to recognize our veterans, just one simple way that we recognize veterans at Texas Tech.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MR. COLONEL ORTIZ APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Lou, I am going to tap you out right there.

Colonel *Ortiz*. Yes.

Mr. ARRINGTON. I made a wager with Mr. O'Rourke that it would be Tedd Mitchell that would go over by at least 2 minutes, and I said there is no way Lou Ortiz—he is very disciplined, he is former military.

No, listen, this is awesome. Just in the interest of time, we are going to come back to some questions.

Colonel ORTIZ. Absolutely.

Mr. ARRINGTON. If he would have had the gavel, he would have been just banging on it.

[Laughter.]

Mr. ARRINGTON. But I think that is rude to do to my friends back here at home.

[Laughter.]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Thank you for your testimony.

Colonel ORTIZ. Thank you for the opportunity.

Mr. ARRINGTON. You bet.

Now we will recognize Nicole Meyer, Ms. Meyer, for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF NICOLE MEYER

Ms. MEYER. Thank you, Mr. O'Rourke, Mr. Arrington, for this chance to speak before you today.

I enlisted in the Air Force in 2010 after graduating from high school. I grew up in a very small town in Washington, and there were not very many opportunities there. If I was to go to college, it would have put me in a lot of debt to start my life, and that wasn't something that I wanted.

I was stationed for six years in New Mexico and spent a year of that in Afghanistan. I began my separation process from the Air Force a year prior to my separation date. I began researching schools and trying to learn how the post-9/11 GI Bill worked. I attended the Transition Assistance Program, TAP, but very little of the week-long class helped me with the transition from Active duty to civilian.

The majority of the class focused on searching for jobs and building a resume. But because I was headed to college, very little of it applied to me. TAP went very briefly over the process of filing a claim but mainly focused on going through an individual on base that would help you go over everything in your medical record to submit your claim. I was unable to use this person due to time constraints and had to figure out how to file a claim on my own through e-Benefits.

The class never went over distance organizations such as Disabled American Veterans or Veterans of Foreign Wars, having veteran service officers that could assist with filing a claim.

Dealing with the Veterans Affairs medical system has been a long, convoluted process that has caused me a lot of stress while in school, and I know many other veterans who had this issue as well. This began with my initial claim for disability during which I was denied for my chronic back problems that had been ongoing for three years at the time.

The doctor I was sent to for my compensation pension exam is well-known by local veterans to recommend that veterans did not

incur their injuries while in service. The decision I was handed by the VA stated that there was no evidence of a disability for my back. I have since been diagnosed with having scoliosis that I developed while on Active duty.

My appeal for disability concerning my back has been ongoing for a year. As a woman, it can be very difficult to receive medical treatment for women's health issues at the Veterans Affairs. Anything other than very basic processes, such as prescribing medication, is referred out to the Veterans Choice Program. Unfortunately, funding is tight and many providers no longer accept the Choice Program.

As of 2015, there are over 2 million women veterans in the United States. I do not understand why receiving treatment for women's health issues is such an arduous process. It took well over two months for me to finally see a woman's health doctor to get treatment for a reoccurring health issue.

When I first contacted the Veterans Educational Transitional Services office at Angelo State University, they were extremely helpful in explaining the process of applying for my education benefits. They offered much more help than the TAP program or the education office at Holliman Air Force Base. Most of the time the education office at Holliman either never answered the phone or were too busy to assist with questions. When I finally was able to get a hold of them, the education office would give me very brief and general answers on education benefits available.

The vets' office at Angelo State University is the first organization I have encountered that actually bothered to answer my questions. The only time I had any issues with my benefits was when the VA was late on my basic allowance for housing for the first month. This was, however, due to an oversight on my own part, not realizing I needed to inform the VA that I was no longer Active duty.

I want to say thank you for taking the time to listen to me today. I hope that today can result in improvements to the current process and that more veterans are able to get the help that they need.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MS. MEYER APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Thank you, Nicole.

Mr. Iuta, we will recognize you for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF IKAIKA (KAI) IUTA

Mr. IUTA. Okay. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman Arrington and Ranking Member O'Rourke. First of all, my name is Kai, and as you can tell by my name, I am not from these parts. So you are probably wondering how the heck did I get here. Well, it all started back when I failed my freshman year in college. School was not working out for me because I didn't know what to do with my life. So my dad, who is an Army vet, he encouraged me to enlist in the United States Army, which I did.

So I enlisted in the Army for four years. During that time, I had one deployment to Afghanistan, and I was assigned to the Global Response Force in 2014, which is a rapid deploying unit just in case stuff went down in the world.

After getting out, the process for the Army, it was good but it wasn't great. Mr. Longoria, you mentioned that there was a high rise of suicides of members when they get out, and I think part of that reason, my theory, is because the military didn't follow through with the transition process, because I think the term "transition," it is very kind of iffy, you know? I think that word "transition" as part of getting out needs to be redefined.

So when I got out of the military, I was going to a small community college at the time in Washington State. At that time I was suffering from an identity crisis because I had done all these years of service and I identified myself as a soldier, but then when I enrolled at the school I was just a nobody. I was just another leaf in the lawn, and there was no veteran support system. All I did was just go to school and go back home and go to work, and I was just leaving an identity-less life.

But luckily I was still able to graduate with my associate degree from there, and from there I had to apply to a bigger university. So I did some research, and I was doing research for the GI Bill, and during that time the GI Bill was limited. There were some special circumstances for the GI Bill. For example, the GI Bill only gave in-state tuition waivers for certain states, and Texas was one of them, thankfully. So I decided to apply to schools in Texas.

I looked up also on the Web site for military-friendly schools. Texas Tech was among the top 10. So I applied, and I was able to get accepted and enrolled into Texas Tech. In my experience, I come from an island, and coming to West Texas is just like, oh, my goodness, what the heck is this? But, you know, when I came into this office, into the Military Veterans Office, they were very kind, very nice. They had a support system for veterans, and I think that is what I needed because as soon as I was talking to them they signed me up for the student organization called the VATT, which is the Veterans at Texas Tech student organization, and I was able to connect with other veterans who are similarly in my situation and who had been through what I had been through. I think that was what made me feel more welcome at Texas Tech than I was at the community college.

Also, the other thing that the Military Veterans Program provided was the Tech Vet Boot Camp, which is basically a veteran orientation to all the resources available at Texas Tech for veterans, and that also helped a lot for my education here at Texas Tech.

I think the most important thing to help servicemembers who want to come back to school is recognizing who they are and reaching out to them, and just how it takes time for the military to turn a civilian into a soldier, it takes time for a soldier to become a civilian again. Providing a resource such as the Military Veterans Program at Texas Tech allows veterans to get connected and help them with their educational needs, because sitting in a class with kids who are 10 years younger than you, it is pretty awkward. However, by providing a support system that recognizes veterans and their distinct situation will make them feel a part of something again.

Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MR. IUTA APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Very, very good. Thank you so much.

And we will cap it off in terms of our presentations with Colonel Lewis, who was the founder and inaugural director of the MVP at Tech and now leads the VetStar Program in the community.

Colonel, we will recognize you for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF COLONEL DAVID J. LEWIS

Colonel LEWIS. Thank you, Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke, for the opportunity to testify today.

VetStar was created to assist veterans by connecting them to the resources to make them successful in the next stage of their lives. Over the years, we have narrowed our direct service focus to what we call stalled transition; that is, assisting those veterans who are struggling in their transition from military to civilian life. Our focus is filling in the gaps where the VA is unable to do so.

VetStar has four primary service lines: peer-to-peer services; emergency financial assistance; homeless services; and mental health to veterans and family members primarily targeted at justice-involved veterans. Because of my experience delivering services to veterans who transition, I created the model we use extensively at VetStar known as FASTRR. FASTRR stands for Find Assist Stabilize Treat Reassess and Reintegrate. I want to focus on just two key aspects of that model today, find and reintegrate.

Veterans that struggle in their transition issues tend to isolate due to a variety of reasons, including trust and stigma issues. But almost all of them have someone in a trusted relationship—a spouse, a parent, a close friend, or someone that I consider to be eyes and ears in the community. Many times that trusted relationship knows the VA might be able to help, but they are generally unaware of other community-based resources. Essentially, that isolated veteran must be found. Unfortunately, one of the more common places to find them is in the local jails or in an emergency room.

The most critical component of our model after find is reintegrate, a last step. Our goal is to change the environment and alter the veteran's perception of where they belong in our community. We use multiple peer-to-peer programs such as VetLife and Team Red White and Blue to give the veteran a chance to be with other veterans. Proper reintegration can resolve many of the issues faced by the veteran, especially when delivered in a peer-based setting.

One technique we use is a program called Task Force Lubbock, bringing veterans together to do community service projects. The outcome is less about the service project itself but rather focused on bringing veterans together in formal group therapy. Bluntly stated, our military was trained to break things and kill people. Using those skills to create and repair is very therapeutic.

The majority of our veterans transition from military to civilian life with few or no issues. They have earned the right to be successful in their transition, especially as they pursue their educational opportunities. Roughly 19 out of 20 veterans are successful with

few or no issues. Veterans make superb students and employees despite stereotypes that are placed upon them.

A successful academic program consists of many parts, but the most important task in my mind is retaining the veterans in our academic programs. If that veteran is experiencing stalled transition in community partnerships, then organizations such as ours are absolutely essential. Traditional university programs such as student counseling services are typically quite good, but they may lack the cultural competency and timeliness to effectively address issues such as TBI and MST, PTSD or moral injury.

Veterans experiencing stalled transition may not have symptoms until several months after they separate. Our close working relationship with the MVP office allows for near seamless awareness and coordination to address those challenges and provide interventions, as required, to prevent them from leaving the university. The process in place today is relatively effective, but it is reactive, relying on a lot of agencies to get the veterans to our services. As a result, far too many fall through the cracks and wind up in some portion of what I call the death spiral.

My recommendation to the Committee on improving both educational outcomes and community success outcomes fall into four general categories.

First, community transition, what we call Boots to Roots. DoD does a remarkable and unrivaled job of training us to go to war, as you have already heard. Training us to come home again is marginal at best. The skill set that keeps you alive in combat is not a good skill set when you return. Veterans facing stalled transition find themselves on a new battlefield.

Boots to Roots has three main components. First, an awareness of who can provide those services in the community and the associated mental health and other resources. Second, a process to assist us in detuning or desensitizing the limbic training that many of our warriors go through in their initial military training. And finally, for those intending to pursue their education, an eye exam to identify and correct any TBI-related vision issues that might preclude success in the classroom.

My second recommendation is expanding communities of courage, and I consider Lubbock to be one of those. The community must invest in a returning warrior. Many communities are unprepared to comprehend and manage the challenges of a returning warrior force, especially when it comes to the challenging issues we have talked about.

Third are the peer support programs I have already identified.

And finally, as you noted, Mr. Chairman, rural challenges. DoD perfected recruiting in rural areas. We have not perfected delivering services to the rural veterans once they return to those communities.

In conclusion, our veterans have earned the very best possible educational opportunities we can provide. A smooth transition from military service to the civilian world is essential for our veterans to take full advantage of the opportunities provided through our country's commitment to our forces. We can overcome transitions that have stalled. My experience has taught me that communities must be engaged in this transition. The VA cannot do it alone.

We are not victims. We are not broken. But occasionally we still need a hand up to get us fully transitioned into the civilian world. Thank you for this opportunity.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MR. COLONEL LEWIS APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. ARRINGTON. Thank you, Colonel Lewis.

You guys did not disappoint. I am inspired just listening to you.

I am going to defer to my Ranking Member and give him as much time as he may need, and we will just have more of an informal exchange of questions and dialogue with you all.

Mr. Ranking Member, the floor is yours.

Mr. O'ROURKE. As you said, this was an amazing panel, wonderful testimony, very helpful towards our goal of improving transition, integration, and making the most out of those veterans who come back to our community.

I love what you just said, Colonel, about not seeing veterans as broken or a problem or victims, as is so often the mindset that otherwise well-intentioned people approach this issue with, but instead seeing them as this extraordinary resource and opportunity given their training, their experience, their skill set, to be able to apply that to the needs of a community, the unmet business opportunity, that they can become the entrepreneur that Lubbock is missing in this one area. They can train at Texas Tech to fill some of the gaps left in this community. Whatever it is, connecting them with that purpose and that function is so critical.

Chairman Arrington, I don't know if you remember this hearing. We had a great hearing on the Hill this year, I think primarily about post-traumatic stress disorder, and also reintegration. One of the panelists was Sebastian Junger, who wrote a book called *Tribe*, which many of you may be familiar with. This is a theme that many of you have brought up. Mr. Iuta, you said this, I think, more eloquently than I am going to be able to say this.

He said that you, as a member of a military unit, go from being as essential as you can possibly be as a human being—what you do or what you fail to do will determine your fate and the fate of your comrades in that unit—to sometimes a civilian life where that purpose and that essence of what it means to be alive and to be human is missing.

I heard you, Mr. Iuta, talk about this identity crisis that you had when you came back and the search for purpose. That was your word. And it really hit home from what I have heard from so many returning veterans and those who are trying to figure out how to make the most of these extraordinary Americans who have already so proven themselves. And we in each community should be fighting over getting them to come to our city so that they can contribute to our success.

Again, the Chairman has reminded the Full Committee of what an exceptional job Texas Tech does. Dr. Mitchell, you made a wonderful case for how that happens. And, Mr. Chapman, even your experience of first coming here—did you say in '05?

Mr. CHAPMAN. Yes, sir.

Mr. O'ROURKE. And there was not a TAP program at the time, a transition assistance program for separating servicemembers.

There was something else that preceded it. There is a TAP program now which was still not sufficient for your purposes as you described them. I think most servicemembers, as they talk about TAP, it is like that PE credit that I had to satisfy before I could graduate from college. It is something that you have to do, get rid of, get out of the way so you can get moving on with your life. It is not really a comprehensive transition into civilian life, connecting you with that education or that job or that thing that you are going to do that is going to allow you to excel and live to your full potential.

So you were highlighting a challenge that Chairman Arrington and I on this Committee are trying to meet, and that is how do we make the TAP program more successful. Do we expand it? Do we measure it more effectively? Do we talk to you after you have been through TAP, and not just check a box, are you satisfied or are you unsatisfied, but sit down and talk with you and share what you just shared with us right now? I think all that would be helpful.

But I just want to begin by saying the approach with which you have brought your testimony today is the right one and so helpful, each one of you.

Dr. Mitchell, I do have one specific question. You hit upon something that makes so much obvious sense to everyone in America, that you have these servicemembers who have been driving trucks on some of the toughest roads in Afghanistan and then have to come back and try to get a commercial driver's license and spend their GI Bill money on education, or you have medics who have been performing extraordinary life-saving work on the battlefield and have to come back and prove themselves again through an academic setting. And you are talking about how Tech is trying to shorten the time period that someone has to spend proving their credentials and getting back into function and purpose in their lives.

Do you have any metrics or numbers that you could share with us about what that has saved in what a returning veteran would otherwise have to spend out of their GI Bill earned benefit or what they have saved in time if you did not have this program in place?

Dr. MITCHELL. Sure. A Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing is a four-year degree. What we offer is a 12-month degree.

Mr. O'ROURKE. So right there you have saved three years.

Dr. MITCHELL. Three years. These are folks that come out, and the way this has worked, you work with the folks at METC. You look at the curriculum that they use for medics, and you overlay the two curricula to look to see all the similarities, because there are a lot. And by doing that, then you can say, okay, this will count, this will count, this will count. We can work this thing in a way that you can wind up receiving several courses. You can get out of those courses straight off.

But just from the perspective of pure time, this is a 12-month program, whereas a BSN is a four-year degree.

Mr. O'ROURKE. I am going to turn it back over to the Chairman. Just very quickly from Mr. Chapman, Ms. Meyer, and Mr. Iuta, could you each talk about what you would like to see for transitioning servicemembers right now in an improved Transition Assistance Program, or TAP program? Again, for a lot of

transitioning servicemembers that we talk to, it is checking a box. For their commanders it is very often checking a box. Many of the commanders, we are told, petition for the members of their unit to be able to take an online course because they need to get this sucker done and get that servicemember back in the field and functioning in their unit. And I can understand that impulse, but it is short-changing the ability to successfully transition.

So give us some advice as we try to either administratively work with the Department of Defense to do a better job, if perhaps we need to rewrite legislation to ensure that they are doing a better job. What should we be looking for? If you could each take maybe a minute to do that, and then I can hand it back over to the Chairman.

Mr. CHAPMAN. Yes, sir. As you mentioned, when I got out, I showed up in a classroom I believe for four or five days. A ton of information was thrown at me. Again, this was within a month's time from me exiting a combat zone. There was no time to even process mentally getting out.

So I have always been an advocate for—they spend a ton of time building you up to what is necessary, in my case to be a Marine. It is necessary. Now, I think the same thing should be said for the digress back into civilian life, and I think there needs to be an intentional timeframe where they can start making that transition.

Mr. O'ROURKE. If you had to just ballpark it, what would that timeframe be? More than a month? Less than six months?

Mr. CHAPMAN. To be honest, sir, I think it is hard to put a timeframe on it, because if you are looking at somebody in my situation, a month removed from combat, I would probably need six months to just come down; whereas somebody who hasn't, two months may do the trick where there is an intentionality of what is it going to look like as you move back into the job market or moving on to your education; whereas somebody that has been through some tougher times in a combat situation where there possibly could be some mental health challenges that go along with that, six months just to process through that.

It looks so different for each and every servicemember that it is hard for me to say a specific time, but I would say a minimum of two months, with a maximum of six months.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Okay, that is helpful. Chairman Arrington and I serve with a colleague who is also a veteran, Brad Wenstrup, and he talked about when he came back from Iraq that he was given an amount of time essentially without a job or anything that he had to do, and he said that was actually more painful than anything. He wanted to have that next thing assigned.

I wonder if the time period we need during transition has got to be enough to ensure that you are enrolled in that program so you shouldn't transition and then enroll but you are enrolled so you start right away, or you have that next job lined up, or you have whatever it is you are going to do next. It seems there is a very dangerous period of time—again, Mr. Iuta's word—where you don't have that purpose, what do I do right now, and too often we see veterans who are unable to connect with that next step.

Mr. CHAPMAN. May I make one suggestion?

Mr. O'ROURKE. Sure, yes.

Mr. CHAPMAN. I think it would be beneficial for the TAP course to be specific to the location, what state specifically they are going to be moving to, and what resources and opportunities are available in that state.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Great.

Ms. Meyer, would you care to comment on that? How could we improve the Transition Assistance Program?

Ms. MEYER. Well, I definitely like what he just said about tailoring it to where that individual is moving to or where they are staying. Each state differs so much in benefits. Take Texas, for example. We have the Hazelwood that a lot of other states don't have. I think if we took a more tailored approach to TAP itself to fit each group of veterans, like say you have several veterans who are going to college, tailor it to them. If you have several veterans that are going straight into the job force, tailor it to them, make it more specific to help them.

I think we also need to talk more about support groups that are out there. Like I said, I wasn't even aware of veteran service officers, and I know many other veterans are surprised by that as well.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Mr. Iuta?

Mr. IUTA. Oh, yes. So, one of the things that the Army had, their TAP program is called the ACAP program. So what happens is you are allowed to ACAP three months before you get out. A suggestion I would have is that, during that time in ACAP, unfortunately you are still tied to your unit, so you still have to answer phone calls and stuff like that. My suggestion is to completely detach from the unit and actually work through those hard three months on that transition, finding a job, finding a house.

One of the things I put down in my statement is the Army helped me get a job, but they asked me where I was going to live, and actually one of the veteran demographics is that we have the highest homeless rate. So just ensuring that they have a roof over their head, they have the necessary health resources and how to access them, that is the most important part. Because they will make you sign up for the VA, but they won't tell you how to use them, how it works. So just more education on the details of the transition, I guess.

Mr. O'ROURKE. I think that makes a ton of sense. Today we were at the Grace campus, which is a homeless area in Lubbock with some extraordinary volunteers and support group who are trying to help those homeless members of the community transition into housing, and we talked about how Texas is third in the country for the number of homeless veterans.

One of the connections that we are missing is that there are extraordinary people like Colonel Lewis and other veteran service organizations—you mentioned this, Ms. Meyer—who are doing wonderful work, and very often that transitioning servicemember doesn't know that that is available.

So in addition to the VA and DoD and every other Federal agency, there are also these people who selflessly are contributing at their own expense or through their organization to a successful transition. So making that servicemember aware of what exists in the community would be incredibly helpful.

Colonel Lewis, I don't know if you want to talk about that briefly, about how we do that.

Colonel LEWIS. Yes, thank you. I would love to have that opportunity. You don't know what you don't know until you get out of the service. A lot of the challenges don't present until you are out of the service. So I am a very strong proponent of a community-based transition. You start in the DoD, but you finish in the community. There is not a VetStar everywhere, we understand that, but there is a VFW, there is an American Legion, there is a DAV, there is something out there.

Again, our Boots to Roots is focused on let's get them started in DoD and let's get them finished in the community so they know where to go. They may come into the community and not know—you know, "I don't have any issues," and six months later, "I have issues; where do I go?" And that is the big challenge here.

You say, well, that is hard to do because you don't know where they are going. Well, DoD ships their household goods someplace. They know where that is going. So at a minimum we could take that data and say where are they going in the country and at least alert somebody. I don't think that is as difficult as we might think.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, thank you.

Mr. ARRINGTON. What frustrates me as a Member of our Subcommittee, almost on a consistent hearing-by-hearing basis, is the lack of data to determine whether something is working or not. We struggle with that. We know it is important. Everybody understands why transition assistance programs are beneficial and necessary. The question is when we are spending hundreds of millions of dollars and we don't know what we are getting for it. But then I have field hearings and field dialogues, and I am sure you do too, Mr. Ranking Member, in your district, where I consistently hear that it is not working.

So we feel like we will get to that point, and we are going to be working on how we can assess these 5-day-plus-2 programs. But when I hear you talk, all of you, I think, 5 days plus 2? I mean, who remembers that? And what value can that bring, truly, to, as you said, Mr. Iuta, somebody who has been—you know, we spend so much time and effort to prepare a soldier for their mission, and then to reintegrate their thinking and repurpose their whole person for this assimilation as a civilian, I mean, we just hardly do anything. It makes it all the clearer to me that we have such problems.

I have a friend who I was so honored to be at his internment at Arlington Cemetery. He was a Navy Seal. He was a hero. He was a superhero in high school, from Plainview High School, and I don't think he could ever make that transition as it is defined now as a Navy Seal and as a warrior, and I don't know how much time anybody was going to give him to repurpose.

So you are kind of on your own, and we have 20 people killing themselves every day in the military. It is no wonder to me.

So I think the Boots to Roots concept, I just wonder how many programs, community-based programs exist, and can we do more of what you are doing on the ground through DoD. It feels like they are just checking the box, to be very candid. I mean, their focus is on you coming in and preparing you. I don't know about as much

coming out. But you guys own it, and the community owns it, because they will deal with the ensuing problems as a result of somebody not being ready.

So I hope we can develop something in the way of a specific plan for retooling the TAP program, for heaven's sake.

Let me jump real quick over here. There are so many questions I have written down, and I know that the Ranking Member has a hard stop. We might just carry over just a little bit.

But, Dr. Mitchell, I think the program, the accelerated Veteran to Bachelor of Science in Nursing is extremely innovative. Are there other programs throughout the country like this? Did you model this after some other program, or just developed it out of a non-off-the-shelf deal?

Dr. MITCHELL. This is primarily developed by the folks in our School of Nursing who had had some contacts with the folks at METC. And as they were looking through trying to figure out exactly, this is such a wealth of knowledge that is just being left at the door once these people leave the military, we had some of our School of Nursing folks that had contacts at METC. So this started out as just a conversation, and there are other schools that are doing similar things. But this program developed kind of de novo from these conversations that we had.

Mr. ARRINGTON. Is it proprietary, or can some other universities use the curriculum?

Dr. MITCHELL. Oh, no, no, no. We don't want it to be proprietary. This is something that—if you look at the number of medics and corpsmen that are out there, there is simply no way that a single program can funnel all of them.

Mr. ARRINGTON. There's a good question: have you shared this with the nursing associations, the national trade associations?

Dr. MITCHELL. Oh, yes. There are a lot of folks in the nursing world who know about what we are doing with this. The big question was, and the big hesitation was, are you going to be able to retrain them and reeducate them to nursing in a way that is effective? So the first hurdle was to get them through the curriculum, see how they do. The second hurdle is what happens when they take the in-class, are they going to do well on it? So we had a pilot group that went through, and 100 percent passed the in-class the first time they took it.

So the curriculum works. They do very well on the in-class. Now we are going to size it up, we are going to ramp it up.

Mr. ARRINGTON. And that is the licensing—

Dr. MITCHELL. The licensing exam, the national licensing exam.

Mr. ARRINGTON [continued]. It is the national licensing, not the state licensing?

Dr. MITCHELL. Correct.

Mr. ARRINGTON. Okay. So the scores of the folks coming through—I have noticed it is about a 100 percent increase every year in your program.

Dr. MITCHELL. That is what we are trying to do, double it.

Mr. ARRINGTON. So where are we at in terms of enrollment now? You started with how many?

Dr. MITCHELL. We started with six, we went to 12, we will go to 22, then 45. So we will just keep bumping it up. We want to target 80 to 100.

Mr. ARRINGTON. And the results in terms of their testing for the licensing exam is comparable to the general population?

Dr. MITCHELL. No, it is much better.

Mr. ARRINGTON. Really?

Dr. MITCHELL. Yes. One hundred percent passed, and their average score was higher than the national average on the exam.

Mr. ARRINGTON. And they basically stepped out of three years of the program.

Dr. MITCHELL. Yes, and what it is, you have to keep in mind that these veterans will come through, and in the first two years they have a lot of what they call the common core tests or classes—History, English, things like that—that we don't teach. But what they are receiving is a BSN in a 12-month period of time, which is a four-year degree.

Mr. ARRINGTON. Right, and they are performing even at a higher level—

Dr. MITCHELL. Than the average, than the national average.

Mr. ARRINGTON [continued]. So the competency-based—

Dr. MITCHELL [continued]. Portion?

Mr. ARRINGTON [continued].—portion where you determine what credit they will get based on knowledge and skills—

Dr. MITCHELL. The clinical skills exam.

Mr. ARRINGTON [continued]. And that is a national tool—

Dr. MITCHELL. It is a national tool.

Mr. ARRINGTON.—that you can use off the shelf?

Dr. MITCHELL. Correct. All students across the country use national skills exams. So what you do is, if you have somebody who has been a corpsman for two years versus a medic for 15 years, they are going to have a different skill level. So you are actually bringing them through for their clinical skills assessments to see where are you in this curriculum. So you may have some people that can move a little faster than others.

Mr. ARRINGTON. To follow-up on the Ranking Member's comment about saving time and resources, and what Mr. Iuta said about here I am in a class full of 18- and 19-year-olds and they haven't experienced a whole lot of life, or maybe what they understand about life but not what a soldier returning would recognize.

So it would seem to me that, especially in the undergraduate timeframe, that Texas Tech and other general academic campuses might consider that same competency-based credit to streamline so it saves time, saves money, but it would also give them a sense of value too, because they bring something to the table, and they know they do.

You said they are more mature, et cetera, et cetera. But this would be a way to tangibly and measurably say, yes, you bring serious value to the table.

Are there thoughts about that, Mr. Ortiz?

Colonel ORTIZ. Oh, absolutely. We have a couple of programs already on campus that maximize experience, military experience and training. One is university studies. You get credit, up to 18 hours, depending on your rank or the training that you have had

and the military experience you have had. The other one is the BAAS program. It is the Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences. That program is actually a feeder program for all of the folks that come out of a two-year program.

Five years ago we didn't have a place where an Associate's two-year degree could go into a Bachelor's. We have that now. So that is another mechanism where we can speed up the process.

We also have another program that we are looking at now. The VBSN program was under the auspices, originated under the auspices of the College Credit for Heroes Program, and that is a program that we signed on to. We have a partnership agreement with the College Credit for Heroes. So we are looking at different areas where we can maximize experience and credit for veterans that come to campus because you are absolutely correct.

Dr. MITCHELL. Mr. Chairman, may I add to that?

Mr. ARRINGTON. Yes.

Dr. MITCHELL. Because this is something, again, that is not just solely in the lap of the Federal Government. The State of Texas, through the Texas Workforce Commission, the College Credit for Heroes gave us the seed money to get this thing developed. So this is something where the Health Sciences Center, we have skin in the game by redeploying faculty members toward this area. The State of Texas has skin in the game, and the Feds have skin in the game with this. So this is something, it works out for everybody. Everybody can share the burden, and then everybody gets the benefit.

Mr. ARRINGTON. Well, I am glad to know we can point to a Federal program where their investment has returned significant value. I think you mentioned HRSA and some other groups. I read your testimony. We need to identify those programs and pots of money and write letters and find ways to get the commitment of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle, but I think especially there is skepticism as a Republican where some of these monies, where they go and what are the results. But this is a great example, I think, of serving the public by serving our veterans through these programs.

Do we know, can you measure on the MVP program, getting off the academic program and just the support program of the MVP—and I am proud to see how it has developed and grown. But could you tell us what the veteran population prior to MVP, how they performed in terms of student success, retention, graduation rate, employment rate? Maybe you can't, but that is I think what I would like to know, what was it like before, or compared to a university today. Take a population at a university of comparable size that has veterans but doesn't have an MVP program. Can we measure that it has improved, if not significantly transformed, how our veterans matriculate?

Colonel ORTIZ. Oh, absolutely. The Student Veterans of America has done extensive work in terms of measuring performance of our veteran populations. So here at Texas Tech we have always had a portion of the student population that was veteran based, and we have had veterans here at Texas Tech since World War II, or since the inception of the campus here.

In terms of measurement, we work with institutional research. We track our performance data relative to the rest of the campus population. That is whether you are talking about retention statistics, graduation statistics. There are some metrics that we don't track. We would love to do that.

Within MVP right now I don't have a data analyst. We rely on the standard reporting metrics for the rest of the student population. But that is something we would like to incorporate.

Mr. ARRINGTON. Could you tell me now? Because the student veteran survey was a good start, but it wasn't apples to apples. My problem is they took their success rate over every program—four-year, two-year—and they are just very different. But do you know that the program you have for the apples to apples comparison of undergrad four-year programs as a veteran student or dependent versus general population and that one performs as well or better than the other? Do you all have that much data?

Colonel ORTIZ. We can measure that, yes. Yes, we can.

Mr. ARRINGTON. Are they performing as well or better, or are they performing better?

Colonel ORTIZ. They are performing equivalent or better than the general student population. Yes, sir.

Mr. ARRINGTON. And do we know that much over there at the Health Sciences Center in terms of how the general population versus our veterans—I am not talking about the degree program. I am just talking about the support system that you provide for veterans there.

Dr. MITCHELL. No, but that is easy to look at, because we have all of our veterans identified.

Mr. ARRINGTON. I am going to ask the Ranking Member to take over here. But one thing that we often discuss as a Subcommittee—and there is one man in particular who brings this up. I think it is a valid concern, and that is some of the schools on the for-profit side who churn out a lot of veterans, and the concern is are they getting a quality service and are they getting a quality product for the taxpayer money and for the time invested by the veteran. I think it is a legitimate question, but I think the answer to that for me is getting to outcomes and supporting universities that are producing results and making the investment, like you guys have, to support your veterans through the program. It is a very robust program.

So if you are performing and the success rate of your students is high on retention and graduation, and mostly employment—I would think that would be the highest measure of success—then there should be a reward for that. And if you don't produce that, I don't think you ought to get the taxpayer money. That is how I feel about it. We are a little ways from being able to do that, but I make no secret where I would like to go because I think it would solve the problem. If you are a for-profit and you are performing for our veterans, great. If you are not, whether you are a for-profit or a public, why would we keep throwing good money after bad?

So it is more of a statement. If you have comments, I would love to hear them. Otherwise, I yield to the Ranking Member.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Dr. Mitchell, could I ask you one more question about this, the nursing program we have been talking about? How unique is that?

Dr. MITCHELL. How unique is the program?

Mr. O'ROURKE. Yes, like how many other institutions have reduced a four-year commitment—

Dr. MITCHELL. You can count them on one hand.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Okay. And how many more are there, ballpark, in the country?

Dr. MITCHELL. Nursing programs? It is over 1,000 nursing schools in the United States, including the two-year programs. I mean, I think it is over 1,000 nursing programs.

Mr. O'ROURKE. I won't hold you to it, but to the best of your knowledge, how many people are doing this? Is it under five?

Dr. MITCHELL. A handful. Texas A&M has a program, we have a program—it is just a handful of people that are doing this.

Mr. O'ROURKE. So I think one idea that comes out of this hearing is to either administratively require or ask the Administration to require every nursing program to follow your lead. If you can do it and you have the performance that 100 percent are passing and their scores are higher than the national average that is a really good indication of the value of doing it this way. If we are saving three years of tuition, that is even better, to the Chairman's point about safeguarding the taxpayer's dollars.

And if the Administration can't because they don't have the authority, or won't, then I think the Chairman and I should discuss a bill that would require any nursing program that receives Federal GI Bill resources to take the Texas Tech lead and go from four to one year. It is a great value for the veteran, which is the most important thing, and a great value for the taxpayer, which is important as well.

And then I would think from there, there have got to be a number of other programs. If you were part of the Cyber Command, if you were a programmer, if you had some other technical vocation within the military, we shouldn't require you to go to school to relearn that and blow a bunch of GI Bill earned-benefit resources on that. We should get you plugged into that job. It gets back to this function thing: Are we going to delay your purpose for four years, or are we going to plug you in in less than a year?

That is the way to do it, and I think we could really be on to something here. I can see it in lights right now that the Arrington GI Bill reform measure that saves taxpayers billions of dollars every year and gets veterans connected—

Mr. ARRINGTON. You had me at saving billions of dollars.

[Laughter.]

Mr. ARRINGTON. I will even name it after you if we can do that.

[Laughter.]

Mr. CHAPMAN. Whenever they built this program, I believe they looked at it in a very holistic manner, not just the degree itself. They knew they needed somebody in place to help do the processes of getting into the program itself, because that is an education alone, and that is what I do. Some of them are working for two years, some it is a week. It just depends. But generally my first

conversation lasts from 20 up to 30 minutes just to get them a brief of what all they can anticipate happening through their process.

And also we have a great—we use what is called—are you all familiar with Zoom? It is kind of like Skype. What it allows me to do is—just last week I was having an advising session with a student in Kuwait where I can share my screen and show them exactly what needs to be done. It is much like the TAP thing, except we are doing it at our institution, guiding them through it. And I think—actually, I know that in that process and in that journey to come into our program, I feel it is my duty as their liaison to make sure that they have a complete trust in us that we are going to do everything we can to make sure they are successful if they reciprocate that to us.

I think it should also be noted that there is a broader view than just the courses themselves.

Mr. O'ROURKE. And I would like to take what you shared, and what Ms. Meyer and Mr. Iuta have shared, and then Colonel Ortiz, as you have described how you have been able to successfully integrate returning servicemembers here, and have that inform our work with the Department of Defense on the Transition Assistance Program, if there are some best practices that are clearly working here, and maybe even using the technology that you just described.

If we can take your recent experiences and inform a better, more comprehensive program, I would say that the endpoint would be getting to what Colonel Lewis has championed and pioneered, which is connecting you with the community and having roots in that community. This is where you are welcomed, where you have family, where you have purpose, and where you are going to be successful, not as the victim and not as somebody that we have to repair but someone for whom we are desperate to find a home because we know you are going to fire on all cylinders once you get here to Lubbock or to El Paso, or to wherever it is in the country that you are supposed to be, and the community is ready for you and they are excited for you and ready to plug you in.

I mean, I just think that we would have such better outcomes if that were the model. I think the Chairman has been really good about this. We would have to figure out how we measure that to know that we are being successful. I mean, I think there is probably anecdotal feedback we could get, but also what is the earning potential of someone who goes through this revised TAP program, or what is their educational success and how do they perform in other ways that we can look at and measure.

So those would be three things, Mr. Chairman, I would love to work on with you just out of this hearing, building on this nursing program, going from four years to one, saving money and getting someone plugged in far more quickly based on the skills and experience that they have already accrued, rewriting the TAP program based on the experience that some of those on this panel have shared with us, and then this idea of effective community integration that has been pioneered here in Lubbock through Colonel Lewis and others.

You may have other things that you take from this, but those are the three that I am really excited to work on with you, and I think

this hearing could provide the impetus to get those done, or at least far along the way over the course of 2018.

Mr. ARRINGTON. I agree, I agree, and I think that is well articulated. I think the themes were very clear, and the opportunities to replicate the best practices are very clear as well.

If I may just ask, I know you have to go at some point, so I don't want you to—when it is time, please feel free. I wanted to ask Kyle about issues outside of counseling on benefits and the logistics of working with the VA as an advocate and an intermediary for your student veteran.

Outside of that or in addition to that, the things on the social side, on the mental health-related side, other issues that a veteran, a non-traditional student is dealing with, what would be the one thing that causes the veteran the greatest challenge in integrating as a student to perform, and obviously as a new civilian, again outside of the VA benefits?

Mr. CHAPMAN. That is a great question. It is tough to answer because I have found, through the hundreds of phone calls and advising sessions that I have given, it looks different for each and every one of them. I think it is the individual that is working with them to kind of gauge that, where are they at, and how much do you need to help them, essentially. Some are running away with it, but there are others where you have to show it to them so they can physically see what they need to do. Then they get a familiarity with it, and then they can move on to the next thing.

Mr. ARRINGTON. So it is a case by case.

Mr. CHAPMAN. It is.

Mr. ARRINGTON. You can't say that if we could tackle this one issue for our returning soldiers with respect to when you get them for higher education, we would solve 80 percent of the problems. You say it is case by case. It is not that clear-cut that there are one or two things that would be the bigger of the problems, which again I go back to if you measure the outcomes, then you won't be trying to dictate which things you have to do programmatically. It is just to invest the resources and the time and the effort to find out and be proactive in engaging the veteran community, and then have a plan specific for those individuals, because we will reward you if you do that because we care about the success rate of our student veterans.

Mr. CHAPMAN. I want to say the best answer to that is to have people in place who can do just that, that can listen to them and kind of get a gauge of where they are at and what processes need to be taken, or what steps need to be taken with each individual.

Dr. MITCHELL. Mr. Chairman, I think having things where a veteran—if they have pathways in the civilian life that are similar to the pathways they have been placed on in the military, everything in the military is for military readiness. There is a lot of that, a lot of the educational endeavors they are picking up along the way that aren't headed toward a degree. They are headed toward better military readiness. But a lot of those things parallel what educational institutions do for a very different reason. The success of the veterans' programs is because we have the people on both sides of this compare notes, overlap—what if this lays over with this? Quite frankly, that can help to make their transition easier because

they are going from something familiar to them to something else familiar to them in just a different setting.

That is why we are looking at the School of Pharmacy. Pharmacy technician is a way to overlay that, and the School of Health Professions. Are there things they are doing here that we can overlay with this? Is there something in cyber security? Is there something you can do to overlay over here with the civilian job that would be in electronics?

But the military does it for military readiness. They are not doing it trying to get them a degree. But a lot of what they train them to do overlaps with a civilian counterpart. And if you can just marry them up and use competency-based evaluations, you could save them a lot of heartache on the military side, on the veteran side, and you could really shore up a good workforce on the civilian side that is highly trained in that area.

Mr. ARRINGTON. You mentioned a specific recommendation. Mr. O'Rourke, you have been here longer, and you are much wiser on these things, I admit. But the 85/15 rule seems to make sense when I understand it as you have to have some demonstration that there is value to the program in such a way that you can attract at least 15 percent of the general population to attend such a program and to participate. I get that. I think that makes all the sense in the world.

But it also makes sense—and I am wondering why, because it seems like you have more than that in the Health Sciences Center. Maybe they measure it on a program by program basis?

Dr. MITCHELL. That is what happens. In the Veterans to BSM Program, it is for veterans.

Mr. ARRINGTON. It is for veterans.

Dr. MITCHELL. There is no 15 percent civilian.

Mr. ARRINGTON. So in that case, if you are accredited—

Dr. MITCHELL. The DOE, the Department of Education, they are measuring the quality of your programs.

Mr. ARRINGTON. Does it make sense? It seems to me that in a situation where the program is for veterans, you will never be able to prove out that 15 percent. That is just not what it is for. But if there is an outside, universally respected entity that is giving them some accreditation or rating, that we should use that.

Dr. MITCHELL. It is Federal Government accreditation.

Mr. ARRINGTON. Yes, it is a Federal—

Dr. MITCHELL. It is DOE.

Mr. ARRINGTON. What are your thoughts on that? Does it make sense to you?

Mr. O'ROURKE. To seek the advice of counsel.

[Laughter.]

Mr. O'ROURKE. She will work with you.

[Laughter.]

Mr. ARRINGTON. All right.

Mr. O'ROURKE. No, it makes sense, what you just described. If we have measures that satisfy the concern primarily, again, of the veteran, are they successful having gone through this program, are they able to find a job and their purpose, is the taxpayer's investment protected, 85/15 doesn't matter to me, it really doesn't. I just want to make sure that those things are satisfied. Maybe 85/15

was a way to kind of get an idea that there was value outside of that ready GI Bill money, that somebody outside of that who is risking their own private dollars sees value in it, and I understand that. But if there is a better, more comprehensive measure, let's go with that.

Mr. ARRINGTON. I thought it was on the institution but not on the program. So it is program by program. Okay, you always learn something.

Do you want a question or two? I am just going to follow-up with two more and then I am done.

Mr. O'ROURKE. No, I want to listen to you.

Mr. ARRINGTON. I have tremendous respect for Colonel Lewis. He has been doing this a long time. I principally believe strongly that the more that we can divest the VA of services where they can be done on the ground, in the community, in relationship with the customer, the better and more effective. Of course, again, where is the data? I don't know, but I just intuitively believe that.

So where would you say just generally, as you look at the VA transition program or otherwise, we can do just that because you just know in your experience that it will be better executed, implemented, and performed at the local level?

Colonel LEWIS. Great question. I think SSVF, the homeless program, gives us a great model for that. Basically, the VA came to the communities and said you know more about your homeless population than we do in Washington, D.C. The VA has had a housing program in our area operated out of Amarillo for a long time. I have had an SSVF program for two-and-a-half years. We have housed 230 homeless veterans in this region between Lubbock, Amarillo, and the 30-county area.

How did that happen? Well, because we knew where to go look, where to connect with people, how to find centers of influence, how to do the things that we need to do.

I think it is a great model to say this is what happens, we provide the resources, you provide the expertise locally, because there is an environmental change everywhere you go. So I think that is a great model right there to be able to say you have the boots on the ground, you have the expertise. We can do that in a lot of areas in the transition pieces. Big towns that have great universities, or even small towns with great universities, have that wonderful opportunity to be able to take that university expertise and leverage that into the services that need to be provided to our transitioning veterans.

Mr. ARRINGTON. You said the transition, Mr. Iuta, had to be re-defined, just the word "transition." How would you define transition?

Mr. IUTA. I think a lot of times we think of transition as far as the military, transition is just that part where you are in that process of getting out of the military, and it just stops right there. But I think transition extends beyond just getting out. It extends all the way until the veteran is able to at least somewhat be able to be independent or be sustainable by himself.

Mr. ARRINGTON. Nicole, I can't help but say that if our office can be of assistance to you, that is what we are here for. So on your issue of the disability claim process or appeals process, that was

one of the big issues we took on as a Committee and actually passed one of those eight bills that I said made it to the President's desk, to restructure that so it would work for you guys and would be much more efficient.

There were some 450,000 claims in arrears, and I think the average was a year or two years, but it was not good. So that is just being rolled out, I believe. But in the meantime, if our office can help you with that, let's talk after this, okay?

Ms. MEYER. Thank you, sir.

Mr. ARRINGTON. I am going to ask the Ranking Member if he has any closing thoughts, comments, or questions. I will let him have the last word, but I will say I am so pleased and truly inspired by you guys and your commitment to helping your fellow brother and sister in the bond of being a veteran, and having served and having to deal with the challenges that one faces coming out, and being able to give back in the way you are doing now. I know that our President, Lawrence Schovanec, is a veteran himself, and I know he is personally committed.

I think creating a culture that supports the veterans is really what—that is the ultimate goal. I read that throughout the testimony and how you recognize and reward, and how you have faculty, hundreds of faculty—I think 700 have taken some of these courses. That 700 faculty at a university taking courses to better understand how they can support their veterans, if it is part of the culture, I think you have won. I think the veteran wins. I am just so proud of the work that you guys have done, and sorry for shamelessly trotting out these wonderful people and programs for my Ranking Member.

But I wish all of the Committee Members that we serve with could hear your stories and all the good work you are doing. He is always the best at distilling it to the two or three things that we can glean from it, follow it up, take it back, work on it, and hopefully make it have an impact to better serve our veterans.

God bless you guys. Colonel, thank you. Everybody, Mr. Ortiz, appreciate your leadership there.

For the closing comments, I will ask the Ranking Member to close us out.

Mr. O'ROURKE. Well, I want to thank you. We wouldn't have this hearing here in Lubbock if you had not requested it and you worked with our team, our office, this amazing staff who supports us and who really leads on these issues and does the necessary work to make sure that our Committee can be successful.

Again, Lubbock and Texas Tech have been incredibly welcoming, and I am very grateful for that.

I am struck, Mr. Chairman, as I was when I first started serving in Congress on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, by how veterans really distinguish themselves through their service, that they have served in uniform, they have put their lives on the line for so many, and they have lost so much while serving this country, have come back and never stop serving. They do it in veteran service organizations, they do it through their testimony here today, they do it by holding our feet to the fire, creating the pressure that sometimes forms the necessary political will to get things done that otherwise aren't going to happen of their own accord.

There are no enlightened Members of Congress who just come up with great ideas and make them happen. We are very often almost exclusively forced to do that in a good way by those whom we represent. They are the inspiration, they are the force, they are the drive, and I found that to be the case today. I mean, so many notes that we have taken, I think potentially good bill ideas; or, as you often remind us, if we don't have to write an act of Congress and we get the Administration to do it of their own volition or with our help, all the better, but good is going to come out of this.

You facilitated it. Those on this panel made it happen. So we are very grateful for your testimony, your contribution.

Colonel Lewis, who I had the pleasure of meeting almost a year ago, blew me away by his leadership, what he had organized, the people that he introduced me to here in the community. The great VA staff in Lubbock, the excellent VA staff in Amarillo, all the veterans who serve in this area, like you, really make me proud. It is a huge honor. I am so lucky and so fortunate to be here and have this responsibility, and with you to be in these positions of public trust to be able to do something with it.

My closing idea that came from Colonel Lewis is that El Paso, I think at least until recently, lead the country in what they describe as "brain drain," talent that we nurture, we educate, we provide the quality of life, the museums, the parks, the paved streets, and then leaves our community and flourishes somewhere else. We are also a military community, Fort Bliss, 32,000 active-duty servicemembers and incredibly wonderful tradition of service there, so many veterans and so many military retirees.

I love your idea of connecting those separating servicemembers with the community perhaps from which they came and applying their skill or service, maybe facilitated through a great institution like Texas Tech, and connecting them with a career and providing that vitality that is sometimes missing from El Paso. I don't know about Lubbock, but you mentioned Plainview earlier. I think about just the cities of the Plains and the Panhandle, of Pampa and Dalhart and Booker and Canyon.

Why don't we connect those veterans who came from those communities back with careers and opportunities connected to education? I love, love the Boots to Roots concept, and I hope there is some way that we can help to implement that. One, and first and foremost, it is really good for the veteran; and two, it is just so good for those communities. And again, your mindset of seeing veterans as an opportunity and potential and a net contributor is a way that we have to approach it from Congress, and we will because of your example and the way you have shown us to do that.

So my thanks to each of you for doing this, to the great staff who helped to make today a success, and most of all to you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting us all to be here. Thank you.

Mr. ARRINGTON. You know, the American people on both sides of the aisle are fed up with Washington, and I was right there with them as I was running, raging against the machine. I think they are very right to feel that frustration, and even anger. But I hope my colleagues and my fellow West Texans saw today what I think they don't get enough of. Maybe it is just the media. Maybe it is just not happening enough, and I think it is probably a little bit

of both, and that is people who are putting partisanship and other interests aside, putting America first, rolling up their sleeves, solving problems, and delivering on the promises. That is more a credit to you and our colleagues on the Committee than me and my leadership, but it is an honor to serve with you, Beto.

Okay, guys, my last act as the Chairman of this Subcommittee before we close out is to invite our Ranking Member to a horned frog roast. I don't know if he has ever eaten a horned frog. It tastes like chicken.

[Laughter.]

Mr. ARRINGTON. But I will make a prediction: We will win and win big because Cliff King is on fire and ready to prove something to a lot of people, and I am still believing. So if you can stick around, it tastes like chicken. Roger Williams, I hope that is for the record and he reads it.

Now I ask unanimous consent that the Angelo State University letter be submitted into the record and that all Members have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks.

Without objection, so ordered.

Mr. ARRINGTON. This hearing is now adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:00 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

Prepared Statement of Tedd Mitchell

Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, my name is Dr. Tedd Mitchell. I am the President of Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TTUHSC), one of four component institutions within the Texas Tech University System. It is an honor to be a witness before your Subcommittee on the very important topic of best practices in veterans' education and transition to civilian life.

First, I would like to mention TTUHSC has had a long partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that started in 2006 with the medical academic affiliation agreement which has allowed our students to have rich invaluable clinical training opportunities within the VA Health Care Systems. TTUHSC's partnership with the VA will be enhanced with the building of the new and expanded Lubbock VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic on the TTUHSC campus. TTUHSC is honored to be the site of this new clinic which will provide improved and expanded care to South Plains veterans. On behalf of these veterans, TTUHSC is grateful for the VA Committee's willingness and foresight to authorize the creation of this new clinic.

TTUHSC prides itself in its commitment to veterans and their families and its recognition of their service to our country. Last week, TTUHSC held its annual Veterans Day ceremony honoring the men and women at TTUHSC who have served our country. As a member of the Council of College and Military Educators, TTUHSC strives to ensure veterans have a successful transition into the college setting and, once there, receive the support they need to be successful.

For the fall 2017 semester, TTUHSC has a total of 118 veterans enrolled in its programs. TTUHSC has student veterans in all five of our schools: Nursing, Health Professions, Medicine, Pharmacy and Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences. These students are located throughout West Texas on our six regional campuses; Abilene, Amarillo, Dallas, Lubbock and the Permian Basin. The Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center at El Paso has a total of 21 veterans enrolled in its programs. These students are in the Paul L. Foster School of Medicine and the Hunt School of Nursing.

TTUHSC has committed itself to the Department of Veterans Affairs Principles of Excellence program and has been identified as a Military Friendly University (Bronze Level) by G.I. Jobs Magazine. Our Veterans and Military Advising Office within TTUHSC Student Services assists and guides prospective and accepted students from initial contact going forward. This office assists students through the process of utilizing their VA Education Benefits and Hazelwood Exemption which is a state program.

TTUHSC takes the stress off veterans by ensuring all necessary documents are submitted to the Department of Veterans Affairs to certify student enrollments. Sarah Henly serves as TTUHSC's Veteran and Military Advisor and is a veteran herself. Our Veterans and Military Advising Office and Sarah's Dedication have produced phenomenal results for veterans interested in enrolling in TTUHSC but who may have found the experience to be too daunting.

The Veteran and Military Advising Office continues to be the primary point of contact and resource for veterans after they have enrolled and begin their degree program. TTUHSC hosts lunches each semester for our student veterans on all campuses. TTUHSC recognizes our student veterans all the way to the end. At commencement, graduating veterans receive military stoles with a red double T to recognize not only their recent accomplishment but service to our country as well.

One of TTUHSC's more innovative programs is the Accelerated Veteran to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (VBSN) track. VBSN is a nursing degree completed in 12 months specifically designed for veterans with prior military medical training.

This program allows veterans to receive competency based college credit and to earn their BSN in less time with less cost.

This program is unique in that TTUHSC faculty developed this curriculum with the Medical Education and Training Command (METC) located at the Joint Services Base in San Antonio, Texas. TTUHSC faculty collaborated with METC personnel to review the METC curriculum for medics. The medic curriculum was examined to determine which courses offered key elements similar to nursing courses. This program then created a competency based examination to award college credits by recognizing prior learning. Veterans have the opportunity to be given college credit for four courses (14 semester credit hours).

TTUHSC received support from the US Department of Health and Human Services Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to develop and implement the VBSN program. HRSA's Nurse Education, Practice, Quality and Retention (NEPQR) - Veterans in Bachelor of Science in Nursing Program awarded \$1.04 million. TTUHSC also received \$200,000 from the Texas Workforce Commission. Both grants have been great resources and we recommend Congress continue to fund this program.

The VBSN has had phenomenal success. The current 2017 VBSN class as 12 students. Seven students graduated in December 2016 and all passed the nurse licensing examination. The incoming cohort for 2018 has 22 students. For 2019, TTUHSC has 45 prospects. TTUHSC anticipates increasing our numbers annually by 50 percent. TTUHSC offers the VBSN program in seven locations: Lubbock, Amarillo, Odessa, Abilene, Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio. As a result of VBSN's success, TTUHSC's School of Pharmacy and School of Health Professions are considering offering competency-based education as well.

TTUHSC would like to offer recommendations for the Subcommittee to consider to improve the quality of education for student veterans.

Federal funding for education programmatic initiatives Continue to approve federal funding for HRSA's NEPQR grants. HRSA's Nursing Education Practice, Quality and Retention (NEPQR) - VBSN Program Grant was critical to supporting new program development to serve veterans.

Military Housing Allowance (MHA) To take into consideration the growth in distance education, determine the housing allowance based upon where the student does their clinical work. VBSN students do their clinical work at a "site," rather than on a campus. TTUHSC is very grateful for the work of the Subcommittee on its passage of legislation to expand and extend the G.I. Bill. This Subcommittee recognized that students do not necessarily receive their training in the same location as where the school is headquartered, in TTUHSC's case Lubbock. TTUHSC is very grateful the Subcommittee clarified the Monthly House Allowance (MHA) to beneficiaries of the Post-9/11 G.I. bill, to allow veterans to receive MHA based on the location where the student attends the majority of his/her classes. This legislation will have a profound effect on our students at TTUHSC's six regional campuses. TTUHSC understands the Subcommittee's concerns about schools taking advantage of this new provision. We would ask the Subcommittee to consider the feasibility of having the VA pay MHA based on the site where the student is located since many programs are 100 percent online with only clinical experience required. Again, TTUHSC is grateful for the changes the Subcommittee has already made to the MHA.

VA 85/15 Rule Eliminate the application of the VA 85/15 rule entirely for entities with regional and professional accreditation. The 85/15 rule is not effective in maintaining educational quality in that it claims to use the market place to ensure quality of the educational offerings, requiring each course to include a minimum fifteen percent civilian population enrollment. It also does not address the unique needs of veterans transitioning to civilian life and education, precluding courses designed to help veterans in this transition being prevented from certification for VA education benefits. A solution is to allow the agencies with DOE deemed status - such as SACS/COC - to determine quality.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear before this Subcommittee and to share TTUHSC's best practices in support of our student veterans. TTUHSC appreciates the service and sacrifice these students have made. Assisting them to reach their academic and career goals will continue be a priority for TTUHSC.

Tedd L. Mitchell, M.D.
President
Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center
3601 4th Street
Lubbock, Texas 79430

Prepared Statement of Aaron Kyle Chapman

Good afternoon Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke and distinguished Members. Thank you for inviting me to appear before your Subcommittee. My name is Kyle Chapman and I had the honor of serving in the U.S. Marine Corp from December 2000 to December 2004 with 3rd Battalion 5th Marines and 2nd Battalion 4th Marines. Currently I serve as the Texas Tech University Health Science Center (TTUHSC) School of Nursing (SON) Veteran Liaison and work closely with the Veteran to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) Track. I would like to share a portion of my story about my transition from military life to civilian life and how it has impacted what I do today.

When I exited the Marine Corp and became a civilian I was within a month removed from my second tour of combat in Ramadi, Iraq. In 2005, I began college at South Plains College and did well. I then transferred to Texas Tech University (TTU) the summer of 2005 at which point I was mentally, emotionally, and physically not coping well with my transition. I fell into a depression trying to cope with flashbacks and nightmares or better known as Post Traumatic Stress (PTS). I stopped going to class and left TTU with a .62 GPA. In April 2009, through different sorts of intervention from family, friends, and VA mental health counselors I decided to attend the Amarillo VA substance abuse and recovery program. I have been sober since April 2009. I went back to school at South Plains College the fall of 2011 and restarted my college journey. In summer 2013 I was able to transfer back to TTU on academic probation and graduated in August 2015 Cum Laude with a degree in Human Development and Family Studies and minor in Addictive Disorders and Recovery Studies. My intent was to work with military, veterans, and their families in a resource, PTS, and substance abuse manner. Much of my success in college was due to the TTU Military and Veterans Programs (MVP) assistance. In October of 2015, I was hired as the TTUHSC SON Veteran Liaison.

Today I have the distinct honor to serve military and veterans locally, in Texas, nationally, and globally through my position with the purpose of assisting them with their transition to higher education. On a daily basis I work with military and veterans to help them through the application process of the VBSN track which includes the application and admission process. After acceptance, I continue to assist with any issues or concerns that may arise until the day they graduate.

I believe one of the greatest ways to honor our military and veterans is to recognize and honor the value they bring to our society through their career and educational endeavors. In the Veterans to BSN track we do just that. We do this in several ways but most importantly the VBSN track honors their service by recognizing they have a working and practical knowledge of skills obtained while serving in the military. If they can demonstrate their knowledge to our faculty through testing and practical application (known as a Comprehensive Assessment Placement -CAP) they are exempt from having to take these courses if they so choose. Therefore our veterans are able to graduate more quickly and with less debt. (Please refer to the Veteran to BSN brochure)

The Veteran to BSN Track is a tremendous degree plan that I believe takes into consideration the holistic view of transition from military to higher education. However, there is always room for improvement and challenges to face. One challenge that is not only true for VBSN and TTUHSC students but all institutions that have regional campus and satellite locations is the Post 911 G.I Bill Basic Allowance for Housing or better known as the BAH rate. I am sure you all are familiar with this benefit but as an example currently the BAH rate for Lubbock, TX is \$1,097 per month and San Antonio, TX is \$1,811 per month. Being that Lubbock, TX is where the official TTUHSC institution is physically located our students attending the VBSN track in San Antonio, TX will receive the BAH rate in Lubbock. So, our students in San Antonio are receiving \$714 less per month where the cost of living is significantly higher.

I am thankful this Subcommittee addressed this inequity in the passage of H.R.3218, the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017. Thank you for allowing veterans to receive MHA based on the location where the student attends the majority of their classes. This will help our students at TTUHSC's regional campuses. I understand the Subcommittee's concerns about some schools taking advantage of this provision. As the Subcommittee monitors the implementation of H.R. 3218, I would suggest the Subcommittee consider allowing students to receive MHA at the "site" where students do their clinical training as well where as many students receive their didactic training 100 percent online. Please know, we are thankful for the change made by H.R.3218.

Providing resources for military and veterans to transition into college and into the workplace are very important. As a student at TTU, the MVP was crucial to

my success as it is for many military and veterans. Also, degree plans much like the Veterans to BSN are invaluable as they recognize the value of their service and allow them the opportunity to capitalize on their skill set and turn it into a career, which is the goal. I am proud to have served in the U.S. Marine Corp, of my University and to serve our military and veteran students at Texas Tech University Health Science Center. I am honored to have this opportunity to share my story and am glad the subcommittee is devoting its time on this important initiative. In closing I would like to quote one of our current VBSN students who was recently recognized for her assistance with Hurricane Harvey relief efforts.

“The situations in the military are uncontrolled field settings,” Grant said. “That training has helped me stay in the correct mindset while I work in more controlled environments. The best part of TTUHSC is that they have acknowledged all of my training in the Army. A lot of places say they are military-friendly, but TTUHSC really backs it up. They stand behind their military students. When they say it, they mean it.”

Prepared Statement of Lou Ortiz

Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke, and Members of the House Veterans Affairs Economic Opportunity Subcommittee, welcome to Texas Tech, and thank you for the opportunity today to describe our main campus programs that directly support the education goals of our military and veteran students who have served and sacrificed for our nation.

Texas Tech University Military & Veterans Programs was created in 2010 as a department solely dedicated to helping veterans and their families succeed. We currently serve more than 2,200 student veterans and dependents on the Texas Tech University main campus and have developed a veteran support structure and culture that serves their needs. We are proud to assist these students in transitioning from military to academic life, providing them with a campus support structure that presents the best opportunity for academic success, and preparing our veteran graduates to enter the workforce. We serve undergraduate, graduate, and law students on our main campus and satellite locations across the state including Waco, Dallas, Junction, Fredericksburg and Marble Falls, Texas.

Our core mission is to assist veterans in obtaining the federal and state education benefits they have earned by virtue of the service to our nation. VA federal benefits we administer include:

1. Chapter 30 Montgomery GI Bill
2. Chapter 31 Vocational Rehabilitation
3. Chapter 32 Veterans Educational Assistance Program
4. Chapter 33 Post 9/11 GI Bill
5. Chapter 1606 Reserve GI Bill
6. Chapter 1607 Reserve Educational Assistance Program
7. Chapter 35 Dependent's Educational Assistance

We also administer the State of Texas Hazlewood Act (Exemption) for Texas veterans as well as DoD Tuition Assistance Programs for students who are on active duty.

Beyond our core benefits role, the Military & Veterans Programs Office serves as an integration and resource office for all military and veteran related organizations, activities, events on the main campus. We work hand in hand with the Student Veterans of America Chapter—Veterans Association at Texas Tech, Tech Law Military Association, Faculty & Student Veterans Association, Army and Air Force ROTC, and the Military & Veterans National Alumni Chapter. We also partner and coordinate with key veteran support organizations and resources throughout the local community. We place significant emphasis on providing a supportive environment and culture by instituting programs at three key stages for veterans at Texas Tech University—transition to campus, campus support, and job search and employment.

1. Transition from Military to Academic Life

- a. Tech Vet Boot Camp - Before the start of each Fall and Spring semester, MVP hosts Tech Vet Boot Camp. Our two-day Boot Camp is designed to help veterans transition to college life by providing best practices in study skills, time management, writing, and money management. Special guests include the Brain Performance Institute offering high performance brain training program known as Strategic

Memory Advance Reasoning Training. TechVet Boot Camp is a great way to meet other veteran students and network at the start of the semester. As non-traditional students, peer to peer interaction with other veterans is vital to establishing social connections in their new academic setting. We are developing an expanded program of one week duration that will incorporate additional math and writing and information on community resources.

b. Stars and Stripes Lounge - Centrally located in the Student Union Building, our Stars & Stripes Lounge opened in Spring 2014. It serves as a study and social area for military and veterans and is furnished with tables, computer terminals, a big screen TV.

2. Providing a Support System and Culture for Veteran Success on Campus - As a preface to outlining veteran support, I must tell you that the vast majority of our military and veteran students are emotionally mature, goal oriented, mission-driven, and self-sufficient role models. Academically, they perform equal to or better than our general student population. However, based on their unique military service experiences that may include combat, some veterans do experience social, administrative, financial, and physical or mental health challenges in transitioning from military to the classroom.

As a starting point for campus support, there are over 300 faculty and staff members who are veterans at Texas Tech. These faculty members serve as role models, advisors and mentors for current student veterans.

Another key component of our support structure is a comprehensive Green Zone training program that incorporates 7 distinct training modules for faculty and staff.

a. Green Zone -Our Green Zone program is tailored to provide increased awareness and understanding of our veteran population and guidance on where to refer them for assistance. Over 700 TTU faculty and staff members have attended one or more of 7 training modules. Our unique multi-module approach, incorporating training by subject matter experts in key support areas on campus, allows faculty and staff to gain a more comprehensive understanding of veteran challenges, how to recognize them, and where to refer veterans for assistance.

i. Module I: Core Training is open to all faculty and staff members as the first module of veterans' advocacy training and a prerequisite for all other modules. This course is designed to assist faculty and staff to better serve student veterans and their family members on campus. Attendees learn about the transition issues veterans face as they as they leave military service and enter campus life, specific information about Texas Tech's veteran students, and insight about campus and community resources. Green Zone module I must be taken before subsequent training modules can be scheduled.

ii. Module II: Understanding Benefits is taught by MVP certifying officials for faculty and staff who are interested in an overview of how federal and state veterans' benefits work. Learning objectives include having a basic understanding of federal, state, and DOD benefit programs offered at TTU including eligibility & awards, and basic responsibilities required of the university and the students.

iii. Module III: Mental Health is taught by Student Counseling Services for faculty and staff members who are interested in gaining a greater understanding of mental health issues faced by veterans and service members. Attendees will increase their understanding of mental health concerns sometimes faced by veterans and service members; decrease the stigma of mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and PTS; explore the nature of interpersonal violence and sexual assault and; be provided with referral resources.

iv. Module IV: Student Disability Services is for faculty and staff members who are interested in a basic overview of how TTU Student Disability Services works with veterans and service members on campus. Learning objectives include understanding Student Disability Services programs and services offered, learning how students can register; gaining a basic understanding about applicable federal/ state laws and guidelines; understanding student responsibilities; and gaining greater familiarity with resources and support available to faculty and staff on campus.

v. Module V: Advising Veterans is taught by senior MVP staff for faculty and staff advisors of veterans and family members on campus. Learning objectives include a veteran 'snapshot' and their expectations, responsibilities of the advisor in the context of Veterans Educational Benefits, responsibility of the school in reporting to the state/federal government, and best practices in advising veterans.

vi. Module VI: Hiring Veterans is presented by Human Resources and open to faculty and staff members who are interested in hiring veterans at Texas Tech University in their department. Trainees will learn about the soft skills that all veterans bring to the workforce, how to use the "Veterans' Only job posting", and "Veteran Direct Appointment hiring initiative" authorized by state law.

vii. Module VII: Other veteran, military, or family related topics are explored in this module. Guest speakers from on or off campus may present on topics of interest to the military and veteran community.

b. Veteran Liaisons - In addition to our faculty and staff veterans, we have over 35 veteran liaisons in each academic college and major staff support function who are dedicated to veteran success. They provide front-line support for veterans who have questions or need assistance in their respective colleges or offices. A pre-requisite is attendance at Green Zone Module 1, Core Training. Liaisons meet with the Military & Veterans Programs Office staff quarterly to share information and report specific veteran related information.

3. Transition to Employment - As veterans succeed in earning their degrees, their next step after graduation is finding employment and beginning their career. Career preparation begins before they complete their degree program. The University Career Center has developed a Veterans Career Program for veterans to receive the assistance they need to be successful in preparing for their future careers. A career center counselor meets with them to identify individual career needs and creates a career development plan. Among the services provided are career testing, job search resources, career workshops, mock interviews, and translating military experience into career readiness.

a. Camo to Corporate Program - In Spring 2017, Military & Veterans Programs partnered with the University Center to develop a pilot Camo to Corporate Programs.

i. This program is for graduating veteran seniors designed to better prepare them for job search and employment

ii. Students signed agreements to participate in six (6) evening sessions including a Strong interest inventory, resume and cover letter writing, networking, interviewing, etiquette, and proper dress

iii. As part of the program, veterans who complete all sessions acquire valuable skills job search skills and a tailored business suit to prepare for the professional world after graduation

b. Military & Veterans National Alumni Chapter - In May 2016, recognizing the value of a broad network of military and veteran alumni across the state and nation, we created a Military & Veterans National Alumni Chapter. One of the primary goals of our chapter is to connect current students and graduating seniors with alumni who are serving in business, corporations, government, and the military. We have begun connecting alumni employers who may provide internship, mentoring, and employment opportunities to our students through the career center and Camo to Corporate program. Additionally, the alumni chapter benefits students by providing education scholarships for veteran students.

We are proud of our Texas Tech veterans and do our best to recognize them at every opportunity. One way we do this is our unique camouflage stole that we award at a special ceremony the day before graduation. The stole is highly visible when veterans walk at graduation and they are singled out for their service by leadership at each graduation ceremony.

This is a brief overview of the Texas Tech programs that support the remarkable men and women veteran students who have served our nation. Central to our success is the strong commitment of campus leadership in providing the resources, facilities, and support that extends across our administration, faculty, staff, and local community. We very much appreciate the support of the House Economic Opportunity Subcommittee in providing your leadership, legislation, and resources for our veterans at Texas Tech and across the nation. Thanks for the opportunity to speak to you today. I look forward to your questions.

Prepared Statement of Staff Sergeant Nicole Meyer, USAF

Staff Sergeant Nicole Meyer, USAF (Honorably Discharged)
Enlisted in the United States Air Force on November 16th, 2010.

Attended Basic Military Training, Joint Base San Antonio- Lackland, Texas. November 2010- January 2011.

Attended Technical Training in Material Management, Joint Base San Antonio- Lackland, Texas. January 2011–March 2011

Stationed at 49th Logistics Readiness Squadron, Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico, April 2011–June 2014. 49th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, June 2014–August 2016.

Deployed 455th Expeditionary Logistics Readiness Squadron, Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, October 2013–May 2014

Deployed 451st Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, Kandahar Air Base, Afghanistan, January 2015–June 2015.

I began my separation process from the Air Force a year prior to my separation date. I began researching schools and trying to learn how the Post 9–11 GI Bill worked. I attended the Transition Assistance Programs (TAPS). Very little of the week-long class helped me with the transition from Active Duty to Civilian. The majority of the class focused on searching for jobs and building a resume. But because I was headed to college, very little of it applied to me. TAPS went very briefly over the process of filing a claim, but mainly focused on going through an individual on base that would help you go over everything in your medical record to submit your claim. I was unable to use this person due to time constraints, and had to figure out how to file a claim on my own through E–Benefits. The class never went over assistance organizations such as Disabled American Veterans, or Veterans of Foreign Wars having Veteran Service Officers that could assist with filing a claim.

Dealing with the Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical System has been a long, convoluted process. This began with my initial claim for disability, during which I was denied for my chronic back problems that had been on-going for three years at the time. The doctor I was sent to for my compensation and pension exam is well-known by local veterans to recommend that Veterans did not incur their injuries while in-service. The decision I was handed by the VA stated that there was no evidence of a disability for my back. I have since been diagnosed with having developed scoliosis while on Active Duty. My appeal for disability concerning my back has been on-going for a year.

As a woman, it can be difficult to receive medical treatment for women’s health issues. Anything other than very basic processes, such as prescribing medication, is referred out to the Veterans Choice Program. Unfortunately, funding is tight, and many providers no longer accept the Choice program. As of 2015, there are over 2 million female Veterans in the US. I do not understand why receiving treatment for women’s health issues is such an arduous process. It took well over two months to finally see a women’s health doctor to get treatment for a reoccurring health issue.

When I first contacted the Veteran’s Educational and Transitional Services (VETS) Office at Angelo State University, they were extremely helpful in explaining the process of applying for my education benefits. They offered much more help than the TAPS program, or the Education Office at Holloman Air Force Base. Most of the time, the Education Office either never answered the phone, or were too busy to assist with questions. When I finally was able get hold of them, the Education Office would give me very brief and general answers on Education Benefits available. The VETS Office at Angelo State University is the first organization I have encountered that actually bothered to answer my questions. The only time I had any problems with my benefits was when the VA was late on my Basic Allowance for Housing payment for the first month. This was however, due to an oversight on my part, not realizing that I needed to inform the VA that I was no longer Active Duty.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to me today. I hope that today can result in improvements to the current process, and that more Veterans are able to get the help that they need.

Prepared Statement of Ikaika (Kai) Iuta

Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O’Rourke, and Members of the House Veterans Affairs Economic Opportunity Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

My name is Ikaika Iuta, but everyone calls me Kai. I am from Hawaii. After graduating high school, I attended a junior college in California for one year. I couldn’t afford to go back to that school the following year. This led me to enlist in the U.S. Army in 2010. I was assigned to the 2nd Infantry Division 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat team as a Motor Transportation Operator in Fort Lewis, WA. From 2011–2012, I was deployed to Kandahar, Afghanistan attached to the 10th Mountain &

82nd Airborne Divisions. In 2013, my unit was assigned in a joint operation as the Global Response Force with the 82nd Airborne. I got out of the military in February of 2014. That same year I continued my education at Green River Community College in Auburn, Washington earning my Associate of Arts degree. In 2015, I enrolled at Texas Tech University. I am currently studying Psychology and graduating in December.

My transition out of the military was okay but not perfect. During the Army Career & Alumni Program or A.C.A.P, I was equipped with many resources but no knowledge on how to access them or how these things can apply to my particular situation. For example, ACAP helped me create a resume and get a job but I didn't know where I was going to live or what kind of services were offered for housing or help in getting housing. If it wasn't for the kindness of friends, I would have been homeless coming out of the military and another statistic to the veteran demographic. ACAP also helped me with information about the GI bill but it was unclear on how it worked. For example, during this time, the Post 9/11 GI bill only covered in-state tuition and veterans who were out of state would have to pay out of state tuition. This means the GI bill would only cover the in-state tuition part leaving the veteran to pay for the rest. However, there were certain states that gave in-state waivers for veterans. I was lucky enough to live in a state that offered this. During my time at Green River Community College, I felt awkward and out of place. My identity as a soldier was slowly stripped away and my service seemed like it was a different lifetime. My daily rituals consisted of going to school and work. I made no friends and wasn't connected to the campus or community. In August 2015, I transferred to Texas Tech University hoping to finish my degree and make new friends. I chose Texas Tech University because during that time it was ranked in the top 10 for military friendly universities.

Upon my arrival to campus, I was culture-shocked because I had never been this far east of the United States and I had never been to the south. My first stop on campus was the Texas Tech Military Veterans Program where I was given a lot of information and resources for veterans. They also encouraged me to sign up for the veteran student organization on campus which is called Veterans at Texas Tech or VATT. This organization was a great help because I connected with a lot of veterans and they shared their experiences as a student at Texas Tech. MVP also hosted a welcome event where new student veterans came together and veteran Lubbock organizations were there for information. The following semester I signed up for the veteran orientation program also known as Tech Vet Boot Camp. The program gave me an in depth training to the resources offered for veterans at Texas Tech. For example, I learned that Student Counseling Services offers 6 free counseling sessions to any student. I also learned that when you graduate from Texas Tech you are awarded a military stole. This may not seem to mean much or that significant but this little thing speaks volumes to me because this shows the school recognizes that veterans who are students at Texas Tech, are a part of a distinct important demographic of the student population. Since being here at Texas Tech I have been able to find community and I don't feel as isolated as I was at my other school.

I think the most important thing to help service members who want to come back school is recognizing who they are and reaching out to them. Providing a resource such as the Military Veterans Program at Texas Tech allows veterans to get connected and help them with their educational needs. Sitting in a classroom with kids 10 years younger than you can make you feel out of place and isolated. However, providing a support system that recognizes veterans and their distinct situations will make them feel a part of something.

I will graduate in December and look forward to receiving my graduation Texas Tech stole. My future plans is to go on to graduate school and study Industrial/Organizational Psychology. My future plans is to go on to graduate school and study Industrial/Organizational Psychology.

Thank you for time today. I look forward to your questions.

Prepared Statement of Colonel David J. Lewis, USAF (Ret.)

Introduction

Thank you Chairman Arrington and Ranking Member O'Rourke for the opportunity to testify at this hearing.

By way of self-introduction, I am the Director of VetStar, the veterans division of StarCare Specialty Health System. StarCare is the Local Mental Health Authority for Lubbock and four other Texas counties; however, our program serves up to thirty counties in the Texas Panhandle and South Plains. I am also an Assistant

Professor of Practice in the Political Science Department and the Director of Strategic Studies under the Texas Tech University's Institute for Peace and Conflict. I retired from the United States Air Force after nearly twenty-nine years of active duty, with combat tours in the air as well as on the ground during Operation DESERT STORM. I spent two years with the U. S. Army, two years at the U.S. Naval War College, with duty as a Professor of Strategy, and two years commanding a foreign F-16 fighter squadron from the Republic of Singapore. Following my retirement in 2009, I was the founder and first Director of the Texas Tech Military and Veterans Program. The observations in this testimony are a direct result of our work with veterans in our region through seven years of efforts in VetStar. My testimony does not reflect the official views of either StarCare Specialty Health or Texas Tech University; however, I believe my comments are consistent with the values and positions of those organizations.

VetStar was created to assist veterans by connecting them to the resources to make them successful in the next stage of their life. Over the years, we have narrowed our direct service focus to assisting those veterans who are struggling in their transition from military to civilian life, and provide referral assistance for all other areas of interest to our veteran population. Our focus, therefore, is "filling in the gaps" where the VA is unable to do so.

VetStar has four primary service lines; first, peer to peer services through the State of Texas Military and Veteran Peer Network, or MVPN. MVPN was created to provide a first-line of defense for the mental health challenges of Texas veterans. This program is funded through the Department of State Health Services, and administered by the Texas Veterans Commission. Next is a grant from the Fund for Veteran Assistance under the Texas Veterans Commission. This grant allows us to provide emergency financial assistance on a one-time basis to South Plains veterans who are experiencing a financial crisis. Additionally, we have a Supportive Services for Veterans and Families grant from the VA to provide assistance to veterans and families who experience homelessness, or are at risk of becoming homeless. Finally, we have a grant from the Texas Health and Human Services Commission to provide mental health under the Texas Veterans + Family Alliance program. We primarily target justice-involved veterans for this mental health grant.

VetStar also provides meeting space and chairs the monthly Veterans Resource Coordination Group (VRCG) meeting in Lubbock. The goal of the VRCG is to bring all veteran serving agencies together on a monthly basis to identify gaps and/or excessive overlap in veteran services in our region, as well as provide a forum for education and information awareness. VetStar has a robust relationship with the MVP office at Texas Tech University, as well as Lubbock Christian University, Wayland Baptist University and South Plains College.

Because of my experience delivering services to veterans in transition, I created the model we use extensively at VetStar - the FASTRR model. The acronym is as follows: F- Find, A-Assess, S-Stabilize, T-Treat, R-Reassess, R-Reintegrate. The details are as follows:

Find - Veterans that struggle with their transition issues tend to isolate themselves. This is due to a variety of reasons, including trust and stigma issues associated with seeking assistance. Nearly all of them have someone in a trusted relationship; a spouse, a parent, a close friend etc. I consider them to be our "eyes and ears" in the community. Many times, the trusted relation knows the VA may be able to help, but they are generally unaware of community-based resources. Essentially, isolated veterans must be "found." Unfortunately, one of the more common places to find them is in the local jails and detention centers, a result of some type of justice involvement. Substance use issues such as Public Intoxication, Driving Under the Influence, or Possession of a Controlled Substance are indicators of a veteran struggling with their transition, and indicators that the veteran is attempting to solve issues on their own. Our goal is to find them prior to justice involvement, or Intercept "0" in the GAINS Center Sequential Intercept Model.¹

Assess - Once a struggling veteran is identified, we want to assess for 1) Ideations of suicide, 2) Major substance abuse issues, and 3) Homelessness, or some combination of these. The initial assessment determines our course of action for appropriate intervention. This is essentially a triage operation, and it helps us develop a success plan to move the veteran forward with their life.

Stabilize - Stabilization is the foundation for therapeutic work, and it begins to empower our veterans to regain control of their situation. We utilize a VA developed program known as Seeking Safety to provide stability to veterans with co-occurring trauma and substance use issues. Seeking Safety is present-based therapy that is

¹Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration GAINS Center Sequential Intercept Model

designed to keep you safe today, and in the future. It is highly scripted, and very effective. We prefer to have our veterans complete Seeking Safety prior to treatment, as it significantly improves their chances of successfully graduating the treatment program. Stabilization is also found through the Housing First model for veteran who are homeless. Once housing is secured, the veteran receives a “housing stability” plan that includes wrap-around services as needed.

Treat - Treatment is based on evidence-based therapies provided by the VA, or other local/regional providers if the veteran is not eligible for VHA services. There is significant stigma associated with seeking treatment, and we may start the veteran with Equine Assisted Therapies to get them started. This non-traditional approach is highly effective in our service area.

Reassess - Coming out of the “treat” phase, or directly from earlier steps if treatment is not required, VetStar uses a unique 16-point veteran success plan to identify vulnerabilities and capitalize on veteran strengths in order to make them successful. We look at a variety of issues such as Health, Mental Health, Transportation, Employment, Family Support etc. to develop a tailored plan to maximize the probability of success for the veteran and their family.

Reintegrate - Arguably the most critical component of our model after FIND, our goal is to change the environment and alter the veteran’s perception of where they belong in our community. Programs such as VetLife and Team Red White and Blue give the veteran a chance to be with other veterans in a peer-based model. Without this critical step, the temptation is too great for the veteran to return to the same behaviors and locations that created the challenges. I strongly believe that reintegration can resolve many of the issues faced by the veteran, especially if it is delivered in a peer-based setting. One technique we use is a program called Task Force Lubbock, where we bring veterans together to do community service projects. The outcome is less about the service project itself, but rather focused on bringing veterans together for informal peer support (group therapy). Bluntly stated, our military was trained to break things and kill people; using those skills to create and repair is very therapeutic.

Understanding the concept of Stalled Transition - Stalled transition is a phrase I use to communicate the concept of a veteran struggling in their transition from military to civilian life. This struggle may be very brief, as it is for most servicemembers, or it may persist for decades due to personal struggles with PTSD, Moral Injury, MST, TBI or substance use issues. Using this term helps us understand the “hand-up” versus “hand-out” concept. The vast majority of “stalled” veterans require a relatively small investment to get them back into our society, including meaningful family relationships and gainful employment. The veteran is stalled, not permanently stuck or “broken” which is an especially harmful stereotype.

General Comments

The majority of our veterans transition from military to civilian life with few or no issues. Our observation in the South Plains service area is roughly 6% of our veteran population is struggling with their transition.² This means roughly 19 out of 20 veterans are being successful in their transition, with few or no issues. We should always keep in mind that the vast majority of veterans make superb students and employees, despite stereotypes that are placed upon them.

For those that struggle however, the “death spiral” can occur in the following manner:

- Veterans may be leaving the military with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Moral Injury or Military Sexual Trauma (MST) issues
- As a result, returning servicemembers may not relate to family and/or friends, and may struggle to identify and communicate their issues
- Inability to communicate, and reluctance to seek treatment can lead to self-medication³, justice involvement, domestic violence⁴ and family breakup⁵, job

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration GAINS Center Sequential Intercept Model

³ Self-medication is widely used, but not an accurate term. Using substance for emotional control is more accurate

⁴ Families of Veterans with PTSD have more family violence, verbal aggression, and female partners of Veterans with PTSD reported perpetrating more acts of family violence than did their partners. Retrieved from <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treatment/family/partners-of-vets-research-findings.asp>

⁵ Approximately 38% of Vietnam veteran marriages failed within six months of the veteran’s return from Southeast Asia. Similar trends are occurring with veterans of our current wars.

loss or rapid switching of jobs, loss of income and/or housing, and may lead to homelessness

- While the “spiral” is not the sole cause, tragically, 20 veterans die by suicide every day in our country

Our veterans have earned the right to be successful in their transition from the military, and especially to be successful as they pursue the educational opportunities they earned as servicemembers. A successful academic veterans program consists of many parts, such as recruiting and transition/orientation to the university, but the most important task, in my assessment, is retaining the veterans in academic or other training programs. Dropping out can occur for a variety of reasons, but if the veteran is experiencing “stalled transition” then community partnerships with organizations capable of applying appropriate interventions are essential. Traditional university programs, such as student counseling services, are typically quite good, but they may lack the cultural competency and timeliness to effectively address issues such as TBI, MST, PTSD, or moral injury.

Veterans who experience stalled transition may not have symptoms until several months after they separate from the military. If symptoms develop during their educational experience then they may be isolated from necessary support structures. Successful intervention begins with the ability to FIND the struggling veteran, through eyes and ears in the community, organizational relationships and family resource awareness. VetStar’s close working relationship with the Texas Tech University MVP office allows for near seamless awareness and coordination to address challenges, and intervention as required to preclude the veteran from leaving the university. This may be as simple as emergency financial assistance, or more complex challenges may present, and required more in-depth interventions. The VetStar process in place today is relatively effective, but it is a reactive process, relying on many different agencies to get the struggling veteran to our services. As a result, far too many veterans are falling through the cracks and, tragically, wind up in some portion of the death spiral.

Looking Forward

My recommendations to this committee on improving both educational outcomes for veterans, and community success outcomes in general, fall into four categories:

- Community Transition Programs
- Community Awareness
- Peer Support
- Rural Challenges

Community Transition Programs (Boots to Roots): One of the perils of an all-volunteer force is that communities are not well equipped to deal with the challenges a servicemember may face upon their return to the community, and veterans are unaware of the resources available to them if they do find themselves in the spiral. The Department of Defense does a remarkable, and unrivaled, job of training warriors to go to war; however, training them to come home again is marginal at best. The skill set that keeps you alive in combat, such as heightened arousal, hostile appraisal of events, making quick, unilateral decisions, sticking to the mission, and keeping your emotions sealed away are not good skills once you return home. Many veterans who face stalled transition issues find themselves on a new battlefield upon their return; one they were not trained for. The Boots to Roots concept has three components: First, an awareness of who can provide peer support in the community, and the associated mental health, employment, education and other resources; and second, a process to assist in “detuning” or desensitizing the limbic (mid-brain) psychological training that many of our warriors go through during their initial training in the military.⁶ Finally, for those intending to pursue advanced education, or anyone exposed to IED blasts, an eye exam to identify and correct any vision problems that may preclude their success in the classroom.⁷

Community Awareness (Communities of Courage): We are an all-volunteer force, and have been since 1973. This has resulted in a civil-military divide as a consequence, and many communities are unprepared to comprehend and manage the challenges of a returning warrior force, especially when it comes to PTSD, Moral Injury and TBI issues. Communities naturally want to honor their warriors upon

⁶ For additional discussion on this issue see On Killing by LTC Dave Grossman. The U.S. military used psychological “reprogramming” training techniques to raise killing rates from 15% in WW II to 95% in Vietnam

⁷ See the VA’s Clinical Recommendation for Eye and Vision Care following Blast Exposure and/or Traumatic Brain Injury Retrieved from <https://www.va.gov/optometry/docs/VCE—OMS—Eye—Care—Provider—CR—11FEB2015—FINAL.pdf>

their return with a Support the Troops bumper sticker, or annual parade, but the community must invest in their returning warriors. Those who struggle, isolate, and wind up justice-involved should find compassionate and culturally competent options in the community, including specialty courts known as Veterans Treatment Courts (VTCs)⁸. America's conflicts are morally ambitious around the world, but to those who fight them, especially in counter-insurgency operations, they can be morally ambiguous. We tend to view World War II as our "touchstone" war, yet today's conflicts bear very little resemblance to that war. Much of our nation's perspective, good or bad, is delivered via Hollywood, or social media, and lacks the comprehension of what it means to serve in today's military. Communities can spend enormous sums of taxpayer dollars addressing the challenges from a traditional justice perspective; instead, the focus should be on understanding and treatment, which can reduce recidivism significantly. Formal studies are sparse, but my experience shows that only 6% of veterans engaged by VetStar in our justice-involved program will re-offend. A 2016 National Institute of Justice survey found just one court reporting any recidivists, and preliminary 11.4% recidivism rates compared to 66% via traditional criminal court processes.⁹ These data are very preliminary, but the VTC is modeled after the successful National Association of Drug Court Professionals model, and shows good promise to date.

Once a servicemember separates from the military and returns to the community, the community "owns the challenge." Conversely, the community reaps the dividends from getting the veteran back on step and involved in the community. Communities can facilitate the veteran's involvement with other veterans by providing peer support drop-in centers that can begin the important dialogue.

One final observation regarding the community is that I frequently hear professionals (Social Work, Mental Health and others) lament the fact that they want to help, but the veteran typically won't respond to their "traditional" methods of engagement. To combat this, I have created a Veterans Studies program here at Texas Tech to help develop the cultural competencies needed to help our workforce understand the "lifecycle" of our military, including recruitment, boot camp, military life, deployment and redeployment and all the associated traumas that may be encountered along the way. This class is in its first offering this semester, but the challenges will be with us for decades to come. I think it is a valuable investment for our current and future workforce.

Peer Support: The VetStar model is based on a Search and Rescue concept; very familiar to most of those who served in the military. Our greatest strength is the direct veteran to veteran contact to build trust, and then trust by extension into culturally competent service providers. Once a veteran is "found" we provide the peer support necessary to get the struggling veteran headed in the right direction. This may begin with a casual conversation over coffee, or may require direct intervention in support of a law enforcement or crisis team response to a veteran in full crisis. Understanding developed by someone who has "been there, done that" even with different branches of service, or different eras of service is an important step in gaining the trust of the struggling veteran. Virtually every step we take in VetStar begins with the all-important peer to peer connection. Peer support must be recognized by both the VA and the community as an essential element of success for servicemembers upon their return.

Rural Challenges: The Department of Defense perfected recruiting in the rural areas; this is generally considered to be beneficial economically as job markets in rural areas tend to be less flexible. Military training opportunities can bring technical skills to a population that may typically find them unavailable. The challenge, however, is delivering services to rural veterans once they return to their communities. Many non-scientific studies estimate the percentage of rural recruits to be somewhere between 35% and 44% of the total military population. Many exceptional programs, such as the highly successful Welcome Back Veterans (WBV) program, are found exclusively in urban areas.¹⁰ In our area, fewer than 40% of eligible rural veterans access their care through the VA system.¹¹ VetStar has formed a collaborative with the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center's F. Marie Hall Institute for Rural Health to leverage state of the art telemedicine capabilities into vet-

⁸Justice for Vets, a division of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals, has established training and standards for Veterans Treatment Courts

⁹Hartley, R., & Baldwin, J. (2016). Waging War on Recidivism Among Justice-Involved Veterans: An Impact Evaluation of a Large Urban Veterans Treatment Court. *Criminal Justice Policy Review* retrieved from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0887403416650490>

¹⁰See the excellent discussion about WBV from RAND Corporation retrieved from <https://www.rand.org/health/projects/wbv.html>

¹¹Retrieved from VA National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics GDX—16 data set

erans residing in a twenty-county rural area of the South Plains in an effort to overcome this lack of access to VA care. VetStar provides “Pathfinders” and the Institute for Rural Health provides the telemedicine.

In short, every man and woman who put their hand in the air to volunteer to serve their country deserves the same level of services upon their return; it is more difficult to provide those services in rural areas.

Conclusion

Our veterans have earned the very best possible education opportunities that we can provide for them. A smooth transition from military service to the civilian world is essential for veterans to take full advantage of the opportunities provided through our country’s commitment to our military forces, past and present. We can overcome transitions that have stalled. My experience has taught me that our communities must be engaged in this transition; the VA cannot do it alone. Programs such as Communities of Courage and Boots to Roots as well as Veterans Studies workforce training can fill the gaps that exist today. We are not victims; we are not broken. But, occasionally, we will need a hand-up to get us fully transitioned into the civilian world.

Thank you for this opportunity.

