

S. HRG. 118–228

**COMMITTEES ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS AND ARMED
SERVICES: MILITARY TO CIVILIAN TRANSITION:
ENSURING SUCCESS AFTER SERVICE**

JOINT HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

AND THE

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

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COMMITTEES ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS AND ARMED SERVICES: MILITARY TO CIVILIAN TRANSITION: ENSURING SUCCESS AFTER SERVICE

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2023

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

The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 9:59 a.m., in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Jon Tester, and Hon. Jack Reed, Joint Chairs of the Committees, presiding.

Present from Committee on Veterans' Affairs:

Senators Tester, Murray, Brown, Blumenthal, Hirono, Sinema, Hassan, King, Moran, Boozman, Tillis, Sullivan, Blackburn, Cramer, and Tuberville.

Present from Committee on Armed Services:

Senators Reed, Shaheen, Gillibrand, Blumenthal, Hirono, Kaine, King, Peters, Rosen, Kelly, Wicker, Fischer, Cotton, Ernst, Sullivan, Cramer, Scott, Tuberville, Budd, and Schmitt.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JON TESTER,
CHAIRMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM MONTANA**

Chairman TESTER. I want to call this hearing to order.

Good morning. This is a rare occurrence where we have a joint hearing with Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs and the Senate Armed Services Committee.

I want to give special thanks to Chairman Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, for making this hearing happen. This is a critically important topic. It is a topic that we have been talking about since I came to this body, and that has been a number of years back. And it is about the yearly transition of 200,000 service members from being a warrior to a civilian, and the tools that we provide these men and women during that process that will impact everything from financial, to medical, to emotional well-being.

Today, I want to hear how the DOD, the VA, and the DOL are working together to ensure that this impact is a positive one. In partnership through agencies, we have made some strides to improve the transition process, but we are far from where we need to be. In partnership, they are important. I want to make sure during this hearing that you guys are talking to one another, and that

we understand what is going on with the folks who are retiring out of the military.

Look, we have got enhanced GI Bill benefits, programs like SkillBridge. We have got DOD and state governments that are working to streamline requirements to get service members everything, from commercial drivers' licenses, to a number of other opportunities that are in the private sector that they have learned those skills in the military. There is still too much red tape out there, and we need to work to undo that.

We have enacted the PACT Act, which has been a huge success, a large expansion of VA health care, and benefits in a decade, and I might add, necessarily so. We have improved veterans' access to mental health through the Hannon Act and the STRONG Act, but recent data shows that we are not where we need to be when it comes to veterans' mental health. We need to get more of these veterans into the system so they don't fall through the cracks, and that transition process is an opportunity to happen.

And in fact, we have got some people on this roster today that have some ideas on how to make that transition from DOD to the VA system, smoother. I am looking for our first panel to provide a government perspective on what is working and what is not. I am looking for our second panel, composed of veterans and advocates, to provide their personal perspectives on what is working, and what is not. They will also advocate for various policies to make sure we are doing right by our service members.

I want to read you some statistics before I turn it over to my fellow Chairman, Jack Reed. These are DOD data on enlisted deaths: 89 percent of active-duty deaths by suicide were among enlisted service members, enlisted service members; across the active and reserve component, those who died by suicide were primarily enlisted males under the age of 30. These are data points we need to take into consideration.

If this population is struggling with their mental health while in the service, those struggles are likely to continue and get worse as they make the transition to civilian life. And that is why this hearing today is so important.

With that, I turn it over to Senator Reed.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JACK REED,
CHAIRMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM RHODE ISLAND**

Chairman REED. Thank you very much, Chairman Tester. It is a privilege to share the dais with you this morning. I am glad we have brought our Committees together to discuss such a very important issue. I would like to welcome and thank our witnesses for joining us today.

Our military's greatest asset is the people, the men and women who serve. Our men and women in uniform have long provided America with the strongest national defense in the world, and the leaders in this room have a fundamental duty to ensure that they are set up for success, both in and out of the service. The military is a challenging profession, and we know that our service members have sacrificed much for the Nation. We also know that the overwhelming majority of veterans report positive experiences in the military.

Through surveys and data, we know that American veterans are more civically engaged, earn more money, and have more education than those who have not served. Veteran unemployment is lower than non-veteran unemployment across the country, and across nearly every demographic. Their economic outlook and quality of life is, on average, higher than non-veteran Americans.

In short, the military service is a social good. It benefits the Nation, and it benefits those who serve. Transitioning from military service to civilian life can be challenging, however, the Department of Defense, and in conjunction with the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Department of Labor, prepare service members and their families for this transition, primarily through a structured training program known as the Transition Assistance Program, or TAP.

TAP provides information, resources, and tools to service members and their families to help prepare for the move from military life to civilian life. Service members are required to begin TAP a year before separating from military service; and those who are retiring can begin TAP up to two years in advance of their anticipated retirement date. I have been encouraged by the overall success of TAP, but there are opportunities for improvement that we will discuss today.

In particular, recent Government Accountability Office reports have highlighted the challenge in getting full participation in the program among service members. Although 90 percent of transitioning service members do eventually participate in TAP, up to 70 percent did not enroll in TAP a year in advance of their separation as required by law. I understand the Department of Defense is working to implement the GAO's recommendations and would ask our witnesses for an update on those efforts.

A number of professional transition programs have shown great promise. For example, the SkillBridge Internship Program allows service members in the final months of their military career to work full-time in a private employer to gain experience and knowledge about the civilian workforce.

Similarly, the United States Military Apprenticeship Program provides active-duty military members with professional skills training and the opportunity to earn nationally recognized certificates while finishing their military careers. I would like to know what lessons can be drawn from these programs and applied to other efforts.

Finally, the transition from the military medical system, TRICARE, to the VA Health Care System can be daunting and confusing. Although VA eligibility and implementation should be smooth, many service members experience delays in determining their disability ratings, which can cause uncertainty and financial stress. Swift implementation of health care programs will be key to improving the transition of members from active service to civilian life. And I would ask our witnesses to share their views on how the transition can be streamlined.

Thank you again to our witnesses, and I look forward to your testimonies.

Now, on behalf of Chairman Tester, I would like to recognize Ranking Member Moran.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JERRY MORAN,
RANKING MEMBER, U.S. SENATOR FROM KANSAS**

Senator MORAN. Senator Reed, or Chairman Reed, thank you very much. Thank you to you, and our Chairman, and Veterans, and Senator Wicker for joining us. And thank you for our witnesses for being here.

Our committee in the Department of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Labor should prioritize a seamless transition and provide resources to reduce unemployment, homelessness, and suicide, all issues our committee deals with on an ongoing basis, and it seems like they all come together at this moment when we talk about transition. But we can address unemployment, homelessness, and suicide, as well as bolster military recruitment and support success after the military, if we can improve the transition from active duty to prior service.

Success after service will look different for every service member. That is why we must make certain that veterans are equipped with the knowledge and resources they need to thrive, that knowledge and resource needs to come earlier than the day in which they leave active service.

I also want to address the friction, and I would like to see you all address the friction that exists in the transition process between military retention and readiness, something hugely important to our military, but to our Nation and its national security. We need to allow service members to attend pre-separation counseling, TAP classes, apprenticeships, and internships before separation.

FY 2019 NDAA, Congress reformed TAP, put additional requirements on the Departments to individualize the transition process for those who are at higher risk for unemployment or post-transition issues. Additionally, Congress required that each service member go through TAP at least once, more than 365 days prior to separation. A mandate that we know is not being followed for at least 70 percent of transitioning service members, according to the Government Accountability Office.

Since those reforms were made in 2018, GAO has issued 12 reports on transition. Those reports include nearly 40 recommendations to VA and DOD. It is my understanding that very few of those recommendations have been agreed to or implemented, and DOD has not implemented a single one.

Given these facts, I worry that there is a lack of understanding from commanders about the importance of prioritizing a positive transition and allowing service members time to prepare for the next phases, and their families' phase in their lives. I understand the importance of operational readiness; however, if a service member has a positive transition experience and receives support from their command and peers as they leave the military, they are more likely to have a positive view of their military experience, a successful transition, and assist with the recruitment by encouraging others to join the military.

I am grateful to each one of our witnesses for being here today. In the second panel, we will be joined by a Kansan, who I want to express my gratitude for his presence here; Dr. Arthur DeGroat, Lieutenant Colonel, retired, he is from the Kansas State University Military Affairs and Innovation Center, and he has become a sig-

nificant component of witness—of our witness panels as we deal with transition.

So Dr. DeGroat, thank you for joining us. And I assume I should—I have to return this to Senator Reed.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Moran.

On behalf of Chairman Tester, let me recognize the Ranking Member of the Armed Services Committee, Senator Wicker.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ROGER F. WICKER,
RANKING MEMBER, U.S. SENATOR FROM MISSISSIPPI**

Senator WICKER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I am glad to be here today, joining with three of my distinguished colleagues. I am particularly proud that I share the leadership role on the Armed Services Committee with a fellow veteran, Senator Jack Reed. His career in the military is far more distinguished than mine, but I am proud to be a veteran, proud to have served, and proud to be here with three very distinguished supporters of our military and our veteran community.

There are improvements that need to be made in our veteran experience, and in our transition experience, but the truth is that the vast majority of our veterans are highly successful in their post-military careers and personal lives. And I do appreciate Chairman Reed making that point, and making the very positive point about military service during the active-duty time and as a veteran.

As our economy struggles with inflation and rising interest rates, the reporting from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that veterans and their families have consistently achieved higher standards of living than non-veterans. This is over the past 40 years. The veteran unemployment rate is lower than the non-veteran employment rate. Both can be improved, but that is a significant statistic. This has been true nearly every month since January 2003 when the Bureau of Labor Statistics began tracking this information; this impressive fact is no surprise to those of us who understand how valuable veterans are to civilian employers.

Between 2005 and 2015, a recent study from the University of Akron found that military veterans earned higher average wages than non-veterans. These facts demonstrate what those of us in the military community have known for years. Most veterans are doing well. The skills and character we developed during our time in service lead to desirable outcomes. Our witnesses should be congratulated for the superb work that they and their Departments have been doing in this area over the past decades.

The success of our veterans shows that joining the military is a great way to improve career and life prospects. This is true regardless of sex, race, or national origin. As I have said and echoing others, the United States Military is the greatest civil rights program in the history of the world. The success of veterans from minority communities proves this. Researchers studied households headed by racial or ethnic minorities with low education experience. In that study, researchers found that households headed by veterans had significantly higher standards of living than those headed by non-veterans.

And in 2017, the median annual incomes of Black and Hispanic veteran households were more than \$20,000 higher than those of

minority non-veteran households. So as you can see, I am not only proud to be a veteran, I value military service and encourage many young Americans to follow this type of service.

We have also learned that effective pre-separation transition programs are helping to prepare service members for life after their military careers. The programs set these veterans up for civilian life, and their communities notice their success. In particular, young Americans see that military service can have very positive effects. This helps recruiting efforts. In this way, these transition programs act as a force multiplier.

The Transition Assistance Program has been operating for just over 30 years, but it has a lot to show from that relatively brief tenure. Today, it supports around 200,000 service members every year. Congress has capitalized on that momentum. We have identified the success of these transition programs and expanded these opportunities. The FY 2019 National Defense Authorization Act required broad reforms to make the Transition Assistance Program even stronger.

Today, we will find out if we can improve on that. Congress must keep faith with our veterans through these initiatives, which I will continue to support. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about their efforts to execute these transition programs.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Wicker, for your statement and for your service. Thank you very much.

Now, let me welcome the first panel. From the Department of Defense, we have the Honorable Ashish Vazirani, Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.

From the Department of Veterans Affairs we have the Honorable Joshua D. Jacobs, Under Secretary for Benefits; accompanied by Mr. John W. Boerstler, Chief Veterans Experience Officer.

From the Department of Labor, we have the Honorable James D. Rodriguez, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training.

And from the Government Accountability Office, we have Mr. John Sawyer, Director of Education, Workforce, and Income Security.

Mr. Vazirani, please begin with your opening statement.

PANEL I

STATEMENT OF HON. ASHISH S. VAZIRANI, ACTING UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR PERSONNEL AND READINESS, DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Mr. VAZIRANI. Chairman Tester, Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Moran, Ranking Member Wicker, and distinguished Members of the Committee.

Chairman REED. If you could pull the microphone as close as possible, sir.

Mr. VAZIRANI. I appreciate the opportunity to address this joint hearing today, not just as the Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, but as an advocate for and a champion of service members and their families at all stages of their

service, inclusive of transition. I am honored to be in the company of my colleagues from the Department of Veterans Affairs and Labor, both of whom are integral partners in our collaborative and coordinated mission to facilitate the transition from military to civilian life, as well as a representative from the GAO, which provides thoughtful evaluations.

A service member's transition begins on day one of service, and it is our duty to ensure a successful service member is a successful veteran. Members of the military and their families repeatedly prove their dedication, courage, and selflessness in protecting our Nation. In return, our value proposition is to provide them with the support, services, and resources they need to thrive beyond the battlefield.

President Biden said, "The only truly sacred obligation we have is to prepare and equip those women and men we send into harm's way and care for them and their families when they return home."

Service members are better prepared for their transition to civilian life today than at any other point. This reflects Secretary Austin's steadfast commitment to take care of our people. This commitment extends beyond their separation from duty in either the active or reserve component. DOD is one of the seven agencies that each plays a crucial role in the governance of military to civilian transition.

Our investments in our service members' training and education, financial readiness, and health and well-being, coupled with the whole-of-government efforts to support their transition, are proving effective. Veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill are more likely to graduate and have a higher GPA. Veterans are 20 percent more likely to be homeowners. Veterans earn more than their civilian counterparts on average, and veterans enrolled with the VA have better health outcomes than their civilian counterparts.

The Joint Executive Committee stands as the bedrock of our collaborative efforts, and I have the privilege of serving as the DOD co-chair. The JEC provides the framework through which our agencies jointly oversee this transition process. The Transition Assistance Program Executive Council, a subordinate committee of the JEC, co-chaired by VA, Labor, and DOD, is responsible for ensuring that we have met statutory requirements, and continuously improve the transition process for future service members and their families.

DOD, with the collaboration and coordination of our interagency partners, is supporting service members in their transition to civilian life with a human-centered design approach. Our lines of effort are too numerous to name them all here, but we have made great strides in mental health support services, career advancement, and educational resources, transitioning spouse employment assistance, and homelessness prevention, just to name a few.

Our interagency team knows our work is ongoing. We are wholeheartedly committed to continuous improvement of the transition process and our Transition Assistance Program. We appreciate the legislative authorities that Congress provides to support transitioning service members and improve transition processes and programs. We continue to use those authorities with our interagency partners.

In closing, I am proud of the holistic transition framework that delivers individualized support for service members and their families through our interagency partnership. With your continued support, we will uphold our promise to take care of our people, securing their future, and ensuring the continued success of the All-Volunteer Force.

Thank you. And I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Vazirani appears on page 69 of the Appendix.]

Chairman REED. Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary.

And I am now going to recognize the next person; if I can find my notes.

Senator MORAN. I think to recognize Mr. Jacobs.

Chairman REED. I think, we will recognize Mr. Jacobs now. Thank you, Senator Moran.

Mr. Jacobs.

STATEMENT OF HON. JOSHUA D. JACOBS, UNDER SECRETARY FOR BENEFITS, DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; ACCOMPANIED BY JOHN BOERSTLER, CHIEF VETERANS EXPERIENCE OFFICER

Mr. JACOBS. Thank you very much. And good morning, Chairman Tester, Chairman Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, as well as Members of this distinguished Committee.

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you to discuss VA's efforts to support service members as they transition from military to civilian life.

I am accompanied by VA's Chief Veteran Experience Officer, John Boerstler. And I am pleased to join our partners from DOD, DOL, GAO, as well as our VSO partners on the second panel.

Each year, approximately 200,000 service members transition from military to civilian life. For many, transition is an opportunity to take on new challenges and build the next chapter in their lives. For others, this time can be daunting and filled with a mix of emotions and uncertainties. It is our duty to care for all types of veterans, regardless of where they are in this journey.

We need to connect them with their earned benefits in health care, because veterans who utilize their earned benefits are healthier, they earn more, and they are better set up for success as they enter into civilian life; not only that, we know that our success or failure in connecting veterans with their benefits has lasting impacts on the military's ability to recruit future generations of service members.

To empower transitioning service members in their journey toward a fulfilling civilian life, service members are allowed to begin their Transition Assistance Program one year prior to separation, or two years prior to retiring. Attending TAP as early as possible in the transition process is critical for transitioning service members, given the vast amount of information they need to digest in a compressed time frame. It also gives them the opportunity to access their earned VA benefits more quickly through the Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program, or to get their foot in the door to a potential employer through the SkillBridge Program.

As part of the broader interagency TAP program, VA delivers a 1-day TAP course, which was attended by 88 percent of all VOW Act-eligible transitioning service members in FY '22. VA's TAP course is a valuable resource that provides guidance on how to access earned VA benefits and enroll in VA health care, and participation in TAP is correlated with a higher application rate for VA benefits.

Additionally, VA also contacts all eligible veterans at three key stages during their first year after separation from active duty through a program called Solid Start, which was established in 2019. As of September 30th, Solid Start has assisted nearly 400,000 veterans with accessing their earned benefits. Despite these successes, too many recently separated veterans aren't accessing VA's most high-impact services within the first year after they separate from active duty, including health care and compensation benefits. Part of the reason for this may be that veterans under 40, and especially those under 30, don't consider VA an immediate need, but they should.

To tackle that challenge, VA, in partnership with all military service branches, as well as our federal partners, including DOD and DOL, are using the voice of veterans and their families to identify pain points and co-design solutions through extensive human-centered design research conducted over the last two years. Some of those pain points were echoed recently when Sergeant First Class Rima Rusnack [ph.] began her transition journey and started visualizing her life in a different capacity. A life geared more toward academics.

For Rima, it was only two years ago that transition came on the radar. She has many goals for life after service, but for the first time in her career, she didn't know what actions to take. While still in uniform, she began studying to get her master's degree with the ultimate goal of obtaining her doctorate. She needed to know whether she would be financially secure during school, but she wasn't sure what the GI Bill would cover or when she could even utilize it.

Rima is also a paratrooper. Every jump takes a toll no matter how well you execute the parachute landing fall. While knee and back pain from jumping out of airplanes is tolerable at this point, she expects it to become more of a challenge later in life. She was fortunate enough to attend TAP in February, and she applied for her benefits through BDD. She left active duty in August and received her first disability compensation payment in September. And as she begins this next chapter in her life, she is going to continue her service to this country through the Army Reserves.

Stories like Rima's are why we are actively co-designing solutions that address pain points and demonstrate tangible value to Veterans. It is why we began hosting Annual Veteran Transition symposiums to coordinate and improve the way that we support transitioning service members and their families. It is why we are updating the TAP curriculum so accredited VSOs and State Departments of Veterans Affairs will now have the opportunity to directly engage with transitioning service members and their families for nearly an hour, at the end of every 1-day VA TAP class.

And it is why the cross-agency team co-designed and is prototyping with service members, veterans, and their families a personalized digital solution that enables them to set goals, take action, and get help when they get stuck. We are also working to engage more with service members during their military career by collaborating with DOD to educate commanders on the importance of connecting service members and spouses with VA benefits and health care prior to separation; and as I stated earlier, improving the experience during that process.

The military-to-civilian transition process brings opportunities for us to improve trust in VA, and support the personal growth of veterans as they navigate this challenging, but ultimately rewarding phase of their lives.

Thank you for your continued support of transitioning service members, veterans, caregivers, and their survivors.

I would be happy to answer any questions you or the Committee members may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Jacobs appears on page 87 of the Appendix.]

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Josh. Thank you for your testimony.

Next up, we have, from the Department of Labor, the Honorable James Rodriguez, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training. You have the floor, James.

STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES D. RODRIGUEZ, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF LABOR FOR VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. Chairman Tester, Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Moran, and Ranking Member Wicker, and distinguished Members of the Veterans Affairs and Armed Services Committees; thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the current state of the Transition Assistance Program and the steps that should be made to continue modernizing and reforming the program.

I have spent my entire federal career serving veterans. This is my passion and that of my team who carry out our mission every day across the entire country. DOL is the federal lead for employment and training programs. Within DOL, VETS's mission is to prepare America's veterans, service members, and military spouses for meaningful careers, provide them with employment resources and expertise, protect their employment rights, and promote their employment opportunities.

VETS administers employment programs for transitioning service members as part of TAP. Successful employment is a key to economic success and can strongly impact physical and mental health, life expectancy, and the quality of life. Our American Job Centers are one-stop locations that offer a broad range of career and supportive services to the public, and veterans receive priority service for all DOL-funded training programs. That is why it is so critical that DOL VETS is at the table today, and that we continue to have a seat at the table with our federal partners and to ensure the success of transitioning service members and veterans in the future.

Today, I would like to highlight four topics that will interest this Committee. First, service members are attending DOL TAP employment workshops in record-breaking numbers. VETS administers three core TAP employment workshops: the 1-day Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition Workshop, the 2-day DOL Employment Workshop, and the 2-day Career and Credentialing Exploration Workshop.

In FY 2022, we provided instructions to over 266,000 participants, which is over a 40 percent increase from the previous workshop record in FY 2021. And our participant survey results are very encouraging. In FY 2023, 97 percent of participants indicated they would use what they learned in their own transition planning, and 95 percent reported that their confidence in transition planning was enhanced.

Second, VETS is leading the way to transform the TAP employment space. Via the VETS Employer Outreach Program, VETS is also asking U.S. employers to participate in the DOD SkillBridge Program. Last year, employers provided 22,548 employment-related DOD SkillBridge opportunities to service members across all services.

And in response to consistent feedback that service members want more personalized support beyond the classroom environment, VETS created the Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot, or ENPP. Since its launch in 2021, at 13 military installations, ENPP has served about 13,000 participants, and preliminary data shows that ENPP participants earn higher wages than those who did not participate in the ENPP.

Third, VETS's pilot programs are a huge success. For example, as of March 31, 2023, 96 percent of ENPP survey respondents reported positive feelings after meeting with their employment navigator and would recommend ENPP to a friend or colleague. Additionally, 98 percent felt ENPP partners met or exceeded their employment-related expectations.

And our off-based transition training pilot provides veterans and their spouses workshops modeled after our TAP curriculum at locations across the active-duty military installations in areas with high veteran unemployment in 10 pilot states so that they can get additional post-separation assistance when they need it.

Fourth, VETS will leverage data to improve TAP outcomes. Traditionally, VETS has only had access to data about TAP workshops and those workshop participants. However, new initiatives such as ENPP have enabled VETS to access employment outcome information on our transitioning service members through a National Directory of New Hires at the Department of Health and Human Services. DOL will leverage this information to improve program delivery and employment outcomes, and we look forward to sharing the outcomes of our research with our partners and stakeholders in the future.

In conclusion, our long-term strategic goal for TAP is for the Nation to recognize military service as a path to high-quality, civilian careers. The future of the country's All-Volunteer Force across the Armed Services depends on this recognition, and we look forward to working with the Committees to ensure all veterans can secure

a good job that will provide them with career advancement opportunities.

Thank you again for the invitation to participate in this hearing with my colleagues from VA, DOD, and the GAO, and I welcome your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Rodriguez appears on page 101 of the Appendix.]

Chairman TESTER. Yes. Thank you for your testimony, Mr. Rodriguez.

Next up from the Government Accountability Office, we have John Sawyer, Director of Education, Workforce, and Income Security.

STATEMENT OF JOHN D. SAWYER, DIRECTOR, EDUCATION, WORKFORCE, AND INCOME SECURITY, GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

Mr. SAWYER. Chairmen Reed and Tester, Ranking Members Wicker and Moran, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss GAO's recent work on programs that help service members transition from military service to civilian life.

Over the next few years, more than half-a-million service members are expected to take this critical step. There are several federal programs that provide benefits and services to help service members achieve their educational, employment, and other goals, and overcome potential challenges in adjusting to civilian life.

Today, I would like to highlight: (1) our work on DOD's credentialing programs that help service members obtain civilian credentials related to their military skills and training, (2) DOD's Transition Assistance Program, which provides tailored counseling and classes to help service members achieve their post-transition goals, and (3) VA's Solid Start Program, which serves new veterans in their first year after leaving military service.

Our work has found that oversight and implementation of these programs could be enhanced to better achieve their intended benefits. Since February 2022, we have issued 10 recommendations on these programs. I am pleased to report that VA implemented our Solid Start recommendation to further collaborate with Veterans Service Organizations to identify and address outreach gaps for hard-to-reach veterans. As a result, VA increased its rate of successful outreach to younger veterans and continues to regularly coordinate with VSOs to enhance its overall outreach.

The remaining recommendations were directed at DOD and its service branches. For example, we found that DOD's credentialing programs lacked adequate evidence to show that the programs were working. As a result, we recommended that DOD more fully assess the effectiveness of its credentialing programs. DOD agreed and expects to implement this recommendation in fiscal year 2025.

The remaining recommendations were issued in our December 2022 report on DOD's Transition Assistance Program. In that report, we found that attendance in the tailored 2-day classes increased significantly since 2016. However, the service branches waived over half of transitioning service members from attending

them. Per Service Branch policies, service members who need maximum transition support must attend a 2-day class, but we found that nearly a quarter of them did not.

And finally, we found that most transitioning service members (70 percent) did not start TAP at least one year in advance, as generally required. While the service branches and the TAP Policy Office collect and review performance information on 2-day class attendance and timeliness, they do not fully leverage this information to understand and improve results. We believe that better understanding root causes for attendance and timeliness results would help DOD improve service members' ability to benefit from the full range of transition resources available to them.

Effectively addressing the outstanding recommendations would help DOD gain reasonable assurance that every service member who leaves the military receives the best possible chance to succeed as they transition back to civilian life.

This concludes my oral statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Sawyer appears on page 111 of the Appendix.]

Chairman TESTER. Thank you for your statement. Thank the whole panel for their statements. There are two panels today. I would ask the members on the rostrum, and we get four minutes to ask questions. So get your good questions up so we don't run over, because otherwise, this would be an incredibly long hearing, not that it shouldn't be because it is important.

I am going to start my questions with you, Mr. Sawyer, since you are warmed up. In your review of the transition process, did you identify—you talked about they didn't start to—many of them didn't start transition one year in advance; did you identify the reasons why?

Mr. SAWYER. Thank you for that question, Chairman Tester. In our report, we did not specifically identify reasons why individuals were not starting the Transition Assistance Program at least one year in advance of their anticipated separation or transition date. We did find that there is information available to DOD to allow them to assess the results, and that is why we recommended that they use this information to identify and understand root causes.

Chairman TESTER. So we will go to you, Mr. Vazirani. How does the DOD hold commanders, or does it hold commanders accountable for providing service members the need for transition, the time they need for transition?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, thank you. The DOD is holding, or observing and watching what the commanders are doing. And so we do that through collecting data on the Transition Assistance Program. We have compliance measures and timeliness measures, we measure compliance across eight domains, and we measure timeliness whether the service member starts 365 days in advance.

Chairman TESTER. And what are you seeing with those measurements?

Mr. VAZIRANI. What we are seeing is, as has been reported, about 30 percent are starting on time. We know that we have to make improvements there. We are providing that data to the services.

And one of the things that we are also doing is, at the assessment at the end of TAP, understanding if there are barriers to that timeliness. And what we are finding is that those barriers tend to be in the area of three categories: involuntary separations which are happening within that 365-day time period, mission requirements, and then also personal decisions.

Chairman TESTER. So you are in a tough position because everybody on this roster knows the military needs every person they can get and keep every person that they have available to them. So I think the last thing you want to talk about is transitioning folks out of the military. But I think it is important that this is a group effort, that is why everybody is here today. We have got you representing the DOD, we have got Jacobs representing the VA, we have got the folks on this panel that give us the full gamut. We have got a massive problem that has been around for a long time in mental health with the folks that are coming out. And the statistics that I read in my opening statement show that this is really most prevalent in enlisted members.

So do you have; do you have, before I move on—just real quickly, Mr. Vazirani, do you have any ideas on how we can make it better while keeping our numbers up in the military?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, as the Secretary said, mental health is health, and we are very focused on assessing the mental health of service members and ensuring their mental health throughout their time of service, through the congressionally mandated suicide prevention response.

Chairman TESTER. Yes.

Mr. VAZIRANI. We have implemented, we are implementing a program looking across and implementing a public health approach, ensuring that we are fostering a supportive environment, that we are addressing stigma, that we are improving the delivery of behavioral health care, and that we are revising suicide prevention training so that commanders and our first-line leaders understand the signs of where a service member may have concerns about their mental health or behavioral health.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you. I will go to Chairman Reed, and then Ranking Member Moran.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much, Chairman Tester.

Quickly, Mr. Vazirani, what steps are you taking to get compliance with the statutory 365-day sign-up? There are some circumstances in which you can't, i.e., someone who is terminated from duty prior to that time period. But what are you doing specifically?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, one of the things that we are doing is we are in the process of integrating a single data repository that will allow for that measurement and providing that information back to the military services and to commanders. And when we think about the accountability portion of this, we try to think about this non-accountability necessarily from a punitive standpoint, but from what can we learn? Are we understanding the best practices? And are we sharing those best practices across the services?

Chairman REED. Well, thank you. One of my experiences is that the transition from uniform to civilian, DOD to VA, the most challenging aspect is medical health care. I recall going up to Walter

Reed in 2000, visiting and finding people who were there for six or seven months trying to get their VA eligibility or disability status to a level that meets the military level. And the other issue, just the first step. Have we successfully combined electronic medical records between the VA and the Department of Defense yet?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, the Department of Defense has completed the deployment of the electronic health record within Kronos, with the exception of the Lovell Center in Chicago, and we are working with our partners at the VA to implement that. We are taking all of the lessons we have learned through the Kronos implementation and applying that to ensure that we have a successful implementation at Lovell.

Chairman REED. But we are not operational yet; are we?

Mr. VAZIRANI. We are not operational between the two systems; however, we do have visibility, so there is a sharing of information between DOD and VA. So while the electronic health record is not operational, there is a sharing of information to coordinate that care, and ensure continuity of care.

Chairman REED. Well, I would encourage you. I mean, this is slightly off-topic, but not entirely. I would expedite that. It is something going on now for a decade or more, and that would, I think, help smooth out the transition dramatically.

And what are the primary choke points, Mr. Jacobs, Secretary, between VA in terms of healthcare? I understand that VA does a separate independent disability assessment; is that true, that differs from the Department of Defense?

Mr. JACOBS. We have a joint program called IDES, when a service member is—when they have a condition that impedes their service, where we can do a joint disability process. But for anyone applying for VA disability compensation, that is a separate and distinct approach. And the benefits that we provide, in terms of disability compensation, are not only a recognition of the impact of the individual service, but they are also a gateway to other benefits. They impact healthcare eligibility, and the criteria, the priority group within healthcare. It also can inform eligibility for other benefits and make connections.

Chairman REED. But the reality is that a DOD physician could give someone an 80 percent disability rating that the VA would independently rate?

Mr. JACOBS. We are providing independent assessments based on our rating schedule for disability compensation purposes.

Chairman REED. I think that is something that deserves further coordination, and maybe even legislative support. I think that would be helpful. Thank you. I know this is a very challenging situation. But the other point, too, I presume, and I have exceeded my time. Just very quickly. There is a mandate for an information session on medical health care opportunities that are specifically designed for the retiring veteran?

Mr. JACOBS. Yes. And the 1-day VA TAP course that we provide, we include information about health care, in addition to the full suite of other benefits.

Chairman REED. Thank you.

Chairman TESTER. Ranking Member Moran.

Senator MORAN. Chairman, thank you.

Secretary Vazirani, both of my colleagues who preceded me in asking questions have highlighted the need for, and I think our view that the Department of Defense further emphasize and act more expeditiously. Would you confirm to me that you understand and support the value of this transition program for the benefit of the servicemen and women who serve today and the veterans they will be tomorrow? And tell me what the impediment in the Department of Defense and the branches is toward moving more expeditiously to meet the requirements of the statute?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I do confirm our commitment to taking care of people and ensuring that service members make a successful transition so that they are successful; as a veteran as well. We are working with the military departments and services to make sure that they have the information available about the starting of TAP and the completion of TAP, providing that information, creating dashboards that the commanders have available to them, and their leaders have available to them, so that we have a clear understanding of if there are any barriers to TAP and addressing those barriers.

Senator MORAN. What, if any, is the pushback or the lack of enthusiasm for complying with the law by those you are informing?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Sir, we have not heard any pushback regarding compliance with the law. I think the one thing that we do is we trust our commanders to ensure that they are balancing the readiness of their unit with the needs of the individual. The one thing that we do understand, and we have been taking advantage of, is this full year to plan for transition so that the service member has time to customize that approach for their expectations and for their needs.

Senator MORAN. Mr. Sawyer, you highlighted in your testimony, and in response to Senator Tester about the data, including the lack of 2-day attendance as being waived. What is the plan at GAO to try to push the services to take statutory mandate seriously, and decrease the utilization of their waiver authority?

Mr. SAWYER. Thank you for that question, sir. Now, in our report we did not direct any recommendations toward the waivers. We did notice that for some 53 percent of those who were transitioning, waivers were granted. We are not sure why that occurred. Our scope did not allow us to investigate that. However, we did see that among tier 3 service members, those who are designated as having the greatest risk of a successful transition, some 22 percent did not take the class at all. And that is why we recommended that DOD should spend some time evaluating root causes. Is it commander support? Is it the culture change? Is it mission requirements? What are the reasons that are driving this?

Senator MORAN. Is the timing of your recommendations and the response to your recommendations such that we should see further progress at the DOD, or the VA, or the Department of Labor in response to your recommendations? Or is this the course of business at the moment?

Mr. SAWYER. To answer that question, based on our follow-up and discussions with DOD and VA, they are moving toward addressing these recommendations and issues.

Senator MORAN. So GAO feels comfortable with the progress that those two Departments are making?

[Pause.]

Mr. SAWYER. We——

Senator MORAN. All right. Let me ask you this question: Should I feel comfortable with the progress that these two Departments are making?

Mr. SAWYER. I think you should feel comfortable with the progress. However, we have recommendations and we are going to monitor the corrective actions. Because these recommendations deal with identifying root causes, they are tough recommendations in that you really have to go below the surface and really try to identify reasons why these timeliness and attendance results are such that they are.

Senator MORAN. Mr. Sawyer, if I don't reach out to you, would you reach out to me with any concerns that you have in the recommendations being followed?

Mr. SAWYER. Absolutely, sir.

Senator MORAN. Thank you, sir.

Chairman TESTER. In lieu of Ranking Member Wicker, Senator Fischer.

**HON. DEB FISCHER,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NEBRASKA**

Senator FISCHER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Vazirani, within the TAP, how much leeway is given to individual TAP offices to teach the curriculum so they can tailor it to their needs? For example, if you have a service member who is going to sign up again, but that doesn't show on their records yet, they still have to attend the weeklong class; is that correct?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, if I can clarify your question. If a service member has gone through TAP, transitioned and then come back into service, is that the question, sorry?

Senator FISCHER. No. No. If they are still in the service, but with the requirements and the timeline that is there, they have to start the process, but yet their records haven't kept up with their intentions, that they plan to reenlist, for example. Are the programs given any kind of flexibility to be able to tailor it to certain instances?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, the program is designed to tailor to each individual. Each individual goes through an individual assessment, and they are tiered. They then have a separation counseling to help them understand which elements of the TAP program will be beneficial for them. At the end of the program, there is also a capstone, which the commander will sign off on completion. If during that time period, the service member decides they want to stay in service, then there would not be a need to complete the program.

Senator FISCHER. Okay. Do you think you have the program appropriately staffed to handle the current number of military personnel?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we do believe we have the current level of staffing correct. I think as we continue to learn more about the program, we will continue to evolve that and determine whether or

not additional authorizations are required to fulfill the program. But at this point, we do believe that we have the right staffing.

Senator FISCHER. We have seen a GAO study from December 2022, and it found that nearly 25 percent of service members who needed that maximum support didn't attend the mandatory 2-day class. So what steps do you see the Department needs to take or are you taking now that would address that?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we are taking steps to get a better understanding of why service members are electing not to participate. There are service members who want—as I indicated earlier, the personal decisions why they wouldn't. So we are trying to get a better understanding of that. We are also ensuring that—

Senator FISCHER. What specifically are you doing?

Mr. VAZIRANI. So through the TAP assessment, we are digging into that and understanding those barriers. And then the other thing, through the commander's capstone, getting a better understanding of why that service member would not want to participate in that program.

Mr. JACOBS. And Senator Fischer, if I might add; one of the things that we are doing is we are recognizing that TAP is a commander's program. We are creating a visual management tool so that commanders have greater visibility of their transitioning service members. It is work that Mr. Boerstler is leading through a human design element. We are prototyping that tool, and if it is appropriate, I would love for him to share a little bit about that.

Senator FISCHER. That would be great. When you say you are prototyping it, do you have a pilot program in place? Are you using it?

Mr. BOERSTLER. Yes, Senator. We are currently actually testing it this week with command teams. So this cannot only include the commanders themselves, but the senior enlisted personnel that are supporting the commanders' decisions. It will give them much greater visibility, as Mr. Jacobs mentioned, to actually see which units that they oversee are in compliance with the 12-month or 24-month requirements.

This is a decision that has been co-designed from all of our agencies, plus a few more, including all six service branches, and has been taken through our governance process. So it is underway and it should be available next year.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Hassan.

**HON. MARGARET WOOD HASSAN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE**

[Technical issue.]

Senator HASSAN [continuing]. Really help build that sense of community that is so important. Now, I will start with a question to you, Mr. Vazirani. Senator Cramer and I, as you know, worked together last year to pass into law of the Solid Start Act, which requires the VA to call each veteran three times within their first year of separating from the military to make sure that they know about and understand the VA benefits that are available to them.

In your written testimony, you referred to the year before separation and the year after separation as the critical transition period.

The Solid Start Program helps with the second half of that critical transition period. How can we provide a similarly tailored approach to service members in the first half of that transition period as they prepare to separate from the military, to help them plan for and work toward their long-term goals post-military service, including for future careers? And I hope you were able to hear that. Apparently, there was some difficulty with this speaker, this microphone.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, thank you for that question, I was able to hear the question. I appreciate it. As I indicated, and as I said earlier, we certainly believe that mental health is health, and throughout the service members' cycle of service, we do have checks on their mental health. During that 365 days in the transition time period, we have worked with our interagency partners in developing an enterprise individual assessment, and that covers nine different domains. As we look at those, that is how we understand how to tailor the program, the Transition Assistance Program, for that service member.

Senator HASSAN. Well, thank you. And I hope that includes some real outreach similar to what we are trying to accomplish in Solid Start, so that everything doesn't rest with the service member to initiate the transition services.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, it does. And in that, in that if a service member has had, through that mental health assessment, or interaction with behavioral health, and mental health, they are referred to the inTransition Program which helps them to understand what services would be available, and help them transition.

Senator HASSAN. I understand that, and my time is short, so I will follow up with you. But it is not just about mental health, right? I mean there are other things that veterans need and they need outreach for. So let us move to one other question, because I continually hear how service members feel unprepared to transition into their new careers, or move to new places, because they don't have connections with local community, something New Hampshire is proactively trying to deal with.

So for example, James Roberg of Antrim, New Hampshire, shared with my office his experience working for the New Hampshire Department of Military Affairs, and Veteran Services. This state office has developed a variety of resources to help transitioning service members and veterans including a research book full of available state and local resources. Like many other transitioning service members, James had no idea that there was a state office like this in New Hampshire, and yet he eventually ended up working there, and to this day continues to help educate other service members on employment opportunities in the state. In New Hampshire we have worked to help address this gap in knowledge, because we value veterans in our community, and recognize their contributions to our workforce.

So I would ask that you guys respond to this in writing, because I am running out of time. But I am very interested in how we can ensure that more service members get directly connected to state and local resources that can provide meaningful connections with the communities that the veteran plans to reside in, before the veteran makes that transition. Thank you all so much for your work.

Chairman TESTER. There will be a number of questions for the record. And I would hope that you all answer them in a timely manner.

DoD Response: DoD agrees that linking transitioning Service members with local communities where they intend to reside post-military service is vital to a successful transition. The DoD has Memoranda of Understanding with all 54 states, territories and the District of Columbia, to provide states' Departments of Veterans Affairs with information about transitioning service members. States in turn use this data too in a number of ways, including welcoming Service members to their state and connecting Service members to local resources. Additionally, states and accredited Veterans Service Organizations are provided with up to 45 minutes during of the TAP course to brief transitioning Service member on services offered by their organizations.

Senator Scott.

**HON. RICK SCOTT,
U.S. SENATOR FROM FLORIDA**

Senator SCOTT. Thank you, Chairman. First off, I want to thank each of you for being here; thank you for caring about our service men and women, and their families, and thank you for what you try to do every day.

I am just going to give you a couple experiences I had. I was in the Navy and got out. Do you think anybody before talked to me about what I was going to do afterwards? Do you think anybody ever called me afterwards? Nobody, ever, nobody ever. In 2011, I became Governor of Florida, and right after I won the election I welcomed some National Guard members back from overseas, and 30 percent unemployment. Now, unemployment was bad at the time, but 30 percent unemployment, and their experiences, you know, nobody was talking to them about how to get a job.

So we put a lot of effort into—in our state into, one, making sure people could get a job, and then a variety of other issues. We also had a state agency that just did Veteran Affairs, and the thing that surprised me the most, it was there was no coordination with the Federal Government, I mean, like none. They wouldn't give us any information on who was getting out, and so, I mean there is a big opportunity to help our families.

And so my goal as Governor was to make Florida the place where you want to serve; and number two is, make it the place where you want to retire. And so we did a variety of things. And I have been up here five years, and I am really proud of the things that the Armed Services Committee has done. The 2019 NDAA established programs for counseling Pathways, for self-assessments, for individualized initial counseling, tier assignments that reflect the service members' transition preparedness, revised curriculum, and improvement to the Transition Assistance Program,

There is just a lot of—I think this Armed Services Committee has done a lot of good things, but we are here, you know, in my state there is a lot of news from our Veterans Service Organizations, and also from the GAO report in 2022 that indicates it is not working the way it should. And then we had a meeting yesterday, and you are absolutely committed to getting this done.

But the GAO said that 90 percent of the transition troops participated, but one-quarter did not even attend the mandatory 2-day

class. So there has to be a lot of things to make that happen. Florida is home to—we have 21 military bases, three in the flight commands. I always think it is the best place to serve, but I think there is a lot of opportunities that we have to make it better.

So here, let me get to my questions, and I think we did everything we could. I mean, we have waived every fee for spouses. Probably one the biggest things we did was parents that had a child in the Medicaid, and needed them to have a Medicaid waiver, they would go to the bottom of the list, mostly. And we changed it, they went to the top of the list. That changed people's lives a lot.

So can any of you talk to me about how you work with your state counterparts? Because I assume most states have what I had; there is a state agency, and how do you work with them now?

Mr. JACOBS. Yes. Thank you, Senator, for that question. And I have to say you have an excellent veteran leader and advocate in "Hammer", Hammer Hartsell, who is the Lead of the State Department of Veterans Affairs in Florida.

Senator SCOTT. Yes.

Mr. JACOBS. It seems like every time we have an engagement, he is there. We actively work with all of the State Departments of Veterans Affairs through the NASDVA program. And one of the things that we are doing through the upgrade to our VA TAP curriculum, is we are including at the end of our day, for the last 45 to 60 minutes, a portion of the day where accredited VSOs in State Departments of Veterans Affairs can directly engage with transitioning service members, because we know that personal relationship is important. That when veterans go home they are provided with 200 pages of material on VA benefits and healthcare alone.

There are a lot of questions, and they have incredible advocates in both accredited VSOs and state and local government who are there, and whose sole purpose is to help connect them to those earned benefits. So we actively work with them, we actively seek input and feedback on our programs. I get feedback from Hammer personally, when something is not going well, or he wants to say: Hey, you know, your staff did a great job, you should recognize them. And so it is a really important part of our operating model, and they are really valued partners.

Senator SCOTT. Thanks. Thanks for what you guys are doing.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Shaheen.

**HON. JEANNE SHAHEEN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE**

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you all for being here. I want to make sure I understand some of the testimony earlier with respect to the TAP program. Mr. Rodriguez, I understand you to say that vets are attending TAP in record numbers; was that correct?

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. Yes, it is. I am talking about the DOL version of TAP, that 1-day TAP course.

Senator SHAHEEN. Okay. So that is a different TAP course than—

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. Well, it is a single day that is separate from the DOD and the Veterans Affairs days.

Senator SHAHEEN. And how do you coordinate with what DOD is doing?

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. We work seamlessly together as part of the TAP Executive Committee, the Joint Executive Committee, we work together to ensure that TAP is a seamless transfer of information and sharing of resources to better prepare that service member when they are preparing to transition out of the military.

Senator SHAHEEN. So if I am a service member, can I go to the DOL TAP rather than DOD TAP?

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. It is the same TAP, so there are three mandatory days: one day DOD, one day Department of Veterans Affairs, one day DOL, and then there are two additional optional days that a service member can take.

Senator SHAHEEN. So what percentage are actually attending DOL's TAP?

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. I don't have the percentage, Senator, but I can tell you the numbers. Roughly 148,560 service members are going through the 1-day DOL TAP.

Senator SHAHEEN. But I understood you to say, Mr. Sawyer, that 70 percent of members of the military who are getting out didn't attend. Are you talking about a different program?

Mr. SAWYER. Thank you. The 70 percent relates to those starting the program at least one year in advance of their transition date.

Senator SHAHEEN. I can understand why veterans might be confused because the coordination is challenging. And as we heard from virtually both—all the Chair and Ranking Members talked about the mental health challenges and the number of veterans who are at risk of suicide.

And Mr.—is it Boerstler? I understand that you have worked with our European allies about how they administer their transition assistant programs. Do veterans—non-U.S. Veterans face the same risk of suicide in their first year as U.S. Veterans?

Mr. BOERSTLER. Senator, I would have to take that question for the record because we don't—to understand their methodologies and how they measure that rate, but I do know that there are some great programs that our allies use as well as our own. But I think we still have the best system.

Senator SHAHEEN. So when you talk about those great programs, are there things that we should be adopting from what our allies are doing?

Mr. BOERSTLER. I do think that we—as I mentioned, Senator, we do have the best system when we compare to a lot of our allies and the way that they execute these programs. There are some interesting use cases, particularly in the United Kingdom and their Career Transition Partnership, but in the intervening years, as Assistant Secretary Rodriguez mentioned, the ENPP program for the Department of Labor almost mirrors what the United Kingdom has been doing. It has been very successful. So I think there is a lot we can learn from each other.

Senator SHAHEEN. I appreciate that.

Mr. Jacobs, one of the things that we are hearing in New Hampshire is that too many veterans are not taking advantage of the VA benefits, particularly for mental health. It is the theme that every-

body has referenced in all of the questions. So what can we do better?

Mr. JACOBS. Thank you very much for that question. We know that when veterans connect and access their earned benefits, whether it is disability compensation, home loans, education, or their VA health care, they have better health outcomes, they have better economic opportunities, and it decreases the risk for suicide.

Senator SHAHEEN. Right. Okay. How do we do that?

Mr. JACOBS. Correct. So we are aggressively continuing to do more outreach. So during the transition period, we are identifying where there are veterans transitioning service members at risk and providing a warm handover. We have benefits counselors, we have military service coordinators, and there are VHA liaisons on military treatment facilities.

Part of the way that we are doing that is through the Solid Start Program, where we are calling transitioning service members three times in the first year after they leave the military, at the 90-, 180-, and 365-day marks. And the goal of this program when it was created, was to address the very real mental health concerns that we are all focused on. And the program is structured in a way where it is open-ended, so it is really tailored around responding to the veterans' needs.

Do they need a connection with a mental health counselor? And then we can connect them to a Vet Center, a CBOC, a medical center. Do they need a status update on their claim? Do they need assistance with their claim? Do they need help pursuing housing? And so we have opportunities like that. But it is also, to the point that was made earlier, it is Buddy Check Week. It is promoting opportunities for us, not only as a government, but as a broader society, to support one another, to know the signs, to look out for, so that when we see a fellow veteran, a friend in crisis, you know that there is a place to help them, even if you don't have the resources to do it yourself.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Schmitt.

**HON. ERIC SCHMITT,
U.S. SENATOR FROM MISSOURI**

Senator SCHMITT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you all for being here, and the work that you do every day, helping the folks that served us in Missouri. We are really proud. We have got three bases. We have got Whiteman Air Force Base, we have got Fort Leonard Wood, and we have got Rosecrans, which is the Air National Guard Base in Northwest Missouri. And so those folks that have committed themselves to this country, they deserve all the support and the best support, which is why we are all here. So thank you for that.

I wanted to ask just two questions, and I will just throw it out whoever wants to answer. The first is Senator Ossoff and I co-sponsored a bill that would support military spouses as they are being reassigned to ease some of the regulatory burdens that exist as they are moving from place to place. What are just one or two things that we can do better to ease that sort of burden? As they

want to continue their careers or business ventures as they are moving from place to place?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, if I may, I will start. First of all, thank you very much for the work that you have done to support military spouse employment. The one thing that we are finding is really effective for military spouses is the COMPACTs and encouraging the states to sign on to COMPACTs. That portability, not only benefits an active duty—the spouse of an active-duty service member, it supports spouses of veterans, it supports all Americans. And so the more that we can get states to sign on to those COMPACTs, I think we will find that we will have greater portability.

Senator SCHMITT. Thank you. I don't know if anybody else had anything to add to that.

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. Senator, I will add a few things there.

Senator SCHMITT. Okay.

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. One of the biggest challenges is our military spouses are at a 31 percent unemployment rate, so they have the highest unemployment rate of any category affiliated with the military community. So we need to figure out a way to protect military spouses' employment when they are transferring from duty station to duty station, or if their spouse is guard or reserve, and they are called to active duty, and that spouse has to take time away to take care of their families, or whatever things that come as part of life when someone is active duty, or called to active duty.

I think there are ways to protect military spouses, to give them the courage to identify as military spouses, and finally—encourage employers to actually employ these military spouses and help retain that spousal employment when someone is called to active duty.

Mr. JACOBS. And I will add, at the risk of being a bit parochial, we are actively looking to hire military spouses at VA. We know they are incredible mission-oriented teammates that need sometimes additional flexibility to enable them to continue to support our mission while moving and in partnership with their spouse. So we are actively working to do that from a VA perspective as well.

Senator SCHMITT. I am sure this is probably true for other senators, but I know that as I get around Missouri and talk to employers, they are—I mean, they are looking for skilled people. The labor shortage obviously is a broad issue. But as it relates to military folks, and this question has been asked in a few different ways but you know, it is the United States Senate. Just because a question has been asked, it doesn't mean it has been asked by everybody.

Your sort of take on: What are a couple of things that we can do better to make sure that, you know, our military servicemen and women, while they are in active duty, can avail themselves to as much of that training as possible as they transition? Because there is a great need out there, and I know that a lot of employers are really looking for people who served the country as well. What are just a couple of takeaways that we can take back home and work on?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I will start on that. As we think about the opportunities for military—the service member and the military spouse to gain employment, or to be successful as they go beyond, I think encouraging employers to get involved in the pro-

grams that we have, whether it is SkillBridge, or our Military Spouse Employment Partnership, those would be helpful. I think the other thing, sir, that would be really helpful is if we can encourage more Americans to talk about the value of service, and the benefits, and how successful veterans are. That will help us on the front-end as well as we encourage people to come into service.

Mr. JACOBS. And I would just briefly add. You know, one of the things I heard when I joined Hiring Our Heroes in a community event with the health and life sciences industry is that oftentimes companies will have incredible veteran candidates. They may not have a position that they can offer them, but they think it is a valuable resource. And so it is making, kind of, that connective tissue a little bit stronger so that they have got colleagues in industry who they can refer those incredible candidates to, even if they can't offer a position at that time.

Senator SCHMITT. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Murray.

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

Senator MURRAY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for having this hearing. Thank you all for being here.

There is no question that our service members deserve a seamless transition out of the military to VA services. In my home State of Washington, DOD went live with its own electronic health records program back in 2017. It has its own challenges, and I am sure you all know that when the VA rolled out its EHR program, it was not working the way it should have, and patient safety has been a very big concern.

So I want to make sure that DOD is working hand-in-hand with VA so that we can truly have a seamless electronic health record system that is available across both agencies to serve service members and veterans alike.

Mr. Vazirani, I want to ask you, can you share some of the lessons DOD has learned while you rolled out your EHR system? And how did you earn back the trust with providers and service members after you had significant periods of system downtime?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, thank you for that. As we have rolled out our EHR, the things that we learned, particularly through that first time period, the things that we—the barriers that we had in utilization, we have learned about what we need to do from a usability standpoint to make the EHR more usable for the healthcare provider. We have learned about the training that we need to conduct to ensure that there is a quick ramp-up on utilization. And those are some of the things and some of the lessons that we have learned and that we shared with our VA partners.

Senator MURRAY. Okay. I appreciate that. I wanted to ask you about women's service members, because transitioning out of the military is a challenging experience for all service members, but it is particularly difficult for women who face additional barriers in the civilian world. Everything from gender pay caps, to sexual harassment, lack of access to childcare. And there was a study by Syracuse University that 54 percent of women veterans who left the service didn't feel prepared to navigate the resources available to

them in their local communities. That is compared to 35 percent of male veterans.

Mr. Vazirani, has DOD tailored the Transition Assistance Program at all for women service members?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we have. One of the things that we do through that transition process, and particularly in that—understanding of what benefits are available, and the care, we have tailored, particularly the education around health benefits and how to access health benefits for women. The other thing that we continue to do is focusing on all veterans, but particularly for women, is to understand, for those who may have come across or encountered something along the spectrum of harm, the resource is available to them there.

Senator MURRAY. Thank you.

Mr. VAZIRANI: So I will turn to maybe Mr. Jacobs.

Senator MURRAY. Very good.

Mr. VAZIRANI. And he could talk about what VA would?

Senator MURRAY. Yes.

Mr. JACOBS. Senator, we have what is called the Women's Health Transition Training program, which provides tailored support and information for transitioning service members, includes gender-specific health care information as well as information about how to access benefits in a timely way. What I would say is, it is underutilized. So we are working to try to get the word out and promote and encourage more transitioning service members to take it, because we do think it is a valuable resource.

Senator MURRAY. Okay. Thank you. And one last question. In last year's Military Family Support Programming Survey, 80 percent of the respondents said their finances were a major source of stress, and more than half of military and veteran families reported experiencing barriers to savings over the previous two years. Twenty-two percent of currently serving military families, and 38 percent of Veteran's families have less than \$500 or no emergency savings at all. I think financial literacy is critically important.

And Mr. Vazirani, in my few seconds that I have left, what is DOD doing, right now, to promote financial literacy and making sure that it is an integral part of the Transition Assistance Program?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, one of the things we do is, from the very outset, from the time a service member starts in boot camp, we make sure they understand what financial readiness resources are available to them. We provide education, and training, and coaching, and access to personal financial counselors throughout their time in service.

Senator MURRAY. Okay. And if I can get a more detailed response from you, I would really appreciate that.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Sure.

Senator MURRAY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

DoD Response: The Department considers financial readiness to be an integral part of total force readiness and provides comprehensive financial literacy training and education to all Service members in accordance with section 992 of Title 10, United States Code. Mandatory financial literacy training is delivered at various touchpoints throughout the military lifecycle as specified in statute, starting at the very outset in boot camp and continuing through a Service member's point of transition from service. Touchpoint training topics are chosen to provide members with the information they need to navigate important financial decisions at the point of need in the military lifecycle, as well as build the general financial literacy skills they need to successfully navigate financial challenges they might encounter throughout their lifetimes.

To fulfill the statutory requirements to deliver financial literacy training during transition, all Service members are provided the "Financial Planning for Transition" course as part of the Transition Assistance Program. Specific learning objectives include how to create and update a spending plan, debt and credit management, fundamentals of income tax and changes to their tax situation, life insurance, survivor and dependent benefits, estate planning, emergency savings, how to manage their Thrift Savings Plan, TRICARE options and costs, and the components of the military retirement system and how to prepare for retirement.

While the transition financial training objectives are designed to be relevant to the point of transition, the comprehensive nature of the Department's financial literacy education program ensures that transition is not the first time that members receive training on these important subjects. Over the course of one's service, training covers the importance of planning for the future and understanding military benefits like the Blended Retirement System (BRS). BRS is taught at numerous training touchpoints, such as during initial entry training, when vesting in the Thrift Savings Plan, upon entitlement to continuation pay, during leadership training, and at other major life events in preparation for when one eventually transitions.

To further support transition and any other life event a Service member might encounter, DoD also provides members and their families with access to DoD personal financial counselors who can provide individualized information that is factual, unbiased, and free from conflicts of interest. In addition, DoD's financial readiness outreach efforts reinforce training, encourage sound financial behaviors, and provide members with the information they need to seek additional knowledge and access DoD financial literacy and counseling resources.

Chairman TESTER. Yes. Senator Cotton.

**HON. TOM COTTON,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ARKANSAS**

Senator COTTON. Mr. Vazirani, I have heard reports that former U.S. service members have been approached by communist China and offered jobs that draw on their military expertise to aid the PLA. This is already happening with some of our European partners, veterans, oftentimes through professional military companies in third-world countries, like South Africa. What steps, if any, has the Department of Defense taken today, during the transition process, to ensure that our troops are aware of this kind of activity, and adequately prepared to resist these offers, especially when done through intermediaries?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we continue to be concerned about the pacing threat of China, and the approach that they take to try and undermine what we are doing. We have provided guidance through the military departments on when our service members are—there is outreach from mal actors. And Senator, I will be happy to get back to you with the specific steps we have taken and the guidance we provide.

Senator COTTON. Yes, could you please get back to me, in writing, on those steps, and also what mechanisms, if any, you have in place to track these kinds of offers? Because I do think it is a

growing concern, like I said with our European partners, but I worry about reports that it is now occurring in the United States as well.

DoD Response: The Department has focused on outreach to current Service members, veterans, and retirees to educate them about foreign actors' attempts to recruit former Service members. These education efforts include information and training provided to the current force, outreach through the VA to veterans, and outreach to retirees through the Defense Finance and Accounting Service. Through education about foreign actors' practices and intent, we believe current and former members will be better prepared to recognize and resist these recruitment efforts.

I believe that our reserves play a crucial role in the Nation's defense by allowing the U.S. to retain critical skills and talents in our services while also allowing active-duty service members to transition into the reserves; unfortunately, like the rest of the active-duty military, the reserves are facing historic shortfalls as well. Has the DOD studied barriers to transitioning into the reserves from the active duty?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, that is, as far as addressing barriers to transitioning to the reserves, we are looking at that. We want to ensure that we—particularly as we continue to rely on the reserve component, one of the things we have been doing, we brought on our first Chief Talent Management Officer. An area that we are looking at is permeability between the active and the reserve component and providing that opportunity for service members to move from one to the other, active to reserve, but also the opportunity to come back into the active component.

Senator COTTON. Okay. In the studies, has the DOD identified any specific issues that create challenges for transitioning troops who may have gone into the reserves, but decided not to?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, if I can take that for the record, and I will get back to you with the specific findings?

DoD Response: TAP counseling, information, and support are force multipliers directly supporting Reserve Component affiliation. The military services are highly competitive employers of choice, whose value and worth becomes increasingly apparent in a fully informed transition/reserve component affiliation environment.

Senator COTTON. You may. One final and related question; obviously, we want to make sure that every man and woman who wears the country's uniform, and wants to leave the service is set up for success in civilian life, or in the reserves if they choose to go there. But I am also curious about barriers to remaining—I shouldn't say barriers—drivers to transition when troops may have stayed on active duty. So as you are studying the challenges that they have in the transition process, have you also studied the main issues that are driving their desire to separate in the first place?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, one of the things that we are seeing now is we are seeing actually record levels of retention.

Senator COTTON. Yes.

Mr. VAZIRANI. And so we are benefiting from that, and that is certainly helping us in end strength. One of the areas that we have talked about during this panel that is a driver for service members

to get out, is military spouse employment, and the opportunity for a service member's military spouse to also have a successful career, and also contribute to the family's financial readiness.

So that is an area that we are very—we are working very hard on to ensure that military spouses have career opportunities to support their service member, particularly as we look at our model, which typically requires the service member to move every two to three years.

Senator COTTON. Okay. Thank you.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Peters.

**HON. GARY C. PETERS,
U.S. SENATOR FROM MICHIGAN**

Senator PETERS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you to our witnesses here today. Thank you for your work in this area. I think we can all agree that it is critical that our veterans have the support they need as they transition into civilian life.

Which is why it has been a priority of mine, to introduce legislation that was signed into law to help veterans who may have been wrongly given a less than honorable discharge from the military as a result of PTSD and TBI that was simply not diagnosed; they exhibited behaviors that led to a less than honorable discharge, and yet those behaviors were a result of PTSD and traumatic brain injury.

That is why my bill, which was signed into law in 2016, allows for service members, who have been diagnosed with PTSD, or TBI, or other related conditions in connection with their service in the military, they can more easily petition to upgrade their status.

We know whether a veteran is entitled to VA benefits depends largely on the discharge status that is assigned to them. And VA benefits play an absolutely critical role in the successful transition to civilian life. It remains a key priority of mine that the Discharge Review Boards continue to take these types of mental traumas into account when they are reviewing these petitions. And to that end, this year's NDAA included a provision that I authored, calling on the GAO to complete a review of the Discharge Review Board's implementation of the legislation.

But in order for veterans to access their newly earned benefits through an upgrade, they first need to be made aware of the opportunity to petition. That as they are suffering from the trauma of PTSD and other mental traumas, they don't need to do that in silence; they can seek out help, but they need to be aware that it exists.

So Under Secretary Vazirani, and Under Secretary Jacobs, could you each describe what your agencies are doing to ensure those leaving or have already left military service are aware of the opportunities to petition a Discharge Review Board for an upgrade? And my second question to each of you is, are there opportunities or additional ways to communicate this option, perhaps through the Transition Assistance Program? Whoever would like to go first?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, first of all, I appreciate the efforts that you have made to ensure that service members and veterans receive the benefits that they are entitled to.

We have been working with the military departments to ensure that service members who have been discharged and want to seek a change or correction to their record, or a characterization of discharge are aware of those vehicles. Each military department maintains their own website that provides information about the discharge review process and the Boards of Correction. We, in P&R, also maintain a site, and then we work jointly with DOD—excuse me—with VA, to maintain a website that outlines, and has an online tool that will take an individual through the different steps based on questions of what they are trying to change and how to get to the right resource. And so we are working with the VA on that.

At this point, I will turn to Mr. Jacobs.

Senator PETERS. Thank you.

Mr. JACOBS. Yes, Senator, thanks for your leadership on this issue. We know that veterans with an OTH discharge may be at higher risk for adverse outcomes, so we are actively working to increase our engagement and outreach, thanks in large part to Mr. Boerstler, who has worked to create a journey map leveraging human-centered design to understand where the pain points and the opportunities are for us. And so we are using those insights.

We have had a couple of symposiums within the interagency where we can look at the full life cycle, but also with veterans who have OTH discharges to understand where there are challenges and where we can make improvements. And finally, what I would say is, we are working on a regulation. We have issued draft regulations, and we are hoping to finalize that that might address some of these issues.

Senator PETERS. Well, I look forward to continuing to work with you.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, if I may?

Senator PETERS. Yes, please.

Mr. VAZIRANI. One of the things you asked, your second question was what are we doing—what else will we do?

Senator PETERS. Right, proactively.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Yes, proactively. So what we are doing is we are creating resources through our Military OneSource program to tape webinars that will outline the steps that a service member would take. We are also developing a learning tool online that service members—and those will be resources that service members will be exposed to during the TAP process.

Senator PETERS. Good. Great. Thank you.

Mr. BOERSTLER. And Senator, I would just like to add that VA's Solid Start, our outbound call program, contacts every single veteran, regardless of discharge type, to ensure that they are equipped with the resources they need.

Senator PETERS. Okay. Great. Thank you.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Ernst.

**HON. JONI ERNST,
U.S. SENATOR FROM IOWA**

Senator ERNST. Yes, thank you, Mr. Chair. And thanks to all of our witnesses who are here today for your testimony. We all know, and as you will witness from a lot of the comments today, that

leaving the service is very complex, and it can be complicated at times, and I do believe we all need to do our best for our country's best. And that means supporting all transitioning service members to be successful.

Many years ago, when I was a young woman, I actually was part of the Army Career and Alumni Program, the old ACAP program, and worked at the Job Assistance Center. So one of my roles was educating members that were leaving the service on job employment, how to write resumes, fill out job applications. So I truly appreciated and enjoyed the time that I had at Fort Benning working with those service members that were separating. But I know that there is a lot more that we need to do. So part of this, beyond all the employment assistance, part of it is mental health education, resource education.

And so Mr. Vazirani, the first year after discharge is always, I think, the most difficult for those transitioning members. And it comes with that increased risk of suicide. I know my colleague, Senator Hassan, had mentioned the Buddy Check Program. I was glad to partner with her on that effort. But getting transitioning service members connected to the post-service benefits and resources they need as quickly as possible really has the potential to lower the risk of suicide.

So to what extent does the Transition Assistance Program provide service members other resources? Again, beyond the employment, and beyond education resources, we want to focus on those resources specifically for mental health; what does that provide?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, so through the Transition Assistance Program, we do also want to ensure that the service member has a successful transition, and so through that assessment process, as we look across those different domains, we try and understand where a service member may be at risk, whether it is at risk of homelessness, whether it is at risk because of mental health issues, whether it is at risk because of spouse employment. So we try and tailor the program to that service member.

I think another area that we have worked very closely through the Joint Executive Council and in our interagency partnership is the Benefits Delivery at Discharge, and we have made that process electronic, where we are sharing information with the VA now. A service member now can make that application for benefits between 180 days and 90 days in advance of separation, so that when they separate they will have that benefit statement, and they will get that payment earlier on. So that is an area that we have been collaborating with the VA on. And I will turn to Mr. Jacobs again.

Senator ERNST. Certainly.

Mr. JACOBS. And Senator, I have the benefit, the participant's guide that all transitioning service members get when they attend the VA's 1-day TAP class, that includes an overview that transitioning service members actually write and try to tailor to their particular needs. It includes opportunities for follow-up.

Senator ERNST. That is good.

Mr. JACOBS. We also have benefits advisers where we can make that warm handoff, and other staff who are there to help with some of the more personal questions that they may not feel comfortable asking in a broader group.

Senator ERNST. Okay. Well, I truly appreciate that, because I know back when I was working in that area, there was a lot of work to be done. But I appreciate you closing up that gap. One of the other areas is, of course, on help with filing disability claims. I could go on and on, but is there a way that those VA contract employees who are teaching that VA curriculum at TAP, are they allowed, legally, to assist with VA claims? And what would be some resources or ways that we could assist there?

Mr. JACOBS. Yes, no, thanks. One of the ways that we are working to provide more assistance to help with the filing of claims is through the upgrades to our TAP 6.0 curriculum, which is going to launch in January. And through that change, we are going to add at the end of every day, between 45 and 60 minutes, for accredited VSOs, as well as State Departments of Veterans Affairs, to come in and speak directly to transitioning service members and their families.

And that is important for a couple of reasons. One is to the point that you just said, there is a lot of information. We are compressing 200 pages into a day. And so there are going to be follow-up questions, and those VSOs and State Departments of VA can help in the following days, weeks, and months, either directly or through a warm handoff to us.

Two, there is a growing risk of predatory actors trying to target veterans to get their earned benefits. They are charging money for things that our accredited VSO partners and their state governments are doing for free and very well. And so by creating that touchpoint at the end of every TAP class that VA offers, we are creating that warm connection and helping build relationships that, hopefully, can be helpful later on.

Senator ERNST. Thank you. And to our Chairs, thank you so much for the time today. And thank you to our witnesses.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Kelly has deferred to Senator Sinema.

**HON. KYRSTEN SINEMA,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ARIZONA**

Senator SINEMA. Thank you, Chairman. And thank you, Senator Kelly. Thank you for holding this hearing today and thank you to our witnesses for being here today. This is an exciting chance to unify our active-duty priorities and VA priorities to address important concerns and to strengthen the process all service members go through when transitioning to civilian life.

Arizona has five active-duty military bases and over 20,000 service members that will someday, we hope, join the almost half-a-million veterans already living in Arizona. We are proud that so many veterans call our state home, and want Arizona to continue to be an attractive place to settle in civilian life. When transitioning out of military service, it is not enough just to have resources out there, but our veterans need to be made aware of all the programs that exist.

The Transition Assistance Program is often criticized for being too brief and not giving veterans time to retain the information provided. When losing the group safety net of the military, our veterans need to be set up to pursue a fulfilling career after their

service. Arizona veterans tell me that, while the military has given them an invaluable skill set, it can be difficult to transfer those skills into the civilian workforce without career guidance from people that understand their unique circumstances.

So my first question is about the Sergeant Daniel Somers Veterans Network of Support legislation. We were proud to pass that into law. In fact, Congress had to pass it twice, once each for the DOD and for the VA. Together, these bills established a program where transitioning service members identify loved ones who will receive updates from the DOD and VA, respectively, to help them be better informed during the transition process.

Can you provide me with an update on our pilot from the law I wrote, and any lessons that we have learned from the process?

Mr. VAZIRANI. So Senator, thank you for that legislation and giving us the opportunity to connect to those family members. I will have to get back to you with—for the record on the results of the pilot at this stage.

DoD Response: We are happy to provide an update. The Department of Defense Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP) office and the American Red Cross began collaboration in March 2020, resulting in a signed Memorandum of Agreement in December 2020. In December 2020, the pilot landing page was deployed on the Military OneSource website. In January of 2021, the American Red Cross (ARC) began conducting outreach and engagement in three ARC regions including New Jersey, the Texas Gulf Coast (Houston area), and Arizona/New Mexico. The first “Friends & Family Connection” eNewsletter was distributed under the pilot that same month.

From its inception in December 2020, the Friends & Family Connection Network of Support pilot landing page gained 203 subscribers by the end of August 2023. In July 2023, the Network of Support Pilot Survey, scheduled to run for four weeks, was released. In August 2023, an reminder was sent to complete the survey. On August 28, 2023, the survey closed with only 20 participants having responded. We are currently consolidating the data and preparing information for a pending report due to Congress.

Mr. JACOBS. And I would just add, you know, personally I know my wife helps make sure that I get to my annual physical, that I do all the things, and I know that is a big source of support for many transitioning service members, particularly given the breadth, the depth, the scope of the information that is being provided. So continuing to encourage spouses is really important to attend. But we are also mindful that sometimes they just can’t make it during the day so—or while they are actually still in uniform; so some of the off-based training that DOL provides is also a really great resource, and then continuing to follow up in the first year after they transition to try to connect those dots as well.

Senator SINEMA. Thank you. I would like to follow up with each of the Departments on more detailed information about the success or challenges that the pilot is experiencing. As mentioned in previous testimony, transition from the military can take a lifetime. In last Congress, we passed my bill to Reduce Unemployment for Veterans of All Ages Act. That lifted the arbitrary 12-year time limit on VA’s vocational rehab and employment, for VR&E Program for veterans with service-connected disabilities.

Can you provide an update on the VR&E Program, specifically any details on how it is being used by older generations of veterans?

Mr. JACOBS. Yes, Senator, I would have to get back to you for the record with more details, but what I would say is we have seen an increased demand for VR&E services, particularly in the aftermath of the PACT Act. It is one of our most impactful programs that we provide tailored to the individual needs, and it helps many more veterans as they are figuring out how to transition in their career goals. And so I would be happy to follow up with you or your staff in addition to in writing.

Senator SINEMA. Thank you. I appreciate that. Another benefit for transitioning service members is the SkillBridge Program which has a great deal of support from industry partners at home in Arizona, but once service members become aware of this program it is often too late for them to participate. How can you better spread awareness and encourage participation?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, thank you. We also believe that the SkillBridge Program is a very effective program. One of the things that we are doing is, in the transition counseling process is making sure that the service members are aware of SkillBridge as a transition program, we are also ensuring that commanders are aware of the benefits of the program to ensuring the success of the transition of that service member, so they get those experiences working with companies, and/or nonprofits, or state agencies in order to put their skills to use and understand how they may be able to apply those when they do transition to becoming a civilian.

Senator SINEMA. Thank you, Chairman.

Chairman TESTER. Back to back Arizona; Senator Kelly.

**HON. MARK KELLY,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ARIZONA**

Senator KELLY. Thank you Mr. Chairman, and thank you Chairman Reed as well, and Ranking Member Wicker, and Ranking Member Moran, for holding this very critical joint hearing on the Military to Civilian Transition.

As a Navy veteran myself I know how critical and how crucial support of our Nation's service members and their families is to ensuring their continued success after their service to our country. An Army survey of young adults aged 18 to 28 found that nearly 21 percent believe that joining the military—and this surprised me—joining the military puts their lives on hold. This perception could not be further from the truth.

I am a veteran who took, you know, my time in service in the U.S. Navy, you know, started with training to be a pilot, and then I was a combat pilot. And then after that I earned a Master's Degree in Engineering, and then went to school to become a test pilot, did that job for a while, and later had the opportunity to serve at NASA as an astronaut. I wasn't putting my life on hold.

You know, we need to be sharing the message about the incredible honor it is to serve, and just the—but I would also like—that it is a great job because of the challenges, because of the travel benefits, the teamwork, the camaraderie, but also the focus on a mission, and how great it is to have the opportunity to serve your country. And we need to do that work by providing support for our service members as they transition, as well as into their transition from military to civilian life.

So thank you to all the witnesses for being here, and for your work to support the success of our Nation's service members, and veterans, and their families. And I know that a successful transition often requires a lot of time, and it requires planning, and it requires conversations with family. Service members need support to think about professional development from an early point in their military careers, whether that development will occur in their service to our country, or whether it will be later in civilian life.

And by beginning these conversations early on we are setting our service members and military families up for success. So I commend DOD for significantly increasing participation in DOD's Transition Assistance Program. And I know that DOD can do better, and can do better early on.

So Secretary Vazirani, and Mr. Sawyer, how can each service further improve their career and professional development programming to support earlier integration in a service member's career?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator thank you for your comments, and I agree with you wholeheartedly that military service is a powerful way for Americans to set themselves apart while in service and beyond their service. As far as starting earlier, a number of the programs that we have that are not—that are aligned with but not specifically associated with transition, for example, the Tuition Assistance Program, help service members develop—either earn degrees, or develop credentials, certifications that will help them in their military service, or beyond their military service.

The other things that we do are helping service members to translate the work that they do into what could be a civilian career when they decide to transition, and that is through our credentialing program. We help service members achieve credentials and we also help them translate the work that they do through their MOS into career opportunities understanding where they can apply those credentials.

Senator KELLY. And Mr. Sawyer, what else—in the remaining few seconds I have—how can Congress help you with this in improving this process?

Mr. SAWYER. And thank you for that. The continued oversight that you are providing and I believe holding DOD and the agencies accountable for implementing the recommendations that we have given to them in this area. Awareness, ensuring that service members are becoming aware of the timeliness and 2-day class requirements, is another area that could be helpful. And for the Department we have issued recommendations asking them to develop performance goals with these programs and to evaluate those programs to ensure that objectives are being achieved.

Senator KELLY. Well, thank you both. And I think it is so important that we continue to get the message out that serving in the U.S. Military is not putting your life on hold. Thank you.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Sullivan.

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

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you Mr. Chairman. And gentlemen, thank you for being here. I think this is a really important hearing

because we all know this is a win-win proposition for everybody, employers, our country needs hard workers, our members of the military, their families to be able to come off active duty and go into a good-paying job, and then to have a workforce where the men and women that you hire know what it is like to have discipline and get up at 0500, or 0400, or whatever, and be on time, I mean this is a win all over the place.

So I want to ask a specific question. I had a provision that was in last year's NDAA that encouraged DOD to partner with local employers, local unions, the building trades in Alaska, in particular, hire a lot of members coming out of the military. And what I have seen is that a lot of times it is really base-commander-specific. Meaning, a base commander at JBER might be like: Yes, let us bring the unions and employers on base, our guys can start doing transition stuff early before, you know—one day before they get out. And then you have a new commander, and all that goes away.

So what my NDAA provision was to try to get DOD to focus on, kind of from a broad perspective, let us do that across the board. And can I get an update from any of you on where DOD has been with regard to working with these groups that hire? Like I said, local unions, a lot of them have a really good program, the IBEW, for example, has a really good program in Alaska, in contractors, in the construction trades. If you have an update on that I would love to hear about it, but you might recall this provision.

And then I do want to—maybe I will just ask the second question next. It follows up on Senator Kelly's question about credentialing, and the one area in particular that I think is really important is the maritime industry. You might remember President Trump signed an Executive order that would make it easier for transitioning military members in the maritime space to waive licenses, in allowing their experience to count toward Merchant Mariner credentialing, and other credentials. But again, these are super well trained, ready to go, and sometimes we make it hard, a lot of times we make it hard.

So two questions I will throw it out to any and all the witnesses, but if you can take that first one first, and then the one on credentialing following up on Senator Kelly's question. Thank you.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, so we continue to work with employers, and try and expand the engagement with employers, to help transitioning veterans. So we continue to grow the SkillBridge Program.

Senator SULLIVAN. Yes. The SkillBridge program is great by the way and I think it—do you think it is going well?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we do believe it is going well. We have had over 22,000 participants in the SkillBridge Program last year.

Senator SULLIVAN. Great.

Mr. VAZIRANI. A high percentage of those participants convert to full-time employee with their SkillBridge internship. We are replicating that program for military spouses, with the Military Spouse Career Accelerator Program, providing them with a 12-week fellowship, so that they can gain that. And we are seeing an 80 percent conversion there as well.

Senator SULLIVAN. Do you agree with me it is a little bit base-commander dependent? And we could do a better job of kind of making sure everybody is on board with this, or is that just something I am seeing back home in Alaska?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I do believe that there are areas of the country where, particularly for service members who want to stay in the place they want to retire from the locations they are in, that we can probably do a better job engaging at the local level, and local employers.

Senator SULLIVAN. Yes.

Mr. VAZIRANI. And so Senator, that is something that I will take back. I would love to work with you and your team——

Senator SULLIVAN. Great.

Mr. VAZIRANI [continuing]. To figure out how do we drive more local engagement at across the enterprise with consistency.

Senator SULLIVAN. Yes. That is really important. That is what my NDAA provision from last year was about. And then real quick on credentialing, anyone who wants to take that one on? I know it is a big topic, but it has got so much promise.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, there we continue to focus on our credentialing program. We provide a tool that will allow service members to gain their credential, and a tool also as well to figure out how to——

Senator SULLIVAN. When they are still on active duty?

Mr. VAZIRANI. While they are still on active duty——

Senator SULLIVAN. Oh. Good.

Mr. VAZIRANI [continuing]. To earn their credentials. And then we engage with the Department of Labor through the U.S. Military Apprenticeship Program, and service members can gain a Department of Labor Journeyman Certificate, and we have over 93,000 participants in that program. And Mr. Rodriguez may want to comment.

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. Thank you, Mr. Vazirani. Senator, I just wanted to add that I spent a week in Alaska, and I visited the Commanders at JBER. If you recall, during my confirmation hearing, and you asked me to go to Alaska, so we spent the week there.

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you.

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. I met with the commanders. They said exactly what you did: They wanted connections to the local community. We had our state director come; we actually went to the American Job Center there at the local level to ensure that they were connected. And we spoke to the Electric Workers Union out there, IBEW. I visited them as well.

Senator SULLIVAN. Good.

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. So there is a strong relationship at the local community with the commanders, but as you mentioned, that often changes when the commander does change—they have a change of command, but the resources are there at the local levels. We have to ensure that they understand that those resources exist and make sure that we are continually connecting with the incoming commanders as well.

Senator SULLIVAN. Great. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Blumenthal.

**HON. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL,
U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT**

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. As I go around the State of Connecticut, and I am sure my colleagues have the same experience, what I find is, again and again, small- and medium-sized businesses saying to me: We need people with skills, particularly in manufacturing. Every year, I guess the estimate is 200,000 service members transition back to civilian life, that is a potential pool of skilled labor that right now, I am guessing, is only partially used for manufacturing, particularly by those small- and medium-sized businesses.

A Government Accountability Office released a January 2023 Report that urged the VA to collaborate with Veterans Service Organizations in identifying outreach gaps. The combination of VSOs and small businesses, I think, offer a real opportunity for apprenticeship, on-the-job training, perhaps even skills provided while on active duty in anticipation of potential jobs outside.

The military is one of the great educational forces, if not the greatest in America today, in terms of its resources and the numbers of people that it involves. So I would like to ask this panel what your ideas are for enhancing the skill training and job placement in manufacturing, or small- and medium-sized businesses around the country?

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. Senator, I will take this question. First, I just visited an advanced manufacturing company, Rockwell Technologies, in Wisconsin, and their premise was they cannot hire enough veterans. They want to get more veterans into advanced manufacturing, so they are working across the veteran community to make sure that they are aware of these types of resources exist for training. Apprenticeship programs we know are extremely valuable, \$80,000 starting salary when someone completes an apprenticeship program, and a 90-percent hire rate post-apprenticeship.

So through our regional veteran employment coordinators located across the entire country, we are connecting corporations and veterans across the entire country to these types of opportunities. And we do this in conjunction with the SkillBridge Program. As they are working on SkillBridge, when they do get the opportunity to participate in DOD, for those who don't get to participate in it, we have opportunities that we are working to solidify with companies across the entire country.

Also, as part of Task Force Movement, which I sit on that organization's structure there, we are looking at, again, how do we align manufacturing organizations to locate this talent and make sure that they are connected with these opportunities that exist?

Mr. BOERSTLER. And Senator, I would add as well, in partnership with the Department of Labor and Department of Defense, we send a weekly email called "Vet Resources" to about 14 million subscribers, veterans and their families across the country. That includes links to jobs that are routinely updated, sometimes daily, when we connect with the corporate sector, the commercial sector, to cull these jobs.

And more importantly, I think the jointness that we, you know, continue to share these resources with our veterans and their fami-

lies, through that channel, and many others, is a great way to connect the dots between the commercial sector and our veterans.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, the other thing I will add, is in the TAP program, in the tailored instruction in the 2-day courses, there is a 2-day course delivered by the Small Business Administration that can help service members transitioning explore opportunities in small business, either as an entrepreneur or working in a small business.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you all. Thank you for your service. And I hope, perhaps, the next panel will address this question as well because I think the Veterans Service Organizations can play an important role in this challenge.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Tillis.

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

Senator TILLIS. Thank you, Chair Tester. And thank you, gentlemen, for being here. A couple of questions; I was in here earlier, and one thing that I am curious about is, to what extent does the TAP program emphasize and ensure that we get a connection with the VA upon separation?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, so in the TAP program, one of the specific core courses is a session that is led by the VA, so that is—

Senator TILLIS. Yes. But I mean, we are leading them to water, but we know if you take a look at the number of suicides that occur, on average, about two-thirds of the people who commit suicide every day are not connected to the VA. So I know that there is—it is obviously a natural transition because it is a discussion about benefits and everything else, but to what extent does the TAP program remain focused on, not only leading them to water, but actually enrolling and becoming connected? And I would be also curious, Mr. Sawyer, if you have any observations on that.

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I will comment just briefly on the particular piece that you mentioned about suicide and suicide prevention. So through that transition process, we conduct a mental health assessment. There is also a single—we are working on this, a single health assessment with the VA, so that if we identify that a service member may be at risk, or has been treated for mental health, then they are referred into the inTransition Program, and then that information is shared with the VA. So we start that process early, and we are very focused on ensuring that there is continuity of care so that in that transition period, the 365 days following—

Senator TILLIS. Okay. Mr. Jacobs, do you have anything to add? I am going to go fast, because I have got one other point I want to make related to it.

Mr. JACOBS. We think there is a moral imperative to connect veterans to their earned benefits and health care, because it is exactly to your point. When veterans utilize their earned benefits in health care, they do better, and it is not only in terms of reduced suicide rates, but it is better health outcomes, better economic opportunities.

So we have a 1-day TAP course. One of the ways that we are enhancing it is by including our VSO, accredited VSO, and State Department of Veterans Affairs partners, and that is important because, you know, this is 200 pages of information about VA benefits and health care. It is a lot to digest in one day.

Senator TILLIS. And most people aren't going to.

Mr. JACOBS. They are going to come back with more questions. And our VSO partners and state partners can help them as one more fact.

Senator TILLIS. Okay. Mr. Sawyer, you have something to add, briefly?

Mr. SAWYER. Thank you. I would just like to add that GAO does have ongoing work that is looking at mental health and suicide prevention for transitioning service members, as well as the warm handover process, and we would love to meet with you to—

Senator TILLIS. I am going to make sure I stay within time. But I did want to go back to something that Chair Reed mentioned about the electronic health record, I have been following. I was on Senate Armed Services until last Congress following the electronic health record implementation. DOD, good on you all for getting it done. We have got to get it done in the VA. It is a long way from being done.

Until those two platforms are completely implemented, we probably need some duct tape and baling wire to get data that we can use to better predict—and better predict what we should be trying—I have said in this Committee before: It will be great when we have a TAP audience of one. We are not there yet. But one of the ways that we can get there is through predictive analytics. And one thing that came to my mind is whether or not we should take a look at information that we had in the electronic health record for the service member and see if we could use predictive analytics to say that this person could be in crisis, and sadly, correlate that using historic records. Sadly, probably correlate that to this veterans' population who has committed suicide.

And then if you start thinking: If there is a statistical correlation there, then that should begin to be something that is very, very much embedded in future TAP programs. My time has expired. Thank you.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Tillis. And on behalf of Senator Tester, let me recognize Senator Hirono.

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

Senator HIRONO. I thank both Chairs for this hearing, as I sit on both Committees. This is for Secretary Vazirani and Secretary Jacobs, since I have both of you here. There is a huge issue on Oahu in which veterans are having difficulty accessing critical health care services at the Matsunaga CBOC, which is located at Tripler Army Medical Center.

Can you both look into what DOD and VA can do to make it easier for veterans to get on base for care and report back to the Committees and my staff? I think this should be, I hope, a pretty easy fix, because what is happening is when our veterans try to get on base, they have their VA card, VA ID cards, and apparently that

is not adequate to get on base. And they are supposed to have a DOD-compliant ID. So can both of you figure this out, and make it easier for veterans to get the care that they need from the Mat-sunaga CBOC?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we are certainly committed to taking care of people, and beyond the transition point as well. We are working through the Joint Executive Council on access to bases for veterans. We are working through a common ID, to develop a common ID that can be utilized. And I certainly commit to getting back to you on a solution.

Senator HIRONO. Why can't the VA, why can't they just use their VA ID? Anyway, that is an idea. Rather than requiring them to go get a whole another ID.

DoD Response: The DoD does accept the Veteran Health Identification Card (VHIC) as a valid VA credential for accessing military installation. This credential is specifically identified in DoD Manual 5200.08, Volume 3. As of September 30, 2022, approximately 176,000 VHIC were enrolled for recurring installation access, an increase of approximately 56,000 since September 30, 2021. To further enhance access to military installations, the VA-DoD Joint Executive Committee has directed the establishment of a data transfer from the VA to the DoD that identifies all VA Service-Connected Disabled (SCD) Veterans, recipients of the Purple Heart, former Prisoners of War, and all enrolled VA caregivers. Once this data transfer is established (June 2024), Veterans and VA enrolled caregivers will be able to utilize a REAL ID complaint driver's license along with the behind-the-scenes data transfer to establish eligibility to access the installation for medical appointments, visit the commissary, or use of eligible Morale, Welfare and Recreation facilities. The VHIC will still be a valid credential.

There are three things required to access an installation: IDENTITY, PURPOSE, and FITNESS. More often than not, an installation access issue has to do with the Veteran (or their caregiver) unable to establish FITNESS. That is, they have been flagged for relevant criminal arrest information that prohibits access to the installation, during their background check at a Military Visitor Information Center. A second common access issue is that the VA facility failed to provide an update to the medical appointment roster provided to the DoD, and therefore the Veteran is unable to establish PURPOSE. However, a call to the VA facility can more often than not address this issue. Generally, the installation and the medical facility can work through the PURPOSE issue. Finally, VA reports issues of base access up their chain of command. Those issues identified as being based on DoD policy are transferred to the DoD. In the last six months VA has only reported two instances as a result of DoD policy (one in Alaska and one in Florida). As a result, the DoD coordinates directly with the installation to correct the deficiency.

Next question for Mr. Jacobs; regarding the Solid Start Program; does VA track—during which stage of Solid Start veterans stop responding to outreach? The idea is that, at certain specific time frames, the 200,000 veterans a year are supposed to be contacted within 90 days, 180 days, and 360 days. Do you keep data on when they stop responding?

And I would also like to know what are the questions that they are asked? Because this program is supposed to be a check-in to help address concerns, connect the VA with resources. So do they get asked things like; whether they have experienced sexual assault during their time in service, whether they exhibit suicide ideation? What kinds of questions are asked of the VAs as you make these contacts?

Mr. JACOBS. Yes. Thanks, Senator, for that question. So through our Solid Start Program, we contact transitioning—recently transitioned veterans at three points in the one-year after they have left the military. It is usually around the 90, 180, and 365-day mark. In some cases, we can connect with those veterans quite

easily. We send an email in advance, making sure that they know, because many veterans don't answer—many Americans don't answer phone calls from numbers they don't know about. We call at each increment seven times. So if we don't—if we are not able to successfully contact them, we move on. But then we continue to try to contact.

And the goal here is really personalized, individual attention. So it is really focused on, one, making sure that if there is a mental health crisis, that we can help them. But two, it is making sure that we are connecting them to the benefits and the care that they need, whether it is an update on their status—the status of their—

Senator HIRONO. So I know what the purpose is of Solid Start. Mr. JACOBS. Yes. Yes.

Senator HIRONO. But is there a time frame in which the veterans stop responding to contacts within this one-year time frame?

Mr. JACOBS. We have been able to connect with about 75 to 80 percent of veterans through the Solid Start. But I would have to get back to you with more specific data.

Senator HIRONO. Isn't there a standard list of questions that the contactor is asking so that they can ascertain whether services need to be—so they can be connected with services? Can you send me those questions?

Mr. JACOBS. I would be happy to follow up. And we do also try to make sure that it is open-ended so that we are—it is not overly prescriptive, but we can get back with some more detailed information on that.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you. My time is running out, but I did have one question, Mr. Chairman; both Chairs, if I can ask about SkillBridge.

Chairman TESTER. For the record.

Senator HIRONO. I think—oh, shoot. You are not going to let me ask the question.

Chairman TESTER. I can't do it. We have got another panel.

Senator HIRONO. Okay. Sorry about that. I will submit the question.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Blackburn.

**HON. MARSHA BLACKBURN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM TENNESSEE**

Senator BLACKBURN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all for being with us. I think we all have plenty of questions. I want to stay with that Solid Start Program, Mr. Jacobs, if we can do that. So I want to be sure that I am following you on this. The veterans are contacted by phone call 90, 180, and 365 days into the program; is that accurate?

Mr. JACOBS. Yes, Senator.

Senator BLACKBURN. Okay. And then you confirm that they have received a mental health evaluation in the last year of their service?

Mr. JACOBS. No.

Senator BLACKBURN. Oh. Okay.

Mr. JACOBS. So the goal is to try to identify, I think the reason that the program was stood up in 2019 was recognizing the first year post-transition is a high risk for some veterans.

Senator BLACKBURN. Okay. So then—I want to confirm that I heard this right, too. So the VA, through the VA Solid Start Program, the VA receives information that is shared from DOD to VA?

Mr. JACOBS. Yes, Senator?

Senator BLACKBURN. Okay. And that is what you use to ascertain veterans that are eligible for these mental health services, right?

Mr. JACOBS. Yes. So the—

Senator BLACKBURN. Okay. All right. Let me move on then. So these veterans are deemed a priority, correct?

Mr. JACOBS. We do receive information for high priority.

Senator BLACKBURN. Okay. So they are automatically enrolled in the VA system, and they have their profiles flagged for licensed professional mental health counselors so that they can start that dialogue; is that accurate?

Mr. JACOBS. No. They are not automatically enrolled. They have to enroll at their own discretion.

Senator BLACKBURN. They have to enroll. So what is the wait time to enroll?

Mr. JACOBS. I would have to get that for the record.

Senator BLACKBURN. Okay. So I will submit that in writing. Now, one of the things of interest to me is, if you have got all this data and you are transferring it from DOD to VA, why would an individual have to wait weeks to get their information? I have got several veterans that are a part of our team back in Tennessee and here in DC, and it makes no sense that one of our team members had to wait 14 weeks to get their medical documents from the DOD, and then had to wait for VA to schedule appointments. So if you are doing it for one sector, it seems like you could kind of clean up the system and do it across the board.

Mr. JACOBS. Senator, I would like to get the information on the individual team member so that we can personally address that, and also correct it—

Senator BLACKBURN. Well, I think, writ large, just the fact that people have to wait so long to get their information, then they have got to wait again—

Mr. JACOBS. Yes.

Senator BLACKBURN [continuing]. To get an appointment. Going to the TAP program, we have had a lot of fun looking at this with you all, into the TAP program. I had some comments that I am going to take my time to read, these come from different members of our team. I would like to note that TAP—let us see: He wished he went back to take advantage of the program more and appreciated the classes offered, but he had managed a \$180 million budget, and felt like this program was one-size-fits-all, and he had to go back and take the class on budget.

So these need to be personalized more. Here are some more comments, “Some of the contractors that work there have never successfully transitioned, themselves. The contractor teaching my class how to get a DC and V-suite job in the corporate world.” He was a retired E6 that got his job teaching our class right out of his retirement. So he had no experience; “Wasting days teaching me,

a 20-year veteran, how to do a simple budget, handing me a VA book and telling me all I need to know is in there.” “Holding job fairs every Wednesday that consist of a truck driver, L-E-O, or assembly line position. Resumes produced that are not just lukewarm; they are not helpful.” So I think that if we are going to put the money into this, then we need to see some personalization.

My time has expired. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman TESTER. Senator King.

**HON. ANGUS S. KING, JR.,
U.S. SENATOR FROM MAINE**

Senator KING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Those of us who are on both Committees, get twice the time; is that correct?

Chairman TESTER. Divided by two.

Senator KING. Yes, I see. Thank you. I figured. I did want to mention there was some talk earlier about spouse employment, and Senator Sinema, Lankford, myself, and Senator Fischer got a bill passed in the Senate about a month ago requiring the Federal Government to allow remote working for military spouses at any government agency. So that is a step forward. We need to get it through the further process, but it has been passed by the Senate.

How much of this is legislation, and how much is implementation? One of my life mottos is, implementation is as important as vision. And it sounds like what we are really talking about today is implementation. And do you need new authorities? Do you come to us with recommendations for any changes to the law, additional funding, or additional resources?

Mr. Vazirani, do you need anything further from us? Or do you have the authorities you need, and it is just a question of working the system?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, thank you for that, and the opportunity to express this; one of the things I think we found is that the work through the Joint Executive Council has really helped in this collaboration, and in taking the authorities that you provided us and implementing them.

Senator KING. I like the idea of the Joint Executive Council. By the way do you—does the Joint Executive Council ever meet with veterans and Veterans Service Organizations, have focus groups, polling, and just input from your customers?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, the working committees do have those kinds of engagements, and we do have them at the Joint Executive Council as well. We do bring people in to talk through ideas. So we continue to work that. I think through that interagency process, we have worked through, and we are understanding where we may have difficulties or barriers; and Senator, as we do that, we would appreciate the opportunity to come back to you and let you know if we do need additional authorities.

Senator KING. I hope you will. And I hope all of you will take advantage of my invitation to suggest any changes in authorities, any federal statutes that are obstacles to the implementation. Here is a question that occurs to me: we are talking about TAP, which I understand is a mandatory program. What would the base commander do if a soldier skipped a mandatory weapons safety class?

My suspicion is he or she would make sure they got to that class. Is this, again, an implementation at the base commander level?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we continue to work through that and ensuring that commanders who have the responsibility to balance the mission readiness along with care for the service member. And that is why we have the commander engaged at that 90-day point for that capstone to review how the service member is engaging. And, as Mr. Boerstler has indicated, we are creating that dashboard so that a commander can track how a service member will—

Senator KING. There is something seriously wrong, if 70 percent don't meet the one-year guideline, that is a serious problem. And it seems to me that is an accountability problem. So I hope that is a priority.

We talked about credentialing. Isn't one of the issues with credentialing state laws, and to what extent are we able to work with states and state COMPACTs? So if you learned to be a plumber or electrician in the military, you don't have to go out and spend a year going through a state process to get a license to be a plumber or an electrician.

Mr. Labor, what is your view of that one?

Mr. RODRIGUEZ [continuing]. But I going to say, so I apologize there. Senator, one of the things that was passed in 2021, that there was the ability for states to have reciprocity agreements with regards to accepting those licenses and credentials—

Senator KING. And is that happening; that is my question?

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. That is one of the things we are working on with the states. We are trying to ensure that they understand, one, that agreement exist, but also for the military spouses to be educated about that as well, as well as the Department of Defense's Legal Departments to ensure that they can provide support to those military spouses to have conversations with the State Departments.

Mr. KING. I think that would be a place where some emphasis should be placed to work with the states' press, the states, because all the states talk about wanting to help veterans. This is one clear way they can do it.

I am out of time, but one additional issue that has come up in other hearings we have had is financial counseling that is necessary for many veterans because they are suddenly out into the Wild West of civilian life. And so financial counseling is something that is important. Thank you all. And a hearing like this always focuses on the negative, on what is not being done. You all are doing a lot. And I just want you to know that we appreciate it. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman TESTER. So here is what is going to happen because nature is calling some. And we are going to take about a five-minute break for the panelists, be back—I am sorry to do that to you guys, but you know how it is. And then get back. We will finish up, and then we will go to the second panel so—and you can go vote right now if you want. Okay?

So we are adjourned for five minutes. And it will be five minutes.

[Whereupon, at 12:10 p.m. to 12:15 p.m. there was a recess.]

Chairman TESTER. If nobody else shows up, we have got about another 12 minutes, and then we will get to the second panel; if you are good with those, Senator Budd.

**HON. TED BUDD,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NORTH CAROLINA**

Senator BUDD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And again, thank you all for the panel for being here today.

Mr. Boerstler, North Carolina has taken great efforts to integrate veteran communities. It is something we hold dear, and it is very important to us in North Carolina. Here are some examples. NCServes, launched in 2015, it was the Nation's first statewide coordinated network for veterans and military families, and North Carolina communities were some of the first to adopt the Community Veterans Engagement Board structure in 2016, with seven of those CVEBs now locally led by nonprofit leaders and working very closely with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

North Carolina leaders are also part of Mission 85, it is a three-state effort in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, to align local, state, and federal, and nonprofit resources to improve the quality and continuity of care for veterans along Interstate 85 in North Carolina. You are familiar with those efforts?

Mr. BOERSTLER. Yes, Senator, very familiar. Thank you.

Senator BUDD. Great. It seems like we are leading the country in efforts to improve veteran reintegration. So that being the case, how would you like to see this model—it sounds like you are familiar with, how would you like to see this utilized in other states?

Mr. BOERSTLER. Well, thank you very much, Senator. I think, with the leadership of the Veterans Bridge Home, in particular, that help steward the NCServes initiative you mentioned, they are a critical part of our Vet Resources Community Network, which is a nationwide community of practice that shares these lessons from North Carolina with other states that want to align with a lot of the objectives that they have set out.

And CVEBs, Community Veterans Engagement Boards, as you mentioned, are still fantastic listening posts and observation posts for us out in the field that can relay customer and employee experiences directly to the facilities that are in their backyards, but also VA's Central Office. So they are incredibly essential. They are the conduit between that installation and that return home to the community. And we are glad to partner with not only these partners, but also our State Departments of Veterans Affairs who are in tandem.

Senator BUDD. Thank you, sir.

Mr. Vazirani, in your written statement, you state, often, and I quote this, "Often military spouses find the transition of their service member an ideal time to begin, restart, or re-energize their career." So unfortunately, that is also a statement about a lack of employment opportunities while their spouse is in service. So would you agree that though the Department—that through the Department, they should work to improve spouse employment opportunities, not just in transition, but also during service?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, we firmly believe that military spouse employment is critical to the successful service of the service mem-

ber and to a successful transition. So we are working very hard across the interagency, also with states, to ensure that military spouses have employment opportunities. We also work with our corporate nonprofit partners to ensure that there are good career opportunities for military spouses.

Senator BUDD. Thank you. So what is the Department doing to improve spousal employment opportunities, particularly when a military family relocates during the transition back to civilian life?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, so through our Military Spouse Employment Program, there is a specific aspect through the transition period called MySTeP, which helps a military spouse, through that transition process, finding new opportunities. One of the new programs that we have is called the Military Spouse Career Accelerator Program. So it is a SkillBridge-like program. We engage with corporate nonprofit partners, provide a 12-week fellowship for a military spouse. They gain pointed experience, and we are seeing that we are having a very high conversion rate of those spouses into full-time employment with their fellowship sponsor.

Senator BUDD. Let me make sure I am not asking the same question, can you talk specifically about DOD's Military Spouse Employment Partnership? I don't think that is the same one you were just referring to, unless it is.

Mr. VAZIRANI. So they are slightly different programs. The Military Spouse Employment Partnership is where we engage with employers to actually—to bring on full-time hires. And we continue to grow that program. In fact, we are inducting today, 130 new partners into our Military Spouse Employment Partnership Program.

Senator BUDD. So this Military Spouse Employment Partnership, the MSEP, what are current limitations to the program, if any?

Mr. VAZIRANI. I think the current limitation is just expanding our reach, and helping employers to understand the benefits of employing military spouses. We know that military spouses are, in many cases, significantly more qualified than their civilian counterparts. They have higher levels of education. We also know that through that military experience, they develop a level of resilience and a level of ingenuity that proves them to be very successful employees.

Senator BUDD. Thank you. My time has expired.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Budd, I appreciate yours and Senator Rosen's patience. Senator Rosen.

**HON. JACKY ROSEN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NEVADA**

Senator ROSEN. And thank you, Chairman Tester. It is a really important hearing. You know, our servicemen, how we care for them as they transition, it really makes a difference. I want to agree with Senator King that streamlining and implementation is always key to success, reducing the, I guess, paperwork is always the most stressful thing for people. So I want to talk about a reserve and guard demobilization.

So Secretary Vazirani and Secretary Rodriguez, these are for you. I am concerned with the demobilization process for guard and reserve service members transitioning from active-duty orders back to reserve status. The reserve component, they are required to com-

plete the TAP program, even though they are not separating from the military. The TAP curriculum is tailored to individuals separating from military service entirely rather than returning to reserve status in their civilian applications.

So instead of receiving help completing travel vouchers, and reimbursements for costs incurred during their mobilization and deployment, reservists are forced to take classes tailored to those leaving the military and starting new lives as civilians. We have heard a lot about this from our reserve men and women in Nevada.

So as such, they must figure out the burdensome, let me tell you, burdensome reimbursement process on their own. And the reserve components just face their own direct set of challenges, as they lack access to day-to-day services available to either active-duty troops, because they are not at their 28 unit days of the month to be able to sit down with someone for help.

So I get to get language in the FY '24 NDAA that encourages DOD to modify the demobilization process for the reserve component to better address their needs and circumstances, and this requires the Committee be briefed on actions taken to improve this process.

So for both of the Secretaries, Vazirani and Rodriguez, how would you improve this reserve component part so it better focuses on what they actually need, particularly this is a huge stressor, this financial stressor, that they can't figure out how to get their reimbursements, their travel vouchers? They are not getting out of the military; we need to help them so they can continue their service. Please?

Mr. VAZIRANI. Senator, I think the area that we can help that reserve component member make that transition, and to your point, they are not transitioning from the military; they are transitioning from their active service to their—back to their reserve unit, and to their—so one of the things that we will continue to do, and we are doing this through the interagency partnership, is how do we assess the needs of an individual coming into the TAP program, and continuing to evolve the TAP program.

And so an area here to support the reserve component, those members, is an area that we recognize we should continue to evolve, and we appreciate the support that you are providing on that.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you. We would love to see some reporting on how you are doing that. Please, Mr. Secretary.

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. Senator, that is a great question with regards to the guard reservists because they have unique requirements in their process of transitioning as well. One of the things we have done is we executed an off-base transition training pilot that began last year, and that is allowing us to be at the local communities working with the guard reserves that allow us to work through their individual needs when it comes to preparing for transition, and/or when they are looking for a job to maintain while they are actually performing guard reserve work.

One of the things that we have seen so far at the TAP sites, is that there is currently in 10 states, over 7,000 service members have been supported through the current pilots, and we want to ensure that they also understand that if we are able to in the future,

utilize American Job Centers to support guard reserve, that would be another requirement—or another resource, I am sorry, that would allow those guard reserve members to utilize at the state and local levels.

Senator ROSEN. All right, thank you. I am going to let the second panel. We really appreciate you.

And there you go, Chairman; both Chairmen.

Chairman TESTER. Well you finally came along. You should have come to the panel earlier, and we could have finished this up a lot quicker, Senator Rosen.

I want to thank the first panel. Needless to say, thank you for the work you do. And also needless to say, we have more work to do. So thank you all for that. And you are dismissed, and we will start on the second panel.

Chairman TESTER. So I am going to welcome the witnesses to the second panel, and I am going to apologize up-front; obviously, this is a big issue by the presence of so many members, which is a good thing. The bad thing is that I wish we could spend more time with you, the second panel.

And on this second panel we have: Ryan Gallucci, Executive Director of the VFW, Veterans of Foreign Wars.

We also have Tom Porter, Vice President of Government Affairs for Blue Star Families.

We have Kevin O'Neil, who is the Employment and Education Policy Associate for The American Legion.

And last but certainly not least, we have Dr. Arthur DeGroat, somebody who has been in front of the VA Committee before; he is Executive Director of the Office of Military and Veterans Affairs at Kansas State University.

And as soon as you get seated and you are ready to go, I am going to turn to Chairman Reed for a comment.

Chairman REED. First of all, I welcome all of you, but I want to particularly welcome Ryan Gallucci, who is a Rhode Islander, and a graduate of the University of Rhode Island, and thank you for your service in the military, and now at VFW. So go Rhodi. Thank you.

Chairman TESTER. And Mr. Gallucci, you have the floor, five minutes.

PANEL II

STATEMENT OF RYAN GALLUCCI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

Mr. GALLUCCI. Thank you, Chairman Tester, Chairman Reed, Ranking Members Moran, Wicker, and Members of the Committees. Thank you for the opportunity to provide VFW's remarks on this vital topic.

Nearly 200,000 service members exit the force each year, which makes regular joint oversight hearings like this imperative for today's military. A solid transition can set up veterans for success after service; conversely, a failed transition could lead to devastating consequences like unemployment, homelessness, even suicide. The perception of veterans after service directly correlates to

the next generation's propensity to serve; failed transitions hurt military recruiting, making this a national security priority.

The VFW is on the ground every day at more than 20 military installations worldwide, working with nearly 20,000 transitioning service members, or approximately 10 percent of the transitioning force every year. Accredited by VA, our professional staff assists troops with Benefits Delivery at Discharge or BDD claims, provide benefits' guidance, and even provide VA benefits briefings when offered the opportunity.

Last year, VFW filed more than 12,000 claims for transitioning service members, ensuring timely connections to benefits like VA compensation and care. We speak today not only as veterans who have gone through TAP, but as professionals who work in TAP every day.

The VFW testified on TAP before the House earlier this summer. At the time we were frustrated by a lack of engagement from VA. Thankfully, our collaboration with VA has substantially evolved. The VFW is the only organization that participated in multiple TAP 6.0 pilots. We provided feedback on the 5.1 curriculum and are now collaborating on ways to ensure TAP participants have access to competent, accredited representation where practical.

This is why the VFW highly recommends the passage of the TAP Promotion Act. We know the immense value for all troops to access accredited representatives. VA has committed to making this a reality. By codifying this collaboration, we ensure that more service members have access to critical information and resources prior to separation.

Sadly, many are not offered the opportunity to even use this program because they cannot attend TAP on time. Timely attendance in TAP is critical. Recently, a member of Chairman Tester's own staff contacted VFW to file a BDD claim. When the VFW spoke to this staff member, we learned they had just one day to spare before they were ineligible. In a stroke of luck they had their records available, and the VFW was able to file before the hours'-long window closed. Had they waited even one day, they would have missed an opportunity to apply for seamless care and benefits.

This problem disproportionately affects junior-enlisted and junior officers, who comprise most of the separating force. Veterans Experience Office data indicate that this is a real problem, with most claimants reporting they file after the uniform comes off because they miss the BDD window entirely. The VFW clients indicate that this may be a command-level problem demanding command-level solutions, such as evaluating leaders on compliance.

Connections to community resources are also a force multiplier that often means the difference between a successful—excuse me—successful or unsuccessful transition. The law was written to ensure community connections are made for all separating service members. Unfortunately, DOD has decided to make warm handoffs only for troops it determines require the most help. The law is clear, though: these connections are for everyone.

We cannot feasibly contort the TAP curriculum to meet the unique needs of everyone leaving the military. This is where countless organizations that offer community-based services play a role. If troops are going to college, connect them to Student Veterans of

America chapters. If they want tech careers in Texas, connect them to VetsinTech. If they want to work on Wall Street, there is FourBlock. No one knows what challenges they will actually face until the uniform finally comes off. This is why reliable community connections are so important. If no one knows these organizations exist, they will not be able to help. We only prevent service members from slipping through the cracks if DOD makes the connections as required by law.

Finally, the VFW knows that families often play a critical role in facilitating successful transitions, while the service member focuses on completing their service obligation. Spouse attendance in TAP is notoriously low, but these classrooms full of uniformed service members, on-base during the duty day, may not be the most effective vehicle. The VFW is a strong proponent of Labor's Off-Base Transition Training program, which is why we recommend either integrating VA benefits into OBTT, or testing an OBTT-like program around military installations focused on families.

Look, we have come a long way since the VOW Act. Veterans' unemployment is down; knowledge of benefits is up, innovations that we heard about earlier, like SkillBridge, Solid Start, Employment Navigator and Partnership Program are available. But we still miss many of the transitioning service members who need these services the most. The VFW believes we have a key role to play in this, which is why we are grateful for the dialogue with your Committees today.

Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, this concludes my testimony. And I am eager to answer any questions you or the Committee members may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Gallucci appears on page 129 of the Appendix.]

Chairman REED. There will be questions. Thank you, Ryan. Mr. Porter, you have the floor.

STATEMENT OF TOM PORTER, VICE PRESIDENT OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS, BLUE STAR FAMILIES

Mr. PORTER. Thank you, Chairman Tester, Chairman Reed, for having the hearing. Blue Star Families is the Nation's largest grassroots military family support organization, and we are really at the heart of the issue that we are talking about here today, transitions, here today.

We are committed to connecting military and veteran families with their neighbors and organizations to create vibrant communities of mutual support. Our groundbreaking research is raising the Nation's awareness of the unique challenges of military family life, both during and after service. Our innovative programs are solving specific challenges for our families, such as fighting economic insecurity with resources that foster spouse career development, address food insecurity, building family strength with family programming, and provide critical peer support for caregivers.

With more than 275,000 members, including chapters and communities all over the world, Blue Star Families touches more than 1.5 million family members every year. By cultivating innovative programs and partnerships, we seek to ensure that our military

and veteran families always feel connected, supported, and empowered.

Blue Star Families has 13 chapters across the country, which provide virtual and in-person support, and local presence where various programs, events, and services are provided to military and veteran families to help them feel more welcome and engaged in the community.

This past year, Craig Newmark, founder of Craigslist, committed \$100 million to the support of veterans by contributing to solutions for the most pressing challenges facing veteran and military families, including mental health, suicide prevention, housing and homelessness, and food insecurity. As part of this generous contribution, he also made a personal commitment to Blue Star Families to start 12 new outposts to assist military and veteran families.

Our outposts will build upon our existing chapter structure, allowing us to partner with local organizations to bring events, programs, and resources to even more veteran and military-connected communities worldwide.

Transitioning from uniform to civilian life is a critical period for service members and their families, which is why it is extremely important that TAP is a comprehensive, family-centered, and outcome-based program that is delivered well in advance to service members and their family members before leaving service.

A 2022 GAO report said that over 90 percent of transitioning service members participated in TAP, but that nearly 25 percent of service members who needed maximum support didn't attend the mandatory 2-day class. However, our 2021 survey told us that over half, 58 percent of veterans reported they did not attend TAP or any government-sponsored transition assistance programming. Furthermore, 41 percent of these veterans reported they and their families disagreed that they were well-prepared to successfully navigate the transition from military to civilian life.

There are evaluation gaps in services, and service members, and dependents' accessibility of the services. It is a positive step that spouse employment has been incorporated into TAP; however, child-friendly courses also are key to ensure dependents' accessibility. Our perception is there are actually few literal barriers to participation for military spouses.

Instead, it seems that there is a culture of nonattendance among transitioning spouses that must be overcome. One of the biggest challenges that spouses indicate they face in our research, has to do with mental health challenges, and the impact they have on integration into civilian society, marital issues, and several others. It is our understanding that TAP includes some classes about identifying PTSD, and other mental health challenges, but not necessarily classes about how to manage these challenges and their consequences. Specifically, we believe that robust marital support programs will help these military spouses.

So in addition to what we normally look at in terms of transitioning with the TAP program, a lot of discussion here, also important that we haven't had a lot of discussion about here today, are some of the major programs that recently have been passed, like the Honoring our PACT Act, the VA has done an amazing job

reaching out to the veteran and military and veteran community to encourage them to enroll in their new benefits.

So over 600,000 cases of benefits have been approved in the last year, and it is an incredible amount. And those that get the disability benefits at the time following their separation that could be an enormous benefit and help during that critical part of transition.

Also, the honoring—the John Scott Hannon Act that was passed a couple of years ago; Blue Star Families is a recipient of one of the Fox Grants that were a part of that bill that you passed, Senator Tester. We appreciate that. We are in our second year that we have received that grant, it is a significant grant. We have done a lot of good. We have got some solid feedback. What we are doing with that money is we are training family members and friends on how to address veterans in this critical time of need.

So great work on that, thank you very much, and appreciate you having me here today.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Porter appears on page 141 of the Appendix.]

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Tom.
Mr. O'Neil, you have the floor.

**STATEMENT OF KEVIN O'NEIL, EMPLOYMENT AND
EDUCATION POLICY ASSOCIATE, THE AMERICAN LEGION**

Mr. O'NEIL. Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Member Moran, on behalf of National Commander Daniel J. Seehafer, and our 1.6 million dues-paying members, The American Legion thanks you for the opportunity to testify in Military to Civilian Transition.

My own transition journey began as I was driving down an unpaved road in Djibouti, Africa, with two of my fellow Airmen. We were on our way to start our overnight shift, and I proposed the question: What do you plan to do when you separate? Neither knew. The uncertainty in their responses propelled me to start thinking about the path that I would take following my military career. After many nights alone on deployment and a great deal of time to think, I made the decision to go back to school.

Upon separating from the Air Force, I enrolled at a community college, and from there I transitioned to a four-year university where I earned my degree. I had finally achieved the goal that I set for myself four years prior. I went on to earn my graduate degree, and all of that has led me here today.

While I am incredibly proud of these accomplishments, I recognized that I was fortunate enough to have found my path well before my separation. This cannot be said for all service members, and I believe that this is why we are here today. TAP offers a plethora of information that service members can utilize to achieve success post-military service, but there are improvements that can be made. One improvement is seeing that service members begin TAP no later than 365 days prior to their anticipated separation.

According to a GAO Report released in December 2022, 70 percent of service members are not completing TAP within the mandated time frame. With over 200,000 service members separating annually, that equates to around 140,000 transitioning service

members who may have less than a year to plan for their future. This is far too many service members who may find themselves unprepared for the transition to civilian life.

In light of the information gathered in this study, The American Legion would like to offer a couple of suggestions to remedy this issue. First, we can look to the Veterans Affairs Military Life Cycle modules, or MLC, as a best practice for providing vital information regarding the transition process. MLC modules comprise 14 comprehensive informational sessions that allow transitioning service members and their families to access the information provided through TAP at any time throughout their military service. It is a great tool that can be emulated by other federal agencies.

For instance, DOL offers a program titled the Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot. This program offers one-on-one career assistance to transitioning service members and their spouses at installations worldwide. It is an excellent opportunity for service members and their spouses to better prepare for civilian life by finding the right career.

If DOL were to create online modules similar to those offered through the VA's MLC modules, service members and their spouses would have greater access to information that will prepare them for a successful career post-military service. In addition to allowing for greater access to the many opportunities available to transitioning service members and their families, we would like to see an application created that can be accessed at any time throughout one's military career.

This app would comprise the modules offered through TAP, as well as the programs offered by DOL, DOD, and other Executive Branch agencies. Through interagency partnerships and the creation of a comprehensive Military Life Cycle app, we can ensure that service members and their families have unfettered access to information that will assist in transitioning to civilian life.

Not only do we want service members and their spouses to be successful in their post-military endeavors, but we also want them to serve knowing that there are options for them when it comes time to separate or retire. This will allow service members to be successful both in their military career and post-military career, as it contributes to a sense of security that comes only from having a plan.

Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Member Moran, The American Legion thanks you once again for allowing us to be here. And I welcome any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. O'Neil appears on page 150 of the Appendix.]

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Kevin, for your testimony.
Next, we have Dr. Arthur DeGroat.

STATEMENT OF ARTHUR DEGROAT, EDD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS, KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Dr. DEGROAT. Chairmen, Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, Members of these Committees; I, as a third-generation Army Officer, am honored for this opportunity to ad-

dress you today with my insights on the challenges of Post-9/11 era of veterans' transition. As a combat veteran, a human science researcher, a professional practitioner of transition assistance through higher education at Kansas University, and working with nonprofit Veterans Service Organizations, professional consulting, and my own personal coaching with over 120 veterans from the ranks of Specialist to four-star General, I believe that I have a unique and relevant perspective on contemporary veterans' transition.

This year marks my 39th year in public service to our Nation's Military, in and out of uniform, and for the last 18 years, I have worked extensively with our veterans' transition effort. So I am deeply thankful to participate with you at this joint hearing today on a subject of my greatest personal interest.

For opening remarks, I wish to share a brief statement of my strategic perspective on our transition challenge. The military separation system deployed at the inception of the All-Volunteer Force in the 1970s was adequate for many generations of military members departing their service. Societal workforce and generational dynamics of previous decades proved to offer more favorable conditions for effective transition for our Cold War and Gulf War I veterans than we face today. However, we see today that far too little research work was conducted then and now on the practice of exit transition.

Thankfully, for four decades, this gap of an empirical basis needed to guide veteran separation went largely unnoticed due to the presence of a large allied military defense sector that absorbed up to 80 percent of transitioning veterans into employment after their service.

As we entered the Post-9/11 era, where social, economic, generational, martial, and workforce conditions had changed in significant ways, we found our legacy separation systems ill-suited to effectively assist our new generation of service members and their families to re-enter civil life in the workplace.

Responding to this reality, we performed a process improvement approach to adapt our legacy separation system to a transition assistance model. Some key changes impacting modern transition include the changed nature of the workforce, a change from a human resource development model to a talent acquisition model, dramatic change to the very nature of work in the workplace, the economic necessity for dual-working spouse families, and the increased awareness of the impacts of behavioral health care and human performance.

From my research and practice, I believe that the sum totality of these societal and generational changes, compounded by a lack of an evidence-based approach to modern transition, were not adequately accounted for as we adapted our legacy military separation system to meet Post-9/11 era transition assistance needs. While many process improvements were made reactively to our underperforming systems of today, I find some of these changes have been ineffective when being applied to our transition system, some of these being addressed today in this hearing.

So today, we find our Post-9/11 era veterans having a greater transition challenge than any previous generation and having to

serve as pioneers as the first generation of veterans to face such a major cross-boundary career transition and doing so while competing for entry with a highly skilled incumbent civilian talent pool for careers in new industry sectors where our veterans have little to no direct relevant experience in. Adding complexity to this current reality, we are also asking our young service members to forge their post-military futures within a process started just 365 days before they exit.

This is both daunting and unrealistic, given what we know empirically about adults making these types of life changes. My deepest belief is that our current TAP program places too much life decision-making upon our existing service members too close to their departure, rendering a state of learned helplessness where our service members perceived an actual need, or lack preparation to transition questions if their innate belief is they can do so successfully.

In my written testimony, I offered several recommendations aimed to overcome systematic challenges in our current efforts, including adapting from a one-stage simultaneous process to a more natural evidence-based approach of a three-stage process of transition that sequentially merges with our retention efforts, that can prepare our service members and their families for staying or leaving in a time frame where essential resources and assets and planning can occur over time.

This would require an institutional culture where transition is not viewed as a competitor to retention. Both are simply a natural aspect of caring for service members over their life course.

My written testimony also addresses the empirical realities of service members' human capital and economic entry cost to civilian life and work that needs to be addressed more realistically than we are doing today. As well as commenting on the phenomena that as a result of learned helplessness, many transitioning service members place an over-reliance on VA financial disability entitlements, becoming a disincentive to do the hard work for self-sufficiency and independence.

In conclusion, I appreciate this opportunity to help our military, VA, and others as we continue to work together to improve this vital capability to care for our service members and their families as they move successfully into civil society as proud, independent, and successful veterans. I am also ready to share some insights on health and well-being impacts upon transition performance, as it was highlighted during the first panel.

I look forward to your questions. Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Dr. DeGroat appears on page 162 of the Appendix.]

Chairman TESTER. Dr. DeGroat, thank you for your testimony. As I thank all of you for your testimony. I am just going to say one comment about you, Dr. DeGroat, because these other fellows are in front of the Committee much more often than you are, but I really appreciate you thinking outside the box, and you do that very, very well. And I appreciate that.

I want to ask to all of you, you guys heard the previous panel; you heard the transition programs that are there, there is a lot of

things you could say, and you could eat up the next hour each one of you, but if you were going to pick one thing, one thing that the Department of Defense could do better and that the VA could do better, what would it be?

And I will start with you, Mr. Gallucci.

Mr. GALLUCCI. Thank you, Chairman Tester. So one thing that we believe VA can do better is the collaboration that we are already working on, and that is the integration of accredited representatives in the Transition Assistance Program, which is also supported by the TAP Promotion Act. The reason this is so important is that we know that the people who need this program the most are not linked to it.

We also know that TAP can't be everything to everyone; it is supposed to provide a baseline of information to separating service members. That is where high-touch, vetted, accredited programs and resources like the VFW, or VSO peers, or state agencies play such a critical role.

Some of the urgency of this: are the predatory actors that Mr. Jacobs spoke to in the first hearing. We call them "claim sharks". I want to share two stories. The first is Joe Ziegler, our accredited representative on Fort Wainwright in Alaska; the service members he meets with regularly wonder why they are getting solicitation emails and aggressive online ads from these companies looking to sign predatory contracts.

The second is a gentleman who is sitting behind me from the State of Tennessee, Preston Stewart, VFW member, who his peers, within the military service, recommended one of these predatory companies to help him with his benefits. So our recommendation is to inject this into the Military Life Cycle module so that leaders at all levels know what "right" looks like. There are aggressive predatory actors out there, but there is lots of free assistance, competent, highly trained assistants ready to help.

Chairman TESTER. Tom.

Mr. PORTER. Thank you, Chairman. I think that we would really like them to be able to look at the TAP program through the lens of what the family members want. Maybe they are looking at it from a top-down perspective. What does not only the service member want and his or her transition to civilian life, but what does the spouse want? What does the child want? And then deliver on that in person. A lot of new possibilities have developed opportunities with a virtual TAP, but they really need to have the in-person, high-touch availability for these opportunities.

And they need to be able to have these events when it is not just during working hours; they could be outside of working hours, because if a spouse has a job, if the service member is busy during the day, then there is less excuse for them not to be able to attend if it is outside of working hours. I can tell you that as a recently retired service member, just trying to get a hold of anybody to do anything on the military side outside of working hours it is almost impossible. So they can do better on that.

And then how better to acclimate to the civilian world than working in public-private partnerships to tell people what it is like on the outside and the skills that are necessary to make that transition. And then, when you do all these things, to be able to tell

everybody about it. I would say look at what the VA is doing with the PACT Act. If they can do a hundred outreach events in a month's time and see the progress and the results that they are getting in terms of people enrolling in the VA at this point, then they can do this, DOD and VA can both do this, in terms of talking to service members, their spouses, their family members about the possibilities of their training and their transitioning to new opportunities in the civilian world.

Chairman TESTER. Okay. And Kevin.

Mr. O'NEIL. Thank you for the question. In reference to the VA, I think that they can do a better job in advertising their Military Life Cycle modules. I think this is a very important resource. Currently, only 30,000 participants have utilized this resource in the past year. I think this could be greatly enhanced, and that comes with better advertisement and communication.

Additionally, I don't think we need to see transition, retention, and recruitment in conflict. The Marine Corps has proven that these things can coincide and work effectively together with their Marine for Life Program. The Marine Corps currently has the best retention and recruitment of all branches of the military.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you for that. Dr. DeGroat.

Dr. DEGROAT. I believe the DOD has the opportunity to make the greatest improvement to our TAP program, and particularly, to see the conflict between transition and retention. I think we saw when we had wounded warriors, we recognized that we weren't caring for them well during Iraq and Afghanistan. And so what we did is create Warrior Transition Battalions and sort of Recovery Units, and putting line units, and line leaders in charge of their soldiers to help them get well.

And I think we need to expand the role of the activity leadership, in units, to start the conversations earlier with their service members, to make sure that they are talking about the right things, and that their responsibility—they are responsible for their soldiers, if they choose to stay and re-enlist, or if they opt to transition back to civilian life.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, all. Senator Reed.

Chairman REED. Well, in the spirit of our partnership, I will yield to Senator Moran.

Chairman TESTER. Okay. Senator Moran.

Senator MORAN. Senator Reed, thank you.

First of all, let me compliment Mr. O'Neil. I appreciated your story about how you have lived your life, and how you thought about it, and the success that you have had since service. And I thank you for your service, and I wish you well in all the endeavors that now follow it. You captured me with the kind of personal nature of what you have experienced.

And Mr. Porter, you mentioned Fox Grants, that captured my attention, too. I think it is one of the significant components of the John S. Hannon Act, and I rarely run into anyone, or any community, or any organization that knows or is utilizing them. And I am not absent to community leaders, and I am not absent veterans. I am anxious to hear your story about that grant in the two or three sentences that you can tell me, and maybe we can follow up more.

Mr. PORTER. Thank you, Senator. So we are in our second year at Blue Star Families with the Fox Grant, \$750,000 the first year, and was recently approved for the next year. And so what we do, we focused it on equipping family and friends on the training and the skill sets that they need to be able to talk to that veteran service member during that critical time, to get the help that they need, and which is, as we all know, it is a very sensitive time.

So it is an eight-week training. And our program, it is called Upstream Solutions to Crisis, and that is within Blue Star Families, and we have so far completed seven cohorts, a total of 50 participants. So it is very in-depth training, and we are very proud of that. And we are going to be looking forward to doing more.

Senator MORAN. Is this occurring across the country, with Blue Star Families in a particular community taking the lead? Or this is something that you do nationally?

Mr. PORTER. It is across the country, nationally. It is. And we hope to expand it.

Senator MORAN. And does that mean utilizing technology to deliver that conversation, those services?

Mr. PORTER. Sure, and in-person.

Senator MORAN. Right; and in person. Okay. Thank you.

Dr. DeGroat, welcome back. I was reminded by your presence that the last time you were with us, Chairman Tester called you: "Hot, white, smart." And thanked you for improving his image of Kansans by your presence today. In your testimony, you say, and I quote, "Societal and generational changes were not adequately accounted for as we adopted our legacy military separation system to meet current Post-9/11 era transition demands."

You mentioned this in your response to Senator Tester's question. I wanted to give you, at least for my benefit, tell me more. You have done a lot of research into Military Life Cycle, and touchpoints in military careers leading up to separation. What should we know to take from that sentence?

Dr. DEGROAT. I think societally this is a different—let me go back. We tend to see veterans as this monolithic archetype from generation to generation, but there are significant generational differences between each generation of veterans. Yet, we continue to just mildly improve on some existing legacy systems as we manage them in all different processes of talent management. But I think we have to recognize that, generationally, these are different people, the nature of their war experience.

I went to war one time in 23 years for 7 months. Young veterans in three years have gone back and forth to wars in two different theaters or three different theaters in four years. The iteration of how we utilize soldiers today has incredibly increased psychological demands. This is the first generation that went to war where they are present on the battlefield and the home front because of the presence of social media and communication technologies.

The cognitive, mental, and moral demands on the current generation of our service members, they are still managing their homes while they are managing their soldiers on the battlefield, concurrently. So and then the nature of the workforce, we had a—we had an economy and industries where small unit leadership, which is the majority of our combat soldiers, they have great expe-

rience in leading groups of diverse young people to do very complicated, dualistic, hazardous things. And historically, they made great lead supervisors in manufacturing and industry.

But now we have knowledge workers, and knowledge economies. And so I also believe strongly that one of our shortfalls, in this generation, is the reliance on and looking at the MOS skill—the Military Occupational Skill—most service members take the ASVAB test, and it kind of boils down to all—from the whole range of choices of what they can do in the military, from what they were talented for and what they desire to do. It says: You can be a cook, a truck driver, or a fuel handler.

So now as we start to transition, we are saying: Okay, let us just credential you in that, and make you do one of those three things in civilian life. So I think the reality is, as our workforce today, where our service members may have been snipers today, but they don't want to be snipers in the civilian world, even if they could. They are looking for a bold transition, a cross-boundary transition to a new industry and a new life, where their soft skills, as veterans, are very relevant, but their innate military talent is not directly relevant.

So those are just a few examples where, generationally, the workforce has changed, our soldiers and veterans have changed, and we have to have a transition program that is relevant and that places them within those realities. And my written testimony cites about 13 other areas, specifically, where we are missing the mark on being more relevant.

Senator MORAN. Dr. DeGroat, thank you. Chairman Reed, thank you for your leadership on the Committee, thank you for your leadership in the Army Caucus with me, and thank you for bringing our two Committees together for this important topic.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much, Senator Moran, and gentlemen, thank you for your testimony.

Mr. Gallucci, you mentioned these shakedown artists that are going after people as they retire. Have you been in contact, or any organizations, with the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau? That organization has a dedicated section for the military?

Mr. GALLUCCI. Yes, Senator. As a matter of fact, my colleague who is with us today, Kristina Keenan, had participated in a roundtable of CFPB on this last week. We are in regular contact. We are also working—Kristina had worked with state attorneys general to pen a letter in support of reining in some of these companies.

Chairman REED. Well, if you need any assistance, please contact me in my office directly.

And Mr. Porter, I was talking about the transition with respect to health care. You say, from a very interesting perspective, the families. What is one or two things that we could do better in terms of transitioning active-duty personnel into a transition to civilian life, maintaining the best health care they can?

Mr. PORTER. I am sorry. Are you talking about VA health care, or are you talking about transitioning?

Chairman REED. I am just talking about transitioning.

Mr. PORTER. Okay.

Chairman REED. Because, you know, many families don't get VA but they have some benefits, or they just need advice as to how to sign up for the best program for their family, both value and cost.

Mr. PORTER. Right. As I was mentioning before, it is really important to look at this through the lens of not only the service member, but the spouse and the child. What are their needs? What are their school needs? What are their employment needs, their health care needs, their community needs? And to be able to fold in other outside partners, so public-private partnerships can be part of that. That could be able to give job training, transitioning advice into the civilian career world. So those are important things.

But the main thing is to look at this from the perspective of not just the top-down from what the commander thinks on the base, but what does the service member, spouse, and children need?

Chairman REED. Well, thank you. And you, Mr. O'Neil, do you have any ideas in terms of this issue of medical transition; because I think it is important?

Mr. O'NEIL. Thank you for the question, sir. I do believe that, as I stated, regarding the Military Life Cycle modules, that resources can be better advertised and better communicated, and this should start day one in the service from your first duty station when you first process. You should be aware of these opportunities. But having access to virtual online modules creates a sense of anonymity that I think is important to service members because, unfortunately, there is a stigma associated with mental health issues.

Chairman REED. Thank you. And Dr. DeGroat, I think you have raised a fundamentally important topic, that is, there is a real desire within the military to retain personnel. And when you set up a system that sets up exit routes that are pretty clear now, that seems to have a tension with retention. You have raised this issue. Any advice in terms of how do we blend those two together?

Dr. DEGROAT. I think it is a perceived tension because soldiers, everyone, every soldier leaves either by the end of their service tour, or the end of a career, or by sacrifice in combat, or result, or just by separation. So the fact that every soldier leaves, and it means that that transition is just another part of—it is the same thing as retention. It is the other side of retention.

I think when you show the soldier early on all of the challenges of leaving, and all of the assets and opportunities of staying for a while longer, I think they make a more informed choice. I don't think the truth of the value of military service is a disincentive to stay. They joined for the right reasons. And so I really don't think in practice, it is really a competitive thing, one or the other. I think actually it is the same thing. Given more opportunity to think about it early on, you are actually coaching the person. You have made a great choice, you can stay here if you want, you and your family, or you can transition. And if you transition, here is, to do what you want to do, these are the things you need to do between now and then.

If you are ready for that, if you have saved money to start your own business, if you have got enough savings, and a plan, and enough credentials to get the kind of compensation in your career, your future career that you need to support your family independently; health care, child care, then you are ready to go. But if you

are not ready to go, then you continue to stay in the service, serve honorably and usefully, and build those assets and resources needed while you are in your uniform and prepare yourself for that eventual transition.

Chairman REED. So the premise is that an individual has to be informed about the benefits of continued service, the values, and all the external, as well as the cost of all those things. And then, at the same time, they have to be made aware of what is available outside so they can make a better judgment. And do you feel we are—very quickly, do you feel we are doing that now?

Dr. DEGROAT. We are not doing that, but I think we can do that.

Chairman REED. Okay.

Dr. DEGROAT. I think it is just a culture change, and we have to really look at that and make sure commanders realize that is the right thing to do. It is not change—it is not going to drive—it may improve retention or delay transition until the service member is more prepared, and their families are more prepared. But not having that conversation until the last year, and currently models, it looks like transition is when retention fails.

Chairman REED. One other quick question, which is basically a lot of personnel will make that decision, you know, they are going to reenlist, I am going to reenlist, and then two months before their—expiration of their service, they suddenly throw up their hands: No, I am getting out. And those are counted in statistics as: Well, you didn't have the full year. I think we have to do something about that. I think they have to refine who falls into the category.

Dr. DEGROAT. Yes, sir. My written testimony shows that transition in other industries is usually a three-stage process. It starts with confronting the reality of eventually leaving. Then there is a stage of disengagement, which is pretty much what our TAP program is now. And then there is a period of resocialization that science says could be up to three-and-a-half to seven years. So what we are doing is essentially compressing all three of those natural adult transition stages into one, 365, and as many testimony, was made, we are asking life-changing—young people to make life-changing decisions that will affect the course of their life, too late, and not enough time to think through and build the assets needed to go to the next stage.

Chairman REED. Thank you.

Dr. DEGROAT. So I think, simply, that the opportunity is just to use the existing military infrastructure that we used in retention counseling with unit line leaders who know those soldiers and families the best, use them to start having the transition conversations with not being fearful that that is going to encourage them out.

In fact, those conversations of showing the alternatives and the options, which would suggest, you are probably not ready after four years to take yourself and your three children, as a junior enlisted person, with very little direct transferable workplace skills. You ought to stay in a little longer, become a non-commissioned officer, get some leadership skills, get some more courses while you are here. Maybe it is time for your spouse to get ready before you get out, because then you will be a dual-working family.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much. I want to thank all the witnesses. Do you have another comment?

Senator MORAN. If I could ask a question if you would let me?

Chairman REED. I will let you ask a question, but it has to be succinct, and the answer has to be even more succinct.

Senator MORAN. Dr. DeGroat, please don't get me in trouble with—it won't be my fault; it will be your fault if I am in trouble with Chairman Reed.

You said something, and I was writing it as quickly as I could, and it had something to do with VA benefits. You said at the end of your testimony, and what I wrote was: That it has a consequence in creating less motivation to pursue other options. Would you tell me what you were conveying?

Dr. DEGROAT. I will make this very concise. I believe the frustrations that young people have when they are separating with the transition program is that they then start over-relying on seeking higher levels of disability as a financial cushion and that becomes a disincentive, where they are spending all their efforts in transition on working the disability claim and ratings, at the expense of working on independence and reliance for transitioning.

Senator MORAN. Is there any suggestion in that answer that the VA needs to emphasize more educational benefits, workforce, workforce training benefits? Or is this just that people have this expectation of monetary benefits upon their departure?

Dr. DEGROAT. I think if the DOD transition program—in the DOD if the transition program is more effective, as we talked about today with some of these changes, then that problem will solve itself. But I think the lack of—the perceived lack of transitioning well through the DOD TAP program is causing an over-reliance and an overburden on the VA for disability to be the sole source of their plan for transition.

Senator MORAN. Thank you.

Chairman REED. The last word has to be given by two Rhode Islanders. So Mr. Gallucci, please go.

Mr. GALLUCCI. Well, thank you, Chairman Reed. I wanted just to take a second to respond to Ranking Member Moran's comments, and Dr. DeGroat's comments as well. I fundamentally disagree that that is what is happening. Unfortunately, this is the system that is set up. What we see is that these benefits are often an enabler to economic readjustment and the like. I sit before you as a product of many VA programs. I am service-connected; I utilize VA health care; I use the GI Bill; I use the VA home loan.

Now, I believe that these have allowed me and people like me to thrive after military service against other factors. What I will also say is that one of the things that is missing in the TAP curriculum is that the primary mechanism for eligibility for VA care, is that service-connected disabilities. There is other policy nuances here where insurance companies don't have to cover conditions that result from military service, and that is supposed to be covered by the VA.

If I were injured on my job with the VFW, I would be eligible for workers' compensation. I am not eligible for that in the military. There is a reason that these benefits exist. I invite the dialogue with Dr. DeGroat and with the Committee, but I don't want to understate the significance of separating service members applying for these earned benefits.

Chairman REED. Well, thank you, gentlemen. I want to thank you for your testimony, and also for your service to the Nation, your continued service to the Nation. I appreciate it deeply.

We will keep the record open for a week. And the hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 1:09 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

Prepared Statements

NOT FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL RELEASED BY THE COMMITTEE

Statement of
The Honorable Ashish Vazirani
Acting Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness)
before the
Senate Armed Services Committee
and
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
“Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service”
October 18, 2023

NOT FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL RELEASED BY THE COMMITTEE

Chairmans Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, and other distinguished Members of the Committees, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the collaborative relationship between the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Labor (DOL), and our other federal agency partners. DoD and our partners are working closely to improve the effectiveness, quality, timeliness, and efficiency of the delivery of benefits and health care services, while enhancing interoperability and efficiency in our joint operations, particularly in the area of military-to-civilian transition. We advance these goals primarily through the Joint Executive Committee (JEC), a VA-DoD interagency collaborative body co-chaired by VA Deputy Secretary Tanya Bradsher and me. We are uniquely situated, not just because of our positions, but because we are also statutorily charged as the “chief collaborators” on behalf of each department. As such, we are the standard-bearers leading nearly all joint efforts between VA and DoD.

As a result of the JEC, we moved past the historically bifurcated view that DoD’s role ends when the Service member separates from military service, to embrace a new appreciation of overlapping interests and dependent responsibilities across the Service member and Veteran journey. I am honored to join VA’s Under Secretary for Benefits, Mr. Josh Jacobs, and Assistant Secretary of Labor for the Veterans’ Employment and Training Service, Mr. James Rodriguez, to share how the three departments collaborate regarding military-to-civilian transition.

Joint Framework for Transition Success

Nearly 200,000 Service members transition from the military to civilian life each year. This transition is widely recognized as a potentially challenging and stressful process for Service members, Veterans, their family members, and caregivers. While no experience is identical, Service members and Veterans share a broad set of common stages they universally traverse. VA, DoD, and DOL focus on each stage, particularly during the critical transition period—365 days before separation and extending through the critical 365 days after separation—to proactively identify and address potential gaps as well as opportunities for collaboration, coordination, and shared resources. Recognizing the need for interagency collaboration, the Fiscal Year (FY) 2004 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) directed the establishment of the VA-DoD Joint Executive Committee (JEC) to maximize coordination and sharing between

and within the Departments (Attachment 1: Joint Executive Committee Organizational Structure).

In 2020, understanding the critical importance of a successful transition, the Transition Assistance Program Executive Council (TAP-EC) was realigned under the JEC to ensure comprehensive oversight by senior leaders and direct access to decision makers. The military-to-civilian transition process works in large part because of a dynamic and collaborative interagency partnership. In addition to DoD, VA, and DOL, four other federal agencies and the military services comprise the TAP-EC, including the Department of Education, Department of Homeland Security, Small Business Administration and the Office of Personnel Management. This formal collaborative body sets the conditions for a successful military-to-civilian transition and establishes expectations for program and interagency integration, performance measures, and outcomes to facilitate synergy, consistency, and synchronization in the military-to-civilian transition. The TAP-EC ensures that the transition program is relevant, progressive, and continuously improving to meet the needs of the transitioning Service member.

Military-to-Civilian Transition

As the Acting Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness, my job is to support our DoD mission by ensuring readiness of our force; this includes preparing Services members and their families for transition. The Department is committed to supporting our Warfighters and their families as they navigate the transition from military to civilian life. Over the last five years, DoD and our interagency partners have hosted numerous Military to Civilian Transition Summits that yielded two key outcomes: (1) we aligned disparate department and interagency transition activities into one overarching transition framework, and (2) we designated the year before and year after separation as the “critical transition period.” These summits led to the development of the Military to Civilian Readiness (M2C Ready) Framework, adopted by the JEC in September 2019 (Attachment 2: M2C Ready Framework).

Under the auspices of the JEC, the Departments began implementation of a more interconnected and efficient transition process that aligns military-to-civilian transition activities along a continuum during the critical 365 days before separation and extending through the critical 365 days after separation. This 365-pre and 365-post transition time provides for comprehensive, standardized, and individualized assessments across DoD, VA, and the military

services; and reinforces development of an individualized transition plan according to a Service member's unique circumstances.

Military to Civilian Readiness (M2C Ready) Framework

M2C Ready is an overarching framework that aligns all the various activities during transition to provide transitioning Service members with an understanding of, and easy access to, all the benefits, services and resources they are entitled to. Further, M2C Ready provides interagency support to facilitate a holistic and successful transition, and it guides policymakers towards areas of the process that need additional attention without creating duplicative programs or activities. The M2C Ready framework assisted in identifying gaps in the transition process and facilitated agency efforts aimed at advancing the health, benefits, and support of Service members, Veterans, and their families.

Transition Assistance Program (TAP) of Today

Today's Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is far different than the program of ten, five, or even three years ago. Through DoD, VA and DOL focused collaborative efforts, the TAP of today is an individualized, robust program with alternate pathways and multiple levels of assistance. At each step of the process, Service members have access to trained counselors who guide the Service member and tailor the program, allowing Service members to be in control of their transition and use programs, resources, and information that fit their specific needs and align with their post-transition goals.

Initial Counseling

The TAP journey begins with an Initial Counseling (IC) session initiated no later than 365 days prior to separation, and Service members eligible for retirement are strongly encouraged to begin transition 24 months prior to retirement. During the individualized counseling session with a trained TAP counselor, a Service member completes a baseline wellbeing assessment and begins development of an Individual Transition Plan. Based on the personal self-assessment and counseling, the TAP counselor assigns the Service member to a transition tier level. The assigned tier level—one (minimal assistance), two (medium assistance), or three (most assistance)—determines the transition assistance a Service member needs. Each

individual Service member's tier alignment details which TAP components, courses, and Career Readiness Standards (CRS) are mandatory.

Individual Self-Assessment

The military-to-civilian transition process has historically focused on career readiness, as directed by 10 U.S.C 1142, U.S.C. 1144, and supporting Department policies. Illuminated by numerous stories of Veterans who died by suicide, like that of Sgt. Daniel Keegan and Sgt. Daniel Somers, among many others, the TAP-EC is piloting a self-assessment that will assist in determining the likelihood the Service member will face major readjustment, health care, employment, or other transition-related challenges across nine multiple life domains: social & relational, resiliency, hope, financial, employment, housing, sense of belonging, mental & physical health resource awareness. To ensure meaningful data, the pilot will run from March 1, 2023 through February 29, 2024 at 17 installations. We project a potential Phase II pilot from May through June 2024 to evaluate any significant adjustments and lessons learned identified by the initial pilot. A department-wide implementation date will be determined based on the success of the pilot, required adjustments, and lessons learned.

Pre-Separation Counseling Brief

Once the IC and assessment are complete, the Service member attends the Pre-Separation Counseling Brief (Pre-Sep). Pre-Sep informs the Service member of various services, benefits, and resources available during and after transition. The Pre-Sep also familiarizes the Service member with available resources and content within the TAP courses. This provides the Service member with the knowledge and flexibility to determine when to use services based on individual needs and timeline for transition.

Benefits Delivery at Discharge

DoD and VA encourage Service members to apply for VA Disability compensation benefits prior to separation and therefore coordinate closely in the execution of the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program. BDD allows Service members who are separating and applying for VA disability to file their claim as early as 180 days prior to separation. In September of 2023, DoD and VA began leveraging electronic pre-separation service treatment

records as a foundation for considering Service members' applications for BDD. This eliminates burdensome requirements for Service members to obtain and transmit records to VA, reduces time-consuming administration at military medical treatment facilities, and speeds the application process by as much as 50 percent. We are working to make all available personnel record and clinical data available electronically for the BDD population to create even more efficiencies.

One Separation Health Assessment (OneSHA)

Furthermore, DoD and VA consolidated the DoD's Separation History and Physical Examination (SHPE) and VA's Separation Health Assessment (SHA) into a single, common VA-DoD separation health assessment with identical questions, terminology, and definitions. The new common form includes a new mental health assessment and collects information about occupational and environmental exposure, women's health, traumatic brain injury, oral health, and other focus areas. This common form facilitates streamlined transition of health care from DoD to VA; improved clinical documentation of health status, including mental health at the time of separation; and improved VA claims processing for separating Service members who apply under the BDD program. The VA is already transferring all of the data from their use of the new form to DoD. The DoD will implement the form Fall 2024.

Transition Curriculum

During the transition period, all Service members must complete five core courses: Managing Your Transition, Military Occupational Code Crosswalk, Financial Planning for Transition, VA Benefits and Services, and DOL Employment Fundamentals for Career Transition.

Along with the core curriculum, TAP includes four two-day courses (tracks) to provide focused information and resources aligned with specific post-transition goals. The four tracks are employment, vocational, education, and entrepreneurship. Regardless of their designated tier, Service members must elect a track based on individual post-transition goals and are encouraged to attend the track-specific course. However, only those determined as Tier Level 3 are required to attend the elected track. Military Departments may exempt Service members determined as Tier Level 2 from track attendance based on the results of their IC and self-

assessment. DoD strongly encourages attendance at any additional track(s) that would provide valuable information supporting the Service member's individual transition plan.

Capstone

Conducted no later than 90 days before transition from active duty, Capstone is the final component of transition administered by the DoD. During Capstone, the Commander, or Commander's designee, reviews the Service member's transition journey to determine completion of all applicable components. Service members identified as requiring additional support require a warm handover by the Commander or designee. These warm handovers may include to Military OneSource for peer support, VA for housing assistance, or DOL for employment assistance. A warm handover creates a connection between the Service member and the appropriate partner or agency with the resources to assist in transition and beyond. Service members may also request a warm handover from the TAP counselor if they have a concern with their preparedness.

Enhanced Statement of Benefits

After separation, a Service member is provided with a list of all the benefits, services, and health care to which they may be entitled, though that list is not tailored to each individual Service member. Under the direction of the JEC, DoD and VA are developing an online, authoritative, and individualized Enhanced Statement of Benefits, which will be hosted on VA.gov. This tailored, searchable listing of eligible DoD, VA, and DOL post-separation benefits will make it easier and faster for Veterans to identify eligibility; search for benefits, services, and health care; and apply for benefits. Acquisitions efforts are planned for 2024.

Eligibility for Military OneSource After Separation

Military OneSource's 24/7 call center, website, and mobile app with access to over 100+ support services for transitioning Service members and their dependents, are available for 365 days after separation. Military OneSource is a familiar and trusted resource for Service members and their families. The top three services requested by transitioning Service members and their families are non-medical counseling (relationship and readjustment counseling), tax services, and hometown information and referral services.

VA Solid Start

As a result of DoD, VA, and DOL's collaboration on M2C Ready, the VA's Solid Start program was launched in 2021. It was designed to contact Veterans at three critical points during the first year of transition at the 90-, 180-, and 360-day mark in order to achieve early and consistent contact and support the transition to civilian life—from help getting a home loan, to health care, to returning to work to mental health support. Additionally, DoD data provided to Solid Start assists VA counselors in prioritizing outreach to Veterans.

Assessment and Joint Longitudinal Study

The DoD uses the Transition Assistance Participant Assessment (TAPA) to capture Service member experiences and knowledge gained throughout the TAP process. TAPA, along with diverse assessments from both governmental and non-governmental entities, allows the TAP-EC Interagency to evaluate TAP, the perception of TAP, and the quality of the counseling and instruction provided. The TAPA also captures basic demographics, such as Service, component, grade, length of service, location, and gender. Participation in the TAPA is voluntary and anonymous. However, the Department encourages Service members to complete the TAPA after each TAP course so that program improvement continues.

DoD and DOL joined forces with VA to participate in the Post-Separation Transition Assistance Program Assessment (PSTAP) Outcome Study. The study uses a cross-sectional and longitudinal survey to collect information from Veterans to continually evaluate and improve the military to civilian transition. Data collection began with the administration of the 2019 Cross-Sectional Survey with more than 3,000 Veterans voluntarily participating and with new cohorts of Veterans added each year. This multi-year study will help the departments determine the effectiveness of TAP on transitioning Service member long-term outcomes in the broad domains of employment, education, health, social relationships, finances, overall life satisfaction, and well-being and provide policy makers at DoD, VA, and DOL with valuable observations help guide future transition policy decisions.

Health Care Transition

The DoD and VA continue to engage in joint efforts to provide a consistent, patient-centered health care experience that delivers excellent quality, access, satisfaction, value, and, most importantly, outcomes. VA and DoD together manage the two largest health care systems in the nation, which care for an overlapping population. Over the years, we have enhanced our coordinated care; gained value, efficiencies, and consistency; and reduced duplication and waste, from a collaborative relationship that provides high-quality care for more than 18 million Service members, Veterans, and eligible beneficiaries.

Mental Health Touchpoints

Over the last two years, the JEC, TAP-EC, Benefits Executive Committee (BEC), the Joint Suicide Prevention and Associated Mental Health Work Group, and the Separation Health Working Group have established mental health touchpoints along the transition process. We have also implemented procedures between VA and DoD to improve data exchange and conduct warm handoffs of Service members at increased risk. Additionally, these touch points include Initial Counseling, an individual self-assessment, VA pre-registration for health care and benefits, a new Separation Health Assessment, inTransition behavioral health care assistance, and post-separation enrollment into VA Solid Start.

InTransition/Warm-hand-off

The DoD's inTransition Program assists Service members who have used behavioral health care services while on active duty in finding new providers and maintaining continuity of care across transitions—including when relocating to another assignment, returning from deployment, transitioning from active duty to the reserve, transitioning from the reserve to active duty, or preparing to leave military service. This assistance takes the shape of world-wide, specialized, telephonic transition coaching to facilitate the connection to a new provider, such as VA, community, or other providers. In 2020, as part of M2C Ready, the inTransition program began providing to VA data that classifies a subset of separating Service members into two categories of potential concern based on six mental health factors to facilitate VA outreach and access to care and benefits through VA's Solid Start program.

Military/Veteran Crisis Line

Today's Military/Veterans Crisis Line (MVCL) has grown to include an online chat and text service with over 500 responders in three call centers across the United States. Since its inception in 2007, MVCL has answered more than 7.1 million calls, 327,000 texts; and engaged in 862,000 virtual chats, resulting in over 1.3 million referrals to suicide prevention coordinators available in each VA medical center across the country. Suicide prevention coordinators can connect Veterans to the counseling and services they need. DoD and VA are committed to evolving the Military/Veterans Crisis Line (MVCL) to find the most effective ways to support Service members, Veterans, and their loved ones in crisis.

Predictive Modeling and Machine Learning

The DoD and the Air Force have partnered with RallyPoint, a social media platform with two million Veterans and current military members, through a pilot program to address the needs across five different populations within the military community: caregivers, transitioning Service members, those needing childcare, those in need of family advocacy services, and those in crisis. The pilot uses a predictive model and machine learning to connect Service members and families to the right Military OneSource resource at the right time. Further, the Air Force's predictive model and machine learning activities provide help to Service members and/or Veterans displaying suicidal ideation by detecting key word indicators. To date, the Air Force pilot has been credited with 49 interventions. The DoD, in close coordination with VA, is evaluating additional opportunities to implement predictive modeling and machine learning to provide the right resource, at the right time, to the right Service member, Veteran, or family member.

Enhancing Caregiver Transition

Caregiver and Service member transition experiences are tightly coupled. To provide a seamless experience to caregivers, the DoD and VA must ensure that they are fully engaged in Service member care coordination and transition planning, and that dedicated personnel are proactively engaging caregivers and families directly to provide guidance, relevant resources, planning, support, and clear expectations for next steps. In December 2022, the JEC directed a Human Centered Design (HCD) research effort to identify and evaluate opportunities to jointly improve and standardize the DoD and VA caregiver programs. The HCD research included discussions and evaluations with caregivers, the military departments, and the VA and DoD

service recovery programs to understand duplication and differences in DoD and VA program requirements, as well as needs, desires, and pain points impacting caregivers of medically separating or catastrophically injured Service members. The research results will be available in early spring 2024 and the JEC will use the gathered experiential information to consider program, policy, and legislative improvements for this group of transitioning individuals.

Career Readiness

Ensuring a healthy, ready force is essential to our national security. That also means we must prepare Service members for the transition into a civilian career. TAP courses are one piece of the transition framework. DoD partners with VA, DOL, and the Office of Personnel Management to advance several programs focused on career readiness, including Service members interested in pursuing civilian employment with the Federal government as an employer of choice.

Skillbridge

The highly popular Skillbridge program permits interested Service members to gain valuable civilian employment skills by providing job training, including apprenticeship programs, with defense industrial base employers as well as federal, state, local, and private-sector employers. In return, these businesses have access to the world's most highly trained and motivated workforce and can evaluate participants' suitability for future employment within their company. The program is voluntary, with the scope and individual participation defined by Service operational needs, force structure policy, and Service member interest. Over 22,000 Service members enrolled or participated in FY 2022, with over 3,800 industry partners to date. In comparison, in FY 2019, approximately 8,000 Service members participated with 450 industry partners.

In 2023, Skillbridge was realigned within the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs to improve program stability, governance, evaluation, and management. Those efforts include enhanced information systems, data collection, and data analysis. The DoD is conducting employer and stakeholder outreach engagements to ensure that the next evolution of Skillbridge is fully informed by Department, military services, Service member, and industry partner assessments and requirements.

Credentialing and Apprenticeships

The DoD credentialing program strengthens the career readiness of Service members by helping them attain civilian credentials, mapping military skills and experiences to enhance the professionalism of the All-Volunteer Force and bolstering preparedness for transitioning Service members to maximize employment opportunities. This is achieved by validating Service members' progress along a skills continuum from novice to expert, assessing milestones, and facilitating the attainment of qualifications along a targeted career and education pathway.

Additionally, the United Services Military Apprenticeship Program (USMAP) allows Service members to earn their DOL journeyman certificate through documented hours and skills in Military Occupational Specialties. It is the largest federal government registered apprenticeship program, with more than 93,000 active participants.

Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot

The Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot (ENPP) provides one-on-one career assistance to interested transitioning Service members, and their spouses, at 29 military installations worldwide. Provided outside of the formal TAP classroom instruction, participants complete self-assessments, undergo skills testing, explore career options, and identify high-demand occupations and necessary credentials. Participants also review detailed labor-market information and connect with government and non-government partners to identify other services to help secure meaningful and lasting post-separation careers.

Transition and the Military Family

The DoD provides an extensive portfolio of programs and services focused on supporting individuals and families during and after their military service and across the multiple domains of military family readiness: career, social, financial, health, and community. As the needs of Service members and their families change, the DoD continues to adjust and rebalance programs to serve the transitioning military community with relevant programs.

Spouse Transition

The Secretary of Defense has made taking care of people one of the Department's three top priorities, and that includes the health and well-being of our military families and spouses. Military spouses are eligible to attend TAP with their Service member. Additionally, the Military Spouse Transition Program (MySTeP) provides tailored, topical transition resources and information for military spouses.

Often, military spouses find the transition of their Service member an ideal time to begin, restart, or reenergize their career. The DoD has numerous tools and resources in place to assist military spouses in the employment space both during and after their Service member's military career. The Spouse Education and Career Opportunities (SECO) program provides several initiatives that specifically support the career needs of military spouses before, during, and after the transition of their Service member, including comprehensive educational and career coaching services through master's level, certified career coaches. SECO initiatives are available to military spouses for 365 days following the separation or retirement of their Service member.

The Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP) connects spouses to over 700 corporations, small businesses, federal agencies, and non-profits that have committed to recruit, hire, promote, and retain military spouses. Since 2011, MSEP employer partners have hired more than 275,000 spouses across all industry sectors.

Finally, occupational interstate licensure compacts provide consistent rules for licensed practitioners to work in multiple states and provide the most effective means for relieving the burdens of maintaining multiple state licenses for military spouses. The military provisions added to most of these compacts assist military spouses to establish a home state where they hold a license and have that license allow them to practice in all other compact-member states. Compacts offer a national solution for licensure portability for both civilian and military members.

Exceptional Family Member Program

The Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) helps military families with special medical and educational needs to navigate and access the resources to meet those needs. Military and Family Support Centers provide both EFMP family support and transition assistance services to prepare families for civilian life. Service members and their families can use EFMP family support services in conjunction with TAP through their installation's Military

and Family Support Center. EFMP family support services assist families with navigating and accessing resources individualized to meet their needs throughout the military lifecycle, including providing information and referral to essential services and considerations when transitioning out of the military. Each year, an estimated 200,000 Service members transition to civilian life. Of this, an estimated 12 percent have one or more family members enrolled in the EFMP.

Transitional Compensation for Abused Dependents (TCAD)

The Family Advocacy Program (FAP) promotes early identification, reporting, comprehensive intervention, assessment, and coordinated support to victims of child abuse and neglect and domestic abuse. Each installation is responsible for ensuring public awareness activities to include the availability of transitional compensation for abused dependents (TCAD) for victims of child abuse and neglect and domestic abuse. Transitional compensation benefits are designed to help family members establish a life apart from abusive Service members. The FAP Domestic Abuse Victim Advocate (DAVA) and other FAP personnel are available to offer victims education and information about TCAD to include eligibility criteria, application requirements, and expectations of what TCAD can provide and support to the victim through the TCAD application process.

Financial Readiness

DoD's financial readiness program provides mandatory financial literacy training to members at specific milestones across the military lifecycle, including transition, following the best practices outlined by the congressionally established Financial Literacy Education Commission (FLEC). DoD programs provide trusted, factual, objective, and unbiased education and counseling support to members and spouses free of conflict-of-interest, delivered in a non-judgmental manner, allowing individuals to make informed financial decisions to meet their goals and navigate potential financial challenges.

Financial readiness training that supports a successful transition to post-service life begins on day one of military service with an overview of the Blended Retirement System and the importance of saving for retirement and contributing to the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP). Using

the FLEC best practices, transition assistance financial literacy and counseling efforts build on an individual's mandatory prior training and focus on what is needed for transition.

Specific to the TSP, over the course of a career, education is initially focused on TSP basic investing, saving for retirement, and maximizing the government's matching contribution. In preparation for transition, the focus of education shifts to plan portability and options upon separation or retirement to include penalties and tax implications for early withdrawal. At points in between, training and education addresses the implications of being vested in TSP and options to increase one's TSP contributions and build a stronger financial future through pay increases or allotting a bonus to their account. The DoD also provides no-cost on-demand personal financial counseling with supplemental education and resources to members and spouses.

States: An Integral Partner in Transition

State Department of Veterans Affairs (SDVA) offices play a critical role in transition as they have been tasked to specifically manage Veterans' affairs and carry out the responsibility for Veteran services and programs in their respective states or territories. Additionally, these state departments welcome Veterans and their family's home, while connecting them to federal and state benefits, support, high-quality care, and recognition they have earned. DoD initiatives around transition include direct communication and connection with SDVAs.

The newest version of the TAP curriculum includes introductory information and links to SDVAs for 54 states and territories and the District of Columbia. Beginning in January 2024, the TAP VA Benefits Day will include a 45-minute session with state, county VA Reps, and Veteran Service Organizations, jointly identified by the VA and each host installation delivered at over 200 TAP locations around the globe.

Recognizing the importance of data, in both outreach and connecting Veterans to services and resources, the DoD has Memoranda of Understanding with each SDVA. DoD provides 240 data points for each transitioning Service member to SDVAs. In August, the DoD began updating the MOUs with revised language to provide additional data-use flexibilities to SDVAs and the inclusion of new transition data elements contained in the DoD Form 2648: Pre-Separation Counseling Checklist for Active Component, Active Guard Reserve, Active Reserve, Full Time Support, and Reserve Program Administrator Service Members, which will be

provided to SDVAs up to a year prior to separation, providing key data to states to support the transition experience.

Furthermore, the DoD has asked the TAP-EC (inclusive of our interagency partners) to jointly review DD Form 2648 and recommend additional data elements that could be advantageous to the SDVAs in their work to support transitioning Service members. The DoD appreciates the Senate including language in the FY24 NDAA that makes providing transition data to the SDVAs a smoother process. The DoD is committed to our partnership with SDVAs and our effort to facilitate a smooth military to civilian transition.

TAP of Tomorrow

Since its inception in 1991, military-to-civilian transition programming has undergone successive and sweeping statutory and policy changes. Military-to-civilian transition is an ever-evolving, complex, and multi-faceted environment. The DoD and our interagency partners see enormous opportunity in the areas of continuity of care, a one-stop mobile application, enhanced data exchange, and the inclusion of DOL into the JEC governance forum.

Within the JEC, the DoD and VA are assessing existing resources, benefits, programs, and authorities available to enable active-duty Service members with mental health challenges, military sexual trauma, or identified social risks to access and receive care and/or services from the VA during the last 90 days of military service—prior to their date of separation—to establish care and ensure continuity of care and to access VA services while still in uniform.

VA, in partnership with the DoD and DOL, applied human-centered design work to identify experiential needs and desires of transitioning Service members, recently separated Veterans, and their families during military-to-civilian transition. HCD insights led to identifying a wealth of information including four personas of separating Service members such as the “Lifer,” the “Goal-Oriented,” the “Purpose Seeker,” and the “True Separator” that will inform solutions. This information has been instrumental in the development of a minimum viable product, enterprise-wide mobile application, that will better facilitate the transition process across the range of personas. Additionally, the data exchange between DoD, VA, DOL, and other federal partners will elevate our combined abilities to improve the effectiveness, quality, timeliness, and efficiency of military to civilian transition.

Finally, while the JEC is an excellent example of DoD-VA collaboration, we can't fully reach our interagency potential without the inclusion of DOL at the table. The DoD continues to be an advocate for including DOL as a permanent member of the JEC. Transition, including job-training and post-service placement efforts, are an all-hands approach, and we need our DOL partners alongside of us.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss our collaborative military-to-civilian transition efforts, our engagement with states, and the opportunities that lie ahead. Military-to-civilian transition is, and must remain, adaptive to the evolving needs of Service members, Veterans, and their families. With a unique focus on operations and resources that help transition Service members to civilian life, DoD, VA, DOL and our other interagency partners will continue using the Military to Civilian Readiness Framework to align the myriad of independent transition activities, including the Transition Assistance Program, under one overarching umbrella during the critical year before and year after separation. This framework continues to be instrumental in establishing comprehensive, standardized, and individualized assessments across departments. The data generated from these assessments will be leveraged for more personalized services and targeted outcomes.

Senior leaders within the departments have expressed their core focus areas and stressed the importance of working together for the mutual benefit of Service members, Veterans, and their families. In February 2021, VA Secretary Denis R. McDonough highlighted three core non-negotiables: providing all Veterans timely, world-class health care; ensuring that Veterans and their families have access to the benefits earned; and honoring Veterans with a final resting place that is a lasting tribute to their service. In March 2021, Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III identified three priorities for the Force: defending the Nation, taking care of our people, and succeeding through teamwork. Additionally, he reaffirmed DoD's commitment to maintaining interagency collaboration to support Veterans and their families long after they have served.

To that end, my commitment is that transition will remain innovative, responsive, transparent, and collaborative. The DoD, working with our interagency partners, through the JEC, will continuously improve transition services and support. Together, we will build on current successes and achieve ever-improving outcomes for transitioning service members. This

will be achieved by providing agile, adaptive, and individualized support and services, and addressing barriers that inhibit a successful transition to civilian life. We appreciate your continued support of Service members, Veterans, their families, and caregivers. I look forward to your questions.

**STATEMENT OF JOSHUA D. JACOBS,
UNDER SECRETARY FOR BENEFITS,
VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS AND
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
UNITED STATES SENATE**

"MILITARY TO CIVILIAN TRANSITION: ENSURING SUCCESS AFTER SERVICE"

October 18, 2023

Chairman Tester, Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Moran, Ranking Member Wicker and distinguished members of the Committees, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) efforts to support Service members as they transition to the civilian population. I appreciate your continued support of the Nation's Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors. The military to civilian transition involves a tremendous breadth of benefits, tools, partners, information and counseling resources. Within VA, our focus is on increasing transparency, improving collaboration and keeping Veterans at the center of everything we do.

To that end, VA and its interagency partners have a robust governance structure under the Transition Assistance Program Executive Council (TAP-EC) and Joint Executive Committee (JEC). The TAP-EC is composed of multiple working groups that provide oversight and input into transition curriculum, data sharing, employment, performance management, the Reserve Component, strategic communications and available supportive services. The JEC, which is co-chaired by the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness and the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, serves as the primary Federal interagency body for overseeing transition assistance activities for Active and Reserve Component Service members.

Recent legislative changes in the transition space, including the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (NDAA 2019), P.L. 115-232, have been impactful. Service members are now required to begin TAP no later than 365 days prior to separation or release from active duty, and as soon as possible in the 24 months prior to retirement. This change has underscored the importance of engaging in conversations about transition early and often. Shortly after NDAA 2019 was enacted on August 13, 2018, VA, in concert with our TAP interagency partners, approved the Military to Civilian Readiness (M2C Ready) Pathway, a joint agency effort designed to better connect Service members, Veterans and their families with available resources to support their transition.

Military to Civilian Readiness (M2C Ready)

To improve the customer experience across Federal programs, the JEC approved the M2C Ready framework in September 2019. Military to Civilian Readiness (M2C Ready) is a six-step framework meant to ensure successful and comprehensive support for transitioning Service members, Veterans, and their families from 365-days pre-separation and continuing through 365-days post-separation. This framework aims to ensure that transitioning Service members, recently separated Service members and Veterans (1) receive comprehensive, standardized and individualized assessments across VA and DoD; (2) are informed and educated about all post-separation VA, Department of Labor (DOL) and DoD benefits and services for which they are eligible; (3) are equipped with the tools they need to succeed and reintegrate into their communities; and (4) achieve sustainable economic well-being.

TAP

Established in 1991, TAP is an interagency effort designed to help the nearly 200,000 transitioning Service members annually. Together with DoD, DOL, the Small Business Administration (SBA), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Education, the Office of Personnel Management and other agencies, we equip Service members with the tools they need to succeed in civilian life and we connect them with the benefits and services they have earned and deserve. In partnership, we take a comprehensive approach to care, ensuring TAP is a tailored program that evolves with the changing needs of transitioning Service members.

TAP consists of five core curricula shared among the interagency partners. These courses are developed and maintained through these partnerships to ensure continuity, consistency and relevance while reducing redundancy for the transitioning Service members. VA, DoD, DOL and SBA collaborate through an annual evaluation process by reviewing and approving the TAP curricula through the interagency governance structure. Each agency is responsible for the delivery or facilitation of its curriculum.

The 1-day VA Benefits and Services (BAS) course helps Service members and their families understand how to navigate the resources within VA, including how to access the benefits and services they have earned through their military careers. More specifically, the BAS course provides the skills, resources and tools needed to support emotional and physical health; career readiness; and economic stability in civilian life.

During fiscal year 2023 (FY), Benefits Advisors delivered the VA BAS course to 154,375 transitioning Service members during an in-person classroom environment and to 9,032 transitioning Service members on a virtual platform. In addition, in FY 2023, VA Benefits Advisors conducted 301,352 individual touchpoints, following the 1-day BAS course, with Service members, military spouses, caregivers and survivors across all of VA's transition assistance offerings at over 300 military installations worldwide. As of quarter two in FY 2023, the BAS course has a 96.4% satisfaction rating for in-person

course delivery. VA continues to seek opportunities for improvement by conducting site visits, quality assurance evaluations and, most recently, Human-Centered Design research to channel direct Service member and Veteran feedback about the transition experience into action.

In addition to the BAS course, Service members and their families may access Military Life Cycle (MLC) modules to access information about VA's benefits and services at their own pace and when they need that information most. MLC modules are 45- to 60-minute information sessions that can be taken any time throughout a Service member's career. The sessions are especially valuable after major events such as permanent changes of station, marriage or the birth of a child. Each MLC module addresses a specific in-depth topic. In FY 2023, 16,772 Service members participated in MLCs. Available MLC modules include the following:

- Reserve Component Dual Payments;
- Social and Emotional Health Resources;
- Survivor and Casualty Assistance Resources;
- VA Benefits 101;
- VA Education Benefits;
- VA Home Loan Guaranty Program;
- VA Life Insurance Benefits;
- Vet Centers;
- Community Integration Resources;
- VA Education and Training Benefits for Spouses and Dependents;
- Mental Health for Families;
- Disability Compensation; and
- Other than Honorable (OTH) Discharge.

Future micro-learning opportunities will cover topics related to Reserve Component National Guard; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer plus (LGBTQ+)-specific benefits; and a Commander/Senior Advisor MLC. A Common Access Card-enabled device is not required to access the courses. VA Benefits Advisors also are available through one-on-one assistance sessions to answer questions, explain benefits and connect spouses to helpful resources, including education and employment benefits.

Women's Health Transition Training (WHTT)

WHTT is a five-phase web-based training course that can be taken anytime, anywhere, and is open to all Service women and women Veterans. Topics include transitioning to civilian life, health benefits (emphasizing women-specific needs), mental well-being, managing health care, eligibility and transition assistance resources. The program initially started in 2018 when VA and the Air Force developed a pilot program to increase awareness of women's health services available through VA, and then in 2019, the JEC voted to make WHTT a permanent voluntary component of TAP. Full implementation of the web-based course was completed in February 2021.

Separation Health Assessment

The Separation Health Assessment is a JEC initiative that a VA/DoD interagency team designed in support of Service members during separation. The objective is to establish a consistent opportunity for Service members to discuss events, illnesses and injuries incurred or aggravated during service. Service members must meet statutory and policy requirements for a Separation Health Assessment before transitioning from active duty service. To ensure Service members' health care needs are addressed before separating, VA and DoD screen for medical record retainability and provide final documentation in the service treatment record that VA can use to help determine service connections in evaluating future disability claims. In January 2022, the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness signed a new Memorandum of Agreement on Separation Health Assessments that details the joint partnership for consistent application of the Separation Health Assessment. The VA/DoD agreement includes continuity of health care (physical and mental) and improvements to transition support plans. The Departments are committed to improving the efficiency of the separation examination process for transitioning Service members.

VA Health Care Support for Transitioning Service Members

The health and overall well-being of Veterans is a top priority. VA recognizes that the first year of transition out of military service is crucial for Service members and Veterans. The first year following discharge from active duty service, in particular, is associated with several increased risks, including housing instability, homelessness, difficulties with family reintegration, unemployment, posttraumatic stress disorder and substance use, all of which can increase the risk for suicide. Veterans and former Service members with an OTH discharge in acute suicidal crisis are eligible for emergent suicide care in VA facilities and in the community. In addition, ongoing mental health care is available to former Service members with an OTH discharge, including reservists, who meet the eligibility criteria in 38 U.S.C. § 1720I. This important information and other mental health resources and care are shared with transitioning Service members and Veterans at multiple touchpoints throughout their transition journey.

VA programs such as the VA Liaison and Post 9/11 Transition and Case Management bridge the gap between DoD and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) to support transitioning Service members and Post 9/11 era Veterans. This is done through VA Liaisons who are nurses and social workers, located at DoD installations, that coordinate the transfer of health care for Service members from DoD military treatment facilities (MTF) to VA health care facilities as they exit the military.

VA Solid Start (VASS)

The VASS program launched on December 2, 2019, as part of the M2C Ready Pathway, to make early, consistent and caring contact with newly separated Veterans. VA Solid Start proactively calls all eligible Veterans at three key stages (90-, 180- and 365-days post-separation) during their first year after separation from active duty. Using data provided by DoD, VASS provides priority contact to Veterans meeting certain mental health risk factors, helping to target and provide access and continuity of care for mental health. VASS representatives address challenges the Veteran may be facing at the time of the call by connecting the Veteran with the appropriate benefit or resources for assistance. These representatives receive special training to recognize the signs of crisis and, when needed, can provide a direct transfer to the Veterans Crisis Line for additional support.

In FY 2022, VASS successfully connected with 175,369 recently separated Veterans, surpassing its goal of a 50% successful connection rate by achieving a rate of 64%. As a subset of this group, VASS successfully connected with 29,042, or 78%, of eligible Priority Veterans, helping to lower the barrier to accessing mental health care. On October 17, 2022, the Solid Start Act of 2022, P.L. 117-205, was signed into law, permanently authorizing VA to expand the Solid Start Program with DoD coordination. The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) will continue to utilize multi-channel engagement efforts to further improve the successful connection rates with all VASS-eligible Veterans.

Network of Support Pilot

The Veterans Comprehensive Prevention, Access to Care and Treatment Act of 2020 (Veterans COMPACT Act of 2020), P.L. 116-214, was signed into law on December 5, 2020. The Veterans COMPACT Act of 2020 calls for a pilot program that allows Veterans to designate up to ten people to receive information on specified services and benefits from VA. The intent of the program is to provide each Veteran with a Network of Support (NoS) made up of friends and family members they select who can help them better understand and apply for the benefits they have earned. The NoS pilot was launched in December 2021 and will run through December 2023. During FY 2022, VA developed and obtained Office of Management and Budget approval for the required survey, which was conducted in December 2022 and will be conducted again in December 2023. Preliminary results show the program is well received (~77% of respondents agree) and the information provided is useful (~82% of respondents agree). As of September 17, 2023, 1,857 transitioning Service members/Veterans and 573 network members opted into the NoS Pilot (a total of 2,430 participants); exceeding the minimum requirement of 1,000 participants.

Personalized Career Planning and Guidance

Personalized Career Planning and Guidance (PCPG), also known as Chapter 36, fulfills 38 U.S.C. § 3697A by supporting transitioning Service members, Veterans and

qualified dependents by offering personalized career and academic counseling to achieve goals and ensuring the use of VA benefits. Since the inception of the PCPG program in FY 2021, PCPG has provided career and academic services to over 13,000 transitioning Service Members, Veterans and eligible dependents.

VA SkillBridge

VA SkillBridge, a DoD-sponsored program, successfully launched in February 2020 and focuses on supporting Service members who are entering into careers with VA. VA SkillBridge provides Active Duty transitioning Service members with employment training, internship and apprenticeship opportunities during their last 180 days of service. The program offers valuable civilian work experience to better prepare active duty transitioning Service members for post-separation employment. VA SkillBridge is executed in partnership with DoD and, since its launch in February 2020, VA SkillBridge has engaged with 54 internal VA entities across the three administrations (VBA, National Cemetery Administration and VHA) that have either established or are interested in establishing a VA SkillBridge program for transitioning Service members.

Additional Post Separation Touchpoints

The last step of the M2C Ready Pathway ensures continuity of support during the 365 days post-transition and beyond. This step starts with person-to-person connections through warm handovers, where the interagency partner, such as DoD, Small Business Administration and DOL, acknowledges that an eligible Service member requires post-military assistance. In agreement, the interagency partner follows through on assisting the needs of the Service member, mitigating risk and assisting the Service member in attaining post-transition goals and a successful transition.

The Transition Service Member Resource Connection (TSMRC) Pilot launched in May 2022 and has 30 DoD military installation participants. TSMRC provides a single point of entry for DoD TAP Managers who initiate a warm handover to VA during Capstone (90 days before separation). This single point of entry allows for near real-time tracking and validation of warm handover connections. It also supports warm handovers to VA in areas of education, disability compensation, health care, housing, mental health resources and other VA services. During the first year of the pilot (May 2022 - May 2023), 100% (150) of transitioning Service members needing a warm handover to VA were connected by DoD TAP Managers with VA. The pilot was recently expanded (on March 1, 2023) to support DoD's pilot, the Enterprise Individual Self-Assessment, which is expected to run until the spring of 2024.

Sexual Trauma Health Care Assistance

The Sexual Trauma Working Group was formally established as a JEC Independent Working Group in alignment with the VA-DoD Joint Strategic Plan for FY 2019-2021. In FY 2022, this working group outlined three priorities to address: Sexual Trauma Health Care Assistance, Sexual Trauma Benefits Assistance and

Sexual Trauma Transition Assistance. Ultimately, the primary focus of the Sexual Trauma Working Group is to maintain a standard of coordinated care for Service members who experience sexual trauma during military service. This focus includes connections and coordination between DoD Sexual Assault Response Coordinators and VHA Military Sexual Trauma Coordinators, as well as annual training to educate Sexual Assault Response Coordinators about VA services.

Recent Statutory Updates

Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020

On January 5, 2021, the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020, P.L. 116-315, was signed into law and included several provisions related to transition assistance.

Section 4301 states that DOL and VA shall have access to information reported by employers (National Directory of New Hires) for the purposes of tracking employment of Veterans. In order to carry out this requirement, VBA is pursuing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which manages the Federal Directory of New Hires. The final draft of the MOU is in the VBA concurrence process. Once the MOU clears VBA, it will then go to HHS for their signature.

Section 4304 requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make grants available to eligible organizations that specialize in providing transition services to former Service members who are separated, retired or discharged, as well as to their spouses. These transition services consist of resume assistance, interview training, job recruitment training and related services leading to a successful transition. VA is working rigorously to meet all requirements of this section to develop the framework for a robust Veteran Transitional Assistance Grant Program. VA continues the process to hire staff, establish a Grants Management Office, and implement a technology solution. We are planning the program to be implemented in FY 2024, and within the first quarter, VA anticipates publishing a final rule and posting a Notice of Funding Opportunity on Grants.gov. During the second and third quarters of FY 2024, VA anticipates conducting a grant review as well as announcing grant awards.

Section 4306 requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, in consultation with the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Labor and the Administrator of SBA, to conduct a 5-year longitudinal study on three cohorts who are going through TAP and are defined by specific attributes. VA is leveraging the Post-Separation Transition Assessment (PSTAP) Outcomes to meet the requirements of section 4306. PSTAP is a multi-year study to analyze the effect of TAP participation. PSTAP seeks to assess the long-term outcomes of Veterans in the broad life domains of employment, education, health and social relationships, financial issues, overall satisfaction and well-being. The second

annual Congressional progress report for section 4306 is due to Congress by March 2024.

Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Improvement Act of 2019

The Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019, P.L. 116-171, was signed into law on October 17, 2020, and includes provisions regarding mental health care and suicide prevention programs. The Act includes seven titles with 34 sections. Title I of the Act covers improvement of transition of individuals to services from VA and requires a 5-year (FY 2015-2020) retrospective, joint VA/DoD review of records of each former Service member who died by suicide within one year of their release from active duty. In completing this review with respect to a former member of the Armed Forces, DoD and VA must consider whether DoD had identified the former member as being at elevated risk of suicide during the 365 days before separation and, in the case the member was identified as being at elevated risk, whether that was communicated by DoD to VA through the VASS initiative or any other means. The JEC co-chairs chose to establish a working group to manage and track this effort because the requirements crossed various lanes within VA and DoD. Work to date includes cohort identification, receipt of \$2.05 million in Joint Incentive Funding for DoD contract staff and advances in planning for data acquisition, analyses and development of the Congressional report.

Collaboration

To improve the transition process, VA collaborates with other agencies across the Federal government, as well as with local and State agencies and other partners. One large-scale program, the Economic Development Initiatives (EDI) effort, spans across military and civilian sectors. EDI aims to connect military members, Veterans and spouses in specific geographic communities with information and resources that promote economic well-being. This effort includes hosting job fairs to link Veterans directly with resources, including disability claims clinics and career opportunities. EDI also provides support and employment assistance for military and Veteran spouses.

In FY 2022, VA, in partnership with DoD and DOL, applied Human-Centered Design to better understand the experiential needs and desires of transitioning Service members, recently separated Veterans and their families navigating military transition. The results of this research are being used to improve and enhance programs and services internally to VA and across the Federal government, which also strives to serve as an employer of choice for Veterans through statutory hiring preferences/authorities and workforce initiatives.

On December 13, 2021, President Biden signed Executive Order 14058, Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government. Soon after the executive order was signed, five priority Life Experience projects were announced as opportunity areas for cross-agency partnership. The experience of Navigating Military Transition was one of the selected lifecycle journeys.

DoD, the Department of Education, DHS, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, DOL, VA, the General Services Administration, the Office of Management and Budget, the Office of Personnel Management, SBA and representation from all military branches have partnered to use Human-Centered Design to understand major pain points and design solutions that improve and simplify the transition experience.

This cross-agency collaborative is currently working to define a minimum viable product that is a digital solution. This solution is intended to help address three of the four areas of opportunity identified in research, which were navigating the transition process, planning for life after the military, and organizing and presenting personalized resource connections. The cross-agency collaborative will continue work through the rest of this year in packaging recommendations for potential solutions that can be developed and implemented in the coming fiscal year and beyond.

In addition to the cross-agency effort, VA has used the research to improve its programs and services. The improvements include the following: developing an OTH discharge Journey Map, developing more focused communication strategies, modifying the VA TAP curriculum based on Service member feedback, integrating more quick response codes into the curriculum for ease of access to benefits and services, and developing 12 new special emphasis Military Life Cycle modules to include OTH, LGBTQ+, Military Sexual Trauma and Rural Veterans to name a few.

This year, VA hosted its Second Annual VA Transition Forum on July 27-28, 2023. This symposium built upon last year's synergies and focused on how VA can connect transitioning Service members and Veterans with community resources at the State and local levels. The forum also provided a platform for VA stakeholders to learn more about transition supportive programs, identify opportunities to better coordinate transition services, and build and strengthen community relationships.

Since 2017, VA has worked with TAP interagency partners to host and participate in the Military to Civilian Transition (MTC) summit which brings together stakeholders from the public and private sectors to discuss the military to civilian transition not only for Service members and Veterans but also for their families, caregivers and survivors. In September 2023, DOL hosted this year's summit and discussions included topics on new initiatives, technology, and how to connect with all Veterans.

Opportunities for Enhancement

VA frequently assesses for needed changes and opportunities for growth. Four areas for improvement include the need for increased: human-centered design, collaboration with veterans service organizations (VSO), data sharing and spousal and family engagements.

(1) Applying Human-Centered Design to Enhance the Transition Experience. Beginning in October 2021, cross-agency partners embarked on a

discovery research initiative that explored how customers currently experience military transition. That research yielded seven key insights, four customer personas, a map of the transition journey, and identification of four key areas of opportunity for improvement, which include: navigating the transition process, planning for life after the military, right-sizing and timing curriculum content, and selecting, organizing and presenting personalized resource connections.

To act on the research, in September of 2022, as a part of the President's Management Agenda (PMA) Lifecycle Journey initiatives and in response to Executive Order 14058—Transforming Federal Customer Service Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government—representatives from nine Federal agencies and five military service branches launched the first of three Human-Centered Design sprints focused on improving the Transition Experience.

Cross-agency partners landed on developing a mobile or web application to deliver the right information and resources from multiple agencies at the right time based on the Service member's life goals.

The team improved and validated this concept through multiple rounds of testing and design iteration based on feedback gathered directly from Service members and Veterans who recently separated from military service.

The functional prototype began development in January 2023 and is currently being shared with various stakeholders and leaders across the Federal Government. The Transition Assistance Program Executive Committee has approved the development of a minimal viable product (MVP) in FY 2024, with VA being identified as the lead agency for development and ownership of the digital solution—to be hosted and powered by its VA.gov platform.

In order to codify this Human-Centered Design practice and methodology of approaching and solving experience challenges for Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors now and in the future, VA has proposed legislation in its FY 2024 budget submission that would establish the Veterans Experience Office as a permanent and core business at VA.

VA Transition Communications Journey

VA's Transition Sub-Council (VATSC) began improvements to the existing transitioning Veteran outreach program in October 2022. The current early communications e-mail program sends Service members a series of automated e-mails with VA information starting 365 days before end of active service (EAS) and ending two years after, through the eBenefits platform.

Through customer feedback from recently transitioned Veterans and VA transition program subject matter expert evaluations, it was determined the early communications effort needed significant improvements. Customer feedback suggests

contact up to 21 months before EAS is needed, less information at one time and easier access to one-on-one assistance if requested.

The VATSC, in partnership with the Veterans Experience Office, is implementing new e-mail marketing technology and redesigning the content and timing to deliver better information at better times during the transition journey. This new onboarding campaign will complement other transition programs such as TAP, VASS and the transition app MVP.

VA 1-Day TAP Course

(2) Collaboration with VSOs. VA understands the importance of collaboration with its internal and external partners, including VSOs that serve as advocates for the well-being of the Veteran community and provide exceptional support to transitioning Service members and their families. The next iteration of the VA Benefits and Services Course (BAS version 6.0) will feature a condensed training program. This will allow time for our VSO partners working on or near a military installation to make direct connections with transitioning Service members while providing them information about their services.

VATSC is also working across the enterprise to make recommendations to senior agency leadership for solutions to customer pain points in the 1-day VA BAS course in order to increase enrollment in VA benefits, increase enrollment in VA care, and improve the overall transition experience.

(3) Data Sharing. We must continue to enhance data-sharing efforts with other government agencies to improve VA's ability to analyze Veteran outcomes. We also need to formalize data sharing with State Veterans Affairs offices to ensure that they know when Service members are relocating to their States and that Service members understand the role their States can play in their transition plans and overall well-being.

(4) Spousal and Family Engagements. VA is seeking to improve messaging and marketing to military spouses and Veterans about the many resources and programs available to them before, during and after their transition.

Conclusion

VA transition support has undergone major enhancements since the inception of TAP in 1991. Ongoing program modifications ensure VA's support continues to meet the changing needs of the transitioning Service member population. We continue to put the transitioning Service member experience at the center of everything we do. VA is committed to ensuring that the partnership between VA and DoD is aligned, enduring and strong, with a shared focus on putting the needs of Service members, Veterans and their families first. We seek continuous improvements, recognizing the driving factors are the major life events impacting Veterans and their families today.

VA shares Congress' goal of ensuring Service members and their families are supported as they transition from military to civilian life and will remain dedicated to strengthening our transition initiatives. Chairman Tester, Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Moran and Ranking Member Wicker, this concludes my testimony. I am happy to respond to any questions you or the Committee members may have.



Department of Veterans Affairs
Senior Executive Biography

Joshua Jacobs

Under Secretary for Benefits

Joshua Jacobs serves as the Under Secretary for Benefits. In this role, he leads more than 28,000 Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) employees in the delivery of non-medical benefits programs. VBA provides disability compensation benefits to nearly 6 million Veterans and their survivors and administers pension benefits for over 300,000 Veterans and their survivors. Through a nationwide network of 56 regional offices, special processing centers, and VBA Headquarters, he oversees the execution of nearly \$150 billion in direct benefits to Veterans and their dependents.



Josh previously served as Senior Advisor for Policy in the Office of the Secretary, where he helped to design and implement a new structure and process for enterprise governance and policy development. In this role, Josh established and chaired a new Evidence Based Policy Council, which meets on a regular basis to drive enterprise policy making. Josh also developed a new interagency policy development process to coordinate and implement more than 50 interagency policy efforts.

Prior to rejoining VA in 2021, Josh Jacobs was a Senior Associate at Booz Allen Hamilton. From 2013 to 2017, Josh served as Senior Advisor in the Office of the Secretary of VA, where he was awarded the Secretary's Meritorious Service Award. Josh also served nine years in the U.S. Senate, including two years as Deputy Staff Director for the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. Josh is a graduate of the University of Washington. He and his wife, Julia, have three children.

Official Biography for John W. Boerstler

Chief Veterans Experience Officer Veterans Experience Office



John W. Boerstler was sworn-in on February 16, 2021, as the Chief Veterans Experience Officer at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). As Chief Veterans Experience Officer, John leads the Veterans Experience Office (VEO), the Secretary's customer experience (CX) insight engine supporting and enabling the Department in providing the highest quality experiences in the delivery of care, benefits and memorial

services to Service members, Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors. In this role he provides executive oversight of VEO's many innovative projects and programs, working collaboratively within VA's leadership to help achieve greater access, outcomes and experiences for all VA's customers.

Prior to his current position, he served as the Chief Executive Officer of Combined Arms, a collaborative backbone organization whose purpose was to unite collaborative methodology and technology in order to more effectively connect Veterans to thousands of government and non-profit services.

John has a distinguished career as a leader in the Veteran services field as a recipient of both the Eisenhower and Marshall Memorial Fellowships, having travelled to the United Kingdom, France, Denmark, Israel, Bosnia, Hungary and Ukraine to write comparative papers on their military transition systems. As the first Marshall Prize recipient, John recently completed a 3-year project in Ukraine to assist in the development of their Ministry of Veterans Affairs – the first of its kind in Europe. John was also honored to be selected in the inaugural cohort of Stand-To Scholars at the George W. Bush Institute's Veteran Leadership Program in 2018.

John is a native Texan who served honorably in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1999-2007 as a non-commissioned officer and infantry unit leader, including one combat tour in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2004-2005 and Operation Natural Fire in the Republic of Kenya in 2006. John has also served as the Executive Director of NextOp, a program manager with Wounded Warrior Project, the Mayor of Houston's Office of Veterans Affairs, and as a policy and district staffer for a U.S. Representative. In 2009, John helped found the Lone Star Veterans Association which became the largest network of Post-9/11 Veterans in Texas and successfully merged with Combined Arms in March 2019.

**STATEMENT OF
JAMES D. RODRIGUEZ, ASSISTANT SECRETARY
VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
BEFORE A
JOINT HEARING OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS AND
THE COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
UNITED STATES SENATE**

October 18, 2023

Introduction

Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, and distinguished members of the Committees, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the current state of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the steps that should be made to continue modernizing and reforming the program.

It has been an honor to lead the Department of Labor (DOL) Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) for the last two years. My wife Vanessa and I both served on active duty in the Marine Corps, and we have two wonderful daughters who in many ways grew up having to serve with us. So, this isn't just a job for me, it's my life's mission. I have been truly impressed by the talent, dedication, and commitment of our DOL VETS team, as well as by the high level of cooperation and collaboration with our interagency partners.

DOL is the lead federal agency for employment and training programs. Successful employment is one key to economic success, and can strongly impact physical and mental health, life expectancy, and the quality of life.¹ Our American Job Centers are one-stop locations that offer a broad range of career and supportive services to the public. And veterans receive priority of service for all DOL funded training programs.

VETS' mission is to prepare America's veterans, service members, and military spouses for meaningful careers, provide them with employment resources and expertise, protect their employment rights, and promote their employment opportunities. VETS administers programs designed to address the employment, training, and job security needs of over 196,000 military service members who transition to civilian life each year,² 8.8 million military veterans in the U.S. civilian labor force,³ over 766,000 National Guard and Reserve members,⁴ and nearly 950,000 military spouses (594,110 active duty and 354,255 Guard and Reserve spouses).⁵ Along with our partners, we are committed to ensuring the best transition for our service members and their families.

¹ See for examples: <https://health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health/literature-summaries/employment>

² Department of Defense (DoD), Improvements to the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Congressional Report, August 2022.

³ Civilian labor force aged 18 years and over. Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) – 2022: <https://www.bls.gov/charts/cpsaat48.htm>

⁴ Department of Defense (DoD), Defense Manpower Data Center, Military Personnel Report, Selected Reserve Personnel by Reserve Component and Rank/Grade (Updated Monthly), July 2023: <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>

⁵ Military OneSource – Demographics Profile, 2021: <https://demographics.militaryonesource.mil/>

TAP Overview

TAP provides training, resources, and assistance to separating and retiring service members on active duty, Guard, Reserve, and their spouses, as defined in 10 U.S.C. § 1144. TAP is a cooperative effort by VETS, the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Education (ED), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Small Business Administration (SBA), and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

Congress originally established TAP in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 1991 (P.L. 101-510). This enactment authorized the development of a voluntary program consisting of transition assistance counseling and employment assistance for separating service members and their spouses. In 2011, the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (P.L. 112-56) mandated TAP participation for all Transitioning Service Members (TSM) - including pre-separation counseling and completion of courses provided by the newly established interagency partnerships - to start no later than 90 days prior to an anticipated date of transition. DOL, DoD, VA, and SBA collaborated to prepare new curricula and expand training, education, and transition activities to include Career Readiness Standards, a set of common and specified activities for service members to achieve.

The most recent legislative change to TAP occurred with the John S. McCain NDAA for FY 2019 (P.L. 115-232), which requires TAP classes to occur no later than 365 days prior to an anticipated date of separation or release from active duty, or 24 months prior to retirement. These requirements allowed TAP to evolve from a one-size-fits-all program where service members had to transition to civilian life in a condensed timeframe to an individualized program tailored specifically to the needs of each service member under a more suitable timeline.

Service Members Attended TAP Employment Workshops in Record-Breaking Numbers

In FY 2022, service members and military spouses attended VETS' TAP employment workshops in record-breaking numbers. TAP employment workshops provided instruction to 266,127 total participants,⁶ which is an over 40% increase from the previous workshop record of 188,924 total participants in FY 2021.

There are three core VETS TAP employment workshops. First, VETS is responsible for the delivery of the Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition (EFCT) Workshop, which is a mandatory, one-day course for employment preparation.

- **One-Day EFCT Workshop:** The EFCT lays the foundation for transitioning from military to civilian life, introducing the essential tools and resources needed to evaluate career options, gain information for civilian employment, and understand the fundamentals of the employment process. In FY 2022, VETS provided EFCT workshops to 149,229 participants, which is a 35.8% increase compared to 109,888 participants in FY 2021.

⁶ Note that an individual service member may attend more than one workshop. References to the total number of TAP workshop participants do not track individual unique participants.

In addition, based on service members' individual needs, VETS offers two elective tracks to acquire additional skills via a two-day workshop: (1) the DOL Employment Workshop (DOLEW), and (2) the Career and Credential Exploration (C2E) Workshop. Service members must elect one two-day track during their individual counseling; however, they are encouraged to attend any additional track(s) and attendance to the courses more than once (as their unit missions allows) to prepare them for their transition.

- Two-Day DOLEW: The DOLEW is intended for those pursuing the employment track and covers emerging best practices in career employment, including in-depth training to learn interview skills, build effective resumes, and use emerging technology to network and search for employment. In FY 2022, VETS provided DOLEW workshops to 82,253 participants, which is a 21.3% increase compared to the 67,762 participants in FY 2021.
- Two-Day C2E Workshop: For those on the vocational track, the C2E workshop offers an opportunity for participants to complete a personalized career development assessment of their occupational interests and abilities. Participants are guided through a variety of career considerations, including labor market projections, educational opportunities, Registered Apprenticeships, certifications, and licensure requirements. In FY 2022, VETS provided C2E workshops to 15,341 participants, which is a 35.9% increase compared to the 11,284 participants in FY 2021.

In January 2023, VETS launched its revised EFCT and DOLEW curricula based on participants' feedback. Throughout FY 2022, the VETS TAP curriculum development team compiled and categorized input from stakeholders:

- TAP service members (through survey results and written comments);
- DOL TAP facilitators;
- VETS federal field staff;
- TAP interagency curriculum subject matter experts;
- National Association of State Workforce Agencies; and
- Veteran Service Organizations.

The VETS TAP curriculum development team used the stakeholder input to reorganize workshop content, remove redundancies, and improve sections on resume writing, federal hiring, interviewing, and salary negotiation. VETS piloted the revised curricula at several military installations, and made further refinements based on pilot participant feedback. VETS is currently following the same process with the C2E curriculum. VETS will launch the revised C2E workshop in January 2024.

VETS workshops are highly rated by attendees. FY 2023 Transition Assistance Participant Assessment results through the second quarter indicated that 97% would use what they learned in their own transition planning, and 95% reported that the EFCT enhanced their confidence in transition planning.

VETS Designed and Implemented Innovative Employment Workshops

In addition to the three core VETS employment workshops, VETS designed and implemented two other innovative suites of employment workshops to address the unique needs of military spouses, caregivers, and our wounded, ill, and/or injured service members:

Military Spouse Employment Curriculum: In February 2021, VETS announced the launch of a monthly series of career workshops to provide employment assistance to transitioning military spouses, also known as the Transition Employment Assistance for Military Spouses' (TEAMS) curriculum. The TEAMS workshops are designed to help military spouses plan and prepare for their job search in pursuit of their employment goals. Currently, VETS offers ten TEAMS courses. The courses use a combination of current curriculum components for service members, such as resume development and interviewing techniques, and components more specifically tailored to the needs of military spouses, who often face frequent moves and the complexities associated with state licensing and credentialing requirements. In collaboration with SBA, VETS offers its entrepreneurship course through TEAMS and our collaboration with Hiring Our Heroes resulted in VETS creating and providing a specialized one-hour Federal hiring seminar for military spouses attending monthly Amplify events. Through July 31, 2023, VETS has provided 323 workshops to more than 3,380 military spouses and caregivers in FY 2023. We continue to work with our partners at DoD to schedule and promote TEAMS events.

Wounded Warrior and Caregiver Employment Workshop (WWCEW): Each year, there are approximately 15,000 TSMs who are considered wounded, ill, and/or injured, transitioning either through their service branch's warrior care or military recovery units or through the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES).⁷ In April 2022, VETS launched the WWCEW for those being evaluated for a disability rating through IDES as an alternative to the required one-day EFCT. Disabled service members face barriers to completing the traditional EFCT, such as coordinating class schedules with medical appointments, long class duration, working with medical and health restrictions, and requiring caregiver attendance. The curriculum includes six self-paced online modules that participants can complete at their own pace, and the course interface enables users to register for a virtual meeting with a VETS facilitator to ask questions and to discuss activities and course content to accommodate the individual's needs. As of July 31, over 13,400 participants have attended WWCEW in FY 2023.

Military Life Cycle Curriculum: In FY 2023, VETS developed and implemented its first Military Life Cycle (MLC) course on Apprenticeship. The MLC curriculum is a self-paced online training module that a TSM, their spouse, or a veteran can access at any time. The course provides essential information and resources to broaden service members' understanding of credentialing and apprenticeship opportunities. VETS will continue to develop additional MLC employment related curricula in coordination with our Interagency Partners.⁸

⁷ 2021 DoD Demographics Profile of the Military Community: <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2021-demographics-report.pdf>

⁸ Note that the Apprenticeship MLC course is accessible at <https://www.tapevents.mil/courses> by selecting MLC from the drop down menu.

Transforming Employment Opportunities during Transition

In FY 2022, almost 28,000 separating service members participated in two interagency employment programs that are rapidly transforming the TAP employment space, expanding TAP's information-sharing program to include hands-on training and assistance for service members and their spouses. According to DoD, over 22,000 service members participated in SkillBridge and 5,369 separating service members and 340 military spouses participated in the VETS Employment Navigator and Partnership Program (ENPP).

Employment Navigator and Partnership Program: The ENPP began at 13 military installations worldwide on April 1, 2021. The ENPP leverages the Secretary's authority (10 U.S.C. § 1144) to assist TSMs and their spouses with identifying and connecting to employment and training opportunities. The pilot was designed in response to feedback from veterans who stated that, while their TAP classroom experience was educational, they desired a more personalized approach. ENPP provides one-on-one, tailored services for TSMs and their spouses.

Through our full-time contract employment navigator staff and our employment partners, ENPP clients receive assistance with their resumes, career direction, as well as referrals to vetted partner organizations and American Job Centers (AJC) that provide additional personalized support. ENPP Partners are required to select a primary service provided across nine possible categories of services, which include: digital employment opportunity matching, training services, employment mentorship, hiring events, employment networking, Registered Apprenticeship opportunities, referrals to employment opportunities, placement services, and wrap-around services. A list of our current partners can be found on the VETS ENPP Partner Page,⁹ and organizations that are interested in partnership with us can submit an application form.¹⁰ As of July 31, 2023, ENPP served over 11,256 TSMs and 778 military spouses since its launch.

Also, at ENPP sites, the lead Employment Navigator can serve as the initial point of contact for a TSM receiving a warm handover at Capstone. No later than 90 days prior to separating, TSMs will go through Capstone, a process by which the military service branch evaluates whether service members have met the Career Readiness Standards (CRS). To meet the employment track CRS for employment, a service member must have either a completed resume or confirmation of employment. If a service member fails to meet the CRS for employment, they are provided a "warm handover," a person-to-person connection between the transitioning service member and an AJC, which connects them to designated services and follow-up resources as needed.

During a warm handover, at ENPP sites employment navigators connect TSMs to a designated AJC point-of-contact, who verifies with DOL that a client has connected with the AJC. In addition to being connected with the state AJCs where they reside, many service members receiving a warm handover also receive services from our employment navigators and partners. VETS believes that providing TSMs with additional support from employment

⁹ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap/employment-navigator-partnership/enpp-partnerships>

¹⁰ <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/VETS/files/tap/DOLVETSENPPTPotentialPartnerApplicationForm.pdf>

navigators will enable more service members to meet the CRS and lead to a reduction in the number of TSMS who are required to receive a warm handover for employment.

According to participant surveys, the ENPP has been a great success. As of July 31, 2023, 96% of ENPP survey respondents reported positive feelings after meeting with their Employment Navigator and would recommend ENPP to a friend or colleague. Additionally, 98% felt ENPP partners met or exceeded their employment related expectations. As one ENPP survey respondent stated, “The value of the employment navigator is having a one-on-one conversation to go back over the plethora of information you received in TAP classes and give guidance and recommendations specific to your situation.” We are very proud of the progress that has been made through ENPP and look forward to continuing and expanding this initiative as time and budget allow.

DOL is excited to continue collaboration with Congress, ENPP stakeholders, the military services, and employers across the United States to annually increase employment-related TAP outcomes created by these two emerging interagency TAP employment programs.

Expanding the Off-Base Transition Training Pilot

On January 11, 2022, VETS announced the launch of a five-year Off-Base Transition Training (OBTT) pilot program, in accordance with section 4303 of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-315), enacted on January 5, 2021. Section 4303 directed DOL to provide TAP to veterans and the spouses of veterans at locations other than active military installations for a period of five years to improve employment-related outcomes in areas with high veteran unemployment. The OBTT pilot launched in eight metropolitan areas across five states (California, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas). VETS is currently working to expand to five additional states (Colorado, Illinois, Nevada, New York, and Oregon). VETS will continue to expand by selecting states with high rates of veteran unemployment, with preference given to states with a high rate of Unemployment Compensation for Ex-servicemembers (UCX) usage by recently separated veterans.

OBTT features ten two-hour, instructor-led employment skills and workforce development workshops. The workshops cover the following topics:

- Marketing Yourself
- My Next Move
- Resume Essentials
- Resume Writing
- Employment Rights
- Federal Hiring
- Interview Skills
- LinkedIn Job Search
- LinkedIn Profiles
- Salary Negotiations

The OBTT workshops are offered in-person at various times and locations in the pilot states, as well as virtually nationwide. As of July 31, 2023, 6,170 veterans or spouses of veterans were provided support through 3,304 virtual and in-person workshops through OBTT.

Overall, VETS believes that OBTT has been a beneficial resource for our veterans, especially for those who have been separated from the military for over 10 years, as TAP was

not mandatory for most separating service members until 2011. As one OBTT participant indicated in a survey: “Over the course of years, I have attended a myriad of workshops and acquired much valuable information during the presentations. Many of the workshops offered applicable information and materials. However, I must say that the workshop presented by OBTT, *Marketing Yourself and Other Job Search Tactics*, was the most organized, user friendly, and engaging that I have ever attended. The format of the workbooks is excellent. They are now my resource books for future questions. I feel prepared to go out and find employment that can utilize my skills and interests. Many, many kudos to you and your team! My wish and desire is that this workshop continues so others can have the opportunity I was afforded.”

Leveraging Data to Improve TAP Outcomes

Data analytics and research are the key tools we use to understand the effectiveness and customer experience of our TAP services and improve employment outcomes for transitioning service members. Through changes in TAP since the passage of the FY 2019 NDAA, VETS is transforming its data collection and analysis capabilities around the transition space. Traditionally, VETS has only had access to data about TAP workshops and those workshops’ participants. However, new initiatives, such as ENPP and related data acquisition efforts, have enabled VETS to collect more data on TSMs’ transition experience through developing a new data system and building a new one-of-a-kind dataset. Overall, the past year has been a transformative time for DOL’s TAP program.

Last year (FY 2022), VETS updated its data-sharing agreement with DoD (specifically, the Defense Manpower Data Center) to expand the amount of data transferred to DOL. Through the Veterans’ Data Exchange Initiative (VDEI), which started in FY 2016 with DoD, the Department receives a daily refresh of information on TSMs collected on the DD Form 2648 (Pre-Separation Counseling Checklist) and TAP course attendance information. This data allows VETS to monitor DOL Benefit briefing attendance, DOL-provided TAP services, and receipt of warm handovers, and ultimately helps VETS measure program effectiveness. Additionally, in December 2021, VETS launched its case management system, the TAP Employment Navigator System (TENS), which is used by Employment Navigators (who are contracted staff), ENPP partners, and TAP Team members to capture data, develop reports, and manage ENPP processes. TENS includes an integrated client request meeting scheduler, program reporting, policy/guidance storage, and client record management.

For DOL’s TAP Evaluation and Employment Navigator (TEEN) Study, VETS completed the required data-sharing agreements with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) which were needed to extend the use of existing VDEI and ENPP data to include wage and employment information from the HHS administered National Directory of New Hires (NDNH).

In nearly every point of this early analysis, TSMs who received ENPP services saw notably better outcomes compared to those service members who did not. This is observed in examination of both average quarterly wages and Unemployment Insurance utilization data. For

example, preliminary findings from the TEEN study indicate an increase of 5.8% (\$13,620.45) higher average quarterly wages earned for enlisted TSMs who participated in ENPP compared to their counterparts (\$12,871.72) who did not participate. Additionally, preliminary analysis indicates that TSMs who utilized ENPP services are obtaining employment 2.9 months after separation on average compared to their non-ENPP veterans who obtain employment in 4.4 months on average. Also, approximately 30% of ENPP veterans obtained employment in 30 days or less of their anticipated separation date, compared to 20% of non-ENPP veterans. VETS will continue analyzing the data being collected and will be able to provide more nuanced information as data sets increase and analysis matures.

Based upon the current outcomes to date, VETS is prepared to transition the ENPP from the pilot phase to a program phase. VETS is prepared to make the Employment Navigator and Partnership Program part of the regular DOL Transition Assistance Program established under 10 U.S.C. section 1144. As funding allows, and in coordination with the TAP Interagency governance and military services, VETS will extend ENPP beyond the current pilot sites to serve as many TSMs and their spouses as possible.

Earlier this year, the Department published the findings of two evaluations on TAP, the TAP Impact Study and the ENPP Formative Study. The TAP Impact study evaluated the impact of the “Transition Goals, Plans, and Success” (GPS) program, which was implemented between 2013 and 2019, for nearly 289,000 Army servicemembers for up to 36 months post-separation.¹¹ This study found that the version of TAP was effective in helping participants obtain employment within the first quarter post-separation and achieve job retention at six months post-separation. The program also had an impact on specific subgroups’ employment rates, including for Black servicemembers and lower-ranking military personnel. However, the TAP study showed that GPS participants had lower earnings than employed non-participants across time. This finding demonstrates the need to continuously improve the quality of jobs that TAP participants have access to, in order to maximize their earning potential.

The ENPP Formative Study examined the early implementation of the ENPP and variations in the implementation by ENPP site.¹² The study found that ENPP was implemented as planned, and recommendations for improvement have been addressed. For example, interview participants stressed the importance of screening Employment Navigators for soft skills, the human connection that is so important for helping TSMs make sense in a tumultuous time in their lives. We also established eligibility criteria and an approval process for new partner organizations, and a new data tracking and reporting system. DOL’s VETS ENPP Evaluation is underway, and the key components include a rigorous implementation and outcomes evaluation, an assessment of whether an impact study is feasible, and a synthesis of findings from other DOL studies on workforce navigators.

¹¹ Evaluation of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Impact Study Report, [Evaluation of the Transition Assistance Program \(TAP\) Impact Study Report \(dol.gov\)](#). Published July 2023.

¹² Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot (ENPP) Formative Study Report, [Transition Assistance Program \(TAP\) Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot \(ENPP\) Formative Study Report \(dol.gov\)](#). Published July 2023.

As we complete these studies, we will share the results with the public, Congress, our partners, and other stakeholders, so that we can continue to ensure the quality of our programs for our service members and their families.

Successful Interdepartmental Collaboration

VETS believes that, at its core, TAP is a collaborative program that requires close coordination between our interagency partners and with our public-private partnerships to be successful in its mission. Since DOL is the federal lead for employment, training programs, and the American workforce system, it is imperative that DOL continues to work closely with DoD, VA, and SBA to ensure all training and employment programs for veterans are providing quality jobs for veterans. To accomplish this mission, VETS will continue to build stronger ties with Congress, its interagency partners, ENPP partners, DoD SkillBridge stakeholders, and employers to annually increase employment-related TAP outcomes.

VETS works with its interagency partners to provide program oversight. In conjunction with DoD and VA, VETS co-chairs the TAP Executive Council, the TAP Senior Steering Group, Transition Assistance Interagency Working Group, and six functional working groups. Interagency members including DOL, DoD, VA, ED, DHS, SBA, OPM, and the armed services meet and coordinate on a regular basis to ensure the partners are supporting and advancing TAP, as well as to reduce redundancy, better serve unique populations, and improve coordination of services across program areas.

VETS, along with all the TAP interagency partners, is participating in the President's Management Agenda Life Experience Human Centered Design (HCD) project named Navigating the Transition from Military to Civilian Life. The project lead is the VA's Veterans Experience Office. Beginning in September 2022, representatives from VETS and all the TAP interagency partners worked as a co-design team for the project. Guided by the HCD model, the first co-design sprint produced a concept for a digital solution used to deliver information and resources based on service members' own transition plans. The project team continues to work on the digital solution prototype to support development, piloting, and eventual implementation. The cross-agency collaborative will continue work through the rest of this year in packaging recommendations for potential solutions that can be developed and implemented in the coming fiscal year and beyond.

Through the ENPP, VETS has served over 12,700 TSMs and their spouses. Originally launched at 13 locations, the pilot has since expanded to 29 locations at the request of the military services and has grown to over 47 partners. ENs and installation personnel meet regularly to assist with operational or policy related needs. Additionally, ENPP partners and VETS' staff meet monthly to share updates and to address best practices and challenges. ENPP would not have succeeded without the great work that our partners are doing for our service members and their spouses, and for that we are grateful.

Through OBTT, our full-time contracted Employment Resource Coordinators are actively engaging with local stakeholders, including veteran and military spouse organizations. Stakeholder engagement through OBTT is essential for reaching our target audience. Each of our sites meets regularly with representatives throughout their community to leverage information, resources, and to share best practices.

DOL is proud to work with our partners to promote the DoD administered SkillBridge program, which connects service members with industry partners in real-world job experiences, helping bridge the gap between the end of service and the beginning of their civilian careers. Employers participate in the SkillBridge program to provide opportunities for service members through specific industry training, Registered Apprenticeships, and internships during their last 180 days of service. Timely access to the SkillBridge program and other TAP programs and services is crucial to the transition process, especially for those who face more challenges in the civilian sector, such as junior enlisted, service members with exceptional family members, and those who have unplanned transitions.

Each of these emerging interagency employment programs provide positive employment outcomes that are rapidly transforming the employment TAP space. Over the next few years, VETS is excited to continue collaboration with Congress, stakeholders, the military services, and employers, to annually increase employment related TAP outcomes created by these two emerging interagency TAP employment programs and initiatives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our long-term strategic goal for TAP is for the nation as a whole to recognize military service as a path to high-quality civilian careers. The future of the country's All-Volunteer Force across the armed services depends upon this recognition. As the lead Federal agency on veteran employment, VETS looks forward to working with this Committee and our many partners and stakeholders to create opportunities that ensure all veterans can have a good job and opportunity for advancement.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Moran, distinguished Members of the Committee, this concludes my statement. Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this hearing, and I welcome your questions.



United States Government Accountability Office

Testimony
Before the Committee on Armed
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MILITARY AND VETERAN SUPPORT

Programs to Help Servicemembers and New Veterans Transition to Civilian Life Could Be Enhanced

Statement of John D. Sawyer, Director, Education,
Workforce, and Income Security

Chairmen Reed and Tester, Ranking Members Wicker and Moran, and Members of the Committees:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss issues regarding servicemembers' transition from military to civilian life. Approximately 200,000 servicemembers go through this transition each year. Helping them overcome challenges that can be related to this transition—such as unemployment, homelessness, mental health issues, and disability-related issues—is essential.

Various federal agencies offer programs to facilitate servicemembers' transition. These include Department of Defense (DOD) programs in which servicemembers can participate even before they plan to leave military service. For example, there are DOD programs that allow servicemembers to obtain credentials related to their military training and skills that will translate into civilian occupations. Once servicemembers decide to leave the military, the mandatory Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is designed to help them access veteran benefits and develop post-transition plans and goals, such as choosing a career path, finding employment, starting a business, or deciding which college or vocational school to attend.¹ In fiscal year 2021, DOD and its interagency partners collectively reported obligating over \$160 million to implement TAP. Finally, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) administers the Solid Start program—an outreach program launched in 2019—to support new veterans during their first year after leaving the military, many of whom face significant difficulties reintegrating into civilian life.

My remarks today are based on GAO's recent body of work on servicemembers' transition to civilian life. In particular, this statement summarizes our recent findings in three areas: (1) DOD's credentialing programs;² (2) implementation of TAP counseling pathways,³ including

¹Under 10 U.S.C. § 1144, the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of Homeland Security shall require the participation of servicemembers who are being separated from active duty, with limited exceptions.

²GAO, *Military and Veteran Support: DOD Has Taken Steps to Help Servicemembers Transfer Skills to Civilian Employment but Has Limited Evidence to Determine Program Effectiveness*, [GAO-22-105261](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 17, 2022).

³GAO, *Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Can Better Leverage Performance Information to Improve Participation in Counseling Pathways*, [GAO-23-104538](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 12, 2022).

TAP implementation at small or remote installations;⁴ and (3) VA's Solid Start program.⁵ Appendix I of this statement also provides information on the status of recommendations from our recent work in these areas.

To conduct our prior work, we analyzed data and documents from DOD, VA, and the Department of Labor; interviewed relevant agency officials and representatives from selected veterans service organizations; conducted site visits to selected military installations to achieve variation across numbers of transitioning servicemembers, military branch of service, and geographic location; and reviewed relevant federal laws and policies. More detailed information on our scope and methodologies can be found in the published reports.

The work upon which this statement is based was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

**Credentialing
Programs Help
Servicemembers
Transfer Military Skills
to Civilian
Employment but
Evidence on
Effectiveness Is
Limited**

One of the challenges for servicemembers who transition out of the military is getting civilian employers to recognize their military skills and experience. Our February 2022 report found that DOD has taken steps to help servicemembers mitigate challenges related to transferring military

⁴GAO, *Military Personnel: DOD's Transition Assistance Program at Small or Remote Installations*, [GAO-21-104608](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 21, 2021).

⁵GAO, *Veterans Benefits: VA Could Enhance Outreach for Its Solid Start Program by Increasing Collaboration with Veterans Organizations*, [GAO-23-105699](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 5, 2023).

skills to the civilian workforce.⁶ For example, DOD has developed credentialing programs to help servicemembers voluntarily attain credentials.

- **Credentialing Opportunities Online (COOL).** This program helps servicemembers obtain occupational credentials related to their military training and skills and translate them to civilian occupations.⁷ The program's online platform offers servicemembers information on credentialing opportunities that match their military occupations to civilian occupational credentials. The program may also pay for expenses related to obtaining professional certification—such as books, tuition, and exam fees.
- **United Services Military Apprenticeship Program (USMAP).** This hands-on training program allows servicemembers to complete civilian apprenticeship requirements while on active duty and can provide more information to employers on servicemembers' skills. This formal military training program, which is a registered apprenticeship with the Department of Labor, applies to the trade-related military occupations, such as aviation and construction. According to DOD, documented apprenticeships, such as USMAP, can lead to better job prospects and higher wages for transitioning servicemembers.

We found that while DOD standardized its credentialing programs' performance measures (e.g., program participation and completion) across the DOD service branches, it did not fully assess the effectiveness of the programs, resulting in an evidence gap. We identified two studies that provided some evidence about the effectiveness of COOL and USMAP but found that DOD did not have current evidence of program

⁶GAO-22-105261.

⁷We use the umbrella term "credentials" to encompass (1) certifications, (2) licenses, and (3) certificates of completion of apprenticeships. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), a certification is a time-limited credential awarded by a non-governmental certification body based on an individual demonstrating, through an examination process, that they have acquired the designated knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform a specific job. It does not convey a legal authority to work in an occupation. According to BLS, a license is a time-limited credential awarded by a governmental licensing agency based on pre-determined criteria. The criteria may include some combination of education, assessments, or work experience. It conveys a legal authority to work in an occupation. According to DOL, a certificate of completion of an apprenticeship is a credential that conveys that the apprentice has successfully met the requirements of the apprenticeship program.

effectiveness across all services. Federal standards for internal control state that agencies should use quality information to evaluate their programs.⁸ Additionally, in our prior work, we have noted that federal decision makers need evidence about whether federal programs and activities achieve intended results.⁹ Consequently, we recommended that DOD take steps to develop evidence that would allow it to assess the effectiveness of its credentialing programs. This could help DOD build the evidence needed for effective decision-making and meet its goal of helping servicemembers succeed in the civilian workforce after leaving military service. DOD agreed with this recommendation and plans to complete implementation by May 2025.

**TAP Counseling
Pathways Have Been
Implemented but
Many
Servicemembers Did
Not Attend 2-Day
Classes or Begin TAP
on Time**

TAP Implementation

The John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (Fiscal Year 2019 NDAA) included provisions to improve TAP, such as requiring eligible transitioning servicemembers to meet with a TAP counselor to complete a self-assessment and attend revised core TAP classes as well as tailored 2-day classes.¹⁰ In addition, the Fiscal Year 2019 NDAA required the service branches to establish counseling pathways, which the service branches have done by assigning servicemembers to one of three tiers depending on how prepared they

⁸See GAO, Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

⁹See GAO, Evidence-Based Policymaking: Selected Agencies Coordinate Activities, but Could Enhance *Collaboration*, [GAO-20-119](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 4, 2019).

¹⁰Pub. L. No. 115-232, div. A, tit. V, § 552, 132 Stat. 1636, 1769-72 (2018).

are to transition and how much transition support they need.¹¹ Our December 2022 report found that all key components of the TAP counseling pathways had been fully implemented by the DOD service branches.¹² Service branch officials, installation staff, and servicemembers we interviewed generally expressed positive feedback about the TAP counseling pathways, including its tailored approach to better meet servicemembers' needs.

Nonetheless, our July 2021 report found that the small or remote installations in our review experienced some challenges implementing TAP because of their location, size, and the COVID-19 pandemic, according to TAP officials.¹³ These officials reported taking steps, when possible, to mitigate these challenges. For example, officials at six of the nine small or remote installations we met with said that employment opportunities around their installation were limited, which can affect the networking opportunities servicemembers have when searching for post-military employment. To mitigate this challenge, some installation officials have built relationships with local employers to provide networking opportunities to servicemembers. Additionally, at the time of our review, the COVID-19 pandemic had caused the military services to shift to virtual TAP delivery for nearly all servicemembers. At six of the nine small or remote installations in our review, servicemembers also had to complete the VA benefits briefing through self-paced virtual learning. To mitigate this challenge, one installation official said the installation was able to provide servicemembers access to VA information sessions with their local VA office to supplement the self-paced virtual briefing.

2-Day Class Attendance

More than 90 percent of DOD active-duty transitioning servicemembers participated in the TAP counseling pathways from April 2021 through March 2022. However, we found that the DOD service branches had waived attendance in a tailored 2-day class for 53 percent (64,106) of

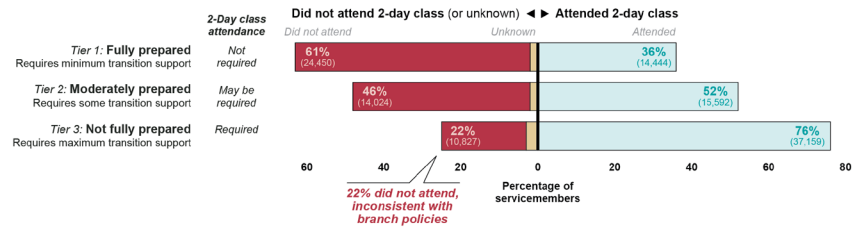
¹¹Servicemembers deemed fully prepared to transition are assigned to tier 1. Those deemed moderately prepared to transition are assigned to tier 2. Finally, servicemembers deemed not fully prepared to transition are assigned to tier 3. Among TAP-eligible servicemembers who left military service between April 1, 2021, and March 31, 2022, the highest proportion (41 percent) were deemed to require maximum transition support and therefore assigned to tier 3.

¹²[GAO-23-104538](#).

¹³[GAO-21-104608](#).

servicemembers who left military service.¹⁴ Service branch TAP policies stipulate that all tier 3 servicemembers—those deemed to require maximum transition support—must attend at least one 2-day class, but we found that nearly 11,000 (22 percent) did not (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: 2-Day Class Attendance by Tier, for DOD Active-Duty Servicemembers Who Left Military Service from April 1, 2021, through March 31, 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-24-107083

Note: We considered 2-day class attendance unknown for servicemembers whose eForm (which documents Transition Assistance Program participation data) had not been signed.

Service branch officials cited the following reasons why some tier 3 servicemembers may not have attended a 2-day class as required: the servicemember refused to attend or was unable to attend because of hospitalization; the servicemember was undergoing a medical discharge; the servicemember was deployed immediately before leaving military service; the COVID-19 pandemic affected operations; and levels of command support varied.

Timing of TAP

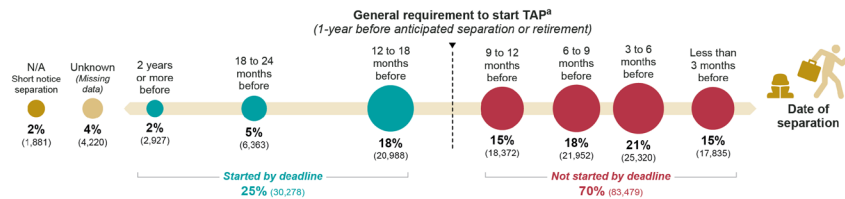
TAP must generally be started at least 1 year before a servicemember leaves military service, but this did not occur for the majority of transitioning servicemembers.¹⁵ Our December 2022 data analysis showed that from April 2021 through March 2022, 25 percent of active-

¹⁴We considered servicemembers' attendance in a 2-day class to have been waived by the Secretary of their military department if: (1) a waiver was documented on the servicemember's eForm or (2) the servicemember was assigned to a tier for which 2-day class attendance is not required under their service branch's policy.

¹⁵Servicemembers facing an unanticipated separation or retirement are to begin TAP as soon as possible within the remaining period of service, according to DOD TAP policy.

duty DOD servicemembers started TAP on time while 70 percent started the program less than 1 year before their anticipated separation or retirement date (see fig. 2).¹⁶ However, the latter group may include some servicemembers not required to meet the 1-year requirement, such as those undergoing unanticipated separations with less than 1 year of service remaining.

Figure 2: Time Frames for Starting the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), for DOD Active-Duty Servicemembers Who Left Military Service from April 1, 2021, through March 31, 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-24-107083

Note: The 1-year time frame does not apply when servicemembers face an unanticipated separation or retirement or, for reserve component members, when demobilization operations make the time frame unfeasible. Therefore, in some cases the requirement may have been met although the servicemember started TAP less than 1 year before separation or retirement. We classified time frames for starting TAP as unknown for servicemembers with unsigned eForms (which document TAP participation data), with anticipated separation dates that preceded their individualized initial counseling dates, or for whom the individualized initial counseling or anticipated separation dates were missing. This figure does not include DOD reserve component servicemembers. The percentages shown for "N/A" and "Unknown" do not add to 5 percent due to rounding.

*Servicemembers start TAP by attending individualized initial counseling.

Service branch officials cited various factors that delay servicemembers' TAP start dates, including unit mission requirements, unit deployments, servicemembers' uncertainty about their futures, and lack of awareness of TAP's requirements among both servicemembers and commanders. In addition, TAP staff we interviewed at the five selected installations in our December 2022 review said timely participation can be challenging when

¹⁶For the remaining servicemembers, the timing of when they started TAP was unknown due to missing data (4 percent) or not applicable because they separated under short notice (2 percent). The percentages for these two categories do not add to 5 percent due to rounding. To analyze how far in advance servicemembers started TAP, we compared the date servicemembers attended individualized initial counseling to their anticipated separation or retirement date as recorded in DOD's TAP data system. Our analysis should not be used to draw conclusions about the service branches' legal compliance.

support from servicemembers' immediate command or front-line supervisor is lacking.

Servicemembers who start TAP less than 1 year before separating may face challenges with their transition to civilian life, according to TAP staff we interviewed at the five selected installations for our December 2022 report. For example, TAP staff at one installation said that servicemembers who start TAP late often cannot take advantage of transition resources such as DOD's SkillBridge program that provides on-the-job training opportunities with civilian employers during the last 6 months of military service. Starting TAP late may also hinder servicemembers from applying for disability benefits and obtaining a disability decision before leaving military service, according to some installation TAP officials.¹⁷

While DOD and the service branches collect performance information on 2-day class attendance and timing of TAP participation, we found they had not fully leveraged available data to understand and improve results. This is inconsistent with leading practices for using performance information and with priorities set by the Office of Management and Budget to increase federal agencies' use of data to inform their decision-making.¹⁸ Analyzing TAP attendance and timing performance information could help DOD officials better understand, for example, which tier 3 servicemembers are at greatest risk of not attending a 2-day class or why certain servicemembers start TAP late. Accordingly, we recommended that each of the service branches, in concert with the TAP policy office, better leverage TAP performance information to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving 2-day class attendance and timeliness of starting TAP. DOD agreed with our recommendations, and

¹⁷Qualifying veterans may be eligible for disability benefit payments for service-connected disabilities. 38 U.S.C. §§ 1101 et seq.

¹⁸GAO has reported that performance information can help decision makers understand and improve results at federal agencies. See GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Survey Results Suggest Increased Use of Performance Information across the Federal Government*, [GAO-22-103910](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 3, 2021). In that report, GAO identified various actions the executive branch had taken that were intended to improve agencies' use of performance information and other evidence in decision making. For additional information on leading practices for using performance information, see *Managing for Results: Enhancing Agency Use of Performance Information for Management Decision Making*, [GAO-05-927](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2005).

each service branch has identified planned steps and time frames for implementation ranging from September 2023 to June 2024.

Regarding TAP's effectiveness, DOD and its interagency partners published a TAP evaluation plan in April 2021 that describes ongoing and planned evaluations of TAP's long-term outcomes and effectiveness, according to DOD TAP policy officials.¹⁹ For details on these evaluations, see our December 2022 report.

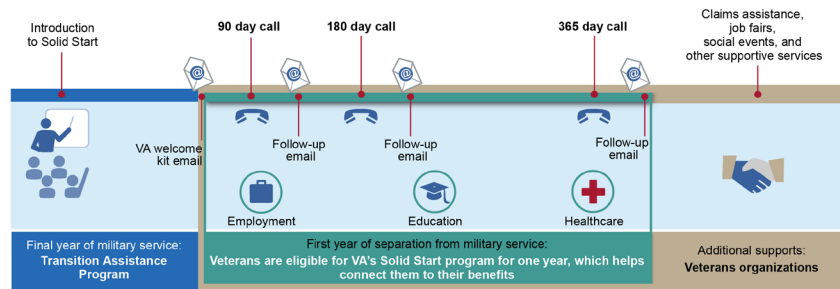
VA Took Steps to Enhance Collaboration with Veterans Organizations for Solid Start

Our January 2023 report found that VA has implemented Solid Start—an outreach program to help support the well-being of new veterans—by proactively phoning all eligible veterans three times during their first year after separation (see fig. 3).²⁰ During phone calls, Solid Start representatives inform veterans of specific VA benefits based on their needs and interests, such as education and employment counseling. Once representatives speak with the veteran, they follow up with a personalized email with more information. If needed, Solid Start representatives may also transfer veterans to specific services during the call, such as the VA Homeless Coordinator and the Veterans Crisis Line—a confidential service for veterans at immediate risk of self-harm.

¹⁹*Transition Assistance Program Interagency Evaluation Plan, Fiscal Year 2021-2025.* Performance Management Work Group officials we interviewed said officials representing the Departments of Defense, Labor, Veterans Affairs, Homeland Security, and Education, the Small Business Administration and Office of Personnel Management serve on the group. The Performance Management Work Group identifies TAP performance measures and collaborates on TAP evaluations, according to these officials.

²⁰[GAO-23-105699](#). Solid Start representatives call and email new veterans with information about their benefits three times: 90, 180, and 365 days after separation.

Figure 3: Examples of Supports for New Veterans, Including Solid Start Communication Milestones



Source: GAO summary of documentation and interviews with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). | GAO-24-107083

Notes: The Transition Assistance Program, with limited exceptions, is a mandatory program that helps separating servicemembers prepare for their transition to civilian life. For the Solid Start program, if VA Solid Start representatives speak with a veteran, they send a personalized follow-up email. Representatives also send general informational emails throughout the year of eligibility. VA continues to offer benefits and resources to veterans after the first year of separation.

Veterans organizations are non-governmental organizations that assist veterans with a range of services.

VA monitors Solid Start's performance by analyzing whether veterans who were successfully contacted used a greater number of benefits than those not contacted. VA data showed that representatives successfully contacted about 71 percent of eligible veterans in 2021, and these veterans used benefits to a greater extent than their peers who did not speak with a Solid Start representative. For example, VA data showed that about 44 percent of veterans who were successfully contacted enrolled in VA health care, compared to about 7 percent of veterans who were not contacted.

Solid Start has had less success, however, reaching certain groups of veterans, such as those under age 23. Additionally, veteran organization representatives said that it might be difficult to contact veterans who are experiencing homelessness, who struggle to use technology, or who underwent traumatic experiences in the military. At the time of our review, VA had not collaborated with veterans organizations to address outreach challenges, even though such organizations are well positioned to connect with hard-to-reach veterans. VA's Strategic Plan for fiscal years 2022 to 2028 states that VA will engage veterans organizations to identify

gaps in service that should be addressed, improve customer service, and build partnerships to leverage shared resources.²¹

In our January 2023 report, we recommended that VA further collaborate with veterans organizations in identifying and addressing outreach gaps, and assessing Solid Start outreach strategies for hard-to-reach groups of veterans. VA has since implemented our recommendation by engaging veterans service organizations and developing a plan to collaborate more regularly. VA also developed additional outreach strategies, including connecting with younger veterans through targeted e-mails and social media. As a result, VA should be able to connect directly with even more veterans and make them aware of their benefits.

In conclusion, servicemembers need support as they transition out of the military. DOD, VA, and other agencies have programs in place to help them. It is crucial that the government ensure that servicemembers are aware of these programs and can take advantage of the services offered. It is also imperative that the government continue to assess program effectiveness and fully analyze the data it collects to understand and improve results. This could enhance servicemembers' ability to benefit from the full range of transition services available to them before leaving military service.

GAO continues to do work in this area. Our ongoing work focuses on several programs aimed at helping servicemembers successfully readjust to civilian life. We plan to issue reports in the next 12 to 18 months on the following studies:

- Mental Health and Suicide Prevention for Transitioning Servicemembers
- TAP Warm Handover Process
- Transition programs for Special Operations Forces

Chairmen Reed and Tester, Ranking Members Wicker and Moran, and Members of the Committees, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

²¹Department of Veterans Affairs, *Fiscal Years 2022-28 Strategic Plan* (Washington, D.C.: April 2022).

**GAO Contact and
Staff
Acknowledgments**

If you or your staff have any questions about this testimony, please contact John D. Sawyer at (202) 512-7215 or sawyerj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this testimony.

In addition to the contact named above, Meeta Engle (Assistant Director), Amy MacDonald (Analyst in Charge), Walker Adams, Yasmine Evans, and Aaron Olszewski made key contributions to this testimony. Also contributing were Holly Dye, James Bennett, Rachael Chamberlin, Kate O'Dea Lamas, and Almeta Spencer.

Appendix I: Status of GAO Recommendations Related to Helping Servicemembers and New Veterans Transition to Civilian Life

Since February 2022, we have made 10 recommendations intended to enhance the transition to civilian life for servicemembers and new veterans (see table 1). VA has fully implemented one of these recommendations. DOD agreed with the other 9 recommendations and has developed a corrective action plan.

Table 1: Status of GAO Recommendations Related to Helping Servicemembers and New Veterans Transition to Civilian Life

No.	GAO report and recommendation number	Recommendation	Recommendation status	Planned or implemented corrective action
1.	GAO-22-105261 February 2022 (Recommendation 1)	The Secretary of Defense should take steps to develop evidence that would allow the Department to assess the effectiveness of its Credentialing Programs.	Open	DOD's target date to implement this recommendation is May 2025, by which time it plans to review, assess, and (if necessary) develop new sources of information to determine the effectiveness of its Credentialing Programs.
2.	GAO-23-104538 December 2022 (Recommendation 1)	The Secretary of the Air Force, in coordination with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate, particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support.	Open	The Air Force's target date to implement this recommendation was September 2023, which includes training TAP counselors and issuing guidance, as appropriate. GAO is in the process of following up on the status of Air Force's actions.
3.	GAO-23-104538 December 2022 (Recommendation 2)	The Secretary of the Army, in coordination with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate, particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support.	Open	The Army's target date to implement this recommendation is June 2024, which includes establishing quarterly reporting of TAP compliance rates and updating current data tracking and reporting tools, as appropriate.

Appendix I: Status of GAO Recommendations
Related to Helping Servicemembers and New
Veterans Transition to Civilian Life

No.	GAO report and recommendation number	Recommendation	Recommendation status	Planned or implemented corrective action
4.	GAO-23-104538 December 2022 (Recommendation 3)	The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps, in coordination with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on Marine Corps servicemembers' 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate, particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support.	Open	The Marine Corps' target date to implement this recommendation is December 2023, which includes reviewing and revising policies, and continued inspections, as appropriate.
5.	GAO-23-104538 December 2022 (Recommendation 4)	The Secretary of the Navy, in coordination with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate, particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support.	Open	The Navy's target date to implement this recommendation was September 2023, which includes exploring options to improve tracking and reporting, and to re-commence area site visits and counselor training. GAO is in the process of following up on the status of Navy's actions.
6.	GAO-23-104538 December 2022 (Recommendation 5)	The Secretary of the Air Force, in coordination with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness.	Open	The Air Force's target date to implement this recommendation is March 2024, which includes developing field communication messages about TAP's timeliness requirement and assessing the feasibility of creating automated notifications of the servicemember's separation date.

Appendix I: Status of GAO Recommendations
Related to Helping Servicemembers and New
Veterans Transition to Civilian Life

No.	GAO report and recommendation number	Recommendation	Recommendation status	Planned or implemented corrective action
7.	GAO-23-104538 December 2022 (Recommendation 6)	The Secretary of the Army, in coordination with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness.	Open	The Army's target date to implement this recommendation is June 2024, which includes establishing quarterly reporting of TAP timeliness rates and updating current data tracking and reporting tools, as appropriate.
8.	GAO-23-104538 December 2022 (Recommendation 7)	The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps, in coordination with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when Marine Corps servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness.	Open	The Marine Corps' target date to implement this recommendation is December 2023, which includes reviewing and revising policies, continued inspections, and maximizing strategic communication efforts to improve awareness of timeliness requirements.
9.	GAO-23-104538 December 2022 (Recommendation 8)	The Secretary of the Navy, in coordination with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness.	Open	The Navy's target date to implement this recommendation was September 2023, which includes analyzing reasons why servicemembers did not meet the timeliness requirement and to re-commence area site visits and counselor training. GAO is in the process of following up on the status of Navy's actions.
10.	GAO-23-105699 January 2023 (Recommendation 1)	The VA's Under Secretary for Benefits should collaborate with veterans organizations, such as VSCs, in identifying and addressing any outreach gaps, and assessing Solid Start outreach strategies for hard-to-reach groups of veterans.	Closed—Implemented	VA implemented an updated VSO engagement plan for more regular and recurring collaboration to ensure VSCs have the necessary training, information, and tools to promote Solid Start. VA also conducted additional outreach to connect with younger veterans through targeted e-mails and social media.

Source: GAO | GAO-24-107083

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GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-107083](#), a testimony before the Committees on Armed Services and Veterans' Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Each year, around 200,000 servicemembers transition out of the military. Various federal programs are designed to facilitate this transition. This includes helping servicemembers achieve their education, employment, and other goals and overcome potential challenges in adjusting to civilian life.

This testimony is based on GAO's past work on transition assistance and addresses: (1) DOD credentialing programs; (2) DOD's Transition Assistance Program; and (3) VA's Solid Start program.

For that work, GAO analyzed DOD and VA data and documents; interviewed relevant agency officials and representatives of selected veterans service organizations; conducted site visits to military installations selected based on numbers of transitioning servicemembers and variation in service branch and location; and reviewed relevant federal laws and policies.

What GAO Recommends

Since February 2022, GAO has made 10 recommendations related to these military transition programs. The recommendations included assessing the effectiveness of DOD's credentialing programs and its service branches' use of TAP performance information to improve 2-day class attendance and timeliness of starting TAP. DOD and VA concurred with the recommendations and identified planned steps and time frames toward their implementation. VA implemented the recommendation to further collaborate with veterans organizations to identify and address any outreach gaps.

View [GAO-24-107083](#). For more information, contact John D. Sawyer at (202) 512-7215 or sawyerj@gao.gov.

October 18, 2023

MILITARY AND VETERAN SUPPORT

Programs to Help Servicemembers and New Veterans Transition to Civilian Life Could Be Enhanced

What GAO Found

GAO reviewed selected programs to help servicemembers transition to civilian life and has made numerous recommendations to the Departments of Defense (DOD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) to enhance their performance.

Servicemembers have the opportunity to obtain civilian credentials related to their military training and skills before they leave the military, which they can use to obtain civilian jobs after they leave. DOD facilitates credential attainment through two programs:

- Credentialing Opportunities Online helps servicemembers match their military occupations to civilian occupational credentials and may pay expenses related pursuing professional certification, including books, tuition, and exam fees.
- United Services Military Apprenticeship Program allows servicemembers to complete civilian apprenticeship requirements while on active duty.

In [February 2022](#), GAO found that DOD had not fully assessed the effectiveness of these programs, resulting in an evidence gap. Such an assessment would enhance DOD's decision-making and ability to help servicemembers succeed in the civilian workforce after leaving the military.

Servicemembers preparing to leave the military generally must participate in the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). DOD service branches have implemented elements of TAP, such as ensuring that servicemembers meet with a TAP counselor, attend tailored 2-day classes, and participate in a counseling pathway tailored to the level of transition support a servicemember needs. However, in [July 2021](#), GAO found that selected small or remote installations experienced implementation challenges, according to TAP officials. Challenges included limited nearby employment opportunities, which officials mitigated by building relationships with local employers. In addition, GAO's [December 2022](#) analysis of TAP data from April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2022, showed that nearly a quarter of servicemembers who were required to attend a 2-day TAP class did not do so. GAO also found that most servicemembers (70 percent) did not start TAP more than 1 year in advance, as generally required. Additionally, DOD and the service branches were not using available performance data to understand root causes of poor participation and take appropriate corrective action.

Solid Start provides tailored information about resources and benefits to support veterans during their first year after leaving the military. GAO found in [January 2023](#), that VA representatives successfully contacted about 71 percent of eligible veterans in 2021, and these veterans used VA benefits to a greater extent than those who did not speak with a representative. However, GAO found that VA had not collaborated with veterans organizations to help connect with hard-to-reach veterans. As a result, GAO recommended greater collaboration with these organizations. VA has since implemented the recommendation by augmenting its collaboration and outreach efforts. As a result, VA should be able to connect directly with even more veterans and make them aware of their benefits.

STATEMENT OF
RYAN GALLUCCI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
WASHINGTON OFFICE
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
WITH RESPECT TO

“Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service”

Washington, D.C.

October 18, 2023

Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, and members of the committees, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide our remarks on this vital topic.

We are very grateful for the continued push to hold this joint hearing. Nearly 200,000 service members exit the force every year, which is why the VFW believes hearings like this should be a regular collaboration among the Veterans Affairs Committee, the Armed Service Committee, and program stakeholders like the VFW to ensure these troops are not neglected. A solid transition can set veterans up for success after service. Conversely, a failed transition could lead to devastating consequences like unemployment, homelessness, even suicide. The national perception of veterans after service has consequences for the next generation and their propensity to serve. Failed transitions hurt military recruiting efforts. It is long past time that we begin treating transition as a national security priority.

The VFW has an enduring commitment to supporting transitioning service members (TSMs). Often seen on Capitol Hill as an organization solely invested in veterans benefits and related legislation, the VFW is on the ground every day at more than 20 military installations worldwide and interacts with nearly 20,000 TSMs, or approximately ten percent of the total transitioning force, every year. Accredited by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), our representatives assist TSMs with Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) claims, provide benefits guidance, and even give VA benefits briefings in Transition Assistance Program (TAP) classrooms. In 2022 alone, our BDD team filed 12,214 claims, ensuring timely connections to veterans' earned benefits, like VA disability compensation and health care. The VFW's interactions with and provision of services to TSMs make us an indispensable stakeholder in the military transition space.

In addition to assisting TSMs, our accredited representatives inform VFW legislative efforts around military transition via direct feedback and surveys of TSMs. While much of the feedback we receive is consistent with what is already widely known, such as TAP coursework being akin to getting “hit with a fire hose,” we have been able to identify other specific areas in need of improvement, enhanced oversight, or reform.

BDD Program Access

The VFW highly recommends passage of H.R. 3933/S. 2888, *TAP Promotion Act*, as we believe there is immense value in ensuring all TSMs can directly access accredited representatives during TAP. This bill would ensure a representative is physically present in the TAP classroom while VA benefits and services that can be applied for *prior* to separation are discussed, including the BDD program. Currently, Department of Defense (DOD) TAP managers can choose whether to allow representatives into their classrooms, resulting in wide variability with which TSMs are afforded opportunities to directly connect with representatives and begin filing BDD claims. The VFW has strong collaborative relationships with the DOD TAP managers on the installations we currently serve. In places like Fort Cavazos, Camp Pendleton, Joint Base Andrews, and Naval Station Norfolk, we enjoy strong support from TAP managers who understand the value of our programs and services. However, in speaking to program leaders from each service branch, we keenly recognize that these collaborative relationships are the exception and not the rule for the three hundred thirty-one total transition sites across the military.

For many, this variability creates unnecessary barriers to participation at a time when personnel are having to balance duty requirements and transition preparation, which are often at odds with each other. Critically, we also see disparity in *who* is filing BDD claims. Our BDD program users tend to skew toward senior ranks in both the enlisted and officer force, meaning that many are leaving the military with retirement benefits. Accordingly, even without using BDD, they are better positioned to experience less transition unknowns than TSMs in the junior and middle enlisted and junior officer ranks. Alarming, these latter cohorts often need more assistance during transition, not less, and include individuals at disproportionately higher risk of suicide— young, enlisted, male, and exited service within the preceding twelve months.

The VFW finds the above highly concerning, especially considering VA’s recent 2022 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report that stated veterans who have any contact with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) had a suicide rate of 1.0 per day while those having no interaction with VBA or the Veterans Health Administration had a rate of 6.7. While high level, these data points suggest potential protective qualities may exist for veterans interacting with their earned VA benefits relative to those who have no interaction with VA at large. Combined with passing H.R. 4157/S. 928, *Not Just A Number Act*, the VFW firmly believes that incorporating accredited representatives in TAP via the *TAP Promotion Act* can save the lives of veterans, particularly those who are at heightened suicide risk in the initial twelve months after military discharge.

Timeliness

Another critical factor in TSM success after service is participating in DOD TAP early so they can re-engage TAP resources as their post-service plans develop and inevitably change. Timely attendance in TAP classes is critical for TSMs to begin thinking about life as veterans. The vast amount of information covered during TAP is simply overwhelming for many, necessitating extra time to sort through and digest what is pertinent for each person individually. One such example is the BDD program, which is briefly mentioned during the VA Benefits and Services presentation. Any TSM wishing to file a BDD claim must do so between 180 to 90 days before separation or retirement. Accordingly, each member must learn about BDD well in advance of their submission window, ensure medical concerns are documented, and then request their full medical record beforehand, all of which can take weeks to months to complete. It recently took one service member 60 days to obtain their full medical record from Walter Reed, which was received immediately after filing a formal complaint. This particular service member lost the opportunity to file an expedited VA claim because the wait time for records was one of the issues that caused the BDD window of time to be missed.

Sadly, many TSMs are not afforded the opportunity to even use the BDD program because they do not get to TAP on time. Another such example is a previous member of Senator Tester's own staff who recently contacted the VFW to file a BDD claim. There was just *one day* to spare before no longer being eligible for the program. In a rare stroke of luck, this individual had the necessary medical records on hand to file the BDD claim, and VFW personnel scrambled to help before the hours-long window closed. However, if the deadline had been missed it would have been through no fault of this individual who would have been in good company according to the report on TAP the Government Accountability Office (GAO) most recently published.

The law stipulates that TSMs must begin pre-separation counseling no later than 365 days prior to anticipated separation or retirement. Exceptions to this rule will always exist for those who are unexpectedly leaving the military. However, that is why they are the exception and not the rule. Now common knowledge, GAO found that 70 percent of service members did not begin TAP on time, as reported in December 2022. When asked in recent public forums what contributed to poor compliance, DOD stated the COVID-19 pandemic impacted timeliness. Yet, VFW data collected between September 2022 and September 2023—a period which includes nearly five months of survey responses collected after the national COVID-19 emergency ended—suggests more factors hinder timely attendance.

Nearly two-thirds of TSMs we surveyed did not start TAP 365 days before discharge (Figure 1). Of those who started less than 12 months out, almost forty-six percent reported not beginning until six months or less before discharge. In addition to losing essential planning time, service members who complete TAP late are at considerable risk of missing application deadlines, like those for the BDD program and college. Our survey data implies urgent oversight, statutory, and policy improvements are necessary if we want to see change. The deadlines put in place are there for a reason and are not arbitrary dates on a calendar. Troops learning about programs after they miss the deadlines shows the disregard DOD has for the total separating force. DOD is continually failing to make sure troops are set up for success by not requiring adherence to the law.

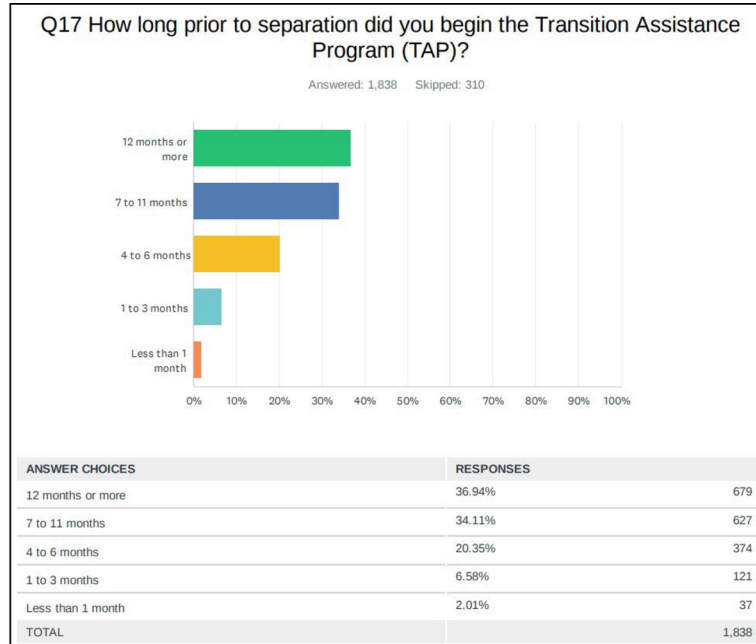


Figure 1. VFW TSM Survey Results from Sept. 2022 – Sept. 2023: Timeliness.

The intent of the fiscal year (FY) 2019 transition law reforms was to ensure TSMs could go to TAP early and often. Specifically, the reforms were intended to ensure TSMs complete the actual TAP course itself including DOD Transition Day, VA Benefits and Services, DOL One-Day, and as applicable a two-day career track at least one year from discharge. While this intent is widely known and DOD officials purport to agree with this intent, in practice it is not adhered to. This is because the law as written leaves room for interpretation and arbitrary application across DOD.

Transition assistance and related timeliness requirements are in 10 U.S.C. § 1142, wherein transition mandates are broadly referred to as “preseparation counseling.” Several points about this statute enable TSMs to miss the deadline of 365 days, again through no fault of their own:

1. In practice, preseparation counseling consists of a self-assessment, a one-on-one counseling session, and DD Form 2648, the title of which is “Service Member Pre-Separation/Transition Counseling and Career Readiness Standards Eform.” These requirements largely amount to paperwork, or boxes that TSMs must check, before they physically (or virtually) complete the TAP class, which is where the actual transition assistance takes place. These evolutions represent DOD’s interpretation of what TSMs should complete no later than 365 days from separation or retirement.

2. There is no explicit definition of which components of preseparation counseling are to be started 365 days before discharge. This has given DOD the leeway to decide what preseparation counseling looks like and when it is carried out, as described above. Accordingly, if Congress intended preseparation counseling to mean TAP class—as the VFW did during the FY 2019 TAP reform discussions—it appears that DOD has been operating from a different definition that includes paperwork only.
3. Also critical, the statute does not say when preseparation counseling shall *end by*, thereby giving military commanders the latitude to send TSMs to TAP at their personal convenience, not at the necessity of the TSMs in their charge.
4. The TAP curriculum itself is not outlined in the law until 10 U.S.C. § 1144. Therein, it states that commanders “may permit a member” to attend TAP before the period established in Section 1142. It does not compel commanders to send them beforehand.

It should also be noted that the same 2022 GAO report found that only eleven percent of TSMs completed preseparation counseling requirements on time. As such, DOD is not even complying with its own interpretation of the law. While the requirements covered under preseparation counseling enable initial planning, they do not cover the “how” of transition, like translating skills to a resume, creating a financial plan, or applying for VA benefits and services.

Considering the factors above, the current DOD TAP policy, DOD Instruction [1332.35](#), offers conflicting guidance (Figure 2) on when TSMs should begin “transition assistance,” and in no clear terms states when TSMs should go to TAP class itself.

5.2. TRANSITION ASSISTANCE TIMELINE. The following timelines apply to the discharge or release from active duty of an eligible Service member during key touch points in the TAP MLC.

- a. In the case of an anticipated retirement, transition assistance will begin as soon as possible during the 24-month period before the retirement date.
- b. In the case of a separation other than a retirement, transition assistance will begin as soon as possible during the 12-month period before the anticipated discharge date.
- c. Transition assistance must begin no later than 365 days before separation, retirement, or release from active duty except in those cases pursuant to Title 10, U.S.C., specific timelines.

Figure 2. DoDI 1332.35, September 26, 2019, Section 5.2.

As a result, Army leadership have taken it upon themselves to create their own transition timeline (Figure 3) of when they believe transitioning soldiers should complete TAP components to get what they have stated to be “maximum benefit.” Importantly, TAP class is generally completed in three to five *consecutive days*. However, according to the Army’s transition timeline, soldiers should complete it over the course of *nine months*.

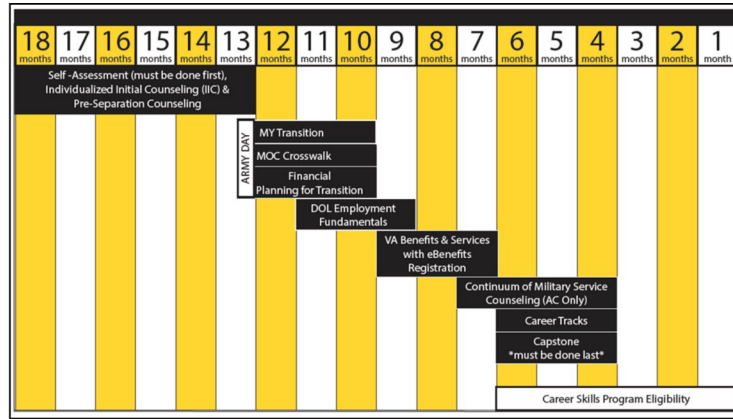


Figure 3. Army Transition Assistance Program Timeline (Sept. 2023).

In addition to statutory challenges, other critical factors enable a military transition culture that deprioritizes TSM preparedness and DOD's compliance with the law. The VFW understands and empathizes with military commanders that operational requirements are paramount. Protecting the nation from foreign and domestic adversaries is the number one charge of DOD, necessitating force availability to carry out missions across domains. This reality is personal and tacit to the VFW. However, getting missions done is all about people—past, present, and future—the full gravity of which we believe is lost on DOD as evidence suggests the Department continues to prioritize operational readiness over TSM long-term success and well-being.

As individuals, we are prone to discounting the future through our choices in favor of short-term gains, even when such choices are not in our long-term best interests. Accordingly, institutions falling prey to this tendency writ large can generally expect long-term outcomes that are contrary to their strategic plans and needs. The VFW contends that much of DOD's people-related issues, including transition, center on this premise. While it may seem like recruiting and transition are mutually exclusive, they indeed are directly connected. Successful transitions enable the recruiting of subsequent generations by influencing public perceptions of service within communities and across the nation. Veterans holding "homeless veteran" signs speak much louder than successful, well-integrated veterans who do not hold signs proclaiming their success.

Except for those relatively few service members who left the military and subsequently returned, most individuals in leadership roles throughout DOD have never transitioned to civilian life. Leaders in this context span the most junior non-commissioned officers to the most senior generals and admirals. As such, they do not fully understand the gravity of transition for individuals or the military as a whole because they have not personally experienced it and are not taught it. Accordingly, decisions and policies from the lowest to highest levels appear to prioritize transition statute and TSM preparedness largely in name only. This is allowed to persist because TAP law adherence *is not measured* within DOD in a way that drives

accountability, which was among the key takeaways from the May 2023 hearing at which the VFW testified before the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity.

Symptoms of absent accountability are illustrated not only in GAO reporting, VFW data, and elsewhere, but also in every instance of service members feeling or actually being limited in any element of TAP as depicted in Figure 4. Service members have even said they felt like they could not focus on transition until they took off their uniforms for the last time. By extension, transition-specific resources like SkillBridge are also negatively impacted by the lack of institutional prioritization of TAP, as evidenced by the Navy's most recent [scaling back](#) of access to the program. While TSMs of all ranks are impacted by DOD's spotty adherence to the TAP law, the VFW is especially concerned about junior and middle enlisted service members and junior officers who leave the military after one or two contracts, as initially touched on in the BDD section above.

Last month, the DOD Military-Civilian Transition Office held its annual TAP Summit, which was hosted by the Department of Labor (DOL). Included was a panel session with two very recently transitioned senior enlisted personnel. They described their transition experiences and the resources they leveraged to be successful throughout their transition process. When asked whether they could honestly and confidently say E-4s and E-5s are granted the same opportunities and supports they personally received during transition, they both agreed they are not and that they believe the problem spans wider than junior and middle enlisted TSMs.

Both retirees discussed factors that impede equal access across the force, including the fact that junior and middle enlisted TSMs are "tasked with learning their jobs" and have less agency in their work schedules. They also noted that TSMs in general are impacted by leaders' inconsistent willingness to give them the "space and opportunity" to use transition resources because, as mentioned above, they have not experienced transition themselves and do not "know what's on the other side." This leads to a common lack of empathy for and understanding of TSMs' needs because leaders at all levels are not meaningfully taught about the global implications of transition, including heightened suicide risk. Combined with no real accountability measures, each of these factors coalesce to form a negative climate around transition that essentially penalizes TSMs for exiting the military, leaving many ill-prepared to readjust to civilian life.

The VFW recommends amending Section 1142 (a)(3)(A) of Title 10 U.S.C. to include an end date by which TAP shall be completed no later than. Currently, there is only an open-ended start date with which the services are barely in compliance. DOD must ensure not only starting TAP on time, but also completing it in a timely manner. We also recommend amending Section 1144 (f)(2) of Title 10 U.S.C. from "may permit a member" to "shall permit a member." Last, we also

"My command *did not* allow it."
(E-4 – E-6, Tier Unknown to TSM, San Diego, August 2023)

"I was *not aware* of this."
(E-7 – E-9, Tier Unknown to TSM, Camp Lejeune, June 2023)

"Time restraints."
(E-4 – E-6, Tier 3, San Diego, June 2023)

"Unfortunately, when you are working in certain positions the *work/due outs/suspense* are still *priority*. Sadly, if you have leaders that *[do]* not support the entire process the service member suffers."
(O-4 to O-6, Tier not collected, Fort Liberty, August 2022)

Figure 4. TSM explanations of why they did not complete a two-day TAP track.

urge Congress to mandate that DOD begins holding commanders accountable for performance to the TAP law, because what gets measured gets done. Similarly, we recommend DOD integrates training into enlisted and officer leader courses on the implications of transition on individuals and the entire force. A culture shift around transition timeliness and equal resource access cannot happen without accountability and intentional training.

Every service member's transition and that of their family is different with varying levels of complexity necessitating early receipt of all transition programming, including the full TAP curriculum. Service members facing anticipated separation or retirement must be able to complete all TAP coursework no later than 365 days before discharge from service and be permitted to return as time and unit capacity allows. If we truly seek to ensure service members become successful veterans, thereby acting as community-level ambassadors for military service, they must be afforded every opportunity to properly transition as Congress intended.

Community Connections

Connections to resources in the communities in which service members will reside can be an incredible force multiplier for TSMs and can be the difference between successful transitions and unsuccessful ones. That is why the law was written to ensure these connections are made for all service members leaving the force.

The law as written states “**(2)** Each member described in subsection (a) shall meet in person or by video conference with a counselor before beginning counseling under this section to—**(C)** receive information from the counselor regarding resources (including resources regarding military sexual trauma)—**(ii)** located in the community in which the member will reside after separation, retirement, or discharge.”

This specifies each member is to receive information regarding resources located in the community in which the member will reside after separation. This is not happening for every TSM, and where it is happening it is not being done consistently and effectively. As illustrated in Figure 5, one third of our survey respondents reported they either were not connected to community resources or did not know if they were connected.

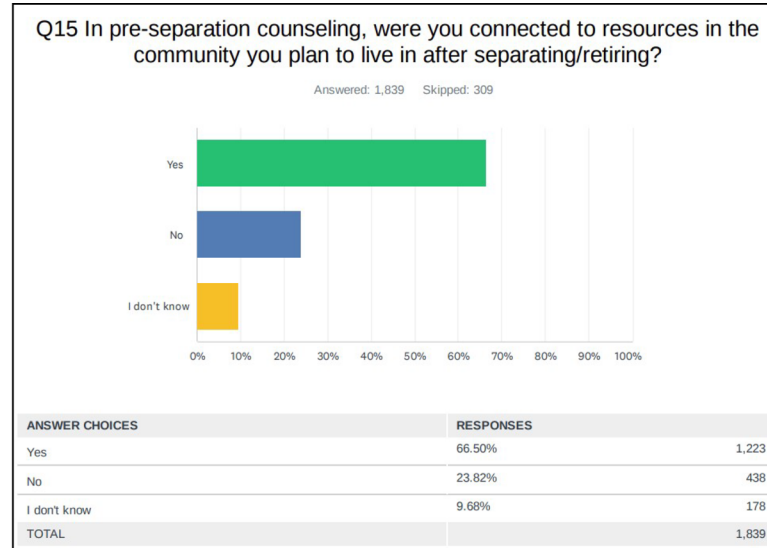


Figure 5. VFW TSM Survey Results from Sept. 2022 – Sept. 2023: Connections.

DOD has decided to make “warm handovers” only to agencies for TSMs it determines require the most transition assistance. The law does not state that it is at the discretion of TAP managers to make connections to community resources. It requires those connections be made for all TSMs.

In accordance with this law, we would like Congress to ensure connections are being made consistently between TSMs and resources in the communities to which they are transitioning, with an emphasis on specialized transition service organizations that receive federal grant funding. One existing tool Congress can designate is the National Resource Directory (NRD), which is housed within the Defense Health Agency. NRD, which is a partnership between DOD, VA, and DOL, contains a large repository of strictly vetted organizations that span the transition spectrum from career assistance to caregiver support.

The VFW insists connections to community resources be specifically defined and we recommend that the definition includes NRD. We believe Congress should evaluate and make sure the NRD team and website are properly funded and staffed to accommodate any increased workloads, capabilities, or necessary upgrades.

There are no national transition services in every city and state that support TSMs who are seeking services across all industries. However, there are a multitude of organizations that specialize in certain fields in certain areas of the country. If TSMs are seeking education opportunities, they should be connected to local Student Veterans of America chapters. If they are seeking employment in the technology industry in Texas, they should be connected to

organizations like VetsinTech. If they are seeking to enter the finance world in New York City, they should be connected to FourBlock. If they are service members separating from the Special Operations Forces, they should be connected to organizations like The Honor Foundation. Organizations with tailored transition plans for service members and veterans will not be able to offer the most value if they are underutilized and TSMs do not know they exist. TAP cannot be everything for everybody, but there are countless organizations that could offer specialized services as long as DOD makes the connections to community resources as required by law.

Within Section 1142 (c)(2)(C) of Title 10 U.S.C, the VFW recommends that Congress defines “resources” to mean those contained within the NRD. Additionally, we recommend ensuring all service members are connected to community resources as outlined in this section. Currently, DOD is only doing warm handovers to service members who fail readiness standards twice, not the entire force.

Oversight of TAP 6.0

As mentioned above, the VFW had the opportunity to testify before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs earlier this summer. At the time, we were frustrated by the lack of engagement from certain business lines within VA. We are pleased to report that in the ensuing months the collaboration and communication with VA business lines responsible for TAP have substantially evolved. The VFW is the only organization that participated in multiple pilot programs at Camp Pendleton and Fort Meade. VA invited us to provide feedback on the current TAP 5.1 curriculum. We also participated in a series of summits with VA and DOL on TAP, and recently joined a working session with VA Under Secretary for Benefits Joshua Jacobs, his TAP team, and the Veterans Experience Office where the VFW believes we have built a battle rhythm for consistent updates to the curriculum and collaboration on our shared business processes to help veterans access their earned benefits.

In the lead-up to TAP 6.0, VA has committed to meet consistently with accredited Veterans Service Organizations with a substantial presence on military installations to ensure that the program and the curriculum satisfy the need for TSMs to easily navigate and access their benefits prior to separation. In our latest discussions with VA, we believe that many of the recommendations from the VFW and our peer organizations deeply involved in transition have been accepted for integration into the new curriculum. These improvements include discussing the veteran’s right to competent representation in the VA claims process, comprehensive explanation of VA health care eligibility, and integration of accredited national and state claims representatives into the TAP briefings where available.

The VFW is also working with VA to integrate information on the right to competent, free, and accredited VA claims representation into its military life cycle training. This would ensure that key leaders are well informed on how TSMs under their command should navigate their earned benefits when leaving military service. Tragically, the VFW hears regularly from our accredited advocates and our claims clients that predatory actors have invaded this space, seeking TSMs and veterans to pay exorbitant and illegal fees for VA benefits assistance. To fight this, leaders at all levels of the military should have a keen understanding of how their service members can

avoid scams by utilizing properly vetted and accountable resources like VA-accredited claims representatives.

I was just recently approached at a VFW training conference by accredited claims advocate Joseph Zeigler to discuss this problem. Mr. Zeigler provides BDD claims assistance to TSMs on Fort Wainwright in Alaska. He explained that when he meets with service members about their claims they regularly report aggressive solicitations from these predatory companies to sign contracts for VA claims assistance.

Moreover, VFW member Preston Stewart, who is present with the VFW for this hearing, entered into a contract with one of these predatory companies on the advice of peers who are still in uniform. Thankfully, today Mr. Stewart is working with the VFW because not only can we provide a higher level of professional advocacy and service, but we are legally prohibited from stealing his benefits when he receives an award.

In the last year, our dialogue with both VA and DOD has improved, as we have heard both VA Secretary Denis McDonough and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin tell service members and veterans to never pay for benefits assistance. We have seen numerous consumer warnings from VA leaders and VA's own inspector general. Our next objective is to ensure that this message resonates with all military leaders so that these predatory companies can no longer scam those who wear the uniform.

We are grateful that VA is building this constructive dialogue, but we must all work together to consistently improve the transition experience and military life cycle for today's all-volunteer force. Though the VFW is confident that VA is moving in the right direction, we urge the committees to make sure TAP 6.0 is properly reviewed and vetted before full rollout in January 2024.

OBTT for VA Benefits

Finally, another of the VFW's concerns with military transition is low spouse participation in TAP. Anecdotally, we believe that a spouse often serves as the facilitator of a military family's transition, managing family affairs while the service member focuses on completing military service obligations. However, spouse participation in transition training is consistently low. While the VFW encourages spouses to participate in TAP, we also recognize that it may not be reasonable to expect more military spouses or family members to attend TAP in its current format during duty hours on military installations.

An alternative solution to this dilemma could be to pilot offering these resources after hours in partnership with community organizations in and around military installations, similar to DOL's Off-Base Transition Training (OBTT) program. Currently, OBTT offers in-person and online workshops to veteran jobseekers, leaning heavily on state workforce agencies, community service providers, and even VA facilities to offer training and resources. The VFW believes that either integrating VA benefits seminars into the current OBTT program or mirroring the program with a focus on VA benefits offers a pragmatic solution to this problem. We would welcome working with your committees to make this possible.

Considerable progress in improving the transition from military to civilian life has been made since the passage of the *VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011* (P.L. 112-56). Veteran unemployment is down. Service members are better informed on benefits. Innovative programs like SkillBridge are available to the force. However, those who need these programs and services the most continue to be missed. At a time when the military is worried about recruiting, patriotism among Americans is waning, and our military remains operational around the world, we have a duty to come together to solve these problems and demonstrate the persistent value to serve in the all-volunteer force. The VFW believes that we have a key role to play in this and we welcome dialogue with your committees, VA, DOD, and the service branches to posture our service members to thrive when they remove their uniforms for the last time.

Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, this concludes my testimony and I welcome any questions you or members of the committees may have.



Testimony of Tom Porter
Vice President of Government Affairs, Blue Star Families
before a
Joint Hearing of the
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
and
Senate Committee on Armed Services

October 18, 2023

Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, and distinguished Members of the Committees on Veterans' Affairs and Armed Services, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony for this hearing on Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service.

I am Vice President of Government Affairs of Blue Star Families— the nation's largest grass-roots military family support organization. Blue Star Families was founded in 2009 by military spouses to strengthen and empower military and Veteran families to thrive as they serve. We are committed to connecting them with their neighboring individuals and organizations to create vibrant communities of mutual support because we firmly believe that we are all stronger when we take care of one another.

The families of our All-Volunteer Force make unprecedented sacrifices every day to serve our country. Our groundbreaking research is raising the nation's awareness of the unique challenges of military family life – both during and after service.

With the help of neighbors across the country, Blue Star Families is overcoming the isolation and alienation of frequent moves, deployments, and reduced support from the government. Our innovative programs are solving specific challenges for military and Veteran families, such as fighting economic insecurity with resources that foster spouse career development, address food insecurity, building family strength with rich family programming, and provide critical peer support for caregivers – whose numbers are only increasing.



With more than 275,000 members in our network, including in chapters and communities all over the world, Blue Star Families touches more than 1.5 million military family members every year. By cultivating innovative programs and partnerships, we seek to ensure that our military and Veteran families always feel connected, supported, and empowered to thrive, wherever their service takes them.

Blue Star Families has thirteen (13) chapters across the country, including in New England, Ohio, and Tennessee. Our chapters provide virtual and in-person support and a local presence where various programs, events, and services are provided to all members of the military community (military, veteran, guard and reserve families) to help them feel more welcome and engaged in their community. We help them make connections to civilian neighbors, institutions, organizations.

This past year, Craig Newmark, Founder of Craigslist, committed \$100 million to the support of Veterans by contributing to solutions for the most pressing challenges facing veterans and military families, including mental health and suicide prevention, housing and homelessness, and food insecurity. As part of his generous contribution, he also made a personal commitment to Blue Star Families to start twelve (12) new Outposts to assist military and Veteran families. Blue Star Families Outposts will build upon our existing Chapter structure, and allow us to partner with local organizations to bring events, programs, and resources to even more local Veteran and military-connected communities nationwide.

At Blue Star Families, we know that behind every statistic is a story, and it is my honor to share both data and stories with you. Today, I want to share with you five main areas of concern that relates to military to civilian transition and how this ensures success after service which are suicide prevention, toxic exposure, transiting, education benefits, and recommending service.

Suicide Prevention

Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for veterans¹ and “1.5 times more likely to die

¹ Howard, J. T., Stewart, I. J., Amuan, M., Janak, J. C., & Pugh, M. J. (2022). Association of traumatic brain injury with mortality among military veterans serving after September 11, 2001. *JAMA network open*, 5(2), e2148150-e2148150.



by suicide than nonveteran adults.”² Despite efforts to expand mental health care, Veteran families continue to face many barriers to accessing mental health services during these stressful events. There is a clear need for mental health support, and it is critical to increase the capacity of service providers throughout veteran communities. In addition, given the barriers to accessing mental health resources, and the tendency of Veteran families to turn toward informal support, we should also activate and encourage engagement with less formal mental health supports such as wellness centers, chaplains, and friends and families. These supports cannot and should not replace mental health care, but they can support and extend mental health if given psychoeducation about the signs and symptoms of mental health challenges and how to talk to someone about their mental health.

In 2022, Blue Star Families was awarded the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant through the *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act*. Chairman Tester and Ranking Member Moran, we thank you for your leadership in passing this landmark law.

Blue Star Families developed our Upstream Solutions to Crisis program designed to provide supporters with the knowledge and skills necessary to provide effective assistance to Veterans and service members who may be experiencing mental health challenges or having thoughts of suicide. Through our 8-week sessions, participants gain valuable insights, resources, and strategies to help those in need and contribute to reducing the stigma surrounding mental health in the military community.

Blue Star Families has partnered with experts in the field such as PsychArmor (learning new skills), The American Red Cross (having hard conversations about mental health), Spiritune (self-care and music therapy), and the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors - TAPS (safe messaging and best practices on suicide reporting), along with providing lock-boxes to every participant for gun safety in the program. Additionally, every participant develops a crisis plan in the event their loved one becomes suicidal so that they have a plan in place that they can follow if the situation arises.

Over the last year we have made significant strides for our program by successfully conducting and completing seven cohorts with a total of 50 participants which is a testament to the sustained demand and relevance of our initiative—with an additional two cohorts currently in process. Our sessions have been instrumental in empowering

² DeAngelis, T(2022). Veterans are at higher risk for suicide. Psychologists are helping them tackle their unique struggles. *American Psychological Association*. 53 (8), 56.
<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/11/preventing-veteran-suicide>



supporters with the knowledge and skills needed to recognize signs of mental health distress, offer appropriate support, and connect individuals with the resources they require; and have been statistically shown to increase participants' sense of social support, comfort in talking to a friend or loved one in times of mental health crisis, and likelihood of utilizing critical resources as well.

Our program has undergone third-party evaluation metrics through the University of Alabama and found significant and outstanding results in both qualitative and quantitative data.

- 97% of participants reported that "Seeing a mental health professional is a sign of strength"³
- 90% of participants reported that "when people talk openly about their mental health, I think they are brave"⁴
- 93% of participants reported that "when people talk openly about their mental health, I think they are helping to end the stigma"⁵
- 73% of participants reported that "Nothing would prevent them from talking about suicide with others"⁶
- 90% of participants are taking time to focus on their self-care each week⁷
- 100% of participants think suicide can be prevented some or all of the time⁸

Participant quote: "I realize I'm not alone."⁹

One participant who participated in our program shared how she initially felt isolated and overwhelmed in her role. Through the support of our community and program, she realized that she wasn't alone in her struggles. She found solace in connecting with others who shared similar experiences and challenges. With this newfound sense of belonging, she gained the strength to overcome adversity and continue supporting her loved one.

Participant quote: "In this community we were able to create small pods of connectedness."¹⁰

³ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.

⁴ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.

⁵ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.

⁶ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.

⁷ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.

⁸ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.

⁹ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.

¹⁰ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis.Unpublished raw data.



Our program fostered a sense of connectedness within a diverse group of participants within the military and Veteran community. These small pods of support allowed participants to come together and view their roles from a fresh perspective. As they shared their experiences and provided mutual support, they discovered new ways to cope with the challenges they faced.

Participant quote: "Helped us identify what is big and what is little. Gave us a way to organize the issues we face into terms we can understand."¹¹

Participants learned to categorize and prioritize their challenges, differentiating between major concerns and minor issues. This allowed them to approach their roles with a clearer perspective, addressing the most crucial matters first and, in turn, reducing stress and anxiety.

With these powerful outcomes, Blue Star Families is making strides in creating a safety net of peer support that is able to identify and support Veterans and service members experiencing mental health crises. This has led Blue Star Families to receive funding for 2024 as well.

Toxic Exposures

The *Honoring Our PACT Act* was passed into law in August 2022 after years of advocacy by many veterans and military family support organizations, finally providing extensive VA benefits and healthcare for the millions who suffered toxic exposures during their deployments. Before the law was passed, the VA was disapproving approximately 80% of disability claims by Veterans with toxic exposures, like from burn pits. Following passage of the new law, the VSA is APPROVING the same percentage - an incredible turnaround that is having enormous positive impacts within the military and Veteran community.

I can personally attest to the value this new law has for my family. I just retired on October 1st following 27 years of reserve and active Navy service around the world, which included deployments to the Middle East and Afghanistan. I was diagnosed with asthma as a result of toxic exposure following my deployments, and later diagnosed with rhinitis and sinusitis - all three covered presumptive illnesses under the PACT Act. Once I applied for the new benefits with the user-friendly VA website - VA.gov/PACT, I attended one quick VA exam and approximately three months later my disability rating was approved. I am now receiving benefits and am a new VA health care recipient. My family will receive DIC should I pass away as a result of my exposures, and that is a critical benefit for many

¹¹ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2023 Upstream Solutions to Crisis. Unpublished raw data.



military and Veteran families. Further, VA disability benefits can make a significant difference in military families' livelihood after they transition to civilian life.

Impressively, Veterans and their survivors have filed more than one million claims for toxic exposure-related benefits under the PACT Act. As of September 30, VA has processed more than 610,000 of these claims, granting 77.4% of them and awarding more than \$2.46 billion in earned benefits to Veterans and survivors.

While VA is doing a commendable job reaching out to encourage application for PACT Act benefits, including enrollment in VA healthcare, the Department of Defense must do more to inform the approximately 200,000 service members who transition out of the military each year. They and their families need to be fully educated about their new benefits and why they should enroll in the VA, even if they are not suffering any symptoms at the time. With all of those who have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan presumed to be exposed to burn pits and other toxins, commanders need to ensure their service members and their families know where to turn for healthcare and benefits.

Education

Blue Star Families' research calls attention to the unique experiences and challenges faced by military and Veteran families. Our annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS)—developed in partnership with Syracuse University's D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) and fielded since 2009—is the largest annual comprehensive survey of military and Veteran families, and has elevated more than 100,000 of their voices. Data from the MFLS and other Blue Star Families research has been used at every level of government to help inform those tasked with making policy decisions that impact our military-connected communities.

In the 2022 MFLS survey fielding, a majority (62%) of Veterans said they used their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits themselves, 9% said a spouse used them, and 11% said their child used them.¹² Of those that didn't use them already, 11% of Veterans plan to use them in the future, 2% plan for their spouse to use them, and 7% plan to have their children use them.¹³

Blue Star Families applauds Congress for improving education benefits for military-connected students and refusing to make cuts to the Post-9/11 GI Bill over the last decade. We also express our profound appreciation for passing long-sought

¹² Blue Star Families. (2023). 2022 Military Family Lifestyle Survey. Unpublished raw data.

¹³ Blue Star Families. (2023). 2022 Military Family Lifestyle Survey. Unpublished raw data.



legislation to close the 90-10 loophole and curtail the abuse of the benefits by bad-acting schools.

Military and Veteran families continue to serve and sacrifice at home and abroad, and continuing our investment in their education benefits both provides an incentive for them to serve longer, while also providing a critical draw for those we need to attract to military service. We ask that Congress continue to stand against any cuts or reduction in education benefits for military and Veteran families.

Transition

Transitioning from uniform to civilian life is a critical period for service members and their families, which is why it is extremely important that the Transition Assistance Program is a comprehensive, family-centered, and outcome-based program that delivered well in advance to service members and their family members before leaving service.

In a GAO report from 2022, over 90% of transitioning service members participated in the TAP counseling pathways.¹⁴ Additionally, the report found that “nearly 25% of servicemembers who needed maximum support didn’t attend a mandatory 2-day class.”¹⁵ However, our 2021 MFLS tells a different story, with over half (58%) of veterans reporting that they did not attend TAP or any government-sponsored transition assistance programming.¹⁶ Furthermore, 41% of these veterans reported that they and their families disagreed that they were well-prepared to successfully navigate the transition from military to civilian life.¹⁷

There are evaluation gaps in services and servicemembers’ and dependents’ accessibility to services. It is a positive step that spouse employment has been incorporated into TAP. However, child-friendly courses are also key to ensure dependents’ accessibility. Our perception is that there are actually few literal barriers to participation for military spouses; instead it seems that there is a culture of non-attendance among transitioning spouses that must be overcome.

One of the biggest challenges that spouses indicate they face in our research has to do

¹⁴ U.S. Government Accountability Office (2022). Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Can Better Leverage Performance Information to Improve Participation in Counseling Pathways. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-104538>

¹⁵ U.S. Government Accountability Office (2022). Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Can Better Leverage Performance Information to Improve Participation in Counseling Pathways. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-104538>

¹⁶ Blue Star Families. (2022). 2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey. Unpublished raw data.

¹⁷ Blue Star Families. (2022). 2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey. Unpublished raw data.



with mental health challenges and the impact they have on integration into civilian society, marital issues, and several others. It is our understanding that TAP includes some classes about identifying PTSD and other mental health challenges, but not necessarily classes about how to manage these challenges and their consequences. Specifically, we believe that robust marital support programs will help military spouses.

Recommending Service

In view of the current challenges with recruitment in the armed forces, only 37% of military family respondents to the 2022 MFLS said they would recommend that a young family member join the military.¹⁸ Challenges to families were most often cited by military-connected family respondents as a reason to not recommend military service.

While “good benefits” and “economic stability” are top reasons for recommending military service, “poor military leadership,” “challenges for families,” and “financial sacrifice” are cited by active-duty family respondents as top reasons they were unlikely to recommend military service.

The top challenges listed for families were: Military spouse employment (48%), amount of time away from family as a result of military service (45%), military pay (40%), BAH/off base housing concerns (40%), and relocation and PCS issues (37%).

Female active-duty service member respondents who were likely to recommend service for reasons such as good benefits, positive opportunities, and job skill acquisition, while those who were unlikely to recommend service focused on challenges to families, poor leadership, and both racial and gender discrimination.¹⁹

Male active-duty service member respondents who were unlikely to recommend service noted a lack of leadership and politics (both past and present), as well as a general need for improvement, while those who were more likely to recommend service mentioned reasons similar to their female counterparts such as good benefits and economic/job stability.²⁰

¹⁸ Blue Star Families (2023). 2022 Military family lifestyle survey comprehensive report. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/BSF_MFLS_Spring23_Full_Report_Digital.pdf

¹⁹ Blue Star Families (2023). 2022 Military family lifestyle survey comprehensive report. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/BSF_MFLS_Spring23_Full_Report_Digital.pdf

²⁰ Blue Star Families (2023). 2022 Military family lifestyle survey comprehensive report. https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/BSF_MFLS_Spring23_Full_Report_Digital.pdf



Members of the Committees, thank you for inviting me here today to provide views on behalf of Blue Star Families. I am happy to answer any questions.

**STATEMENT OF
KEVIN O'NEIL
EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION POLICY ASSOCIATE
VETERANS EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION DIVISION
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
SENATE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
AND THE
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**

OCTOBER 18, 2023

Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, and distinguished senators, on behalf of National Commander Daniel J. Seehafer and the 1.6 million dues-paying members of The American Legion, we thank you for the opportunity to testify on military to civilian transition. The American Legion is directed by active Legionnaires who dedicate their time and resources to serve veterans, servicemembers, and their families. As a resolution-based organization, our positions are guided by more than 104 years of advocacy and resolutions that originate at the grassroots level of our organization. Every time The American Legion testifies, we offer a direct voice from the veteran community to Congress.

Military transition programs should not operate independently of recruiting and retention efforts. These closely connected efforts are integral to the military's personnel management strategy. Transition programs are directly connected to recruiting as they demonstrate the service branch's commitment to informing potential recruits about what to expect during and after their military service. Knowing that support and assistance are available during transition from military to civilian life can be attractive for individuals considering military service for education and training opportunities. Additionally, transition programs play a key role in retention by offering servicemembers the confidence that they will be well-prepared for life when they leave the military. This can make servicemembers more likely to stay in the military because they feel supported and informed about their post-service options.

However, until the Department of Defense (DOD) treats transition as part of recruiting and retention and as a key component of manpower and personnel programs, outcomes for servicemembers throughout the military lifecycle cannot be optimized. In accordance with Resolution No. 102: *Expansion of the Department of Defense's Transition Assistance Program (TAP) to include Ancillary Programs and Services*, The American Legion supports legislation that encourages the DOD to make improvements in service delivery, business processes, and technology innovations.¹

¹ The American Legion Resolution No. 102 (2018): *Expansion of the Department of Defense's Transition Assistance Program (TAP) to include Ancillary Programs and Services*, <https://archive.legion.org/node/588>.

Immediate TAP Improvements

Established through the Fiscal Year (FY) 1991 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), TAP is a cooperative federal interagency effort led by the DOD, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Education (ED), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), to provide assistance, resources, and training to retiring and separating active duty servicemembers, Guard and Reserve members, and their spouses.² The TAP's governance structure resides under the Transition Assistance Program Executive Council (TAP-EC) and the Joint Executive Committee (JEC). The JEC is the primary Federal interagency body, comprised of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness and the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs. The JEC oversees transition assistance activities for active duty and reserve servicemembers. The TAP-EC comprises multiple working groups to provide input and oversight into TAP's course curriculum, data sharing, performance management, communication, and supportive services.

The TAP's most recent significant update came from provisions in the FY 2019 NDAA, which requires servicemembers to begin TAP no later than 365 days before an anticipated separation (or release from active duty) or 24 months before retirement.³ It comprises three mandatory days of instruction: DOD Transition Day, VA Benefits and Services, and DOL Employment Fundamentals. Additionally, tailored two-day classes, known as career tracks, are available on entrepreneurship, vocational training, employment, or higher education.

As part of the FY 2019 NDAA inclusions, servicemembers are assigned into tiers by assessing a servicemember's transition preparedness level when receiving individualized pre-TAP counseling. Counselors assign servicemembers to one of three tiers based on several factors, including rank, term of service, disability, health, military occupational specialty, education, and employment history:

- Tier 1 servicemembers are considered well-prepared for transition and require minimal support. They are only required to attend the first three days of TAP.
- Tier 2 servicemembers are characterized as potentially in need of transition assistance. They are only required to attend the first three days of TAP but are encouraged to attend at least one of the additional courses.
- Tier 3 servicemembers are considered poorly prepared for their transition and require significant transition support, making the two-day career track completion mandatory.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found in its December 2022 report on TAP that 22% of tier 3 servicemembers did not attend or complete their 2-day career tracks. Moreover,

² National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991, Pub. L. No. 101-510, Title V, §502, 104 Stat. 1551 (1990).

³ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, Pub. L. No. 115-232, Title V, §552, 132 Stat. 1769 (2018).

the GAO found that 70% of transitioning servicemembers (TSMs) did not start TAP at least one year in advance as mandated by law.⁴

Delaying TAP participation reduces the window for transitioning servicemembers to learn about post-service programs, apply for earned benefits, and evaluate their own transition needs in time to seek support. With difficulties ensuring servicemember timeliness and full participation in the program offerings, more must be done to provide successful outcomes.

The American Legion also believes that technical language from the FY 2019 NDAA is preventing the service branches from identifying more tier 2 and tier 3 servicemembers. Specifically, they have reported that the factors of "disability" and "character of discharge" are largely incompatible with the requirement that the TAP process begin 365 days prior to discharge. Section 571 of the Houses' FY 2024 NDAA, *Amendments to Pathways for Counseling in the Transition Assistance Program*, makes allowance for a shorter timeline by changing this language to "potential or confirmed disability" and "potential or confirmed character."⁵ The American Legion supports this section and encourages adoption into the final NDAA. Further, The American Legion urges Congress to ensure that DOD and each service branch implement GAO's recommendations outlined in their December 2022 report regarding TAP timeliness and report servicemembers attendance to DOD. This data can assist DOD efforts to optimize performance outcomes.

Improving TAP Accessibility and Portability

Outside of the TAP curriculum, the VA offers Military Life Cycle (MLC) modules that allow servicemembers and their families to access information about the VA's services and benefits at their own time, in-person or online.⁶ The information sessions in the 14 modules are comprehensive and address specific topics in-depth, including VA Education Benefits, the VA Home Loan Guaranty Program, and Community Integration Resources.

The VA's MLC offers a promising best practice for the government agencies involved in TAP to provide micro-learning opportunities to servicemembers throughout their military service, increasing transition readiness outcomes well before TAP. However, VA has reported that between FY 2022 and FY 2023 Q2, only 30,191 participants viewed the modules.⁷ It is not enough for the VA to design high-quality training material; there must also be a communications plan to reach the intended audience and data collection on usage metrics.

In line with the recommendations above, The American Legion stresses the need for TAP delivery modernization. A great example is the delivery of remote TAP training following the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing for the virtual delivery of transition resources and training. The American Legion recommends developing a mobile app, which can serve as a valuable addition to the

⁴ U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Could Enhance the Transition Assistance Program by Better Leveraging Performance Information.", May 2023, GAO-23-106793, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-106793.pdf>.

⁵ H.R. 2670, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024, Title V, §571.

⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, "TAP Online Courses," www.TAPevents.mil/courses.

⁷ Data provided by VBA June 16, 2023.

programs' virtual offerings by providing servicemembers with an extensive toolkit of on-demand transition-related content. A mobile app would make TAP resources and information easily accessible to servicemembers and veterans on their smartphones or tablets, allowing them to conveniently access important materials as often as they want while allowing users to customize their career and transition plans and access content most relevant to individual needs and goals. Additionally, the application should also permit offline access, allowing military personnel deployed in areas with limited connectivity to provide access to critical information and resources. The American Legion cautions, however, that the mobile app should be implemented thoughtfully to ensure its effectiveness and usability. It should not be hastily developed in a vacuum, and its interagency partners and community organizations, such as veteran service organizations, should be able to provide feedback.

Modernizing SkillBridge

The SkillBridge Program is a DOD initiative that facilitates the transition of active-duty servicemembers to civilian employment by allowing them to participate in job training, internships, or apprenticeships with civilian employers during their last 180 days of military service. The program is designed to help servicemembers gain valuable civilian work experience and skills to make their transition to the civilian workforce smoother and more successful. SkillBridge is considered a win-win for servicemembers and civilian employers. Servicemembers gain valuable experience and skills to help secure meaningful civilian employment. At the same time, employers benefit from the unique talents, work ethic, and leadership qualities that military personnel bring to the workplace. The program currently has 3,745 authorized employers.⁸ Since its inception in 2011, more than 50,000 servicemembers have participated in SkillBridge⁹, with 22,548 members participating in the program in FY 2022.¹⁰

Despite SkillBridge's popularity, it can only be useful to servicemembers if they are actually provided with timely, easy access. Junior enlisted servicemembers, individuals identified as poorly prepared for their transition, servicemembers with families and dependents, and those with unplanned transitions may not consider applying for SkillBridge opportunities due to various barriers. Access to SkillBridge still depends on commander approval, and its accessibility varies by service branches. For example, the Navy restricted access to the program based on servicemembers' rank and time until discharge due to the command's inability to backfill participants' positions, creating personnel gaps that negatively impact unit operations.¹¹ This

⁸ Department of Defense, "Authorized SkillBridge Organizations," <https://skillbridge.osd.mil/organizations.htm>.

⁹ Lopez, Todd C. "Service Members Find Civilian Career Opportunities Through SkillBridge," DOD News, June 3, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/story/Article/3052396/service-members-find-civilian-career-opportunities-through-skillbridge>.

¹⁰ J. Margarita Devlin, "Statement of J. Margarita Devlin, Deputy Assistant Secretary Veterans' Employment and Training Service U.S. Department of Labor before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Committee on Veterans' Affairs U.S. House of Representatives," 2023, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20230517/115740/HHRG-118-VR10-Wstate-DevlinM-20230517.pdf>.

¹¹ Memo from CNO Washington DC to NAVADMIN. March 3, 2023, my.navy.mil/Portals/55/Messages/NAVADMIN/NAV2023/NAV23064.txt?ver=Y3LXOQQ9wdHMUhcDfhWCrg%3D%3D.

friction between operational demands and transition demands results in reduced opportunities for servicemembers to participate in SkillBridge and other similar transition programs.

The American Legion urges Congress to authorize SkillBridge funding to invest in improved management and reporting requirements. DOD should be able to manage applications, approval, and outcomes for all SkillBridge programs through a platform that is accessible by both employers and garrison transition centers. Every installation should offer this valuable transition program, and every servicemember should have the opportunity to apply for participation. Furthermore, The American Legion urges that service branch commanders offer servicemembers voluntary extensions past their separation date to allow participants interested in attending or in the process of completing the Skillbridge program. Finally, a modernized SkillBridge program must be able to empower employers to replicate best practices by identifying them. The American Legion urges Congress to require DOD to report annually to Congress on SkillBridge participation and outcomes.

Asserting the Military Life Cycle

America has no shortage of transition programs and benefits available to servicemembers. According to American Legion analysis, at least 27 DOD and federal programs support the transition to civilian life (see APPENDIX). Of these, DOD's Military-Civilian Transition Office (MCTO) provides oversight for only three: TAP, the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (YRRP), and the SkillBridge Program.¹² Notably, SkillBridge was not a part of MCTO until 2023, coinciding with excessive delays to program approval.¹³

Notwithstanding the reorganization of SkillBridge in 2023 and the YRRP in 2020, DOD has made little progress in integrating policy and program oversight of the numerous transition programs into one accountable office within Personnel and Readiness (P&R). Despite these programs receiving funding from DOD, service branches, and other federal agencies, P&R has indicated that the challenges and priorities of recruiting and retention are the most important issues and demand far more attention. While this rationale makes sense for now, it neglects the long-term value of transition programs returning military servicemembers back to society as successful, productive, well-connected citizens. Moreover, it fails in the assessment that an investment in transition is somehow adverse to retention; no organization has refuted this more than the Marine Corps.

Of all the service branches, the Marine Corps has adapted the most advanced transition program, based on Marine Corps Order (MCO) 1700.31, and implemented through the Transition Readiness Program (TRP).¹⁴ The Transition Readiness Program goes beyond TAP to establish a total Marine Life Cycle concept, providing Marines with a roadmap for their military career while emphasizing

¹² DoD Military-Civilian Transition Office, LinkedIn, <https://www.linkedin.com/showcase/military-civilian-transition-office/about/>.

¹³ Amanda Miller, "Growth of SkillBridge Transition Program Paused after Overwhelming Popularity," Military.com, July 10, 2023, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2023/07/07/growth-of-skillbridge-transition-program-paused-after-overwhelming-popularity.html>.

¹⁴ Marine Corps Order 1700.31, December 30, 2015, <https://www.marines.mil/portals/1/MCO%201700.31.pdf>.

the value of building core civilian competencies from initial entry.¹⁵ Notably, MCO 1700.31 also created the Unit Transition Coordinator (UTC) billet to assist Marines with their Life Cycle programs and with all unit transition activities. This investment has proven to increase recruiting and retention. By June 2023, the Marine Corps achieved 110% of its retention goal and up to 30% of 2024's recruiting goals, far ahead of its sister branches.^{16 17}

The American Legion recommends that other service branches adopt the lessons of the Marine Corps TRP, and that DOD adopt the spirit of this model by taking ownership of the constellation of transition programs, and providing stronger oversight and accountability measures. Further, The American Legion urges Congress to continue its oversight of the Military Life Cycle Transition Process. The amount of information servicemembers must absorb and retain during the condensed multi-day TAP program is daunting. Coupled with the concurrent demands of mission readiness, life stressors, and other transition-related difficulties, the current TAP program has limited chances of meeting the important goal of successfully returning our servicemembers back to civilian life. Servicemembers must be presented with digestible key information throughout their military service to ensure they build knowledge and familiarity with resources to support their transition to civilian life well before they attend TAP in their final year of service.

In 2011, Congress mandated the Military Life Cycle Transition under the *Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) Act* as the model for servicemembers to begin transition preparation early in their service.¹⁸ It also required that servicemembers be made aware of the Career Readiness Standards (CRS) that must be met prior to separation while ensuring that servicemembers can grow and develop their transferable skills throughout their service. This allows for transition to be a natural part of a servicemember's lifecycle, providing them with informed decisions regarding their personal goals throughout their military career and beyond. While DOD has published a policy and created a resource website, there has been no timeline established for implementation and no reporting requirements to ensure compliance. The American Legion urges Congress to provide DOD clear guidance to implement the Military Life Cycle Transition, directing measurable outcomes on tasks, timelines, and reporting requirements.

Conclusion

The American Legion believes the DOD's highest priority is ensuring our country's security needs. This can only be done through successful recruiting and retention. But to sustain the force through times of war and peace, we must emphasize the importance of instilling confidence that military service will return successful citizens to society. Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, and distinguished senators, The American Legion thanks you for your

¹⁵ Marine For Life Cycle, Marine Corps Community Services (MCCS), <https://pendleton.usmc-mccs.org/about/marine-for-life-cycle>.

¹⁶ South, Todd, "Marines on target for active, Reserve recruiting and retention goals," Marine Corps Times, June 29, 2023, <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/modern-day-marine/2023/06/29/marines-on-target-for-active-reserve-recruiting-and-retention-goals>.

¹⁷ Baldor, Lolita C, "The Few, the Proud' aren't so few: Marines recruiting surges while other services struggle," ABC News, June 29, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/proud-marines-recruiting-surges-services-struggle-101816734>.

¹⁸ Pub. L. No. 112-56, Title II, §221, 125 Stat. 715 (2011).

leadership and for allowing us the opportunity to explain the positions of our members and the importance of this subject. Questions concerning this statement can be directed to Mr. John Kamin, Senior Legislative Associate, at jkamin@legion.org.

APPENDIX: TRANSITION RESOURCES

PROGRAMS OVERSEEN BY MILITARY-CIVILIAN TRANSITION OFFICE (OSD-P&R)

Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

DOD's flagship transition program. Provides information, tools and training to help service members and their spouses get ready to successfully move from the military to civilian life.

SkillBridge

Opportunity for servicemembers to gain valuable civilian work experience through specific industry training, apprenticeships, or internships during the last 180 days of service. Overseen by ODASD(FE&T) until 2023, now overseen by MCTO.

Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program

DoD-wide effort to promote the well-being of National Guard and Reserve members' well-being, families, and communities by connecting them with resources throughout the deployment cycle. Overseen by Defense Personnel and Family Support Center within the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs until 2020.

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES OPERATED OUTSIDE OF MILITARY-CIVILIAN TRANSITION OFFICE OVERSIGHT

Army Employment Readiness Program (ERP)

Provides employment information to servicemembers and military spouses in job search skills, education, training, transition, and volunteer opportunities. Operated through Army Community Service (ACS) centers.

Army Recovery Care Program (ARCP)

Manages recovery and complex care for wounded, ill and injured Soldiers across all Army components, including transition plans.

Army Reserve Private Public Partnership Program (P3)

Connect Soldiers with internship, employment, and education opportunities in collaboration with military and veterans service organizations.

Career Path DECIDE

A decision support tool to help servicemembers and Veterans identify, prepare for, and become increasingly qualified for employment as they transition military service to the civilian workforce. Currently under Manpower and Reserve Affairs.

Career and Transition System (Kuder Career Interests Assessment)

An online resource for servicemembers to translate interests, skills, and work values into personalized career plans to explore occupational information. Currently under Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES).

Career One Stop Veteran and Military Transition Center

Veteran and Military Transition Center is a one-stop website for employment, training, and financial help after military service. Currently overseen by Department of Labor.

Credentialing Opportunities On-Line (COOL) Program

Designed to match military occupations to civilian credentials (occupational certifications, licenses, and apprenticeships) and provide resources to help Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen attain these credentials. Provided in keeping with requirements of P.L. 113-66, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014, Sec 542.

Distance Learning Readiness Self-Assessment (DLRSA)

DLRSA was developed to help prospective distance learners self-assess their readiness for distance learning. Currently overseen by Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES).

DOD Career Ready

Career Ready Portal is designed to provide an organized set of information and links to these valuable resources with "more features and resources planned over time." Last under ODASD(FE&T).

Education and Employment Initiative (E2I)

Connects Navy wounded warriors and their caregivers to education resources and career counseling services, from assisting with job applications, to identifying vocational training opportunities, to sharing direct employer contacts. Organized under Navy Wounded Warrior Program.

Employment Navigator & Partnership Pilot (ENPP)

Provides one-on-one career assistance to interested transitioning servicemembers, and their spouses, at select military installations worldwide. Provided outside the formal DOL Transition Assistance Program (TAP) classroom instruction. Overseen by Department of Labor.

inTransition

Provides telephonic coaching sessions using motivational interviewing techniques that empower servicemembers to determine their own paths to continue in care and improve their well-being. Overseen by Military Health System and Defense Health Agency.

Joint Service Transcripts

Describes military schooling and work history in civilian language. It serves as a counseling tool for academic and career counselors in advising servicemembers and veterans. Currently under Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES).

Marine for Life Network (M4L)

Connects transitioning Marines and their family members to education resources, employment opportunities, and other veterans services that aid their career and life goals outside of military service.

MilGears

Tool to consolidate military and civilian experience, training, and education into a single Learning and Employment record (LER) to keep a record of all accomplishments in order to communicate to educational institutions and employers. Designed to requirements of ODASD(FE&T).

Military 2 Mariner

Designed to recruit veterans into fast-track pipelines in the U.S. Merchant Marines. Managed by the Department of Transportation's Maritime Administration (MARAD).

Off-Base Transition Training (OBTT)

Pilot program is an opportunity for veterans and servicemembers currently serving in the National Guard and Reserve and their spouses to take control of their careers through workshops to help meet their employment goals. Overseen by Department of Labor.

Operation Warfighter

Internship program that matches qualified wounded, ill, and injured servicemembers with non-funded federal internships in order for them to gain valuable work experience during their recovery and rehabilitation. Overseen by Defense Health Agency.

Soldier for Life

Official U.S. Army program created to engage and connect Army, government, and non-government organizations in order to influence policies, programs, and services that support Soldiers, veterans, and families; build sustainable relationships and outcomes; and reinforce the Soldier For Life (SFL) mindset throughout the entirety of the Soldier Life Cycle (SLC).

Troops to Teachers

Helps servicemembers and veterans become certified and employed as teachers in K-12 schools. Established in 1992 as a DOD program, shifted to the Department of Education in the late 1990s before returning to DOD in 2013. Despite over 100,000 alumni, the program is currently operating with minimum staff and resources. Currently under Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES).

Tuition Assistance Program

Program provides financial assistance for voluntary off-duty civilian education programs in support of a Soldier's professional and personal self-development goals. Currently under Manpower and Reserve Affairs.

United Services Military Apprenticeship Program (USMAP)

Formal military training program that provides active duty and Full Time Support (FTS) Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard servicemembers the opportunity to improve their job skills and to complete their civilian apprenticeship requirements while they are on active duty. Last under ODASD(FE&T).

U.S. Army Partnership for your Success (PAYS) Program

Provides soldiers with an opportunity to serve their country while they prepare for their future. PAYS Partners guarantee Soldiers an interview and possible employment after the Army. Overseen by Army Recruiting Command (USAREC).

U.S. Special Operations Command Care Coalition

Assists Special Operations Forces (SOF) Wounded, Ill, or Injured servicemembers and their families seamlessly transition to civilian life for continued medical care, benefits, and career opportunities. Overseen by Headquarters, United States Special Operations Command.

TAP SYLLABUS**TAP Curriculum: VA Benefits and Services**

One-day interactive briefing designed to enable transitioning servicemembers to make informed decisions regarding the use of VA benefits.

TAP Curriculum: Department of Labor Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition (DOLEF)

Introduces the essential tools and resources needed to evaluate career options, gain information for civilian employment, and understand the fundamentals of the employment process.

DOD Education Track: Managing Your (MY) Education

Assists servicemembers in identifying the higher education requirements that support their personal career goals.

DOD Vocational Track: Career and Credential Exploration

Offers the opportunity for servicemembers to complete a personalized career development assessment of occupational interest and ability.

DOL Employment Track: DOL Employment Workshop (DOLEW)

Covers emerging best practices in career employment, including in-depth training to learn interview skills, build effective resumes, and use emerging technology to network and search for employment.

SBA Entrepreneurship Track: Boots to Business

Introduction to Entrepreneurship" course which provides participants with an introductory understanding of business ownership. After completing the "Introduction to Entrepreneurship" course, participants can elect to further their study through one of the multi-week online B2B follow-on courses or take advantage of the many resources and services offered by the SBA and its partner network, including Veterans Business Outreach Centers, SCORE, Small Business Development Centers, and Women's Business Centers.

ONLINE TAP MODULES

Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition (EFCT)

Lays the foundation for transition from military to civilian careers by introducing essential tools and resources needed to evaluate career options, gain information for civilian employment, and understand the fundamentals of the employment process.

Financial Planning for Transition

Provides transitioning servicemembers with an understanding of how transition may impact their finances, and provides the tools and resources for a successful financial transition.

Managing Your (MY) Transition

Assists servicemembers in identifying the higher education requirements that support their personal career goals.

Military Crosswalk Search

Assists with determining which military occupations qualifications are "substantially equivalent" to the state's requirements for licensure and identify gaps between civilian occupational licensure requirements and a veteran's current knowledge, skills, education, and training. Overseen by Department of Labor within the O*NET program.

VA Benefits and Services

Designed to enable transitioning servicemembers to make informed decisions regarding the use of VA benefits.

Wounded Warrior and Caregiver EFCT

Blended learning delivery of the online Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition (EFCT) followed by instructor-led virtual sessions designed to meet the needs of transitioning servicemembers who may be wounded, ill, and/or injured.



STATEMENT OF

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KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
&
MEMBER
KANSAS GOVERNOR'S MILITARY COUNCIL

BEFORE THE

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
AND
UNITED STATE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

WITH RESPECT TO

"Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service"

Washington, D.C.

October 18, 2023

Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, and members of these committees, I, as a third generation Army Officer, am both honored and thankful for this opportunity to address you with my insights on the challenges of Post 9-11 era veteran transition to successful and fulfilling civilian lives after their service. As a combat veteran, as well as a human science researcher, and active practitioner of transition assistance through higher

education administration, non-profit veteran service organizations, professional consulting and personal mentorship efforts -I believe I have a unique and relevant perspective upon this human life event of contemporary veteran's transition and am honored to serve you at this joint hearing.

Today, I wish to share a few broad comments from my perspective. First, I offer my thoughts and findings on the enduring and contemporary challenges of this vital process. Secondly, I wish to comment upon efforts made to date to improve our transition system relative to performance outcomes. Finally and most importantly, I share where and why I believe we still face daunting programmatic performance shortfalls. I am sure everyone in this room today are well aware of the costs we face of continuing to not get this right—to include the promises not yet fulfilled to our Post 9-11 era veterans and families; and the domino effects we are seeing in the next generation of young citizens witnessing the post-military struggles of their elders and losing interest in serving our great Nation. I make my comments today not as criticism but of commitment to help us all make the adjustments needed to succeed.

My Strategic Perspective on Transition Challenges

The military separation system employed since the inception of the All-Volunteer Force in the 1970's was adequate for many generations of military members in transition. Societal, workforce and generational dynamics of these decades proved to offer a more permissive climate and environment facilitating effective transition for the Cold War and Gulf War I veterans. With minimal adaption to this system, our Nation entered the Post 9-11 Era where social, economic, generational, martial and workforce conditions had changed in significant ways rendering our

modified “separation” system ill-suited to effectively assist our new generation of service members and their families to re-enter civil life, the workplace and supportive communities. Some key changes effecting transition of these Post 9-11 veterans include: the changed nature of the workforce and its composition, a change from human resource hiring to talent acquisition models, dramatic changes to the very nature of work and the workplace, the economic necessity for dual working spouse families, the increased acceptance of behavioral health and its consequences on life events—such as transition and a myriad of others. From my lived experience, research and practice, I believe that the sum totality of these societal and generational changes where not adequately accounted for as we adapted our legacy military separation system to meet current Post 9-11 Era transition demands.

In the early 1970’s, useful social science research was conducted that guided the Human Resource (HR) practices involved in designing, recruiting, developing, employing and retaining a new All-Volunteer Force that serves the veteran today. Most of the transition-related applied research work focused exclusively upon the entry transition to military life. However, far too little research work conducted on the practice of exit transitions of veterans into civil life and work. For four decades, this gap of research needed to guide veteran’s separation went largely unnoticed due to the presence of a large, allied-military defense sector that absorbed up to 80% of transitioning veterans into defense-related employment after their uniformed service. Realizing this dynamic myself, I addressed this shortfall in my 18-years of study and practice of Post 9-11 Era veteran transition and have found, adapted and applied relevant social science research principles that I believe we should be using nationally to improve our strategies and programs of exit transition (SEE EXHIBIT 1 & 4).

VETERANS TRANSX FACTORS—Staged - Life Event Map (DeGroat, 2019)

Linking Lived Experience Phenomena to Social Science Theory

Pre-Service Factors	During-Service Factors	Transition-Period Dynamics	Intervening Influences	Environmental Dynamics	Transition Performance
Education-level/quality	Actual/perceived value of military service experience	Presence of realistic life stage goals and personal adult transition strategy (Adults in Transition, Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006)	Level of deliberate effort in upskilling activities (Hardy, 1994) (Jolly, 1999)	Viable pathways exist for veterans chosen new career	Successful entry in new career track employment (optimal outcome)
Socio-economic factors (Social Reproduction Theory, Bourdieu, 1987)	Employment opportunity (Human Capital, Menn, 2012)	Mindset about transition (Dweck, 2006)	Participation/level of engagement in transition education programs of proven efficacy	Employer's reactive and able to hiring veterans sound business decision -CSI/PMI image -meet DOD contracting requirements	Under-employment (post-study outcome)
Lifelong/Life Skills	Expectations of manageability of military job/experience from American Narrative (Proshart & Molinero, 2011)	Presence/nature of workplace ready skills (Gallup, State of the American Workplace, 2017)	Level of stress of concurrent life events of social readjustment (Holmes & Rahe, 1967)	Social/workplace attitudes about veterans	Gainful employment (post-study outcome)
Career Orientation (Bruce & Hall, 2006)	Transferable value of acquired military training and relevance of self education	Ability to re-socialize into civil life (Psychological Capital, Luthans, Kremer & Avolio, 2007)	Geographic relocation facilitates supportive of employment goals	Viability of legacy veteran service organizations to assist recent veterans	Special employment
	Pervasive levels of institutionalization of military socialization (Institutional Logic Theory, Thornton & Ocasio, 1994)	Ability to offset/accommodate economic entry costs of independent private sector employment compensation (Psychological Contract, Rousseau, 1995)	Presence of relevant social connections to the private sector workplace (Social Capital Theory, Putnam, 2001)	Discouraged worker (Data # US Dept of Labor, BLS)	Unemployed (JCI) (Data # U.S. Dept of VA)
	Military Marriage and Family development	Ability to replace military benefits and entitlements not provided by private sector employment	Ability to replace military benefits and entitlements not provided by private sector employment		Discouraged worker (Data # US Dept of Labor, BLS)
	Level of dependency upon military system's welfare benefits/entitlements network	Willingness/ability to develop new workplace skills through education and training (Dikavos, 2009, 2011)	Disability, health care and well-being issues at time of transition		Discouraged worker (Data # US Dept of Labor, BLS)
		Disability-benefits disenrollment	Impact of military disability compensation on employment		Discouraged worker (Data # US Dept of Labor, BLS)
		Family member transition expectations & needs	Recruitment incentives for transition into National Guard or Reserves		Discouraged worker (Data # US Dept of Labor, BLS)

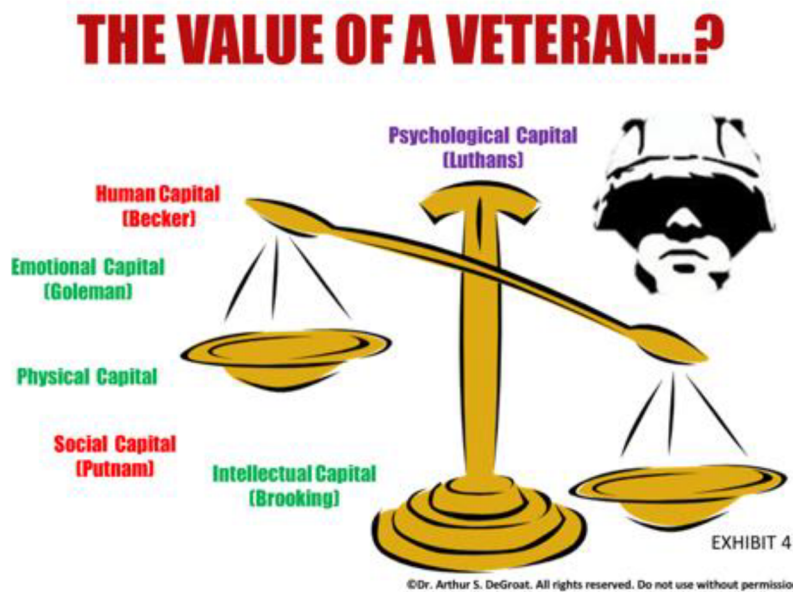
EXHIBIT 1

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I have had the opportunity to work with many transitioning veterans to test and prove the applicability of better foundational under-pinnings of this most difficult human life event.

While many of the process improvements made over recent years are fundamentally valid, I find their application ineffective when being applied to generationally outdated exit transition system.

I think we are seeing these efforts to improve applied with limited success to improvement — thus we continue to perform significantly below current needs and expectations. Additionally, It appears to me that the iterative changes made were incremental and reactionary efforts to mediate “symptomatic” —not systemic shortfalls —mostly by lacking an empirical basis needed to achieve optimal outcomes. Simply stated, I view our current Post 9-11 Era exit transition system as too heavily driven by historical practice and not predicated upon evidence-based or data-driven solutions that are generationally appropriate. Moreover, in doing so, we appear to be

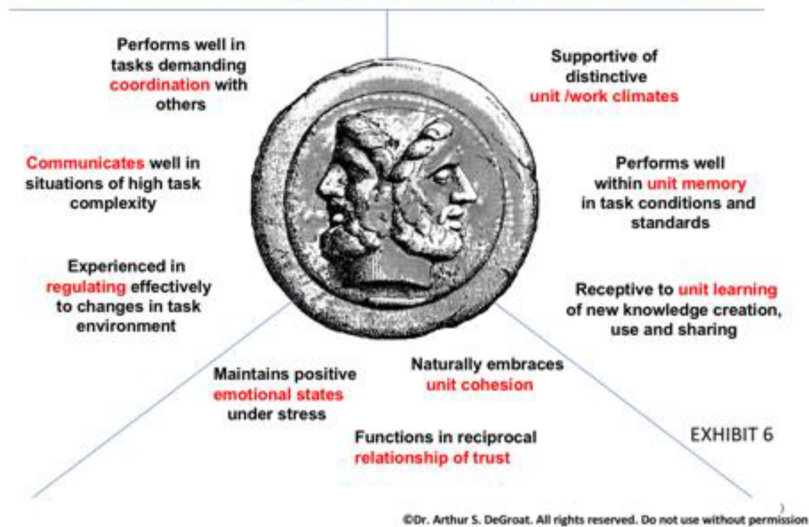


aggressively and progressively applying the right things —the wrong way- and at the wrong place in this process. As a believer in the validity of social reproduction theory, it appears that our exit transition shortfalls not only negatively impact this generation of veterans—but evidence is mounting that it is serving as another major disincentive for the next generation to serve our Nation in uniform. Current data points to the significant reduction of new recruits from families that recently served-where veterans and families that have not transitioned well are reluctant to influence or support their children from doing so.

Today, we find our Post 9-11 era veterans having limited opportunity to enter our contemporary workforce—a work force that has changed dramatically from the workforces previous generations of veterans entered. Additionally, a plethora of business management and organization behavior research details the changed nature of work and the work place in the Post 9-11 Era. All of this suggests to me that our current generation of Post 9-11 Era veterans are having to serve as “pioneers” as the first generation of veterans to face major, cross-boundary career transitions; and having to compete with an incumbent talent pool for employment in contemporary sectors where the veterans have little to no direct, relevant experience in. Adding complexity to this current reality, we are asking our young service members to know and envision their post-military futures in process started just 365 days before they exit. This is both daunting and unrealistic given what we know empirically about adults making these life transitions. While not a psychologist myself, my deepest belief is that our current TAP program, as applied, places too much life decision-making upon our exiting service members too close to their departure rendering a state of “learned helplessness” where their lack of readiness to transition questions their innate belief that they can do so.

Another major generationally different condition troubling our current effort is that most private sector employers consider military service as absenteeism from the workforce—rendering them valued in our current talent acquisition model as “entry-level talent” despite the veteran possessing years of exemplary professional military service experience. While many employers recognize the innate talent and general value of former service members attributes as desirable “soft skills” (SEE EXHIBIT 6), current employers do not see veterans having immediate workplace-ready skills, nor possessing the ready knowledge and experiences needed to perform for their companies within the industry standard 14 day of on-boarding.

“OTHER ATTRIBUTES” VALUE OF A VETERAN EMPLOYEE



By not adequately addressing these realities, our modern TAP approach appears to still rely on the legacy premise that the service member's military talent and experience is directly transferable to the workforce needs of today. As such, an unrealistic and over-reliance upon our current practice in exit transition assistance is predicated upon simply translating existing military skills, known as Military Occupational Specialties (MOS), into workplace equivalencies that simply do not exist. Evidence from human capital research (SEE EXHIBIT 5) informs us that human talent is sector specific—meaning military talent is not directly transferrable to the civilian market or workplace without additional knowledge, training and application in the private sector. Thus, most of our transitioning veterans are truly not ready to compete for entry into the workforce without additional training—and the TAP programmatic often fail to illuminate this reality to the service member, nor do it in a timely fashion to allow mediation. I believe the promising skill bridge program is a realization of this fact—however this program has not yet scaled to make a meaningful difference to this cohort.

A HUMAN CAPITAL PERSPECTIVE ON TALENT

What CAN They Do.....and.....What WILL They DO

- **General Cognitive Ability-
intelligence**

- **Knowledge**** – understanding of principles, facts and processes (e.g. sales)
- **Skills**** – capacity to learn more info more quickly (e.g. problem solving)
- **Experience**** – transfer knowledge from generic to specific

**** These are context-specific and demand adaptability to new, non-military task environment**

- **Personality- traits that
direct behavior**

- **Interests and Values** – preferences to certain type of work



EXHIBIT 5

Ployhart & Moliterno (2011)

The second legacy practice of ineffective exit transition is that military unit leaders do not adequately support or perform the developmental coaching of their service members to plan for their futures after service- and place a premium on professional military development and retention. While this is a valid focus placed upon our leaders to train and retain their people—the reality is that they need to go beyond soldier development and perform more adult life development to prepare their service members for the eventual departure. This dynamic's major shortfall negatively effecting transition is the practice of focusing primarily upon what the

veteran can do in the private workforce by falsely making these fore mentioned MOS linkages; while insufficient effort is offered to develop what the exiting service member wants to do after departure. Interestingly, anecdotal evidence tells us that most veterans do not want to work in career fields in post-military careers what they did in the military. In summary, these issues alone indicate that our efforts to “shoe-horn” military talent directly in a workforce that does not desire this talent directly (SEE EXHIBIT 12); and thrust it upon transitioning veterans to pursue carer fields that they do not desire. This fundamentally limits exit transition success.

We Need to Do Better in Steering our Transitioning Veteran's to Where our Workforce Opportunities Are

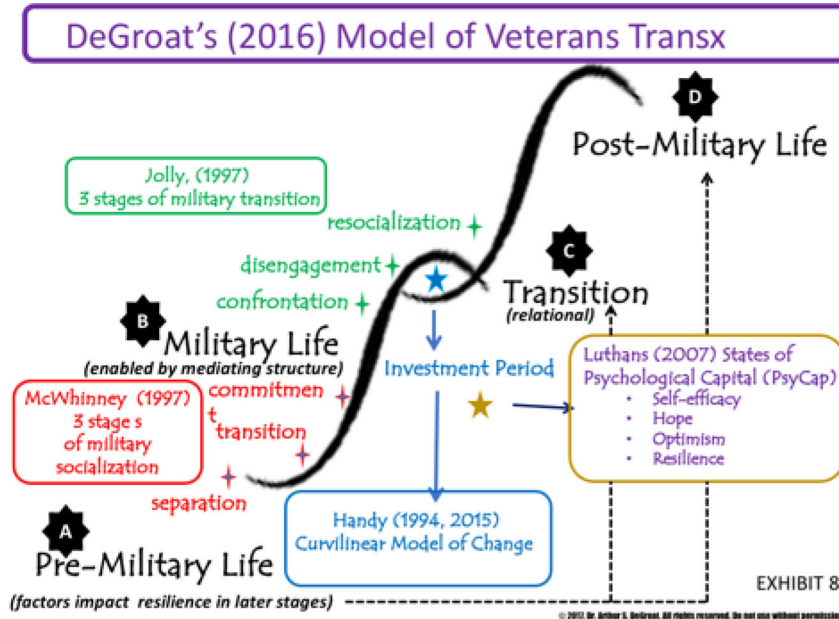


Too many of employers are seeking veteran workers in weaker industries

EXHIBIT 12

Prospective Exit Transition Practice Improvements Needed for Increased Effectiveness**1. Improve the Process**

Contemporary military service culture justifiably places retention of their well-developed and experienced military talent at a premium. However, this has manifest into a professional culture that renders transition as fundamentally a retention failure. In my years of practice and study, I have witnessed military unit leaders viewing this relationship between service member retention and transition as competing demands. Within this competitive mindset or culture, it is then explainable that unit leaders place little effort to help our young service members confront eventual departure and envision future life plans-nor allowing sufficient time to make adequate preparations while gainfully serving in uniform. While reforms made to extend the exit timeline of our transition process have been made—they have not yet addressed the fact that transition is a subset and complementary function of retention and should be professionally be addressed in unit service member development. I offer that until the military culture changes from leading and caring for service members during their service career to focusing upon their life cycle needs an effective, evidence-based exit transition process will fail to operate effectively. I offer a relevant life cycle model to consider (SEE EXHIBIT 8).



From a life cycle model approach, empirical research in adult and military transition posit that this unique life event unfolds in three distinct phases, with specific inputs and outputs needed to advance through the stages; and that many overlapping issues confound the process. Research also indicates that effective military exit transition as a holistic process typically lasts from 3.5 to 7 years- meaning much of this process occurs long before and after our current separation process is enacted. The sum result of my decades of work in this area suggest that successful transition must become an integral component of developing, leading and caring of our service members from day one—and not be viewed as a competitive venture to retention. I will elaborate further.

It is my firm belief that our Nation would be wise to recognize that this empirically valid staged process be incorporated (SEE EXHIBIT 9); and current exit transition tasks be re-programmed to be performed at each appropriate stage of the service members life cycle. This staged process of exit transition should start early in the service members career in the unit by (Stage 1) *confronting* reenlistment or an eventual departure. Then continues when it is time to progressively (Stage 2) *disengage* from unit activities to allow the performance of key transition preparations once a decision was made to depart. At this time, the service member starts to utilize TAP resources and begins making logical choices and commitment to educational, vocational and financial preparations to meet expected entry costs to civilian life and work.

HOW VETERANS FACE TRANSITION.. IN STAGES

(Jolly, 1997)



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The process concludes upon departure by (Stage 3) *re-socializing* into society and work life as a veteran.

I believe that our exit transition program must be modified as a staged, life cycle program. This validates the current organizational approach of this being an interagency, effort starting with DOD, then VA and DOL, and concluding in community-based efforts (VSOs, state and local governmental and employer-based transition assistance programs).

2. Assess and Address the True Entry Costs of Effective Exit Transition

Without fully understanding, and where possibly mitigating, the effects of the true, high entry costs into independent civil life— we will continue to offer exit transitions assistance information and support that does not match the realistic conditions being faced by our new veterans and their families. I find this in my practice to be the major factor that a majority of exiting service members continue to view TAP as an ineffective effort; and/or resulting in self-doubt and fear. However, I do witness that the current TAP curriculums have incorporated a significant understanding of these entry cost issues—but still lack offering the service members time and relevant assistance in developing solutions to overcome them. I will share a few of these entry costs.

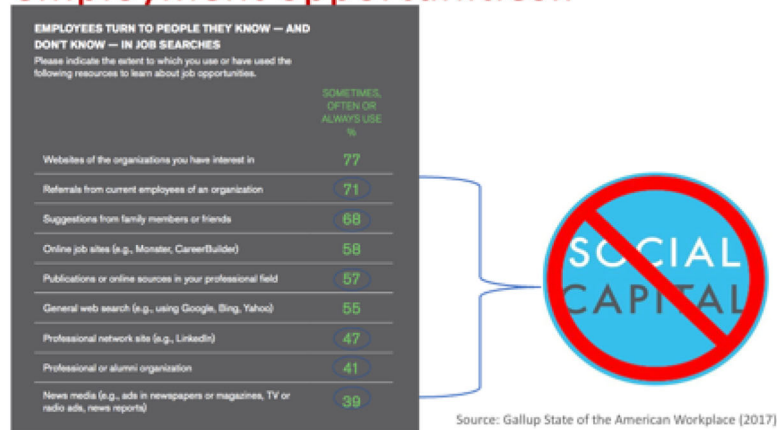
Economic Entry Cost. From my perspective, a leading factor in service member discouragement is the economic reality of a major compensation gap that exists between military pay and benefits and industry compensation rates based upon market rates, not military and recruiting and retention formulas. In most cases, our veterans are not aware-- nor ready to accept major decreases in compensation and benefits as an “entry cost” into civilian employment. For

many military disability claims become a financial cushion to mitigate this reality—driving up VA costs and workload, and prolonging or preventing the active successful search for employment. The current TAP program asks the service member to identify financial gaps in their intended plans for many “out-of-pocket” expenses for housing, healthcare, childcare and taxation. To the degree that these are captured accurately relative to entry salaries in the civilian workplace greatly affect the mindset and readiness of the departing veteran to find and accept work. Generally, the departing veteran underestimates the financial entry costs and overly expects higher compensation than is offered. Confounding the ability to meet financial entry costs, evidence also indicates that spouses are less competitive for private employment than civilian candidates due to lack of skill development, work experience and social capital needed to establish oneself in private employment after living a military life as a service spouse. When these spouses are also serving in the growing population of in-home caregivers to their veteran—they face even greater limitations to meet entry costs.

Skill, Knowledge, Abilities and Other Attributes (SKAOA). In the absence of relevant private sector work experience, professional credentials and professional network connections, new veterans lack the human and social capital needed to overcome this cost of entry. Moreover, the under-utilization of the Post 9-11 GI Bill as a result of not believing it was needed; and/or submitting to the moral (family) and institutional (retention) pressures of transferring these vital resources to their family members renders the new veteran limited in meeting the skills entry cost in our new workforce and economy.

Building a Culture of Self-Sufficiency vs Entitlement. I witness exiting service members maintaining an overly reliant institutional dependency on the DOD and VA for their future financial success—thus limiting self-responsibility and acceptance of concierge-style assistance, coaching, mentoring from successful military “transitioners.” A key principle of adult transition is the presence of role models in the new lifeworld that they will be entering (civilian); and moving away from those who reinforce their former identities and roles (military). Currently, I find too few programs that identify and empower successful “transitioners” as *exemplars* to coach and assist our *re-socializing* veterans in private lives. My review of the TAP website prior to this hearing offers only two testimonials of successful transition. Perhaps we should modify our service’s alumni programs, such as “Soldier for Life” to develop a pool of successful “transitioners” to help those making this transition today. This would also help our exiting veterans build new social capital needed in civilian life-proven to be essential in civilian career development. Interestingly, HR and hiring managers cite that in addition to overly formulaic resumes, transitioning veterans lack credible, non-military references that validate their fitness for sought after positions (SEE EXHIBIT 13). Without such an effort to promote self-sufficiency and connecting our departing service members to successful civilian veterans, the reliance on institutional entitlements will continue to limit the energy and efforts of our new veterans to find ways to navigate this crucial exit transition stage, meet and overcome entry costs and find new life in society after their service.

Veterans lack social capital to find employment opportunities..



Strategic Consideration:
Traditional recruitment mechanisms may not reach veteran prospects

EXHIBIT 13

Re-Examine Institutional Approaches and Funding For Veteran Entrepreneurship.

Another reform of our current TAP program that I strongly support is the scaling-down or elimination of the Small Business Bureau's (SBA) Entrepreneurship Track as a viable pathway for departing service members. Without seeing compelling success outcome data, anecdotal evidence suggests that steering or perpetuating a departing veteran's interest in this challenging work form is highly unrealistic. Contemporary business management science clearly points out that entrepreneurialism is one of the most powerful ideologies of our time and has not produced careers as expected for many sound reasons. If business professionals with specialized

education, experience and private capital typically fail-on what rationale, would we base the great emphasis we give this pathway to our veterans? Research points out several points about entrepreneurialism that validate my suggestion. First, the rationale for most governmental encouragement of entrepreneurial activity is predicated upon either job creation as a social-economic enterprise (not an individual success enterprise); and secondly it is promoted as “emancipatory entrepreneurialism” as an ideology that those most hard to climb the traditional economic ladder can conceptually build their own. Quite simply, a rare few departing veterans possess the essential enabling conditions of skills, experience, hyper-individualism and private capital to start, scale and operate a successfully business to sustain themselves and their families—and are best served in established organizations that provide higher compensation, better benefits, access to more training and stability. Lastly, a glimpse into career theory further highlights the lack of viable fit for recent veterans to find this pathway lucrative or possible.

Closing Remarks

In closing, I believe we can improve our outcome performance of veterans transition by making the adaptations suggested in my testimony that (a) better contend with current realities, (b) base our programmatic on evidence-based practices in adult transition social science, (c) build a true, life cycle model based on existing staged models, and (d) re-structure current successful features in a more practical and optimal timed sequence. By doing so, I believe that we can increase the logic, timing and flow of enduring steps of this challenging process- while increasing the transitioning service member’s confidence in the system.

Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, and members of these committees, this concludes my testimony. I welcome any questions you may have. Thank You

(I dedicate this testimony to my mentor, friend and exemplar of the finest in veterans' character- Colonel Retired Mike McDermott, U.S. Army, Infantry. COL McDermott is one of the most highly decorated combat veterans of the war in Vietnam; and a sage of wisdom on making veterans lives worth living after their service.)

Questions for the Record

Chairman Tester
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service
October 18, 2023

For DOD:

1. Last year, GAO reported (22-105261) that DOD did not gather evidence from its credentialing programs to gauge whether or not they've been effective.
 - a. Has DOD started gathering and assessing data on its credentialing programs, like COOL and US-MAP to evaluate their effectiveness?
2. The SkillBridge program has been a critical tool to help transitioning servicemembers gain experience and training in a civilian industry.
 - a. What is DOD doing to ensure the SkillBridge program remains a viable option for transitioning servicemembers while also minimizing the impact on mission readiness?
3. The *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act* included a requirement for DOD and VA to review the records of veterans who died by suicide within one year following their discharge. This report was due to Congress yesterday, and is critical to helping us identify risk factors and improve suicide prevention measures for recently-separated servicemembers.
 - a. What can DOD do to expedite the completion of this report?
4. A recent GAO report (23-105381) found DOD and VA fell short in ensuring servicemembers know about their potential eligibility for VA Military Sexual Trauma (MST) care, and in helping servicemembers transition their DOD MST-related care to VA.
 - a. How does DOD plan to better standardize the information provided to transitioning servicemembers regarding their eligibility for VA MST care?
 - b. How does DOD plan to strengthen relationships between DOD and VA staff at the local and regional level to ensure smoother transitions of MST-related care for separating servicemembers?
5. More than 21,000 servicemembers are referred to the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) every year. This program was created to simplify the disability evaluation process for servicemembers being medically discharged.
 - a. How is the IDES program working?
 - b. What lessons learned from this program can DOD apply to the larger transition process?

Responses were unavailable at the time of publication. Contact U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for additional information.
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**October 18, 2023 Joint SVAC-SASC Hearing in Transition
Questions for the Record
Submitted by Senator Brown**

Questions for Mr. Ashish S. Vazirani:

Daniel J. Harvey Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Servicemember Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide Act

My legislation, the Daniel J. Harvey Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Servicemember Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide Act, would expand the Transition Assistance Program to include a specific mental health counseling component, and ensure veterans are given information about the mental health programs and benefits available at their local VA facility. This is one way Congress can help improve the transition process for servicemembers so that they have the support they need as they return to their local communities.

Mr. Vazirani: do you agree it's important for servicemembers to be connected to their local VA as they transition from service to veteran status? How might this help ease their transition?

EHR

The VA / DOD Electronic Health Record (EHR) modernization efforts have been full of delays and blunders in Ohio. The Department of Defense is almost done with its EHR modernization effort, while VA is only about 2 percent of the way there. It is important that VA get these modernization efforts right, and hold Oracle Cerner – the contractor for this effort – accountable so that the rollout provides value add to our veterans and their quality of care.

Mr. Vazirani: how will the EHR modernization efforts help to improve care coordination and delivery for veterans, particularly during their transition from servicemember to veteran status? How will improved coordination of care can help save lives?

Responses were unavailable at the time of publication. Contact U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for additional information.

Senator Mazie K. Hirono
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee/Senate Armed Services Committee
Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service
October 18, 2023

Questions for Under Secretary Ashish Vazirani (DOD)

1. Often in conversations about how to successfully move servicemembers into stable, good paying jobs after separation, Skillbridge is the top – and sometimes the only – program cited. However, the implementation of the program is varied and sometimes lackluster: some Commanders deny requests for Skillbridge, it is only available to a narrow range of active duty servicemembers, and it is sometimes used as a way to take a break from service rather than to gain a skill to enable a successful transition.
 - a. Are there other programs facilitated by DOD could better serve Servicemembers during their transition than Skillbridge?
 - b. Are there changes that can be made to Skillbridge to make it better live up to its mission?
 - c. Can DOD find ways to ensure coverage for servicemembers participating in Skillbridge to alleviate the pressure it can put on commands?
 - d. Please provide a state-by-state breakdown of the 22,000 servicemembers who have participated in Skillbridge over the last year, as you mentioned during the hearing.
2. Deputy Under Secretary Vazirani, many transitioning Servicemembers have specialized skills that would be a boon to the Department's civilian workforce or the broader defense industrial base. For example, the DOD will need many new hires as it develops Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard Detachment Guam.
 - a. Does the Department try to transition separating servicemembers with applicable skillsets into high demand civilian jobs?
 - b. How can the Department increase hiring agility to focus efforts on opportunities like the Guam shipyard to transition servicemembers directly into jobs they're already trained for?
 - c. Are there barriers in the federal hiring process that limit the Department's ability to take those "direct commission"-type steps?
3. "Success" during and after the transition can be dependent on the installation where a servicemember transitions, and GAO found that the Services waive a high number of personnel from attending TAP.
 - a. Generally, how does DOD decide TAP is "working" for servicemembers?
 - b. Has DOD analyzed transition outcomes based on installation?
 - c. How can we create more consistent outcomes across the entire enterprise?
 - d. How can DOD incentivize commands to have 100% participation in TAP?

- i. Has DOD already taken steps to incentivize command buy-in to the program?
- ii. Does DOD have, or enforce accountability standards for commands that deny the opportunity for servicemembers to attend TAP at all, or within the timeframes mandated by the 2019 NDAA?
- iii. Do avenues exist for a servicemember to appeal a commanders' decision denying their participation in TAP?

Responses were unavailable at the time of publication. Contact U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for additional information.
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**Senator Angus S. King Jr.
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Senate Armed Services Committee
Hearing on Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service
October 18, 2023**

Questions for Ashish S. Vazirani, Acting Under Secretary of Defense

1. How has the Department of Defense effectively communicated the benefits of spouses/dependents attending TAP and encouraged their attendance?
 - a. Mr. Vazirani, How can this be improved?
2. Pre-enroll – Ensuring that veterans who want a warm hand-off to the VA get one is critical for an individual's successful transition. Currently, servicemembers can file a VBA claim for disability benefits for a service-connected condition between 90-180 days before separation through the Benefits through Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program. This allows them to get their deserved benefits as soon as they get out. However, they cannot do this for VHA. This leads to a break in the continuum of care for individuals who would be eligible for the VHA care. This is particularly important for individuals struggling with mental health – we know the first year or two post-separation have higher risks of suicide, and Dr. Miller, director of VA Suicide Prevention, is supportive of allowing servicemembers to pre-enroll in VHA.
 - a. Mr. Vazirani / Mr. Jacobs, do you believe allowing servicemembers to pre-enroll in the VHA, similar to how they enroll in VA now, would improve a servicemembers successful transition to civilian life?
 - b. Mr. Vazirani / Mr. Jacobs, How many individuals utilize the Integrated Disability Evaluation System every year? Can IDES be expanded to include a larger percentage of transitioning servicemembers?
3. Attendance accountability – GAO found that most servicemembers (70 percent) did not start TAP at least 1 year in advance, as generally required. You and Senator Cramer sent a letter to the Service Chiefs on the need improve timeliness of TAP attendance.
 - a. Mr. Vazirani, what efforts are being made to hold installation commanders accountable when their servicemembers are late to TAP?
4. Individual experience – A 2020 GAO study noted that veterans “report having difficulty discerning which, if any, of these programs are relevant to them or whether they qualify to use these programs.” It is also worth noting that 44.4% of active duty

servicemembers are under the age of 25, and an addition 21.5% are under the age of 30. They require digital, intuitive ways to access information in a timely manner.

- a. Mr. Boerstler, as head of the veteran experience office, how are you working to ensure that individuals are not overwhelmed with hundred-page documents and PowerPoints slides but actually get the information they need when they need it.
- b. Mr. Vazirani and Mr. Rodriguez, same question.

5. DOL TSM Eligibility – Under the current guidance for the DOL’s Jobs for Veterans State Grants, assistance to transitioning servicemembers is only provided if the installation commander finds that servicemember lacking in their career readiness standards. However, this only accounts for approximately 20 to 30-percent of servicemembers.

- a. Mr. Rodriguez, do you support making transitioning servicemembers eligible for DOL funded career centers? Acting Secretary Su can make this change herself without legislation.

6. Housing – Boots 2 Roots has expressed to staff that housing is a significant challenge for transitioning servicemembers. They are caught in a catch-22 where they have trouble signing a rental lease, or getting a bank loan for a house, without a letter of employment. However, a lot of times they can’t get a letter of employment until they leave the military.

- a. What can be done to ensure transitioning servicemembers have the documentation and tools they need to find a living situation post-separation?

Responses were unavailable at the time of publication. Contact U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs for additional information.

**Senator Boozman
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service
October 18, 2023**

Questions for [Department of Defense/ Deputy Under Secretary Ashish Vazirani]

1. What are some of the standardization practices DOD is implementing in the TAP and Skillbridge programs to provide transitioning service members the same guidance, training, and opportunities across all branches of service?
2. Understanding that the transition from military to civilian life is a major risk factor for a decline in mental health:
 - a. To what extent have the Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs worked together to utilize tools like cost-effective, scalable remote health monitoring software to establish a baseline and continue testing for things like Heart Rate Variability?
 - b. Is there a pilot program that spans across the two agencies to maximize commercial innovation in the mental healthcare space?

Responses were unavailable at the time of publication. Contact U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for additional information.

Senator Marsha Blackburn
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service
18th October 2023

Questions for The Honorable Ashish S. Vazirani, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, Department of Defense

1. Why did Department of Defense have nobody attend the September 12th Bicameral Transition Roundtable?
2. What is the Department of Defense plan to address concerns related to National guard and Reservist utilizing TAP? When does the Department of Defense plan to implement changes to the TAP curriculum to better serve the non-active-duty components?

Responses were unavailable at the time of publication. Contact U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for additional information.
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**U.S. Senator Tommy Tuberville
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service
October 18, 2023**

Questions for Ashish S. Vazirani—Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, Department of Defense

1. Regarding the SkillBridge program, how does the Department of Defense measure success in this program, especially given that not every installation is leveraging SkillBridge at the volume as Congress intended?

- Does the DOD track participation in SkillBridge installation by installation?
- How does DOD manage the installations with low SkillBridge participation?

2. Please provide the contract DoD uses to facilitate TAP. This should include all technical exhibits included in the contract.

Responses were unavailable at the time of publication. Contact U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for additional information.

Senate Armed Services Committee

Questions for the Record

Hearing on 10/18/23, #23-67

“To receive testimony on Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service”

Witnesses: Jacobs, Vazirani, Rodriguez, Boerstler, Sawyer, Gallucci, Porter, O’Neil, DeGroat

Senator Jack Reed

TAP programming for women

1. Secretary Vazirani, you testified that the Transition Assistance Program includes some programming that is specifically designed for women in service. Can you please provide more detail on this training for transitioning women in each of the military services as well as a summary of the content, delivery modality, duration, and objectives of each block of such instruction?

Response: TAP is tailored to meet the Service member’s individual needs and goals by leveraging individual assessments, individual counseling, and tier assignments for support based on those individual needs. In addition to the core courses, TAP includes a Department of Veterans Affairs Military Life Cycle (MLC) course specifically geared to transitioning and recently separated Service women titled, Women’s Health Transition Training (WHTT). The course is designed to help women Veterans understand the VA health care benefits available to them including women's health services, how to enroll in VA health care, and other transition assistance tools and resources.

WHTT is offered as an online course only and is located on Transition Online Learning at www.TAPevents.mil/courses which allows open access to users after leaving military service. The length of the class is 240 minutes and includes a Participant Handbook. The WHTT course is divided into five modules:

- Module 1: Shift from Active Duty
Objective: Understand the differences between the Military Health System and the VA health care system.
- Module 2: Understanding VA Health Care
Objective: Explain the VA infrastructure, care models, and VA culture.
- Module 3: Available Women’s Health Services
Objective: Provide detailed information on VA Women’s Health and the wide range of services, including comprehensive primary care, cancer screenings, preventive care and wellness, reproductive health, mental health, and specialty care.
- Module 4: Enrolling and Accessing VA Health Care
Objective: Navigate the process of enrollment with information about eligibility and the necessary forms. Discuss how to make the first appointment and what to bring.
- Module 5: Transition Assistance
Objective: Present resources to help with the transition to civilian life, including social support services.

Senator Tim KaineSkillbridge

2. Secretary Vazirani, the statements of Mr. O'Neill and Mr. Galluci highlighted the Navy's recent efforts to scale back access to SkillBridge as outlined in NAVADMIN 064/23. Do you anticipate the other service branches placing similar restrictions on participation?

Response: The Department highly values the SkillBridge program and views it as an integral component to Service member transition. As part of an internal realignment, the program is receiving a comprehensive review for effectiveness and best practices. The Department's intent is to ensure all stakeholders within the SkillBridge program, including Service members, industry partners and commanders in the field, are receiving the optimum benefit from the program. Based on this review, OSD policy will be updated in the upcoming calendar year.

3. Secretary Vazirani, with respect to the aforementioned NAVADMIN on SkillBridge, it said that the program is "not an entitlement and participation does impact readiness" but according to the written testimony of Mr. O'Neill from the American Legion this is "due to the command's inability to backfill participants' positions, creating personnel gaps that negatively impact unit operations." From the Department's perspective, why is the servicemember's ability to take advantage of SkillBridge or any other elements of the Transition Assistance Program affected by factors that are within the services' control?

Response: The Department highly values the SkillBridge program and views it as an integral component to Service member transition. As part of an internal realignment, the program is receiving a comprehensive review for effectiveness and best practices. The Department's intent is to ensure all stakeholders within the SkillBridge program, including service members, industry partners and commanders in the field, are receiving the optimum benefit from the program. Based on this review, OSD will look to updating DoD policy in the upcoming calendar year.

Regarding TAP, the Department achieves consistent outcomes across the enterprise, including measures and indicators, pre-/post-separation assessment, and long-term outcomes by domain (i.e., entrepreneurship, education, employment, and more). Core precepts to support consistent outcomes across the entire enterprise are based on established standardized performance metrics to measure TAP, aligning mission and program long-term outcomes with expectations for transitioning Service members, providing a meaningful and consistent structure within which to define and assess transition needs and gaps; providing DoD Military Services and TAP partnering agencies with observable, transparent, and measurable indicators associated with successful transition; and establishing evidence-based practices and benchmarks.

4. Secretary Vazirani, how should the services and subordinate commands ensure that their manning reflects known upcoming separations or retirements and that they're postured to provide an appropriate period of transition for servicemembers?

Response: Subordinate commands routinely take into account planned and unplanned personnel gaps impacting mission readiness and work with higher organizational echelons to mitigate those impacts. As part of their human resource planning, Services are aware of upcoming separations and retirements and have standing strategies in place to ameliorate these routine personnel life cycle activities. Such strategies include planned rotation dates and end of enlistments that commands track and work transition, backfill and work gap solutions.

5. Secretary Vazirani, how do you think the realignment of SkillBridge to Manpower and Reserve Affairs will ensure that the services and commands are properly managing their total force and end strength and enable transitioning servicemembers to take full advantage of the resources offered within the transition assistance program?

Response: The Department aligned SkillBridge policy and program management with the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and other transition support programs to improve program stability, governance, evaluation, and management. These transition support programs now operate under DoD/VA Joint Executive Committee and TAP Interagency oversight ensuring effective federal agency and Military Department collaboration and service delivery to provide synergy, consistency, and synchronization in design and delivery.

6. Secretary Vazirani, according to your written testimony, over 22,000 servicemembers enrolled or participated in SkillBridge in FY 2022, with over 3,800 industry partners in comparison to FY 2019 when approximately 8,000 servicemembers participated with 450 industry partners. Please provide a breakdown of participants in SkillBridge for FY19, FY20, FY21, and FY22 based on 1) Service, 2) Rank, 3) Gender, 4) Marital/Dependent Status.

Response: The Department does not have visibility on SkillBridge participant demographics. As part of an internal realignment, the program is receiving a comprehensive review for effectiveness and best practices. The Department's intent is to ensure all stakeholders within the SkillBridge program, including Service members, industry partners and commanders in the field, are receiving the optimum benefit from the program. Based on this review, OSD policy, data acquisition, and program management activities will be updated in the upcoming calendar year.

7. Secretary Vazirani, is there a Defense-level management system in place to track the application, approval, tracking, and reporting of all SkillBridge programs?

Response: The Department does not have visibility on SkillBridge application, approval, tracking, and reporting. As part of an internal realignment, the program is receiving a comprehensive review for effectiveness and best practices. The Department's intent is to ensure all stakeholders within the SkillBridge program, including service members, industry partners and commanders in the field, are receiving the optimum benefit from the program. OSD policy and program management activities will be updated in the upcoming calendar year.

8. Secretary Vazirani, are there any mechanisms in place to determine the employment status of SkillBridge participants within one year of separation or retirement?

Response: The Department does not have visibility on the employment status of SkillBridge participants within one year of separation or retirement. As part of an internal realignment, the program is receiving a comprehensive review for effectiveness and best practices. Based on this review, OSD policy, data acquisition, and program management activities will be updated in the upcoming calendar year.

Senator Jacky Rosen

Allocation of Dedicated Days to Attend TAP

9. Secretary Vazirani, the FY 2019 NDAA mandated that servicemembers attend TAP no later than one year prior to separation, and that the program include individualized counseling and a variety of workshops. However, nearly 25% of servicemembers who needed maximum support during their transition did not attend a mandatory 2-day career planning class, and most servicemembers didn't attend TAP at least one year before leaving service. Some contributing factors causing these delayed attendances and program absences are the ongoing duty requirements and demanding daily work schedules that Active Duty servicemembers still adhere to during their separation process. We need to ensure that everyone separating from the military has the time to forge their next path into the civilian world. What are your thoughts on creating a special leave status specifically for transition activities so that servicemembers can dedicate the necessary time to attend TAP classes and counseling sessions without competing with their duty day responsibilities?

Response: I do not believe we need to create a special leave status specifically for Service members to attend TAP courses. There are sufficient nonchargeable mechanisms already in place to give Service members ample time to prepare for their separation from the military. First, TAP courses are the appointed place of duty for Service members attending the courses locally. Second, commanders may grant administrative absences (i.e., paid time off) to Service members to attend TAP courses outside the local area of their duty stations. When circumstances preclude in-person attendance (e.g., remote duty location, deployed, at sea), commanders may authorize completion of TAP through participation in virtual instructor-led courses. Third, Service members stationed overseas may be granted permissive temporary additional duty of up to 30 days and Service members stationed in the U.S. up to 20 days to participate in pre-separation job searches and house hunting activities to facilitate their transition to civilian life. Additionally, Service members may use their regular, chargeable leave immediately prior to separation or retirement without having to report back to their duty station to get an early start on their transition into civilian life, while still receiving military pay and benefits for up to 90 days, or even 120 days in certain cases. Also, we recognize that TAP is statutorily required for Service members from all the DoD Military Services who are being released or discharged (regardless of character of discharge) after 180 or more continuous days of active duty and for those being retired or separated from active duty for disability and expect and encourage members to attend and commanders to act to ensure their attendance.

10. Secretary Vazirani and Mr. Boerstler, what does the program need in order to provide enhanced follow-up support to those who are transitioning that is catered specifically to where they intend to live after separating, rather than programs available in the location of their last duty station where they no longer live?

A. Secretary Vazirani

Response: TAP is tailored to meet the Service member's individual needs and goals by leveraging individual assessments, individual counseling, and tier assignments for support based on those individual needs. Based on individual goals, transitioning Service members either remain in the community near their final duty station, return to a community near a previous duty station, return to where they entered the Service, or relocate to an entirely new location. In each circumstance, it is imperative they are aware of the resources available at their transition location of choice. To ensure Service member preparation, TAP provides information on how to research, assess, and access those resources regardless of the selected transition location. The Pre-Separation Counseling Brief provides Service members information and websites to find the local VA Vet Centers, American Job Centers, VA Medical Centers, local health care and mental health services, local assistance for Health Insurance Marketplace, local job banks, local volunteer opportunities, state and local education benefits, local FBI office, local immigration office, state VA benefits, and voting assistance. As the Pre-Separation Counseling Brief is provided at 365 days prior to transition, the information on local resources is repeated during the respective TAP course aligned with the resource. In addition to the how to locate resources, a Service member can also opt-in to receive information directly from the state, or as many states, as they choose during the Individualized Initial Counseling. The Department is creating Memorandums of Understanding with the states to share this information.

Senator Roger Wicker

Benefits of Military Service

11. Secretary Vazirani, despite what we see in the news and in the movies, the data show that an overwhelming majority of service members have a successful transition to civilian life. They are better educated, earn more money, are more likely to be married, and are more likely to own a home than their non-veteran counterparts. Wouldn't public awareness of these facts assist with in our current recruiting crisis?

Response: With fewer young people in this country having a direct connection to military service, their ideas about military life are often shaped by the media and through movies. Recognizing we needed to reframe the public's understanding and impressions of the military, the Department is implementing an integrated media campaign to help Americans understand the value of military service, with specific focus on how military service can be a pathway to greater education and career opportunities, and subsequently, success in civilian life after service.

12. Secretary Vazirani, what more can the department do to spread this message?

Response: The Department has developed strategic outreach plans to highlight the benefits of military service and inspire service across the Nation. The Department is also working with other agencies to develop a whole of government approach of public service, with specific focus on presenting the opportunities and benefits of military service. The Department continues to invest and expand community outreach programs and niche marketing/advertising plans to better penetrate the recruiting market by tailoring messages to targeted audiences. Additionally, the Department has created external facing toolkits for members of Congress and local community leaders to message the value of public service with focused messaging to generate interest in military service.

13. Secretary Vazirani, what is it about military service that sets veterans up for such success and what should we be doing to make sure more people know about this?

Response: Military service instills in veterans a distinct set of skills, values, and experiences that contribute significantly to their future successes in civilian life. The Department is one of the largest providers of training and education, proportionately recruiting right out of high school, demanding proficiency through military training, education, and credentialing. The result of the Department's investment in Service members' professional development and extensive on-the-job training equates to highly trained, equipped, and talented veterans with technical and nontechnical skills engrained from accession to transition. These includes a strong work ethic, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving competences, and adaptability, sharpened while serving in diverse and challenging environments with a commitment to excellence.

Public awareness campaigns and strategic messaging are crucial to awareness and recognition of veterans as high performing, top talent. These efforts contribute to positive narratives influencing the propensity to serve for future young Americans, while promoting the value of the veteran in American's workforce as an economic imperative. Our TAP Governance programmed FY24 strategic communication initiatives, including effective social media strategies highlighting authentic and successful military transition experiences while keying in on the unique skills and experiences of veterans and focused on enhancing the positive perception of military service as a pathway to success. This initiative is vital to our ongoing communication efforts to promote professional and personal growth of service in our nation's military, pre- and post-transition.

Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Timelines

14. Secretary Vazirani, I understand that starting the transition process earlier can be beneficial for some service members, but not every servicemember can plan their separation a year in advance. Moreover, sometimes the military needs time to persuade service members to remain in uniform. Amid our recruiting crisis, retention is more important than ever. How will the Department align the requirement to begin transition 365 days from separation with the reality

that there will always be some service members for whom it does not make sense to begin transition so far in advance?

Response: Balancing the complexities of transition demands flexibility that tailors the transition process to individual circumstances, needs, and goals. We achieve that flexibility for Service members and Commanders by beginning TAP with individualized counseling and an individual transition plan 365 days prior to transition. This approach ensures preparation for those who ultimately transition within that 365 days while providing meaningful information for those who continue to serve.

Program Efficacy

15. Secretary Vazirani, the feedback this committee often hears from service members going through the Transition Assistance Program is that the program is great, but it may be too much information at one time. The program is required by statute to cover a plethora of different items – 87 items in total. How can we ensure the program remains highly effective while also ensuring service members do not receive a deluge of information that they will be unable to retain?

Response: TAP leverages repetition, activities, adult learning theory, and multiple delivery options to facilitate learning. Generally, a Service member first encounters TAP information during the mandatory Individualized Initial Counseling. From the very beginning during initial counseling, Service members are encouraged to attend the various courses in TAP more than once. If the Service member is unable to attend in-person, there is access available through the TAP Events website (<https://www.tapevents.mil/courses>) which includes the self-paced online versions of every TAP course. The Service member has access with or without a CAC and can easily download the participant guides to conduct further research. Included in the online portal is a resource tab (<https://www.tapevents.mil/resources>). This tab includes all the participant guides from the TAP courses as well as the Pre-Separation Counseling Brief. A new addition for FY24 is the Transition Interagency Website Guide. This guide pulls all the websites and resources discussed during the TAP courses into one convenient location. The guide is divided by topic rather than course to allow the Service member to locate all the resources for one topic across all interagency partners.

Within the courses themselves, the developers utilize the tenets of Adult Learning Theory and Malcom Knowles to create the best learning environment possible. This includes providing the “why” this is important for the Service member to learn as adult learners learn best when they understand the relevance to themselves and their situation. To ensure the Service member understands the importance of TAP and the relevance, each course contains learning objectives by which the “why” is explained. An example is within the Managing Your Transition course. The course focuses on the importance of TAP, the situational changes which often occur due to transition, identifying when resources are needed, and where to locate these resources. Activities allow the class to discuss their own concerns and understand they are shared thereby lessening the feeling of being alone in this situation. As adults generally need to understand the relevance and prefer to learn by doing, all courses use activities and research by which the Service member utilizes their own situation to determine information such as Civilian Salary

Equivalent, taxes at a new location, cost of attending a specific school, relevance of a certification to a career, creating or updating their linked in profile, etc. Adults require readiness to learn so repetition is used throughout as a way to introduce new topics, provide additional information, and solidify the information or concept. An example of this is the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD), which is first introduced during the Pre-Separation Counseling Brief to ensure awareness of the program and understand the time constraints on the submission. During the VA Benefits and Services Brief the Service member is provided more detail on how best to prepare and the next steps in the process.

The TAP courses also follow accepted common practices within the adult learning industry when creating participant guides and slides. The participant guides utilize charts, graphs, bulleted lists, etc. so as not to have pages of words/continuous text. The slide decks are built to support the facilitation and discussion, rather than provide all the information. The human factor of delivery and discussion is crucial when it comes to lessening the overwhelming or “firehose” effect. The best advice given to Service members as it relates to attending the TAP courses is to attend in person whenever possible, go early, and repeat for additional learning.

Senator Joni Ernst

Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) claims

16. Secretary Vazirani, if the only Career Readiness Standard deliverable is to “Register on VA.gov,” what metrics is the Department utilizing to determine whether or not the BDD claims processing undertaken during TAP is successful?

Response: DoD is committed to partnering with VA to expand the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program. Receiving a VA rating determination within the first 30 days of separations greatly assists transitioning service members (TSM) in planning for the next chapter of their lives. DoD works collaboratively with the VA to communicate the program’s availability while the service member is still in Uniform, and to improve and enhance the BDD behind-the-scenes process, including new electronic notifications and data transfer, thus making it easier for TSMs to submit claims and for the VA to receive a service member’s medical records. Additionally, the DoD is an active member of the Benefits Executive Committee, a subordinate committee to the Joint Executive Committee, and uses this forum to coordinate each Department’s BDD efforts. The DoD’s focus is on ensuring timely delivery of requested medical records to the VA to assist them in making a claims determination. Because the process of making a claim is with the VA, the DoD defers to the VA to discuss specific metrics they use to determine BDD’s success.

Senator Dan SullivanMental Health Accession Standards

17. Secretary Vazirani, you spoke extensively in your opening statement on mental health particularly as it pertains to the DOD's Separation History and Physical Examination (SHPE). In your role as the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, you're also responsible for recruiting standards. According to the basic accession standards for all military service as defined in the Department of Defense Instruction (DODI) 6130.03, Volume 1, Medical Standards for Military Service, Appointment, Enlistment, or Induction, any applicant who has received treatment for depression within the last 36 months (at the time of enlistment) is initially disqualified and will require a waiver from the Service Medical Waiver Review Authority. How do the mental health standards for those on active duty differ from those seeking to join the military?

Response: Service members are periodically evaluated for continued service based on medical standards in DoD Instruction (DoDI) 6130.03 Volume 2 (V2), "Medical Standards for Military Service: Retention," September 4, 2020. Mental health standards are detailed in DoDI 6130.03 V2 section 5.28, "Behavioral Health" of the policy. Accession standards in DoDI 6130.03 Volume 1 (V1), "Medical Standards for Military Service: Appointment, Enlistment, or Induction," May 6, 2018, are established in the context of a screening medical examiner with the potential for further specialist consultation. Retention mental health standards are established in the context of ongoing duty performance and health information availability.

Service members with depressive disorders are reviewed on a case-by-case basis, and if, despite appropriate treatment, (1) they require persistent duty modifications to reduce psychological stressors or enhance safety, or (2) the condition impairs function so as to preclude satisfactory performance of required military duties of the member's office, grade, rank, or rating, they may be referred to the Disability Evaluation System for a determination of fitness.

For those entering into military service, depressive disorder is disqualifying if: (1) outpatient care including counseling was required for longer than 12 cumulative months; (2) symptoms or treatment occurred within the previous 36 months; (3) the applicant required any inpatient treatment in a hospital or residential facility; (4) there has been any recurrence; or (5) any suicidality (in accordance with DoDI 6130.03 V1, paragraph 6.28.m.).

Applicants who do not meet the physical and medical standards as described in DoDI 6130.03 V1 can be considered for a medical waiver from the Service Medical Waiver Review Authorities, based on additional supporting medical documentation and/or specialty consultation. Service Medical Waiver Review Authorities make waiver determinations on a case-by-case basis to determine suitability for service, emphasizing safety, functionality, assignability, and deployability.

Senator Ted BuddMilitary Spouse Employment

18. Secretary Vazirani, how many military spouse employment programs exist within the Department of Defense (DOD)? Please provide a list including brief descriptions as well as how much each program costs annually.

Response: The Office of the Secretary of Defense provides the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities (SECO) Program. This virtual program provides no cost career information, tools and resources to military spouses where and when they need it. The SECO program provides a full spectrum of educational and career support for military spouses of all components and up to 365 days post separation/retirement. The SECO program is delivered through several primary initiatives to include:

The SECO Career Center provides military spouses with access to Career Coaches and Advisors. Career Coaches hold a minimum of a master's degree while Advisors hold a minimum of a bachelor's degree and all are certified career and educational counselors. Approximately \$19 million supports the SECO Career Center, SECO program management and operations, and Military Spouse Employment Partnership annually.

The Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP) connects military spouses to employers that have committed to recruiting, hiring, promoting, and retaining them in their workforce. Launched in 2011, MSEP employer partners have grown to more than 700 and have reported hiring more than 275,000 military spouses. Employer partners include corporations, small businesses, non-profits and federal agencies. Approximately \$19 million supports the SECO Career Center, SECO program management and operations, and Military Spouse Employment Partnership annually.

The My Career Advancement Account (MyCAA) is a workforce development program that provides up to \$4,000 in financial assistance to eligible spouses (sponsor active-duty in the pay grades of E1-E6, O1-O3, W1-W2) for the pursuit of a license, certification, or an associate degree. Additionally, the FY 2021 NDAA allowed eligible military spouses to use the MyCAA Scholarship for national testing and continuing education credits. Approximately \$25 million supports annual financial assistance to military spouses and delivery of the program costs approximately \$2.5 million annually.

The Military Spouse Transition Program (MySTeP) provides self-directed virtual training on a number of topics to assist in easing the challenges associated with transition away from the military. MySTeP is broken into micro-learning (3-4 minute) videos that are delivered through Stepping-In (new spouses), Stepping-Through (mid-career spouses) and Stepping-Beyond (spouses within a year or post transition). MySTeP is supported by approximately \$900 thousand annually.

The MySECO Website is a one-stop access point for military spouses that provides 24/7/365 access to a number of resources and tools specifically designed for the military spouse community. Through MySECO, spouses access the MSEP Jobs Board, MyCAA, MySTeP, military spouse specific resume builder, events and more. The MySECO website costs approximately \$1.1 million annually.

Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot (MSCAP) is a competitive, compensated, 12-week fellowship for military spouses in industry. This program was provisioned through the FY 2022 NDAA. Congress appropriated \$10 million for this pilot. The first spouses were placed into fellowships in January 2023. As of 27 November, 412 spouses have been placed into fellowships; 321 spouses have completed fellowships; 269 spouses have been converted from fellow to employed representing an 84% conversion rate.

Additionally, the Military Departments provide employment readiness programs at the installation level. These programs, typically located within the Family Support Center, provide face to face employment support to Service members and their families to include military spouses. The Military Departments manage the costs for these programs.

19. Secretary Vazirani, the Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP) seeks to connect military spouses with partner employers who are committed to recruit, hire and promote and retain military spouses. To what extent does MSEP work directly with the Department of Veteran Affairs to hire military spouses at the VA?

Response: Through the Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP) jobs portal, military spouses are able to connect to federal agencies employment opportunities to include the VA. These opportunities are updated on a daily basis directly through USAJobs. The SECO Career Center provides military spouses with expert assistance when applying for federal employment to include resume and cover letter support. In FY 2021, the SECO program established a Federal Concierge Service that curates spouse talent for opportunities identified by federal partners. In FY 2024, the SECO program, through MSEP, plans to establish a military spouse talent marketplace from which federal employers will be able to review spouses seeking federal employment.

20. Secretary Vazirani, to what extent does MSEP work with VA hospitals to improve hiring of military spouses? Please describe this process.

Response: The VA manages their hiring processes and has the authority to exercise both non-competitive and direct hiring authorities where appropriate. MSEP, through its jobs portal links military spouses looking for employment opportunities directly to the VA Hospital system. This allows the VA hospital system to leverage military spouse talent through associated hiring authorities.

21. Secretary Jacobs, Secretary Vazirani, and Secretary Rodriguez, do existing programs designed to support military spouse employment have a specific hiring portal for matching military spouses with healthcare specialties in the area they live in or plan to move to? Specifically, does the Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP), Veteran and Military Spouse

Talent Engagement Program (VMSTEP) or the Military Spouse Education and Career Opportunities (SECO) have existing mechanisms for supporting military spouses seeking healthcare posts across the nation?

A. Secretary Vazirani

Response: The MSEP Jobs Portal, an initiative under the SECO Program, connects military spouse talent to opportunities from more than 700 employers to include federal agencies. Spouses are able to utilize the portal to filter by industry, job type, location and other typical parameters. MSEP includes multiple healthcare providers in both the private and federal space.

Emergency Medical Transition Certifications

22. Secretary Vazirani, what professional transition services, if any, does the Department of Defense make available to help combat medics obtain the certifications necessary to transition from military service into civilian jobs in the emergency medical field?

Response: The Department is committed to helping our Service members obtain the certifications required to succeed in and out of uniform. This is why, in addition to the professional services that we offer through the Transition Assistance Program, we also provide a large and diverse set of credentialing opportunities – which include professional certifications, apprenticeships, and occupational licenses – to Service members, enabling them to expand their education, hone their skills, prepare for promotion, change career fields, and plan for transition. To date, more than 1,700 unique credentials have been mapped to enlisted military occupations. All five Services sponsor these opportunities.

Combat medics have a unique and in-demand skillset that could be applied to benefit a variety of civilian employers in the emergency medical field. The Department has developed several platforms, applications, and programs to help these medics secure the certifications needed to bridge their military experience. They include Credentialing Opportunities Online (COOL), MilGears, and the U.S. Military Apprenticeship Program (USMAP).

These resources allow Service members to identify and earn civilian certifications and licenses, generate learning and employment records, and even demonstrate their qualifications to potential employers through on-the-job training opportunities. Combat medics and other military personnel can explore these resources independently or in collaboration with their career and education counselors as they prepare for transition. For example, combat medics who search for related civilian credentials on COOL using their military occupation code will find nearly 90 certifications that they might be interested in pursuing to land their civilian job-of-choice in the emergency medical field.

Additional Background Information on COOL, MilGears, and USMAP

COOL, MilGears, and USMAP are the three pillars of the DoD Credentialing Program.

- *COOL*: COOL, a web-based platform, enables Service members to identify and earn civilian certifications and licenses that correspond to their military occupations, academic degrees, off-duty training, Reserve occupations, and pre-Service credentials. Service members took more than 40K voluntary credentials in 2022.
<https://www.cool.osd.mil>
- *MilGears*: MilGears, a web-based application, leverages COOL data to provide Service members with a personalized assessment of their individual military training and experience and off-duty education and credentialing. This application generates a learning and employment record, in addition to highlighting next steps to pursue and achieve industry credentials, in-service advancement, and post-service employment opportunities.
<https://milgears.osd.mil>
- *USMAP*: USMAP allows Service members to earn their Department of Labor Journeyman Certificate through documented hours and skills in military occupational specialties. It is the largest federal government apprenticeship program with more than 116K active participants.
<https://usmap.osd.mil>

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
 Questions for the Record Submitted to
 Joshua Jacobs, Under Secretary for Benefits, and
 John Boerstler, Chief Veterans Experience Officer,
 from the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
 "Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service"

October 18, 2023

Questions for the Record from Senator Mazie Hirono:

Question 1: "Success" during and after the transition can be dependent on the installation where a servicemember transitions, and GAO found that the Services waive a high number of personnel from attending TAP.

- a. Generally, how does VA decide TAP has "worked" for servicemembers?
- b. Has VA analyzed transition outcomes based on installation?
- c. How can VA help DOD create more consistent outcomes across the entire enterprise?

VA Response 1a: VA uses several key methods to determine the success of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). The first is the Transition Assistance Participant Assessment (TAPA). The TAPA is a Department of Defense (DoD)-hosted, voluntary, and anonymous assessment provided to participants after each TAP module. VA uses an aggregated measure of five Likert scale questions to determine an overall weighted "TAP Satisfaction score" measuring delivery, content, and utility of the VA Benefits and Services course. The percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree to the five questions is used to determine the satisfaction score. Since 2015, VA TAP maintained a satisfaction score of over 95%. The most current score for in-person TAP satisfaction is 96.2% for quarter 3 of fiscal year (FY) 2024.

Additionally, VA conducts the Post Separation TAP Assessment (PSTAP) Outcome Study, which is a multi-year study helping to determine the effectiveness of TAP on transitioning Service members' (TSM) long-term outcomes in the broad life domains of employment, education, health and relationships, financial, overall satisfaction, and well-being. The results of the PSTAP are released annually and, along with other data, used to inform improvements to the TAP program as well as to validate previous improvements.

Several key PSTAP findings are:

1. Overall, Veterans who participated in TAP applied for benefits at a higher percentage. Higher application rates are found as much as seven years after separation.
2. For 2023, over 82% of Veterans in the Cross-Sectional Survey work in permanent positions; over 90% of employed Veterans in the Longitudinal Survey are employed in permanent positions.

3. There was higher satisfaction with the program for VA Benefits and Services Instructor-led or in-person training.
4. For 2023, Veterans in the Longitudinal Survey identified the following challenges:
 - a. Managing salary expectations.
 - b. Translating military experience to civilian job requirements.
 - c. Adapting to differences between military and civilian workforce, cultures, and norms.

VA Response 1b: VA has not analyzed transition outcomes based on installation.

VA Response 1c: VA continues to help DoD create more consistent outcomes across the entire enterprise by fostering interagency collaboration through the VA-DoD interagency governance structure. Specifically, there is a tiered leadership model within the TAP space consisting of the Transition Executive Committee (TEC), the Senior Transition Steering Group (STSG), and the Transition Working Group (TWG), with each group being co-chaired by DoD, VA, and Department of Labor (DoL). The TEC provides oversight and direction to the STSG, and the STSG provides oversight and direction to the TWG. This three-tiered model has helped VA provide DoD with consistent outcomes and strengthen the relationship across the TAP space. The work within this three-tiered structure will continue to strengthen TAP efforts, and VA remains committed to working alongside DoD and DoL in a collaborative effort.

Question 2: During the hearing, I asked if VA tracked which “phase” of Solid Start – 90, 180, or 360 days – in which a veteran becomes unresponsive.

- a. Please provide more details on whether the ~30% of veterans who are not responsive to outreach are not responsive during the entire process, or are more likely to stop being responsive during a specific “phase” of this outreach.
- b. Are there adjustments made by VA to limit that drop-off, particularly for veterans who have a history of mental health concerns?
- c. Please also provide the general questions/areas of a veteran’s life VA is checking in about during this program.

VA Response 2a: VA Solid Start (VASS) contacts all recently separated Service members by phone and email at three key stages during the first year after release from active duty. These phone calls and follow-up emails after successful connections help individuals connect with the benefits and services they have earned. Throughout the period of eligibility, VASS completes a minimum of 7 call attempts during each of the 3 contact stages, resulting in a total of at least 21 call attempts during the eligibility period. The approximately 30% of recently separated Veterans who were not responsive to VASS calls reflects non-responsiveness during the entire VASS process. In FY 2024, the percentage of VASS-eligible Service members who were not responsive dropped to approximately 23%.

VA tracks the successful connections of each recently separated Service member by “phase” but does not have data available to show a definitive point at which previously

engaged, recently separated, Service members no longer accept VASS calls. Historically, once a recently separated Service member engages with the VASS program, they are more likely to continue the engagement throughout the remainder of their period of eligibility. VA is developing additional data points to better measure engagement throughout the full period of eligibility in an effort to identify opportunities for additional engagement efforts to remain connected with recently separated Service members.

VA Response 2b: VASS continues engagement efforts through email and telephone calls throughout the full period of eligibility, attempting at least seven telephone calls and three email communications during each “phase” of the program. Additionally, for those recently separated Service members meeting certain risk factors during their last year of active duty, we provide targeted emails on available support and how to enroll in VA health care each quarter. Each email includes contact information for the VCL, VA health care enrollment, and the VASS program for additional support.

VASS prioritizes calls to those who meet certain risk factors, as identified by DoD, in their last year of active-duty service, helping to lower the barrier to accessing high-quality VA mental health care treatment. VASS calls are driven by recently separated Service member needs and provide information and assistance with accessing benefits and services, health care, mental health care, education, and employment opportunities.

VA Response 2c: Solid Start calls are not scripted, and representatives ask open-ended questions that seek to establish the current status and potential needs of the recently separated Service member during each VASS engagement. There are no time limitations for the calls, and each call is driven by the needs of the recently separated Service member at the time of the call. The conversation starters will vary based on the needs of each recently separated Service member. VASS agents have the necessary knowledge, training, and access to assist recently separated Service members with accessing earned benefits to address any issues or challenges they may be experiencing at the time of the call, such as homelessness, employment issues, accessing VA health care, and assistance with compensation claims.

Listed below are some of the general questions VASS agents use to connect and engage with recently separated Service members during VASS conversations:

- How have you been doing since you left the military?
- Transition can be a very stressful time. How are things going?
- VA is here to help during your transition to civilian life, do you have any concerns at this time?
- How has your transition from the military to civilian life been so far?
- Can you share some of the challenges you've faced since leaving the military?
- How is your mental and emotional well-being post-military?
- Are you pursuing further education or training to enhance your civilian career?

- Have you been able to access the health care and medical services you need since leaving the military?

Question 3: Many transitioning Servicemembers have specialized skills that would be a boon to the Department of Defense's civilian workforce or the broader defense industrial base. For example, the DOD will need many new hires as it develops Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard Detachment Guam.

- a. How does VA work with veterans to try to transition those with applicable skillsets into these kinds of high demand civilian jobs?
- b. Are there barriers in the federal hiring process that limit the ability of veterans – particularly those with unique experience that makes them a perfect fit for civilian work at DOD – from being recruited or hired efficiently?

VA Response 3a: VA takes part in the DoD SkillBridge Program, a program providing TSMs an opportunity to gain valuable civilian work experience through specific industry training, apprenticeships, or internships. VA is an industry partner and provides opportunities through the VA SkillBridge Program for VA positions, such as positions in healthcare and administration. For other types of employment opportunities for which specialized skills are needed for high-demand civilian jobs, VA offers education and training programs to help obtain and improve skillsets for those careers.

The VA Personalized Career Planning and Guidance program (PCPG) is one way in which VA works with Veterans to try to transition those with applicable skillsets into high-demand civilian jobs. PCPG provides career and education counseling to transitioning Service members within six months of leaving the military, to Veterans who have left the military within the past 12 months, or at any time to individuals eligible to use VA education benefits.

These services are designed to provide personalized counseling and support to help guide career paths, ensure the most effective use of VA benefits, and achieve educational and career goals.

PCPG career and education counseling services include:

- Résumé support.
- Education and employment planning.
- Detailed skills assessment.
- Employment and Market Analysis.
- Personalized action plan to achieve education and career goals.
- Adjustment counseling to successfully transition to civilian employment.
- Connection to VA benefits and service.
- Tele-counseling.

VA Response 3b: VA defers to DoD for a response.

Question 4: Senator Sullivan asked questions during the hearing relating to DOD and VA working directly with labor unions and other industries to transition servicemembers directly into the trades. Alaska has seen success with this model through the nonprofit VIPER Transitions. VIPER has worked with IBEW in Hawaii to expand their reach, and transition more servicemembers directly from active duty to apprenticeship programs in unions.

- a. Has VA ever partnered with labor unions to build these kinds of formal pathways for recently-separated veterans?
- b. Is there an opportunity to engage labor unions more when it comes to hiring veterans, particularly those who may have separated some time ago and are still looking to establish careers?

VA Response 4a: No.

VA Response 4b: VBA Human Capital Services National Recruitment Team is responsible for developing national outreach and marketing plans that may be expanded to include engagement with labor unions and Veterans service organizations.

Questions for the Record from Chairman Jon Tester:

Question 1: The *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act* included a requirement for DOD and VA to review the records of veterans who died by suicide within one year following their discharge. This report was due to Congress yesterday, and is critical to helping us identify risk factors and improve suicide prevention measures for recently-separated servicemembers.

- a. What can VA do to expedite the completion of this report?

VA Response: VA will continue to actively coordinate with DoD regarding the completion of this report. VA will continue to promptly address any questions that DoD may have regarding information that VA has generated for the report. VA will promptly review DoD's input for DoD sections of the report, upon receipt. VA will coordinate with DoD to finalize and submit the final report.

Question 2: A recent GAO report (23-105381) found DOD and VA fell short in ensuring servicemembers know about their potential eligibility for VA Military Sexual Trauma (MST) care, and in helping servicemembers transition their DOD MST-related care to VA.

- a. How does VA plan to strengthen relationships between DOD and VA staff at the local and regional level to ensure smoother transitions of MST-related care for separating servicemembers?

VA Response: VA is firmly committed to ensuring that MST survivors have access to the services and benefits they need to assist in their recovery. In partnership with DoD, VA implemented a number of initiatives designed to inform current and former Service members about the VA MST-related care and benefits available to them as well as

increased coordination among local and regional VA and DoD staff who assist in the transition process.

VA and DoD continue to increase collaboration and cross-training among staff who are key touch points for providing information to MST survivors about VA services available. In FY 2024, this included national-level trainings provided by Veterans Health Administration (VHA) MST subject-matter experts to DoD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Personnel and Post-9/11 Military2VA Case Managers. VA is currently updating the VA Liaison for Healthcare Program Guide and the Post-9/11 M2VA Case Management Program Guide to ensure the inclusion of information about MST-related care so that these staff can provide effective transition assistance to new Post-9/11 Veterans and transitioning Service members who may be MST survivors. Finally, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) also provides training on sexual trauma and the disability compensation claims process to DoD personnel who are responsible for connecting survivors to medical and mental health resources and facilitating contact with VA personnel. This includes providing annual training regarding VBA MST-related benefits and processes to DoD's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office. VBA also incorporated VHA and DoD presenters into their annual National MST Training Symposium to further educate VBA MST Outreach Coordinators and other field personnel.

VA and DoD collaborate on large-scale outreach efforts to ensure that transitioning Service members are informed about MST-related services available to them. For example, the Departments collaboratively developed a handout describing services available to MST survivors that will be provided to each separating Service member as part of their Separation Health Assessment. Additionally, VA and DoD developed an informational poster describing VA MST-related care and benefits available to current and former Service members that is currently being disseminated widely throughout all DOD installations. The poster includes a scannable Quick Response Code as well as web links to enable Service members to access additional information and resources at their own convenience and in a private setting, if desired.

VA recognizes that there is still a need to enhance these efforts and, in collaboration with DoD, has established a standing VA-DoD Joint Executive Committee Sexual Trauma Working Group to ensure effective coordination and collaboration. VA and DoD will continue to work together through this work group to identify additional opportunities to ensure smoother transitions of MST-related care for separating Service members. VA is committed to ensuring that all MST survivors receive the timely, high-quality health care and mental health services that they deserve in a safe, welcoming environment conducive to their treatment, healing, and recovery.

Question 3: More than 21,000 servicemembers are referred to the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) every year. This program was created to simplify the disability evaluation process for servicemembers being medically discharged.

a. How is the IDES program working?

b. What lessons learned from this program can VA apply to the larger transition process?

VA Response 3a: As a program jointly operated by VA and DoD, IDES provides transitioning Service members with a single process, using the same physical examination protocols, to assess their fitness for continued service at the same time as their eligibility for VA disability compensation benefits. Service members determined to be unfit for duty receive a single set of disability ratings to determine the appropriate level of DoD and VA disability benefits. IDES participants found fit for duty continue their military service. The combined VA and DoD process streamlines compensation decisions, allowing for earlier access to a wide range of VA benefits and services.

As IDES workloads have stabilized after the COVID-19 pandemic, VA has completed over 25,000 IDES cases annually in the last 2 years:

FY	IDES Referrals	Completed IDES Cases
2021	24,365	18,621
2022	28,222	25,408
2023	28,154	25,685
2024	26,832	25,079

VA and DoD continue to strengthen and improve IDES. Both Departments remain committed to identifying and capitalizing on opportunities to build on IDES success through process improvements as well as identifying and promoting best practices among service branches. With this shared commitment, IDES serves as an example of what effective VA and DoD partnerships can achieve.

VA Response 3b: One lesson learned is the importance of an effective, collaborative partnership between VA and DoD. VA and DoD maintain an ongoing partnership for close collaboration and early intervention, both for program processes and Service member engagement. Service members are informed of what to expect early in the IDES process during the joint multidisciplinary briefing (MDB). During the MDB, VA and DoD representatives explain the IDES process and help manage the Service member's expectations. From a programmatic standpoint, VA and DoD meet monthly to modernize and enhance interagency processes on various topics, including electronic record transmittal and examination protocol updates. These collaborative engagements make the process for the Service member less burdensome and can be mirrored to enhance processes for the larger transition process.

Another lesson gleaned from the IDES program is the value of one-on-one case management. Service members referred to IDES receive a designated VA Military Services Coordinator (MSC) and a DoD Physical Evaluation Board Liaison Officer to advise and assist them through the IDES process. The service provided by MSCs is well received by Service members. While MSCs prioritize their IDES workload, they also provide information and assistance to transitioning Service members on the Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program and serve as a resource to Veterans on other VA

benefits programs. MSCs are integral to the IDES program because they have the ability to case manage and serve as expert resources to the larger transition process.

Questions for the Record from Senator Marsha Blackburn:

Question 1: What is the current wait time from when a veteran initially enrolls into the VA system, to when they receive counseling from a Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor?

VA Response: In FY 2023, the new patient wait time for mental health care was 21.2 days. This metric is calculated from the reference date to the date of appointment. The reference date is defined as either the date on which a consult is entered in VA's system or the date on which an appointment is created if no consult exists. The FY 2024 mental health wait time for new patients is 19 days for services related to counseling from a Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor. During FY 2024, VHA separated mental health wait times into 2 different categories, Mental Health 20-day and Mental Health 28-day. Services related to counseling from a Licensed Professional Mental Health Counselor would fall under the 20-day wait time standard. VA's Office of Integrated Veteran Care conferred with the Offices of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, and there are concerns with using the Veteran's enrollment date as the start point of the measure. Using the enrollment date will, in many cases, significantly overstate the wait time because it may be weeks, months, or longer before the Veteran requests mental health services or is referred for mental health care after enrolling.

Question 2: What can the VA do to ensure veterans with mental health conditions are properly enrolled in VA?

VA Response: VA specifically addresses mental health during the TAP VA Benefits and Services Course, Module 2: Maintaining Your Health. Through the module, VA provides an opportunity for Service members to register for VA health care. The module also includes an overview of VA mental health care services, explains why mental well-being is important, describes the mental health care services that VA provides, discusses suicide risk factors and prevention, and provides a list of available mental health programs and resources.

The VA Solid Start (VASS) program proactively contacts all recently-separated Service members at three key stages, 0-90-, 91-180-, and 181-365 days, post release from active duty; this helps them connect to the benefits and services they have earned. VASS provides priority contact to recently separated Service members meeting certain risk factors during their last year of active duty, lowering the barrier to accessing care and supporting a successful transition to VA mental health care.

VA and DoD collaborate closely to help Service members transition from active duty to civilian life and ensure that mental health needs are addressed throughout the transition process, to include programs to facilitate enrollment and transition to VA health care;

increase availability and access to mental health resources; and promote use of mental health services and support.

Below is a summary of VA policies and programs that support continuity of care for Transitioning Service members who enroll in VA health care.

- COMPACT Act (Section 201): Section 201 of the Veterans COMPACT Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-214), codified at 38 U.S.C. § 1720J, was implemented in January 2023, and expands VA's authority to provide, pay for, or reimburse for emergent suicide care for eligible individuals (title 38 Veterans and certain former Service members, as described in 38 U.S.C. § 1720I(b)). Eligible individuals do not have to be enrolled in VA health care to access the benefit, and they do not have to be financially responsible for costs associated with emergent suicide care, including emergency transportation. Emergent suicide care includes inpatient or crisis residential care for 30 days and outpatient care for 90 days. If the individual remains in acute suicidal crisis, extensions may be provided. This section potentially increases eligibility to an additional 9 million unenrolled Veterans, doubling the number of Veterans who could access services previously.
- MakeTheConnection.net: A one-stop web resource where Veterans, families, and friends can privately explore information on mental health issues, listen to fellow Veterans and their families share their stories of resilience and recovery, and easily find and access local support and resources. The site includes a section focused on Transitioning from Service (<https://www.maketheconnection.net/events/transitioning-from-service>), where Veterans can learn about signs of struggle, self-help tools, and resources to help overcome transition challenges.
- Mental Health Screening on Separation Health Assessment: All separating or retiring Service members receive a mandatory mental health assessment as part of the separation health assessment (SHA). Service members who screen positive on any of the screening measures are referred, with their consent, to inTransition, a DoD program that provides free, confidential, specialized coaching and assistance to Veterans, Active-duty Service members, National Guard members, reservists, and retirees who are considering mental health care.
- Military Life Cycle (MLC) modules: VA offers nine MLC modules that are 40- to 60-minute information sessions to help Service members and their loved one's plan for the future. MLC modules can be taken online at any time throughout a Service member's career; they are especially valuable after major events like permanent changes of station, marriage, or the birth of a child. Multiple MLCs include content and information in support of mental health including:
 - *Social and Emotional Health*: This module helps Service members and their families identify stressful life events, cope with challenges, support emotional health, access VA and DoD resources, help a friend, and connect with peer groups.

- *Mental Health for Families* – Provides transitioning Service members, spouses, and dependents with the resources available to support mental health care needs, including how to recognize the risks of not having adequate health care coverage; recognize how health care coverage can impact current or future mental health care needs; explore coverage options to plan for the transition; and identify the process to access and apply for (where appropriate) resources and support.
- Mobile Applications (apps): VA has a suite of award-winning mobile apps (<https://mobile.va.gov/appstore/mental-health>) to support Veterans and their families with tools to help them manage emotional and behavioral concerns. Available mobile apps include those for use by Veterans (self-help) to support their ability to cope with personal issues (such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, PTSD and alcohol use, or smoking cessation), as well as mobile apps designed as an adjunct to psychotherapy and used with a mental health provider to support Veterans' engagement in care and their use of skills learned in therapy. VA's Mobile Apps enable Veterans to engage in self-help before their problems reach a level of needing professional assistance and aim to promote active engagement when they are in care. The goal is to empower Veterans and their families and support VA's efforts to improve access to care.
- Opioid Management and Safety Initiative Joint Incentive Fund: VA and DoD are working to align performance metrics and decision support systems to promote opioid safety through: 1) adapting the Stratification Tool for Opioid Risk Management predictive model to DoD data systems; 2) translation of Opioid Safety Initiative metrics and dashboard features to DoD data systems and reports; 3) development of a DoD dashboard where VA clinicians can view information relevant to opioid safety for transitioning Service members or recently transitioned Veterans; and 4) transmission of risk factors and other relevant information for clinical outreach and treatment planning for transitioning Service members for use in VA decision support.
- Post-9/11 Military2VA Case Management Program: Embedded at every VA medical center (VAMC), this program (<https://www.oefoif.va.gov/OEFOIF/index.asp>) provides personalized, proactive screenings to approximately 200,000 Post-9/11 Service members and Veterans transitioning into VA annually to identify high-risk factors (such as risk for suicide or homelessness) and ongoing clinical case management needs. Case managers apply a holistic and integrated care planning approach for ongoing case management for approximately 38,000 Veterans annually with complex care needs.
- Same-Day Services for Urgent Primary and Mental Health-Care Needs: In addition to the Emergency Department/Urgent Care Centers available at VAMCs, VA offers same day services in mental health. Former Service members who have an urgent need for mental health services, including treatment for substance use disorder, will receive immediate attention from a health care professional at any VA facility. Same-day services may include: a face-to-face visit with a clinician; advice provided

during a call with a nurse; a telehealth or video care visit; an appointment made with a specialist; or a prescription filled the same day, depending on what best meets the needs of the Veteran.

- Self-Assessments: VA provides access to confidential anonymous risk assessments (<https://www.maketheconnection.net/resources/self-assessments/>) that Veterans and family members can use to help them understand if and how stress and depression are affecting them.
- Solid Start: Solid Start (<https://discover.va.gov/transition-programs/>) calls recently separated Service members 3 times during their first year after separation from active-duty military service (around 90-, 180-, and 365-days post-separation). Solid Start prioritizes calls to eligible Veterans who had a mental health appointment within their last year of active-duty service and meet other criteria; representatives are trained to connect recently separated Service members in crisis to the Veterans Crisis Line through a warm transfer, remaining on the line until the Veteran is connected. Specially trained VA representatives offer specific VA benefits, services, and external resources based on issues or challenges identified by the recently separated Service member during the call. In addition to calls, recently separated Service members receive information on benefits and eligibility in written format (such as by email or mail) about the variety of VA benefits and health care resources available, including for mental health care, and a caring contact, regardless of VA eligibility.
- Transition Assistance Program (TAP): Required of all Service members, without regard to component, who are being discharged or released after 180 or more days of continuous active duty and all Service members retiring or separating from active duty for disability, TAP (<https://www.benefits.va.gov/transition/tap.asp>) provides information, tools, and training to ensure that Service members and their spouses are prepared for the next step in civilian life, whether pursuing additional education, finding a job in the public or private sector, or starting their own business. TAP benefits advisors are located at over 300 DoD installations.
 - *VA Benefits and Services course*: VA provides one full day of instruction for TAP that helps transitioning Service members understand the benefits and services they have earned. The course shows transitioning Service members how to locate and access different state and local benefits by using the National Resource Directory and includes information on how to find local, county, or state Veterans Service Organizations; Veteran peer groups; and community engagement boards. The course also provides a demonstration on navigating VA's mental health website, guidance on self-care and emotional and social support, videos with personal stories from Veterans, and facilitator examples and engagement questions. Information includes different options for obtaining services to help with mental health needs, steps to recognize when you need help, and descriptions and links for mental health

programs/resources such as Vet Centers, About Face, Beyond MST and the Veterans Crisis Line

- **VA Liaisons for Health Care:** Located at DoD installations, VA Liaisons (<https://www.oefoif.va.gov/valiaisons.asp>) are nurses and social workers who provide direct access and coordinated individualized VA health care for Service members transitioning from DoD installations and medical treatment facilities (MTF) prior to their discharge from the military. Liaisons bridge the gap during the vulnerable time of transition by assessing needs to include those at high risk for suicide or homelessness and expediting the Service members' initial registration for VA health care. If MST-related treatment needs are identified, VA Liaisons communicate this information to the receiving VA medical facility to ensure continuity of care, including the scheduling of VA health care appointments as necessary. The Liaisons work closely with Post-9/11 Military2VA (M2VA) Case Management available at all VAMCs to provide comprehensive care coordination and case management services to transitioning Service members and Post-9/11 era Veterans. M2VA teams screen new transitioning Service members and Veterans for the need for case management services and identify risk factors early to effectively engage the most appropriate expertise to address a Veteran's specialized care needs. Veterans with complex care needs receive individualized care plans that encompass their holistic care needs.
- **VA Mental Health Services website:** This new site (<https://www.va.gov/health-care/health-needs-conditions/mental-health/>) provides simple guidance and direct links on how to access VA mental health services for PTSD, psychological effects of MST, depression, grief, anxiety, and other needs. This site makes clear that some of these services are available to former Service members even if they are not enrolled in VA health care.
- **VA Resource Locator:** The VA Resource Locator (<https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/local-resources>) is a tool that helps Veterans find local mental health and suicide prevention resources, including their local Suicide Prevention Coordinator.
- **Vet Centers:** Vet Centers (<https://www.vetcenter.va.gov>) are community-based counseling centers that provide a wide range of social and psychological services including professional readjustment counseling to certain Veterans and active-duty Service members (including members of the National Guard and Reserve components) and their families. All Vet Centers maintain regularly scheduled, non-traditional hours, including evenings and weekends, to ensure that Veterans, Service members, and their families can access these services. In addition, there is no cost for Vet Center services. There are 300 Vet Centers located in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and Guam.
- **Whole Health Orientation Groups:** Veterans may attend Whole Health Orientation (<https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/index.asp>) groups that offer an opportunity to

connect with VA and to enroll in VA health care and, if needed, receive a referral for VA mental health care. The orientations are advertised to transitioning Service members and their families through TAP and post-separation phone calls, as well as through local outreach activities. Introduction to Whole Health is a two-hour peer-led session explaining the Whole Health approach to care. The Whole Health model is a holistic look at the many areas of life that can affect Veterans' health from work environments, relationships, diet, sleep patterns, and more. The Circle of Health helps illustrate how these areas are all interconnected. Every VAMC offers monthly open access Introduction to Whole Health orientation groups.

- **Veterans Crisis Line (VCL):** VA provides 24-hour, 7-days a week, and 365-days a year continuous crisis intervention services through the VCL. This service connects Veterans in crisis and their families and friends with qualified, caring VA responders through a confidential toll-free hotline, online chat, or text. Veterans and their loved ones can Dial 988 then Press 1, chat online at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat, or send a text message to 838255. The VCL is an important resource for outreach and access to care. Its mission is to supplement local suicide prevention efforts.

Question 3: How many Veterans that are considered "priority" are contacted by the VA under the VA Solid Start program each FY? How many priority Veterans are successfully contacted? How many of the successfully contacted Veterans enroll into VA?

VA Response: The number of priorities recently separated Service members varies by year based on the population of recently separated Service members transitioning from active-duty service who meet certain risk factors during their last year of active duty.

As noted in the VA Solid Start Congressionally Mandated Report issued in June 2024, in calendar year 2023, VA Solid Start had 25,733 priority recently separated Service members in the program and connected with 21,530 of them, representing 83.7% of the recently separated priority Service member population. Of those recently separated priority Service members who were successfully contacted by VA Solid Start, 18,008 (87.7%) enrolled in VHA health care. In FY 2024, VA Solid Start connected with 36,329 recently separated priority Service members, helping to ensure continuity of mental health care post-transition.

Questions for the Record from Senator John Boozman:

Question 1: Understanding that the transition from military to civilian life is a major risk factor for a decline in mental health:

- To what extent have the Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs worked together to utilize tools like cost-effective, scalable remote health monitoring software to establish a baseline and continue testing for things like Heart Rate Variability?**

b. Is there a pilot program that spans across the two agencies to maximize commercial innovation in the mental healthcare space?

VA Response 1a: VA is unaware of any VA programs or VA-DoD collaborations that use tools to establish biometric baselines and monitoring of heart rate variability. VA has been developing patient-generated health data tools with a long-term vision for capturing heart rate variability along with other biometric measurements. Additionally, VA has the following remote monitoring programs, some of which have involved DoD collaborations:

- VA's Remote Patient Monitoring: Home Telehealth (RPM-HT) program: RPM-HT serves more than 130,000 Veterans with monitoring and management of their chronic illnesses in their homes each year through disease management protocols (DMP) in depression, PTSD, bipolar disorder, substance use disorder, anxiety, and schizophrenia. A DMP is a series of questions, answers, responses, educational material, and information derived from clinical practice and meant to replicate aspects of face-to-face assessments. The DMPs also include capture of biometric data, as assigned by the care coordinator based on individual Veteran need. The application of this clinical content is stated within the DMP and is based on the assessment of scientific evidence and clinical appropriateness by an expert group within VA. These DMPs are sent to Veterans enrolled in the program by an assigned technology or service for daily responses that are transmitted back to the RPM-HT Care Coordinator for review and intervention as needed. Clinical Practice Guidelines (CPG) are statements developed to assist providers and patients choose the best and most appropriate care for specific health conditions. In collaboration with the DoD, VA has created CPGs in the chronic disease and mental health areas. The guidelines describe critical decision points regarding the above-mentioned areas pertaining to diagnosis and management based on clear and comprehensive evidence-based recommendations that incorporate current information and practices for practitioners throughout the DoD and VA health care systems. The guidelines are intended to improve patient outcomes and local management of patients enrolled in the RPM-HT program. At this time, VA's RPM-HT program does not monitor for heart rate variability.
- MyHealtheVet: VA's patient portal, MyHealtheVet, helps Veterans manage their health at home. Veterans and their caregivers can access the information they need to help manage their health and can access their VA care teams through secure messaging.
- Mobile Applications (Apps): VA has a suite of award-winning mobile apps (<https://mobile.va.gov/appstore/mental-health>) to support Veterans and their families with tools to help them manage emotional and behavioral concerns. Available mobile apps include those for use by Veterans (self-help) to support their ability to cope with personal issues (such as PTSD symptoms, PTSD and alcohol use, or smoking cessation) as well as mobile apps designed as an

adjunct to psychotherapy and used with a mental health provider to support Veterans' engagement in care and their use of skills learned in therapy. VA's Mobile Apps enable Veterans to engage in self-help before their problems reach a level of needing professional assistance and aim to promote active engagement when they are in care. The goal is to empower Veterans and their families and potentially support VA's efforts to improve access to care.

VA Response 1b: VA is not aware of any VA-DoD pilot programs or collaborations relevant to commercial innovation in mental health.

Questions for the Record from Senator Sherrod Brown:

Daniel J. Harvey Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Servicemember Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide Act

My legislation, the Daniel J. Harvey Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Servicemember Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide Act, would expand the Transition Assistance Program to include a specific mental health counseling component, and ensure veterans are given information about the mental health programs and benefits available at their local VA facility. This is one way Congress can help improve the transition process for servicemembers so that they have the support they need as they return to their local communities.

Question 1: Mr. Jacobs: do you agree it's important for servicemembers to be connected to their local VA as they transition from service to veteran status? How might this help ease their transition?

VA Response: VA understands the importance of connecting Service members, Veterans, and their families to their local VA resources as they transition from service to Veteran status. Annually, TAP supports approximately 200,000 TSMs worldwide at over 200 military installations. The one-day VA Benefits and Services course helps Service members and their families understand how to navigate the resources within VA, including how to access the benefits and services they have earned through their military careers. This course discusses the importance of local VA regional offices (RO) and how to locate the nearest RO.

VA also encourages Service members and their families to connect with their local VA Benefits Advisors by one-on-one sessions. Extensively trained and well-versed in all facets of VA offerings, VA Benefits Advisors support Service members, Veterans, military families, caregivers, and survivors in learning about VA benefits, services, and tools. During one-on-one sessions, Benefits Advisors can refer TSMs to their local Vet Center or VAMC to help them connect with VA health care services.

In response to Executive Order 13822, "Supporting Our Veterans During Their Transition From Uniformed Service to Civilian Life," VA, DoD, and the Department of Homeland Security issued a Joint Action Plan for seamless access to mental health

care, with VA implementing the Solid Start Program that established an early and consistent relationship with every eligible Veteran during their first year of transition through one-on-one interactions supporting, educating, and empowering them to leverage benefits they earned. Solid Start achieves early and consistent contact at three key stages following discharge to civilian life (0–90, 90–180, and 180–365 days), during the first year of transition. Solid Start launched on December 2, 2019, and VA continues to build trust with TSMs. Service members will have an established VA contact who provides information and connection to benefits and services when transitioning from DoD to VA.

Additionally, VA's primary website, VA.gov, is a one-stop-shop for all things VA. It offers current information, resources, tools, and contact information for all VA benefits and services, including resources on mental health services and programs. VA also supports transitioning Service member mental health through:

- Direct care services provided to Service members, including VA/DoD Sharing Agreements, Vet Centers, Services related to MST, and the VA Liaison Program.
- Indirect services that identify or support transitioning Service members with mental health needs, including Veterans and Military Crisis Line, Mental Health Screening on the Separation Health Assessment, Opioid Management and Safety Initiative, Post-9/11 Military2VA Case Management Program, Suicide Prevention Program.
- Outreach and education services for Transitioning Service members that address mental health issues, including MakeTheConnection.net, Peer Services, and Mobile apps.

Nationally, VA participates in the VA/DoD Joint Executive Committee Sexual Trauma Working Group (STWG). The STWG is a standing collaborative structure for VA and DoD to strengthen efforts to facilitate access to VA treatment related to MST for TSMs, assist Veterans in filing MST-related disability claims and facilitate communication and collaboration between the Departments.

EHR

The VA / DOD Electronic Health Record (EHR) modernization efforts have been full of delays and blunders in Ohio. The Department of Defense is almost done with its EHR modernization effort, while VA is only about 2 percent of the way there. It is important that VA get these modernization efforts right, and hold Oracle Cerner – the contractor for this effort – accountable so that the rollout provides value add to our veterans and their quality of care.

Question 2: Mr. Jacobs: how will the EHR modernization efforts help to improve care coordination and delivery for veterans, particularly during their transition from servicemember to veteran status? How will improved coordination of care can help save lives?

VA Response: The Federal EHR will show the Service member and Veteran records all within the same health record; therefore, VHA staff will not need to search multiple locations to find the medical records they need to provide optimized and coordinated care. Access to all of this information in one platform leads to a complete and accurate picture of a Veterans health care needs, which has been shown to improve the quality of the care delivered by VA. The transition of a Service member to Veteran status is a vulnerable time and having access to a Service member/Veterans' health record in one location is a unique feature of the Federal EHR.

**Department of Veterans Affairs
January 2025**

**Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Questions for the Record Submitted to
Joshua Jacobs, Under Secretary for Benefits, and
John Boerstler, Chief Veterans Experience Officer,
from the Senate Armed Services Committee
“Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service”**

October 18, 2023

Questions for the Record from Senator Jack Reed:

TAP programming for women

Question 1: Secretary Vazirani, you testified that the Transition Assistance Program includes some programming that is specifically designed for women in service. Can you please provide more detail on this training for transitioning women in each of the military services as well as a summary of the content, delivery modality, duration, and objectives of each block of such instruction?

VA Response: For an effective transition, Service women, like their male counterparts, benefit from obtaining training relevant to their individual post-transition goals. A critical source of information for transitioning Service women is the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Women's Health Transition Training (WHTT), permanently launched on February 22, 2021.

WHTT is an optional course designed to encourage Service women to learn about women's health care services available through VA. The course informs participants about women-specific health care services available after their separation from the military and empowers them with information to enroll in and use VA health care services. The five-phase course can be taken at any time, any place, through Transition Online Learning at TAPevents.mil.¹ The course is self-paced and open to all Service women and women Veterans. The course consists of five modules: Shift from Active Duty; Understanding VA Health Care; Available Women's Health Services; Enrolling and Accessing VA Health Care; and Transition Assistance. Participants learn about a wide range of topics, including:

- Health care services, including mental health, military sexual trauma counseling, suicide prevention services, and homelessness assistance.
- Eligibility requirements to enroll in VA health care, the VA enrollment process, and how to connect with other Service women through women-specific networks and programs post-service.
- Points of contact for added support.

¹ <https://discover.va.gov/transition-programs/womens-health-transition-training/>

Feedback from WHTT pilot participants shows that the course increases awareness of women's health services available through VA, and the on-demand course makes this important information readily available to all transitioning Service members, caregivers, family members, and Veterans. In fiscal year (FY) 2022, over 80% of WHTT participants who responded to the course evaluation indicated they felt they had the necessary information to begin their VA health care enrollment.

In FY 2023, there were 371 total WHTT attendees including Service members, caregivers, family members, Veterans, and others. About 78% of participants said that WHTT influenced them to enroll in VA health care. About 95% of participants said that they have the necessary information to start the enrollment process at VA.

As with all TAP-related initiatives, VA works closely with interagency partners at the Department of Defense (DoD) to promote WHTT to ensure that all transitioning Service women know about, and have access to, the course. Since the course is both permanent and voluntary, VA will continue to coordinate with its TAP interagency partners and other stakeholders to promote the course through existing strategic communications tactics and strategies including the VA TAP course, the TAP Interagency Strategic Communications Working Group, social media, blogs, web content, and articles.

Questions for the Record from Senator Tim Kaine:

SkillBridge

Question 2: Secretary Vazirani, the statements of Mr. O'Neill and Mr. Galluci highlighted the Navy's recent efforts to scale back access to SkillBridge as outlined in NAVADMIN 064/23. Do you anticipate the other service branches placing similar restrictions on participation?

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Question 3: Secretary Vazirani, with respect to the aforementioned NAVADMIN on SkillBridge, it said that the program is "not an entitlement and participation does impact readiness" but according to the written testimony of Mr. O'Neill from the American Legion this is "due to the command's inability to backfill participants' positions, creating personnel gaps that negatively impact unit operations." From the Department's perspective, why is the servicemember's ability to take advantage of SkillBridge or any other elements of the Transition Assistance Program affected by factors that are within the services' control?

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Question 4: Secretary Vazirani, how should the services and subordinate commands ensure that their manning reflects known upcoming separations or retirements and that they're postured to provide an appropriate period of transition for servicemembers?

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Question 5: Secretary Vazirani, how do you think the realignment of SkillBridge to Manpower and Reserve Affairs will ensure that the services and commands are properly managing their total force and end strength and enable transitioning servicemembers to take full advantage of the resources offered within the transition assistance program?

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Question 6: Secretary Vazirani, according to your written testimony, over 22,000 servicemembers enrolled or participated in SkillBridge in FY 2022, with over 3,800 industry partners in comparison to FY 2019 when approximately 8,000 servicemembers participated with 450 industry partners. Please provide a breakdown of participants in SkillBridge for FY19, FY20, FY21, and FY22 based on 1) Service, 2) Rank, 3) Gender, 4) Marital/Dependent Status

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Question 7: Secretary Vazirani, is there a Defense-level management system in place to track the application, approval, tracking, and reporting of all SkillBridge programs?

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Question 8: Secretary Vazirani, are there any mechanisms in place to determine the employment status of SkillBridge participants within one year of separation or retirement?

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Questions for the Record from Senator Jacky Rosen:

Allocation of Dedicated Days to Attend TAP

Question 9: Secretary Vazirani, the FY 2019 NDAA mandated that servicemembers attend TAP no later than one year prior to separation, and that the program include individualized counseling and a variety of workshops. However, nearly 25% of servicemembers who needed maximum support during

their transition did not attend a mandatory 2-day career planning class, and most servicemembers didn't attend TAP at least one year before leaving service. Some contributing factors causing these delayed attendances and program absences are the ongoing duty requirements and demanding daily work schedules that Active Duty servicemembers still adhere to during their separation process. We need to ensure that everyone separating from the military has the time to forge their next path into the civilian world. What are your thoughts on creating a special leave status specifically for transition activities so that servicemembers can dedicate the necessary time to attend TAP classes and counseling sessions without competing with their duty day responsibilities?

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Question 10: Secretary Vazirani and Mr. Boerstler, what does the program need in order to provide enhanced follow-up support to those who are transitioning that is catered specifically to where they intend to live after separating, rather than programs available in the location of their last duty station where they no longer live?

- A. Secretary Vazirani
- B. Mr. Boerstler

VA Response: The VA Solid Start (VASS) program provides contact by phone to all newly separated Service members, regardless of their character of discharge, during their first year of transition from the military. Recently separated Service members who are VASS-eligible receive calls during their first year after separation from active duty at three key stages (0-90-, 91-180-, and 181-365-days, post release from active duty). VASS calls are not scripted. Representatives ask open-ended questions that seek to establish the current status and potential needs of the recently separated Service member. Each call is different and is driven by the needs of the recently separated Service member at the time of the call. After each connection, the recently separated Service member receives a comprehensive follow-up email from the VASS representative that provides information on all issues that were discussed and connections for additional support and assistance. To educate transitioning Service members about the VASS program, information has been incorporated into TAP and the VA Welcome Kit. Additionally, prior to making any calls to recently separated Service members who are VASS-eligible, the VASS program reaches out by email to welcome the recently separated Service members into the program, thank them for their service, provide information on the VASS program, and set expectations on when they will receive their first call.

Impact of MHS Genesis and Electronic Health Records on Veteran Healthcare (VHA)

Question 11: Secretary Jacobs, the transition to Military Health System (MHS) Genesis has experienced a bumpy rollout to the military and veteran communities. VA Secretary McDonough even went so far to say that "[his]

confidence in the Electronic Healthcare Records [system] is badly shaken.” Veterans deserve a healthcare system that works for them, not against them. How is the change to the MHS Genesis impacting the VA’s intake of transitioning servicemembers and new veterans’ electronic health records?

VA Response: There has been no major change in VA access to DoD health records due to MHS GENESIS, and care is needed to ensure that remains the case when DoD legacy systems are finally sunset.

Question 12: Secretary Jacobs, how long does it take for a transitioning servicemember’s electronic health record to populate in the VA?

VA Response: The Joint Longitudinal Viewer now provides access in real time to all entries in MHS GENESIS, and it has been integrated into both Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) workflows. MHS GENESIS provides input to the creation of an archive of the Active-Duty Service Member DoD Health Record (also known as the Service Treatment Record) in the same way that the predecessor DoD system did, and the resulting set of documents is automatically copied into VBA’s records management systems, the Veterans Benefits Management System. There are minor issues to be resolved with forms, format, and ease-of-use for some of the forms and data formats, but there are no major disruptions.

Question 13: Secretary Jacobs, is there a substantial delay in healthcare for new veterans?

VA Response: VA does not track wait times for individuals who have just become Veterans, but it does track wait times for new patients.

VHA typically reports wait times for new patients. For FY 2023, the average new patient wait times were 25.8 days for primary care, 21.2 days for mental health care, and 31.3 days for specialty care. The wait time element of VA’s designated access standards for these types of care is 20 days for primary care and mental health care and 28 days for specialty care. VA measures wait times from the date of the request for the appointment to the first, next available appointment date relevant to the requested medical service.

This is based on Veterans already enrolled with VA and reflects their average wait time as new patients. A new patient is a Veteran who has not completed an appointment in a stop code or stop code grouping in the past 36 months. Stop codes are standardized codes used to characterize VHA outpatient clinics. There are concerns with using the Veteran’s enrollment date as the start point of the measure. Using the enrollment date will in many cases significantly overstate the wait time because it may be weeks, months, or longer before the Veteran requests health services and/or is referred for health care after enrolling.

Mentor-based Approach to Transitioning Veterans

Question 14: Dr. DeGroat, a personal connection could be the difference between a successful transition into a civilian job and unemployment. Mentors are critical lifelines for new veterans to see how someone walked the same path before them. What kind of mentorship programs do you think organizations should provide or facilitate for transitioning servicemembers?

VA Response: VA defers to Dr. DeGroat for response.

Question 15: Dr. DeGroat, how can TAP better emphasize holistic support that includes developing personal connections with a veteran mentor?

VA Response: VA defers to Dr. DeGroat for response.

Preventing Veteran Homelessness During TAP

Question 16: Mr. O'Neil, veteran homelessness has decreased over the last decade, but one homeless veteran is one too many. What has worked in decreasing veteran homelessness during the transition process, and what efforts can still be improved upon?

VA Response: VA defers to Mr. O'Neil for response.

Questions for the Record from Senator Mark Kelly:

Mental Health – Veterans' Crisis Line

Question 17: Mr. Boerstler, I commend DOD for working with its interagency partners, including VA and DOL, to connect servicemembers who do not demonstrate they are prepared to transition with veteran support at these agencies. Transitioning from military life to civilian life can be a tricky one, which is why it's so important to have opportunities for warm handovers. Those warm handovers need to include mental health as well. I was alarmed to learn, then, of the grave concerns of the Veterans Crisis Line, as reported in the VA Office of the Inspector General's report in September. Unfortunately, my office has heard from a handful of constituents that characterize their calls to the Veterans Crisis Line as unhelpful, and even harmful in some cases. I appreciate the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, under the leadership of Senators Tester and Moran, for addressing this concern head on in their SVAC hearing last month. As we discuss how we can improve the military to civilian transition, it's important we also consider the crucial support role of the Veterans' Crisis Line. Can you please speak to what VA is doing to implement robust oversight and quality control of the Veterans Crisis Line?

VA Response: The Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) has a robust quality program to ensure oversight and quality control. VCL holds a variety of accreditations to verify quality control measures are in place, including maintaining a five-year accreditation with the American Association of Suicidology (AAS), a three-year accreditation with the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities, and a three-year accreditation with International Customer Management Institute. In response to section 211 of the STRONG Veterans Act of 2022 (the STRONG Act, P.L. 117-328, Div. V), VCL reviewed the entire training program and is implementing recommendations from the 2023 AAS accreditation visit. AAS training guidelines and criteria are considered best-in-practice, so by reviewing the AAS feedback and implementing their recommendations, VCL will ensure that high-quality training is provided for all staff. These changes will further augment the high-quality training provided to all VCL Crisis Responders. Additionally, VCL is increasing silent monitoring for crisis responders. As a result, supervisory crisis responders will perform silent monitoring for two calls per month for each eligible responder. Furthermore, VCL requires Quality Assurance to complete silent monitoring for 80% crisis responders at least once per each two-week pay period.

VCL is working aggressively to ensure robust oversight and quality controls are in place throughout the organization in accordance with the VA's Office of Inspector General (OIG) recommendations and new statutory requirements. In response to OIG's report, 22-00507-211, VCL implemented process improvements and OIG closed 9 of the 11 recommendations for VCL. The two remaining recommendations require the completion of an Administrative Investigation Board that is being managed by VA's Workforce Management and Consulting. Actions taken from the OIG report to address oversight and quality control include VA's implementation of section 212 of the STRONG Act that also addresses OIG's recommendation 3, to strengthen the quality management oversight of staff who provide crisis management services, including overtime coverage. To address OIG recommendation 4, to enhance text transcript retention and establish supervisory oversight protocols for text messages, VCL implemented a method of retaining text transcripts through copying and pasting the interaction transcript from the text service to Medora, VCL's electronic medical record system, since May 2022. As of July 10, 2023, VCL established oversight protocols for silent monitors to verify the text interaction is pasted into Medora during their review process. VCL is addressing OIG recommendation 6, to identify criteria for immediate internal review of customers' deaths by suicide and accidental overdose to identify crisis management and administrative performance improvement actions. This is accomplished through creating a VCL Reporting Hub entry, following a report of a Veteran's death by suicide.

In accordance with VCL's standard operating procedures (SOP) regarding critical incidents and near misses, VCL Quality Assurance examines any and all past interaction(s) VCL has had with the Veteran and possible follow-up actions. In addition, VCL created a desk guide for Quality Assurance staff in the methodology to use when examining customers' deaths by suicide or accidental overdose. Finally, in response to recommendation 10, that VCL clarify and strengthen procedures for complaint

submission, provide staff training, ensure consistency, and monitor compliance, VCL took several actions. In February 2023, VCL signed the SOP for Complaints Regarding VCL Services. Beginning in February 2023, VCL provided complaint submission training to staff. All new VCL employees receive required training during new employee orientation. The risk management staff triage, track, and report on all complaints for status, progress, and final resolution. Monthly Complaint Reports are produced, which report on all complaints received and outcomes.

Question 18: Mr. Boerstler, how can we work together to ensure veterans have the quality care they need and deserve?

VA Response: A critical component of improving the Veteran experience now and in the future is codifying the Veterans Experience Office (VEO) in statute. This cost-neutral legislative proposal (legislative proposal 10 from the President's FY 2025 Budget Request)) would ensure that the voice of those VA serves – Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors – remain at the center of VA strategy, decision-making, and execution of service delivery across health care, benefits, memorial services, and appeals. This support will ensure VA maintains the necessary focus on the Veteran to maintain and improve products, services, and other cutting edge customer experience innovations. Congress can aid in this effort by ensuring the formalization of VEO in statute as a permanent capability at VA.

While both VA and DoD are working diligently to improve integration and service coordination for Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors, congressional support for building technological, systemic, and journey-oriented pathways that streamline the customer experience between VA and DoD would be a force multiplier.

VEO leverages several listening posts and feedback channels to consistently monitor the pulse of customer experiences across VA's many products and services to improve service delivery to Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. That said, there are additional opportunities for Congress and VA to reach as many Veterans, family members, caregivers, and survivors as possible through unified community networking events and communications products. As Congress is well aware, roughly half of transitioning Service members do not engage with VA. Amplifying VA services through multiple channels would maximize awareness across the Veteran community with the hope of welcoming additional and new generations of Veterans to VA. By positively messaging the progress of VA and Congress' relationship with that progress, VA could simultaneously create new avenues for delivering feedback to VA relating to customer experiences.

VA has made suicide prevention a top priority and is implementing a comprehensive approach to reach all Veterans. Suicide is a complex issue with no single cause. VA has made substantial strides in ensuring that Veterans receive high-quality care, and we are committed to ensuring that we provide the most accessible, convenient, and high-quality care possible through the VA system as well as through community providers. We aim to do so in a transparent, patient-centric way. The quality of VA mental health care has

been repeatedly validated by independent research and external evaluations. Studies show that clinical quality and safety of VA care was rated better than, or equal to, non-VA care in most studies. Patient experience in VA care was rated better than, or equal to, experience in non-VA care in all studies, but access and cost/efficiency outcomes were mixed. A comprehensive evaluation of VA mental health treatment (<https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/24915/evaluation-of-the-department-of-veterans-affairs-mental-health-services>) by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in 2018 found, in part, that VA provides mental health care of comparable or superior quality to care provided in private and non-VA public sectors.

Maintaining the integrity of VA's mental health care system is vitally important, but it is not enough. We know that some Veterans may not receive any health care services from VA, which highlights that VA alone cannot end Veteran suicide. VA is committed to supporting Veterans' mental health and equitable access to VA's life-saving resources. It is essential that VA deploy diverse and coordinated actions to build recruitment pathways and retain providers in VA both to remain an employer of choice and to provide the highest quality mental health care in the country. A coordinated approach is anticipated to supply a steady pipeline over the entire career path for mental health providers and support staff. With the ever-increasing need for mental health professionals, a pipeline to recruit and retain mental health staff will prepare VA and other agencies and associations to proactively respond to increased demand.

VA trains 120,000 health professions trainees (HPT) annually and has success in recruitment; 75% of VA staff psychologists and 65% of VA staff physicians were trained in a VA facility. Through the Office of Academic Affiliations (OAA), VA continues to increase the recruitment pool through expansion of the mental health professions education program. Section 103 of the STRONG Act requires VA, by the end of 2025, to add an additional 250 paid trainee slots in covered mental health disciplines, including psychiatry, licensed professional mental health counseling, marriage and family therapy, and mental health nurse practitioners, among others. In the first year of the expansion, VA added 108.6 mental health HPT positions with HPTs beginning training in academic year 2023-2024 (July 1, 2023). This expansion will continue until at least 250 positions are added. Last fiscal year, 19% of mental health hires were participants in Training Recruitment Events.

VA will continue to do all we can to prevent Veteran suicides because one Veteran who dies by suicide is one too many. We will continue to leverage the strength we find in the diversity that defines the Veteran population and our VA workforce, ensuring everyone entering a VA facility feels safe and welcome and receives culturally appropriate, high-quality care.

Questions for the Record from Senator Roger Wicker:

Benefits of Military Service

Question 19: Secretary Vazirani, despite what we see in the news and in the movies, the data show that an overwhelming majority of service members have a successful transition to civilian life. They are better educated, earn more money, are more likely to be married, and are more likely to own a home than their non-veteran counterparts. Wouldn't public awareness of these facts assist with in our current recruiting crisis?

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Question 20: Secretary Vazirani, what more can the department do to spread this message?

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Question 21: Secretary Vazirani, what is it about military service that sets veterans up for such success and what should we be doing to make sure more people know about this?

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Timelines

Question 22: Mr. Sawyer, a Government Accountability Office report on the Transition Assistance Program from December 2022 stated that as of publication, the majority of transitioning service members were not starting TAP 365 days prior to separation. The report notes some limitations in the Department's data collection and analysis. What are the GAO's recommended improvements to the Department's data collection and analysis?

VA Response: VA defers to GAO for response.

Question 23: Mr. Sawyer, how can the Department better use their existing data?

VA Response: VA defers to GAO for response.

Question 24: Secretary Vazirani, I understand that starting the transition process earlier can be beneficial for some service members, but not every servicemember can plan their separation a year in advance. Moreover, sometimes the military needs time to persuade service members to remain in uniform. Amid our recruiting crisis, retention is more important than ever. How will the Department align the requirement to begin transition 365 days from separation with the reality

that there will always be some service members for whom it does not make sense to begin transition so far in advance?

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Program Efficacy

Question 25: Secretary Vazirani, the feedback this committee often hears from service members going through the Transition Assistance Program is that the program is great, but it may be too much information at one time. The program is required by statute to cover a plethora of different items – 87 items in total. How can we ensure the program remains highly effective while also ensuring service members do not receive a deluge of information that they will be unable to retain?

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Transition Assistance Curricula for Military Spouses

Question 26: Secretary Rodriguez, I understand the Department of Labor has developed specific transition curriculum for military spouses, as the challenges spouses face during transition can be different from the service member. Has the program seen success thus far, and are their plans to expand it to additional locations?

VA Response: VA defers to the Department of Labor (DoL) for response.

Questions for the Record from Senator Joni Ernst:

Title 32 Guardsmen TAP

Question 27: Secretary Jacobs, is there parity between the Transition Assistance Program for Active Guard soldiers and airmen under Title 32 authorities at transition and the one national program that covers transitioning service members under Title 10 authorities.

VA Response: VA defers to DoD. The VA one-day course (VA Benefits and Services) provided under TAP is provided to all Service members, without regard to component, who are being discharged or released after 180 or more days of continuous active duty and all Service members retiring or separating from active duty for disability. who

Question 28: Secretary Jacobs, how is the Federal VA providing oversight of States to ensure a consistent standard of support is provided for Guardsmen transitioning under Title 32 authorities, and not just Guardsmen transitioning under Title 10 authorities?

VA Response: 10 U.S.C. § 1142 and § 1144 determine TAP requirements, and VA extends support by providing information about assistance from state and local organizations through the VA Benefits and Services (one-day) course. The information provided in this one-day course is standardized for all Service members.

VA recognizes the unique challenges and contributions of Reserve Component and National Guard members. For this reason, VA is creating a Reserve Component National Guard (RCNG) Military Life Cycle (MLC) module, a comprehensive resource dedicated to assisting participants with identifying key VA benefits, services, and tools that may be available.

The course is scheduled to launch in January 2025, and aims to achieve the following four objectives:

1. Identify Eligibility for VA Benefits and Services: Equip Veterans and RCNG members to identify their eligibility for VA benefits and services, empowering them to access key resources effectively.
2. Determine Key VA Benefits, Services, and Tools: Help Veterans and RCNG members understand and choose the VA benefits tailored to their needs, enabling informed decisions for their well-being and success.
3. Recognize Rules about Reserve Component Receiving Dual Payments: Equip Veterans and RCNG members to understand and navigate the rules around receiving dual payments, helping them make informed decisions to optimize their benefits while staying compliant.
4. Identify Community Resources Available to RCNG Members and their Families: Help Veterans, RCNG members, and their families identify and tap into community resources, strengthening their support network and overall well-being.

VA also has an existing MLC module, Reserve Component Dual Payments, that provides an overview of drill pay, compensation eligibility, and dual payment.

Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) claims

Question 29: Secretary Vazirani, if the only Career Readiness Standard deliverable is to “Register on VA.gov,” what metrics is the Department utilizing to determine whether or not the BDD claims processing undertaken during TAP is successful?

VA Response: The BDD Program allows transitioning Service members the ability to apply for disability compensation up to 180 days before their anticipated discharge date and to begin their military-to-civilian transition with answers about their eligibility for VA benefits and services. FY 2023 was the first year more than 50,000 Service members applied for benefits through the BDD program and the 4th year of sustained growth in BDD applications. More than 19,000 of these Service members (43.8%) received their first benefits payments within 30 days of separation.

VA, in partnership with DoD, continues to enhance the BDD program to improve the process for transitioning Service members, as follows:

- VA automatically electronically returns the completed Separation Health Assessment (SHA) exam to DoD to meet both the DoD and VA exam requirements, eliminating duplicate exams (2019).
- VA added mental health screening questions to the SHA Disability Benefits Questionnaires and partnered with DoD to set up an in-transition mental health referral program when certain criteria are met (2019).
- VA updated guidance for BDD active-duty applicants filing claims for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by removing the requirement to submit a PTSD stressor verification form to avoid unnecessary distress to the Service member (Oct 2022).
- VA and DoD developed a revised common SHA template so that both Departments can capture and leverage consistent data (April 2023).
- Pregnant Service members are no longer excluded from BDD due to not being able to complete examinations for all claimed conditions. If examinations cannot be completed, a decision will be deferred until after the pregnancy (March 2023).
- VA and DoD are executing the automatic transfer of the digital portion of the Service Treatment Records (STR) for those Service members filing a BDD claim. This means that the burden to hand carry STRs to submit a BDD claim will soon be removed from the Service member (tentatively calendar year 2024).

BDD Data Points – FY 2023

- Total Receipts: 52,806
- Total Completed Claims: 43,868
- Total Completed Claims within 30 days of discharge: 19,120 (43.8%)

BDD Data Points – FY 2024

- Total Receipts: 52,442
- Total Completed Claims: 46,581
- Total Completed Claims within 30 days of discharge: 19,120 (43.8%)

Questions for the Record from Senator Dan Sullivan:

Merchant Mariner Union Partnerships with Military Transition Programs

Question 30: Secretary Rodriguez, as we spoke about during the hearing, I am interested in how the U.S. military and Coast Guard can involve merchant mariner unions more in partnering with military transition programs to benefit both the service members and the maritime industry. Please provide me in detail the work that you're currently doing on this subject.

VA Response: VA defers to DoL for response.

Mental Health Accession Standards

Question 31: Secretary Vazirani, you spoke extensively in your opening statement on mental health particularly as it pertains to the DOD's Separation History and Physical Examination (SHPE). In your role as the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, you're also responsible for recruiting standards. According to the basic accession standards for all military service as defined in the Department of Defense Instruction (DODI) 6130.03, Volume 1, Medical Standards for Military Service, Appointment, Enlistment, or Induction, any applicant who has received treatment for depression within the last 36 months (at the time of enlistment) is initially disqualified and will require a waiver from the Service Medical Waiver Review Authority. How do the mental health standards for those on active duty differ from those seeking to join the military?

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Questions for the Record from Senator Ted Budd:

Military Spouse Employment

Question 32: Secretary Jacobs, how many military spouse employment programs exist within the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA)? Please provide a list including brief descriptions as well as how much each program costs annually.

VA Response: VA has an enterprise-wide Veteran and Military Spouse Talent Engagement Program (VMSTEP). The VMSTEP program provides employment-centric guidance, assistance, and advocacy for, and on behalf of, military spouses. VMSTEP provides monthly live Federal application webinars as part of its suite of supportive services. VBA uses special hiring authority from the Office of Personnel Management for flexibility for appointment of eligible military spouses to many announced job opportunities and conducts targeted outreach for awareness of this flexibility. Through strategic marketing, VA conducts targeted outreach generating awareness of military spouse hiring flexibility through various communication channels to include social media and live employment-centric events.

Question 33: Secretary Vazirani, how many military spouse employment programs exist within the Department of Defense (DOD)? Please provide a list including brief descriptions as well as how much each program costs annually.

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Question 34: Secretary Rodriguez, how many military spouse employment programs exist within the Department of Labor (DOL)? Please provide a list including brief descriptions as well as how much each program costs annually.

VA Response: VA defers to DoL for response.

Question 35: Secretary Vazirani, the Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP) seeks to connect military spouses with partner employers who are committed to recruit, hire and promote and retain military spouses. To what extent does MSEP work directly with the Department of Veteran Affairs to hire military spouses at the VA?

VA Response: VA participates in quarterly MSEP meetings to share VA strategies and outreach efforts to include webinars and hiring events designed to support the military spouse community. The link to the VA Careers portal on usajobs.gov is listed on the MSEP employer partner page to help spouses swiftly access VA specific job opportunities.

Question 36: Secretary Vazirani, to what extent does MSEP work with VA hospitals to improve hiring of military spouses? Please describe this process.

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response.

Question 37: Secretary Jacobs, Secretary Vazirani, and Secretary Rodriguez, do existing programs designed to support military spouse employment have a specific hiring portal for matching military spouses with healthcare specialties in the area they live in or plan to move to? Specifically, does the Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP), Veteran and Military Spouse Talent Engagement Program (VMSTEP) or the Military Spouse Education and Career Opportunities (SECO) have existing mechanisms for supporting military spouses seeking healthcare posts across the nation?

- C. Secretary Jacobs
- D. Secretary Vazirani
- E. Secretary Rodriguez

VA Response: By law, Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) services are geared toward Service members and Veterans with service-connected disabilities. However, since 2020, VR&E Service has hosted yearly career events that are open to all Service members, Veterans, and military spouses. Business partners from various occupations are invited to attend this event. VA posts job opportunities, to include healthcare-specific announcements, through the MSEP portal ²providing a streamlined process for military spouses to quickly access and apply for VA opportunities.

² [Military Spouse Employment Partnership Partner Portal](#)

Emergency Medical Transition Certifications

Question 38: Secretary Vazirani, what professional transition services, if any, does the Department of Defense make available to help combat medics obtain the certifications necessary to transition from military service into civilian jobs in the emergency medical field?

VA Response: VA defers to DoD for response. VA hosts the Intermediate Care Technician (ICT) program. This program provides former military medics and corpsmen an opportunity to augment the VA workforce and use their vast array of clinical skill sets for Veteran care. This program also improves the transition of this highly trained and skilled work force from DoD to Veteran care with a career pathway for professional healthcare roles. Information regarding the ICT program is listed on the VA for Vets (<https://www.vaforvets.va.gov/>) website.

**Department of Veterans Affairs
January 2025**

**Questions for the Record
Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS)
Department of Labor (DOL)
Joint Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs and Senate Committee on Armed Services
Oversight Hearing
"Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service"**

October 18, 2023

Senator Roger Wicker

Q #26: Secretary Rodriguez, I understand the Department of Labor has developed specific transition curriculum for military spouses, as the challenges spouses face during transition can be different from the service member. Has the program seen success thus far, and are there plans to expand it to additional locations?

Answer: In February 2021, VETS announced the launch of a series of career workshops to provide employment assistance to transitioning military spouses and caregivers, known as the Transition Employment Assistance for Military Spouses' (TEAMS) curriculum. All workshops are provided virtually. The TEAMS workshops are designed to help military spouses and caregivers plan and prepare for their job search in pursuit of their employment goals. Currently, VETS offers ten TEAMS courses. The courses use a combination of curriculum components currently offered to service members, such as resume development and interviewing techniques, and components more specifically tailored to the needs of military spouses, who often face frequent moves and the complexities associated with state licensing and credentialing requirements. In collaboration with the Small Business Administration (SBA), VETS offers its entrepreneurship course through TEAMS and, in collaboration with Hiring Our Heroes, VETS created and provided a specialized one-hour Federal Hiring Strategies seminar for military spouses attending monthly events.

In FY 2023, VETS provided 398 workshops to more than 2,075 military spouses and caregivers; as compared to 270 workshops and 1,203 participants in FY 2022. VETS continues to build capacity and awareness to this program and views the growing demand and attendance as success. VETS will continue to work with our partners at the Department of Defense (DoD) to schedule and promote TEAMS events. To learn more about TEAMS workshops, visit dol.gov/TEAMSworkshops.

Senator Dan Sullivan

Q #30: Secretary Rodriguez, as we spoke about during the hearing, I am interested in how the U.S. military and Coast Guard can involve merchant mariner unions more in partnering with military transition programs to benefit both the service members and the maritime industry. Please provide me in detail the work that you're currently doing on this subject.

Answer: VETS serves on the Military to Mariner Task Force (the Task Force), which coordinates Federal efforts to facilitate the transition from military service to civilian employment in the U.S. Merchant Marine and other positions within the U.S. Marine Transportation System. The Task Force has been proactive in addressing many of the challenges in transitioning sea service personnel to the U.S. Merchant Marine. In September 2023, the Task Force delivered a report that included a call for action to support mariner mental health, with the goal of engaging maritime workers, maritime employers, unions, non-governmental agencies, and other maritime organizations in addressing the U.S. mariners' mental health and workplace wellbeing for an industry that touches virtually every aspect of American life. To learn more about the transitioning process for sea service personnel entering the civilian workforce with the U.S. Marchant Marine, visit the Military to Mariner Program at <https://www.maritime.dot.gov/outreach/military-mariner#Step%206>.

Senator Ted Budd

Q #34: Secretary Rodriguez, how many military spouse employment programs exist within the Department of Labor (DOL)? Please provide a list including brief descriptions as well as how much each program costs annually.

Answer: The TEAMS curriculum assists military spouses and caregivers in their career endeavors with training on employment essentials, tailored to their unique circumstances. First proposed in the President's Budget for Fiscal Year 2020, VETS developed ten highly focused TEAMS workshops that address common employment barriers and help military spouses and caregivers learn about specialized programs and explore available resources. These courses are provided at no cost to participants. The ten courses are:

Marketing Me: This two-hour workshop focuses on using marketing techniques in job search, exploring networking opportunities, and using multiple resources to develop a job search action plan.

Career Credentials: This two-hour workshop defines professional credentials and their importance, illustrates pathways for credentialing, and identifies license and credential portability resources.

Your Next Move: This two-hour workshop uses DOL online resources to define and explore career opportunities and uses labor market information as a basis for selecting a career path or job search plan.

Mastering Resume Essentials: This four-and-a-half-hour workshop guides participants to complete a draft resume, learn to evaluate their resume, and understand job application techniques.

Federal Hiring: This two-hour workshop introduces military spouse hiring authorities and helps participants set up accounts on USAJOBS and review features to assist in the federal job search.

Interview Skills: This two-hour workshop provides tips and coaching for job interviews and handling those hard-to-answer interview questions.

Salary Negotiations: This two-hour workshop provides basic knowledge for salary, compensation, job offers and negotiation skills, and exercises and resources to explain employee worth to an employer.

LinkedIn Profiles: This two-hour workshop explains how to build a profile that showcases a professional brand and uses keywords to attract recruiters, as well as obtain skill endorsements and network recommendations.

LinkedIn Job Search: This two-hour workshop offers insider knowledge on LinkedIn's job search features and provides a rare sneak peek into the perspective of LinkedIn recruiters.

Flexible Job Options: This two-hour workshop shows participants how to explore, research, and secure legitimate, career-building, flexible job options. It also breaks down hot topics such as gig economy jobs, temporary and contract work, home-based businesses, and how to shift from an office to a remote work location.

The full course list launched in October 2021. VETS offers these monthly instructor-led, virtual workshops at a variety of times to meet the availability of military spouses stationed worldwide. Anyone interested in attending the workshops can register at dol.gov/TEAMSworkshops. VETS continues to work with our partners at DoD to schedule and promote TEAMS events.

Costs for delivering the TEAMS workshops are not tracked separately; however, overall, we estimate the annual program costs are approximately \$125,000.

Q #37: Secretary Jacobs, Secretary Vazirani, and Secretary Rodriguez, do existing programs designed to support military spouse employment have a specific hiring portal for matching military spouses with healthcare specialties in the area they live in or plan to move to? Specifically, does the Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP), Veteran and Military Spouse Talent Engagement Program (VMSTEP) or the Military Spouse Education and Career Opportunities (SECO) have existing mechanisms for supporting military spouses seeking healthcare posts across the nation?

A: VETS defers to the Departments of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) for their response to this question, as the programs are under their purview.

Senator Mazie K. Hirono
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee/Senate Armed Services Committee
Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service
October 18, 2023

1. "Success" during and after the transition can be dependent on the installation where a servicemember transitions.

- a. Has GAO analyzed transition outcomes by installation?
- b. If so, in GAO's research indicating a high percentage of personnel get TAP attendance waived by their command, were there certain installations that stood out as having a notably high or notably low number of servicemembers who had their participation waived?

1a. GAO has not analyzed transition outcomes by installation.

1b. GAO has not analyzed the extent to which waivers were granted by installation.

**Senate Armed Services Committee
Questions for the Record—Senator Roger Wicker
Hearing on 10/18/23, #23-67**

“To receive testimony on Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service”

**Witnesses: Jacobs, Vazirani, Rodriguez, Boerstler, Sawyer, Gallucci, Porter, O’Neil,
DeGroat**

22. Mr. Sawyer, a Government Accountability Office report on the Transition Assistance Program from December 2022 stated that as of publication, the majority of transitioning service members were not starting TAP 365 days prior to separation. The report notes some limitations in the Department’s data collection and analysis. What are GAO’s recommended improvements to the Department’s data collection and analysis?

In our December 2022 report, we recommended that DOD should more fully analyze its existing data on 2-day class attendance and timeliness to develop corrective action plans and to hold accountable those responsible for implementing such plans. This, in turn, could improve servicemembers’ ability to benefit from the full range of transition resources available to them before separating or retiring from the military. Additional information on how DOD can better analyze its existing data is available in our response to question 23, below.

We did not make any recommendations related to DOD’s data collection in our December 2022 report. However, we concluded that soliciting feedback from Transition Assistance Program (TAP) stakeholders could yield valuable insights that could enhance DOD’s data collection. Specifically, we concluded that until the new TAP information technology platform becomes operational—which DOD officials anticipated would occur in 2024—DOD has the opportunity to solicit input from TAP stakeholders on what performance information would be most useful to inform decision making. Such stakeholders could include officials from the service branches, installations, and TAP performance Management Work Group.

23. Mr. Sawyer, how can the Department better use their existing data?

We recommended that DOD and its service branches should better leverage their existing data on 2-day class attendance and the timeliness of TAP participation to understand and improve results. DOD’s TAP data on 2-day class attendance include information on servicemembers’ characteristics, such as their years of service, rank, or the unit and installation to which they are assigned. DOD could analyze these data to determine whether tier 3 servicemembers who do not attend a 2-day class share common characteristics. This, in turn, could help DOD better understand which tier 3 servicemembers are at greatest risk of not attending a 2-day class as required and to develop and implement corrective action plans accordingly.

Similarly, DOD collects data that could help officials understand why certain servicemembers start TAP late and leverage this information to improve performance. For example, DOD collects data on the reason certain servicemembers attended pre-separation counseling less than 1-year before their anticipated separation or retirement date but has not systematically analyzed these data, according to DOD TAP policy officials. The TAP data system also documents why servicemembers left the military, including whether they separated or retired voluntarily or left due to a medical condition. It also documents servicemembers’ years in service, the unit and installation where they were stationed, and whether they left military service in good standing or for disciplinary reasons. DOD officials should analyze these data to identify the root causes underlying timeliness performance metrics and to develop and implement corrective action plans.

Senator Mazie Hirono
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee/Senate Armed Services Committee
Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service
October 18, 2023

Questions for Dr. Arthur DeGroat (Office of Military and Veterans Affairs, Kansas State University)

1. In both the staff roundtable and during the hearing, you spoke to the impact of placing all transition-related information and decisions at the end of one's service.
 - a. Since we can't legislate the attitudes that have led us to feel "retention" and "transition" are at odds, are there legislative steps you feel could be taken to reorient culture within the military to 1) better facilitate servicemembers' post-separation professional goals and 2) make the transition a more normal part of a servicemember's life?

Responses were unavailable at the time of publication. Contact U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for additional information.
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Statements for the Record

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Statement
of
Kandi Tillman
Managing Co-Founder, 50strong
submitted to the
U.S. Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs & Armed Services
for the October 18, 2023 Joint Hearing
“Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service”
Submitted October 16, 2023

Introduction

**“We want to hire more transitioning military & veterans nationwide.
But we have trouble reaching them.
How do we connect efficiently & at-scale to share our pathways for them to consider
when they are ready?”**

The above was first shared with me in 2018 by a veteran at a Fortune 500 employer that is well-known in the military community. As the spouse of an Army veteran who had a difficult transition due to a lack of strong employment pathways, it was the genesis of 50strong in 2020.

50strong is small social impact company that enables employers in their efforts to open military-ready pathways and drives EASY, CASUAL, VIRTUAL connections between military-affiliated jobseekers and military-seeking employers. In 2023, our funding has come exclusively from 11 large employer partners by which 50strong also provides NO-FEE engagement tools to 175+ employers (and/or DoD-Authorized SkillBridge Partners) and 60+ Higher Education Partners to support their efforts toward strong veteran employment outcomes.

Note: this document is submitted as a personal statement only and does not represent the views of any 50strong sponsor or partner.

Key Insights & Recommendations

The following insights & recommendations are offered to support the committees' understanding of the current landscape.

INSIGHT 1 of 4**While government agencies and Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) are important stakeholders in military transition, employers are equally important stakeholders throughout the Military Lifecycle.**

Employment is a pivotal component of a successful transition, especially given that only 24% of 2021 active duty separations were due to planned retirement¹. Employment relies on employers. However, as evidenced at various roundtables and congressional hearings, there seems to be an idea that **direct employer engagement** is unnecessary, or even considered to be adversarial and discouraged. The common narrative around veteran employment has long-been that veterans “need help” to achieve successful post military employment, and that VSOs are commonly understood to be the essential enablers to providing this “needed assistance”. While the vast VSO supportive ecosystem serves an important role, VSOs are often unable to accurately represent the views, considerations, and needs of employers as essential stakeholders to successful post military employment outcomes. Direct engagement with industry representatives is important to ensuring that hiring managers, human resources leaders, and employment specialists are knowledgeable in current programs and requirements around military community employment. The important reality is that successful military transitions require as much enablement for civilian employers as they do for individual service members. Further, because our national efforts have been focused on enabling the individual via various VSOs without as much emphasis on the importance of the HOW for employers that seek to engage in military employment, navigating the 40,000 VSOs in the ecosystem² is as complicated for employers as it is for individual jobseekers.

If we accept that post military success can be defined by the integration of the veteran to the society where they live, then a key measurement of effectiveness may be assumed to be the level to which transition services have prepared the veteran to successfully function in a manner in which a non-veteran would, reducing the requirement for dedicated services or pathways. A veteran who looks, feels, and acts like a successful non-veteran in the labor force is a success story, but often our programs focus on enduring separation from the society we wish them to integrate to. Employers are uniquely positioned to offer this ongoing civilian exposure throughout the Military Lifecycle of an individual.

Quite simply, if employers are not enabled to be part of the discussion, processes, or policies, any systems developed may inherently favor a government or nonprofit intermediary involved in all employment activities - a situation unlike that for any other part of the labor force.

And, unlike the Fortune 500 employer mentioned in this document’s introduction, it is understandable that a smaller employer would have an even more complex experience in their efforts to support the military community. This is important given that there are “33.2 million

¹ 2021 DoD Demographics Report, <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2021-demographics-report.pdf>

² Charting the Sea of Goodwill, https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/hero/documents/VeteransPhilanthropy_151207_rev.pdf

small businesses in America, which combined account for 99.9% of all U.S. businesses.”³ It is these small employers that we should call upon to help support strong military transitions for separating service members and to shrink the military-civilian divide throughout an individual’s service.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Ensure that strong, thought-leading employer voices are included for all hearings & roundtables *alongside* government agencies and veteran-serving organizations. They are the organizations with the roles and are also willing to assist veterans in preparing for them.
- Encourage all government agencies to enable **direct employer engagement** to ensure any program changes or iterations are mindful of impacts to employment providers of all sizes.
- Continue to support Department of Labor VET’s Employment Navigation & Partnership Pilot, which includes critical employment referrals to employers nationwide and is “...provided outside of the formal DOL Transition Assistance Program classroom instruction... assist them in securing meaningful and lasting post-separation careers.”⁴
- “Update 10 U.S.C. §1144(d) to specifically include authority (“may”) to engage industry representatives, stipulating that such engagement is guided by Service, DoD, and U.S.C. ethics guidelines as applicable”, previously shared by Chris Thorne via statement for the September 12, 2023 Bicameral Staff roundtable.

INSIGHT 2 of 4

In the last 4 years, SkillBridge has revolutionized *direct employer participation in military transition - vet opportunities remain.* SkillBridge directly enables Military Talent Teams to internally demonstrate to hiring teams the capability of military talent in a way that is aligned to their workforce needs, thus reducing their risk in hiring talent and/or creating pathways that may not have been possible in direct hiring efforts. Once value is demonstrated, employers are eager to open more pathways.

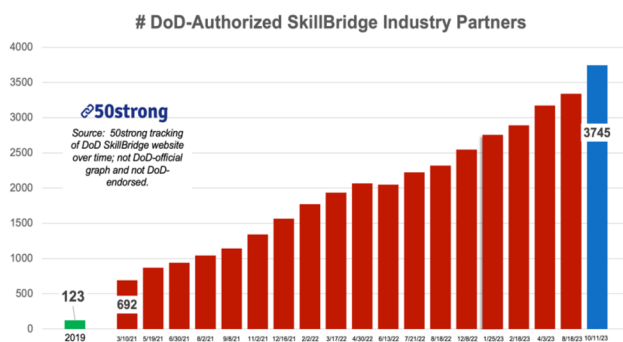
As an example, one of our closest partners, **Lowe’s**, has established a best-practice SkillBridge program that enables fellowship opportunities at any of their locations across the country. Their 12-week program, which begins at the start of each month, is designed to help service members bring their skills and military experience to leadership positions in the civilian sector, regardless of their education level. Last year, 85% of their fellows received an offer for full-time employment. **This effectively means that a service member returning home to Missoula,**

³ U.S. Chamber of Commerce, <https://www.uschamber.com/small-business/state-of-small-business-now>

⁴ Department of Labor VETS, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap/employment-navigator-partnership>

Montana or Yuma, Arizona after serving a 4-year enlistment has a pathway to a bright future in their own community on Day 1 of their post-Active Duty service.⁵

Since 2019, the number of Authorized Partners has grown +30x (via 50strong tracking of DoD SkillBridge website data over time, not DoD-provided or DoD-sponsored data or chart), which demonstrates industry's eagerness & momentum overall; as with any rapidly growing program, it is critical to ensure expansion while maintaining meaningful outcomes via program guidelines and best practice sharing.



“SkillBridge and veteran hiring initiatives are an integral part of our efforts to support the military community... Since the inception of the program in 2020, John Deere has hosted over 270 active-duty service members in SkillBridge internships and has directly hired an additional 300 veterans. The program continues to gain great momentum, highlighted by a 40% year-over-year increase in monthly hire rates at our dealership locations nationwide.”

David Ottavianelli, Director of Workforce and Community Development
John Deere

“In the past 4 years Cushman & Wakefield has hosted over 100 transitioning service members through Skillbridge programs, and hired in excess of 1500 veterans directly to full time roles. Our efforts here aren't simply nice to have programs as they're business imperative in obtaining the best talent the workforce has to offer.”

Matt Disher, Executive Director of Military & Veteran Programs
Cushman & Wakefield

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Update the DoD Instruction. DoDI 1322.29 “Job Training, Employment Skills Training, Apprenticeships, and Internships (JTEST-AI) for Eligible Service Members” given the drastic expansion since it was authorized in 2014.
- Examine the goal of SkillBridge and determine how it applies to training-only partners vs employer partners with direct internship pathways. The current DoDI stipulates “Authorized participation by Service members in JTEST-AI is conditioned on the *high probability of post-service employment with any employer...*”
- Establish a centralized DoD-level tracking & reporting system for all SkillBridge participation applications by service members, approvals to participate by commands, employment outcomes by SkillBridge partners - that are collected by service, rank & separating installation. These metrics & their subsequent sharing are critical as this data will drive accountability among all stakeholders.
- Standardize and modernize service member application processes across all services to avoid unnecessary paperwork and service member application inefficiencies as well as service-specific or installation-specific processes. Note: US Air Force’s AFVEC system can serve as a solid baseline for other services.

INSIGHT 3 of 4**Proposed legislation is underway in both the House and Senate that could have significant negative implications to current momentum of key military transition programs.**

On October 18, the House Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs will hold a legislative hearing that includes review of H.R. 3738 which seems to involve moving administration of “The Transition Assistance Program under section 1144 of title 10.” to the Department of Veterans Affairs. S. 291 includes similar language.

Today, TAP as “...provided under [10 U.S.C. 1144](#), is a cooperative interagency effort among the Department of Labor, and the Departments of Defense, Education, Homeland Security and Veterans Affairs, the Small Business Administration and the Office of Personnel Management.”⁶ The DOL-led effort recognizes that post military employment (direct, or post higher education) is the one common area of focus that is near universal for most every transitioning military family. The TAP process is further enabled by subject matter expertise from the various Agencies and Departments which support a myriad of other potential needs and programs. This construct has proven effective by ensuring that expertise as provided is aligned to Department mission and supported by Department resources which broadly support the U.S. population aligned to that need.

⁶ Department of Labor, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap>

I applaud the leadership efforts of Assistant Secretary Rodriguez to host employer roundtable discussions that have proven critical to ongoing enablement for industry partners. It is important to note that 2019 opinion letters from Department of Labor⁷ were pivotal to employer enablement and expansion of SkillBridge opportunities.

I also am optimistic about the recent move of SkillBridge facilitation to DoD's Military-Transition Civilian Office (MTCO) to align it more appropriately with overall TAP activities and I applaud their early efforts to host Industry Partner roundtable conversations to ensure partner input as the team crafts its next phases to support program maturation.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Given the importance of civilian employment in military transition, ensure that strong, thought-leading employer voices are included for conversations to discuss any proposed legislation that may impact delivery of employment-related transition program administration.
- Continue to support Department of Labor VET's efforts such as Employment Navigation & Partnership Pilot, which includes critical employment referrals to employers nationwide and is "...provided outside of the formal DOL Transition Assistance Program classroom instruction... assist them in securing meaningful and lasting post-separation careers."⁸
- Continue to support DoD MTCO's efforts to update policies, build processes and reporting enablement for proper maturation of SkillBridge facilitation.

INSIGHT 4 of 4

"...half of veterans say they enrolled in school after they left the military..."⁹ which highlights an *extended military transition to civilian employment - yet there is no at-scale "translation" support of their military skills when they transition to the workforce.* Given that 53% of service members said they enter the military for the education benefits¹⁰, 90% of student veterans are enlisted ranks¹¹, and 86% said career/job was WHY they pursue Higher Education¹², we can only fulfill our national promise to a strong post-military future if employment is an aligned outcome (which also directly impacts future DoD recruiting efforts).

⁷ Department of Labor, <https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/whd/whd20191108>

⁸ Department of Labor VETS, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap/employment-navigator-partnership>

⁹ Pew Research 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/09/10/the-transition-to-post-military-employment/>

¹⁰ Institute for Veteran & Military Families, <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/student-veterans-a-valuable-asset-to-higher-education/>

¹¹ Student Veterans of America annual report 2020, <https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/SVA-2020-Annual-Report.pdf>

¹² Institute for Veteran & Military Families, <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/student-veterans-a-valuable-asset-to-higher-education/>

Given the annual \$10.6 billion taxpayer investment spent on Education Benefits¹³ with the intent of education benefits being, as stated in the 2021 VA Report: "...to enhance the Nation's competitiveness through the development of a more highly educated and more productive workforce"¹⁴, we must find new ways to drive Education Partner & Industry Partner collaboration toward employment outcomes beyond simply adding more educational programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Establish a centralized tracking of employment outcomes for any school accepting Post 9/11 GI Bill payments.
- Ensure TAP Education tracks are inclusive of employers vs focusing on education partners that may only have an enrollment-focused intent.
- Encourage all Education partners that receive Post 9/11 GI Bill payments to ensure prioritization of career preparation that is robust, in collaboration with industry and clearly communicated to students.
- Continue to strengthen the relationship with employers and higher education through formal connection activities and sharing of opportunities.

Impact Since Launching 50strong

We began 50strong in August 2020 to provide EASY, CASUAL, VIRTUAL connects between military-affiliated jobseekers to military-seeking employers. It is important to note that no taxpayer funds are used. So far in 2023:

- We have provided ~30,000 employment referrals for military-affiliated jobseekers to eleven employer sponsors and countless untracked referrals to 175+ other participating employers.
- 38% of those registering for 50strong industry-led career prep & employment events are E1-E5. This opting-in by Junior Enlisted service members and veterans is meaningful given that "Veterans from the middle-enlisted paygrades (E5–E6), senior enlisted (E7–E9), and junior officer (O1–O3) paygrades were significantly more likely to use job placement programs than junior enlisted paygrades (E1–E4)."¹⁵
- 50strong's efforts are organically highlighted by many TAP facilitators as a tool for early/often industry-led career prep & opportunity exposure for transitioning service members.

¹³ FY2021 Annual Benefits Report – VA Education https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/docs/2021_education.pdf; <https://www.dodmou.com/TADECIDE>

¹⁴ FY2021 Annual Benefits Report – VA Education https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/docs/2021_education.pdf

¹⁵ Institute for Veteran & Military Families, https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/2021_USAA_Brief1_finalDIGITAL_12.16.21_V2-FINAL-ua.pdf

- We built and launched 50strong SkillBridgeConnect, offering partner-driven, real-time updates for CITY-LEVEL opportunity sharing for ANY DoD-authorized SkillBridge partner (that wishes to collaborate) at NO FEE. *There are currently ~6000 opportunities publicly available for service members to review with ~1500 updates in the past two weeks.*¹⁶
- Recent examples of 50strong EmployerConnect virtual learning & networking events as well as feedback from military-affiliated jobseeker attendees are included below.



¹⁶ 50strong, <https://www.50-strong.us/skillbridge listings>

“Such an amazing event that's filled with QUALITY content, partners and program information. The doors of opportunity just flung wide open!”

“This is an amazing concept. The fact that I was previously pigeon-holing myself to only about 10 different companies let's me know that there are many more opportunities than I originally thought.”

“It was my first event and I was really impressed. I didn't know what to expect, but I'm glad I stayed up way past my bedtime to attend (I'm in Germany).”

“This was such an amazing opportunity, heard from so many amazing companies operating in different sectors. Was able to network with people that I may have not met before, a lessons learned moment. Also will be busy reaching out to these military recruitment teams.”

“Great Meeting...the presenters gave us an amazing plethora of information on how to leverage the programs, no matter how you get there and communication and dedication to your goal is key to getting hired.”

“Very helpful meeting to help explain routes at several companies seeking to provide employment opportunities for military affiliates. Thank You!”

“This was the best Veteran Assistance event I have attended. I am confident I will be able to obtain a position with a company from today's event.”

“Very appreciative of the efforts the 50strong Team takes to make this a qualitative and professionally polished forum to engage w/ renown and well-respected civilian organizations.”



STATEMENT OF ANDREW SANDOE
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, HIRE HEROES USA

BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
AND
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

WITH RESPECT TO

"Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service"
October 18, 2023

Introduction

Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, and Members of the Committees, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for the record for this important joint hearing about improving the military to civilian transition.

Hire Heroes USA is the preeminent nonprofit organization providing employment services to transitioning servicemembers, veterans, and military spouses across the United States. Founded in 2005, Hire Heroes USA has helped secure employment for more than 87,000 unique veterans and military spouses to date. We provide services, free of charge, to over 20,000 transitioning service members (TSMs), veterans, and military spouses annually, helping them navigate the challenging transition process and thrive in the civilian workforce.

Based in Alpharetta, Georgia, Hire Heroes USA boasts a nationwide presence, with four offices strategically located across the country. We offer comprehensive employment services in all 50 states. Complementing our commitment to empowering job seekers, we offer a full suite of recruiting and talent solutions to our extensive network of corporate partners. Our services include Employer Spotlights for showcasing company culture, Virtual Career Fairs for convenient online job connections, a Job Board with 30,000+ job opportunities, and Target Email Campaigns for tailored job matching. Additionally, our Direct Placement Program ensures a customized and thorough talent acquisition process to align candidates with the needs and values of our partners. Additionally, we take pride in our collaboration with over 100 organizations that help our clients overcome other barriers, such as housing insecurity or access to benefits.

Our organizational impact is rigorously examined through data-driven research, culminating in the annual publication of our Hire Heroes Report,¹ which is utilized by decision makers, policy makers, and shared throughout the ecosystem to inform partners, employers, and other parties in

¹ Hire Heroes USA (2022). "2021 Hire Heroes Report." <https://www.hireheroesusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2021-Hire-Heroes-Report.pdf>



the Veteran Service Organization space. Our client population and data access provide us with unique insights into the state of the transition process and ways we can better support veteran employment and economic opportunity. It is my pleasure to share some of these insights with the committees and offer our perspective on policy approaches that would support improved employment outcomes during the military to civilian transition.

Current Transition Challenges and the State of Veterans' Employment

Approximately 200,000 servicemembers transition to civilian life annually. Research demonstrates that military service often translates to positive employment and economic outcomes, with veterans having lower unemployment rates, higher median incomes, and higher labor force participation rates than non-veterans.²

While these outcomes represent significant progress in our nation's commitment to supporting veterans, there is more work to be done. Approximately 55% of recently transitioned veterans report finding it difficult to translate their military experience to civilian job requirements and only about a third had civilian employment lined up prior to transition.^{3, 4} In addition, an alarming 61% of veterans are considered underemployed, defined as having education, experience, or skills beyond the requirements of their current position.⁵

These post-service outcomes are not uniform across all groups of veterans. Historically, veterans of color, female veterans, and other underserved members of the veteran community have faced institutional barriers and systemic inequities that impede their ability to successfully navigate civilian life after separating from the military. The Call of Duty Endowment (CODE) recently reported that enlisted veterans of color and women veterans struggle more, on average, with the transition and are most in need of high-quality employment services or outreach. CODE⁶ found that 22% of women veterans of color and 10% of male veterans of color are still unemployed and searching for work two and a half years after their military service is complete.

The federal Transition Assistance Program (TAP) – a joint initiative led by the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and other federal agencies – has played an integral part in gradually improving employment and various other outcomes for TSMs, veterans, and military spouses. However, TAP has faced no shortage of challenges in its more than 20-year history, many of which still remain and have been long recognized by Congress and the military and veteran community at large.

² U.S. Census Bureau. "2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates." <https://data.census.gov/>

³ Call of Duty Endowment (2022). "Lessons Learned for the Future of Veteran Employment." https://www.callofduty.com/cdn/code/PD_CODE_WP_2022_r6.pdf

⁴ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Transition and Economic Development (2019). "Cross-Sectional Survey Report." <https://benefits.va.gov/TRANSITION/docs/pstap-assessment.pdf>

⁵ Penn State University. "The Veterans Metrics Initiative." <https://veteranetwork.psu.edu/projects/tvmi-study/>

⁶ Call of Duty Endowment. (2022, May). Lessons Learned for the Future of Veteran Employment. Retrieved from https://www.callofduty.com/cdn/code/PD_CODE_WP_2022_r6.pdf



A recent GAO report⁷ reveals some concerning findings about TAP including a lack of timely completion of pre-separation counseling requirements and inadequate attendance at career-track classes for servicemembers most at risk. These challenges have been widely reported and acknowledged by defense and veteran leaders, and the Department of Defense must take corrective action soon to ensure service members are no longer falling behind in their transition process.

Taking a broader perspective, it's evident that the current structure of the federal transition program is not optimal. Based on the feedback we receive from most of our clients, and my personal experience transitioning out of the Marine Corps, we know that many perceive the TAP requirements as a mere box-checking exercise without enough meaningful interaction and guidance. Barely half of attendees assess that TAP courses improved their confidence or knowledge for transition planning, with varied satisfaction across ranks, race, and which TAP course they attended.⁸ In addition, the volume of information compressed into a three-day program can often be overwhelming.

Toward a More Individualized Federal Transition Process

Behind Hire Heroes USA's success is our highly individualized approach, where employment services are tailored to the unique needs of each client. Our industry-leading employment model is centered around a team of trained Transition Specialists who work one-on-one with their assigned TSM, veteran, or military spouse client from the start to finish of their employment journey. Our tailored support approach not only results in superior employment outcomes for veterans and military spouses, but it also leads to high levels of client satisfaction and earnings that surpass the national average for veterans by over 30%.⁹

For a variety of reasons, TAP is not a fully individualized process. The sheer volume of TSMs each year coupled with DoD resource constraints make a fully one-on-one model exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, for the government to implement. Perhaps the most individualized step occurs pre-TAP when service members are assigned into tiers based on their preparedness for transition. From there, servicemembers, according to their assigned tier, either complete the standard three days of instruction, are encouraged to pursue some additional courses, or must complete an additional two-day career track.

There are ways to further personalize the TAP process without placing excessive administrative burden on federal agencies. For example, Congress should consider legislative proposals to expand the set of factors considered during tier assignment, ensuring the process is more

⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office (2022). "Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Can Better Leverage Performance Information to Improve Participation in Counseling Pathways." <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-104538>

⁸ Department of Veterans' Affairs (2021). "2020 Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Survey Report." <https://benefits.va.gov/TRANSITION/docs/2020-PSTAP.pdf>

⁹ Hire Heroes USA (2023). "2022 Annual Report." https://www.hireheroesusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Hire-Heroes_Annual-Report-Digital-2022-V3.pdf



accurate and that those least prepared for their transition are receiving additional instruction. Technology modernization also offers a pathway toward improved, more customized service delivery. Integrating modern digital platforms into TAP could ensure TSMs are directed to the best fit resources that address their unique needs, circumstances, and goals.

Engaging the Private Sector to Achieve Better Transition Outcomes

While TAP and other federal programs have played a critical role in gradually improving outcomes after service, we believe the future of the transition process must include increased opportunities for public-private partnership and further empower veteran service organizations to carry out their missions.

Our federally-supported work at Hire Heroes USA is a prime example of this approach. Hire Heroes USA was one of the original partners for the U.S. Department of Labor Employment Navigator & Partnership Pilot (ENPP) program. ENPP provides one-on-one career assistance to transitioning servicemembers and their spouses at select military installations. Currently provided outside of the formal Transition Assistance Program (TAP) classroom instruction, ENPP assists participants in securing meaningful and lasting post-separation careers.¹⁰

Non-government partners, including our organization and more than 45 others, are a critical component of ENPP's success, accepting referrals from the agency and providing a wide range of employment, training, and wraparound services in support of DOL VETS' mission. Since 2021, Hire Heroes USA has supported nearly 2,000 client referrals from the program, providing career coaching, employer connections, resume support, and more. DOL is currently conducting a full assessment of the ENPP program, which includes a rigorous implementation and outcomes evaluation. Based on our experience and recent updates received from DOL VETS, Hire Heroes USA anticipates highly successful results of this program and recommends a significant expansion of this program, beyond the pilot phase, to reach more installations nationwide and benefit thousands of additional servicemembers and spouses.

In 2022, Hire Heroes USA was also awarded a grant through the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP), a long-standing DOL VETS program with widespread bipartisan support and a record of success that has allowed it to continue since 1987. Like other HVRP recipients, we have witnessed remarkable success stories implementing this program and have made significant progress in addressing veteran homelessness. Grant programs such as this that complement government transition resources and leverage the expertise of VSOs are worthwhile federal investments, generating returns not only through increased employment but a host of related outcomes.

More recently, Hire Heroes USA entered into a referral agreement with the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs, Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E) office. Under the agreement, VR&E case managers refer veterans most in need of individualized employment services to us

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Labor. "Employment Navigator & Partnership Pilot (ENPP)." <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap/employment-navigator-partnership>



for added assistance, and we work diligently with the VA system to ensure a smooth client handover. We encourage Congress to identify opportunities where similar referral processes can be implemented or expanded as part of TAP. As funding allows, contracts or grants to service providers, including community-based organizations, would promote further participation. These collaborations are critical to ensuring service members have access to all the resources they need and would greatly facilitate the transition to civilian life.

Conclusion

This concludes my statement. Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, and Members of the Committees, I once again thank you on behalf of Hire Heroes USA for your leadership on this important topic and for allowing us the opportunity to submit our perspective on employment issues facing the thousands of the transitioning military members, veterans, and military spouses we serve. We welcome any questions you may have in relation to this testimony, which can be directed to Ms. Cheryl Ewell, Director of Development, at cewell@hireheroesusa.org.



STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

of the

MILITARY OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

**MILITARY TO CIVILIAN TRANSITION: Ensuring Success After
Service Hearing**

1st SESSION of the 118th CONGRESS

before the

SENATE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE and

SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

October 18, 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MOAA thanks the members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and Senate Armed Services Committee for their dedicated focus on supporting servicemembers, their families, and veterans. The committees have worked hard to ensure our servicemembers can transition out of uniform and into their communities effectively, and we are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this process.

TO PREPARE CURRENT SERVICEMEMBERS AND THEIR FAMILIES, MOAA RECOMMENDS:

- Develop a leader-specific TAP training that allows future command teams to gain insights into the challenges faced by separating servicemembers.
- Require DoD to report reasons for servicemembers not starting TAP one year from separation, and to provide remedies until this standard is being met.
- Create a requirement for an abridged Reserve Component TAP class.
- Track military spouse participation in TAP courses, both in person and online, to ensure effective outreach to spouses.
- Develop a robust marketing plan to promote awareness of existing transition assistance resources available to spouses.

TO PROVIDE A SMOOTH DEPARTURE FROM SERVICE, MOAA RECOMMENDS:

- Pass the TAP Promotion Act (H.R. 3933/S. 2888).
- Pass the Major Richard Star Act (H.R. 1282/S. 344).

MOAA is committed to working with Congress, TAP partners, and all stakeholder groups to monitor and assist in meeting the needs of servicemembers, families, veterans, caregivers, and survivors. We hope to help ensure the next stage of their lives is a successful one.

INTRODUCTION

SENATORS TESTER, REED, MORAN, AND WICKER, on behalf of the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) and our over 362,000 members, thank you for the opportunity to share our views with the Senate Armed Services Committee and Veterans' Affairs Committee.

While MOAA is an organization of officers, we are not an association about officers. Our association recognizes and carries out our responsibility as officers to support the entire uniformed services community, enlisted and officer, across all eight branches of uniformed service. We advocate for a world-class pay and benefits package for those in uniform, retirees, veterans, their families, and survivors – because they have earned it and because it is our sacred duty to match the open-ended commitment of sacrifice made by servicemembers when they don the uniform with our equal commitment to maintain the benefits they earn. In so doing, we also recognize and support the inextricable link between ensuring the quality of service and quality of life of servicemembers and their families with the need to provide for our nation's national security through a strong all-volunteer force (AVF).

Critical to maintaining the AVF is ensuring a servicemember can have a fulfilling next chapter in their return to civilian life. If we cannot support them post-service, they are unlikely to encourage others to follow in their footsteps.

It is for this reason, in part, that supporting servicemembers during and after their transition has been a longstanding part of MOAA's mission. We support servicemembers as they work to find their next careers through our networking and hiring events, and we offer education about their service-earned benefits. We regularly deliver transition-focused webinars, career workshops, and Military Executive Transition seminars geared toward senior and junior personnel. We also offer résumé reviews, career consultations, coaching sessions, LinkedIn profile reviews, interview prep, and salary and benefits negotiation classes.

Providing these transition services allows MOAA a unique perspective from which to assess the TAP. Specifically, MOAA organized recommendations along two lines of effort to build on recent TAP improvements:

- Prepare Current Servicemembers and Their Families to Transition Out of Uniform.
- Provide a Smooth Departure from Service.

We greatly appreciate the opportunity to share recommendations on how to improve the transition assistance program for our community.

PREPARING TO TRANSITION OUT

The Fiscal Year 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) took positive steps to reform the military-to-civilian transition process¹. With these programs fully implemented and lessons learned from these processes, Congress should begin work to increase chain of command understanding of TAP demands, ensure TAP requirements are enforced, ensure command support for the SkillBridge program, and encourage and support spouse involvement.

INCREASE CHAIN OF COMMAND UNDERSTANDING OF TAP DEMANDS

Background: Although the services have made TAP improvements, DoD personnel policy reform is required to ensure chains of command understand and acknowledge the time requirements and demands of TAP on transitioning subordinates.

Challenges/Concerns:

The average millennial (25-40) changes jobs every 2.75 years². By the end of a four-year contract, when many servicemembers will take on the job-hunting process for the first time, a typical civilian has gone through it twice. This is on top of unique demands faced by those transitioning out of the military, including separation physicals, veterans' disability claims, relocation to a new area, and completion of the military retirement process, in some cases.

The magnitude of the change is not clearly understood by those whose professional life has been spent in uniform. Without the firsthand experience of attending TAP, our command teams are not armed with the knowledge to support their subordinates.

Recommendations:

To "lead by example," commanders and their senior enlisted advisers must have a more in-depth understanding of the time and commitment required for a successful transition to civilian life. Battalion-level, and equivalent formations, leadership teams should be required to complete TAP-specific training designed to help change the culture and attitude toward the transition process.

This policy change would ensure these critical leaders have firsthand knowledge of the extensive time requirements and resources available to successfully transition from service to a civilian

¹ <https://www.congress.gov/bills/115/congress/house-bills/5515/text/enr>

² <https://money.yahoo.com/millennials-or-get-z-who-is-doing-the-most-job-hopping-112733374.html>

career. Leaders with perspective on the amount of dedicated time required to conduct TAP, medical appointments, administrative appointments, and fellowships can better counsel subordinates, make better-informed personnel decisions to support operations, and protect these critical transition processes against intrusion from other priorities. Servicemembers will remember how they were treated as they leave uniform; this will affect whether they recommend military service to others.

SERVICEMEMBER TIMELINES

Background: The FY 2019 NDAA requirement for servicemembers to start TAP one year out from separation (Sec. 552) is in the best interest of the servicemember and the services.

By starting early, a servicemember has more flexibility to fulfill the separation requirements, participate in additional classes that may lead to new opportunities, file a VA claim early through the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program, and explore programs like SkillBridge.

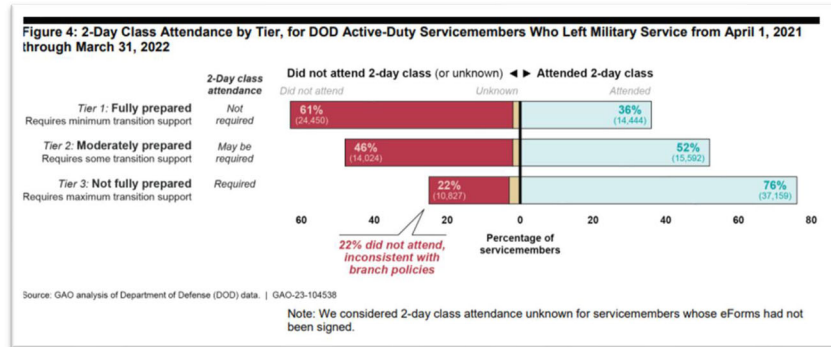
MOAA recognizes the tension faced by commanders looking to accomplish the mission while supporting servicemember transition. As we enter the second year of a difficult recruiting environment, these challenges will become more problematic for a servicemember going through TAP and for commanders who may not have a backfill due to the recruit shortage.

Adhering to these timelines not only supports the servicemember's successful transition, but it also breaks up any absences and allows units to better plan to avoid shortages and ensure the mission is not compromised.

Challenges/Concerns: GAO data shows 70% of servicemembers are not meeting the prescribed deadlines to begin the TAP process³. According to their report, servicemembers start late due to "unit mission requirements, unit deployments, servicemembers' uncertainty about their futures, and lack of awareness of TAP's requirements among both servicemembers and commanders."

Additionally, a significant portion of servicemembers do not attend the two-day TAP classes. MOAA believes all servicemembers should participate in these classes to understand benefits and explore opportunities after serving. The rate of waivers for these classes is too high to guarantee career transition success after military service.

³ <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-104538>



The intent behind the two-day classes was not to reduce the requirements for TAP, but to allow servicemembers to have more time to focus on their particular needs. The current trends are concerning and require specific leadership focus to increase class attendance.

Finally, MOAA recognizes Reserve Component (RC) servicemembers are in a much different situation than those leaving active duty. Many of the current requirements are unnecessary for transitioning RC members, who would benefit from training focused on their unique needs. Similar to the active component, a tiered system could be created that provides the essential information for those returning to their pre-deployment jobs.

Recommendations:

- Require DoD to report reasons for servicemembers not starting TAP one year from separation until this standard is being met.
- Create an abridged Reserve Component-specific TAP class with tiers based on servicemember needs. Some portions of the current TAP curriculum are unnecessary for RC servicemembers.

SKILLBRIDGE

Background: The SkillBridge program provides an excellent opportunity for servicemembers to gain a new perspective on their next chapter, explore possible careers, and get a foot in the door with a potential employer.

Challenges/Concerns: MOAA has been fortunate to work with two SkillBridge fellows. Each fellow did an excellent job in their assigned areas; however, the demands of military service were still keenly present throughout the process.

Each needed to miss time with MOAA to take care of VA appointments or fulfill military obligations. As a military and veterans service organization, we understand these demands and the importance of medical evaluations. However, from a SkillBridge provider perspective, accommodating these duties can be challenging when an organization seeks to instill responsibility with a servicemember. Deadlines and taskings usually must flex to accommodate DoD/VA needs. Both fellows went out of their way to ensure their absence was not felt, something other SkillBridge program participants may not understand.

Anecdotally, other servicemembers report they can't get permission from commanders to take advantage of the program due to staffing considerations or mission readiness. Given the potential for the program to offer a smooth transition to a future employer, it should be more readily embraced, communicated to all grades, and see improved access.

Lastly, finding a match between servicemembers and prospective employers via Skillbridge opportunities is confusing, cumbersome, and not easy to navigate. DoD should work with employers to make improvements to better connect servicemembers to positions reflecting their skillsets.

Recommendations:

- SkillBridge is a highly effective program that should be embraced and supported by DoD and service leadership. Command support is critical to ensure unit-level support for servicemembers making use of this opportunity.

SPOUSE INVOLVEMENT WITH TAP

Background: Military spouses are an integral part of the transition process. The Departments of Defense and Labor recognized the importance of preparing spouses for transition to civilian life and have made positive strides towards easing the burden of incorporating spouses in this unique training. Since October 2019, in accordance with DoD Instruction 1332.35, military spouses "are eligible to attend the DOL One-Day and the DOL Employment Track"⁴. Spouses also are eligible for important services and information on topics including job placement counseling,

⁴ <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/133235p.pdf>

survivor benefits, financial education and counseling, transition planning assistance, and VA benefits orientation. Such support is also offered to spouses serving in a caregiver role for their servicemember.

Online TAP offerings are available to military spouses and do not require an ID card to access. These self-paced courses can be taken in any order⁵.

Additionally, in 2019, DoD created the Military Spouse Transition Program (MySTeP), which is offered through Military OneSource and the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities (SECO) program⁶. MySTeP is an online tool that introduces military spouses to programs, resources, benefits, and tools to help them navigate military life with the ultimate goal of preparing for when their servicemember transitions to civilian life. Because the military spouse journey is complex, there are three different focus areas:

- **Stepping In:** Resource for new military spouses with information on how to achieve education and career goals in the military environment, to include building social and professional networks.
- **Stepping Through:** Assistance for spouses throughout their military experience and additional information about topics such as health and well-being, PCS moves, educational opportunities, career advancement, and financial readiness.
- **Stepping Beyond:** Preparing for life after the military, with details on post-military benefits and mental health resources, as well as resources for those transitioning from service with school-aged children or a child with special needs.

With nearly 25 hours of coursework and downloadable participant guides, the Transition Employment Assistance for Military Spouses (TEAMS) is a series of virtual DOL employment workshops⁷. These standalone modules are typically offered once a month and can be taken in any order. Course topics range from “Mastering Resume Essentials” to “Flexible Job Options,” and are ideal for military spouses at any stage of the military journey. In FY 2023, more than 2,000 military spouses participated in TEAMS workshops. Additionally, in July 2023, DOL began providing a Federal Hiring Strategies course in conjunction with Hiring Our Heroes AMPLIFY events. On average, 20-30 spouses participate in this one-hour course each month.

Challenges/Concerns: The programs offered to military spouses to ease the burden of transition are robust; however, there is a lack of data available on usage/completion rates of DoD-led

⁵ <https://www.tapevents.mil/courses>

⁶ <https://myseco.militaryonesource.mil/portal/mystep>

⁷ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap/teams-workshops>

training. Although it is promising that more than 2,000 spouses took advantage of DOL's TEAMS workshops this year, much more must be done to promote these programs to the more than 700,000 members of the active-duty spouse community.

Recommendations:

- Track military spouse participation in TAP courses, both in person and online, to ensure outreach to spouses is effective. Develop a robust marketing plan to promote awareness of existing transition assistance resources available to spouses.
- Ensure continued funding for transition programs designed for military spouses, caregivers, and survivors.

TO HELP PREPARE SERVICEMEMBERS, MOAA RECOMMENDS:

- Develop a leader-specific TAP training that allows future command teams to gain insights into the challenges separating servicemembers will face.
- Require DoD to report reasons for servicemembers not starting TAP one year from separation until this standard is being met.
- Create a requirement for a Reserve Component TAP class.
- Provide information on military spouse participation in TAP courses.
- Develop a robust marketing plan to promote awareness of existing transition assistance resources available to spouses.
- Ensure continued funding for transition programs designed for military spouses, caregivers, and survivors.

PROVIDE A SMOOTH DEPARTURE

A servicemember is not alone when they make the transition to civilian life, and there are important steps we can take to ensure their support system is strong. VA and veterans service organizations (VSOs) play critical roles in ensuring a successful transition; more can be done to help build these relationships. Additionally, we must increase support for some groups of servicemembers who cannot go through the formal TAP process, such as those who suffered injuries in combat. Existing offsets place a heavy financial burden on these members.

MSO/VSO INVOLVEMENT WITH TAP

Background: A strong financial foothold is vital to ensuring servicemembers effectively integrate into civilian life. When servicemembers have service-connected disabilities, ensuring timely payments and health care through the VA is vital. The Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program allows servicemembers to take care of many aspects of their claims prior to taking off the uniform.

Challenges/Concerns: Current legislation makes it optional to include VSOs in the TAP process⁸, but given the importance of BDD claims for servicemembers, this should be mandated.

The VA has independently begun a pilot to include VSOs as part of TAP. MOAA encourages this collaboration and urges Congress to amend existing laws to require VSO involvement.

Recommendation:

- Pass the TAP Promotion Act (H.R. 3933⁹/S. 2888¹⁰).

SUPPORTING COMBAT-WOUNDED VETERANS

Background: There is also a population of heroes who do not receive much of a choice in how they transition from service – they must leave their chosen profession in a hazy cloud, with reduced physical and/or mental capacity, due to a combat-related injury.

When a servicemember is injured in combat and forced to medically retire before reaching 20 years of service, they are medically retired under Chapter 61. It is a complicated process – for most servicemembers, TAP is the first time they learn about concurrent receipt of retired pay and VA disability. Those who served 20 years and receive a VA disability rating at 50% or higher receive both retirement pay and VA disability compensation ... and they often are surprised to learn their peers, with a 40% disability rating or less, have their retirement pay offset by disability pay.

For those injured in combat, and lucky to have 20 or more years of service, they can choose between their retirement pay or Combat-Related Special Compensation (CRSC) during an

⁸ [https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=\(title:10%20section:1142%20edition:prelim\)%20OR%20\(granuleid:USC-prelim-title10-section1142\)&f=treesort&edition=prelim&num=0&jumpTo=true](https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=(title:10%20section:1142%20edition:prelim)%20OR%20(granuleid:USC-prelim-title10-section1142)&f=treesort&edition=prelim&num=0&jumpTo=true)

⁹ <https://www.congress.gov/bills/118th-congress/house-bill/3933>

¹⁰ <https://www.congress.gov/bills/118th-congress/senate-bill/2888>

annual open season¹¹. For those injured in combat before reaching 20 years of service, there is no choice: Some may have more than \$800 a month “offset” from their earned retirement pay.

Challenges/Concerns: These combat-injured (and often seriously disabled) veterans are subject to a cost-saving offset where retirement pay is reduced for every dollar of VA disability received. DoD retired pay is for completed years of service, while VA disability compensation is for lifelong combat injuries. These different payments with different purposes, established by Congress, are nonetheless subject to an unjust statutory offset. To reduce earned retirement pay because of combat disability compensation is an unfair way to reduce DoD’s outlays.

For many of our combat injured, the first time they learn about medical retirement is from a hospital bed. Maj. Richard Star learned he would be medically retired at Walter Reed. An Army reservist and engineer with multiple combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, Star discovered that due to his years of service and level of disability, his military medical retirement pay, for years of service, would be reduced due to the cost-saving offset. He began an enduring advocacy campaign to support our combat injured and, even though he knew he was terminal, was driven to take care of his fellow servicemembers in his ward at Walter Reed.

The Major Richard Star Act has grown in support since he passed away in early 2021. Over two-thirds of lawmakers have co-sponsored S. 344/H.R. 1282, and the MSO/VSO community has rallied in support of the legislation.

The Star Act deserves such vast support in part because of the nature of so many of the combat injuries suffered by servicemembers in Iraq and Afghanistan, often from improvised explosive devices and homemade explosives. These weapons of war caused traumatic brain injury and other significant levels of injury where many servicemembers cannot return to work; they require their spouse or loved one to become their full-time caregiver. Many face a new economic reality – losing your chosen profession and team, with no chance of returning to work, and becoming a financial liability. The unjust retirement offset adds insult to their injury.

An Afghanistan war veteran shed some light on the challenges and financial strain:

“Everything was rolling right along. ... The Lord was blessing us, and things were going well. And then I got hurt in Afghanistan. ...

¹¹ <https://www.dfas.mil/retiredmilitary/disability/comparison/>

The brain injury often makes me tired in the morning and has affected speech and memory. Due to my foot injury, I rely on a therapy dog to help maneuver through home. To add insult to injury, after five deployments, being penalized financially due to the rules of concurrent receipt. After medically retiring in 2019 — seven years before reaching full retirement — now only receive 60% retirement income; 40% of vested retirement pay is offset — reduced dollar for dollar for VA disability because of an old, unjust law.

Another member described their experience as a terrible heartache: His combat injury led to a loss of income, his TBI made a second career impossible, his spouse gave up her profession to become his caregiver, and his family faced all this with two children preparing for college.

The reduced military retirement pay of more than \$800 a month (after 16 years of service) led this member to financial worry, depression, and the thought that he would have to rely on charity to cover his bills. Veterans in this situation face a terrible downward spiral of negative thoughts, including how their lifelong earning potential — and their life — would have been better if they had never served. Veterans under financial strain face greater risk of suicide: If finances get bad, the thought process goes, my family can collect Veterans' Group Life Insurance.

The Star Act would provide concurrent receipt of retired pay and VA disability for those injured in combat and forced to retire before reaching 20 years of service. These combat-injured veterans retire early at no fault of their own. Their DoD retirement pay is calculated by years of service and grade achieved — far less than a full retirement, had they reached the 20-year threshold.

- Retired pay is paid by DoD for completed years of service, and disability compensation is paid by the VA for lifelong injury: Two different payments for two different purposes.
- Reducing retired pay because of a combat-related disability is an injustice.
- No other federal system would reduce retirement pay due to disability.

Recommendation:

Our combat injured were not able to plan for their transition from military service, and we urge Congress to include the Major Richard Star Act (H.R. 1282¹²/S. 344¹³) into the National Defense Authorization Act or pass it as standalone legislation.

¹² <https://www.congress.gov/bills/118/congress/house-bill/1282>

¹³ <https://www.congress.gov/bills/118/congress/senate-bill/344>

TO PROVIDE A SMOOTH TRANSITION, MOAA RECOMMENDS:

- Pass the TAP Promotion Act (H.R. 3933/S. 2888).
- Pass the Major Richard Star Act (H.R. 1282/S. 344).

CONCLUSION

On behalf of our more than 362,000 members, MOAA offers appreciation for the leadership and arduous work of each of the Committee members. MOAA staunchly works to maintain and defend the AVF, and a robust transition process is critical to that maintenance. The separation process and the stability a veteran experiences post-service has direct implications on whether that veteran will recommend service to others. As we address the recruiting crisis, we most closely monitor TAP and ensure it is effective.

We look forward to working with the committees and your teams to better the lives of those who serve this country faithfully. Through our collective resolve, we assure those in the uniformed service and veteran communities that we will Never Stop Serving them.

STATEMENT FOR RECORD

NATIONAL GUARD ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee

Senate Armed Forces Committee

Joint Hearing on Military to Civilian Transition

October 18, 2023

On behalf of the almost 45,000 members of the National Guard Association of the United States and the nearly 450,000 Soldiers and Airmen of the National Guard, we greatly appreciate this opportunity to share our thoughts on today's hearing topics for the record. Thank you to Chairmen Reed and Tester, Ranking Members Wicker and Moran, and all members of the Senate Armed Forces and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees for the support you have all provided to improve services and quality of life for our nation's veterans, Servicemembers, and their families.

Military life most certainly comes with challenges. Freedom is not free and the Servicemember bears that weight. Since 1636, the National Guard has continually left civilian careers and families behind to answer the call of duty in service to our country. As individuals who simultaneously manage civilian and military careers, the challenges the Reserve Component faces upon separation are more nuanced than that of the Active Component. For us, it is often access to those benefits that can be the most challenging.

Over the past several years, the combined efforts of your two committees have produced critical advances that have improved the lives of our National Guardsmen, and we thank each of you for that hard work. From increased USERRA protections to VA home loan eligibility for National Guard Title 32 service, we continue to make progress on multiple fronts towards true parity between the Active and Reserve Components, both currently serving and retired, and we are incredibly grateful for that.

In this statement for record, we would like to highlight three specific issues impacting National Guard veterans today: TRICARE for Reserve Component retirees, GI Bill benefits parity, continued efforts on a component-agnostic DD-214, and lastly the Major Richard Star Act which we have all been pressing for many years.

TRICARE for Reserve Component

Our top readiness issue is healthcare. NGAUS continues to advocate for zero-cost TRICARE for Guard and Reserve members. To answer the call and defend the nation with ready Servicemembers, we must equip them with the means to maintain their health and wellness. In every other aspect, we set our Soldiers and Airmen up for success. We provide all the equipment and training necessary to mold them into the citizen-soldiers that our nation needs. However, when it comes to health, they are left to provide for themselves.

Aside from readiness, continued care throughout the military career makes for healthier veterans in the process. When Servicemembers can address health concerns as they arise, chronic health conditions are less likely to develop. If we build medical readiness today and provide preventive care throughout our Servicemembers' careers, it is likely to reduce medical expenditures when they transition from drilling Guardsman to Veteran. We ask the Senate to reintroduce **S.5142 – Healthcare for Our Troops Act** from the 117th Congress, which was a bipartisan and bicameral effort. This groundbreaking bill will re-create how we provide preventive health care to the National Guard. It will not only provide better health results to our Servicemembers but will prove cost advantageous overall. We also ask for the support of **S.2046 – Dental Care for Our Troops** and encourage it to be included in the FY24 NDAA. Special thanks to Senators Blumenthal and Capito for their efforts in this area.

Additionally, upon completion of their service to our country, retirees should be eligible to purchase affordable TRICARE specifically designed for retired military personnel. Under current

law, Reserve Component personnel who retire before age 60 are only eligible for the costly TRICARE Retired Reserve plans. When the FY 2008 NDAA lowered the retirement age for Reserve Component personnel, they did not reduce the eligibility age for healthcare. This gap in coverage has resulted in early retirees spending the vast majority, if not all, of their pension on TRICARE premiums, which can be as much as \$6,600 per year just for the individual or nearly \$16,000 for a family. This is outrageous and cost prohibitive. We must take better care of our veterans. We ask for your support on **S.1670 – TRICARE Fairness for National Guard and Reserve Retirees Act** and thank Senators Vance and Warren for leading the way on this effort.

GI Bill Parity for Reserve Component

One of the advantages of military service is the opportunity to gain access to education benefits. Once military service is complete, we must give retirees the tools to succeed in the civilian world. Unlike our Active Component peers, a day in the National Guard or Reserve does not always equal one day of service: regular weekend training days and annual training do not count toward education benefits. We ask Congress to reintroduce **S.2644 - The Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act** (GRAD Act), to count all federal missions and training days toward Post 9/11 GI Bill eligibility. We specifically would like to thank Senator Moran and his team for being such champions for the Guard and working tirelessly on this effort.

When we ensure Guardsmen have the same benefits under Post 9/11 GI Bill as their Active Component counterparts, we improve morale and stop the cycle of treating Reserve Component as less than. The GRAD Act would eliminate confusion over which types of duty qualify for federal education benefits. It would finally offer right-sized education benefits for the Guard and provide the most consequential change to the Post 9/11 GI Bill since the program's inception.

Comprehensive Statement of Military Service

Upon retirement, veterans' benefits often require proof of service through a DD-214. Consistently, we see situations where National Guardsmen are denied benefits either from the Department of Veterans Affairs or state agencies because they were not issued adequate documentation recognizing their service. Providing routine and standard documentation for military service will expedite the benefits process and greatly impact Guardsmen and their families.

We greatly appreciate Congress keeping this issue in the forefront. The FY 2020 NDAA required the Secretary of Defense to establish and implement a standard record of service for members of the Reserve Component that summarizes service, to include dates of Active Duty service. We thank Senators Tester and Moran for leading the way on this, as well as all members of these committees for the role they played in pushing this forward. In February 2022, the Pentagon issued DoD Instruction 1336.01 which began the process to develop that standard record of service form. We look forward to the policy implementation by February 2025 and encourage Congress to ask for progress updates along the way.

We also ask that **S.1291 – the Record of Military Service for Members of the Armed Forces Act**, be reintroduced in the 118th Congress. Codifying this policy into law would issue Guardsmen and Reservists DD-214 documentation at regular intervals throughout the Servicemember's career, not just at separation or retirement.

Major Richard Star Act

Last, but certainly not least, we encourage Congress to pass **S.344 – the Major Richard Star Act**, which has more support this year than ever before. Military Service and Veteran Service Organizations have been advocating on this front for years and will continue doing so until it is complete. No Servicemember should receive reduced retirement pay based on a completely

separate disability pay system. To deny retirement pay because of a disability is an injustice. Congress already acknowledged this in 2004 when they granted concurrent receipt for retirees with at least 20 years of service who have a disability rating above 50 percent. Now is the time to also correct that for those below 50 percent disabled and unable to complete 20 years due to service-connected injuries or illnesses.

Conclusion

Thank you for allowing NGAUS to submit this statement for record. The work done here is critical to the well-being of our Servicemembers and the success of our National Guard both while wearing the uniform and when they retire. We look forward to continuing our work together and sincerely appreciate the steadfast leadership from members and their staff in advocating for the men and women of the National Guard.



**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD OF
STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA**

**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
AND
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE**

**HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:
MILITARY TO CIVILIAN TRANSITION, ENSURING SUCCESS
AFTER SERVICE**

October 18, 2023

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studentveterans.org





Chairmen Reed and Tester, Ranking Members Wicker and Moran, and Members of the Committees: Thank you for allowing Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit a statement on the topic of Military to Civilian Transition, Focusing on Success After Service.

Through a dedicated network of campus-based chapters worldwide, SVA aims to inspire yesterday's warriors by connecting today's military-connected students, student veterans, family members, and survivors with a community of dedicated SVA chapter leaders. Every day these passionate leaders advocate for the necessary resources anywhere. This population is pursuing their education while working to provide support through networking and fostering a sense of comradery post-military service to ensure student veterans can effectively connect, expand their skills, and ultimately achieve their greatest potential.

Servicemember Transition and Higher Education

Earning education benefits is a primary motivator to serve for more than 50 percent of those who join the military, with that number having reached a remarkable 75 percent, according to at least one survey.¹ This desire to use military service to advance one's educational and career goals follows servicemembers through their transition and into civilian life. In fact, according to the Department of Labor (DOL), the percentage of transitioning servicemembers that complete the supplemental higher education track of TAP exceeded—by double digits—that of any other track in every year analyzed in the Department's most recent evaluation of the program.² TAP must prioritize higher education in a way that is consistent with servicemembers' overwhelming interest in the pursuit.

SVA testified on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs in May of this year. Our testimony from May is equally relevant to this hearing, so we offer it here as a statement for the record, with minor updates.³

Transition Assistance Program

An effective transition program is invaluable for those separating from service at any stage – an E-4 completing a single enlistment to someone retiring after 20 years of service. However, from our research, both before and after the 2019 reforms, TAP has been utilized more as a bridge from the moment of separation to the moment of employment or enrollment. Across all transition research, however, the recommendation is that transition

¹ *Educational Opportunities Remain a Major Draw for New Military Recruits*, DIVERSE ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION (Aug. 29, 2021), <https://www.diverseeducation.com/military/article/15114180/educational-opportunities-remain-a-major-draw-for-new-military-recruits>; *Chapter 3: Fighting a Decade-Long War*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Oct. 15, 2023), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2011/10/05/chapter-3-fighting-a-decade-long-war/>.

² DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (TAP) IMPACT STUDY REPORT 75 (2023), *available at* https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/TAP/TAP%20Impact%20Study%20Report_508.pdf.

³ *See generally The Transition Assistance Program: Steps to Ensure Success for Servicemembers as they Enter Civilian Life: Hearing Before the H. Comm. on Veterans' Affairs, Subcomm. on Economic Opportunity*, 118th Cong. (written testimony of Dr. Abby Kinch, Chief of Staff, Student Veterans of America) *available at* <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20230517/115740/HHRG-118-VR10-Wstate-KinchA-20230517.pdf>



programs be designed beyond that bridge.⁴⁵⁶⁷⁸ SVA recommends a "highway" approach when considering TAP enhancements. It should carry transitioning servicemembers from a point well before their date of separation to well beyond their point of entry into their civilian lives.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (FY 2019 NDAA) already stipulates that transition services should start no later than one year from the servicemember's separation date. Still, SVA research has found that this is not always the case. After separation, our research indicates support services do not follow the then veteran through the continuation of transition. These primary issues, as well as others, are discussed below.

TAP is intended to be a robust program aiming to provide a successful holistic transition of military personnel and their spouses from military to civilian life. As subject matter experts at the intersection of issues facing veterans and higher education, SVA will focus on the higher education transition portion of the program. Our statement discusses opportunities for earlier intervention, points of interest in delivery, and the insufficient emphasis placed on transition into higher education.

The statute lists those responsible for employment assistance, job training assistance, and other transitional services that constitute TAP. Specifically, it requires the Secretary of Labor, along with the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, to "establish and maintain a program to furnish counseling, assistance in identifying employment and training opportunities, help in obtaining such employment and training, and other related information and services to members of the armed forces..."⁹ Education is an essential component to finding a career for most transitioning servicemembers, as we will demonstrate below.

The improvements made to TAP with the FY 2019 NDAA resulted in improved sentiment amongst servicemembers transitioning into higher education. SVA research prior to 2020 showed most student veterans had a negative or very negative experience with their transition programs, and a small portion had no experience with a transition program. Since the improvements were made, those sentiments have improved. In 2022, respondents indicated an increase in positive experiences with TAP.¹⁰ The comments aligned with positive feedback were primarily focused on the increased information available in the education track.¹¹

⁴ Blackburn, D. (2016). Transitioning from military to civilian life: Examining the final step in a military career. *Canadian Military Journal*, 16(4), 53-61.

⁵ Hallett, R. E., Kezar, A., Perez, R. J., & Kitchen, J. A. (2020). A typology of college transition and support programs: Situating a 2-year comprehensive college transition program within college access. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 64(3), 230-252.

⁶ Kintzle, S., & Castro, C. A. (2018). Examining veteran transition to the workplace through military transition theory. In *Occupational stress and well-being in military contexts* (pp. 117-127). Emerald Publishing Limited.

⁷ Pedlar, D., Thompson, J. M., & Castro, C. A. (2019). Military-to-civilian transition theories and frameworks. In *Military veteran reintegration* (pp. 21-50). Academic Press.

⁸ Zaidi, B., & Morgan, S. P. (2017). The second demographic transition theory: A review and appraisal. *Annual review of sociology*, 43, 473-492.

⁹ 10 U.S.C. § 1144(a).

¹⁰ 2022 SVA Census (in process). On file with authors; 2022 SVA Basic Needs and Wellness Report (in process). On file with authors.

¹¹ See *id.*



About 50 percent of enlistees at the time of enlistment indicate that they intend to use their G.I. Bill benefits after separation,¹² but SVA estimates show that number may be closer to two-thirds. However, sparse data on veterans in higher education makes that determination foggy. Nevertheless, appropriate transition support into higher education is essential for a large portion of the transitioning population, stressing the importance of the education portion of TAP.

The "Education Track" is a "two-day workshop designed to assist servicemembers in identifying the higher education requirements that support their personal career goals."¹³ It "provides guidance on choosing an educational institution, preparing for the application process, and expectations upon attendance..."¹⁴ SVA's research supports this component's mission, in that almost 60 percent of veterans seeking a higher education degree are motivated by career goals and aspirations.¹⁵ Of those, almost 70 percent chose higher education in lieu of an immediate career because they felt they were ill- or under-prepared for employment following military service.¹⁶ Less than half of student veterans' future goals align with their military occupation,¹⁷ which may contribute to this feeling of unpreparedness. This further supports the need for a transition program designed with the lifespan of the veteran in mind.

According to the program itself, "this two-day workshop is divided into the following topic areas: learning the basics, choosing a field of study, selecting an institution, gaining admission, and funding higher education."¹⁸ In our longitudinal study on the decision-making patterns of servicemembers from pre- to post-enlistment, one of the most striking findings is what we refer to as the "lost guidance counselor."¹⁹ As those about to graduate high school and make their way to college, 18-year-olds around the country may spend upwards of four years with a guidance counselor discussing career options and college planning. They choose programs of study, select institutions of higher learning, explore funding sources, and navigate the admissions process. Even conservatively, the better part of a college bound student's junior and senior years are dedicated to regularly scheduled meetings with a guidance counselor on this impactful life transition.

A two-day workshop cannot replace the support experienced by traditional students with guidance counselors transitioning into higher education. Over half of our respondents rated both the on-base education offices and TAP "below average" in providing advising services.²⁰ While on active duty, servicemembers are often not provided adequate guidance on utilizing Tuition Assistance (TA) with transfer in mind, but with the idea that they will earn a degree while serving.²¹ A large portion of the spending on TA goes to three universities (one non-profit

¹² From the House Hearing before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, 112 Congress, "Examining the Re-design of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP)" provided September 20, 2012.

¹³ DoDTAP. Transition Components. DoD Education Track. <https://www.dodtap.mil/dodtap/app/transition/tracks>.

¹⁴ DoD Instruction 1332.35, 5.1a(4), (6)(b).

¹⁵ 2022 SVA Census (in process). On file with authors.

¹⁶ 2022 SVA Census (in process). Question asking respondents why they chose higher education as a transition medium. On file with authors.

¹⁷ 2022 SVA Census (in process). On file with authors.

¹⁸ DoDTAP. Transition Components. DoD Education Track. <https://www.dodtap.mil/dodtap/app/transition/tracks>.

¹⁹ This comes from qualitative findings in response to issues in the decision-making process from the SVA Lifecycle Atlas project. These portions of the study have not been published. On file with author.

²⁰ 2022 SVA Basic Needs and Wellness Report (in process). On file with authors.

²¹ 2022 SVA Basic Needs and Wellness Report (in process). On file with authors.

and two for-profit).²² Transferability of courses from these institutions to the schools that veterans most often select after separation is very low, meaning much of the TA budget is going to credits that cannot be used to earn degrees that are not completed while serving.^{23,24}

With this gap in service, student veterans arrive on college campuses with a deficit in planning that leads to a higher likelihood of program change. Student veterans are almost twice as likely as traditional students to change their major or program of study multiple times.²⁵ Even with the generous funding from the G.I. Bill, student veterans find themselves graduating with student loan debt,^{26,27} partially due to the lack of proper preparation and advising. If proper interventions were started sooner and with more emphasis on education, TA dollars could be more appropriately used to take courses that transfer or that are housed within the destination school. This would reduce the number of program changes made by beneficiaries and allow G.I. Bill funding to be maximized for use with longer STEM degrees, ensuring degree completion, or even supporting graduate school.

Finally, what compounds this “lost guidance counselor” phenomenon more is the fact that almost two-thirds of student veterans are first-generation college students.^{28,29} Not only do these students not have the professional college counseling afforded to high school students, but they also lack familial guidance, which has been proven to support student transition, retention, and success.^{30,31,32} TAP has the opportunity, and in our opinion, obligation, to fill this gap by working with college-bound servicemembers in an expanded capacity, replacing the lost guidance counselor with professional transition services into and through higher education. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) should further leverage the U.S. Department of Education, as part of the TAP interagency partnership, in providing this guidance, along with the nuanced approach not afforded currently.

More holistically, student veterans find that isolation greatly contributed to their transition stress. Much research has been conducted to examine the loss of camaraderie following separation from the military. The shared-

²² Pulkkinen, L. (September 2021). Getting educated while on active duty is getting harder as military rolls back benefits. *The Hechinger Report*.

²³ This statement is only applicable to those who start coursework on TA, do not finish a degree, and then complete a degree at a different university after separation. However, because a vast majority of student veterans attend public, nonprofit universities, the assumption is that this is a common case.

²⁴ This is not to say that TA is a wasted benefit; only ill-advised. TA is a powerful benefit that entices many servicemembers into service and can be leveraged to continue to draw Americans into military service.

²⁵ Unpublished findings from the SVA Lifecycle Atlas project. On file with author.

²⁶ Bhattarai, R., Brees, S., & Oliff, P. (2023). Veterans Borrow for Private and Public Higher Education Despite GI Bill Benefits. Pew Charitable Trusts.

²⁷ According to the Pew study, this debt is largely to cover costs associated with living expenses. Over half of student veterans are married and over half have children. Almost 20 percent are single parents, according to our research.

²⁸ Student Veterans of America uses the U.S. Department of Education definition of “first-generation college students,” or a student who had parents with no postsecondary education experience.

²⁹ This number has been consistent since the implementation of the SVA Census in 2016. See 2016-2020 SVA Census Reports, 2022 Census Report (in progress), held with authors. <https://studentveterans.org/research/sva-census/>.

³⁰ Aruguete, M. S. (2017). Recognizing challenges and predicting success in first-generation university students. *Journal of STEM Education: Innovations and Research*, 18(2).

³¹ Ives, J., & Castillo-Montoya, M. (2020). First-generation college students as academic learners: A systematic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 90(2), 139-178.

³² Mehta, S. S., Newbold, J. J., & O'Rourke, M. A. (2011). Why do first-generation students fail? *College Student Journal*, 45(1), 20-36.



experience and peer-support structure of our chapters is what makes them so enticing to student veterans on college campuses. Despite this, our survey feedback on the transition to higher education shows that a vast majority of student veterans felt TAP did not prepare them for these types of social and psychological struggles associated with their separation from the military.

"TAP was for getting a job. That's it. I felt like I was leaving home and heading somewhere where I didn't know anyone. The SVA chapter...gave me the opportunity to meet people and make connections. Without it, I would be alone."³³

"Transition assistance program (TAP) was not comprehensive in addressing the actual struggles of transition out of the military (primarily psychological, financial, and medical/disability related...[sic] did not need help writing a resume for 3 days)."³⁴

Combatting common feelings of isolation for student veterans with the camaraderie provided by an SVA chapter on college campuses also exposes these students to the larger campus community. We've noted through chapter conversations that student veterans who engage with their SVA chapter are more likely to engage with other areas of campus: student government; Greek life; industry organizations such as a business, law, or music student group; and identity organizations such as the women's student union or PRIDE student union. Higher education research has shown that participation in campus organizations increases student success on all measures, and we have found the same for student veterans.^{35,36} Additionally, a survey conducted in 2016 showed that most student veterans have some level of service-connected disability,³⁷ though virtually none utilized disability offices or accommodations to support their academic experience. In a 2022 survey, the number of student veterans utilizing these services had increased to 26 percent.³⁸ Not only are SVA chapters a front door to other campus organizations, but they serve as a gateway to needed campus services.

Most student veterans, unfortunately, do not discover their SVA chapter until late in their college career.³⁹ As trained, student veterans are focused on the mission – here, graduation is the only goal – and thus, these students miss out on many opportunities found on college campuses outside of the classroom. Were SVA and other Veteran Service Organizations connected with transitioning servicemembers during TAP, or earlier, this timeline to discovering support from their SVA chapter may be shortened, and we may see real impact that continues beyond immediate transition and beyond education. SVA chapters are often the first social contact on campuses for student veterans. Chapter members provide advice, resources, and feedback on housing, childcare, employment, and other necessities of civilian life. These conversations, should they happen earlier, have the potential to not only better prepare servicemembers

³³ Response to the 2022 SVA Census survey asking respondents to "please use the space below to tell us any experiences as a student veteran, military or veteran dependent, or alumni that you wish to share." Report in progress, held with authors.

³⁴ Response to the 2022 SVA Census survey asking respondents to "please use the space below to tell us any experiences as a student veteran, military or veteran dependent, or alumni that you wish to share." Report in progress, held with authors.

³⁵ Foley, C., Darcy, S., Hergesell, A., Almond, B., McDonald, M., Nguyen, L. T., & Morgan-Brett, E. (2023). Extracurricular activities, graduate attributes and serious leisure: competitive sport versus social-cultural clubs in campus life. *Leisure Studies*, 1-18.

³⁶ Morgan, N. R., Aronson, K. R., McCarthy, K. J., Balotti, B. A., & Perkins, D. F. (2023). Post-9/11 Veterans' Pursuit and Completion of Post-secondary Education: Social Connection, Mental Health, and Finances. *Journal of Education*, 00220574231168638.

³⁷ 2016 SVA Census. <https://studentveterans.org/research/sva-census/>.

³⁸ 2022 SVA Basic Needs and Wellness Report (in process), held with authors.

³⁹ 2022 SVA Basic Needs and Wellness Report (in process), held with authors.



for their transition into higher education, but reduce the stress caused by that transition. Further, organizations like the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and America's Warrior Partnership (AWP) provide essential services to veterans that would likewise be better served if they were introduced earlier in the transition process.

The updated TAP structure also fails to appropriately prioritize education. A straightforward comparison between the length of online workshops shows that a more robust curriculum has been developed for career-related tracks than education. At only 240 minutes, a transitioning servicemember cannot obtain the needed guidance required to make informed decisions, particularly those that carry such weight and impact on their futures. With the addition of Skillbridge, and the emphasis placed there, as well as other programs offered toward transitions into careers, servicemembers, again a majority of whom transition through higher education, are not shown the value or importance that DoD places on education transition services. There is simply an imbalance in the emphasis placed on transition tracks.

The prioritization of TAP by the chain of command is also an issue. Anecdotally and in response to surveys, some student veterans have reported that the culture of their unit is unsupportive when it comes to TAP. Some transitioning servicemembers do not understand the importance of the program because its importance is not stressed to them. Some within the command structure of the transitioning servicemember do not see TAP as important. For example, many survey respondents noted the struggle in making time to complete the education workshop where requests for that time were denied. This aligns with Government Accountability Office findings that roughly a quarter of transitioning servicemembers who needed maximum support did not attend a two-day class and that, overall, 70 percent of servicemembers did not begin the TAP process at least one year prior to separation.⁴⁰ While these are not the most common complaints and were certainly more common before the FY 2019 NDAA changes to TAP, the persistence of this mentality throughout the chain of command does not support a successful transition.

Lastly, we would be remiss if we did not take this opportunity to add that, while TAP is defined as an outcomes-based approach to transition, the lack of data available on those who make that transition through higher education – count of individuals degree choices, successes, debt, and post-graduation earnings – stands as an impediment to any outcomes assessment of a transition program aimed at successful transitions through higher education.⁴¹ Data sharing between the U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Education, and U.S. Department of Labor to identify the true outcomes of veterans' post-transition is imperative.

Housing Assistance

SVA continues to call attention to the numerous issues with the Post-9/11 GI Bill Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA), which are particularly relevant to discussions about transition, especially for servicemembers who plan to enroll shortly after transitioning. For these veterans, MHA is a housing lifeline that lets them step into the civilian world with a familiar benefit that helps them pay for housing costs during their studies. Transitioning veterans are

⁴⁰ U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, GAO-23-104538, SERVICE MEMBERS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE 11-22 (2022).

⁴¹ The Department of Labor (DOL) does attempt to evaluate TAP, including through reports like the Evaluation of The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Impact Study Report. However, the outcome findings related to education-specific aspects of TAP are marred by the fact that they are measured at 6, 12, and 36 months after transition. These measurement points are inappropriate for measuring educational outcomes as many students are participating in programs that take longer than this to complete, and even at the 36-month mark, students graduating from a four-year program, for instance, may just be finding employment and starting to earn a post-graduation salary.



familiar with MHA because it functions much the same as the DOD Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) that they received during their service.

However, the many issues plaguing MHA can have a jarring impact on transitioning servicemembers, including potentially contributing to debt. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, research shows that despite having access to generous education benefits that often include a housing allowance, student veterans borrow more in student loans than non-veterans, and the biggest reason they borrow is to cover housing costs. This raises questions about whether MHA is appropriately defraying housing costs for VA education beneficiaries.⁴²

One issue with MHA is that does not align with annually revised BAH rates until August 1st. This means that every year student veterans are subject to an outdated housing allowance for six months and sometimes longer if DOD implemented temporary rate increases prior to their regular January 1st revision. This silent tax on GI Bill students can result in hundreds, and in some cases, thousands of dollars being withheld from beneficiaries, including newly-transitioned veterans. All of this is in addition to the very real concern that the underlying BAH rate itself is not able to keep pace with rising housing costs.⁴³

This is not the only MHA issue affecting transitioning servicemembers. Those who wish to enroll in an online program will only receive half the national average in MHA—a meager sum of slightly more than \$1,000—resulting in obvious and severe consequences for their finances during a transition period that is already fraught with challenges. MHA should support GI Bill students the same regardless of whether they are pursuing higher education in-person or online.

SVA encourages the committees to review and update BAH and MHA policies to improve the overall transition process. This will help bolster student veterans' financial security, which is an important social determinant of health, help them to excel in their studies, succeed post-graduation, and ultimately transition successfully to civilian life.

The Department of Education's Role

TAP is an interagency partnership between DOD, DOL, VA, and the Department of Education (ED), among others. Yet, too often, ED is glaringly absent from conversations about the program, including congressional roundtables and hearings like the one SVA is submitting this statement for. This must change. ED must have a more prominent seat at the table for TAP, be more thoroughly integrated throughout the program, and leverage and share more of its resources and expertise to help improve the program, including the two-day higher education track and outcome measurement for the education-related components of TAP.

⁴² Phillip Oliff, et al., *Veteran Student Loan Debt Draws Attention*, PEW (Sept. 13, 2021), <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2021/09/13/veteran-student-loan-debt-draws-new-attention>; Phillip Oliff, et al., *Why Veterans with GI Bill Benefits Still Take Out Loans*, PEW (Sept. 22, 2022), <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2022/01/07/why-veterans-with-gi-bill-benefits-still-take-out-student-loans>.

⁴³ See Jen Goodale, *These Bills will Help Military Families as They Face a Housing Crisis*, MILITARY OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA (May 3, 2022), <https://www.moa.org/content/publications-and-media/news-articles/2022-news-articles/advocacy/these-bills-will-help-military-families-as-they-face-a-housing-crisis>; *Military families' housing benefits lag as rents explode: 'That could be \$20,000 that we're paying out of pocket above BAH'*, FORTUNE (Aug. 20, 2022), <https://fortune.com/2022/08/20/military-families-housing-benefits-lag-as-rents-explode-bah-housing-bubble/>; *DoD Authorizes a Temporary Increase to 2021 Basic Allowance for Housing Rates for Certain Locations*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE (Sept. 24, 2021), <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2788871/dod-authorizes-a-temporary-increase-to-2021-basic-allowance-for-housing-rates-f/>; *DoD Authorizes an Automatic Increase to 2022 BAH rates for Certain Locations*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE (Sept. 22, 2022), <https://www.travel.dod.mil/About/News/Article/Article/3167951/dod-authorizes-an-automatic-increase-to-2022-bah-rates-for-certain-locations/>.



We encourage the committees to explore ways to expand ED's role in the TAP program.

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The continued success of veterans in higher education in the Post-9/11 era is no mistake or coincidence. In our Nation's history, educated veterans have always been the best of a generation and the key to solving our most complex challenges. This is the legacy we know today's student veterans carry.

We thank the Chairmen, Ranking Members, and Members of the Committees for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education.



MARK GORDON
GOVERNOR OF WYOMING
CHAIR

MICHELLE LUJAN GRISHAM
GOVERNOR OF NEW MEXICO
VICE CHAIR

JACK WALDORF
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

October 23, 2023

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jon Tester
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
412 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jerry Moran
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
412 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Reed, Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Wicker, and Ranking Member Moran:

In light of the Committees' October 18, 2023, joint hearing, Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service, attached please find Western Governors' Association (WGA) Policy Resolution 2023-08, Veterans.

In the policy resolution, Western Governors call on Congress to provide effective oversight of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense to ensure that transitioning service members receive comprehensive information about VA benefits at least twelve months before their transition to civilian life. Western Governors also endorse offering service members the opportunity to receive credit or professional credentials for their military training, facilitating a smoother transition into civilian careers.

I request that you include this document in the permanent record of the hearing, as it articulates Western Governors' policy positions and recommendations related to this important issue.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and your consideration of this request. Please contact me if you have any questions or require further information.

Sincerely,

Jack Waldorf
Executive Director

Attachment



Policy Resolution 2023-08 Veterans

A. BACKGROUND

American military personnel often return home to a hero's welcome after completing their service, but they face a series of complex challenges. Veterans, whether they volunteered or were drafted, commonly confront a range of issues such as food insecurity, homelessness, unemployment, physical and psychological wounds, and bureaucratic barriers when seeking support services. Western Governors recognize the need to support veterans and address the challenges they face. With one-third of the known veteran population residing in western states, Governors recommend federal regulatory and statutory changes to foster an environment that facilitates access to support services for veterans and encourages further investment in initiatives tailored to assist them.

B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT

1. Western Governors urge the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to prioritize the integration of peer support services and behavioral health services for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) into mental health care models. Additionally, Western Governors urge the VA to address staffing models to support the increasing health concerns for memory care (Dementia, Alzheimer's) and other neurological disorders. VA should also provide continuous training and support for peer specialists and focus on developing and retaining the behavioral health care workforce. Western Governors have highlighted substantive health care workforce recommendations in our health care policy resolution. Ongoing evaluations should be conducted to ensure effective implementation of these practices, which should be disseminated across all VA health care settings to ensure broad access to peer support services for all veterans.
2. Western Governors acknowledge the importance of the VA Governor's Challenge and urge VA to continue its provision of support for programs aimed at effectively addressing the issue of veterans' suicide.
3. Recognizing the need to improve health program services for women veterans, Western Governors urge VA to take urgent action to address gaps in the VA health care system. Improving the promotion of, access to, and the quality of health care for women veterans is essential and requires timely and effective measures to be implemented across VA. Western Governors recommend that VA initiate research programs to study health issues specific to women veterans.
4. Western Governors recognize the significance of expanding access to health care services for veterans, especially those residing in remote areas. VA should take action to increase the accessibility of:
 - a. VA Community Care for veterans residing in areas that do not have access to VA health care facilities. It is imperative that VA consult with Governors to ensure

that veterans living in rural areas are not disadvantaged in accessing health care;

- b. Vet Centers for veterans living in rural areas, to ensure that they have access to necessary health services and support;
 - c. Health care professionals in rural areas, to provide flexibility for veterans and allow them to access the health care provider of their choosing; and
 - d. Telemedicine services, which are a vital tool that can help bridge the gap in accessing health care services.
5. Western Governors recommend that VA seek consultation and input from tribal leaders and communities to inform the development and administration of its programs and services for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian veterans.
 6. To ensure that veterans have timely access to high-quality health care, Western Governors recommend that Congress prioritize providing VA with the necessary resources, authority, and ability to recruit, hire, train, and retain health care professionals. This includes physicians, nurses, mental and behavioral health providers, long-term care professionals, and administrative staff. In addition, Western Governors believe VA should streamline the hiring process, offer competitive salaries and benefits, and provide ongoing training and professional development opportunities for health care professionals.
 7. Western Governors believe VA should collaborate with states and territories to improve and expand the Highly Rural Transportation Grants program. This includes identifying counties that require assistance, simplifying the application and implementation process, and consulting early with Governors for valuable input on their state's needs. Additionally, VA should reevaluate and expand the current eligibility criteria to ensure that more veterans can benefit from the program.
 8. Western Governors urge VA to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the Veteran Transportation Services (VTS) exam and implement necessary revisions to reduce its complexity, facilitating the process for individuals to obtain a license to transport veterans to VA health care facilities and authorized non-VA health care appointments.
 9. Western Governors call on VA to improve community care for veterans by enforcing timely referrals and appointments, particularly for programs like VA Community Care. VA should also streamline reimbursement processes to third-party health care providers in line with industry standards and ensure prompt access to services and increased provider participation.
 10. To ensure that our nation's veterans receive the benefits and services they are entitled to in a timely and efficient manner, Western Governors urge VA to continue to improve and streamline the claims process, especially with the new Sergeant First Class (SFC) Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act (Pub. L. 117-168) claims.
 11. Western Governors recommend that VA implement a policy allowing veterans to select their own care providers, including those who are not affiliated with VA health care

facilities. By doing so, veterans would have greater flexibility and choice when seeking health care services.

12. Western Governors recognize the necessity of conducting a comprehensive review of VA regulations regarding payments for State Veterans Homes and urge VA to consult with states to identify the unique needs of each state. Additionally, Western Governors recommend expanding coverage to include all specialty care services, and prioritize funding for specialized cognitive care.
13. Western Governors recommend that VA authorize and prioritize the expansion of VA programs to provide comprehensive financial support for third-party assisted living and nursing facilities, which offer varying levels of care for long-term care services to our nation's veterans.
14. Western Governors urge Congress to pass legislation that requires VA and the Department of Defense (DOD) to modernize their electronic health record-keeping systems and mandate VA to upgrade its overall technology infrastructure. These upgrades are necessary to streamline access to critical health information, enhance coordination between the two departments, and improve the claims process for veterans, which is a priority for the Governors.
15. Western Governors recommend that the federal government provide funding for state and congressionally chartered Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) to offset the costs of training and to enhance the workforce capacity of VSOs. This would help to improve the level of support and care provided to veterans and their families by such VSOs, ensuring that they have access to the resources and services they need to thrive.
16. Western Governors emphasize the need for VA to provide Veteran Services Officers with access to vital information, enabling them to better assist veterans in navigating VA's programs and services. This will ensure that veterans receive the support and resources necessary to thrive.
17. Western Governors recommend that VA expand its dental services to all veterans enrolled in the VA health care system, regardless of their service-connected dental issues or other narrow criteria.
18. Western Governors urge Congress to authorize and appropriate funds for VA to provide grants to state, territorial, and tribal governments. The purpose of these grants is to increase outreach and assistance to veterans and their families by raising awareness of benefits and aiding them in applying for VA benefits. Priority should be given to areas with high rates of veteran suicide and a shortage of Veteran Services Officers.
19. Western Governors support the idea that service members should be given the opportunity to receive credit or professional credentials for the training they undergo in the military, which can then be transferred to the private sector or educational institutions. This initiative will help veterans transition into civilian careers by providing them with the necessary credentials and recognition for the skills developed through their military service.

20. Western Governors urge Congress to provide diligent oversight over VA and DOD to ensure that transitioning service members receive comprehensive information on VA benefits at least twelve months prior to their transition to civilian life. This includes ensuring that service members are aware of the full range of programs and support services available to them.
21. Western Governors recommend that VA conduct a comprehensive study on their efforts to reduce homelessness and identify those programs that have provided the highest return on investment.

C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE

1. The Governors direct WGA staff to work with congressional committees of jurisdiction, the Executive Branch, and other entities, where appropriate, to achieve the objectives of this resolution.
2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to consult with the Staff Advisory Council regarding its efforts to realize the objectives of this resolution and to keep the Governors apprised of its progress in this regard.

This resolution will expire in June 2026. Western Governors enact new policy resolutions and amend existing resolutions on a semiannual basis. Please consult <http://www.westgov.org/resolutions> for the most current copy of a resolution and a list of all current WGA policy resolutions.

