

**Post-9/11 Veteran Transitions to Civilian Life:
How Are They Doing 6.5 Years After Separating**

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Opportunity

Testimony by:

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Introduction: Our Work and Policy Priorities

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony today about the military-to-civilian transition of post-9/11 veterans on behalf of the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State (Clearinghouse).

About Pennsylvania State University

Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) is one of the oldest land grant universities in the country. As such, Clearinghouse professionals conduct an “action-oriented scholarship” in which applied research is practical. True to the Land Grant Mission, the Clearinghouse uses applied research that is designed to have real-world impact by collaborating with partners to provide information, solve problems, and advance the well-being of all individuals. Last year, Penn State’s research expenditures exceeded \$1.2 billion. In terms of research rankings, Penn State is 5th in overall social and behavioral sciences, which is a ranking that places Penn State ahead of Ivy League and most other prestigious schools.

About the Clearinghouse

The Clearinghouse was founded in 2010 as an applied interdisciplinary research center at Penn State. Beginning with two part-time faculty members, the Clearinghouse now employs more than 50 research staff and professors. The Clearinghouse has received approximately \$100 million in grants and contracts from a variety of funders, such as the Department of Defense (DoD), which includes funding from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines Corps; National Institute for Food and Agriculture; Department of Defense Educational Activity; Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine; Wounded Warrior Project; Heinz Endowments; and The Pew Charitable Trusts.

In 2020, the Clearinghouse team established the Penn State VETeran Evaluation and Research Applications Network ([Penn State VETERANetwork](#))—a collaborative initiative in which veteran-serving funders and organizations use data to inform policy and practice. Clearinghouse funding has been used to complete more than 70 research projects and the Clearinghouse website (<https://militaryfamilies.psu.edu/>) has received 1.1 million unique visitors. The Clearinghouse’s technical assistance team has vetted over 1,500 programs on a rigorous continuum of evidence, handled more than 4,000 requests for information/consultation, and conducted 100 rapid literature reviews. Clearinghouse researchers have made nearly 600 site visits (e.g., military bases, Pentagon, Department of Veterans Affairs [VA] facilities); provided more than 1,200 trainings; and published 248 peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, and technical and other reports.

Key Findings and Recommendations

The Clearinghouse commends the Committee’s continued dedication to and support of Service members, veterans and their families as they progress through their military-to-civilian transitions. In addition, the Committee’s commitment and attention to well-being domains, including mental and physical health, employment, financial, and social integration, are commendable. While important strides have been made with regard to the supports provided to veterans as they reintegrate into civilian life, more efforts must be made and additional research must ensue to ensure veterans and their families are equipped to thrive in their post-service lives. The information below pertains to post-9/11 veterans. Please find below information and recommendations that could be used to address critical needs:

- **Relevant insights from the available evidence** about the transition experience and outcomes of post-9/11 veterans.
 - **Key finding #1:** Approximately 65% of veterans report being fully transitioned into civilian life *within 3 years of military separation* and a large percentage of veterans make use of support programs.
 - **Key finding #2:** Nearly 20% report that they are not fully transitioned 6.5-years post-

- military separation, and these veterans report they have the most difficulty with employment and physical and mental health.
 - **Key finding #3:** Female veterans, veterans of color, and those from the enlisted ranks are more likely to experience transition difficulties.
 - **Key finding #4:** There is growing research that demonstrates the use of specific programs (or components of programs), delivered in specialized formats and settings, can improve well-being outcomes.
 - **Key finding #5:** Transition concerns in the employment, financial, legal, and well-being domains are most prevalent within 90 days of military separation and then decline over time; however, for some, the initial downward trajectory is extremely difficult to overcome.
- **Recommendations for changes that would enhance the reintegration of post-9/11 veterans** based on research findings.
 - **Recommendation for key findings #1 & 2:** A broad and robust coordinated system of sustainable transition support is required from the DoD, VA, public, and nonprofit organizations (e.g., AmericaServes, Combined Arms). The coordinated system of support should be implemented, evaluated, and sustained to assist the majority of veterans for at least 3 years after separation from service.
 - **Recommendation for key findings #1 & 2:** Meaningful screenings for service members and veterans should be implemented, such as the [Veteran Transition Screener \(VTS\)](#), to help identify veterans who are at risk of struggling with their transition, especially the nearly 20% of veterans who are at risk.
 - **Recommendation for key finding #3:** Make sustained investments in evidence-informed programs that address risks associated with problematic employment, financial, health, and social well-being domains.
 - **Recommendation for key finding #4:** Support evaluation that is designed to identify programs and program components that can be employed to improve well-being outcomes for transitioning veterans. Then, these programs and program components should be prioritized and scaled
 - **Recommendation for key finding #5:** As part of the Transition Assistance Program, employ an evidence-based screener (Recommendation 2) to identify and then link high-risk individuals with an online coaching program that begins 2 months prior to separation and continues for 6 months. This coaching program will address employment, financial, and social well-being domains for veterans who are more likely to struggle in these areas.

State of Current Evidence

Defining the Problem

Major life events, such as military-to-civilian transitions (MCTs), are typically experienced as challenging, difficult, and stressful. Leaving the military comes with losses, such as lack of a steady job and loss of valued benefits, close friendships, and a structured and purposeful organizational culture¹. For many individuals, the loss of their military identity and their need to fit into civilian communities are particularly problematic^{1,2}. Leaving the military can impact many well-being domains including employment, education, financial, mental and physical health, and social. While mental and physical health problems receive substantial public attention and support, challenges and successes in other life domains remain understudied and under-supported. For example, after leaving the military, 61% of veterans are underemployed, and slightly more than one-third report experiencing social disconnection and isolation. Other veterans face lack of access to healthcare, often due to geographic isolation, and help-seeking stigma. MCTs can be stressful for entire families, especially spouses³.

The human and other costs associated with MCTs have implications for national security. Evidence

suggests younger people are experiencing increasing hesitancy to pursue military services. This situation makes recruiting and retaining a capable All-Volunteer Force challenging. For instance, a RAND [report](#) found that, while holding veterans in high esteem, a majority of Americans would discourage a person close to them from joining the military. An [IPSOS study](#) also found that a majority of Americans would not recommend military service, and 80% of teens reported having no interest in military service. The most recent [Military Family Life Survey \(MFLS\)](#), sponsored by Blue Star Families, found that one-third of military families are willing to recommend military service to a young family member.

[Understanding How Post-9/11 Veteran MCTs Unfold Over Time](#)

In the last decade, much information has been learned about how MCTs progress over time. The Clearinghouse's has been examining the well-being of a cohort of veterans over the first 6.5 years of their transition to civilian life as part of The Veterans [Metrics Initiative \(TVMI\)](#) and the [Veterans Engaging in Transition Studies \(VETS\)](#). During these 6.5 years, participants have been [surveyed on eight separate occasions](#). This approach has helped Clearinghouse researchers discover (a) a robust reconceptualization of MCT, (b) how long the transition into civilian life has taken for veterans; (c) the quality/success of these transitions; and (d) how the use of programs/services impacts transitions.

First, based on the empirical data, the Clearinghouse developed a [recent MCT conceptualization](#) that provides an organized way to evaluate how well veterans are functioning as they transition to civilian life in specific well-being domains (i.e., employment, financial, physical health, mental health, and social). This MCT framework outlines three categories of reintegration quality—successful, at-risk/partially reintegrated, and problematic. The categories were developed based on veteran responses to questions about their well-being and satisfaction in various life domains. At 3-years post-separation, one-third of veterans were in the problematic category for three or more of the examined well-being domains.

Among those veterans who were fully transitioned within 3 years, 76% reported they experienced no difficulties adjusting. The percent of veteran-transition adjustments categorized as successful varied by domain and were as follows: 96% were fully adjusted in legal, 76% were fully adjusted in education, 62% were fully adjusted in employment, and 59% were fully adjusted in financial. However, fewer veteran transitions were categorized as successful in the mental health (35%), physical health (25%), and social well-being (42%) domains. Among those veterans who were not fully transitioned at 6.5-years post-military separation, 72% fell in the problematic category in the physical health domain, 69% fell in the problematic category in the mental health domain, and 57% fell in the problematic category in the social domain. Nearly half of veterans who were not fully transitioned at 6.5-years post-military separation fell into the problematic category in the employment domain. Slightly more than 40% of this group were categorized as being at-risk/partially reintegrated in the financial well-being domain.

Second, evidence from TVMI and VETS indicates 65% of veterans report being fully transitioned to civilian life within 3 years, and 36% report being fully transitioned within the first year. Yet, approximately 20% of veterans reported that they were not fully integrated into civilian life 6.5-years post-military separation. Of this not fully transitioned group, 82% of the veterans were from the enlisted paygrades, and 25% of the veterans were between 25 and 29 years old.

Third, although research on how veterans' use of veteran programs and their components is linked with transition outcomes is in its nascent stage, Clearinghouse researchers have identified common components of programs that positively impact employment outcomes.

- Veterans who engaged with employment programs that used a mentor coach in career planning, translated military skills to civilian employment opportunities, helped veterans develop interviewing skills, or taught entrepreneurship had a higher likelihood of gaining employment, especially previously unemployed veterans¹⁰. For instance, at 9-months post-

military separation, veterans who worked with a coach/ mentor were 84% more likely to obtain a job.

- In terms of finding better jobs over the transition, veterans who received direct instruction on job interviewing were 63% more likely, than veterans who were not using such programs, to leave their current job for a better opportunity within 1 year of leaving the military, and these veterans were three times more likely to leave a current job for a better opportunity within 18 months of leaving military service¹¹.

Use of financial program components positively impacted financial outcomes among veterans. For example, veterans who used financial programs that provided investment information via a mentor/coach experienced increased financial satisfaction, and the earlier these veterans engaged with these programs in their transition the faster their satisfaction increased¹¹. In the mental health domain, veterans who survived military sexual trauma and received mental health counseling demonstrated higher levels of resilience over time in comparison to those who did not receive counseling¹².

Conclusions

Transitions are major life events that are influenced by multiple factors. By understanding the risk and resilience profile of each veteran, professionals can help veterans choose and utilize interventions that support veterans' transitions and increase their transitional success. Successful transitions are paramount to the current and future well-being of veterans and their families. When veterans engage in a successful transition, their communities also benefit and strengthen as does the military and the security of the United States.

The Clearinghouse thanks the Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony on this topic and for their enduring commitment to improve veteran transition experiences. Clearinghouse professionals stand ready and would be pleased to continue sharing insights from research and programs in support of this goal.

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