

House Armed Services Committee
Member Day Hearing
Thursday, April 11, 2024

Testimony of Rep. Mike Levin (CA-49)

Thank you, Chairman Rogers and Ranking Member Smith, for the opportunity to submit written testimony. Some of the top priorities that I hear about from my constituents in and around Camp Pendleton are issues that come before this committee, so I am grateful for the opportunity to elevate their voices.

As previously Chair, and now Ranking Member, of the House Veterans' Affairs Economic Opportunity Subcommittee, I have remained focused on improving the transition process for service members separating from the military. It is critical that they have effective support to transition into civilian life, and the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is a fundamental part of the process. Many of the veterans who have fallen on hard times are case studies of how we can improve TAP to get and keep veterans employed, housed, and educated. It is no secret that our military is in a recruitment crisis, and there is no better way to show potential recruits the value of military service than every veteran having a good-paying job the day they resume their civilian lives.

I urge the Armed Services Committee to partner with the Veterans' Affairs Committee on improving TAP, which takes place at the crucial juncture between military service and veteran status. The program's success is dependent on close coordination and a warm handoff between the Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the committees of jurisdiction must lead by example. While there are many areas ripe for such collaboration, perhaps the most urgent is improving timely participation in TAP.

Section 552 of the *John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2019* required that TAP counseling begin no later than 365 days before transition. Unfortunately, a December 2022 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that nearly 25% of service members in the highest risk level did not attend a mandatory two-day class, and 70% of service members did not start the program at least one year before separation.¹ GAO made several recommendations to rectify these shortfalls, all of which DOD concurred with, yet all remain open. I urge the committee to join me in closely monitoring DOD's implementation of these recommendations and pushing DOD to achieve compliance with the law as soon as possible.

I am aware of the challenges that commanders face in giving their unit members time to prepare for civilian life, while balancing the vast responsibility of providing for our nation's defense. That is why I recommend this committee modernize how we measure unit force structure. No service member should be denied a quality transition because their commander can't spare them for a small amount of time. I suggest the committee consider ways we can backfill these

¹ <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-104538>

transitioning service members' positions earlier in the process so they can better focus on their stressful transition period.

Another issue that I hear about from my constituents is the need to ensure the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) for service members who live off base is on par with housing costs. Between 2005 and 2015, BAH was calculated to cover 100 percent of local average housing costs. However, the FY2015 NDAA authorized a reduction, and current Department of Defense (DOD) policy provides a BAH intended to cover only 95 percent of local average housing costs. I appreciate that this Committee's FY23 NDAA report expressed concerns regarding housing affordability for service members and encouraged DOD to consider restoring BAH to 100%. As the Department has yet to make this important change, I ask that the Committee require such restoration in statute.

While BAH rates are generally determined annually, Section 605 of the FY2020 NDAA authorized DOD to temporarily adjust BAH mid-year if housing costs differ from BAH rates by more than 20%. This authority was initially granted until September 30, 2022, and later extended to December 31, 2024. I thank the Committee for allowing DOD to respond more quickly to market fluctuations in the costs of adequate housing. However, many of my constituents were distressed to learn that the Camp Pendleton military housing area (MHA) was not included in the 2022 temporary adjustment. This was because average rental costs increased by 17% – still a significant increase that amounts to hundreds of dollars, which military families should not have to foot the bill for. Therefore, I urge the committee to lower the statutory threshold from 20% and make this authority permanent.

I also want to highlight the importance of combatting hunger among our military families. It is unacceptable that a quarter of service members face food insecurity. The men and women who risk their lives for our country should never struggle to put food on the table. That's why I introduced H.R. 5619, the *Military Dependents School Meal Eligibility Act*, which would exclude service members' BAH from the calculation of income when determining eligibility for school meal programs. While we must do more to improve the financial security of those in uniform, this is an important step towards ensuring military parents around Camp Pendleton and across the country can focus on fulfilling their mission rather than on where their kids will find their next meal. I look forward to working with my colleagues across the aisle as we reintroduce this bipartisan bill to enact it into law.

I appreciate the work of this committee in supporting our service members and military families and protecting our national security. Thank you for your attention to the issues I have highlighted.