

**MISSION INCOMPLETE:
STRENGTHENING THE TAP PROGRAM
TO ENSURE A SMOOTHER TRANSITION TO
CIVILIAN LIFE FOR TOMORROW'S VETERANS**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITY
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS
FIRST SESSION

TUESDAY, MARCH 25, 2025

Serial No. 119-12

Printed for the use of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs



Available via <http://govinfo.gov>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

60-684

WASHINGTON : 2025

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

MIKE BOST, Illinois, *Chairman*

AUMUA AMATA COLEMAN RADEWAGEN, American Samoa, <i>Vice-Chairwoman</i>	MARK TAKANO, California, <i>Ranking Member</i>
JACK BERGMAN, Michigan	JULIA BROWNLEY, California
NANCY MACE, South Carolina	CHRIS PAPPAS, New Hampshire
MARIANNETTE MILLER-MEEKS, Iowa	SHEILA CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK, Florida
GREGORY F. MURPHY, North Carolina	MORGAN MCGARVEY, Kentucky
DERRICK VAN ORDEN, Wisconsin	DELIA RAMIREZ, Illinois
MORGAN LUTTRELL, Texas	NIKKI BUDZINSKI, Illinois
JUAN CISCOMANI, Arizona	TIMOTHY M. KENNEDY, New York
KEITH SELF, Texas	MAXINE DEXTER, Oregon
JEN KIGGANS, Virginia	HERB CONAWAY, New Jersey
ABE HAMADEH, Arizona	KELLY MORRISON, Minnesota
KIMBERLYN KING-HINDS, Northern Mariana Islands	
TOM BARRETT, Michigan	

JON CLARK, *Staff Director*

MATT REEL, *Democratic Staff Director*

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

DERRICK VAN ORDEN, Wisconsin, *Chairman*

JUAN CISCOMANI, Arizona	CHRIS PAPPAS, New Hampshire, <i>Ranking Member</i>
ABE HAMADEH, Arizona	MORGAN MCGARVEY, Kentucky
KIMBERLYN KING-HINDS, Northern Mariana Islands	DELIA RAMIREZ, Illinois
TOM BARRETT, Michigan	TIMOTHY M. KENNEDY, New York

Pursuant to clause 2(e)(4) of Rule XI of the Rules of the House, public hearing records of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs are also published in electronic form. **The printed hearing record remains the official version.** Because electronic submissions are used to prepare both printed and electronic versions of the hearing record, the process of converting between various electronic formats may introduce unintentional errors or omissions. Such occurrences are inherent in the current publication process and should diminish as the process is further refined.

C O N T E N T S

TUESDAY, MARCH 25, 2025

	Page
OPENING STATEMENTS	
The Honorable Derrick Van Orden, Chairman	1
The Honorable Chris Pappas, Ranking Member	2
WITNESSES	
PANEL I	
Mr. Alex Baird, Director, Defense Support Services Center, U.S. Department of Defense	4
Mr. John Green, Acting Executive Director, Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs	5
Accompanied by:	
Ms. Regina Yount, Assistant Director, Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs	
Ms. Margarita Devlin, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Operations and Management, Veterans' Employment and Training Service, U.S. Department of Labor	7
PANEL II	
Ms. Joy Craig, Associate Director, Service Member Affairs, Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States	18
Ms. Elizabeth O'Brien, Senior Vice President, Hiring Our Heroes	20
Ms. Barbara Carson, Managing Director of Programs and Services, D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University	21
Mr. Brian Lewis, Executive Director of Customer Operations, Consumers Energy	23
Ms. Kandi Tillman, Managing Co-Founder, 50strong	24
APPENDIX	
PREPARED STATEMENTS OF WITNESSES	
Mr. Alex Baird Prepared Statement	39
Mr. John Green Prepared Statement	45
Ms. Margarita Devlin Prepared Statement	49
Ms. Joy Craig Prepared Statement	59
Ms. Elizabeth O'Brien Prepared Statement	65
Ms. Barbara Carson Prepared Statement	87
Mr. Brian Lewis Prepared Statement	91
Ms. Kandi Tillman Prepared Statement	94
STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD	
Hire Heroes USA Prepared Statement	105

IV

Page

APPENDIX—CONTINUED

Veterans Association of Real Estate Professionals Prepared Statement	107
The American Legion Prepared Statement	108

**MISSION INCOMPLETE:
STRENGTHENING THE TAP PROGRAM
TO ENSURE A SMOOTHER TRANSITION TO
CIVILIAN LIFE FOR TOMORROW'S VETERANS**

TUESDAY, MARCH 25, 2025

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:15 a.m., in room 360, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Derrick Van Orden (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Van Orden, Hamadeh, King-Hinds Barrett, Pappas, McGarvey, Ramirez, and Kennedy.

OPENING STATEMENT OF DERRICK VAN ORDEN, CHAIRMAN

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Good morning. The subcommittee will come to order. I want to thank our witnesses for being here today to discuss the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the role that each one of these departments plays in helping our members transition from being an active duty servicemember, a productive member of the military, to a productive member of society as a civilian.

I want to make sure that we adhere to our strict nonpartisan position, the spirit of this committee. I know Mr. Pappas shares my intention there. He is a good man.

As a former SEAL that served our country for 26 years and I have first-hand knowledge of how difficult it can be to go from being in a military member to being a civilian, and I am not kidding you. I used to wake up for, like, 2 years after I retired wondering where my gun was. That is not a joke.

200,000 military personnel leave the service each year and for many of them it is a time for them to grow. It is also a time, that 24-month period of time, is when our servicemembers wind up committing suicide because they lose their identity. They lose their uniform. They lose the rank. The joke with their spouses are twice the husband and half the paycheck and you all know that. I see these old grizzly war dogs back there. You know what I am talking about, right? Yes.

We have got to do something. The bridging mechanism has to start while we are in the service. Mr. Baird, you are here today from the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and I cannot tell you how thankful I am and I also cannot tell you how pathetic it is that I have to be so thankful that you guys showed up. Check?

That is how these committees work, so thank you for being here. Our office because I am on task and I have got your paycheck now, too? I do not know. I do not care. You are here and I appreciate it.

We went from about 25 percent to 52 percent so that is an extraordinarily huge failure rate for the people that go to TAP. That is real and we have got everybody's Situation Reports (SitReps) here and talk about this a little bit later, SitReps and all yours or whatever. There is no block on here for participation of troops that go to TAP. It is a 175-page document. It is, like, 150 pages into a 175-page document from the Navy. It mentions TAP and a single sentence. What my intention is to make this work.

I spoke to these three folks yesterday in my office in private, and I appreciate you guys showing up to do that so we could work through some things in long form interview, not like this, but I do appreciate that, but we can do better, period. We need to have metrics, so we understand if we are doing better and I expect that out of you.

2019 we worked to modernize the TAP program. I think we did sort of a good job. I was not here at the time. Were you in Congress then?

Mr. PAPPAS. Yes.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You were? Okay, so it is Mr. Pappas' fault. I am just kidding. We did an okay job and we did not do the best job and I get it.

We got 48 percent of servicemembers that are beginning the process of TAP and advanced 48 percent, gentlemen, ladies, and that is unacceptable and we are just going to do better.

Last year I introduced the Enhancing the Transitioning Servicemember's Experience (ETS) Act to hold DoD accountable.

That is the department what I have learned from being here is I cannot hold a department or an office accountable, but I want to hold individual officers accountable, make sure they do not get promoted, they do not pass go, they do not get 200 bucks if there are people who are not going to TAP. If we start burning these people down with shoulder boards, it will be fixed immediately and that is my intent.

With that, I would like to yield to my Ranking Member Mr. Pappas for any comments he may have.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHRIS PAPPAS, RANKING MEMBER

Mr. PAPPAS. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for holding this oversight hearing on the Transition Assistance Program. We know before servicemembers leave the military we must ensure that they are adequately prepared to rejoin civilian life.

This includes having a plan for employment and housing, as well as healthcare and other social supports. Under normal circumstances over 150,000 servicemembers leave the military each year and their ability to successfully reintegrate in civilian life depends on many factors and the Federal Government is spending more than \$13 billion each year to support these efforts.

Without clear oversight of these programs, it is challenging to know what will give our transitioning servicemembers the best outcomes possible, so this is an area of concern for me because the

TAP data presented at this last hearing in September 2024 indicates that DoD is struggling to comply with the transition process 1 year in advance of separating or 2 years in advance of retiring.

While some might argue that this data indicates that DoD might not prioritize TAP, there is a clear connection in how servicemembers experience their transition to veteran status on recruitment. The American Legion recently testified at the joint House and Senate Veterans Service Organization (VSO) hearing stating that, “getting this right is a matter of national security.” I expect that DoD, all agencies, and partners will treat TAP as a matter of national security as well.

We all need to recognize the history of TAP as it was born out of DoD’s drawdown in the 1990’s and, unfortunately, we face some similar economic forces today because of the administration’s use of Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to dismantle agencies and the many services that they provide.

It should not be lost on anyone that our servicemembers will be transitioning into a more volatile economy with rising unemployment and a sinking stock market, and it will be our Nation’s heroes that could suffer consequences if they are not able to rely upon the support of Federal agencies because of hiring freezes and firings at agencies like U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Secretary Collins himself said to expect more cuts but there has been no evidence from DOGE, the administration, or VA that any of these actions are being redirected to provide improved services and benefits to veterans. Rather the opposite is happening.

Our offices are inundated with calls and emails about how veterans’ services are being negatively impacted. In the last 2 months, citizens in my State in New Hampshire have held a number of events at our State capitol. The latest one was drawing hundreds of folks who were deeply concerned about the projected 80,000 job cuts at VA.

The American public does not want to see veteran benefits and services targeted and with all these uncertainties support systems are absolutely necessary. TAP is critical now more than ever.

I also want to express my concern about how the administration is targeting a particular class of servicemembers, our Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) servicemembers and veterans, particularly the transgender community, stating that being transgender is incompatible with military service I believe is an affront to our American values.

As someone from the live free or die State, I find it incomprehensible to discriminate against qualified transgender Americans who are willing and capable of serving and are being denied services that they bravely earned.

As these servicemembers transition out of the military I expect TAP to pay careful attention to their needs and provide them with the support that they deserve.

I want to thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for your spirit of non-partisanship on this subcommittee. Continuing to look to work with you to identify ways that we can improve TAP. With that, I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ranking Member Pappas.

I will introduce our witness panel. Morgan, hey, hey, hey, you got a watch? You do not have watches in Kentucky. I love that guy. Sorry.

Our first witness is Mr. Alex Baird, director of the Defense Support Services Center at the Department of Defense.

Our next witness is Mr. John Green, acting executive director of Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development at the Department of Veterans Affairs. Mr. Green is accompanied by Ms. Regina Yount, the assistant director of Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development at the VA.

Our final witness to this panel is Ms. Margarita, great name Margarita Devlin, deputy assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Veterans Employment and Training.

Please, I will ask you to rise everybody. Please raise your right hand. Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to provide is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Okay, thank you. You may be seated. Let the record reflect that the witnesses have answered in the affirmative.

Mr. Baird, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony on behalf of the Department of Defense.

STATEMENT OF ALEX BAIRD

Mr. BAIRD. Good morning, Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and the distinguished members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Transition Assistance Program, commonly called TAP.

Each of us across the department, our interagency partners, are fully committed to making TAP the best it can be. A big part of that is getting servicemembers to TAP early and increasing the number of servicemembers who attend one of the four 2-day tracks.

Throughout 2020 and 2021, we focused on shifting in-person TAP to delivering TAP in a 100 percent virtual environment. We were successful in the redesigning coursework, information technology (IT), and contract support in ensuring servicemembers got to TAP.

Throughout that challenging period, servicemembers continued to provide high marks concerning TAP content delivery, but our timeliness percentage fell short of both your and our expectations. In mid-2022 we began a series of corrective actions led by the military departments and commanders. We are working together.

We continue to improve TAP while putting procedures in place to increase timeliness and improve 2-day track attendance. By the end of 2023, timeliness percentage doubled and 2-day track attendance increased by over 7 percent.

We have not and will not stop there. We are confident that the military department's corrective action will produce even better results over time and that those results will further validate our commitment to our transitioning servicemembers.

Much of our success is due to the great working relationship we have with VA, DOL, and the other members of the transition executive committee. DoD, the military departments, and our interagency partners are actively involved at every level of the TAP to the working groups.

We are proactive and championing and implementing change and fully committed to supporting the warfighters and their families.

TAP is the foundation of that support and sets the conditions for successful transition.

Today TAP is very different and far more effective than the program of 10, 5, or even 3 years ago and provides servicemembers more comprehensive support than at any time during our Nation's history.

That is possible because TAP is a commanders' program with commanders balancing national defense requirements with individual transition goals and with results supporting readiness, transition, recruiting, retention, reserve component affiliation, and sustainment of the all-volunteer force.

TAP is and will remain adaptive focused on three fundamental tenets, effective counseling, servicemember buy-in, and meaningful support connections throughout the transition period.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I thank you and the ranking member and the other members of this committee for your outstanding unwavering support of the men and women who proudly wear the uniform of our great Nation. Sir, I am very honored to be here with you today.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF ALEX BAIRD APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Well again, Mr. Baird, I am very thankful that you are here. Your written statement will be entered into the record.

Mr. Green, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF JOHN GREEN

Mr. GREEN. Good morning, Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the current State of Transition Assistance Program sharing model efforts and explore collaboration opportunities to improve the program.

Joining me today is Regina Yount, assistant director from Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development Program. We appreciate your ongoing support for the Nation's veterans, their families and caregivers and survivors.

As a retired Army veteran, I understand the challenges members face when leaving active duty. During this critical time many transition and servicemembers are at increased risk for suicide, homelessness, post-traumatic stress, and substance use disorders.

Connecting veterans to the benefits and services they have earned acts to safeguard against these threats and supports their overall well-being. VA recognizes that transition begins well before a servicemember leaves the military and continues long after separation making it essential for VA to stay connected with veterans throughout their lives and provide resources during critical times.

While servicemembers are still on active duty, VA leads a 1-day benefits and services course as part of TAP. This course helps servicemembers navigate VA resources, including excessive benefits and services. In Fiscal Year 2024, benefit advisors assisted over 200,000 transitioning servicemembers.

We understand that information provided can be extensive so we offer additional guidance and clarification through one-on-one counseling sessions with benefit advisors, as well as those online and training that can be accessed any time before or after separation.

We also welcome spouses to all TAP trainings as we recognize the key role they play in the transition process. As an example, our benefit advisors commitment to transitioning servicemembers happened recently at Camp Foster, Okinawa, Japan. The benefit advisors assisted a servicemember who was overwhelmed with the transition process.

Their one-on-one sessions with the advisor aided the soldier in understanding the benefits available, explain the timelines, and help the documentation requirements for submission of the benefits delivery at discharge (BDD) compensation claim.

Upon excellent service, VA connects directly with each new veteran through a VA Solid Start program providing one-on-one sessions tailored to address challenges that may face and link them to benefits and resources.

For example, Jessica, who was on the verge of homelessness when Solid Start contacted her and had no idea she was eligible for health care and thought it was something only available to officers.

As the representative listened to Jessica, they decided to talk with her about healthcare, guided her through how to file a claim for compensation, and offer to connect her with a representative at the VA national contact center for those at risk of homelessness. By her last call with her Solid Start representative, Jessica was receiving compensation payments, had health care, and was living in an apartment.

Since TAP's inception in 1991, transition supports has significantly improved. VA offers several programs to support servicemembers through transition and beyond, such as personalized career planning and veteran and spouse transition grant program. Ongoing assessment and modifications of TAP ensure VA meets the evolving needs of transitioning servicemembers.

In 2024, veteran service organizations' participation was added into the TAP course serving as a direct connection between participants and service organization. The benefits and services course includes a practical exercise to reinforce critical information and highlight time-sensitive information benefits such as life insurance.

Last, VA modernized the silent process for scheduling one-on-one assistance using quick response codes. The VA is committed to maintaining a strong partnership with the Department of Defense, Department of Labor, and other interagency partners.

We share Congress' goal to ensure transitioning servicemembers, veterans, and their families are supported during and after the transition from military to civilian life and remain dedicated to strengthening our transition initiatives.

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and members of the subcommittee this concludes my statement. I am happy to respond to any questions you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOHN GREEN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Green. The written statement of Mr. Green will be entered into the record.

Ms. Devlin, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF MARGARITA DEVLIN

Ms. DEVLIN. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the current state of the Transition Assistance Program and everything we are doing to continue modernizing and refining the program.

The Department of Labor Veterans Employment and Training Service, otherwise known as VETS, exists to support the employment and career goals of transitioning servicemembers, veterans, military spouses, national guardsmen, and reservists as well.

We have three core TAP workshops. Employment fundamentals of career transition is the mandatory 1-day course. We also provide two elective tracks. The employment workshop is, as it sounds, additional support for direct transition to civilian employment.

The career and credential exploration workshop provides support for navigating the labor market and non-college degree credentialing options such as apprenticeship, licensure, and certifications.

Our satisfaction ratings for participants who take our courses are consistently high. For example, 96 percent indicate they would use what they learned in their own transition planning. 94 percent reported that the course enhanced their confidence in their transition planning.

Classroom training is not enough and transition is not a one-size-fits-all experience. I have been in this space for a long time and whether it was during my tenure at VA or now at DOL, there is one consistent bit of feedback we get. Servicemembers want personalized support beyond the classroom.

VETS answered that call when we pilot tested and developed and implemented the employment navigator and partnership program, or ENPP as we call it.

This program, which is currently available at 40 military installations, helps servicemembers and their spouses navigate their post-military career journey. Navigators provide one-on-one career guidance and job seeking skills support, as well as referrals to vetted partner organizations who provide additional services during and after separation from the military.

Navigators also facilitate warm handovers to a designated point of contact at DOL-funded American job centers, and that is especially important if the servicemember does not meet career readiness standards.

Data reflects that ENPP has been a great success. In Fiscal Year 2024, 99 percent of survey respondents reported positive feelings after meeting with their employment navigator and would recommend ENPP to a friend or a colleague.

Also, 96 percent of respondents felt ENPP partners met or exceeded their employment related expectations. Even more importantly, we now have outcome data.

Our preliminary analysis shows, for example, that enlisted servicemembers who worked with an employment navigator became employed approximately 2 months sooner and earned about 11 percent more than their counterparts who did not work with the navigator during their transition. This program is making an impact on servicemembers' lives.

The transition experiences of wounded warriors, caregivers, and military spouses are also unique, so we developed and implemented specialized courses like the Wounded Warrior and Caregiver Employment Workshop and the transition employment assistance for military spouses' workshop to address their needs as well.

We also know transition does not end with the issuing of the DD-214. Veterans may have several transitions throughout their careers and we continue to provide support after separation with programs such as the off-base transition training program.

Facilitating successful military to civilian transitions requires coordination between Federal and non-government partners. DOL appreciates the strong partnership with our interagency colleagues, including VA and DoD plus veteran service organizations, State directors of Veterans Affairs, and many other non-government partners.

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 all-volunteer force depends on it.

We look forward to our continued work with this committee, and we share in your commitment to ensuring servicemembers and spouses have every opportunity for stable careers post-military.

Mr. Chairman, ranking member, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today, and I welcome your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MARGARITA DEVLIN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ms. Devlin. The written statement of Ms. Devlin will be entered into the record.

We are going to go to questioning you guys, and the deal is you—5 minutes is it. If you want to do a second-round 100 percent or a third or a fifth or a hundredth round I do not care. We are going to get some answers this morning.

I now recognize Ranking Member Pappas for 5 minutes for questioning, sir.

Mr. PAPPAS. Okay. Thank you very much to this panel and your discussion about such an important program which for a long time has been a work in progress and we need to continue to see improvements over time.

I want to turn to Mr. Baird first. In March 2024, Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that DoD is not reliably verifying whether warm handovers occur. GAO found that over a 2-year period commanders or their designees verified that a warm handover was provided to nearly 78,000 transitioning servicemembers who were not recorded as receiving one.

GAO recommended that DoD develop additional guidance to commanders and their designees on verifying warm handovers and on recording the verifications in the TAP data base. I am wondering what steps DoD has taken to address this recommendation?

Mr. BAIRD. Thank you for that question, Ranking Member. We have done a lot and the GAO report really caught our attention and we have made a lot of changes. Just yesterday, a new course stood up on the TAP site that is for military commanders and it walks them through what their responsibility is in the TAP space, and it mentions the warm handover.

We have also...probably the strongest arm we have is the service Inspector General (IG) teams and they have now, the inspector generals are now taking a look at the TAP process within the services to make sure that we are meeting all the requirements. It is an education process and we will continue to educate them until they get it right.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thanks for that and we are interested in continuing to engage with you as that all rolls forward in making sure that those recommendations are, you know, continuing to be addressed.

We have also heard concerns from VSOs that enrollment in SkillBridge is down. Our understanding is that the Navy and Marines have scaled back eligibility. I am wondering if you can explain why requirements might have changed?

Mr. BAIRD. The Navy and the Marine Corps took a hard look at who is going through SkillBridge and what they found was in a lot of cases it was senior people and so they have changed the rules.

They have done policy. We see the same support for SkillBridge today that we saw before. The services are just getting better at determining who is the right person to go through SkillBridge.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thanks for that. I have seen the benefits of that program and heard about it directly from participating businesses, as well as transitioning servicemembers, and we want to continue to support a strong SkillBridge program.

If I can turn to VA now, I am wondering how VA is collaborating with DoD to ensure that individuals with mental health issues specifically are receiving the services that they need during that crucial first year after transition.

You talked about Jessica, a veteran and her experience with Solid Start. It was really important to hear about her example, but I am wondering specific to mental health issues how we can continue to see the kind of collaboration that is going to help?

Mr. GREEN. I will say that we continue to collaborate with DoD in order for these transitioning servicemembers are connected through mental health. We do connect them to VA in transition and we also get an opportunity to follow them through our VA Solid Start Program.

There are three particular areas that we actually connect with these transitioning servicemembers, 0 to 90 days, 91 to 180 days, and then 181 days or 365 day. We actually reach out to those particular veterans upwards of seven times each one of those particular time periods. If one of those calls is answered, then we stop calling and we go to the next bucket of dates. There is an opportunity for 21 calls to be made.

Additionally, DoD provides a list to our VA Solid Start Program. VA Solid Start prioritizes those programs and those particular veterans or servicemembers to get an opportunity to outreach and make sure that there are no additional issues that may be there.

Through transition, in transition meeting monthly, they get an opportunity to see if there is any additional issues that may be there that need to be addressed.

Mr. PAPPAS. Just one more quickly, the most recent post-separation TAP assessment, I am wondering if you can tell me what that indicates about veteran satisfaction with TAP and whether the program effectively addresses the challenges that veterans are facing entering the civilian workforce?

Mr. GREEN. Thank you, sir, for that question. Yes, the most recent what we call post-separation transition assessment program gives a satisfaction score of 96.3 percent, so it is highly touted.

During that particular study we did have a great satisfaction rate that we were meeting exactly what transitioning servicemembers needed.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thank you. Thank you very much.

I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, sir. The gentleman yields back.

I recognize Representative Hamadeh from the great State of Arizona.

Mr. HAMADEH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. It is just—yes, Arizona is awesome.

Mr. HAMADEH. There is so much better weather right now.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today. As both a veteran and a member of this committee, I find it deeply troubling that only 52 percent of our transitioning servicemembers are receiving timely access to the Transition Assistance Program, TAP. This is unacceptable.

Now, when I served as an Army Reserve intelligence officer, I witnessed first-hand how critical proper transition support is for our warfighters. We expect excellence and accountability from our servicemembers while they are in uniform, and we should demand nothing less when your department is preparing them for civilian life.

Now, my first question is for Ms. Devlin. I was struck by something you said during our pre-hearing call yesterday. You mentioned that when servicemembers do not complete all parts of TAP you consider it simply in the law and DoD's responsibility not yours, yet your department's own data shows that servicemembers who receive proper transition assistance through your employment navigator program find jobs 63 days faster and earn 11 percent higher wages.

Now, how can the Department of Labor claim to prioritize veteran employment outcomes while washing your hands of responsibility for ensuring servicemembers actually receive the Department of Labor's training?

Ms. DEVLIN. Thank you for asking that question. Just to be clear, we are involved in working with DoD on the accountability that is required to make sure that servicemembers do participate in TAP and have access to it. Forgive me if my answer to that original question was not clear in our meeting.

We do we do take great pride in being a strong partner to DoD, and we have a very active engagement in our interagency council. We do look at the data. We brainstorm together solutions to im-

prove participation rates, how to help military leaders understand the importance of TAP.

We contribute to how that training should look if there is training that is required. We definitely are very involved and we recognize the importance of early intervention and participation in TAP.

Absolutely the navigator program, which is at 40 installations, has proven to be incredibly life changing for these servicemembers who have access to it.

Mr. HAMADEH. Section 1144 of Title 10 specifically tasks the Secretary of Labor with quote, "furnishing information on employment and training assistance," so that is not optional. The law does not say when DoD decides to let you. The law makes clear that the Department of Labor is a key partner in this process with responsibility for coordinating the employment components.

Let me ask you about accountability.

At Fort Cavazos in Texas, servicemembers who attended TAP on time reenlist at a rate of 60 percent compared to just 30 percent for those who do not. That suggests that TAP actually helps retention which should motivate commanders.

Ms. Devlin, given that your department's data shows military members who use the employment navigator program find jobs 2 months faster and earn higher wages, what specific recommendations has the Department of Labor made to improve unit commander accountability for TAP attendance?

Ms. DEVLIN. Thank you for that question as well. I agree. In many cases participation in TAP early enough helps the servicemember really see their options clearly in terms of remaining in the military for additional time versus transitioning out at that point in their life. In many cases it helps them to realize they might need more time to fully prepare for a civilian transition.

With respect to helping the servicemember transition and any recommendations that we have for accountability, one of the things we talked about in the committee, for example, in the interagency committee is training for commanders to help them understand the value of sending their troops to TAP, value in terms of retention but also in terms of recruitment.

Every veteran that, you know, becomes a veteran and leaves the military is a walking billboard for either military service or not based on the experience that they had in the transition.

We have conversations around those kinds of things that are maybe different approaches to tackling the problem. As we sit through these committee meetings we are all very engaged in the process.

My colleagues at VA and DoD are very engaged in making sure because we all believe it is important that servicemembers have access to TAP early enough in the process.

Mr. HAMADEH. Sure, I keep hearing that there are conversations but what about accountability?

Ms. DEVLIN. I will defer to my DoD colleague, if it is okay with you, Mr. Baird, because I know that he has been working with the military services on accountability that we have talked about in our committee meetings.

Mr. BAIRD. One of the things we ask in their questioning or after they have finished with TAP is was there any barrier to you getting to TAP, and that number has remained at about 1 percent.

Mr. HAMADEH. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Hamadeh. If you want a second round of question we are here. I mean, this is what we are doing today, so I appreciate that tremendously. The gentleman yields back.

I now recognize Mr. McGarvey, my very dear friend from the great State of Kentucky, for 5 minutes, sir.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you all for being here today. You know, we are talking about a really important thing which is how we transition active-duty soldiers into civilian life, what our veterans do after that initial call to military service and the Transition Assistance Program, TAP, what we are talking about today, it really helps that transition go smoothly. It provides the resources, the training, the support that our veterans need whether they are going back to school, whether they are starting a business, whether they are just preparing for life finding a job outside of the military. It is like a guide that helps servicemembers navigate what they are going to encounter and to do it confidently.

Just looking at this panel we can see how many different agencies are involved in this, but with TAP shared between you guys, collective responsibility also means shared accountability. As part of that accountability is ensuring that we have common, high-quality standards across the board so that no matter where you go do your TAP you have a quality experience that prepares you for life after the military.

You know, in Kentucky, we have got Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC). This may seem like a trivial example, but one of the things you do when you are training employees to work at a KFC is you have to have training for every employee that ensures you have that same quality no matter what restaurant you go to anywhere in the world, right?

We want to make sure that no matter where you go in the military for your Transition Assistance Program you get that same quality. Right now we are hearing from veterans that that is not the case.

Even the different branches of the service have different transition assistance programs. They are frustrated. Veterans are frustrated. They are not getting the level of support that they feel they need. Sometimes it is available, but when it is not available to them because of what city they are in or where they are stationed that is frustrating.

Mr. Baird, how are the DoD and the military branches making sure that local leaders and unit commanders stick to the rules and ensure servicemembers attend TAP on time?

Mr. BAIRD. Thank you for that question. That is the very reason we made it a service IG spotlight item so that they would take a look at it. Commanders do what the IG looks at and so we are hoping that in—prior to 2022 the services did not have corrective action plans for how they were going to get.

Those plans went to GAO. All those plans were accepted and now they are executing those plans to reach their, you know, higher numbers.

Mr. MCGARVEY. I appreciate that because not only do we need the quality we are hearing from veterans that there is a disregard for the program at DoD. We want to make sure that people are going.

What changes are being made to shift the culture to prioritize a quality TAP program and that people go?

Mr. BAIRD. I think the emphasis is, one, coming through the IG, and two, coming through the increased training we are going to do for commanders. For the first time we now have a guide that they can download and we also have an online class that they can take to help them understand.

I think when TAP first came out they saw it as just another program that they had to do. Now, they are starting to see the benefit of it. We need to get really, quite frankly, we need to get to the new commanders and make sure we do training with the new commanders right off.

Mr. MCGARVEY. I appreciate that.

Ms. Devlin, I want to switch to you for the last time we have got remaining. You have talked about, especially in your written testimony, the importance of tailoring the TAP program to actually meet the demands of private industry and what employers are looking for.

How can the TAP program better involve employers to meet the level of involvement that you would like to see to get the needs of private industries and adapt to current job market trends?

Ms. DEVLIN. Some of the things that we do at the Department of Labor is that as we engage with specific industries where there is a high demand for employment and where they are really looking to hire transitioning servicemembers and veterans. Defense industrial base, for example, is an area that is in high demand and important to national security.

We engage with employers through our employer outreach program and we bring that feedback from those employers back into the department and we infuse it throughout our program. We also take feedback from servicemembers about what they are hearing and even after they leave the military and what their experiences were like.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Thank you very much.

Like I said, you know, we want to make sure this is actually a program that works for our veterans. It is so important. To transition from military life to civilian life is not always easy and we have got to do everything we can to help them out. Thank you guys so much.

I yield back Mr. Chairman.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields.

The chair now recognizes Representative King-Hinds from the Northern Mariana Islands. Ma'am.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It only took me 2 days to get here this time, but I am here.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I do not know how you do it, but God bless you for being here. We appreciate it.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Thank you to all the witnesses for joining us this morning. I find it very disconcerting that only 52 percent of servicemembers attended TAP on time, right? How do we improve this?

Should this be mandatory, a mandatory program or, you know, where that it is compulsory for every servicemember? Is that the case now or is that not the case? It is an open-ended question to whoever wants to answer.

Mr. BAIRD. Thank you for that question. Yes, TAP is mandatory.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Why are the statistics the way they are?

Mr. BAIRD. Quite honestly, I believe because we were not keeping an eye on them close enough, but we are now. We look at them at our level with the transition executive committee but also, too, the department IG teams are looking at the numbers to make sure that they are staying on track.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Okay. I see that there are different agencies here who collaborate, right? Are there gaps or legislative fixes that Congress can help with to ensure that Department of Labor, Veterans Affairs, and whichever other agency works together to be able to streamline the process of helping the veterans and ensuring that they are getting the assistance that they need?

Ms. DEVLIN. I can jump in and just say that from the Department of Labor standpoint we believe we have got what we need with the committee that we have in place.

For example, when we pilot tested the employment navigator program and were able to demonstrate the success we went to the committee and said, listen, we think we should expand this and have more servicemembers have access to it.

DoD and the military services were at the table. They were eager to help. We brainstormed a solution. We developed a strategy and we are going forward with implementation of the expansion subject to funding, of course. Those partnerships are really strong that we have.

When it comes to the data on participation rates, we look at that data on a quarterly basis and sometimes more regularly in between those quarterly meetings and we ask questions. You know, why is this one, you know, a little bit less here? What is happening here?

The military services are there and they help us either answer the question on the spot or they go research it and come back to us so we have a system that enables accountability between our agencies.

Ms. KING-HINDS. All right. I come from a rural community. I come from the Northern Mariana Islands where access to care and services is very limited anyway for our veterans. How are we ensuring that the folks who are coming out of the service are getting the assistance that they need so that they are able to go right into the workforce, that they are ready to go into the workforce?

Ms. DEVLIN. Part of getting ready to go into the workforce is to understand what the individual's interests, aptitudes, and abilities are and where we have the employment navigator, they help them navigate all of that. Where we do not have it there is still the course, right, so if they do the 1-day course it is a lot.

Sometimes we hear it is like drinking from a fire hose, which is why we offered the two elective courses. Taking the first course at

TAP helps the servicemember understand what they might want to do in their elective courses, right?

If they really know that they just want to get into a job, they feel like they have the skills already, maybe they completed some college while in the military, they might go to the employment workshop to learn more about how to do the resume, interviewing skills, networking, all those kinds of things.

If they do not have the training maybe they want to learn more hands-on, maybe they want to do an apprenticeship, they can do the career credentialing workshop.

After that the connection to our partners, I think, is critical because once they get into their community, they can still keep that connection to our partners. For example, the American Workforce System being able to connect with the Disabled Veteran Outreach Program coordinators, local veteran employment representatives. That gives them the continued support that they need after they get into their community so that they can continue to keep working on getting that stable job.

Ms. KING-HINDS. All right, thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back my time.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentlelady yields back.

The chair now recognizes myself for 5 minutes in the third person, which is never just going to not be weird. Hey, I am going to take a point of personal privilege before we start that clock. I just want to cover something that Mr. Pappas referenced in his opening statements.

Currently, the DoD is deployed to about 60 countries at any given time and that is not going to change. When someone joins the military and they decide to, you know, transition from one gender to another, that is a 2 to 3 to 4-year process where people are taking hormones then having some very, very absolutely brutal, barbaric surgeries, and they are nondeployable at that point.

If someone decides to do this, and that is up to them, Chris Beck is the first openly transgender Navy SEAL and he is a really good friend of mine and he is a guy now again. You know, he went back and forth, but he is a really good friend of mine and I have known him for 30 years and he is a good man and he is a solid operator.

He was a frogman, and we did not care what was going on but he got out of the military and then decided to do this. Here is why that is so important. When we say that people are overseas in 60 countries, I have to leave my wife and children or a wife has to leave her husband or, you know, wife, we do not care what you are doing in your personal time, but we have got to leave our kids and potentially get killed because someone is doing this.

That is, Mr. Pappas, the reason that I agree with the current policy. I understand. I respect you tremendously. I just want to make that very clear. Someone is going to leave their family to forward deploy at all times and that is all I have to say about that.

Ms. Devlin, I cannot tell you how excited I am that Lori Chavez-DeRemer is the new secretary. She said, oh, my gosh. We are—did you ever see the movie *The Other Guys*? Watch it, Marky Mark, Will Ferrell, it is great. They did fresh start, so we are doing a fresh start.

Now, I saw you sneak in there Rodriguez. Stand up, sir. Yes. Oh, yes, you tried to, yes, nice to see you. Oh, yes, yes, trying to sneak in. It did not work. Fresh start, ma'am with you guys, and I expect a lot out of you. I expect a lot out of Lori and I know she can perform.

President Trump expects a lot out of you and a lot out of Lori and so does the entire country, not just our veterans community. You guys are in good hands and I expect the best out of you. Okay, that is enough of that.

Okay. Mr. Baird, do you consider TAP a retention tool?

Mr. BAIRD. Yes, sir, I do.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Why?

Mr. BAIRD. Those folks who go out into the field and do TAP and if they do it right then they see the benefits of being in the military.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Yes.

Mr. BAIRD. I think it is a great retention tool.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. You are correct, sir, and they talk to each other. Our vets talk to each other.

Mr. BAIRD. Yes, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You know what I mean? It gets around if it is terrible. It is a retention tool and is, as Mr. Pappas said, it is a national security issue.

Mr. Green, you gave an anecdote about Jessica and one other person, right, but 52 percent of folks go to this program. That means 48 percent do not, 200,000 enlisted math, so about 96,000 people you cannot give me an anecdote for a year. Although I appreciate Jessica and her job, there is 96,000 other people you cannot give me an anecdote for because they did not go to TAP and that, sir, is unacceptable.

We talked in private. Ms. Yount, I asked you a couple of questions yesterday and there is a Solid Start program. You are doing it. Here is the legislation and we pulled it up and this is highlighted. It says, "VA employees must call veterans for outreach purposes," right?

Ms. YOUNT. Correct.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The survey indicates, "Veterans preferred communication methods other than a phone call." They like texting and, you know, chatting and whatnot. Okay.

The Office of General Counsel (OGC) interpreted this to be a voice phone call when it says calling each veteran, so who is the OGC that made this decision?

Ms. YOUNT. That is VA's office of general counsel.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Who is the person? I asked you specifically yesterday.

Ms. YOUNT. Unfortunately, we were unable to get the individual's—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You are excused.

Ms. YOUNT [continuing]. his name.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You are excused.

Ms. YOUNT. Okay.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Now. You will respect this committee ma'am.

Mr. Green, there have been cuts by DOGE, and I will be very frank with you. The messaging and how these guys are getting the

word out is not okay. They are just not doing a good job of it, Mr. Pappas. They are not. We are not beholden to any administration. We are not.

We are beholden to our constituents and our veterans, so I am just going to say it out loud. What they are trying to do is good and righteous at DOGE. How they are getting the message across is confusing it and it is terrifying our veterans, right?

I mean, he is getting calls. I am getting calls. Morgan, you get calls? You guys get calls? I want to ask you this question. Is there a measurable appreciative degradation of your ability from the Department of Veterans Affairs or the Department of Labor, ma'am, to deliver services to our veterans due to this DOGE stuff?

Mr. GREEN. No, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Ma'am?

Ms. DEVLIN. No, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Here is what we have got to do. We have got to quit fear mongering with veterans and our seniors and hungry kids. I was raised on welfare. I went to bed hungry. I do not like that. We are not cutting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. We are not cutting Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). As a matter of fact, we increased it by \$500 million. We are not cutting veterans' benefits.

There were eight folks that were released from the Tomah VA healthcare center where I get my care and I love them. I just called Karen, she runs the place, and I said, "Karen, has there been any degradation of your ability to provide medical care to our veterans?" She said no.

I am just going to ask everybody on both sides of the aisle and external folks to quit fear mongering. Because when I asked you, Mr. Green, you are a subject matter expert, Ms. Devlin, subject matter expert and you know what you are talking about, right?

When you say there is no degradation of your ability to provide services to our veterans I take you at your word. Let us just stop doing that. That is all I am going to ask.

Mr. Pappas, do you have anything you want to wrap up with, sir, before we go to the second panel?

Mr. PAPPAS. I have no further questions. I am interested in engaging our second panel.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay, excellent. You guys are excused and I hope you stick around for the next panel and we will take, what—

Mr. PAPPAS. Five.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You know, everyone says 5 minutes. It is always 10 so let us just say 10 minutes. We will take a 10-minute recess. Thank you very much.

[Recess.]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The committee will come to order. Oh, sorry, my bad. I am now in the proper uniform of the day.

Our second panel we are going to be hearing from our witnesses Ms. Joy Craig, associate director of Service Member Affairs, the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW).

The next witness is Ms. Elizabeth O'Brien, senior vice president of Hiring Our Heroes (HOH), U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Nice to see you.

Our third witness is Ms. Barbara Carson, managing director of Programs and Services for the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF), Syracuse University. That is a very big title.

Our fourth witness is Mr. Brian Lewis, executive director of customer operations at Consumers Energy.

Our final witness to this panel is Ms. Kandi Tillman, the managing co-founder at 50'sstrong.

I would like to welcome you and ask you to stand please and raise your right hands. Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to provide is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Okay, please be seated. Let the record reflect that all witnesses have answered in the affirmative.

Ms. Craig, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony on behalf of the VFW.

STATEMENT OF JOY CRAIG

Ms. CRAIG. Thank you, Chairman. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and its auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide our remarks on the Transition Assistance Program, or TAP.

Nearly 200,000 servicemembers leave the military each year with 80 percent separating before retirement. Military force management depends on a steady pipeline of new recruits to sustain operational readiness. This ongoing cycle underscores the importance of ensuring the Department of Defense delivers effective military to civilian transition programs.

For many servicemembers, joining the military is a means of securing stable employment or a path to upward mobility. It is a major life event and conversely so is transition.

Despite spending up to 6 months training new recruits, DoD provides only 5 days of preparation for their return to civilian life. Veterans who are not fully prepared face increased risks of underemployment, financial hardship, and suicide, especially within the first year after separation.

While DOD's primary mission is national security, it has legal obligations to provide transition services. Federal law mandates that all eligible servicemembers begin transition support no later than 1 year before separation. DoD must ensure timely TAP attendance and provide a warm handoff to community resources.

In October 2023, DoD testified before Congress that commanding officers frequently waived TAP attendance due to mission requirements, voluntary separations or personal choice. At the same hearing, the Government Accountability Office reported that 53 percent of all TAP waivers were approved with 22 percent of at-risk servicemembers skipping the mandatory 2-day track entirely.

DoD must allow more time for TAP participation, ensure command support for transition, tailor courses to different separation

types, expand access for guard and reserve members, and better integrate spouses into the process.

VFW's transition survey shows that future veterans' primary concerns after separation include finding employment, navigating service-connected disabilities, maintaining financial stability, and losing their sense of purpose and camaraderie. It is unrealistic to assume that every servicemember has a job waiting or a safety net to catch them on the outside.

The VFW recommends integrating transition support early and at multiple points throughout a servicemember's career rather than relying solely on the Transition Assistance Program. Poor enforcement of TAP attendance disproportionately affects junior enlisted servicemembers who are the most vulnerable post-discharge.

The VFW's transition survey highlights other issues with TAP. An Army E-6 from Fort Riley reported their unit did not provide adequate time for a smooth transition and described TAP as an overwhelming fire hose of information with no time to act on what was taught.

One sailor from Quantico was repeatedly pulled from TAP classes for operational duties, while another missed crucial instruction because they were not released from deployment in time.

These reports reveal a culture of prioritizing operational needs over transition. One area showing improvement is VA's TAP 6.0 program which has increased access to benefits counseling allowing in-person accredited representatives to help servicemembers navigate VA claims.

Since its launch in January 2024, VFW has reached 13,000 more members than the year prior, a 54 percent increase in engagement, which is why we urge Congress to pass the TAP Promotion Act to ensure all future veterans receive this essential assistance to claim their earned benefits as early as possible.

The transition experience can also have lasting effects on military recruitment. Poor transition can impact how veterans speak to their children and communities about the value of military service and could cause young people to be hesitant to join fearing their own post-discharge challenges.

To address these and other ongoing issues, which I have detailed in my written testimony, the VFW urges Congress to establish a key position within DoD to oversee transition. We recommend an undersecretary of defense for transition to oversee, coordinate, and modernize all transition programs.

As it stands, transition services are fragmented and inconsistently enforced at the unit level where operational priorities often take precedence. An undersecretary would provide Congress a single point of accountability and drive the necessary culture change within DoD.

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, this concludes my remarks. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOY CRAIG APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ms. Craig. The written statement Ms. Craig will be entered into the record.

Ms. O'Brien you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF ELIZABETH O'BRIEN

Ms. O'BRIEN. Good morning, Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. I am Elizabeth O'Brien. I am the senior vice president of Hiring Our Heroes, an initiative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation.

I have also been for the last 2 decades an active-duty military spouse and proud mother of three army brats during our Nation's longest conflicts. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak on the need to update and modernize Transition Assistance Programs for servicemembers transitioning from active duty to the civilian workforce.

Since our inception at Hiring Our Heroes, we have served over 1 million members and currently support 80,000 military-connected individuals each year. Economic opportunity sustains the all-volunteer force, but success depends on effective career navigation.

Programs like SkillBridge and employment related pathways are vital ensuring today's warriors become tomorrow's best recruiters. As we all know in 2011, the United States faced a crisis in veteran unemployment as young veterans struggled with rates soaring up to 30 percent. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation launched Hiring Our Heroes and we united forces with State and local chambers, businesses, Department of Defense, and Department of Labor, and the VA.

The public-private effort helped cut post-9/11 unemployment from 12.1 percent to 5.8 by 2015. However, today, veteran unemployment remains below non-veterans at 4 percent.

However, the unemployment data reveals little about the true employment journey of transitioning servicemembers. Research shows from McKinsey and Company that while veterans generally out earn civilians, 60 percent of transitioning servicemembers earn less in their first civilian job than in the military.

Penn State University reported that 61 percent of veterans feel unemployed, citing a mismatch between their skills and the civilian job opportunities. Edelman found that 62 percent of transitioning servicemembers could not secure a job at their desired level and the LinkedIn veteran opportunity report revealed that veterans are half as likely as civilians to reach leadership roles, again pointing to a disconnect between military experience and employer recognition.

The U.S. still falls short in post-military career support. The Rand study confirmed GAO's 2020 findings that 45 overlapping programs across 11 agencies with less than 5 percent of funding for job placement or skills translation. Most transitioning servicemembers need employment support, yet TAP is not solely designated for that.

Rand's 2024 report urged greater investment in employment programs and stronger Federal and nonprofit collaboration. SkillBridge, a DoD initiative, is the sole Federal transition program that turns conventional transition outcomes on its head.

For over a decade at Hiring Our Heroes we have facilitated and worked as one of the largest intermediaries in support of SkillBridge. In the past 5 years we have connected 10,600 fellows with 2,500 employers nationwide, inclusive of all ranks, 89 percent

job offer rate within 3 months, \$107,000 average starting salary, which is double the pay of an E-6 with 8 years of service and 20 percent higher than an O-3.

What we know is that experiential bridge programs close the gap around poor transition.

Our strategic insight report surveyed 1,900 SkillBridge participants and 381 non-participants. Time to employment was much faster for fellows, with 63 percent being employed within 1 month of transition versus 38 of non-participants. Fellows were far more likely to take a job for positive reasons.

Fellows who were more likely to recommend service to future generations with 61 percent saying they would recommend service versus 54 percent. Also, military spouse employment is key to veteran transition success providing financial stability and allowing the veteran to find the right fit job or upskilling opportunity.

Currently, Hiring Our Heroes facilitates the Department of Defense's military spouse career accelerator pilot. Since 2022 of December, we have placed over 1,000 spouses with an offer rate of 85 percent and 60 percent remote placement.

As we look forward to the future, HOH recommends the following areas of focus. Focus on more employment related services as part of transition. They should be prioritized while reducing or eliminating duplicative programs.

Expand opportunities for SkillBridge and apprenticeships. The programs help servicemembers showcase their skills, create informed career decisions playing a crucial role in successful transition.

The military to civilian transition is not a one-time——

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentlelady's time has expired.

Ms. O'BRIEN. Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF ELIZABETH O'BRIEN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You are sure welcome and thanks for that. Your written testimony will be entered in the record, which I actually read. I did.

Ms. Carson, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF BARBARA CARSON

Ms. CARSON. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on behalf of the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University.

Even in the best of circumstances we know that military to civilian transition can present significant challenges, yet the bar for a successful transition is often quite low focusing on unemployment despite data showing 62 percent of veterans are underemployed after 6-1/2 years.

When exiting service veterans are qualified to get jobs that reflect and respect their service and training. We should not assume that those jobs are the same ones that they did in the military.

Securing meaningful employment can help avoid enormous financial, social, and personal costs. These costs also have implications for our all-volunteer force and in turn our national security.

Data from the Military Family Lifestyle Survey, our collaboration with Blue Star families, as well as recent data that was recently published by Ipsos with Call of Duty Endowment as well as Mission Roll Call, both point to the hesitancy to recommend or pursue military service for the younger generation despite the positive perception of veterans.

The available evidence is a fundamental starting point for how we might improve TAP and the transition process and where TAP alone is not sufficient.

First, as a mandatory program, TAP must continuously be assessed to ensure it is accessible and meets the evolving needs of transitioning servicemembers.

Despite recent progress many still fail to begin TAP as early as required by law and some fail to attend the required portion at all. At the same time, we recognize the inherent tension DoD faces between prioritizing mission readiness and focusing on preparation for post-service life.

We must explore options that preserve flexibility for commanders to meet their compliance goals but also include consequences for noncompliance, such as integrating TAP participation into those performance evaluations.

Beyond TAP, our system of support is complex and not always aligned with what people need or what works best. There are currently 46 programs across 11 agencies which Rand estimates represent \$13 billion of expenditures every year. This investment skews heavily toward education services despite evidence that employment is the key component of most veterans' plans after service.

Budget and performance data for these programs is hard to come by making it difficult to address overlaps and gaps with existing programs. TAP is one of the few Federal programs that has been evaluated, and while it shows long-term employment benefits, effects on wages have been mixed.

Notably, wages were better when TAP was completed earlier and combined with access to other resources. The Veteran Metrics Initiative, or TVMI, a longitudinal study of post-9/11 veterans managed by Penn State University, found that in the months following separation, two-thirds of veterans used at least one program aside from TAP. A third used even more, and veterans who use more programs experience better outcomes.

Nonprofit initiatives like our Onward 2 Opportunity Program (O2O) contribute to these outcomes. O2O provides skilled training and credentialing to over 10,000 transitioning servicemembers, veterans of every era, and spouses each year.

As the only program that has been rigorously evaluated by a third party, O2O provides non-government efforts, many often operate more efficiently—excuse me. It shows that non-government programs operate more efficiently and effectively than some of the government counterparts.

In addition to data that is demonstrating the value of multiple programs aside from TAP, we know that transition is more than one moment in time.

Given this evidence, warm handovers must be easier between DoD, VA, and Labor, as well as to states and communities. We en-

courage appropriate data sharing with safety and other reduced barriers to enrollment and benefits and services at the Federal, State, and local level.

Further, though TAP can be a valuable resource, data suggests that only about half of military spouses engage with it. We encourage increasing their access and/or offering programs that are more tailored for them. Transition impacts the entire family unit and everyone benefits when spouses are prepared.

In sum, the evidence demands an accountable system of supports beyond TAP and government alone, empowering investment of scarce resources into programs that work best for veterans and their families during this critical time. Doing so not only impacts their well-being, successful transition benefits our communities, preserves the all-volunteer force, and ultimately strengthens our national security.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF BARBARA CARSON APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ms. Carson. Your written statement will be entered into the hearing record.

Mr. Lewis, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF BRIAN LEWIS

Mr. LEWIS. Thank you, Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and members of the subcommittee for the opportunity to discuss critical programs that support our Nation's veterans. My name is Brian Lewis, and I am the executive director of customer operations at Consumers Energy where I have worked for 12 years serving in a variety of customer-centric roles. Consumers Energy provides natural gas and electric service to nearly 7 million Michigan residents.

Prior to my civilian career I was a combat medic and a lab tech in the U.S. Army where I was entrusted with the lives of my fellow soldiers. When I transitioned to civilian life, however, I had to abandon medical aspirations as I found my Army training at that time had limited transferability limiting my job prospects.

The challenges veterans face finding transferable and meaningful civilian careers after service to our country are real and compelled me to seek out ways to advocate on their behalf, which I now support at Consumers Energy when veterans join the company.

At Consumers Energy we have more than 800 military veterans who take our pride of service beyond self, a passion we learned in the military, and apply it to a new mission, applying essential heat and light to our fellow Michiganders. Our company's efforts to support veterans is about our earnest desire to ease the often-difficult transition out of the military by providing a welcoming environment for colleagues with different backgrounds and experiences.

Our veterans-based resource group, the veterans advisory panel, provides space for employees to help drive policy change both within our organization and with external partners to better recruit, retain, and support veterans.

Today, the veterans advisory panel is one of the company's largest resource groups with over 500 members. Their feedback ushered in a partnership with the U.S. Department of Labor and led

to the registration of seven different job roles as approved apprenticeship programs.

Now, our veterans can use their GI bill benefits while on apprenticeships that prepare them for rewarding, lifelong careers.

We have also recruited veterans for pre-apprenticeship programs referred to as energy style boot camps hosted at a training center located in Congressman Barrett's district. In partnership with the Utility Workers Union of America and Power for America, these gas and electric boot camps have prepared over 300 veterans for energy careers by providing a pathway to apprenticeships that lead to high-paying, in demand electric and natural gas careers.

As you can imagine though, demand for these programs outpaces availability and each time a new boot camp opens we receive more applicants than we have spaces to fill.

While programs like these are meaningful, there is still work to be done. We encourage Congress to strengthen the connection between the Transition Assistance Program offices and companies in states that are not close to active-duty military installations.

We also see great potential in the Department of Defense's SkillBridge program but believe further coordination with the Transition Assistance Program will improve connections between veterans and prospective employers.

If you are an active duty servicemember of the military or a military veteran listening today my message is simple. Consumers Energy is the ideal career destination for you. We value your heart of service and the unique skills you bring to the energy industry.

We will do everything we can to provide opportunities in the field, at a plant, or in an office. We will invest in your development and give you the opportunity to thrive in a team that is essential to providing energy to Michigan.

Thank you again for the opportunity to participate in this discussion. Consumers Energy stands ready, willing, and able to support policymakers in improving economic opportunity for our Nation's veterans. With that, I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF BRIAN LEWIS APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Mr. Lewis, I want to thank you for your incredibly shameless pitch for your company. That was just so in your face. Let us just acknowledge it. Hey, thank you, sir. Did you go to Fort Sam?

Mr. LEWIS. I spent a year at Fort Sam with a bunch of sailors.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. That is right. Best year of your life—

Mr. LEWIS. Best year.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Your written testimony will be entered into the record.

Ms. Tillman, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF KANDI TILLMAN

Ms. TILLMAN. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, members of the subcommittee, thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today. I am here on behalf of 50's strong, an impact first small business that my husband and I co-founded in 2020. He was a former junior enlisted servicemember that served two tours with the Army Rangers.

Our mission is simple, to help strong employers build strong pathways for military talent and to provide easy virtual connections for those in transition.

Just last Thursday, hundreds of military-affiliated job seekers registered for one 50'stong event that featured 20 employers. Of those that registered, 25 percent identified as E-1 through E-4 ranks, 54 percent were military-affiliated students, and many were transitioning military opting in on their own.

After this one short virtual event 90 percent of those that attended say they discovered new civilian employment pathways and 98 percent said they would recommend it to others.

We did this almost every week.

In 2024, we supported approximately 200 employers, 100 education institutions, and nearly 13,000 military-affiliated job seekers. This was all done at no cost to those job seekers and at no cost to taxpayers. It is thanks to the support of 13 corporate partners.

Several years ago, a veteran at a Fortune 500 company said to me we want to hire more transitioning military. We do not know how to reach them efficiently. I still hear this every day from employers.

As a civilian with 20 years of experience in Fortune 500, this tells me that we need industry-enabled modern and accessible solutions that complement the critical role that government and non-profit organizations play.

I will offer four areas today for us to consider together. First, we must recognize that employment is critical to military transition and therefore employers are a critical stakeholder for any related policy.

According to Military One Source, nearly three-quarters of all those leaving active duty separate versus retire. As a reminder to us all, the vast majority of transitioning military will need civilian employment and it is employers that offer employment.

Second, let us recognize that SkillBridge has revolutionized employer participation in military transition in the last 6 years.

As one strong example, Lowe's has established a SkillBridge program that enables opportunities at any of their locations across the country. Last year 95 percent of their SkillBridge participants received a full-time job offer at the end of their fellowship.

This means that a servicemember returning home to Oshkosh, Wisconsin, or Bedford, New Hampshire, or Buckeye, Arizona, where I live, has a pathway to a strong future in their home community on day one of post-active duty.

I will also highlight Cushman and Wakefield, a global real estate services firm. They have taken on over a hundred SkillBridge interns to more than 30 different types of roles with a 90 percent full-time offer rate. My thanks to the bipartisan leadership of the past three administrations toward this phenomenal growth.

Third, we must find solutions that work for employers of all shapes and sizes, including small businesses that employ 47 percent of private sector workers in the U.S. Importantly, State and local Chambers of Commerce and industry-driven business associations and business vertical-supported groups are often key drivers of small business enablement.

Finally, we must recognize that military transition includes the very large number of those that enroll in school in what I will refer to as extended military transition, yet there is no at skill support to help them translate their skills from the military. There is little tracking of employment outcomes once they complete their education.

Yes, we must protect this investment and also we must recognize that any education training or certification program should honor our promise to those who have served by leading to meaningful employment, not dead end pathways that exhaust their hard-earned education benefits. We must also ensure that the funding is used as intended to intentionally support military-affiliated students.

Based on this I have a few recommendations. First, include diverse employer voices in all congressional hearings and roundtables, enhance TAP curriculum with industry-driven virtual career preparation, continue to support DoD's efforts toward strong employment outcomes, modify SkillBridge Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) requirements to maintain flexible internship models, champion local collaboration in your communities, develop a tracking mechanism for employment outcomes for all transition programs, and encourage all schools receiving post—

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF KANDI TILLMAN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentlelady's time has expired and, ma'am, your written testimony will be entered into the record. I read it, too, and you have some fantastic recommendations. You certainly do.

I now recognize the Ranking Member, Mr. Pappas, for 5 minutes to question the witnesses at his leisure.

Mr. PAPPAS. Well, thank you. I thought it appeared you were close to the end, but I think your recommendations are really important for the subcommittee.

Ms. TILLMAN. My last recommendation, thank you so much, sir, my last recommendation, encourage all schools receiving post-9/11 GI bill funds to allocate resources specifically for student veteran support services.

Mr. PAPPAS. Well, thank you for that, and maybe I could just turn to you for a question. You highlighted SkillBridge as a really important development, something that has been really working. Can you help us understand what the barriers are for more businesses to participate in SkillBridge and what we should be doing to ensure that that connection is made?

Because every time I am out in my district, I meet employers that have veteran employees and are incredibly eager to continue to find more. This is a time where most industries are continuing to hire, so talk about the need to make sure SkillBridge reaches more employers.

Ms. TILLMAN. Thank you so much for the question. SkillBridge is often an entry point for new employers that are trying to figure out how to engage with military talent. There was an important component of SkillBridge that has enabled so much growth and so much momentum in industry and that is the ability for employers to open internships through what we will refer to as third-party intermediary facilitators.

One recommendation I would like to make, I will point out that thanks to the DoD, the military to civilian transition office, tremendous efforts have been made to ensure strong outcomes in the last year's MOU updates.

There is one modification I would like to offer to ensure that new employers, particularly small businesses, can most flexibly engage in the program, and that is to delay Section 4.3.4 of the current MOU that requires individual MOUs for all host employers until a future date but mandate employment outcomes reporting immediately, as outlined in section 4.3.3 for the third-party facilitators that are making their participation possible.

Mr. PAPPAS. Well, thanks for that recommendation. I appreciate your focus on the small business community, too, which I know is valuable to all of our districts here.

Ms. Carson, if I can turn to you for a question? You highlighted your Onward 2 Opportunity Program, and can you tell us a little bit more about how that got started? What makes it unique and if there are lessons that can be translated from the success of that program to other initiatives that provide transition assistance?

Ms. CARSON. Thank you for the question. The Onward 2 Opportunity Program began with a philanthropic effort by the Schultz Family Foundation and it continues to this day with both corporate and philanthropic support.

It is credentialing, not made-up ones that we say that you have a badge from Syracuse University but industry recognized credentials in cyber, IT, Human Resources (HR), and the Project Management Professional (PMP), for example. We make that available at no cost thanks to those funders that I just mentioned.

When combined with a connection to employers it is a very successful intervention that, as I shared in my testimony written and verbal, has been evaluated by third parties. That is exactly what we would like to see with other interventions. What are the outcomes you intend and are you achieving them?

Mr. PAPPAS. Thank you very much for that.

Ms. Craig, if I can turn to you? I appreciate your testimony here today and I think you identified that push and pull relationship that exists between those who are actively serving in their command when it comes to setting aside time to prepare for transition.

Right now, there is only a small amount of time for TAP and some describe it as an experience like drinking from a fire hose. We hear that term all the time.

What suggestions do you want to highlight to ensure that folks can manage the flow of that water and that every servicemember is given adequate time to be able to prepare?

Ms. CRAIG. Thank you for that question, Ranking Member Pappas. As I mentioned earlier, you know, DoD does spend anywhere between 6 weeks and 6 months training, onboarding servicemembers to become warfighters but they are lucky if they get 5 days when they prepare to leave the military.

The real question is why only 5? Why cannot TAP be longer or segmented in a way that members touch base with the program multiple times throughout their service? We do believe that that would be a great question for an undersecretary of defense to investigate further.

The fire hose of information that they receive during those TAP classes they are given very little time to actually act on all the long to-do list that they create for themselves. We believe that TAP should be either extended in time or that commanders could be a little bit more gracious in giving servicemembers time on the clock to prepare for transition.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thanks very much.

I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields back.

The chair now recognizes Mr. Hamadeh from the great State of Arizona for 5 minutes, sir.

Mr. HAMADEH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to our witnesses and thank you Ms. Tillman for everything you and Kevin have done for promoting veterans and the entire Tillman family is near and dear to me.

You know, my first picture I hung up on my office wall was actually one of Pat Tillman and it is a constant reminder of the sacrifices our military servicemembers make. It reminds my staff and I always choose to hire veterans. I prioritize them first and foremost.

As we both know, Arizona's economy is growing and I want to make sure that our employers understand that the veteran pool is the best pool to, you know, to take from, especially with the growing economy and all the semiconductors coming in.

Ms. Tillman, I have got a question for you. What has been your experience working with the Department of Labor with the navigator program, the ENPP?

Ms. TILLMAN. Thank you so much for the question. I would like to offer when we first started 50'strong as a private small business, as you can imagine, navigating government here in DC was quite complicated for us. I will offer the Department of Labor VETS team was one of the first groups to welcome us in.

We have had the privilege of hosting and helping to host employer roundtables with Assistant Secretary Rodriguez and their team has been incredibly supportive and open to the employer community.

Also, as of January of this year, 50'strong is now an official partner of the DOL ENPP program. Referrals are just now starting to come in for that, but we do certainly look forward to further collaboration with their team. I am grateful for their team's efforts to include all types of organizations and employers.

Mr. HAMADEH. Do you have any other recommendations to make that program better?

Ms. TILLMAN. My recommendations are as what they would be for any other program. We have to continue to look toward outcomes. I will applaud the DOL team. They are tracking outcomes of the DOL ENPP program, and I appreciate that.

Mr. HAMADEH. What feedback have you received from the 200 employers that 50'strong works with when it comes to hiring veterans?

Ms. TILLMAN. It is important to note that the vast majority of those 200 employers are opting into our services at no fee. Of those that are coming what we always tell them is if you get value then please continue to come back.

You know, as a small business we will no longer exist if we are not offering value to all in our community and making sure that we are doing it in a way that is trusted and honored.

The feedback that we are hearing from employers is that, I just heard a feedback from an employer that came to one 50's strong event for their first time. They found two great candidates and they ended up hiring one of them.

We are incredibly appreciative to the employers that are coming prepared, offering pathways, and importantly, offering much-needed industry-led career preparation as part of the employment search.

Mr. HAMADEH. Thank you.

Mr. Lewis, what gaps do you most often see in hiring transition servicemembers versus civilians?

Mr. LEWIS. The gaps that we find—thank you for the question, Representative. I would say the gaps that we find most often is that they are still looking for the camaraderie that they had while serving and that is why we have been very diligent and investing in our veterans advisory panel that just led to hearing their challenges, their concerns, and their needs.

It is helped shape some of the benefit packages that we put forward, but I think that is it the most. They have rejoined the team at Consumers Energy, but they want to have the same level of esprit de corps that they had in their time in the service, so we are very deliberate about spending time, investing time in providing that social outlet so that they can feel a little what they had previously.

Mr. HAMADEH. How do you provide that?

Mr. LEWIS. Our veterans advisory panel has weekly and monthly meetings. We have an annual event where we will bring everybody together for Veteran's Day to celebrate their service. We have outside parties come in and speakers.

We continue to invest in the benefits policies, so we have 30 days of paid military leave that is fully paid. We do not require any kind of a gap fill there. We offer 1 year of complete gap fill pay as well.

We provide different mental health offerings. It is just being intentional about spending time with veterans, listening to their needs, and finding programs that meet those needs.

Mr. HAMADEH. Has the feedback been positive from the veterans?

Mr. LEWIS. Completely positive. I think the national average with self-identified veterans is around 7 percent. We have 12 percent at Consumers Energy and continue to fill that pipeline. We are intentional about going out and finding that talent.

Mr. HAMADEH. Very good, thank you. Thank you.

I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields back.

The chair now recognizes Ms. Ramirez from the great State of Illinois, my dear friend, ma'am, 5 minutes.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you, Chairman and thank you ranking member for holding today's hearing.

Thank you for the witnesses that are here. We know that the current attacks on the VA's workforce and its funding are alarming, and I personally am deeply concerned about the impacts those attacks will have on all veteran programs and services.

However, we know that the unique importance of the Transition Assistance Program has on veteran lives. Having ran a homeless shelter where we served a number of veterans experiencing homelessness, I know that the transition from military service to civilian life is distinct and complex.

From employment assistance to mental health services, housing support and access to continued education, our veterans deserve an integrated, streamlined, comprehensive approach to TAP that recognizes their sacrifices, honors their needs, and also provides them with the necessary tools, the resources and the support they need so that they can succeed.

While we continue to fight for full funding and staffing at the VA, given today's conditions we also have to be particularly aware of programs like TAP that provide essential support at a moment of significant transition in veterans' lives instead of recklessly reducing resources and capacity in the VA, which has the potential to impact veteran access to and experience of TAP. We should be instead investing in improvements to the TAP program so that we can meet the diverse needs of our veterans.

I have a couple of questions. Ms. Craig, in your testimony you shared that you believe transitioning out of the military presents unique challenges. You said that this includes shifts and identity, needing further education, struggling with employment, and overall a lack of support.

What additional support do you believe is still needed from our Federal agencies, particularly the VA, to ensure that the TAP program equips veterans to successfully reintegrate into civilian life?

Ms. CRAIG. Thank you for that question, Congresswoman Ramirez. We, the VFW, believes that the VA is doing the best that they can with, you know, the resources that they have at the time. I am sorry. Do you mind do you mind rephrasing the question?

Ms. RAMIREZ. What additional support? Are there any specific gaps in resources that Congress should be addressing as it pertains to the TAP program?

Ms. CRAIG. I would not say necessarily gaps in resources right now. The VFW is highly supportive of the benefits delivery at discharge program, which the VA is gracious enough to allow our representatives to go into that 1 day of their TAP course.

Our BDD reps are able to engage with servicemembers as they are transitioning and link them to the VA at the point of discharge, which we know that when servicemembers get away from the military and do not connect with VA, particularly within that first year, they are even less likely to circle back to the VA and they miss out on crucial resources and services that the VA provides.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you, Ms. Craig.

I want to shift gears now and ask a question to Ms. Carson. Your testimony highlights a key issue that many veterans face, the need for a longer period of plan separation from military service before that 1-year mark. Based on available research, what do you think is a recommended timeframe for servicemembers to begin that transition?

Additionally, as you are answering that question, how should we account for economic conditions when determining the timeframe? For example, if job growth is slowing or if certain industries are

seeing layoffs, should we be adjusting the timeline or tailoring resources accordingly?

Ms. CARSON. Thank you for your question, ma'am. This is a great one that has been looked at by TVMI, which I referenced, and they suggest, and we agree that at 1 year prior to separation it could be extended even more.

It is as easy potentially as making information available that is going to be provided at TAP available earlier. The VA does some of that right now at military it is part of the military lifecycle, being aware of the benefits that are available before you even begin to separate.

In terms of being sensitive to economic trends, we do need more data on that. That is not always available to those of us who are not within the government's data collection resources and that we could adjust and be more timely if that were provided.

One way to do that is to keep a longitudinal study and look in on servicemembers long before they have left service and continue long post-service. The TVMI would be, again, a great place to start the baseline for those questions to see that the four domains of health that have been identified are sustained.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you, Ms. Carson, I appreciate that. I mean, I could not agree more. We have to improve the system coordination. We need to be streamlining dual enrollment processing, staff up more navigators, and conduct greater outreach for the program earlier.

Instead, however, we are trying to stop a staffing purge that will create needless hardship for veterans. The actions of this administration, let me say on the record, are not progress. They are adored to privatization and they put servicemembers' transition to civilian—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentelady's time has expired.

Ms. RAMIREZ [continuing]. life in jeopardy and it is shameful.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentelady's time has expired.

Ms. RAMIREZ. With that, I yield back, Chairman. Thank you.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentelady yields back.

The chair now recognizes Representative King-Hinds from the Northern Mariana Islands for 5 minutes.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I made a promise to our local VFW chapter to extend their half a day to the folks here in DC, who represent the VFW during these testimoneys and to say thank you on their behalf.

I hear from Ms. Craig and Ms. O'Brien about the importance of providing spouse services, that they are included as part of the TAP program, and I just wanted to, kind of, hear more on that subject because I do believe that, you know, when families transition into civilian life it impacts the entire family. I want to hear your thoughts on what that would look like?

Ms. O'BRIEN. Thank you for the question. First and foremost, for the duration of a military servicemember's career if they have a partner, if they are married, the military spouse is expected to come alongside and is a very active participant oftentimes.

As we near transition, we find that military spouses are often included only on an opportunity where there is space available for

them to push in and to sit in. The reality is military spouses carry a huge burden to make a successful transition for the entire family.

We also know that military spouse employment, having the opportunity for spouses to go to work 5 to 6 years, especially 1 year before transition, has a direct impact on how the servicemember transitions out and the job that they select. If we have financial stability in the home, it provides the opportunity for the servicemember to make the right choice and the right fit in terms of employment.

Recommendation is certainly that military spouses are included in TAP, have the opportunity to come alongside and not only on a space available opportunity.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Thank you for that. I agree. This question is also for you. You mentioned that in terms of transitioning back into civilian life one of the issues is not necessarily unemployment but underemployment. How can we help address that issue?

Ms. O'BRIEN. Well, in terms of what Ms. Carson recommended beginning that process at least a minimum of a year out in terms of transition. We know oftentimes because we are not plugging military servicemembers into TAP at the right time it puts them further and further behind and they are forced then to take a job because there is economic pressure to feed our families, to ensure that there is a pathway to economic opportunity.

If we can start that process at minimum a year out and it allows them to figure out what is the right career for them, what skills do they need to acquire, how can they better articulate their soft skills that they bring to employers?

Each of those mile markers becomes increasingly more important and we see those that do not have the time to participate in TAP fully and to participate in SkillBridge end up underemployed over and over again.

There are programs in place. There are nonprofits that have the ability to fill the gaps where needed and to step forward and so creating a tighter synergy in that warm handoff is absolutely important and going back to at least minimum of a year participation.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back my time.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentlelady yields back.

The chair now recognizes Mr. Barrett from the great State of Michigan. Sir.

Mr. BARRETT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for hosting this committee today and want to thank the panelists for your time.

I know Ms. Tillman. I think you, kind of, were explaining through your remarks it reminded me a little bit of the difference between outputs and outcomes. The DoD will say, well, we put this many people through this program. This many people went through the TAP program and did this many briefings and everything else, but we never ask, well, what is the outcome of that?

We know how many outputs were done, but the outcome is still uncertain from there. I think that has got to be a shift in focus of what we do is less about how many people we run through a program and more about what the outcome of that is and the deliverable for it for the purpose of the veterans that it is supposed to be

benefiting. I appreciate your acknowledgement of that distinct difference.

Also, Mr. Lewis, thank you so much for being here from Michigan. Appreciate the partnership with Consumers and the work that you do employing veterans. I know first-hand men and women that I served with in the military who ultimately went and worked at Consumers.

I think a big part of what veterans are looking for, whether they consciously think about it or not, is they are looking for their next purpose in life.

They have a distinct purpose in the military. They know that. They can feel it. There is a mission behind what we do every single day.

Then as you leave service, I think you want to feel that same sense of purpose or at least a degree of that. You understand that military and civilian life are going to be different and they are not going to be entirely exact but having that sense of purpose is very important.

I am curious if you have had any lessons learned through the program that you are doing along the way that you have been doing it for over a decade now, I believe, of some of how you build that connection through that sense of purpose perhaps?

Mr. LEWIS. Thank you for the question, Representative. I know I am repeating myself but being intentional about it, like you have got to get started and I have seen too many employers that just do not get started.

Pulling a group of veterans together we will figure it out for you. We have opinions and we will share them, so I think really being intentional about providing time, getting that group together, hearing their voices. They are going to tell you how to recruit veterans, where you need to look, where we are falling short of a benefits package, and with that we can make those changes.

Veterans bring to the workplace a myriad of skills. They are dependable. They work safe. They show up on time. They execute. They know how to work in a team. If you get us together in a room, we will create the outcomes that are necessary. Just give us space.

It is an easy investment for companies to make. Far too often we fall short because we are focused on the task at hand where we can solve our own problems by getting folks engaged into their own futures.

Mr. BARRETT. Do you think that—and thank you for that. Do you think Consumers has recognized, look, there is a real purpose behind what your company does, right? It is life critical for, you know, home heating, for electricity, for, you know, all the various things that go into that?

Do you feel that that provides a natural fit for veterans to really have a very clear answer of the purpose behind the work that they are doing?

Mr. LEWIS. Absolutely. There is a purpose in our work. There is a beginning and an end. There is always a mission as we start the day. We ride in the literal storms sometimes to throw up power lines. Veterans connect with that very well because they are used to that.

They are used to being in uncomfortable positions for long periods of time because there are people in need and I think they find a greater outcome, a greater opportunity, a greater mission when they do work like providing energy to their citizens.

Mr. BARRETT. Sure. Thank you and the partnership you have with the facility in Potterville that you mentioned, I have toured that facility. I have seen it first-hand some of the work what they do.

When I was in the State legislature we got them approved for some of the tuition assistance programs that are available to our National Guard men and women there. Can you tell me a little bit about how that has worked from the Federal partnership that you describe with the Department of Labor?

Mr. LEWIS. Yes. Shout out to Amber Fogarty. She is my previous co-chair at the veterans advisory panel. She was very intentional with working with the Department of Labor to get seven different apprenticeship programs recognized.

I did not know that was an option when I was coming out of the service. I did not think about skilled trades. The fact that you can now take your GI bill and apply it to those apprenticeship programs and start making significant incomes immediately after service it is just, again, being intentional.

I know the Department of Labor has a program to have apprenticeships recognized. She went through that. I mean, it is a task for businesses to get involved in but the talent will follow those apprenticeship programs. Again, be intentional about it.

Mr. BARRETT. Thank you.

Last I will just say to each of you thank you again for being here. I think this really demonstrates that work has—there is a dignity that comes along with working and having that continued mission.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields back.

The chair now recognizes myself for 5 minutes. Again, hey, I am just going to cover this again. I am going to ask Ms. Craig, how much money do you guys get from the government?

Ms. CRAIG. Actually, Congressman, I am not sure.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Ms. O'Brien.

Ms. CRAIG. I do not believe any.

Ms. O'BRIEN. We have one solar energy grant from the Department of Energy.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. How about from the VA? From the VA? Do you get any money from the VA?

Ms. O'BRIEN. Do we?

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Yes.

Ms. O'BRIEN. No.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Ms. Carson.

Ms. CARSON. The IVMF receives Federal grants from the Small Business Administration and Commerce.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay but not the VA?

Ms. CARSON. Correct.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Correct.

Mr. Lewis.

Mr. LEWIS. No dollars from the VA.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Zero.

Ms. Tillman.

Ms. TILLMAN. No dollars from the VA.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Once again, I am not going to tolerate anybody fear mongering with my veterans period. We had the DoD here. We had everybody here. We had the VA here. There has not been a single incident that I can find anywhere where there has been even the most miniscule degradation of our ability to provide services or education benefits, medical benefits to our veterans, so knock it off.

Write that down. If any of you hear about any of that you call me personally. We are not going to tolerate it.

I met Elon Musk's number one person for the VA, not somebody cleaning the toilets. The first words out of his mouth was we will never cut our veterans' benefits period. I said that is great that was your opener because mine was going to be if you try cutting our veterans benefits I will rip it—oh, I almost was a senior chief just right there, okay?

We are not going to do it. They are not doing it. We are not doing it. He is not doing it so knock it off period. Done with that. It is stupid.

Ms. Craig, 11 agencies are involved in the Transition Assistance Program, is that correct?

Ms. CRAIG. I am sorry, Chairman, you said 11?

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You said, like, 11 agencies are involved in the TAP.

Ms. CRAIG. I believe the number of—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Or Ms. Carson? Who said that?

Ms. CRAIG. I think the number is greater than that. Ms. Carson. Ms. O'Brien and I both said that.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay, so how many people, like, how many people are out of these 11 agencies full-time equivalents. Do you have any idea?

Ms. CARSON. I do not know the answer to that.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Well, it is more than 11, I am going to say. If we have more than 11 agencies involved in something and we have a 52 percent success rate that is a failure. What we could probably, you know, surmise from this is that more agencies does not necessarily mean more better, okay? That is how I listen to people talk.

What we need to do is make sure across the board soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, everybody has the ability to go to this TAP program and here is what is going to change.

Oh, sorry, Mr. Lewis. This is what you were trying to say here. You want to hire veterans because they know where to be, when to be there, what to wear, and they are not high, right? Those are big things.

Mr. Pappas is in the restaurant business. He knows what I am talking about. Okay? Nothing is changing here. Nothing until it is on here in a line item that a commissioned officer is held responsible.

Let me tell you what I am talking about. The difference between the retirement pay for an O-5, which would be a squadron commander, a SEAL team commander, like a wing commander, you

know, I mean, like Colonel Johnson and they are really a lieutenant colonel. That is a phone colonel.

The difference between the pay for an O-5 and an O-6 retirement is \$3,000 a month. Hopefully, they live, what, 40 years like we did, 30 years? That is \$1 million. It is \$1 million difference between an O-5 and an O-6 retirement.

If I go to these screwballs and I am, like, hey, dude, you do not have your people going to TAP it is going to cost you \$1 million. You will have a 100 percent, 100 percent attendance rate, and that is my intention.

Again, an E-7 is making \$27,000 annually. These guys are making \$78,000 a month annually, O-5, O-6s are \$96,000 a month retirement. If I tell you right now if anybody is paying attention here, all you people in charge of stuff, I am coming for you. I am gunning for you O-5s and O-6s and you are trying to blame it on a first sergeant or a master chief? Nope.

It is on you and we will charge you \$1 million if you do not use these programs because you are statutorily obligated to do so. I do not have any questions.

You guys think I am joking. I am not. Okay? What do veterans bring to the workplace? Anger apparently, I do not know.

Listen, I want to thank you all for being here today for both panels. You are awesome. I really appreciate your work.

Ma'am, you are killing it. However, Oshkosh is not in my district, sorry. You got his right though.

If there is anything we can do collectively as a committee we will do it. I know that Mr. Pappas' intention. He is a good man. We are going to do what we can to help you regardless of your political party affiliation or what you do in the privacy of your home. We do not care.

We just want better for our veterans and I know you do, and I thank you very much. I think you are doing God's work.

I now recognize Mr. Pappas for any closing comments that he may have.

MR. PAPPAS. No, just a brief thank you. I really appreciate the contributions of this panel. You are all working in your own capacities to help meet the needs of those who wear the uniform of this country and their spouses and family members.

We are really grateful for it. I think there is a lot that I learned today from you all and the programs that you run, the way that you open doors of opportunity to veterans.

As I said before, you know, transition assistance has been a work in progress over a lot of years. It can continue to get better, but only if we engage, learn these lessons and help promote smart policies. We are all in on that proposition.

Thanks very much.

I yield back.

MR. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields back.

I ask unanimous consent that all members have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous materials. Without objection, so ordered.

This hearing is now adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:02 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENTS OF WITNESSES

Prepared Statement of Alex Baird

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and 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 military-to-civilian transition support and services, while enhancing interoperability and efficiency in our joint operations. We advance these goals primarily through the Joint Executive Committee (JEC), a VA-DoD interagency collaborative body co-chaired by the VA Deputy Secretary and the DoD Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness, and the JEC's subordinate Transition Executive Committee (TEC). As a result of the JEC and TEC, 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.

Joint Framework for Transition Success

The JEC is responsible for oversight and implementation of the Military to Civilian Readiness (M2C Ready) framework, which brings all interagency programs under one overarching umbrella, ensuring that transitioning Service members receive the necessary interconnected resources and support throughout the critical 365-days pre-to 365-days post-separation. The TEC, co-chaired by DoD, VA, and DOL, includes the Departments of Education and Homeland Security, the Small Business Administration, the Office of Personnel Management, and the Military Departments. The TEC is supported by tiered interagency collaborative groups that include a senior transition steering group, an overarching transition working group, a DoD/Military Departments transition coordinating council, and six standing focus area working groups (Employment, Performance Management, Curriculum, Integrated Reserve Components, Data Sharing/Information Technology, and Strategic Communications). and. In November 2024, the TEC established a subordinate interagency Mental Health Task Force to identify TEC inter-agency and intra-agency mental health touchpoints, resources, and tools; and assess information or data sharing connectivity and/or gaps across the full transition continuum. The desired outcome is synchronization closing the gap between clinical and non-clinical mental health support and services.

The JEC and TEC partnerships are best-in-class examples of effective Federal interagency collaboration and service delivery, providing leadership synergy and subject matter expertise that prioritizes our joint strategic goals, identifies challenges, and guides solutions to ensure continuous, meaningful improvement in TAP. The JEC and TEC support DoD's mission by ensuring readiness of our force; this includes preparing Services members and their families for transition. Over the last 7 years, DoD and our interagency partners have hosted numerous Military to Civilian Transition Summits that yielded two key outcomes: (1) we aligned disparate DoD 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.

Under the auspices of the JEC and TEC, 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.

As the new administration sets its priorities, there is a renewed commitment to working with our joint partners to establish new, bold, and transformative initiatives in transition support. The focus will be on creating a seamless continuum of care and assistance, leveraging data-driven insights, and strengthening partnerships to address emerging challenges. This collaborative vision will ensure that Service members, veterans, and their families receive holistic and adaptive support as they transition into civilian life. Through the JEC's stewardship of M2C Ready, and the TEC's collaborative forums, these priorities will drive forward-looking policies that enhance the long-term success of the transitioning military community.

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 toward areas of the process that need additional attention without creating duplicative programs or activities. The M2C Ready framework assists in identifying gaps in the transition process and facilitating agency efforts aimed at advancing the health, benefits, and support of Service members, Veterans, and their families.

Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

DoD is committed to supporting our Warfighters and their families as they complete their active military service and navigate the transition from military to civilian life. TAP is the foundation of that support, setting the conditions for successful transition by providing approximately 200,000 Service members each year with a common level of support—regardless of location, Service, or component—at over 200 locations around the globe. TAP is proactive in championing and implementing change; is markedly different and exponentially more effective than the program of 10, 5, or even 3 years ago; and provides Service members more comprehensive transition preparation, information, support, and services than at any time during our Nation's history.

TAP is first and foremost a Military Departments' Secretary and Commander program executed while Service members are on active duty. TAP is a statutorily mandated program that Service members are required to attend upon meeting eligibility requirements. To be eligible, and thereby required to attend TAP, Service members must have completed 180 days or more of continuous active duty in Title 10 active-duty status, to include Reserve Component members on active-duty orders. In the case of an anticipated retirement, pre-separation counseling must commence as soon as possible during the 24-month period preceding the anticipated retirement date. In the case of a separation other than a retirement, pre-separation counseling must commence not later than 365 days before the anticipated date. If a retirement or other separation is unanticipated with less than 365 before the anticipated retirement or separation date, or in the event a member of a reserve component is demobilized or deactivated when, as determined by the Secretary concerned, operational requirements make the 365-day requirement unfeasible, pre-separation counseling must begin as soon as possible within the remaining period of service.

The Secretaries and Commanders are committed to supporting TAP as both a Service member support program and a strategic readiness program. DoD supports the Secretaries and Commanders by leading collaborative interagency development and delivery of TAP. This design ensures fully informed prioritization and preservation of national defense strategic, operational, and tactical priorities governing active duty Service member requirements balanced with effective and timely TAP delivery supporting individual transition goals. The results directly support and enhance readiness, transition, recruiting, retention, reserve component affiliation, and sustainment of the All-Volunteer Force.

The John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 transformed TAP from a one-size fits all program to an individualized approach providing comprehensive, holistic, timely transition support focused on the Service member's needs and transition goals. Groups or cohorts transition on common timelines, but military-to-civilian transition is an individual activity. The unique personal circumstances, experiences, needs, and post-transition goals of each Service member determine whether that Service member requires employment, education, entrepreneurial, financial, housing, healthcare, or peer-to-peer support during their transition.

Today, TAP is agile and dynamic, and ensures both flexibility and relevance supporting Service member achievement of individual transition goals. Tailoring of the transition process to individual needs and goals provides flexibility. Service mem-

bers receive information and resources that best support their individualized preparation for transition. Relevance, predicated on preparation for civilian life, ensures Service members' buy-in and active participation. Flexibility, relevance, and individualization ensure TAP works and empowers transitioning Service members to become successful veterans who attain their goals and reach their potential in their chosen civilian career paths, and in so doing, strengthens their local communities and the Nation.

Today's TAP 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.

TAP Initial Counseling

For Service members with an anticipated retirement or separation, the TAP journey begins with an Initial Counseling (IC) session initiated no later than 365 days prior to their separation or retirement. DoD strongly encourages Service members with an anticipated retirement to initiate IC as soon as possible during the 24 months preceding retirement. Service members with an unanticipated separation or retirement initiate IC as soon as possible within their remaining period of service.

In 2022, the Military Departments developed Corrective Action Plans (CAP) to improve IC timeliness. The CAPs have already produced marked improvement with 65 percent of Service members meeting IC timeliness requirements in 2023, including 52 percent of those with anticipated separations or retirements beginning TAP no later than 365 days prior to separation or retirement. The CAPs include updates to internal Service administrative regulations and changes to the Inspector General checklist to provide for stricter grading criteria on timeliness. CAPs also include marketing to Service members to ensure understanding, training for commanders and senior leaders on the requirement as well as the benefits of attending TAP early, and additional training for TAP counselors. The full impact of implementing the CAP changes will not be manifested in the data until 2026 at the earliest.

During the individualized counseling session with a trained TAP counselor, the Service member completes an Individual Self-Assessment and begins development of an Individual Transition Plan (ITP). Based on the self-assessment, counseling, and ITP, 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 assignment details which TAP components, courses, 2-day tracks, and Career Readiness Standards are mandatory.

TAP Pre-Separation Brief

Once the IC and assessment are complete, the Service member attends the Pre-Separation 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. Pre-Sep provides the Service member with the knowledge and flexibility to determine when to use services based on their individual needs and transition timeline. October 2024 updates to Pre-Sep included addition of information on the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service programs and an interactive pdf resource guide.

TAP Courses and Tracks

During TAP, Service members 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. In 2024, the VA Benefits and Services course incorporated participation by Veteran Service Organizations identified by the VA.

Along with the core curriculum, TAP includes four 2-day workshops (tracks) to provide focused information and resources aligned with individual post-transition goals. The four tracks are Employment, Managing Your (MY) Education, Vocational (Career and Credential Exploration), and Entrepreneurship (Boots to Business). During initial counseling and 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.

Only Service members designated as Tier Level 3 are required to attend the elected track. In 2022, the Military Departments developed Corrective Action Plans (CAP) to increase Tier 3 track attendance. The CAPs have already produced marked

improvement with 83 percent (29.8K of 35.9K) of Tier 3 Service members attending a track in 2023. The CAPs include training for TAP counselors; reports for commanders identifying Service members who had attended and those who need to attend a track; and inclusion of track attendance in Inspector General checklists. The full impact of implementing the CAP changes will not be manifested in the data until 2026 at the earliest.

Military Departments may exempt Service members designated as Tier Level 2 from track attendance based on the results of their IC and self-assessment. Service members determined as Tier Level 1 are exempt from track attendance. In 2023 over fifty thousand Tier 1 and Tier 2 Service members attended a track (50.1K of 135K). Regardless of tier designation, DoD encourages every Service member to attend any or all the tracks in preparation for transition.

TAP Capstone

Conducted no later than 90 days before transition from active duty, Capstone is the final component of TAP. During Capstone, the Commander, or Commander's designee, reviews the Service member's transition journey to determine completion of all applicable components and individual preparedness for transition. Service members identified as needing additional support require a warm handover by the Commander or designee. These warm handovers may include connection 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 for transition beyond any identified by the TAP Counselor or Commander.

TAP Assessment

DoD uses the Transition Assistance Participant Assessment (TAPA) to capture Service member experiences and knowledge gained throughout the TAP process. TAPA, along with assessments from both governmental and non-governmental entities, allows DoD 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 sex. Participation in the TAPA is voluntary and anonymous. However, DoD encourages Service members to complete the TAPA after each TAP course to ensure continuous program improvement. 2023 TAPA results demonstrate that Service members perceived TAP as valuable and of high quality. 89 percent understand how to access post-transition resources; 87 percent plan to use what they've learned; and 86 percent feel prepared to meet their transition goals.

The TAPA also provides Service members the opportunity to self-identify barriers to TAP, with a 3-year average of only 1 percent of respondents perceiving a barrier (e.g., not allowed time away from work duties to attend TAP). While many operational, administrative, and individual factors contribute to this small percentage, DoD, Service Secretaries, and Commanders are focused on mitigating, reducing, and eliminating barriers.

Future TAP Enterprise Individual Self-Assessment

In 2024, DoD completed a year-long pilot at 17 military installations of an Enterprise Individual Self-Assessment (EISA) to replace the current Individual Self-Assessment. EISA is a standardized, evidence-based self-assessment tool that will assist in determining the likelihood the Service member will face major readjustment, health care, employment, or other transition-related challenges across nine life domains: social & relational, resiliency, hope, financial, employment, housing, sense of belonging, mental health resource awareness, and physical health resource awareness. The Military Departments will administer EISA twice, during IC at the beginning and during Capstone at the end of TAP, to inform and improve counseling, risk mitigation, support connections, and warm handover protocols. DoD contracted development of a modernized transition and reintegration information technology capability that will support EISA worldwide implementation in 2026.

Transition Support

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.

In 2023, DoD realigned SkillBridge 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 DoD, Military Departments, Service member, and industry partner assessments and requirements.

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. DoD programs provide trusted, factual, objective, and unbiased education and counseling support to members and spouses free of conflict-of-interest, delivered in a nonjudgmental manner, allowing individuals to make informed financial decisions to meet their goals and navigate potential financial challenges.

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.

InTransition

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 worldwide, specialized, telephonic transition coaching to facilitate the connection to a new provider, such as VA, community, or other providers.

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. DoD and VA are 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.

Common Separation Health Assessment

Improved collaboration across agencies and within DoD has led to a single, common Separation Health Assessment. This unified assessment supports both the VA disability compensation process and the required DoD health assessment at separation. By adopting a shared form for use by both VA and DoD, the need for Service members to complete multiple assessments is reduced. This change enhances the overall separation experience and boosts efficiency. The creation of a single Separation Health Assessment emerged from the JEC. Its purpose is to ensure continuity in both mental and physical healthcare during transition, increase awareness of the health effects of military service, and support Service members' eligibility for VA disability compensation, benefits, and services.

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.

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. Solid Start contacts 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.

DOL Employment Navigator and Partnership Program (ENPP)

In response to feedback from Veterans who stated that, while their TAP classroom experience was educational, they desired a more personalized approach, DOL developed, piloted, and implemented the ENPP. DOL Employment Navigators provide one-on-one, tailored career guidance and job seeking skills support to transitioning Service members and their spouses, as well as referrals to vetted partner organizations. ENPP is currently available at 40 military installations worldwide and is expanding.

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 on behalf of their Governor and carry out the responsibility for Veteran services and programs in their respective states or territories. Additionally, SDVA's welcome Veterans and connect them to Federal and State benefits, support, high-quality care, and recognition they have earned. TAP curriculum includes introductory information and links to SDVAs for 54 states and territories and the District of Columbia.

Recognizing the importance of data, in both outreach and connecting Veterans to services and resources, DoD updated our data-sharing Memoranda of Understanding with SDVAs. In addition to sharing DD Form 214: Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty data with SDVAs, Service members can also share contact information from the DoD Form 2648: PreSeparation Counseling Checklist with SDVAs up to a year prior to separation, providing SDVAs the ability to proactively engage with and support Service members' transition experience.

Conclusion

As illustrated in our recent Report to Congress and highlighted in this statement, the Military Departments achieved significant improvements in IC timeliness and Tier 3 track attendance. Additionally, the number of Service members reporting a perceived barrier to TAP remains low, demonstrating Commanders' commitment, prioritization, and support of TAP and their transitioning Service members. DoD will work with the Military Departments to ensure continuous improvement across TAP and are confident that improvements evidenced in 2023 will continue and further validate the positive steps the Military Departments put into place.

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss the Transition Assistance Program. Military to civilian transition is an ever-evolving, complex, and multi-faceted environment in which the diversity of individual goals equals the number of transitioning Service members. TAP is and must remain adaptive while vigilantly maintaining programmatic focus on three foundational and complimentary tenets: effective counseling, Service member buy-in, and meaningful support connections throughout the transition period. Correspondingly, TAP will sustain emphasis on an individualized approach that best meets each Service member's post-transition goals. To that end, TAP will remain innovative, proactive, transparent, and collaborative. DoD, working closely with the Service members, Military Departments, interagency partners, and Congress, will continuously improve transition services while building upon current successes to achieve ever-improving outcomes for Service members through TAP.

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

Prepared Statement of John Green

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss how we can strengthen the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). Accompanying me today is Ms. Regina Yount, Assistant Director, Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). I appreciate your continued support of the Nation's Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. Within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), our focus will always remain on keeping Veterans and their families at the center of everything we do.

The military to civilian transition period can present many challenges for Service members, including increased risk for suicide, homelessness, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance use disorders, to name just a few. Connecting Veterans to the benefits and services they have earned and deserve serves as protective factors, guarding against threats to their overall mental, physical, and financial well-being. VA recognizes that transition starts well before a Service member leaves the military and continues for months or even years, as they seek stability at home, at work, and in their community.

Established in 1991, TAP is an interagency effort, led by the Department of Defense (DoD) and designed to help more than 200,000 transitioning Service members annually. Together, with interagency partners such as the Department of Labor (DoL), Small Business Administration, Office of Personnel Management, Department of Education, and Department of Homeland Security, TAP helps equip transitioning Service members with the tools they need to succeed in civilian life, including needed access to benefits and services. In partnership with these agencies, VA takes a comprehensive approach, ensuring the implementation of a tailored program that evolves with the changing needs of transitioning Service members. The connections VA makes during the TAP course are building blocks for the relationship we aspire to have with Veterans for a lifetime, as their needs evolve and change.

During classroom instruction, VA leads a 1-day Benefits and Services Course that helps Service members understand how to navigate resources available within VA, as well as how to access the benefits and services they have earned through their military service. Spouses and caregivers are also invited to participate in the course, as VA recognizes and values them. During Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, Benefits Advisors assisted over 206,000 transitioning Service members by delivering 6,039 Benefits and Services Courses (5,767 in-person and 272 instructor led virtual) to over 153,000 transitioning Service members, Veterans, their families, and caregivers. Additionally, 52,898 individuals completed the eLearning online VA Benefits and Services course through the VA Transition Online Learning at tapevents.mil. During the same period, the VA Benefits and Services Course had a satisfaction rate of 96.3 percent for in-person instruction and 93.6 percent for virtual classes.

As the needs of transitioning Service members evolve, so must the delivery of our transition services. To that end, VA has made the following updates to the 1-day Benefits and Services Course.

VA understands the integral role Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) have in assisting transitioning Service members. Knowing the importance of fostering supportive relationships, in January 2024, VA began inviting accredited VSO representatives (working on or near military installations) to directly connect with attendees during the VA Benefits and Services Course. The goal of these interactions is to increase benefit utilization through information sharing and by creating lasting connections with VSOs. Since the start of this initiative, VSOs have connected with over 53,000 transitioning Service members through the VA Benefits and Services Course. Surveyed course participants have an overall satisfaction rate of 95.7 percent for these VSO interactions.

TAP also goes beyond classroom instruction. VA Benefits Advisors provide one-on-one sessions for transitioning Service members and their families that are based on each individual's specific or unique needs. In Fiscal Year 2024, VA conducted more than 54,000 one-on-one sessions.

The most prevalent topics during one-on-one appointments with Benefits Advisors have been education benefits, disability compensation, and health care questions. The percentages of each topic are the following:

- 42 percent (over 22,800) on claims and application support;
- 42 percent (over 22,700) on education and training program benefits; and
- 34.5 percent (over 16,000) on health care benefits and support services.

To increase direct connections for transitioning Service members, VA modernized the sign-up process for one-on-one appointments. As of October 2024, Benefits Advi-

sors are using Quick Response (QR) Codes to enable Service members to connect directly with them via e-mail to ask questions or to request a one-on-one session. Based on this enhancement, VA has seen an increase in the number of one-on-one appointments made, from 33 percent in quarter one of Fiscal Year 2024 to 40 percent in quarter one of Fiscal Year 2025.

VA continues to enhance access to critical information outside of the Benefits and Services Course. Military Life Cycles are 45-to 60-minute information sessions that can be accessed anytime throughout a Service member's career or after separation. Transitioning Service members and their spouses, who may need to refer to the information provided during the TAP week, can access information at their leisure.

In 2024, VA added a session for Service members discharged for Other Than Honorable conditions. Along with this new course, during the same period, 21,282 Service members, Veterans, and their spouses utilized Military Life Cycles that covered 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; and
- Disability Compensation.

VA understands that major life transitions, including separation from the military, can lead to an increased risk of suicide. To address the increased risk, the Transition Executive Council has created a VA-DoD-DoL Task Force. Established in December 2024, the Task Force has been charged with the following:

- (1) Identifying and refining the mental health touchpoints along the transition continuum.
- (2) Evaluating the effectiveness of the mental health touchpoints connection through referral and warm handover processes to resources and tools for mental health services during the critical 365 days pre-separation to 365-days post-separation.
- (3) Establishing a standardized referral process between VA and DoD, which may leverage programs including inTransition,¹ Military OneSource,² and Solid Start, among others.

Further, VBA has been diligently working on updating communication to Veterans, to include trauma-sensitive written correspondence and forms. VA made several updates to letters including those addressed to Veterans who have experienced military sexual trauma. VBA is continuing to update its letter inventory to ensure a customer-centric approach.

VA's support of transitioning Service members does not end with separation. VA continues our support during the critical first year following release from active duty through the VA Solid Start Program.

VA research shows that during the first-year of transition, Veterans face increased challenges with homelessness, family reintegration, employment, PTSD, and substance abuse, all of which can increase the risk for suicide. The VA launched the Solid Start Program on December 2, 2019, to make early, consistent, and caring contact with newly separated Service members. On October 17, 2022, Solid Start was signed into law (P.L. 117-205), permanently authorizing VA to continue the program with DoD coordination.

In Solid Start, VA calls all eligible, recently separated Service members, regardless of their character of discharge, at three key stages (90-, 180-, and 365-days after separation) during their first year after separation from active duty. Using data provided by DoD, Solid Start provides priority contact to individuals meeting certain

¹ <https://www.health.mil/Military-Health-Topics/Centers-of-Excellence/Psychological-Health-Center-of-Excellence/inTransition>

² <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/>

mental health risk factors, supporting continuity of care, and lowering any barriers to accessing mental health care treatment and support through VA. These representatives receive specialized training to recognize the signs of crisis and, when needed, can provide a warm transfer to the Veterans and Military Crisis Line for additional support. Since the launch of Solid Start through January 2025, VA has reached 57 Veterans who were actively in crisis at the time of the call and successfully connected them to the crisis line for support.

Solid Start representatives address challenges recently separated Service members may be facing by connecting the individual with the appropriate benefits or resources for assistance. Solid Start calls are not scripted, and they do not have any talk time limitations. Representatives ask open-ended questions that seek to establish the individual's status and potential needs. Follow-up materials or connected resources are also driven by these individualized calls and are unique to the Veteran's needs. By establishing a personal, one-on-one relationship with VA in the first critical year post-separation from active duty, Solid Start aims to increase the likelihood that transitioning Service members will stay connected to VA and utilize VA benefits and services, including mental health resources when needed. Since the launch of the program, Veterans who successfully connected with Solid Start have shown increased benefit utilization compared to those with whom Solid Start was unable to successfully connect.

Since its launch, through January 2025, Solid Start has successfully connected with 556,702 recently separated Service members, representing a 74.3 percent successful connection rate. In addition to improving successful connection rates year over year, VA analyzes benefit utilization rates for Solid Start-eligible, recently separated Servicemembers. For those who had successful connections, benefit utilization of compensation, education, health care, home loan, Veteran Readiness and Employment, and Personalized Career Planning and Guidance (PCPG) are higher than for those who did not successfully connect with a VASS representative.

To continue improving connections between active duty and Solid Start, TAP will be launching one-on-one data sharing with Solid Start using the Visitor Engagement Reporting Application (VERA) by April 2025. During one-on-one engagements with Benefits Advisors, transitioning Service members will be able to share information with Solid Start regarding VA benefits they are interested in or plan to enroll in or apply for. The goal is to provide Solid Start representatives with enhanced individualized information that enables VA to get to know the transitioning Service member and their interests before they separate.

Part of ensuring transitioning Service members, Veterans, and their families are cared for and experience a smooth transition into civilian life involves providing them with access to tools needed to address their overall economic well-being and enable their success as valuable community members and leaders. While multiple programs within VA provide pathways to financial well-being such as Education and Veteran Readiness and Employment services, two additional programs that help in this area are highlighted below.

The PCPG program is a critical VA benefit that provides career counseling, assessment, education planning, and guidance resources. This service is customized to each Veteran's needs, supporting them in achieving their personal, career, and education goals. PCPG, also known as Chapter 36 services, fulfills 38 U.S.C. § 3697A requirements by providing these services to transitioning Service members, Veterans, and qualified dependents, who are within 6 months of leaving the military, to Veterans who have left the military within the past 12 months, or at any time to individuals who are eligible to use a VA education benefit. PCPG career and education counseling services include resumé support, education and employment planning, detailed skills assessment, a personalized action plan to achieve education and career goals, adjustment counseling to successfully transition to civilian employment, and a direct connection to VA benefits and services. In Fiscal Year 2024, PCPG processed 14,931 applications requesting services.

The Veteran and Spouse Transitional Grant Program (VSTAGP) is a new 5-year grant program which was established to provide sustainable employment transition assistance services to former members of the Armed Forces who are separated, retired, or discharged from the Armed Forces and to their spouses. Transition services include resumé assistance, interview training, job recruitment training, apprenticeships, employment training and education, and employment referrals, including placement and related services that may contribute to a successful transition into civilian life. Fiscal Year 2025 is the first year of performance for VSTAGP, which has 13 geographically dispersed recipients providing services to former Service members and spouses. As of January 2025, all grantees are signing up applicants and providing services, and, while VA expects our first performance data metrics

from grantees to be available in April 2025, we already have some good news stories to share.

For example, a Veteran believed he was ineligible for VA services. After experiencing homelessness alongside his wife and two children, he felt hopeless, struggling to face his family under the weight of their circumstances. Fortunately, he learned about VSTAGP and connected with the Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) Southern California. Through their employment services, he not only regained confidence but also secured a stable job as a non-emergency ambulance driver, earning \$24.22 per hour. Additionally, JVS was able to leverage other Veteran support programs to help the family secure permanent housing, providing them with the fresh start they so desperately needed. This story and many others like it exemplify the lifelong connection to VA that we are seeking to build so they know to come to us during the downturns in life.

VA also recognizes that the full transition to civilian life does not have a set end date and differs from individual to individual. VA ensures a Veteran, spouse, family member, or survivor can connect with VA at any time in their life journey by building positive lasting relationships with them before and after leaving active service.

Through a robust outreach program, VA provides a variety of benefits and services that can help reduce risk factors associated with suicide and promote protective factors for some Veterans. Outreach is conducted in local and regional areas by VA regional office personnel through in-person or virtual events. During these events, VA representatives address VA's benefits and services such as disability compensation, pension, and education/GI Bill benefits while also connecting them to healthcare resources. During Fiscal Year 2024, VBA conducted 62,661 hours of outreach across 18,526 events. Out of these events, 1,003 were held at military installations, demonstrating VA's continued dedication to providing access across the transition continuum.

In addition to the VA-led efforts for outreach, VA supports DoL's Off-Base Transition Training (OBTT) Program. VA facilitates virtual, bi-weekly 45-minute VA benefits overview sessions providing active-duty Service members, Veterans, spouses, survivors, and their families with the information they need to access their earned benefits. Each session includes time for questions to be answered and participants receive a resource list to connect them with more information on the benefits and topics that were discussed during the session. Since launching the collaborative effort in June 2024, VA has facilitated 16 VA benefits overview sessions. VA and DoL will continue to collaborate and improve the OBTT program.

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 all transitioning Service members. 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.

Conclusion

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 Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, this concludes my testimony. I am happy to respond to any questions you or the Subcommittee members may have.

Prepared Statement of Margarita Devlin

**STATEMENT OF
JUANA 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**

March 25, 2025

Introduction

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, 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 taken to continue modernizing and reforming the program.

The mission of the Department of Labor's (DOL), Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS), is to prepare America's veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses for meaningful careers; provide them with employment resources and expertise; protect their employment and reemployment rights; and promote their employment opportunities. VETS administers programs designed to address the employment, training, and job security needs of approximately 200,000 military service members who transition to civilian life each year, 8.4 million veterans in the U.S. civilian labor force,¹ 754,991 National Guard and Reserve members,² and 901,882 military spouses (561,008 active duty and 340,874 Guard and Reserve spouses).³ Along with our partners, VETS is committed to ensuring a successful transition from military to civilian life.

It is always a pleasure for me to testify before this Subcommittee. I am honored to have served veterans for 30 years as a career federal employee. After nearly four years serving in my current role at VETS, I have seen firsthand the passion, talent, dedication, and innovative spirit of our employees, many of whom are veterans themselves. Our partners across the interagency space are also incredibly dedicated. We continue to work together to improve our programs that support the military-to-civilian transition. But we recognize that transition occurs in an ever-evolving landscape, and this requires us to continuously review and improve our services.

We understand that the transition to civilian life is not a one-size-fits-all process, and we are committed to adapting our programs to meet the particular needs of our individual service members, veterans, and their families. We acknowledge that no program is perfect, and there is

¹ Civilian noninstitutional population aged 18 years and over. Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) – 2024: <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat48.htm>.

² Department of Defense (DoD), Defense Manpower Data Center, Military Personnel Report, Selected Reserve Personnel by Reserve Component and Rank/Grade, November 2024: <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>.

³ Military OneSource – Demographics Profile, 2023: <https://demographics.militaryonesource.mil/>.

always room for growth. That is why we actively seek feedback from transitioning service members (TSM), veterans, military spouses, Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), and other stakeholders, and we incorporate their insights into our policy and program designs. We are not satisfied with maintaining the status quo. Instead, we tirelessly pursue innovation to ensure that TAP remains relevant, effective, and impactful. To achieve this goal, we have piloted programs, enhanced our curriculum, and strengthened interagency partnerships. The Employment Navigator and Partnership Program (ENPP) is one example of how we have responded directly to the needs of our service members, many of whom have told us that participating in TAP, while informative, can feel like drinking from a fire hose. We listened to their feedback and designed the ENPP pilot to provide tailored, one-on-one employment guidance, and its success has led to its expansion as a permanent program. This initiative exemplifies our commitment to evolving alongside the needs of transitioning service members.

TAP Overview

TAP provides training, resources, and assistance to separating and retiring service members on active duty in the Armed Forces, including those on Guard or Reserve duty, as well as their spouses, pursuant to 10 U.S.C. § 1144. TAP is a cooperative effort among DOL, the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Education (ED), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), 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 TSMs—including participation in pre-separation counseling and the completion of courses provided by the newly-established interagency partnerships—to start no later than 90 days prior to a service member's anticipated date of transition. To implement these requirements, DOL, DoD, VA, and SBA collaborated to prepare new curricula and expand training, education, and transition activities to include Career Readiness Standards, a specified set of common activities for service members to complete.

The John S. McCain NDAA for FY 2019 (P.L. 115-232) required TAP classes to commence 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, and operated under a more suitable timeline.

More recently, additional improvements were enacted for TAP in the FY 2024 NDAA (P.L. 118-31), which amended 38 U.S.C. § 320 to add the Assistant Secretary of Labor for VETS to the DoD-VA Joint Executive Committee (JEC). The JEC serves as the primary executive-level federal interagency body for overseeing and supporting transition assistance activities and initiatives for Active and Reserve Component Service members. The FY 2024 NDAA also

renamed the Job Training and Post-Service Placement Executive Committee as the Transition Executive Committee (TEC). The TEC's more targeted mission is to identify areas of improvement in job training, military to civilian transition, and post-service placement.

TAP Employment Workshops

In FY 2024, VETS conducted 10,888 TAP employment workshops, providing instruction to 227,183 participants.⁴ There are three core VETS TAP employment workshops. First, VETS is responsible for delivery of the Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition (EFCT) Workshop, which is a mandatory, one-day employment preparation course. The EFCT Workshop is a foundational workshop that introduces the essential tools that TSMs and their spouses use during their job search. In FY 2024, VETS conducted 5,685 EFCT workshops, providing instruction to 138,698 participants.

VETS also offers two elective tracks, each provided as a two-day workshop: (1) the DOL Employment Workshop (DOLEW), and (2) the Career and Credential Exploration (C2E) Workshop. Service members must elect a single two-day track during their individual counseling; however, they are encouraged to attend additional tracks and repeat courses—as needed—to ensure adequate preparation for their transition to the civilian workforce.

The DOLEW is for those service members pursuing employment after their transition. It covers best practices in civilian career exploration, including providing in-depth training on interview skills, building effective resumes, and using emerging technology to network and search for employment. In FY 2024, VETS conducted 4,115 DOLEWs for 72,898 participants.

For those service members on the vocational track, the two-day C2E workshop offers opportunities for participants to complete a personalized career development assessment of their individual occupational interests and abilities. Participants are guided through a variety of career considerations, including labor market projections, educational opportunities, certifications, licensure requirements, and the availability of Registered Apprenticeships that can lead to industry-recognized credentials. In FY 2024, VETS conducted 1,088 C2E workshops for 15,587 participants.

In January 2025, VETS launched an update to its EFCT curricula based on stakeholder feedback. The VETS TAP curriculum development team compiled and categorized input from the following stakeholders:

- TAP service members (through survey results and written comments via the Transition Assistance Participant Assessment);
- DOL TAP facilitators;
- VSOs;
- VETS federal field staff; and
- TAP interagency curriculum subject matter experts (SMEs).

⁴ 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.

The VETS TAP curriculum development team used stakeholder input to reorganize workshop content for better flow in the classroom, to remove redundancies, and to add content on responsible use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools. VETS piloted the revised curricula at several military installations, and made further refinements based on SME, facilitator, and participant feedback received during the pilots. VETS followed a similar process with the C2E curriculum, and, as of January 2024, offers apprenticeship-specific resume preparation.

VETS workshops are highly rated by attendees. The results of the FY 2024 Transition Assistance Participant Assessment, through the second quarter, indicated that 96 percent of participants would use what they learned in their own transition planning, and 94 percent 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 offers two employment workshops designed to address the unique needs of military spouses, caregivers, and wounded, ill, and/or injured service members:

Military Spouse and Caregiver Employment Curriculum: In February 2021, VETS launched a monthly series of career workshops to provide employment assistance to transitioning military spouses, known as the Transition Employment Assistance for Military Spouses and Caregivers (TEAMS) curriculum. TEAMS workshops help military spouses plan and prepare for their job search in pursuit of their employment goals. VETS offers eleven TEAMS courses that combine current curriculum components developed for service members, such as resume development and interviewing techniques, with components specifically tailored to the needs of military spouses—who often face unique challenges and complexities with obtaining employment due to frequent relocations, among other things. In collaboration with SBA, VETS offers its entrepreneurship course through TEAMS. In addition, as a result of our TEAMS staff collaboration with Hiring Our Heroes, an organization sponsored by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, VETS created and is providing a specialized one-hour federal hiring seminar for military spouses at monthly Amplify events, which are free career development events for military spouses hosted by Hiring Our Heroes. In FY 2024, VETS provided 411 TEAMS workshops for 2,523 military spouses and caregivers. We continue to work with our partners at DoD to schedule and promote in-person TEAMS events at DoD military installations and to offer live TEAMS workshops virtually.

Wounded Warrior and Caregiver Employment Workshop (WWCEW): Each year, there are approximately 20,000 wounded, ill, and/or injured (WII) service members who are transitioning either through their service branch's warrior care or military recovery units or through the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) program.⁵ In April 2022, VETS launched the WWCEW for these TSMS as an alternative means to fulfill the required one-day EFCT workshop. These TSMS face more complex recovery journeys and associated barriers to completing the traditional EFCT workshop. They may encounter difficulty coordinating their class schedules with medical appointments, attending classes of a long duration, working on

⁵ Military OneSource – Demographics Profile, 2023: <https://demographics.militaryonesource.mil/>.

assignments with medical and health restrictions, and requiring assistance from their caregiver to attend a class. To reduce these challenges, WWCEW is offered at *TAPEvents.mil*, which is DoD's online transition learning system where participants can complete the workshop at their own pace. This online course interface enables participants to register for a virtual session where a VETS facilitator is available to answer their questions and clarify course content. In FY 2024, 11,853 participants completed WWCEW.

Military Life Cycle (MLC) Curriculum: With the adoption by the Services of the MLC approach, TAP begins earlier in a service member's career. The MLC emphasizes career readiness planning at every career step for all service members at key milestones during their service, providing multiple opportunities to align their military career goals with their civilian career goals upon separation. The MLC enables service members to follow a well-planned, organized progression that empowers them to make informed career decisions and to take responsibility to advance their personal professional goals. For example, in FY 2024, VETS added a new course to its MLC course library, entitled, *Set Yourself Apart Using STAR*; this course instructs participants on how to write achievement statements using the Situation, Task, Action, and Result (STAR) method to effectively communicate accomplishments by outlining the STAR in a concise and impactful manner. The MLC curriculum is self-paced and is available to service members online and on demand. VETS plans to develop an additional MLC employment related course each year in coordination with our interagency partners.

Off-Base Transition Training

In January 2022, VETS launched 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 employment workshops to veterans and their spouses at locations other than military installations 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 has since expanded to nine additional states (Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, New Jersey, New Mexico, Nevada, New York, Oregon, and Washington) and the District of Columbia. VETS prioritized expansion to states with high rates of veteran unemployment, with preference given to states that have provided recently-separated veterans with Unemployment Compensation for Ex-servicemembers (UCX) at a high rate. The five-year authorization for OBTT will end on January 5, 2026.

The OBTT workshops are offered in-person at various times and locations in the pilot states, as well as virtually nationwide. In FY 2024, 14,731 veterans and spouses attended 2,977 virtual and in-person OBTT workshops. These figures represent a 43 percent increase in participant interaction from FY 2023, demonstrating significant interest in OBTT workshops.

OBTT comprises ten two-hour workshops and three one-hour seminars facilitated by existing TAP contract instructors. Facilitators have extensive understanding of course material and receive supplementary training specific to a veteran audience. Utilizing the existing network

of cross-trained facilitators provides flexibility for the execution of OBTT workshops across the nation. Current workshops cover the following topics:

- Marketing Yourself
- Understanding Resume Essentials
- Creating Your Resume Workshop
- Interview Skills
- Employment Rights
- Federal Hiring
- LinkedIn Job Search
- LinkedIn Profiles
- My Next Move
- Salary Negotiations
- Job Fair Strategies and On-the-Spot Interviews
- Networking and Professional Introductions at Job Fairs
- Federal Hiring Overview

OBTT is a critical component of transition—particularly for those who have been separated from the military for over ten years, as TAP participation was not mandatory for separating service members until 2011. The flexibility OBTT provides allows for greater participation in essential training, which leads to better employment outcomes. As one OBTT participant commented: “The content of tying my military experience to civilian and putting it on paper stood out to me as I had never written a resume. This workshop [Creating Your Resume] provided great examples and resources on how to prepare for writing my own. Speaker was well prepared, well organized, engaging and presented the topic in a thorough way. Overall, an outstanding resource, I would recommend OBTT, 5 stars all the way!” Moreover, 85 percent of participants would recommend OBTT to other veterans and spouses, and 85 percent of participants also found their respective workshop(s) to be informative and helpful in their job search.

Employment Navigator and Partnership Program

ENPP commenced at 13 military installations worldwide on April 1, 2021. ENPP leverages the Secretary of Labor’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. After 2 ½ years of initial implementation, our preliminary analysis of employment outcome data indicated a positive impact from the ENPP pilot. Based on these factors, VETS established ENPP as a program on October 1, 2023, and has since scaled it up, adding 10 installations in FY 2024 for a current total of 40 ENPP sites.

Through our full-time contract Employment Navigator staff and our employment partners, ENPP clients receive assistance with their resumes and career direction, as well as referrals to DOL-funded American Job Centers and vetted ENPP Partner organizations, which provide additional personalized support. ENPP Partners are required to select a primary service from 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,⁶ and organizations that are interested in partnership with VETS can submit an application.⁷ In FY 2024, 6,300 TSMs and 346 military spouses received services through ENPP.

At ENPP sites, the lead Employment Navigators also serve as the initial points of contact for TSMs receiving a “warm handover”, a person-to-person connection between the TSM and an American Job Center. 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, a service member must have either a completed resume or received confirmation of employment. If a service member fails to meet the employment track for CRS, they are provided a warm handover, which connects them to designated services and follow-up resources as needed.

For example, Employment Navigators who participate in a warm handover at ENPP sites help connect TSMs to a designated point of contact at an American Job Center, which then verifies with DOL that the Center has received contact information for, and reached out to, the service member to offer assistance. In addition to being connected with an American Job Center closest to where they reside, many service members who receive a warm handover also obtain services from our Employment Navigators and partners. Providing TSMs with support from ENPP helps more of them meet the employment track for CRS.

Participant surveys demonstrate that ENPP has been a great success. In FY 2024, 99 percent of ENPP survey respondents reported positive feelings after meeting with their Employment Navigators and would recommend ENPP to a friend or colleague. Additionally, 96 percent 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.” Our research and data, described below, has also shown very positive results for ENPP participants.

Enhanced Data Collection and Research

VETS utilizes data analytics and research to understand the effectiveness of TAP services and to improve employment outcomes for TSMs. Historically, VETS’ access to data was limited to the number of workshops conducted and workshop participants; however, VETS-driven program improvements and the changes mandated in the FY 2019 NDAA transformed our data collection and analysis capabilities in the transition space. Initiatives such as ENPP, and subsequent data sharing agreements, have enabled VETS to acquire information on the transition experience through an innovative data system and a one-of-a-kind dataset.

In FY 2022, VETS updated its data-sharing agreement with DoD (specifically, the Defense Manpower Data Center) to expand the data transferred to DOL through the Veterans’ Data Exchange Initiative (VDEI). In addition, DOL receives daily information from DoD on TSMs as collected on DD Form 2648 (Pre-Separation Counseling Checklist) and information

⁶ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap/employment-navigator-partnership/enpp-partnerships>

⁷ <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/VETS/files/tap/DOLVETSENPPPotentialPartnerApplicationForm.pdf>

about TAP course attendance. This data allows VETS to monitor attendance at DOL benefits briefings, DOL-provided TAP workshops, and receipt of warm handovers—to better gauge VETS program effectiveness.

In FY 2023, DOL completed a TAP Impact Study and found that DOL Employment Workshop participants had better employment outcomes than non-participants. Significantly, a higher proportion of participants found jobs in the first-year post-separation; a higher proportion of participating TSMs who were employed at 6 months post-separation were still employed after 12 months; and participants experienced fewer quarters of unemployment by 3 years post-separation.

VETS launched its ENPP case management system in December 2021—the TAP Employment Navigator System (TENS)—used by Employment Navigators, ENPP Partners, and TAP team members to capture data, develop reports, and manage ENPP processes. TENS comprises an integrated client request meeting scheduler, program reporting, policy/guidance storage, and client record management.

In FY 2022, VETS initiated the TAP Evaluation and Employment Navigator (TEEN) Study to analyze the challenges faced by separated and retired service members. In FY 2025, VETS renewed data-sharing agreements with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), first established in FY 2022, which are necessary to continue cross-matching certain HHS data with VDEI and ENPP data. More specifically, this study combines three data sources: (1) armed forces administrative data from DoD through the VDEI; (2) Navigator's data from VETS' TENS database; and (3) employment data from HHS's National Directory of New Hires (NDNH). The data obtained from these combined data sources helps VETS to better understand: (1) the employment outcomes of transitioning service members and their spouses, including DOL TAP Workshop information, and (2) the impact of Employment Navigators on employment outcomes for TSMs. In addition, VETS worked with DOL's Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) to make necessary improvements to its information technology system to enable the receipt, storage, and analysis of these data; the system upgrade for VETS was completed in the first quarter of FY 2023.

VETS' preliminary analysis of these data indicates that TSMs who received ENPP services were employed faster and earn more (as demonstrated by quarterly wages) compared to those who do not receive ENPP services. The median time between separation and employment for enlisted TSMs was 90 days for those who received ENPP services versus 153 days for those who did not receive ENPP services. The difference equated to approximately two months (63 days) faster to civilian employment. Further, the median quarterly wages for enlisted TSMs who received ENPP services and were employed six months after separation were \$11,370, compared to \$10,248 for those who did not receive ENPP services, an 11 percent difference. VETS will continue analyzing the data and will provide more nuanced information as the data sets increase and analysis matures.

It also is noteworthy that a 2023 ENPP Formative Study examined the early implementation of ENPP and variations in its implementation by ENPP site.⁸ The study found that ENPP was implemented as planned and that recommendations for improvement had been addressed. For example, interview participants stressed the importance of screening Employment Navigators for soft skills, such as their ability to connect with TSMs experiencing a particularly challenging period in their lives. VETS also had established eligibility criteria and an approval process for new partner organizations, and a new data tracking and reporting system. Finally, another VETS ENPP Evaluation is currently underway, and key components of it include an implementation study, a study of ENPP participant outcomes, and an assessment of whether an impact evaluation for the ENPP is feasible.

As DOL completes these studies, we will share results with the public, Congress, our partners, and other stakeholders, so that we continue to improve the quality of VETS programs for our service members and their families.

Interdepartmental Collaboration

VETS works with its interagency partners to provide program oversight. In conjunction with DoD and VA, VETS co-chairs the TEC, the Senior Transition Steering Group, the Transition Working Group, and six functional working groups. Interagency members—including DOL, DoD, VA, ED, DHS, SBA, OPM, and the Armed Services—meet and coordinate regularly to ensure proper support for, and advancement of, TAP; this includes identifying redundancies to improve programmatic efficiency.

DOL is also proud to work with our partners to promote the DoD-administered SkillBridge program, which connects service members with industry partners for real-world job experiences, helping bridge the gap between the end of their 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 than their peers, such as junior enlisted service members, service members with “exceptional family members,”⁹ and those who have unplanned transitions.

TAP requires coordination between interagency partners and public-private partners to be successful. Since DOL is the federal lead for employment and the American workforce system, DOL continues to work closely with DoD, VA, and SBA to ensure all training and employment programs generate quality jobs for TSMs. To accomplish this, VETS will build stronger ties with Congress, its interagency partners, ENPP partners, DoD SkillBridge stakeholders, and employers to improve employment-related TAP outcomes.

⁸ 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.

⁹ See <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/resources/millife-guides/efmp-resources/#what-is-efmp>.

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 depends upon this recognition. As the lead federal agency on veteran employment, VETS looks forward to working with this Committee and with our many partners and stakeholders to create opportunities that ensure all transitioning service members and veterans, and their spouses, can have a good job and opportunity for advancement.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my statement. Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this hearing, and I welcome your questions.

Prepared Statement of Joy Craig

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and members of the subcommittee, 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 important topic.

Background

The all-volunteer force is continually evolving as service members complete their terms of service and transition to civilian life. Pentagon data shows that approximately 80 percent of enlisted personnel separate from the military before reaching retirement eligibility. This reflects the military's structured approach to force management, which depends on a steady pipeline of new recruits to sustain operational readiness and force structure. This ongoing cycle, coupled with the fact that nearly 200,000 service members exit the force each year, underscores the importance of ensuring the Department of Defense (DOD) delivers robust and effective military-to-civilian transition programs.

Recognizing the importance of a strong transition, DOD has taken steps to support service members as they reintegrate into civilian life. Just as military training instills discipline, skills, and resilience, an effective transition process empowers veterans to apply those strengths in new careers, communities, and personal endeavors. A well-prepared service member leaving the military can become a thriving, productive member of society who brings leadership, adaptability, and experience into the civilian workforce.

The critical nature of military-to-civilian transition cannot be understated. It is a major life event that, if navigated well, can lead to the reintegration of productive members of society. But new veterans who are not fully prepared for the challenges ahead can just as easily falter and struggle to become stable. However, transitioning out of service presents unique challenges. Leaving the military is often complicated by injuries or illnesses, shifts in identity and support networks, and the need for education or training to embark on a new career. For those unprepared for these changes, the transition can be disorienting, leading to struggles with employment, well-being, and overall security. Tragically, veterans face an increased risk of suicide during their first year after leaving service, underscoring the urgent need for focused support during this time.

To ensure the long-term success of veterans, comprehensive and well-structured transition programs must be a top priority. While the military invests months and sometimes years indoctrinating civilians into military service, transitioning service members (TSMs) often receive only a few days of formal preparation for reintegration. Strengthening transition resources, ensuring early access to support, and fostering a culture that prioritizes a successful post-service life are all essential to maintaining the health and stability of those who have served.

While DOD's primary mission is national security, supporting successful transitions is an extension of that mission. The military builds warriors, but it must also ensure that those warriors are prepared to succeed beyond their time in uniform. By fully embracing transition as a critical component of military service, DOD can solidify its commitment to those who have served by helping them not only to leave the military, but to thrive in the next chapter of their lives.

DOD's Legal Obligations

Title 10 of the United States Code (U.S.C.) § 1142 requires DOD to provide individual pre-separation counseling to all service members preparing to leave active duty. Additionally, the *National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2019* (Sec. 552) places the responsibility for delivering the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) squarely with DOD. The law mandates that all eligible service members begin transition support services on time, which should be no later than 365 days before their expected separation.

Although TAP is a core part of the transition process, Title 10 U.S.C. § 1142 also mandates that DOD connect TSMs with external support systems in the communities where they will reside. This includes not only employment assistance but also local health care options, housing resources, peer support networks, and mental health services. The Fiscal Year 2020 NDAA requires collaboration between DOD and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure the most at-risk service members receive a "warm handoff"—a process in which TSMs are directly referred to VA services and connected to veteran-specific community programs upon discharge.

Despite these mandates, there is a persistent belief within DOD that any gaps in transition services will be addressed by VA after a service member has left the

military. This assumption that “VA will take care of them on the other side” can lead to critical gaps in support at a time when service members need it most.

Additionally, junior enlisted service members face significant challenges post service. Research from The Veterans Metrics Initiative (TVMI) at The Pennsylvania State University shows that this group experiences disproportionately high rates of underemployment, financial instability, substance abuse, housing and food insecurity, and even suicide.

Alarming, only 65 percent of veterans feel fully transitioned 3 years after separation, and 61 percent remain underemployed even six-and-a-half years later. TVMI researchers also found that within the first 3 months after leaving the military, veterans struggled most with employment and financial stability. However, the challenges do not end there. Up to 78 months after separation, veterans continue to experience difficulties with social connections, and mental and physical health.

The Current State of TAP

The benefits of attending TAP courses, both tangible and intangible, are difficult to measure, but ensuring service members attend TAP fully and on time is critical to their post-service success. On January 17, 2025, DOD submitted a report to Congress detailing TAP participation in 2023. While the report showed progress in attendance rates from previous years, still just more than half attended on time.

According to DOD’s report, nearly 177,000 service members attended TAP in 2023. Of these, 65 percent began pre-separation counseling at least 365 days before separation or retirement, as required by law. However, 35 percent still failed to meet this requirement, leaving them with less time to prepare for civilian life.

Among those service members with planned separations, only 52 percent met the requirement to begin counseling at least 1 year before leaving the service. In contrast, 100 percent of service members with unplanned separations began counseling as soon as possible after receiving their separation orders. This contrast underscores an important opportunity for improvement. When required by operational needs, DOD effectively ensures that service members attend TAP, as seen with those undergoing unplanned separations. For those with planned separations—who make up the majority of TSMs—attendance has improved but remains inconsistent. While the increase in compliance is encouraging, further progress is needed to ensure all service members receive the full benefits of early transition preparation.

Under current law—Title 10 U.S.C. § 1144(c)(2)(A)-(B)—service secretaries have the authority to waive the mandatory TAP instruction of Two-Day Tracks if a service member is deemed unlikely to face significant challenges in readjustment, health care, or employment. Additionally, waivers may be granted for those with specialized skills who are essential to supporting a unit’s imminent deployment due to unavoidable circumstances. However, in practice, waivers are often issued for reasons beyond these intended exceptions, frequently tied to mission requirements or administrative convenience rather than a service member’s actual transition needs.

In October 2023, DOD testified before Congress that commanding officers frequently waive TAP attendance due to mission requirements, involuntary separations, or even personal choice. At the same hearing, the Government Accountability Office testified that 53 percent of all TAP waiver requests were approved, with 22 percent of Tier-III service members (those identified as being at the highest risk for transition challenges) not attending the mandatory 2-day course at all.

DOD’s own January 2025 report further highlights the widespread use of waivers by commanders, showing that 55 percent (74,000 TSMs) who were eligible for exemptions in 2023 did not attend the 2-day course. Of the Tier III TSMs who were required to attend the full TAP curriculum, 17 percent (33,000 service members) did not attend an employment, education, or entrepreneurship track. Tier III personnel who miss out on TAP lack the individualized support necessary for a smooth transition and leave the military without being properly connected to VA resources. If commanders can prioritize getting every service member to weapons qualification or other mandatory training, they must also recognize that preparing them for civilian life and educating them about their earned benefits is just as mission critical.

VFW Survey Data

The VFW conducts a post-transition survey with service members who participated in VA’s Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program, gathering firsthand insights into their experiences with TAP. The feedback reveals common challenges faced by TSMs and highlights areas where DOD can improve TAP to better prepare future veterans.

For many, transitioning from military to civilian life is an overwhelming process. A separating Air Force E-5 described it as “dealing with a bunch of important life decisions” without enough guidance. An Army E-6 from Fort Riley, Kansas, said the

unit did not give enough time to complete a smooth transition. Many reported feeling rushed through TAP, with one participant describing it as a “firehose of information” with no time to act on what was being taught. Because most service members must still perform their regular duties while attending TAP, they often struggle to focus fully on their transition. Several suggested that TAP should incorporate dedicated time to begin working on transition tasks rather than just presenting information.

When facing transition out of the military, TSMs share that their primary concerns are finding employment and living with the impacts of their service-connected disabilities. They worry about the loss of their sense of purpose and mission, as well as the camaraderie and dependable network they have come to know. They are concerned about paying their living expenses, finding and affording health care, and housing and food security. It is unwise to assume every service member has a job waiting or a ready support network.

For National Guard and Reserve members, TAP presents additional frustrations. An Air Force O-5 noted that “we need more support for guardsmen. We’re the most complicated group of all, and I don’t think there’s enough support for our unique circumstances.” Additionally, several TSMs emphasized that the core 3-day TAP course is too short, recommending either an extension or a second round of participation. A Navy O-5 in Washington, DC, remarked, “One should attend TAP twice or at least have access to review materials more than once. It’s too much information to absorb in 1 week, and some of it becomes more relevant later in the transition process.” Others suggested the need for “pre-TAP” at the 18-year service mark to allow for earlier preparation.

Many TSMs also reported significant barriers caused by their parent commands. A retiring Army E-7 admitted that the workload made it difficult to focus on transition, saying, “the 82d keeps on trucking along, regardless of folks moving on.” A sailor from Quantico, Virginia, noted being constantly pulled from TAP classes to assist with unit operations, making it difficult to focus. Another service member’s TAP experience was rushed due to not being released from deployment in time to complete the program properly. The common theme was clear—units prioritize operational readiness over transition, leaving many service members scrambling. The lack of personalization within TAP was another frequent concern. Multiple respondents suggested that TAP should be tailored to separation type, such as retirement, medical discharge, or end of service contract, so that service members receive information relevant only to their situation. A soldier from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, explained, “TAP could be improved if each cohort was broken up by separation type so that only relevant info is provided.” A Navy E-7 echoed this, saying the program “lacks the bandwidth to individualize for non-standard retirees.” Others expressed frustration over limited TAP availability, with a sailor from Naval Support Activity Annapolis, Maryland, struggling to register because the first open session was not available for 3 months.

Many also highlighted the need for greater spouse and family involvement. An Army O-5 retiring from Fort Belvoir, Virginia, said, “They need to encourage family attendance. It wasn’t clear when and where to include them.” A Navy E-6 agreed, saying, “Spouses should be encouraged to attend. It’s a wealth of information, and as a team, more can be retained.” These insights suggest that better outreach and flexibility are needed to integrate families into the transition process. Despite these challenges, some found elements of TAP effective. A soldier retiring from Fort Cavazos, Texas, praised the executive TAP course for being “time-effective and relevant to the audience.” However, others found TAP “surprisingly stressful” with one participant stating, “We reviewed each section of the book, which I can do on my own. TAP lacked details that would actually benefit my transition.”

These survey responses underscore the need for DOD to improve TAP by allowing more time for participation, ensuring units prioritize transition, tailoring courses to different separation types, expanding access for Guard and Reserve members, and integrating spouses into the process. By addressing these gaps, TAP can become a more effective bridge to civilian life, helping future veterans to be better prepared for success beyond military service.

Gaps in TAP

While DOD has made significant strides in supporting service members’ transitions, there are still areas for improvement, particularly for junior enlisted personnel and those at high risk. As stated earlier, despite legal requirements many service members do not attend TAP classes on time and commanders can waive attendance for mission requirements or operational needs. As a result, junior enlisted personnel, who often benefit the most from early transition preparation, may not receive the same level of access as their senior counterparts.

VFW staff have observed disparities in TAP participation. According to VFW's accredited BDD representatives, senior enlisted personnel and officers attend TAP at significantly higher rates than junior enlisted service members. For example, during one particular week at Fort Bragg, out of 28 disability and compensation claims submitted by VFW's BDD representative, only six came from junior enlisted service members, even though they constitute a much larger share of those leaving the military. This suggests that many junior enlisted personnel are not receiving the same level of guidance and time to file for their benefits as their senior counterparts. Addressing this gap would help ensure that all service members, regardless of rank, receive the full range of support needed for a smooth and successful transition. TAP has proven to be effective for senior enlisted personnel and officers, who often have greater stability, education, and resources. However, junior enlisted service members—who are statistically more vulnerable to challenges such as underemployment, homelessness, and mental health struggles—may require additional outreach and command encouragement to fully engage in the program. By strengthening engagement efforts for this population, DOD can enhance TAP's impact and better equip all service members for life after service.

Additionally, while TAP offers specialized tracks tailored to different career paths, not all service members receive sufficient counseling to help them select the most suitable option. Those uncertain about a post-military path may benefit from more in-depth guidance to explore available opportunities effectively and make informed decisions about the future.

Another opportunity for improvement lies in structured post-separation follow up. While TAP focuses heavily on pre-separation preparation, many veterans struggle in the critical first six to twelve months after leaving the military. Expanding follow-up support during this critical period could further enhance the success of TSMs long term.

Finally, continued efforts to foster a culture that fully supports transition preparation will be key. While TAP is a valuable program, some service members, particularly those leaving involuntarily, may feel disengaged due to lingering cultural stigma or varying levels of command emphasis on transition planning. By reinforcing the importance of TAP across all ranks and ensuring that every service member is encouraged to participate fully, DOD can further strengthen its commitment to set up TSMs for long-term success.

Successes of VA's TAP 6.0

With the establishment of TAP 6.0 in January 2024, VA has taken a proactive approach by ensuring TSMs receive direct, in-person counsel on navigating the VA benefits system. TAP 6.0 includes accredited representatives who provide crucial guidance on the complex process of filing a VA disability and compensation claim through the BDD process. These accredited representatives assist TSMs in filing claims, expediting disability ratings, and ensuring continuity of essential care including mental health services. This access has significantly increased the number of TSMs receiving benefits upon discharge. Codifying it into law would secure its long-term impact at no additional cost.

Since the implementation of TAP 6.0, the VFW has had no difficulty accessing military installations to support its portion of the VA TAP day. Although VFW representatives are typically allocated only 15 minutes during the Veterans Service Organization (VSO) briefing, they prefer to be scheduled at the end of the day to maximize their opportunity to engage with TSMs. After the briefing, they often remain available to answer questions, schedule appointments, and discuss various aspects of VA disability and compensation claims, including time requirements, necessary documentation, and evidentiary criteria. Representatives distribute their business cards and encourage TSMs to contact them for follow-up appointments. When accredited representatives write their contact information on the classroom whiteboard, nearly every TSM takes a photo for future reference. It is important to note that VFW representatives do not file claims or request TSMs to sign any forms during TAP courses.

During the first year since TAP 6.0 became effective, the VFW briefed 13,000 more TSMs than the year prior, a 54 percent increase in contact. This effort resulted in a 25 percent increase in establishing service connection for VA benefits for service members seeking claims assistance. The VFW's accredited representatives alone briefed nearly 24,000 TSMs in 2023, and in 2024 they briefed 37,000 TSMs, achieving a 26 percent increase in awards.

The VFW urges Congress to pass the *TAP Promotion Act* to codify this practice and ensure that all TSMs have access to this essential benefits assistance before leaving the military.

Community Connections

As TSMs step away from the structured environment of the military, they are faced with a multitude of new and often complex challenges. Connections to local resources are essential for service members' successful transitions, as they can significantly impact outcomes including those related to military sexual trauma. However, VFW survey data indicates that one third of respondents were either unaware of these resources or reported not being connected to them. While DOD prioritizes warm handoffs for those identified as most in need of transition assistance, expanding these connections to all TSMs, as outlined in the law, would help ensure that every TSM has access to the support they need to thrive in civilian life.

To address this, the VFW urges Congress to ensure that all service members are consistently connected to reliable community resources, especially those specialized transition organizations receiving Federal grants. The National Resource Directory is a resource for vetted organizations that could be designated to support these connections. Additionally, VA's partnership with Onward Ops provides trained volunteer sponsors to guide approximately 25,000 service members each year during their first year of civilian reintegration.

While no national transition services exist in every city, many organizations specialize in specific industries or locations. For example, TSMs seeking education can be connected with Student Veterans of America chapters. Those interested in technology jobs in Texas can connect with VetsinTech, and those pursuing finance in New York City with can connect with FourBlock. Specialized organizations like The Honor Foundation serve members from U.S. Special Operations Forces. These resources cannot be fully effective if they are underutilized or not well-known to those who need them.

Successful Suicide Prevention Efforts – VA's Veteran Sponsorship Initiative

Building on DOD's responsibility to connect TSMs with community resources, VA's Veteran Sponsorship Initiative (VSI) takes a targeted approach to supporting those at the highest risk for suicide, ensuring they receive personalized, life-saving assistance during transition. VSI plays a critical role in linking TSMs at risk to essential services, including VA medical care, mental health and wellness support, housing assistance, financial aid, vocational training, and peer mentorship. A key feature of the program is the DOD STARRS Practical Risk Calculator for Suicidal Behavior, a predictive analytics tool designed to identify service members at the highest risk for suicide. This questionnaire, which has been administered to 18,000 active duty TSMs, has demonstrated remarkable accuracy by identifying 93 percent of potential suicide attempts among the top 30 percent of at-risk individuals. Those flagged as high risk receive rapid access to VA health care and peer-certified sponsors through Onward Ops, an organization that provides structured, veteran-led sponsorship to ensure a smoother and more supported transition. Results from VSI show a reduction in suicide attempts after military discharge. By integrating data-driven risk assessment with personalized support, VSI and Onward Ops are ensuring that vulnerable TSMs receive the critical assistance they need. To enhance suicide prevention, the VFW urges DOD to expand VSI and mandate universal participation by all TSMs in the STARRS Practical Risk Calculator for Suicidal Behavior risk assessment.

Impact on DOD's Force Readiness

Proper transition support for TSMs is vital to sustaining the long-term strength and readiness of the force. Ensuring that service members successfully transition to civilian life not only helps maintain their well-being but also fosters a culture of support and commitment in the military. When transitions are well managed, service members are more likely to remain advocates for military service, whether by rejoining in the future, supporting the military in civilian roles, or encouraging their families and communities to consider service.

Data from the Pew Research Center shows that perceptions of military service are evolving, with younger generations expressing more concerns about challenges post service. These concerns influence recruitment efforts, especially among families who have traditionally been strong supporters of military careers. If potential recruits perceive gaps in the military's transition support, they may hesitate to enlist because of uncertainty about long-term benefits, career options, or challenges after leaving service.

VFW's Recommendations for Improving DOD's Transition Services

To enhance DOD accountability and support TSMs, the VFW recommends that Congress pass legislation to create an Under Secretary of Defense for Transition

(USD-T) within DOD. This office would oversee and coordinate all transition programs, ensuring comprehensive and standardized support for service members as they prepare for life after military service. The USD-T would enforce compliance with TAP requirements, hold commanders accountable for participation, and address cultural stigmas around transition assistance, reinforcing that it is a key part of career development. The office would also implement targeted interventions for service members at high risk for post-transition challenges such as suicide, substance use disorders, and mental health issues.

The VFW urges Congress to pass the *TAP Promotion Act* that would strengthen transition support across all branches of service. To ensure service members receive the support to which they are entitled, we recommend that Congress mandate TAP compliance and timeliness by requiring DOD to create an accountability system. Commanders should be incentivized to prioritize transition services by establishing performance metrics and reporting requirements that evaluate their support for transition preparation. Waivers for TAP attendance should be granted only in exceptional circumstances, under strict criteria, rather than for administrative convenience. A cultural shift within the military is needed to ensure that transition preparation is viewed as equally mission critical as other mandatory training.

To expand and strengthen transition programs, the VFW recommends enhancing collaboration with transition service organizations, especially those receiving Federal grants, and increasing integration with programs like Veteran Sponsorship Initiative and Onward Ops. Additionally, the VFW calls for DOD to expand the use of the STARRS Practical Risk Calculator for Suicidal Behavior throughout the Department, ensuring all TSMs are screened.

Finally, the VFW recommends integrating transition support early and at all levels of a service member's career. Transition education should be expanded beyond TAP and introduced at multiple points, including a "Pre-TAP" program around the 18-year service mark for those approaching retirement. TAP itself should also be tailored to different transition paths, ensuring more relevant guidance for each service member's unique situation. Moreover, increasing family and spouse involvement in TAP sessions and improving scheduling flexibility will ensure a smoother transition for the entire family.

The VFW urges Congress and DOD to take decisive action in establishing the USD-T and implementing these critical reforms. By embedding transition preparation into military culture, enforcing accountability for TAP participation, and expanding access to specialized transition resources, DOD can better equip service members for life after service. Recognizing transition as a core mission within DOD will not only improve veterans' well-being but also enhance recruitment, retention, and the overall quality of life for all who have served. This approach will ultimately make it easier for every service member to transition successfully.

Chairman Van Orden and Ranking Member Pappas, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to answer any questions you or the subcommittee members may have.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the VFW has not received any Federal grants in Fiscal Year 2025, nor has it received any Federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

The VFW has not received payments or contracts from any foreign governments in the current year or preceding two calendar years.

Prepared Statement of Elizabeth O'Brien



Statement of Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

ON: "Mission Incomplete: Strengthening the TAP Program to Ensure a Smoother Transition to Civilian Life for Tomorrow's Veterans"

TO: U.S. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

BY: Elizabeth O'Brien, Senior Vice President, Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

DATE: March 25, 2025

**BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS OF THE U.S. HOUSE
OF REPRESENTATIVES SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

**"Mission Incomplete: Strengthening the TAP Program to Ensure a
Smoother Transition to Civilian Life for Tomorrow's Veterans"**

**Testimony of:
Elizabeth O'Brien
Senior Vice President, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation,
Hiring Our Heroes**

Good morning, Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. My name is Elizabeth O'Brien. I am an active-duty military spouse and senior vice president of Hiring Our Heroes (HOH), an initiative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. The Foundation harnesses the power of business to create solutions for the good of America and the world. It anticipates, develops, and deploys solutions to challenges facing communities—today and tomorrow.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak on a topic that is vital to the recruitment, retention, and transition of our all-volunteer force—the need to update and modernize Transition Assistance Programs (TAP) for service members transitioning from active duty to the civilian workforce.

For more than a decade, HOH has delivered innovative solutions to tackle the longstanding employment challenges faced by transitioning veterans and military spouses. Working directly on military bases with its national network of employers, HOH has transformed the way in which the military community finds jobs and, more importantly, how companies recruit military talent. These efforts have made it the national leader in veteran and military spouse employment, now serving more than 80,000 people each year.

At HOH, we believe that economic opportunity is the cornerstone of a strong, sustainable all-volunteer force. Today's generation of young Americans want and need pathways into meaningful careers. Military service provides that pathway, but only if a transitioning service member has the resources and skills to effectively navigate their career journey. In the same way that colleges and universities prepare their graduates for careers, the military and/or the federal agencies must ensure that service members understand how to best leverage their experiences for the next steps in their careers. Programs like SkillBridge and other employment-focused efforts are critical to this effort. By taking care of this generation of warriors, we are preparing them to be our nation's best future recruiters.

Employment Challenges Faced by Transitioning Service Members

In 2011, the United States faced a crisis in veteran unemployment. As the nation started to wind down military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, there were hundreds of thousands of transitioning service members—most of whom were under the age of 25—returning home from war zones and finding a difficult job market. Young veterans especially struggled as their unemployment rate soared to 30%.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation leapt into action. For our part, we launched HOH, leveraging our state and local chambers and relationships with the business community. Other companies and organizations, like JPMorgan Chase & Co. and Syracuse University, followed suit by creating veteran-focused hiring and training programs. The federal government also undertook significant efforts, making veteran employment a top priority.

This joint private/public sector effort yielded significant dividends. Within a few short years, post-9/11 veteran unemployment was cut in half from 12.1%¹ to 5.8%² in 2015. Veterans under the age of 25 saw a more dramatic decrease. Their unemployment rate dropped from 30.2% in 2011³ to 13.0% by the end of 2015.⁴ These trends have continued as veteran unemployment remains below the rate for non-veterans and is currently 4.0%.⁵

Yet unemployment data tells us very little about the employment journey for transitioning service members. Other data sources—ones that look at economic achievement, promotability, career satisfaction, and underemployment—paint a much different picture. In 2023, for example, McKinsey & Co.⁶ found that while veterans tend to earn more than their civilian counterparts, that isn't the case for recently

¹ U.S. Department of Labor (2012, March 20). Employment Situation of Veteran-2011. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/vet_03202012.pdf

² U.S. Department of Labor (2016, March 22). Employment Situation of Veteran-2015. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/vet_03222016.pdf

³ U.S. DoL. Employment Situation of Veteran-2011.

⁴ U.S. DoL. Employment Situation of Veteran-2015.

⁵ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2025). The Employment Situation – February 2025. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empst.pdf>

⁶ Blackburn, S., Kim, M., Lewis, C., Oh, H., & Parry, K. (2023, November 8). From the military to the workforce: How to leverage veterans' skills. McKinsey & Company. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/from-the-military-to-the-workforce-how-to-leverage-veterans-skills>

transitioned service members. That population often struggle “to find jobs that use, recognize, and compensate them commensurate with their level of military experience.” In fact, according to McKinsey, 60% of transitioning service members will make less in their first post-military job as compared to their military compensation.⁷

Research by Penn State University’s (PSU) Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness⁸ adds to this bleak picture, finding that 61% of veterans report being underemployed due to a perceived mismatch between their skills, education, or experiences and their post-transition employment in the civilian job market. These findings were further supported by a 2024 research study conducted by Edelman, which found that 62% of transitioning service members could not find a position at their desired level.⁹ The primary culprit, according to nearly half of those service members, was a mismatch between their skills and the skills required by the employer.¹⁰

LinkedIn found that many of these challenges exist well after separation and impact a veteran’s ability to get promoted into leadership roles at a company. In its 2023 Veteran Opportunity Report, LinkedIn found that veterans are half as likely to reach leadership roles (director or vice president level roles) as compared to nonveterans.¹¹ Once again, the report found a disconnect between a veteran’s experience and skillsets and those recognized or valued by employers.

Taken together, the current body of research underscores the challenges faced by transitioning service members as they search for and find civilian employment. While some service members are able to easily translate their technical military skills, like IT or mechanical skills, it is much more difficult to translate soft skills like leadership, resiliency and teamwork. These latter skills, as noted in the research, are difficult to recognize and value as service members transition to their first post-military job.

⁷ Id.

⁸ Vogt, D., Perkins, D. F., Copeland, L. A., Finley, E. P., Jamieson, C. S., Booth, B., Lederer, S., & Gilman, C. L. (2018). The Veterans Metrics Initiative study of US veterans’ experiences during their transition from military service. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2017-020734>

⁹ Edelman. (2024). 2024 Veterans’ Well-being Survey. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from <https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2024-11/2024%20Veterans%27%20Well-being%20Presentation%20FINAL.pdf>

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ LinkedIn. (2023). 2023 Veteran Opportunity Report. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from <https://socialimpact.linkedin.com/en-us/programs/veterans/veteran-opportunity-report>

Transitioning Veterans Are:	
UNDERPAID 60% of veterans make less in their first military job than in their last year of service - McKinsey	UNDEREMPLOYED 61% of veterans feel underemployed 3 years after leaving service - Penn State
UNABLE TO FIND 62% of veterans are unable to find a position at the right level - Edelman	UNLIKELY TO GET PROMOTED half as likely as non-veterans to reach director or vice president roles - LinkedIn

Why Military Members Struggle with Post-Military Employment

Notwithstanding improvements over the years, our country is doing too little to help service members as they search for their first post-military career. That point was made clearly by a recent study of the RAND Corporation,¹² analyzing overall cost and impact of military transition programs.

In an exhaustive analysis, RAND confirmed key aspects of a GAO report from 2020, finding that there were 45 different programs overseen by 11 federal agencies with significant overlap. RAND noted that "little has changed since the time of the GAO study." All 45 of those programs continue to exist and a vast majority of the funding supports veteran education versus employment assistance. In fact, RAND concluded that less than 5% of the funding supports transitioning service members as they work to translate their skills, find apprenticeships, or search for and find employment.

¹² Kleykamp, M., Wenger, J. B., Elizabeth, H. R., Kubasak, M., Hubble, T., & Skrabala, L. (2024, June 11). Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions: limited scrutiny and substantial investment in education programs. RAND. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html

This latter point is critical to understanding the crux of the issue faced by transitioning service members. When a majority of them are looking for and need employment assistance,¹³ they are receiving very little support in this endeavor from the military or other federal agencies—that is, except the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), but TAP is not an employment assistance program. The process of finding and securing meaningful careers takes a lot more than a couple days of instruction.

For this reason, as well as others, RAND recommended that transition programs be refocused on employment as well as investment in programs that help service members and veterans transition quickly. RAND expanded on these recommendations in their October 2024 research brief, *Federal and Nonprofit Support for Veterans Transitioning to the Workforce*.¹⁴ Here, they stated that nonprofit organizations often provide personalized support for military-to-civilian employment transitions and that these programs can offer tailored assistance that federal programs might lack, presenting a critical opportunity for federal and nonprofit programs to work both independently and collaboratively to impact military transition.

¹³ According to the Pew Research Center, 73% of military members search for employment as the first step of their transition. Mitchell, T., & Mitchell, T. (2024, April 14). The transition to post-military employment. Pew Research Center. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/09/10/the-transition-to-post-military-employment/>

¹⁴ Kleykamp, M., Wenger, J. B., Elizabeth, H. R., Kubasak, M., Hubble, T., Skrabala, L., Rinderknecht, R. G., Saba, S. K., Julia, V. V., & Williams, K. M. (2024, October 24). Federal and nonprofit support for veterans transitioning to the civilian workforce. RAND. Retrieved Mar. 15, 2025, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA1363-3.html

The Importance of Employment Bridges

SkillBridge is the sole federal transition program that turns conventional transition outcomes on their head. SkillBridge, a Department of Defense employment bridge program, allows transitioning service members to gain essential civilian work experience through internships and apprenticeships during their last 180 days of active duty. For more than a decade, HOH has facilitated one of the largest and longest-running SkillBridge programs, called the HOH Fellows Program. That program is a 12-week internship where fellows (transitioning service members) are embedded directly into civilian companies, allowing employers to see firsthand how veterans' military experience and skills align with civilian workforce needs. This hands-on experience ensures that service members find right-fit employment that more fully utilizes their knowledge and abilities.

The impact of the Fellows Program is undeniable. Over the last five years alone we have connected more than 10,600 transitioning service member fellows with more than 2,500 employers nationwide. Eighty-nine percent of those fellows have received a job offer within three months, with an average post-transition annual salary of more than \$107,000—more than double the full-time pay of an E-6 with eight years of service and 20% more than an O-3 with six years of service. In contrast with the McKinsey findings on post-transition salaries, our data shows that effective experiential bridge programs lead to employment and pay more closely aligned with service members' experience and skills.

Importantly, our research goes beyond salary and general employment data. In HOH's 2024 Strategic Insights Report (see Attached), we surveyed 1,903 veterans who participated in the HOH Fellows Program or another SkillBridge program. For comparison purposes, we surveyed an additional 381 veterans who applied to, but did not or could not participate in, the Fellows Program or any SkillBridge Program. The results were startling, with a couple of key highlights listed below:

- Time to employment was much faster for fellows, with 63% being employed within one month of transition versus 38% for non-participants.
- Fellows were far more likely to take a job for positive reasons (i.e., "great opportunity" or "great fit") (59% for fellows versus 41% for non-fellows).

- Conversely, non-participants were far more likely to accept a job for negative reasons (i.e., “needed a paycheck” or “no choice”) (25% for non-participants versus 11% for fellows).
- Fellows were more likely to recommend service to future generations, with 61% saying they would recommend service versus 54% for non-participants.

Poor Transition Outcomes and Military Spouse Unemployment

While the incidence and impact of longstanding military spouse unemployment challenges are widely studied, military spouse employment bears special mention in the context of transition and veteran employment outcomes. A 2019 report¹⁵ from the University of Texas’ Institute for Military and Veteran Family Wellness noted the protective effects an employed spouse can have on veteran transition: when the military spouse is employed, their employment can provide a buffer for both the veteran and the family during the transition period, affording the veteran time to find right-fit work or exploring additional upskilling or training needed for preferred employment.

The Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot, facilitated by Hiring Our Heroes in collaboration with the Department of Defense and Deloitte, offers promising initial data as a solution to military (and, later, transitioning veteran) spouse employment challenges. The program has yielded significant positive results over the initial two years of the pilot. This pioneering three-year initiative, funded by DoD, has established a pivotal linkage between military spouses and employers actively seeking to augment their workforce with exceptional talent, connecting them for 12-week fellowships. Since its inception in December 2022, the program has ushered over 1,050 military spouses into internships, with a job offer rate of more than 85%. Perhaps more importantly, more than 60% of the internships have been remote, creating longer-term employment solutions for military spouses that can help sustain their families through military service and beyond.

¹⁵ Keeling, M., Borah, E. V., Kintzle, S., Kleykamp, M., & Robertson, H. C. (2019). Military spouses transition too! A call to action to address spouses’ military to civilian transition. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 23(1), 3–19. <https://imvfw.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2020-Military-spouses-transition-too.pdf>

Looking Forward

Today's transitioning service members need more than TAP as they search for post-military careers. They need programs that provide them with the tools and resources to help translate their skills, search for and find industries and opportunities, and connect with employers. As we look forward to the future, HOH recommends the following areas of focus:

1. *Focus on More Employment-Related Services.* Most transitioning service members want and need employment following their military service. To help prepare these service members for their career journeys, there should be an increased focus on employment-related programs as part of transition while reducing or eliminating duplicate programs that fail to provide clear benefits or impact. More can be done with less by focusing on the clear needs of transitioning service members and eliminating unnecessary programs with marginal or unclear benefits.
2. *Expand Opportunities for SkillBridge and Apprenticeships.* These programs help service members bridge their military experience by allowing them to showcase their skills, learn about different workplace environments, and make employment decisions based on that workplace experience. These programs are critical to a successful transition and avoid the challenges most service members face.
3. *Look Beyond Active Duty.* The transition from military to civilian life is not a single point in time—it is an ongoing journey that occurs over many years. Employment-focused services need to be available not only to active-duty personnel but also to post-transition veterans who were unable to benefit from these programs while on active duty. Having post-transition resources, like SkillBridge, is especially important as many active-duty service members are unable to participate in the program due to military exigencies.
4. *Continue to Empower Military Spouse Careers.* Military spouses face unemployment at six times the rate of their civilian counterparts, undermining their financial stability and contributing to service member separations. Investing in reskilling and upskilling programs is critical to addressing this challenge. The Department of Defense's Military Spouse Career Accelerator

Pilot (MSCAP) has placed over 1,050 spouses in internships and direct hire roles, with an 85% offer rate and an average salary of \$66,742. Continuing to invest in programs like MSCAP strengthens military families and directly supports the retention of the all-volunteer force.

Conclusion

Over the last fourteen years, Hiring Our Heroes has been proud to serve our veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses in local communities throughout the United States and abroad and to do so with a wide array of private and public sector partners. And with more than 200,000 service members making the transition off active duty annually, there is always more work that needs to be done.

Hiring Our Heroes remains wholly committed to the mission of connecting veterans and military spouses with meaningful career opportunities and is honored to serve on the front line of this movement. We will continue to unite our partners in our common mission as we work together to continue to achieve fundamental change in the veteran and military spouse employment landscape.

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and members of the Subcommittee, I thank you again for the opportunity to testify and look forward to answering your questions.

Hiring Our Heroes
U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

Strategic Insights

Impact of SkillBridge & Other Transition Programs

AUGUST 2024

About

HIRING OUR HEROES (HOH)

Hiring Our Heroes (HOH) is a national, grassroots initiative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, a 501(c)(3) organization. Working with a broad array of private and public sector partners, we are committed to creating long-term economic opportunities for veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses. Anytime, anywhere, we provide the tools, resources, and connections to empower them on their career journeys.

Table of Contents

Strategic Insights Series #1	04
Survey Respondents	05
Positive Impact of SkillBridge	06
1. Time to First Post Military Job	06
2. Reasons for Taking First Job	07
3. Ease of Finding a Job	08
Interconnectivity of Programs/Services	09
Perception of Service	10
1. Overwhelmingly Helps to Create a Positive Perception	10
2. Service Created More Economic Opportunity	10
3. More Likely to Recommend Future Service	11

Strategic Insights Series #3

Military transition and employment programs have grown significantly in the last decade, creating unprecedented opportunities for transitioning service members and military spouses across the country.

Yet very little is known about the use or impact of these programs. Which programs and services are being used by transitioning service members and military spouses? How are the programs being utilized? What is the ultimate impact of these programs?

HOH's Strategic Insights Series is intended to provide data to help answer these questions and more. Applying a pulse survey approach, our goal is to better understand the employment landscape and see the challenges faced by our constituents in real time. The data will help HOH and its partners make informed decisions regarding our programs and better serve the military community.

THIS SURVEY

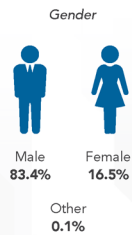
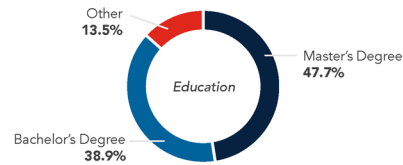
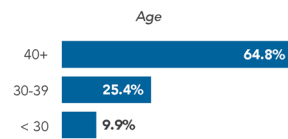
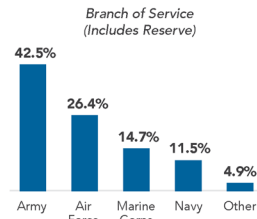
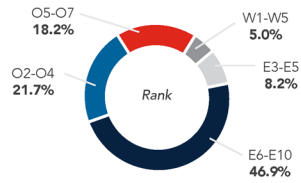
This survey focuses on the impact of the U.S. Department of Defense SkillBridge program and the experiences and outcomes of HOH Fellows Program applicants. The goal is to measure the outcomes of the program as defined by three key objectives: understand how transitioning service members are leveraging the Fellows Program and other SkillBridge programs; determine the impact of SkillBridge participation on their job searches; and assess whether the program has a positive impact on their perception of service.

METHODOLOGY

HOH administered this online survey between August 25 and October 7, 2022, and between October 14 and December 13, 2023, by emailing the survey link to more than 10,000 service members who applied to the Fellows Program in the last three years.

We received 2,284 completed surveys from two categories of respondents: (1) 1,682 who participated as an HOH Fellow as well as 221 who participated in another SkillBridge program (Participants); and (2) 381 who applied for the HOH Fellows Program but did not participate in any SkillBridge program (Non-Participants). This latter population provides a good source of comparative data.

Survey Respondents



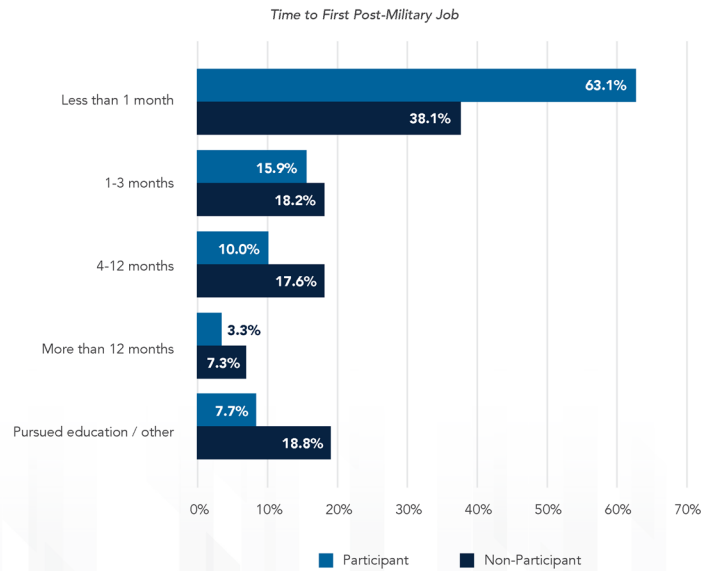
*Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Positive Impact of SkillBridge

1. Time to First Post-Military Job

Respondents who participated in the Fellows Program and other SkillBridge programs found employment quicker than Non-Participants. In fact, 63% of Participants reported having a job within one month, and nearly 80% had a job within three months. Non-Participants, on the other hand, generally needed more time to find their first job.

Question: How long did it take for you to find your first post-military job after leaving service?



2. Reasons for Taking First Job

More than half of SkillBridge participants (59%) took their first job for positive reasons—e.g., “it was a great opportunity with great pay” (32%) or they “really liked the culture of the company. It was a great fit” (17%).

Non-Participants, however, were more likely (59%) to accept their first job for neutral reasons—e.g., “It wasn’t the perfect job, but it was a good next step”—or negative ones—e.g., “I couldn’t risk not having a job.”

Question: Thinking about why you chose your first post-military job, please select the option that best describes why you chose it?

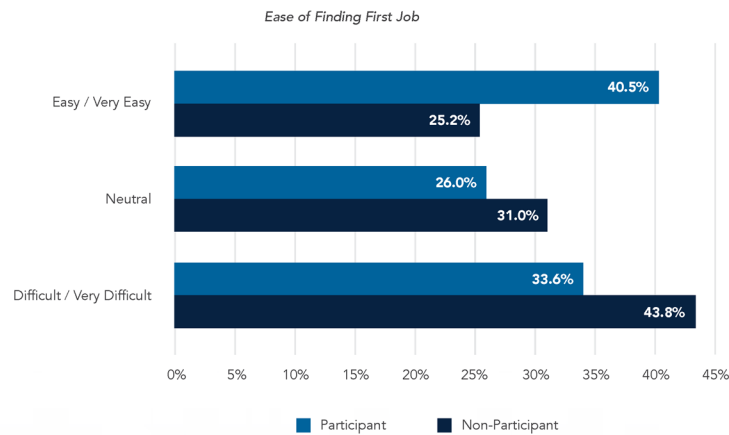
	Selected Answer	Participant	Non-Participant
Positive Reason	It was a great opportunity with great pay.	32.0%	20.1%
	I really liked the culture of the company. It was a great fit.	17.3%	10.4%
	It was exactly what I was looking for.	9.9%	10.4%
		59.1% vs. 41.0%	
Neutral Reason	It wasn’t the perfect job, but it was a good next step until I figured out what is next.	22.1%	26.1%
	There seemed like there was a lot of opportunity for growth.	7.4%	7.6%
		29.5% vs. 33.7%	
Negative Reason	I didn’t feel like I had a choice. My family or I needed the money.	6.9%	16.5%
	I couldn’t risk not having a job, so I took it.	4.6%	8.8%
		11.4% vs. 25.3%	

3. Ease of Finding a Job

Finally, respondents who participated in the SkillBridge program were more likely to report the search for their job was “easy” or “very easy” as compared to Non-Participants.

It is important to note, however, that many respondents—regardless of whether they participated in the SkillBridge program or not—found the job search to be “difficult” or “very difficult.” This underscores the challenges many service members face as they transition from the military and the importance of these programs.

Question: On a scale of 1 to 5, how difficult was it to find your first post-military job?



— Interconnectivity of Programs/Services

Notwithstanding the importance of the SkillBridge participation, a vast majority of Participants reported using additional programs and resources as they prepared for their job search. Less than 10% of Participants stated that they did not participate in other transition programs or events. The rest reported using one or more additional programs, tools and/or events to find a job.

The data helps to highlight the importance of our collective approach. Transitioning service members are using a variety of services, programs, and resources to accomplish their mission. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and no single organization is entirely meeting their needs.

Question: As you prepared for your civilian job search, what other transition programs, events, or services did you receive or participate in? Select all that apply.

Local military Transition Assistance Program (TAP)	69.9%
HOH Career Summits/Virtual Hiring Events	43.5%
ACP Mentoring Program	35.7%
Hire Heroes USA Resume Review/Counseling Services	36.8%
Onward 2 Opportunity Training Programs	24.0%
USO Transition Services	22.1%
Other Programs/Services	23.6%
I didn't participate in any other transition programs, events, or services	9.5%

Perception of Service

1. Overwhelmingly Helps to Create a Positive Perception

Respondents who participated in the Fellows Program and other SkillBridge programs overwhelmingly stated employment transition programs helped to create a positive view of their service. In fact, 89% reported such programs create a positive perception of their service and 10% were neutral on the question.

Question: *Over the last decade the military has created a number of transition programs (like SkillBridge) to help you find post-military careers. Does your ability to participate in these programs have a positive or negative impact on your view of military service?*



2. Service Created More Economic Opportunity

Respondents overall—both Participants and Non-Participants—also agreed military service created “more” or “much more” economic opportunity.

Question: *On a scale from 1 to 5, do you think that your military service created more or less economic opportunity for you and/or your family?*



3. More Likely to Recommend Future Service

Respondents who participated in SkillBridge programs were more likely to recommend military service as compared to Non-Participants—although not by a significant margin. However, Non-Participants were far more likely to not recommend military service.

Question: On a scale from 1 to 5, how likely are you to recommend military service to family members or members of your community?

	Participants	Non-Participants
Likely/Very Likely	60.5%	53.8%
Neutral	24.7%	23.2%
Not Likely/Not Very Likely	14.7%	23.0%

Worth a closer look...

While Participants and Non-Participants were likely to recommend service as a whole, a closer look at the data shows a more significant variation based on the respondent's age, as noted in the chart below.

Age

	22-29	30-39	40+
Likely/Very Likely	42.9%	53.1%	64.5%
Neutral	29.6%	28.4%	22.2%
Not Likely/Not Very Likely	27.4%	18.5%	13.4%

In future surveys, we will continue to examine this issue to understand better this variation and why it may exist.



Prepared Statement of Barbara Carson

Introduction: Our Work and Policy Priorities

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today about transition and the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) on behalf of the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families' (IVMF) at Syracuse University.

About the IVMF

The IVMF was founded in 2011, as higher-education's first interdisciplinary academic institute singularly focused on advancing economic, social, and wellness outcomes on behalf of the Nation's military, veterans, and their families. In support of that mission, the IVMF team designs and delivers class-leading programs and supportive services to the military-connected community, positioning them for a successful transition from military to civilian life. Each year, more than 20,000 service members, veterans, and family members engage IVMF programs and services, which are provided at largely no cost to participants. Our offerings span a variety of categories, from entrepreneurship and career training to connecting individuals with local resources in their communities. The IVMF's programs are underpinned by the Institute's sustained and robust data collection, applied research on the most pressing issues impacting veteran well-being, and evaluation services for public and private partners who also serve the military-connected population.

Accordingly, the IVMF's policy priorities are directly informed by insights from our programmatic, research, and evaluation efforts, as well as from engagements with the IVMF's many external partners including from the public sector, higher education, national and community nonprofits, philanthropy, and the private sector. We remain committed to contributing to the effort to knit together the patchwork of government and non-government support greatly needed to support successful transition.

Key Message

We commend the Committee's continued dedication and progress to the improvement of TAP and the broader transition process, including the attention to measurement and oversight. While important strides have been made, more must be done to ensure veterans and their families are equipped to thrive in their post-service lives.

Below, we offer for consideration:

- **Relevant insights from the available evidence** about the transition experience and associated outcomes, as well as the limits of what TAP alone can achieve.
- **Key takeaway:** Successful transition is essential to individual and family well-being and our national security.
- **Key takeaway:** Transition can be difficult, but preparation and support beyond TAP are associated with better outcomes.
- **Recommendations for changes that would optimize TAP given its role in the overall transition process**, based on areas where TAP currently provides value and where it falls short in its design, implementation, and results.
- **Key takeaway:** TAP remains an important part of the transition process and therefore requires greater accountability through compliance, standards, and evaluation.
- **Key takeaway:** TAP should be part of a broader connected system of support that includes high quality public, nonprofit, and private sector programs that align with transitioning service member needs.

State of Current Evidence

Defining the Problem

Every year, an estimated 200,000 service members transition out of the military. When we include military spouses, National Guard members, and reservists, the number of individuals navigating this transition each year is even higher. Many face challenges during the critical first 3 years outside the service, and data shows that more than half of veterans find the transition to civilian life difficult. Researchers from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have even referred to the first year after separation as "the deadly gap" for transitioning veterans due to an even more elevated risk for death by suicide. The ability to establish meaningful employment and financial stability are critical to a service member's successful transition

from active duty to civilian life, and can help avoid enormous economic, social, and personal costs.

These costs have broader implications for our national security. There is evidence to suggest hesitancy to recommend or pursue military service for the younger generation, which in turn influences our ability to recruit and sustain a robust All-Volunteer Force. In the most recent annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS) report, a collaboration with Blue Star Families, we found that while seven in ten respondents say military service has added value to their family's life, only one-third would recommend military service to a young family member.

Additionally, recent data published by Ipsos with Call of Duty Endowment and Mission Roll Call indicated that 55 percent of adults are unlikely to recommend military careers to teens, and that 80 percent of teens are uninterested in military service as a viable career path—despite positive perceptions of veterans overall. The study also found that roughly half of adult respondents believed challenges in military recruitment pose a significant risk to national security.

Transition and the Programmatic Landscape

Data shows that most veterans are seeking employment after service, even those also interested in school or starting a business. Further, about 62 percent of veterans are underemployed after 6.5 years. Yet, per a recent report from RAND, 95 percent of Federal spending on military-to-civilian transition programs focus on general education services despite those services being utilized by just 41 percent of participants.

More broadly, per U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) classifications, there are 45 Federal programs overseen by 11 Federal agencies that help veterans transition—now 46 with the addition of the new Veteran and Spouse Transitional Assistance Grant Program—which RAND estimated collectively represent over \$13 billion of expenditures per year.

Critically, RAND found it difficult to compile dependable budget information about these programs, and that almost none have been rigorously or independently evaluated, including 27 programs that serve few individuals and for which almost no budget or performance data exists.

RAND's assessment made clear that the current state of Federal programming includes overlaps across the existing programs, but also noted that gaps remain, particularly with employment assistance. Nonprofits have created programs that fill these and other gaps that TAP and the Federal Government may not be best suited to address. For example, 8 years ago the IVMF launched the Onward to Opportunity (O2O) program. O2O provides career exploration and employability skills training, along with access to industry-recognized certifications to over 10,000 transitioning service members, veterans, and spouses every year at no cost. The program operates on 19 military communities, reaching over 70 installations across the country and provides virtual training to participants in all 50 states.

Importantly, O2O is the only program that has undergone a rigorous third-party evaluation to prove its efficacy at helping transitioning service members—especially those leaving the military from junior enlisted ranks—secure better salaries. While a second report from RAND noted challenges nonprofits face with measurement of their employment services, some are already tracking spending and performance to a fair extent. This data suggests there are currently organizations that deliver evidence-based programs more efficiently than the government.

Relatedly, the Ipsos study found there were high levels of support for enhancing certain services for former service members. Specifically, despite generally believing veterans are employed in jobs appropriate for their experience and education, respondents still overwhelmingly backed the expansion of programs focused on job placement.

Transition Experience for Individuals in Context

Our programmatic support and advocacy for those who have served acknowledge that there are differing needs among transitioning service members. We also recognize that the timeline to military transition can vary from one individual to another. Specifically, and in reference to an earlier section of this testimony, we know that even in the best of circumstances, the military transition process can be difficult. Cross-sectional annual data from the MFLS demonstrate that year after year, roughly half of veteran respondents described their transition experience as “difficult” or “very difficult.” This finding is dismaying. Yet, further data supports that “preparedness” lessens the challenges associated with military transition.

There are multiple ways to foster preparation for military transition. First is through giving transitioning service members more time for this change. For example, 61 percent of veterans agreed with the statement “I needed time to figure out

what to do with my life during my transition.” Additionally, while many veterans do not get a lot of lead time before separation, preliminary data also show that 82 percent of veterans who prepared for transition three or more years before separating felt “prepared.” Among those veterans who said they were not able to prepare for transition, only 21 percent felt prepared.

Another aspect of having enough time for military transition is recognizing that the transition process can extend beyond the specific moment of military separation. Additional evidence from The Veteran Metrics Initiative (TVMI), a national longitudinal study of post-9/11 veterans managed by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Pennsylvania State University, found prevalent utilization of transition support programs and services from approximately a year prior to separation through 3 years after separation. Furthermore, even at 5 years post-service, only 81 percent of veterans say they felt fully transitioned, demonstrating that military transition can be a lengthy and uneven process for many service members and veterans.

As outlined above, there is compelling evidence to validate that transitioning out of the military presents challenges and is more than a moment in time, which requires us to think more broadly about military transition. We know that veterans and their families have varying needs before, during, and after the point of transition. They also require different levels of support to meet these needs and struggle to navigate to the right programs at the right time. Preliminary evidence shows that being prepared for military transition can pave the way for a smooth transition but at the same time, we must acknowledge the Department of Defense (DoD) priority of warfighting. This dichotomy highlights an inherent tension between prioritizing mission readiness and focusing on preparation for post-service life.

TAP Challenges and Opportunities

Compliance and Evaluation

TAP has significantly changed over the years and will continue to require adjustment to meet the needs of different generations of veterans in years to come. This necessary evolution means what is and is not working will also shift over time. This fact, coupled with TAP being the transition intervention available to the broadest swath of transitioning service members, reinforces how vital it is to monitor compliance and formally evaluate it for effectiveness.

While improving compliance has been a stated focus of DoD and a priority of this committee, data suggests that many service members still fail to begin TAP as early as required by law, and that a subset fail to attend the required portion at all. We know this varies by service branch and installation, and acknowledge the challenges faced at smaller or more remote locations. However, GAO reports have consistently recommended that DoD identify and address reasons for non-participation, including reducing the reliance on waivers.

In addition to making ongoing monitoring and reporting of key measures at the installation level more robust, other options should be explored to better support and hold commanders accountable for achieving compliance. Options should preserve flexibility to ensure transition can be prioritized in parallel with mission readiness, but also be paired with more consequences for noncompliance, such as integrating TAP participation into performance evaluations.

To date, potentially because of past periods where veteran unemployment rates were quite high, the bar for a successful transition was accordingly set quite low: employed vs. not employed and unemployment compensation spending. We should aspire to more than this bare minimum. Walking out of the service, veterans should be able to get jobs that reflect and respect their service and training, without assuming those jobs should be the same as the ones they did in the military. That is not to say that the first job out of the service will or needs to be the perfect long-term fit; it is to say that it's unacceptable to have to take huge leaps backward or start over, and it's certainly unacceptable to be underemployed after 6 years.

However, TAP is one of the few transition programs to have undergone more formal evaluation. Results have generally been mixed, though there appear to be some important long-term benefits, such as higher labor force participation. One study found that Department of Labor (DOL) employment workshop participants comparatively found jobs more quickly and remained employed longer—but, they had significantly lower wages. Wages were higher if participants also attended sessions on VA benefits and completed the workshops earlier, reinforcing ways TAP might be structured to help with preparation.

Overall, it is time to build on existing evaluations and standardize metrics for TAP, using measures validated by existing evidence. As programs outside the government continue to adopt these measures, this approach will increase oversight,

comparability, and ultimately help us improve the overall system of transition supports.

Value of TAP and Transition Programs

It is important to consider the role TAP plays during the transition process. There is data to indicate the circumstances under which it may offer the most value, as well as how it can be augmented to offer further value.

One way TAP has value for preparedness is through provision of necessary resources. MFLS data shows that veteran respondents tend to turn to multiple sources (e.g., word of mouth, TAP, engagement with veteran-and military-serving organizations) to gather information about military transition. And among those veterans who used these needed resources during military separation, 41 percent indicated that the resources were shared with them at TAP. However, despite the broad availability of transition resources, data from TVMI also showed that of the 19 percent who did not feel fully transitioned, many were not using services, specifically citing lack of awareness of what was available and confusion about their eligibility.

TVMI findings also show that during the first 3 months after transition, 66 percent of veterans use at least one program aside from TAP and 33 percent of veterans use multiple programs and services. These additional programs include both public and private offerings, and veterans who utilized more programs experienced better outcomes.

Empowering family members, such as spouses, to be part of the process of military transition through TAP can also create more capacity to tackle the transition process. Unpublished data from the 2024 MFLS showed that among veteran spouses who have experienced military transition, 32 percent are already engaging with resources through TAP and found it helpful.

At the same time, 17 percent of veteran spouses said they used TAP but found it unhelpful, and 51 percent said that they did not engage with TAP during their family's military transition. Anecdotally, spouses of veterans and separating service members have cited numerous reasons for not engaging with TAP, including scheduling difficulties, lack of understanding about what TAP is, and/or little to no knowledge that their attendance is encouraged.

Additionally, among those spouses who had been through this process, 36 percent indicated that they found the varying sets of transition resources they used through information given to them at TAP. So, while families deploy many informal networks (such as friends, coworkers, neighbors, etc.) in their transition information-seeking process, formal channels such as TAP remain important and relevant, particularly for those who may not necessarily have a robust informal network of supports.

To provide tailored and more useful support, Congress might explore options to work with MSOs and VSOs to develop a separate or targeted transition program for spouses and family members. A program specifically for this population—not a duplication of TAP—would improve awareness of and connection to resources, both at the point of separation and beyond. Congress might also consider legislative solutions that make it easier for military spouses to navigate to TAP and other resources, as they are often the ones managing household finances and their children's education goals. In general, providing opportunities for spouses may distribute responsibility and resources across the family unit in ways that help with preparation.

Taken together, these insights underscore that TAP can be an essential component for both veterans and their families, but they also demonstrate the clear need for additional and complementary supports.

Connections Outside DoD

Given the importance of connecting transitioning service members and their families to public and private offerings alongside TAP and after separation, we need to make warm handoffs easier between DoD, VA, and DOL, as well as between the Federal Government to states, counties and communities—the places where individuals in fact transition into civilian life.

These linkages can be integral to crisis prevention. When they are unaware of a veteran's presence, government and community services cannot effectively address needs in a timely manner. We encourage Congress to come to an agreement on recent legislative proposals that would support data sharing and enrollment in benefits and services at the VA, DOL, State, and local levels for those that choose to do so once they officially separate from the military. To do this efficiently and effectively, we need to decrease barriers for the individual to move between the DoD and new systems of care. Doing so has the added benefit of empowering better oversight and evaluation long-term.

Conclusion

In light of the available evidence, our collective approach to transition requires us to consider interventions further upstream and downstream, moving beyond TAP and government alone. We must also implement more oversight to set veterans and their families up for success during what we know is a critical time.

Finally, setting measurement standards and evaluating TAP and other Federal programs against these standards will help us restructure and enact holistic, systemwide reforms that put resources to their first best use. This system should also include stronger connective tissue between agencies and with the nonprofit sector, including ways to empower allocation of resources to effective, evidence-based nonprofit programs that deliver positive outcomes.

The ability of veterans and their families to thrive in their post-service lives depends on getting transition right. Doing so not only impacts their well-being. Successful transitions benefit our communities, preserve our All-Volunteer Force, and ultimately strengthen our national security.

We thank the Committee again for the opportunity to provide testimony on this topic, and for your enduring commitment to improve transition. We stand ready to continue sharing insights from our research and programs in support of this vital goal.

Prepared Statement of Brian Lewis

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for devoting time to the discussion of essential programs that provide economic opportunity for veterans and thank you for the opportunity to testify about the critical role employers, like Consumers Energy, can play in helping veterans as they move from military to civilian life including ways to leverage industry partnerships through the Transition Assistance Program and SkillBridge Program. My name is Brian Lewis, and I am Executive Director of Customer Operations at Consumers Energy.

I've worked at Consumers Energy for 12 years, serving in a variety of customer centric roles. As the leader of our customer operations team, I oversee our contact centers, complaints resolution, revenue operations, energy assistance and our digital channels. I am also a proud veteran having served as a Combat Medical Specialist and Medical Laboratory Specialist in the U.S. Army and Army Reserve from 1994 to 2002. During my years of service, the Army entrusted me with the lives of my fellow soldiers. However, despite having been trained to provide life-saving support, operate a blood bank or even oversee a microbiology bench, when I transitioned to a civilian life I found my Army training had limited transferability to the civilian medical field and my job prospects were extremely limited. While I'm grateful for the time spent serving my country, I felt underprepared and under resourced to navigate the transition from military to civilian life and I ultimately abandoned my medical aspirations. My experience led me to seek out other ways to serve and contributed to my desire to advocate on behalf of other veterans, helping them navigate the transition to civilian roles. I know firsthand the challenges that veterans can face entering a new career path after national service. It is because I know those challenges firsthand that I helped found the Consumers Energy's Veterans Advisory Panel and served as a past co-chair of this employee resource group.

Our company—Consumers Energy—provides natural gas and electric service to nearly 7 million Michigan residents. We are the state's largest utility with customers in every county within the Lower Peninsula. My Consumers Energy colleagues and I take pride in serving our customers each and every day. This pride of service beyond self is something I, along with the over 800 other military veterans employed by Consumers Energy, have carried with us from our time serving our Nation into our new civilian mission to provide essential heat and light to our fellow Michiganders. Serving our customers can sometimes demand personal sacrifice as they count on us to keep power on around the clock and respond to emergencies during nights, weekends, or holidays, a similar sacrifice that our military men and women are accustomed to as well.

Consumers Energy has a longstanding commitment to provide opportunities for our military veterans. This commitment to veterans is backed up by the numbers. Our workforce is made up of 12 percent military veterans—far greater than the national average of 7 percent. The company has also partnered with the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund to support energy vulnerable Veterans, giving nearly \$550,000 to that organization since 2020. Through our efforts to support veterans Consumers

Energy has been recognized by the Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency as a gold-level “Veteran-friendly Employer” for 9 years running. This designation recognizes our Company’s efforts to recruit, train, and retain veteran employees, helping us fill critical positions across our electric and gas operations.

Our efforts to support veterans have been further recognized by the Department of Defense. In 2023 Consumers Energy received the Secretary of Defense Freedom Award in recognition of our support for employees serving in the National Guard and Reserve capacities. This award is the Department of Defense’s highest recognition for a civilian employer and demonstrates the Company’s efforts to support our employees that transition from active duty to a reserve capacity by providing stability that helps them balance their continued national service with career aspirations and other aspects of civilian life.

The Company’s efforts to support our veterans is about more than awards or accolades, it is about our earnest desire to help ease, what can often be, the difficult transition out of the military by providing a welcoming environment for colleagues with different backgrounds or experiences. Our Veteran’s Advisory Panel Business Employee Resource Group is one way we continuously seek input from our veteran employees to help drive policy change within our organization and with external partners. Today the Veteran’s Advisory Panel is one the Company’s largest resource groups with over 500 members. The group provides essential support for employees and in recruiting and retaining veterans.

Consumers Energy employees are also active in Veterans in Energy—a national organization founded by veterans for the purpose of providing professional support for veterans working in the energy industry. Employee engagement through Veterans in Energy includes annual leadership trainings, peer-to-peer networking, benchmarking and best practices sharing, and advocacy on behalf of veterans’ issues. Through engagement with Veterans in Energy, Consumers Energy employees have been instrumental in advocating for policy changes that have improve Department of Labor apprenticeship programs and demystifying the self-identification process for veterans so employers can have a better understanding of veterans in the workforce.

Consumers Energy has also recognized the importance of providing training and technical skills programs to help develop the highly skilled workforce needed for careers in energy. In partnership with the U.S. Department of Labor, the Company has registered seven different job roles to ensure that veterans can use their GI bill benefits toward apprenticeships that prepare them to work in gas or electric fields.

One way the Company has recruited potential, new apprentices is through electric and gas worker boot camp programs at our training center in Pottsville, Michigan. In partnership with the Utility Workers Union of America and Power for America, these training programs have, to date, helped prepare over 300 veterans for careers in electric and natural gas fields. Not only do these boot camp programs help connect graduates with high starting wage jobs, they also provide a pathway to placement in apprenticeship programs that can ultimately lead to careers in the energy sector with even higher earning potential. Each time we open a new boot camp the demand from applicants is significantly higher than the number of spaces we have to fill. We believe, and the demand for the programs affirms, that training programs are a win-win for veterans and Consumers Energy because the programs make the Company more attractive for job seekers while providing future employees with a pathway to essential and rewarding career opportunities.

Building a skilled, dedicated energy workforce isn’t just in Consumers Energy’s best interest, it’s vital to America’s national interest. The demand for energy is growing at rate not seen in decades. Whether its increasing energy demands from data centers to power artificial intelligence or to support an American manufacturing renaissance, the Nation’s gas and electric utilities are making significant investments in our energy systems to ensure businesses have the energy supplies they can rely on to thrive. Meeting this moment is going to require more and more lineworkers and gas construction crewmembers. We believe that fostering the talent pipeline from the Nation’s military to careers in energy will be an essential strategy to fill these critical roles.

Even with all our past efforts and success, Consumers Energy recognizes there is more to be done to help serve the roughly 200,000 service members who transition out of military service each year. Through our past partnerships with State and Federal agencies we’ve found many ways to help ease this transition, however we acknowledge there is always opportunity for continuous improvement. We believe that more can be done to strengthen the connection between Transition Assistance Program offices and companies in states that don’t have the same proximity to our nations active-duty military installations. Because Michigan does not have large numbers of active-duty personnel it’s been more challenging to make connections

with the TAP offices. Additionally, we see more potential with the Department of Defense's SkillBridge program to make more direct connections between employers and prospective employees. However, SkillBridge is not accessible to all veterans and coordination with Transition Assistance Program needs to be improved. We believe that further funding for SkillBridge and making this platform more accessible for veterans will vastly improve engagement between veterans and prospective employers.

Thank you again for the opportunity to participate in this discussion. Consumers Energy stands ready, willing, and able to support policymakers in improving economic opportunity for our Nation's veterans.

Prepared Statement of Kandi Tillman



WRITTEN TESTIMONY
SUBMITTED TO THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

for the March 25, 2025 Oversight Hearing

**“Mission Incomplete:
Strengthening the TAP Program to
Ensure a Smoother Transition to Civilian Life for Tomorrow’s Veterans”**

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity. My name is Kandi Tillman. My journey here today began 18 years ago when I met a recently separated junior enlisted veteran. He had been a professional athlete, he had a college degree, enlisted after 9/11 and served in the elite Ranger Regiment - clearly he had significant skills. His initial plan was to pursue a Masters Degree to support his career pivot but he did not have education benefits.

I will never forget the day he said, *“What can I do except shoot a gun or swing a bat?”* The personal uncertainty was devastating. It took him nearly three years to find steady employment. I also remember the day in 2008 when I called a random line at the Phoenix VA in desperation.

At the time and having worked in private industry for several years, I knew there were so many things he could do. But he had a lack of awareness of how civilian industry worked & he lacked meaningful connections to those that would understand his military skills. And while his personal reality was heartbreaking, the macro issue was the talent loss for our community - and worse, the lost economic potential for our society. Back then, there was no strong Transition Assistance Program (TAP), no SkillBridge, and little enthusiasm from employers to engage with what they did not understand. Military transition looked very different than it does today. We must not go back.

I am grateful for the steadfast efforts of so many over the past two decades to ensure that service members leaving the military today have a stronger ecosystem of support. Is there more to do? Of course. And we must have a clear and informed understanding of what military transition needs for today.

In 2018, a veteran working at a Fortune 500 company well-known in the military community shared a business challenge with me:

“We want to hire more transitioning military and student veterans nationwide. But we can’t reach them efficiently to even share our opportunities.”

And it wasn't an isolated statement. I was hearing similar scenarios from many employers, including big defense contractors and small mom & pop employers.

Caring about this community wasn't enough; understanding business fundamentals and bridging the gap for employers - who have jobs to offer - was essential.

As a civilian with 20 years of business experience across both Fortune 500 companies and small companies working in this community, I often bring a different perspective to veteran employment beyond traditional case management solutions.

I later married the veteran I mentioned earlier. In 2020, my husband Kevin and I founded **50strong**. Our vision was to create solutions that support strong employers in **all 50 states**, enabling them to build strong pathways for military-affiliated job seekers and to connect with strong military talent.

50strong is a **small business with a big mission**, dedicated to maximizing social impact by facilitating **easy, casual, virtual connections**. I often describe our work as **small and scrappy and running at the speed of industry** - always focused on finding smart solutions while doing as much good as we can.

In 2024, our funding was exclusively from 13 large employer partners. Through their support, 50strong provides **no-fee engagement tools** to more than 250 employers & DoD-authorized SkillBridge partners and over 100 higher education institutions.

Today, we are honored that many TAP leaders **organically refer transitioning service members** to engage with 50strong's **accessible and virtual** efforts. We are also honored to be a Department of Labor ENPP referral partner and we have supported employer roundtables with DoD Military-Civilian Transition Office, DoL VETS and several Congressional offices. Most importantly, we operate **at no cost** to transitioning service members and **without using any taxpayer dollars**.

In 2024, approximately 13,000 transitioning service members & military-affiliated jobseekers registered for our virtual events. Of those:

- approximately 25% were active duty
- approximately 55% were currently-enrolled military students in "extended military transition".
- approximately 25% were E1-E4 ranks, which is important because this group is less likely to opt in to efforts than other ranks.¹

As a recent example, last Thursday and after just one 90 min virtual meetup that included several hundred military-affiliated jobseekers:

- 56% joined for the very first time
- nearly 90% say they learned about new pathways
- 98% recommend 50strong to other military-affiliated jobseekers

We often hear feedback such as the following:

¹Post-9/11 Veteran Transitions to Civilian Life: Predictors of the Use of Employment Programs. Journal of Veterans Studies, <https://journal-veterans-studies.org/articles/10.21061/jvs.v5i1.127>

"Such an amazing event that's filled with QUALITY content, partners and program information. The doors of opportunity just flung wide open!"

"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."

Importantly, this is model that is easily scalable.

We also re-invest our profits to build new solutions for our community. In 2022, we launched the 50strong Opportunity Marketplace². This portal includes SkillBridge, Student Veteran and Apprenticeship opportunities at CITY LEVEL offering employer-driven, real-time updates for CITY-LEVEL opportunity sharing for ANY DoD-authorized SkillBridge & employer partner that wishes to collaborate at NO FEE. *There are currently tens of thousands of full-time roles and over 13,000 SkillBridge opportunities publicly available for service members to leverage.*

As we continue to identify & invest in new solutions, we are honored to have direct input from thousands of military-affiliated jobseekers and employers and education partners. In this context, I'd like to offer four insights and recommendations for ways in which we can improve military transition together.

INSIGHT #1

While TAP and Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) provide essential individualized career counseling and support, the involvement of employers in industry-led career preparation is equally vital. Employment is a pivotal component of a successful transition, especially given that 73% of those leaving active duty separate vs retire.³ ***Post-military employment largely relies on private industry employers.***

Unfortunately employer engagement is often treated as an afterthought. To date, our national efforts have predominantly focused on enabling the individual via TAP and various VSOs without as much emphasis on the importance of the HOW for employers that seek to engage in military transition. The reality of requiring employers to navigate the military services, various TAP leads and the 40,000 VSOs within in the ecosystem⁴ is as complicated for employers as it is for individual jobseekers.

According to a 2024 RAND report, employment-focused transition efforts are minimal as "...very few programs and a small amount of funding are dedicated to helping service members and veterans translate their military skills to the civilian labor market, find civilian apprenticeships or jobs, or connect with civilian employers." Further "the Big Four programs accounted for \$13.5 billion out of \$14.3 billion total, whereas funding for the TAP, which serves all transitioning

² 50strong, www.50-strong.us/marketplace

³ Military OneSource, <https://demographics.militaryonesource.mil/chapter-2-personnel-separations>

⁴ Charting the Sea of Goodwill, https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/hero/documents/VeteransPhilanthropy_151207_rev.pdf

service members, was approximately \$140 million.⁵ It is therefore important that we protect the TAP investment in the context of total transition spending.

But we must look for smart ways to improve it and we can do this by further engaging private industry employers early and often and intimately into TAP. We must do this efficiently and at-scale across hundreds of military installations globally and for the approximately 170,000 service members that separate annually. This requires more than bi-annual on-base hiring fairs or physical flyers to hand out or 2-3 employers at monthly transition classes or government-run job boards that are cumbersome for employers. It requires an efficient, always-on, 24/7 approach to a variety of employers for civilian industry engagement that leverages technology.

Quite simply, employers must be enabled to be part of the discussion, processes, or policies that support transition. Otherwise, any systems developed may inherently favor a government, education or nonprofit intermediary involved in all employment activities - a situation unlike that for any other part of the labor force.

As we often tell service members when they come to 50strong:

*"We do not have jobs. Employers have jobs. Employers are here.
We do NOT want to be an unnecessary bottleneck for you."*

Our recommendations include:

- Ensure that strong, thought-leading employer voices are included for all Congressional hearings & roundtables & policy discussions *alongside* government agencies and veteran-serving organizations.
- Encourage all government agencies to enable **direct employer engagement** to ensure any program changes or policy iterations are mindful of impacts to employers of all sizes, establishing employer advisories to provide ongoing input for TAP, SkillBridge, Jobs for Veterans State Grants, VR&E and all other transition-related programs.
- Protect current investments in TAP while reviewing latest TAP curriculum and ensuring cross-industry employer input to drive improvements.
- Importantly, we must identify ways to further incorporate & leverage INDUSTRY-DRIVEN virtual career preparation into TAP curriculum at scale and across installations.

INSIGHT #2

In the last 6 years, SkillBridge has indeed revolutionized employer participation in military transition. SkillBridge directly enables Military Talent Teams to offer training toward strong employment and 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. Essentially, SkillBridge serves as an entry point for employers.

⁵ Rand "Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions", https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1363-12.html

Everyday we hear about strong outcomes that are directly enabled via SkillBridge, helping transitioning service members get into roles they would have never even considered if not for this program.

According to our tracking - since 2019, the number of Authorized Partners has grown by approximately 5000%⁶ which demonstrates industry's eagerness & momentum overall; as with any rapidly growing program, it is critical to ensure expansion while maintaining meaningful employment outcomes via program guidelines and best practice sharing.

I would like to thank the bipartisan leadership and support of the past three administrations and numerous Congressional leaders which have made SkillBridge the great program that it is today. And I applaud Dr. Neaves and the current team at the DoD Military-Civilian Transition Office for their 2024 updates that are now underway that will directly drive program sustainability & strong outcomes by ensuring clear guidelines and reporting efforts.

As one strong 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, 90% of their fellows received a full-time job offer at the end of their fellowship.⁷ *This means that a service member returning home to Oshkosh, Wisconsin or Bedford, New Hampshire or Buckeye, 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.*

I'll also highlight another strong employer **Cushman & Wakefield**. They are a global commercial real estate services B2B company and a much lesser known entity to the military. They utilize SkillBridge to train service members into virtually any role from a variety of military occupations that don't often have a direct civilian equivalent. *They've taken on more than 100 Skillbridge interns into over 30 different types of roles with a 90%+ full time offer rate.*

Unfortunately, it should be noted that there are also DoD-authorized SkillBridge providers whose programs do not necessarily meet the full intent of the program to provide robust experiential learning that leads to employment, and instead focus on giving the servicemember free time to use as they wish. These are often referred to as "SkillBridge vacations". Unfortunately, this erodes commanders' trust in the program and leads to endless frustration for the service members when there is no opportunity for employment on the backend. Again, I am grateful for efforts underway to prevent this.

We must also ensure that we continue to enable "on ramps" for new employers, especially smaller employers; these yield new SkillBridge internship opportunities for service members and help remove DoD burden of unexpected unemployment expenses. To date, this has been accomplished through individual employer-based internships via Army Career Skills Program,

⁶ 50strong tracking of DoD SkillBridge website data over time, not DoD-provided or DoD-sponsored data; 2019: ~120 partners & 2025: ~6200 partners

⁷ Lowe's, <https://talent.lowes.com/us/en/csp-dod-skillbridge>

U.S Chamber of Commerce's Hiring our Heroes and other reputable "third party" intermediary SkillBridge partners that facilitate new employer-driven internships.

Our recommendations include:

- Continue to champion the 2024 efforts now underway by DoD's Military-Civilian Transition Office⁸ to ensure that all SkillBridge partners are working toward strong employment outcomes.
- Efforts are also underway by DoD's Military-Civilian Transition Office toward centralization of command approvals across Services. We applaud the team's efforts and encourage continued support for efforts that will drive efficient approval processes.
- We do recommend modifying the most recent SkillBridge MOU language in an effort to prevent adding unnecessary bureaucracy for a process that has long-been producing strong outcomes for DoD, employers & service members. This includes updating SkillBridge policy to delay Section 4.3.4 (individual MOU requirements for host employers) until a future date but mandate employment outcomes reporting immediately as outlined in Section 4.3.3.⁹ This will ensure reporting visibility to DoD on an immediate time frame without instituting unnecessary bureaucracy and without incurring DoD costs to resources while also ensuring individual internships are enabled via trusted entities that are skilled at providing this service.

INSIGHT #3

While many Fortune 500 companies have strong military talent efforts to support their business needs, we must find solutions that work for Small Business employers. This includes the more than 33 million small businesses in the U.S. that employ 47% of all private sector employees.¹⁰ It is these small employers that we must call upon to help support strong military transitions for separating service members and to shrink the military-civilian divide throughout an individual's service.

Today, it can be incredibly difficult for any small business to engage with military talent. They often lack resources to physically travel to installations and/or they often lack internal knowledge of how to engage various transition programs and/or they are often thwarted by the idea of government bureaucracy.

As noted in a 2024 Rand report, "GAO catalogued 45 such programs that are overseen by 11 federal agencies."¹¹ which all support various aspects of military transition. It is cumbersome at best for even large employers to navigate and it can be nearly impossible for a small employer.

⁸ DoD SkillBridge MOU, updated August 2024, https://skillbridge.osd.mil/docs/DoD_SkillBridge_MOU_Aug_2024_Release.pdf

⁹ DoD SkillBridge MOU, updated August 2024, https://skillbridge.osd.mil/docs/DoD_SkillBridge_MOU_Aug_2024_Release.pdf

¹⁰ U.S. Small Business Administration, <https://advocacy.sba.gov/2023/03/07/frequently-asked-questions-about-small-business-2023/#~:text=Most%20businesses%20are%20small%2D%2099.9,46.4%25%20of%20private%20sector%20employees>

¹¹ Rand "Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions", https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1363-12.html

Therefore, state & local chambers of commerce and industry-driven business associations are often critical. I was honored recently to join Governor Laura Kelly of Kansas as she convened a roundtable with business leaders and military commands to discuss how to best support Kansas employers.

As another example, John Deere has a unique approach that enables over 1500 privately-owned dealer locations across the country, many of which are small businesses, to connect with transitioning service members. The John Deere national military team serves as the “front porch” and then collaborates across all their individual dealers to align location-based job matching of service members with local workforce needs. As of 2024, John Deere hired approximately 500 veterans & transitioning service members into their dealerships thanks to this incredible effort.

At the local and regional level, it is often business and trade associations which are best positioned to provide education and resources to employers, employment connections to transitioning servicemembers, and regional advocacy to ensure these two groups have regular opportunities to engage each other. Chambers of Commerce are highly invested in ensuring their employer base is connected to the highly skilled transitioning military community to retain or attract newly separated servicemembers and their families as productive members of the area workforce and economy. An example of this is the North San Diego Business Chamber, where their robust activities around veteran employment include providing direct education to transitioning servicemembers and 1 free year of membership in the Chamber to have the opportunity to build strong networks of professional relationships with a wide variety of regional and national employers. The North San Diego Business Chamber also hosts an annual regional Military Summit which provides education and resources for not only transitioning military, veterans, and military families, but for employers as well. Across our nation, the needs, challenges, and opportunities are varied and often distinctly unique, just as are the needs of transitioning servicemembers in varied locations. There is no “one size fits all” program that can address these unique needs nationally, and local and regional efforts are an essential enabler.

Our recommendations include:

- For small, local employers, DoD SkillBridge is often their entry point. Again, we must ensure that there exists an easy on-ramp for individual internships that do not require MOU agreements with DoD. As above, these yield new SkillBridge internship opportunities for service members and help remove DoD burden of unexpected unemployment expenses and they can be incredibly important for local enablement, especially for small employers.
- TAP leads should continue to collaborate with their local chambers of commerce to support opportunities with small businesses near their installations and also with national employers with opportunities across the country. This collaboration should be encouraged by national leadership and the DoD. *Congressional offices can lend their leadership to drive these conversations.*

INSIGHT #4

Military transition must account for the fact that half of all veterans enroll in school after leaving the military¹² - highlighting an “extended transition”. Yet, despite the very large federal investment, there is no at-scale support for translating their military skills when they enter the workforce, actual support offered via schools may be severely limited and there also is minimal reporting of outcomes.

It is important to consider that:

- 53% of service members join the military for education benefits¹³
- 90% of student veterans come from enlisted ranks¹⁴
- 86% of those veterans cite career/job opportunities as their reason for pursuing higher education¹⁵

For these reasons, Post-9/11 GI Bill Benefits can be critical to a bright future for a service member in “extended transition”. We can only fulfill our national promise of a strong post-military future if employment is an aligned outcome and if we honor the use of these funds to support those it intends to support.

Unfortunately, while Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits are the highest expenditure “military transition” program with hundreds of thousands of participating veterans, “...little is known about the program’s effects on military recruitment, retention, military-to-civilian transitions, or civilian-employment outcomes for veterans.”¹⁶

It is too easy to promote more training or education. But without meaningful translation to a job on the backend, this means that veterans may use their hard-earned benefits with little benefit.

Further, there is minimal direction provided to schools on how they use VA funds once students are enrolled. We believe that any school accepting VA funds should have a responsibility in providing veteran-focused support services to ensure outcomes & employment while also acknowledging that they know what needs their students may have.

Recently, I was asked to submit a letter of support for a \$2 million grant - intended to provide military-supportive services to a school that already receives millions in Post-9/11 GI Bill funding annually. I declined because their current VA payments seem to be going into a general fund rather than directly supporting military-affiliated students with programming that improves their outcomes. I certainly hope that I am wrong.

Similarly, a Veteran Center leader at another reputable university shared with me that they have to externally fundraise for every supportive service they offer to military-affiliated students. They

¹² Pew Research 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/09/10/the-transition-to-post-military-employment/>

¹³ Institute for Veteran & Military Families, <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/student-veterans-a-valuable-asset-to-higher-education/>

¹⁴ Student Veterans of American annual report 2020, <https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/SVA-2020-Annual-Report.pdf>

¹⁵ Institute for Veteran & Military Families, <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/student-veterans-a-valuable-asset-to-higher-education/>

¹⁶ Rand “Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions”, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html

also mentioned that at least one of their currently-enrolled student veterans is homeless - even as the school receives millions in VA tuition revenue from the hard-earned education benefits of those students that served.

Given the annual \$10.6 billion taxpayer investment spent on Education Benefits¹⁷ 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"¹⁸, we must find new ways drive & measure employment outcomes.

It is important to note that of our total 50strong event registrants, 54% are currently-enrolled military-affiliated students seeking industry-led career prep & exploration. Many of them are encouraged to come by their Campus Veterans Centers. We recognize that Higher Ed Veteran Centers often have very limited budgets and we work hard to offer no-fee tools to any Education Partner as they seek to support their military-affiliated students. We are grateful to our 100+ education partners that are tapping into our no-fee services to help support their students and we are grateful to the employers that make them possible.

As one student veteran recently shared,

"I was on the internship search for several months, trying to market my military experience to university recruiters...I received a plethora of rejections....I stumbled upon 50strong when I saw a posting for summer internships and was able to meet with AWS. The process has been amazing..They already knew the value my military service brought."

I am proud to share that we will host our first 50strong StudentConnect event on April 3. This virtual event is especially for student veterans and will include employers eager to highlight internship, part-time and new graduate opportunities. We will also host virtual share sessions specially meant to further enable Veteran Center leaders this year.

Our specific recommendations for this Subcommittee include:

- Ensure TAP Education tracks are inclusive of employers vs focusing on education partners that may only have an enrollment-focused intent.
- Establish a centralized tracking of employment outcomes for student veterans for any school accepting Post-9/11 GI Bill payments.
- Recommend that all Education partners that receive Post-9/11 GI Bill payments allocate a certain percentage of funds to directly support programming & services for student veterans and allow for public reporting & transparency of this contribution.
- Ask VA to establish an employer advisory council to support employment outcomes for PGIB beneficiaries and any new education-focused programs, including VETTEC.

¹⁷ FY2021 Annual Benefits Report – VA Education
https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/docs/2021_education.pdf; <https://www.dodmou.com/TADECIDE>

¹⁸ FY2021 Annual Benefits Report – VA Education
https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/docs/2021_education.pdf

Again, I thank this Committee for the opportunity to share these recommendations. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD

Prepared Statement of Hire Heroes USA

Introduction

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit a written statement for the record regarding the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) on behalf of Hire Heroes USA.

Hire Heroes USA is one of the leading veteran employment nonprofit organizations in the Nation. Founded in 2005, we have secured employment for more than 100,000 transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses. We provide comprehensive, one-on-one employment services in all 50 states to 20,000 individuals annually at no cost to our clients. With nearly 40 percent of our staff, including our CEO, being veterans, we understand the unique strengths, values, and insights inherent in our veteran, transitioning service member, and military spouse clients.

The transition to civilian life is more than just the point-in-time marked by separation from the military—it is, at times, a years-long process of adjusting to a new way of life. To meet and overcome our clients' challenges, Hire Heroes USA implements a highly individualized one-on-one approach, pairing each client with a Transition Specialist who walks with the client on the road to employment. The relationship between client and Transition Specialist often extends beyond the point in time when a client is employed, providing ongoing and continued support as the service member adjusts to the civilian workplace. Hire Heroes USA is focused not only on the quantity of clients served, but on the quality of the service they receive.

A 2022 Government Accountability Office (GAO) study found that nearly 25 percent of service members who need maximum transition support did not attend TAP's mandatory 2-day class, and many did not enroll in TAP the requisite year before separation.¹ While there is a need to strengthen and improve the rates at which transitioning service members participate in TAP, there is a simultaneous need to strengthen programs where individuals are currently receiving services.

Employment Navigator and Partnership Program

The Employment Navigator & Partnership Program (ENPP) was initially created in response to transitioning service members' feedback regarding TAP's lack of personalized services. ENPP addresses this gap by connecting transitioning service members to employment service providers to assist with career preparation and job placement services. Available at 40 installations and with over 70 private and nonprofit partners, ENPP takes a critical first step in addressing the need for continuity of services beyond the point of separation from the military.

In its short tenure, the ENPP has successfully complemented TAP: initial Department of Labor (DOL) data show high satisfaction and strong employment outcomes among ENPP participants. ENPP's one-on-one career services, offered by DOL staff and partnering organizations, directly address transitioning service members' needs and have demonstrated strong employment outcomes. DOL data show high satisfaction and strong employment outcomes among ENPP participants. In Fiscal Year 2024, 99 percent of program participants reported satisfaction with their Employment Navigators and said they would recommend the program to a friend. Furthermore, 96 percent of participants reported that ENPP partners met or exceeded employment-related expectations. The DOL Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) also reports that compared to their counterparts who do not participate in ENPP, transitioning service members who participate in ENPP experience a time from military separation to employment that is 63 days faster. Additionally, these

¹ Government Accountability Office. Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Could Enhance the Transition Assistance Program by Better Leveraging Performance Information. May 17, 2023. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-106793>.

same service members earn 11 percent higher wages than those who do not participate in ENPP on average.

ENPP's success lies in the one-on-one career services, offered by DOL staff and high-performing, nonprofit partners, that directly address transition issues and have demonstrated stronger employment outcomes. An original partner of the ENPP program, Hire Heroes USA fills a critical gap in service provision for veterans and transitioning service members. Top requests from ENPP clients—including mentoring, industry-specific training, webinars, and virtual career fairs—reflect this.

Hire Heroes USA has supported over 2,400 client referrals from the program since 2021. Of these referrals, Hire Heroes USA provided services to over 1,900, resulting in over 1,100 confirmed hires. For Hire Heroes USA's ENPP referrals, the 2024 average salary upon hire was \$64,485. According to DOL VETS, ENPP served more than 17,700 individuals as of June 2024.² These numbers demonstrate that through referrals, Hire Heroes USA is serving nearly 11 percent of the total ENPP participants. These services are provided free of charge to the client because Hire Heroes USA incurs the cost, without compensation from the Federal Government. At a cost of approximately \$1,500 per participant placed, Hire Heroes USA commits significant financial resources to serving ENPP clients.

Opportunities for Improvement

While the program has early indicators of positive success, there are concerns regarding program sustainability and evaluation of its effectiveness. Without standardized performance metrics to evaluate outcomes, public and private leaders and decision makers cannot adequately determine the efficiency of the program. ENPP, as well as other Federal programs like TAP and SkillBridge (a DOD program to jumpstart transitioning service members' civilian career through internships, trainings, and apprenticeships with private sector companies), requires increased emphasis on standardized outcomes metrics over outputs and volume of clients served.

The RAND Corporation's recent investigation of the Federal and nonprofit landscape of transition programs demonstrates these problems. A June 2024 report found that the Federal Government spends over \$13 billion on 45 different programs across 11 agencies to support military transition each year. Approximately 97 percent of these funds are spent on education services rather than employment services.³ Upon further investigation into the role of nonprofit organizations in the transition process, RAND found that these organizations fill a critical gap to supplement Federal transition programs and initiatives, particularly in providing individualized employment services.⁴

Hire Heroes USA recommends examining the key takeaways from these reports—including standardizing reporting requirements, outcomes, and metrics in both the public and private sectors—to improve ENPP and other government military-to-civilian transition programs. Such standardization would increase transparency and improve oversight by allowing for more rigorous program evaluation to determine effectiveness. Furthermore, there is a need for increased public-private partnerships to grow effective transition programs. Rather than risk duplicity by creating new programs, the government should strengthen existing programs by partnering with nonprofit organizations that are already producing positive outcomes for those they serve. In these partnerships, RAND cites the need for nonprofit partners to be appropriately funded to do this work. Private organizations, relying on philanthropic support, have mitigated TAP's shortcomings, but declining resources jeopardize the private sector's continued sustainment of ENPP.

ENPP's continued success depends on the involvement of non-governmental partners that have dedicated and experienced staff, data-backed best practices, and local relationships that the government cannot provide. The ENPP partnership model should include compensation for private sector nonprofits providing the highest impact on transitioning service members. All ENPP partners participating in the program ought to continue doing so, but those organizations devoting significant operational resources to supplanting DOL's mission in TAP cannot continue an unsustainable and uncompensated business model.

²Department of Labor Veterans' Employment and Training Service. "Employment Navigator and Partnership Program (ENPP) Factsheet," August 5, 2024. <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/VETS/files/ENPP-Factsheet-2024-08-05.pdf>.

³RAND Corporation. Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions: Limited Scrutiny and Substantial Investment in Education Programs, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1363-12>.

⁴RAND Corporation. The Role, Effectiveness, and Sustainability of Nonprofit Organizations That Provide Employment Support for Veterans, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1363-10>.

A limited number of veteran employment organizations are currently positioned to provide high-quality services at a national or international scale. The sustainability of the current model relies on nonprofit partners' continued, voluntary participation funded through limited, private resources.

For veterans and their families, the military-to-civilian transition is not merely a career or lifestyle change; it represents a fundamental challenge that they should not face alone. For many of our clients, this is the first time they've navigated the civilian workforce, including searching for jobs, creating a resume, interviewing for a role, negotiating compensation, and adjusting to the workplace after securing employment. ENPP partners provide effective resources and support to help veterans and transitioning service members navigate transition; however, without compensation to referral partners and evaluation of program outcomes, the longevity and impact of ENPP is at risk.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion. Hire Heroes USA looks forward to working with the government to improve services and outcomes for all who have served our country.

Prepared Statement of Veterans Association of Real Estate Professionals

Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Veterans Association of Real Estate Professionals (VAREP), we appreciate the opportunity to submit this Statement for the Record on H.R. 1814 and its impact on veteran homeownership and foreclosure prevention. As the only HUD-approved Veteran Service Organization (VSO) dedicated to housing and financial stability, VAREP supports stronger foreclosure prevention measures, including HUD-approved counseling, a Partial Claim Program, and structured borrower engagement—initiatives that align with industry leaders such as the Mortgage Bankers Association and Freedom Mortgage.

Support and Enhancing H.R. 1814 to Better Serve Veterans

While H.R. 1814 is a positive step forward, additional provisions would strengthen its impact and ensure more effective foreclosure prevention:

- Require servicers to refer delinquent VA borrowers to HUD-approved housing counselors by the 31st day of missed payment to prevent further hardship.
- Implement structured action plans that help struggling borrowers actively resolve delinquencies with professional support.
- Enhance coordination between the VA and HUD-approved housing counselors to align foreclosure prevention strategies with veterans' financial realities.
- Establish third-party VSO representation for VA loan default cases to provide case management and borrower advocacy.

The Absence of VSO Advocacy for Veteran Borrowers

At the March 11, 2025, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Hearing, no Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) addressed H.R. 1814, VA loan defaults, or foreclosure prevention. Similarly, at the March 4, 2025, Joint House and Senate VSO Hearing, multiple VSOs testified, yet none focused on veteran financial security, home retention, or loss mitigation.

Unlike VA healthcare and benefits claims, where VSOs play a critical advocacy role, veterans facing foreclosure have no dedicated representation. This gap leaves them vulnerable to financial uncertainty, predatory servicing practices, and unnecessary foreclosures.

Closing the Advocacy Gap: A HUD-Certified VSO for Veteran Borrowers

To address this critical issue, VAREP urges the Committee to establish a federally chartered, HUD-certified VSO dedicated to veteran housing stability, foreclosure prevention, and financial security.

- **Purpose**—Serve as the official advocate and resource for veterans struggling with mortgage challenges.
- **Responsibilities**—
 - Provide direct financial counseling and foreclosure prevention assistance.
 - Act as a liaison between VA, servicers, and veteran borrowers to ensure fair servicing practices.

- Monitor and report servicer performance to Congress for greater oversight and accountability.
- Ensure veteran borrowers have a permanent voice in legislative discussions impacting VA housing policies.

By integrating these crucial improvements, H.R. 1814 can deliver real, lasting solutions for veteran homeowners at risk of foreclosure.

Prepared Statement of The American Legion

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of this subcommittee, on behalf of National Commander Jim LaCoursiere Jr., and more than 1.6 million dues-paying members of The American Legion, we thank you for the opportunity to offer our statement for the record on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). The American Legion is guided by active Legionnaires who dedicate their time and resources to serve veterans, service members, their families, and caregivers. As a resolutions-based organization, our positions are directed by more than 106 years of advocacy and resolutions that originate at the post level of our organization. Every time The American Legion testifies, we offer a direct voice from the veteran community to Congress.

Through its founding principles, The American Legion offers a unique perspective on this issue—especially as TAP straddles both the service member and veteran community. As Congress knows, the TAP is critical to ensuring that those leaving the military have the proper tools and resources to transition back into civilian life. Military Commanders are responsible for a full range of tasks that are paramount to the success of units across the globe. Unfortunately, operational requirements frequently overshadow a service members' transition needs as they enter their final phase of military service.

As our Nation's technology capabilities and data collection improves, it is imperative that the TAP program is continuously modernized and streamlined. Transition is not a one-size-fits-all journey. Addressing the innumerable needs of transitioning service members requires the program to impart all available information to them ahead of their unique journey. Additionally, the experience and requirements for active-duty service members are vastly different than those in the National Guard or the Military Reserves. The American Legion believes that TAP must meet service members and their families where they are to provide the most effective information for their unique needs, which will require change.

To ensure the success of our service members transitioning back to civilian life, TAP must continue to improve to better serve those who are embarking on this major life shift. As The American Legion is a resolution-based organization, the following resolutions support and inform the recommendations below: Resolution No. 100: Accountability of the Department of Defense's Transition Assistance Program (TAP),¹ Resolution No. 13: Transition Assistance Program App,² and Resolution No. 81: Transition Assistance Program Employment Workshops for National Guard and Reserve Members.³ The American Legion looks forward to continuing to work on improvements with both the veterans and armed services committees.

Background on TAP

According to the congressional Research Service, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) estimates that more than 200,000 service members (both the active and reserve component) transition to civilian life each year—joining the more than 18 million veterans nationwide.⁴ This transition to civilian life is not the first major life transition that the service member has faced, but for many it can be the most difficult. Often, a service member's transition is filled with financial instability, lack

¹“Resolution No. 100: Accountability of the Department of Defense's Transition Assistance Program (TAP).” Resolution No. 100: Accountability of the Department of Defense's Transition Assistance Program (TAP) - Digital Archive, n.d. <https://archive.legion.org/node/586>.

²“Resolution No. 13: Transition Assistance Program App.” Resolution No. 13: Transition Assistance Program App - Digital Archive, n.d. <https://archive.legion.org/node/15147>.

³“Resolution No. 81: Transition Assistance Program Employment Workshops for National Guard and Reserve Members.” Resolution No. 81: Transition Assistance Program Employment Workshops for National Guard and Reserve Members - Digital Archive, n.d. <https://archive.legion.org/node/328>.

⁴Military transition assistance program (TAP): Background and issues for Congress - Congress.gov - library of Congress, n.d. <https://www.Congress.gov/crs-product/R48114>.

or loss of purpose, food insecurity, familial and marital hardship, all while struggling to navigate the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).

TAP was established through the Fiscal Year (FY) 1991 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). At its inception, TAP was designed to be a cooperative Federal interagency effort led by the DOD, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Labor (DOL), The Department of Education, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Office of Personnel Management to provide assistance, resources, and training to retiring or separating active duty service members, National Guard and Reserve members, and their spouses.⁵ TAP is governed by both the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness who co-chair the Department of Veterans Affairs-Department of Defense Joint Executive Committee (JEC). The JEC oversees the Transition Assistance Program Executive Council (TAP-EC), which is responsible for the oversight of the TAP course curriculum, performance management, communication, supportive services, and data sharing with input from various working groups.

The most significant recent changes to the TAP took place in the Fiscal Year 2019 NDAA with the requirement that service members need to begin the TAP curriculum no later than 365 days before their anticipated separation or release from active duty, or 24 months prior to their retirement date.⁶ The updated program was comprised of the following mandatory days of instruction: DOD Transition Day, VA Benefits and Services Day, and the DOL Employment Fundamentals Day. Once these 3 days are completed, service members are then required to complete the final 2 days known as career tracks, covering entrepreneurship, employment, educational, and vocational pathways. The Fiscal Year 2019 NDAA also required inclusion of immigration status on pre-separation checklists, and authorized Federal agency participation in Skillbridge, a program later codified in the Fiscal Year 2023 NDAA. The TAP's most recent updates came from the Fiscal Year 2024 NDAA in which the counseling pathways and requirements for the Skillbridge program were amended.⁷

Service members are assigned to one of three tiers based on their preparedness level for transition as identified in their pre-TAP counseling. Factors for the tiers include rank, time in service, disability, health, military occupational specialty, and previous employment history. Service members who are placed in tier one requires minimal support and only need to attend the first 3 days of TAP. Those placed in tier two are also only required to take the first 3 days of TAP but are encouraged to participate in the career track portion. However, service members assigned to tier three are required to complete the TAP curriculum in full. Following the completion of the required curriculum, all service members must complete the Capstone certification showing that they have a verified individual transition plan approved by the commander at least 90 days prior to separation.

Force Readiness and Accessibility Challenges

The American Legion holds a unique position and perspective, in that our advocacy is not simply rooted in veterans' issues. As an organization, we advocate for our veterans, service members, their families, America's youth, and on occasion, the general public. Because of our position and perspective, we understand that the highest priority for the DOD is to ensure our country's security needs are met, but without proper recruiting and retention within the department, security needs cannot be accomplished. Additionally, to ensure DOD can accomplish its mission, military leaders must ensure that service members return to society as successful citizens. To achieve this, service members must be permitted to complete the necessary TAP training activities to be best prepared for their transition back to the civilian world. Frequently, force readiness requirements create competing priorities for commanders, leading to service members being prevented from completing the entire TAP program. Lack of participation in TAP leads to an ill-prepared veteran and future challenges.

⁵Text—H.R. 4739—101st Congress (1989–1990): National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991 - Congress.gov - library of Congress, n.d. <https://www.Congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/house-bill/4739/text>.

⁶Text—H.R. 5515—115th Congress (2017–2018): An Act to authorize appropriations for Fiscal Year 2019 for military activities of the Department of Defense, for military construction, and for defense activities of the Department of Energy, to prescribe military personnel strengths for such fiscal year, and for other purposes - Congress.gov - library of Congress, n.d. <https://www.Congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/5515/text>.

⁷Military transition assistance program (TAP): Background and issues for Congress - Congress.gov - library of Congress, n.d. <https://www.Congress.gov/crs-product/R48114>.

In December 2022, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report on TAP that found 22 percent of service members in tier three did not attend or did not complete the required 2-day career track portion of the curriculum. Further, GAO found that 70 percent of servicemembers failed to meet the statutory requirement to initiate TAP counseling at least 1 year in advance of separation. GAO brought forth recommendations for the DOD to remediate the identified deficiencies.⁸ However, GAO has not determined if DOD implemented said recommendations, nor have they been able to measure the recommendation's impact. By delaying TAP participation, the window in which service members have to participate in or learn about post-service programs, apply for earned benefits, or prepare for their transition properly is drastically reduced. Systemic delays must be remedied to ensure service members thrive rather than struggle in life post military service.

The American Legion believes that as long as a service member is operationally ready in their primary occupational specialty or who is deployed or on temporary duty during the transition phase, the challenges GAO noted will not be resolved. If service members are not in an operationally ready status during their transition phase, participation and compliance in the TAP as codified in law can be ensured. Similarly, participation in the Skillbridge program is less likely as service members must remain operationally ready and employed in their primary duties. Far too often, we have heard from veterans that they simply could not participate or plan for life after service because they were needed for training, field operations, exercises, or because they were deployed until weeks or months prior to the end of their service. With these factors in mind, military leaders must ensure that service members have all the training they need before deployments that are close to the end of a service member's career. Veterans who experience a turbulent transition will surely influence how friends, family, and siblings view service in the military. The American Legion supports legislation that would identify service members who express an intent to complete their current contract and separate from the military. Once said service member has been identified, they will only report to their respective command to ensure that military operations do not interfere with the transition process.

TAP Modernization Through Technology

Beyond the TAP curriculum, there are a wide array of resources available to separating service members and veterans, but the most common hurdle lies in finding resources that are reliable. The VA currently offers Military Life Cycle (MLC) modules that centralize reliable information for separating service members and their families. The MLC's robust modules, which consist of 14 distinct sessions, address a wide range of topics in-depth, including VA Education Benefits, the VA Home Loan Guaranty Program, Community Integration Resources, and other critical areas that support service members' transition from military to civilian life.⁹ The modules are offered in-person or online—allowing users to access information at their own pace.

The MLC module's structure, while currently underutilized, appears to be the most promising approach in reaching a wider audience in a faster and more efficient manner. MLC modules offer a promising model for government agencies involved in military transition to promote easily accessible micro-learning opportunities and increase awareness of benefits long before military separation. Simply creating educational content is insufficient if the intended recipients are not fully aware of its availability or relevance to their needs.

With the ever-evolving landscape of media and artificial intelligence, Congress should take advantage of emerging technologies to make TAP more accessible. The American Legion believes that the creation of a mobile application would serve as a powerful alternative to existing virtual offerings—providing servicemembers with an extensive toolkit of on demand, easily accessible, transition-related content. By making TAP resources available on smartphones and tablets, the application would enable the military-connected community to access critical information any time and place, facilitating consistent engagement with the material. Moreover, the application would offer personalized features, allowing users to tailor their career and tran-

⁸Office, U.S. Government Accountability. "Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Could Enhance the Transition Assistance Program by Better Leveraging Performance Information." Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Could Enhance the Transition Assistance Program by Better Leveraging Performance Information - U.S. GAO, November 9, 2023. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-106793>.

⁹"TAP ONLINE COURSES." Tapevents.mil, n.d. <https://tapevents.mil/courses>.

sition plans to their unique circumstances—ensuring the information they receive is relevant to their specific needs. Finally, the application would ideally incorporate offline capabilities so that personnel deployed in remote or low-connectivity areas could still access essential resources without interruption.

The American Legion cautions that the development of such an application must be done thoughtfully, ensuring it is user-friendly, effective, and accessible. The application should not be rushed into design but rather implemented with careful consideration of the diverse needs of servicemembers, veterans, and their families. Last, it is critical that interagency partners, community resource groups, and veterans service organizations, such as The American Legion, be actively involved in the design process to provide feedback and suggest potential improvements to ensure that the final product meets the needs of its users and maximizes its impact on transition readiness.

Establishing Separate Pathways for Active Duty, National Guard, and Reserve

Currently the benefits earned for military service to this country are varied based on the component in which an individual served. The requirements and ability to use the Post 9/11 GI Bill differ based on whether the service member was active duty, National Guard, or Reserve. Additionally, the transition process for active-duty service members is different than those in the Guard and Reserves.

In 2023, GAO identified that information disseminated through TAP was applicable for active duty members but not the National Guard and Reserves—leading to numerous TAP managers and counselors raising concerns regarding how the program meets their unique needs.¹⁰ Because of the identified gap, there is a need for an alternative pathway for National Guard and Reserve service members to complete TAP so that they have the best information possible when pursuing their transition back to civilian life.

Challenges faced by National Guard and Reserve component service members do not mirror those faced by active-duty service members. Members who serve in the National Guard or Reserves have a civilian profession and have utilized the *Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act* while activated, therefore not requiring as much in-depth training on seeking employment. Occasionally, some service members need additional services to enter a new occupation due to injuries sustained while activated. Within the National Guard and Reserve pathway, the objective is to clarify which VHA, VBA, and retirement benefits are available to the National Guard and Reserves in comparison to their active-duty counterparts.

The unique experience of being deployed 1 day and then returning to a civilian job the next is a transition that needs to be facilitated with resources and a potential warm handoff to one or multiple Federal agencies, which will assist in the process of assimilating back into the general public. Recently, there has been a wave of confusion regarding the benefits available to service members who are activated under Title 32 versus Title 10 orders. The American Legion has previously supported legislation that would improve TAP by specifically tailoring the program for National Guard and Reserve members, such as *The Improving TAP for Guard and Reserve Servicemembers Act*.¹¹ The modification of the TAP program through this bill would ensure all service members, regardless of component, receive quality and informative transitional assistance.

Conclusion

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, The American Legion thanks you for your leadership and for allowing us the opportunity to provide our insight on the Transition Assistance Program.

The American Legion stands ready to work with the subcommittee on changes as they develop, and we look forward to sharing the feedback we receive from our

¹⁰Office, U.S. Government Accountability. “Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Could Enhance the Transition Assistance Program by Better Leveraging Performance Information.” Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Could Enhance the Transition Assistance Program by Better Leveraging Performance Information - U.S. GAO, November 9, 2023. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-106793>.

¹¹H.R. 8336—118th Congress (2023–2024): To amend title 10, United States Code, to establish a counseling pathway in the Transition Assistance Program for members of the reserve components of the Armed Forces., n.d. <https://www.Congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/10545/text>.

membership. For 106 years, The American Legion has never shied away from the responsibility of being a voice for veterans, and we will not start now.

Questions concerning this testimony can be directed to Eric C. Johnson, Legislative Associate, at ejohnson@legion.org.

