

**STRENGTHENING THE TRANSITION
ASSISTANCE PROGRAM: EXPLORING
OUTCOMES TO IMPROVE THE
TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

TUESDAY, JUNE 24, 2025

Serial No. 119-27

Printed for the use of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs



Available via <http://govinfo.gov>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

WASHINGTON : 2025

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TUESDAY, JUNE 24, 2025

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

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:15 a.m., in room 360, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Mike Bost (chairman of the committee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Bost, Mace, Miller-Meeks, Murphy, Van Orden, Luttrell, Ciscomani, Kiggans, Hamadeh, King-Hinds, Takano, Brownley, Pappas, Cherfilus-McCormick, McGarvey, Ramirez, Budzinski, Kennedy, and Conaway.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MIKE BOST, CHAIRMAN

The CHAIRMAN. The Committee will come to order, and without objection, the chair may declare recess at any time. Good morning, everyone, and thank you for being here. I want to thank the witnesses for being here. Now, before we begin, I want to take a moment to pause and think about the service members stationed throughout the Middle East right now. I, along with some of our colleagues, just returned from a visit with our service members that were deployed overseas in Spain. Whenever I met with these men and women, and I always return home with the assurance that one, we have the best and most capable military in the world. Two, the people that do that are some of the best people in the world. While we were in Spain, we were going to visit and see the destroyers that were located there. They had all shipped out.

Matter of fact, one of them, it reminded me of what it was like to be a young person in the military. There at the reception area in the airport was a volunteer and she and her husband had just, this was their first duty station in Spain. I came, we came in and her husband, when they deploy those cruisers, normally it is about 4 months to 4 and a half months out. Her husband had come back in and 48 hours went right back out. She was learning what it was like to be a military spouse as well as him understanding what it was like to be and be in the military. If we want to, if you would just remember them all in your prayers and make sure that you ask for the Lord to keep them all safe no matter what their duty is. Today we are going to focus on the importance of the TAP, our

Transition Assistant Program, or TAP, and broader themes of service members transition experience. A service member's transition begins during the last year of their active duty.

During TAP, a service member is required to go to classes hosted by U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The goal of TAP is to set each service member up for success in civilian life, regardless of their role in the military. Now that means whether you are a young corporal or three-star general, TAP should offer the personalized assistance service members need to thrive. My staff knows that I was make this statement and I will make it again now. It is in my—in my script here, but I am going to add a little to it. You know, when I was a Marine when, and I went through, there was a TAP program and the TAP program was whenever the colonel tapped you on the shoulder and said, "Good-bye, have a great life." The other TAP program was when you got with your buddies the last time and you hit the TAP at the bar. Other than that, that was the TAP programs that were available. However, thanks to former members of this Committee and this Committee as a whole, we have done a lot of work to make the program mandatory and improve outcomes to find what works for our veterans. This is not to say there is still that progress does not still need to be made.

Matter of fact, a lot of progress still needs to be made. Even after significant legislation, only 52 percent of service members meet the 1-year TAP timeline requirements. I believe that 52 should not be counted as a success but as a failure. Additionally, research from Pennsylvania State University Veterans Metric Initiative shows that more than 60 percent of veterans are either unemployed or underemployed. In many cases this is due to poor transition. Finally, nearly 20 percent of veterans do not feel like they are fully transitioned until 6 years after leaving the military service. I also believe we must view TAP and transition as a vitally important to all volunteer forces (AVF).

An unsuccessful transition can impact public view of how we treat our military members, which can impact our Nation's security by the fact that in all voluntary service people are not encouraged to volunteer. Clearly there is more work to be done by this Committee and by the community to fill the gaps. In front of us today are innovators in the transition community. These groups have unique programs and forward-thinking technologies that have helped make thousands of service members transition to veteran status better. Now, without these organizations, veterans will continue to slip through the cracks and VA will always be playing catch up to get these veterans back in the groove of civilian life. Under President Trump leadership, I know we are going to put you the veterans VA services back at the center of the VA mission, and I hope to hear from these groups about the broader solution that Congress can take back and get legislation that will boost our TAP program. Many of these themes are already included in my friend Subcommittee Chairman Derrick Van Orden's Bill H.R. 3387.

With that I want to welcome the witnesses and look forward to your testimony. I now recognize the Ranking Member Takano for his opening ceremony, opening statement.

Mr. TAKANO. I have not done opening ceremonies in a while.
The CHAIRMAN. If you want to do them, go ahead.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MARK TAKANO, RANKING MEMBER

Mr. TAKANO. Thank you Chairman Bost. I appreciate your opening comments about keeping our service members in our thoughts and prayers. I would ask that all here and all who are watching the hearing keep my committee staffers who are service members who are currently deployed. Chris Bennett, he is actually saw and witnessed the Qatar bombing. I believe he is in Qatar. Matt Reill is in the theater. I am not exactly sure where he is, my staff director. I appreciate your sentiment, Mr. Chairman.

I appreciate this committee's continued focus on service member transition. The period of transition is oftentimes the hardest period for veterans to navigate. This committee was the driving force behind the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act's (NDAA) improvements to the Transition Assistance Program, or TAP. The improvements included offering transitioning service members more tailored courses and information. However, much of that law is still not implemented, and many more improvements are needed to make sure veterans leave the military with a job, a plan for their education, or whatever resources they need for a smooth transition. Failure to do so can have catastrophic results. Studies continue to find correlations between difficulties in transition and suicides. The more difficulty a service member has during their transition period, the more likely they are to have suicidal ideations. If this administration is serious about reducing veteran suicide rates, it is critical we get the period of transition right.

This Committee has treated transition with the seriousness it deserves, having held 7 hearings at the subcommittee level or full committee level over the last 5 years. However, the Veterans Affairs Committee is only one part of the story, which also includes the Armed Services Committee as well as the Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs. Over the same 5 years, our counterparts on the House Armed Services Committee have yet to hold a similar hearing.

However, because of where transition was originally written into Federal code, our committee only has secondary referral and jurisdiction of this topic. As we see from the witnesses before us, none of the Federal agencies responsible for a transition is before us. In fact, I ask that the secretary of defense or his designee to testify before us today. Last week, the Department of Defense abruptly refused to participate in this hearing after previously committing to appear. This cancellation came just days after Secretary Collins and Secretary Hegseth signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) titled "Strengthening Our Partnership to Those Who Serve," a memo that was not provided to the committee, but rather we received from our Veterans Service Organization (VSO) partners. Mr. Chairman, I ask unanimous consent that this MOU be included in the hearing record.

The CHAIRMAN. Without objection.

Mr. TAKANO. Now, this hearing would have been a perfect opportunity for DoD and VA to present to the Committee how their proposal to collaborate on sharing healthcare resources will work and

to provide us with the details on how they plan to address VA enrollment during transition. Now, I have been working for years to pass my legislation, the Ensuring Veterans' Smooth Transition (EVEST) Act, which would charge VA health care enrollment from an opt in, excuse me, would change—which would change VA health care enrollment from an opt in process to an opt out, meaning you are automatically enrolled in VA when you transition out of the military. Now, if the MOU is to be believed, the administration shares this view and I would like to hear more. It is just too bad they are not here. Finally, if DoD was here, we could learn how it plans to identify transitioning service members who may be at higher risk from mental health challenges.

Now, it is impossible to mention DoD's absence and not think about the unconstitutional airstrikes in Iran ordered by President Trump over the weekend. Congress was not provided any justification for these strikes. Congress did not vote on an authorization of military force. The public only learned about the strikes from president's—from the president's personally owned, failing niche social network website. This Congress is choosing to give up its responsibility as a co-equal branch of government and that will have grave consequences. We are in the middle of an unprecedented constitutional crisis. There are no Federal agencies here before us from which to demand accountability. What disservice are we doing to service members at this moment when they are called upon to this—in this unprecedented and dangerous time? How can we respond to the transition needs as the economy continues to spiral and we face massive threats to the programs and services on which service members and veterans and their families depend? None of our agency partners found it worth their time to come today, and my Republican colleagues do not think it worthwhile to invite them. Where does that leave us? We are left holding a hearing on a legally mandated program that our committee lacks primary jurisdiction of. I appreciate the witnesses that are here today to share their work. Servicemembers and veterans should not be left depending on charitable donations to foundations for their post separation needs, nor should they depend on the for-profit industry to navigate their earned benefits.

Unfortunately, the lack of participation of the Trump Department of Defense, the Trump Labor Department of Labor, and the Trump VA is indicative of the goal of this administration. Hollowing out Federal agencies, firing workers, and shifting responsibility of the mission of VA and DoD onto individual veterans where nonprofit entities are squeezed and overwhelmed and where claim sharks and scammers rush in to take advantage. Now, this is unacceptable, and this committee should not stand by and accept playing second fiddle on this issue. We certainly should not accept a hearing on a Federal program without the responsible Federal agencies being present. Failures at transition become responsibilities for VA, VSOs, and other stakeholders. Solving a crisis is always more expensive and less successful than preventing one. For example, preventing homelessness with supportive housing costs 1/3 of what it does to house a chronically homeless person. Investing in quality education instead of allowing for profit predatory schools to recruit veterans would save the Federal Government and vet-

erans billions of dollars in wasted GI Bill benefits. Translating career skills gained during military service into quality employment would save tens of millions of dollars in unemployment benefits paid by the Department of Defense. Now, these are goals I believe every member of this committee agrees with. I put it to my colleagues, does this Committee deserve better than being ignored by DoD? Does this Committee deserve better than being ignored by DoD on such a critical issue like transition? Mr. Chairman, DoD's absence is unacceptable, and I ask you to join me in delivering that message. I also ask you to join me in petitioning our respective leadership about updating House rules to put the responsibility of transition where it belongs, with the House Veterans Affairs Committee, our committee.

With that, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Before we go on to the witnesses, you know, I want to say I find it funny now that the Republicans are in the White House. Suddenly there is a concern that the Secretary of Defense and the Department of Defense is not available for hearings. Under Secretary Lloyd Austin and the Biden administration, DoD had the reputation of not showing up for hearings at all. If the ranking member did not have issue with the last Congress, I do not see the ranking member should have issue at this time. The Congress, under President Trump's leadership and department, has already been to two economic opportunities subcommittee hearings. To me, that seems like a partisan exercise that wanted to get real with the answers from DoD and responding like that. I also find it surprising that the ranking members should bring up this, frankly, when the secretary right now has pretty big issues in the Middle East. We both agree that we need to pray for those men and women, because we talked about that. I do also find it funny now that with the Republicans in the White House, suddenly there is a concern for our colleagues about how VA is being run. During the Obama administration, VA grew considerably. This is not only from the number of veterans, but from the programs being created and reformed to by the Congress and the administration. During those 8 years, the Obama administration dropped over 92,000 bombs in the Middle East. Now, after one strike, to prevent an adversary from having nuclear weapons, some people in this room think VA should halt any changes to making the agency work better or believe that VA needs additional bureaucracy. That is ridiculous. If there is a conflict in the Middle East, veterans will need VA working for them instead of bureaucracy more than ever. That is why over 75 million Americans elected President Trump. That is also exactly why what Secretary Collins has appointed, why he is been appointed by the president, and what his intention is, is to do the job of the VA for our veterans as they—and now we want to talk about why they are transitioning and how they are transitioning and how we make that better.

Testifying before us we have Mr. Manish Gupta, chief technical officer at Combined Arms, Mr. Ross Dickman, chief executive officer (CEO) of Hire Heroes USA, Mr. Joseph Loomis, founder and chief executive officer of TurboVets, and Ms. Rebecca Burgess, senior fellow at Yorktown Institute.

Will the witnesses please stand and raise their 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?

[Witnesses sworn.]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Let the record reflect that the witnesses answered in the affirmative. You may be seated.

I now ask Mr. Gupta for 5-minute opening testimony, if you please.

STATEMENT OF MANISH GUPTA

Mr. GUPTA. Chairman, Ranking Member and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for inviting Combined Arms to testify and for your unwavering commitment to our veterans.

Combined Arms is a nonprofit technology company that empowers veterans and military families with access to vetted veteran sources service organizations through our innovative Software as a Service (SaaS) platform. As the chief technology officer of Combined Arms, I lead a network that harnesses advanced technology to strengthen veterans' transitions. Our platform spans all 50 states, integrating 650 vetted organizations that provide over 1500 available social services including housing, job, healthcare services and more. When joining Combined Arms, veterans complete secure profiles detailing service history, skills, and wellness needs, enabling personalized support pathways to match them to resources. Veterans are able to select services such as job training or mental health support using filters by location and category. We also provide real time analytics that tracks delivery and accountability of services. Our pilot with United Service Organization (USO) will engage with active duty 18 months pre-separation. Our innovative data strategies streamlined access to essential help, delivering an Amazon shopping cart style approach to navigate social services.

We are proud to serve over 85,000 veterans and military families across the country, connecting them to thousands of social services. The Transition Assistance Program or TAP, which is a result of interagency partnership across the Federal Government, provides information, tools and training to ensure service members and their families are prepared to enter the civilian life. TAP is a vital bridge to connecting veterans to civilian resources. With enhanced collaboration from Department of Defense, Veteran Affairs and Labor, Combined Arms platform could serve as a force multiplier for TAP.

Our closed loop data powered digital marketplace can significantly enhance TAP's ability to deliver seamless personalized support to service members. For example, DOD collaboration could provide early service data along TAP to tailor pre-separation career and benefit plans. VA integration could accelerate benefit access, linking veterans to health care and or education support. Dual partnerships could enhance job pipelines, integrating programs like SkillBridge to boost employment outcomes. Our platform is equipped with provider interfaces featuring case management, interagency referrals, digitized forms, and Americans Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) 508 compliance, and has been endorsed by the VA and George W. Bush Institute. We recommend standardized VA

liaisons, flexible policies for community innovations like mentorship and national community of practice.

Our digital hub could enable TAP stakeholders to share best practices leveraging over 220,000 strong audience reach to drive continuous improvement. Our platform can strengthen TAP's outcome measurements, employment, mental health and civilian satisfaction. We provide advanced analytics which facilitate over 14,000 careers placements since 2020 and layer client data with public metrics to generate county level heat maps identifying service gaps in rural or unserved areas.

With DoD, VA and DOL data sharing, TAP could accommodate resources, track long-term well-being, ensuring adaptability to veterans evolving needs and as recognized by the VA. These analytics empower data driven decisions optimizing TAP's effectiveness across diverse Western communities. To realize this vision, Combined Arms recommends Congress fund technology integration with TAP platform leveraging VA systems for cost efficient personalized support Enhanced VA led task force to standardize collaboration and integration private sector networks and support pilot programs to test these solutions with metrics tracking employment and well-being.

In conclusion, with robust DOD, VA, and DOL collaboration, Combined Arms platforms could serve as a force multiplier for TAP, revolutionizing veteran transitions through technology. We stand ready to partner with this committee and stakeholders to build a future where every service member thrives. Thank you and I welcome your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MANISH GUPTA APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Gupta. Mr. Dickman, you are recognized for 5 minutes for your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF ROSS DICKMAN

Mr. DICKMAN. Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on improving outcomes for veterans and transitioning service members. I am Ross Dickman, CEO of Hire Heroes USA, the Nation's leading nonprofit focused on veterans and military spouse employment. We serve over 25,000 clients every year, primarily transitioning service members, veterans, and members of the Guard and Reserve, offering personalized one-on-one support to help them achieve meaningful and lasting careers after service. The transition from military to civilian life is more than a single moment. It is a process, one that can take years and looks different for everyone. Multiple factors contribute to the transition and the unique circumstances surrounding a service member's experience. Though rank often serves as a key indicator of success. The American Enterprise Institute's April 2025 report spotlighted that junior enlisted veterans face the most challenges post service, including high unemployment, poor economic outcomes and low utilization of existing services.

This highlights a clear need we must move beyond a one size fits all approach to one that is responsive to the different experiences, challenges, and goals of each veteran. While helpful for broad

awareness and education of benefits, the Transition Assistance Program's current structure is not optimal for individualized employment success. Last year's Research and Development (RAND) report and a similar U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report a year earlier determined that nonprofit organizations fill a critical gap to supplement Federal transition programs. Of the \$13 billion the government spends annually to support transition services, approximately 97 percent of funds are spent on education, despite career support being the number one requested service. Allow me to offer three areas of concern that deserve congressional action.

First, outcomes must matter more than outputs. Success cannot be measured solely by TAP course completion or number of attendees. Many veterans are underemployed in roles that do not reflect their skills, experience, or leadership potential. Sixty-one percent of veterans report underemployment 3 years post-separation, and that number barely budges after 6 years. These numbers signal that we must redefine a successful transition experience.

Second, skills-based hiring must be elevated and incentivized. Many veterans possess advanced experience and leadership capabilities that do not align with traditional degree requirements but make them highly competitive and qualified for in demand roles. At Hire Heroes USA, we help veterans articulate and validate these transferable skills to employers. Broader adoption of skills-based practices supported by Federal incentives could dramatically increase access to meaningful employment.

Third, public-private partnerships are successful and they work. Federal programs like TAP are foundational, but their structure limits the level of personalization. That is where nonprofits like ours come in. As an original partner of the Department of Labor's Employment Navigator and Partnership Program, Hire Heroes USA has delivered faster and more sustainable employment outcomes for thousands of veterans. These results are made possible by high quality nonprofit partners who deliver these services at no cost to veterans and without compensation from the Federal Government. This model is not sustainable. Based on these concerns, we recommend the following to improve veteran transition to civilian life.

First, we encourage Congress to prioritize individualized solutions and Federal transition programs. Concerted efforts should be made to focus on service delivery during the 2 years immediately following separation from service and on the promising practice of skills-based hiring. Second, outcome measures must align in the public and private sectors. Metrics like underemployment, skills utilization and long-term financial security must be part of the equation.

Last, we urge Congress to incentivize long-term sustainable participation of nonprofits in these programs through contractual agreements and competitive grants. Private organizations relying on philanthropic support have mitigated TAP shortcomings, but declining resources jeopardize the private sector's continued sustainment of individualized employment programs. Veterans deserve a transition system that reflects the realities of today's labor market. One that empowers them with the tools, guidance, and op-

opportunities to build the futures they have earned. We look forward to working with Congress to improve this system to benefit all veterans and military spouses.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and for your leadership on this issue. I welcome your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF ROSS DICKMAN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Dickman. Mr. Loomis, you are recognized for 5 minutes to open your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF JOSEPH LOOMIS

Mr. LOOMIS. Chairman Bost, Ranking Members and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. My name is Joseph Loomis. I am the Navy Veteran and the founder of TurboVets and CEO, a veteran focused technology company committed to improving how service members and veterans apply and access all their benefits and services at no cost for the entirety of their lives. Over the past 20 years, I have led innovation in cybersecurity advanced technology, building companies that solve complex problems and challenges, including systems integrations in many of the agencies.

At TurboVets, our mission is to close the gap between policy and technology, ensuring that service members as well as veterans experience a streamlined, supportive, successful transition from civilian into civilian life beyond and life beyond service. The current transition assistance program is obviously outdated and insufficient in addressing actual needs of the dynamics of a service member. Despite the efforts of dedicated agencies, the structure often leaves military service members without clarity, relevant instruction, support, and resources.

Like many veterans, I also experienced firsthand challenges in navigating the maze of the disconnected systems. The process felt more like death by PowerPoint and the consequences are much more significant. Today we are seeing a rising rates of unemployment, financial hardship, mental health crisis, increased homelessness as well in the veteran community. Most concerning of all, we continue to lose more than 6,000 veterans to suicide each year. This is not just a number, it is a call to action and why my team and I started TurboVets. A problem that we are solving today with the Department of Veteran Affairs and the Department of Defense. TAP can be and must be reimaged into a long-term personalized journey rooted in the trust and capability and support.

The transformation requires public-private partnership that integrates technology at every stage of the service members transition process. It also is more than just briefings. It is more than just learning and continuous statements that are made by command leadership. It is tailored tools and podcasts, relevant video instruction, personal mentorship, transparency in real time products. We must envision a secure centralized platform, a true one stop that is similar to the evolution of technology today, a system that allows online resumes job building connections to nonprofits like the other witnesses here today. The platform must seamlessly integrate into government systems with providing real time data automating eligibility verifications, eliminating fraud, protecting veterans from

claim sharks and other organizations leveraging their benefits unbeknownst to their eligibility.

The vision is the foundation upon what we built TurboVets. It is a veteran led team. We use Artificial Intelligence (AI) automation system integrations from our previous experiences in building companies. We are partnered with the agencies in order to solve this problem together. Technology can no longer be a luxury anymore. It is a necessity to integrate and exist in the world today. My team and I, as well as my fellow Americans owe our veterans not just gratitude, but effective modern solutions that deliver meaningful outcomes. It is our duty to serve for those who served us and I have committed my life to partnering with government agencies to fulfill this responsibility. I am confident that with the leadership of the VA and DoD and a collaboration with TurboVets, we will build that outcome and success we seek today.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this vision. I look forward to working ahead and the chance to take anyone questions.

(THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOSEPH LOOMIS APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX)

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Loomis. Ms. Burgess, you are recognized for 5 minutes for your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF REBECCA BURGESS

Ms. BURGESS. Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano and distinguished members of this committee, for 250 years, every branch of the U.S. Armed Forces has had one consistent output, the military veteran. Yet for 250 years, our Nation has never articulated a national veteran strategy. Not even when we returned to our voluntary service routes in 1973 do we recognize the importance of the well transitioned veteran for the sustained success of the AVF. This failure to ask what it might take societally to sustain a volunteer professional military is rooted in the failure to understand there is a life cycle to military recruitment that both begins and ends with the veteran. The veteran is the unacknowledged but permanent Ambassador of national service. How we treat them, talk about them, legislate about them directly relates to how society conceptualizes military service. Perhaps we come to this failure honestly. We have separated our Department of Defense from our Department of Veteran Affairs. That physical structural breaking apart has resulted in a mental breaking apart, especially among those employed in the Defense Department treating soldiers as national security concerns, but veterans as vanishing into the ether of someone else's domestic policy concern.

Our first need then is to recognize that any failed reintegration of a veteran is a discouragement against joining the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Space Force, or Coast Guard. Every successful reintegration is equally an incentive to join. The several service branches and their secretaries and DoD at large must be brought to recognize that it has a vested interest in the successful reintegration of each veteran after their active or reserve duty is completed. In the Nation having a coherent, modernized, effective, and efficient suite of programs and services to make up that transition process. Two concrete steps to take in this regard are to reestablish the Chairman's Office of Reintegration, thereby returning

DoD leadership to the transition process while signaling to all stakeholders that transition outcomes are crucial to the sustainment of the AVF.

Second, perhaps this step would finally trigger the Armed Services Committees of both House and Senate to hold joint hearings with those of Veterans Affairs. Around 200,000 service members exit the military every year, having access to some 45,000 registered nonprofit veterans service organizations, numerous VA benefits such as the Post 911 GI Bill, DoD SkillBridge apprenticeship and immersive career programs, and corporate hiring initiatives. Most of these services and programs have come about haphazardly. The result is that the current institutional framework governing the scope of challenges affecting veterans remains far too disparate, reactive, and administratively marginalized. Survey after survey consistently reveals that the number one source of stress and anxiety for veterans they themselves identify is about knowing where and how to navigate these benefits. We know that transition is both an event and a process taking up to 10 years for some individuals. Generally speaking, the first 90 days are crucial, but the bulk of the reintegrating work occurs in the initial 2-year period after receiving one's DD 2 and 4. Those significant numbers of at least post 911 veterans have felt that they were not entirely fully transitioned at even 6.5 years after service. The Veterans Metrics Initiative have identified 7 domains that are critical to success in transition. Employment, education, finances, legal security, social connections, and physical and mental health.

Furthermore, we know that our junior enlisted women and minority veterans are facing the steepest post service challenges, which are exacerbated by low utilization of existing employment services. Explanations for why include the current fragmentation of the veteran support system. Further insight continues to elude us because of a lack of data transparency and a lack of data about veterans simply. Enhanced data sharing among the DoD, VA and other entities is essential. Connecting the VA DoD identity repository data base and information available from the Social Security Administration specific to payroll information at the zip code level would go a far way toward enabling a better delivery of resources targeted to regions of the country with enduring economic challenges. The majority of VA programs appear only to measure outputs rather than outcomes.

This leaves us in the dark about whether the billions of dollars that are annually allocated for these programs are accomplishing anything other than smoke signals. Any funding would therefore be directed to the programs that effectively improve veteran outcomes and have concrete evidence of the same. Similarly, neither VA nor Congress have articulated any key performance indicators to measure key transition goals. The result is there is no standardized set of outcomes and impact measures for veterans serving programs. Mandating evidence-based funding and third-party oversight to ensure alignment with measurable goals via implementing a Veterans Impact Dashboard would allow for the tracking of the effectiveness of any of the investments in support programs for government delivered and nonprofit and private organizations that receive Federal dollars.

In conclusion, what we need for an improved transition from soldier to civilian is not more programs or more money, but better coordination, data sharing and outcome measurement of existing programs and initiatives. We are 52 if not 250 years behind in examining and understanding the dynamics that exist between our society, our government and our military branches in order to sustain an entirely volunteer military. Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF REBECCA BURGESS APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Ms. Burgess. I want to say thank you to all the witnesses and the written statement of all the witnesses will be entered into the hearing record and we are now going to go to questions and I recognize myself for 5 minutes.

Mr. Gupta, Combined Arms has over 312 member organizations and has successfully made 85,000 military connections. What is the biggest gap you see from the TAP program that transition service members need from Combined Arms?

Mr. GUPTA. Thank you for the question, sir. Combined Arms focus continues to be supporting the veterans and the military families and part of the TAP's transition program. The biggest gap we have seen is the early intervention in making awareness of how nonprofits programs like ours, platform like Combined Arms, can support the transition into civilian life, translating their skills, experiences in a translatable civilian job profile manner and helping them find the resources and services they need in a very unified single open-door policy where they do not have to think or worry what the next step of support structure might look like.

The CHAIRMAN. What feedback have you received from the companies that hire through Combined Arms? What do you hear from them that they need when hiring veterans?

Mr. GUPTA. Veterans have identified the corporate structure lacks the awareness and the discipline to guide the transition to civilian in terms of translation of their benefits offered by the government and available to them through their GI bills. That is the biggest gap in the overall administration on how they move forward and receive the resources and the care they need.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Ms. Burgess, in one of your articles you discussed the broken veteran narrative. What can Congress do to reverse this narrative, especially when it comes to transition?

Ms. BURGESS. Thank you very much for that question. I believe that actually the tone of congressional legislation can help us nationally reverse that broken veteran narrative. In other words, most of our legislation historically has always taken a kind of victim aspect, looking at the needs and the wants and the potential hurts of veterans. If we could flip that narrative, where we are encasing the language in which we identify bills as veterans, as social assets that need particular programs that will lift them up rather than social deficits, I think this could go a very large way toward changing the veteran narrative at that national level.

The CHAIRMAN. I think the frustration that we see with this committee, and I have expressed it to other members many times from this committee, and that is the fact that we quite often always have to deal with what are we going to do to get physically and mentally straightened out painting a picture that all veterans are

broken and all veterans are not broken. They are the best employees that you could have. They are going to show up to work on time. Once you give them a mission set, they are going to accomplish that mission because that is what they are used to. We need to focus, I think, more on that, to make sure that people know and understand that. Do you agree?

Ms. BURGESS. Absolutely. If I could add, I think something we have not looked at nationally is to try and understand veteran transition. If it is about a 10-year process, how does that compare to the civilian transition from college and the identity that you create in college to those first years in the professional world? We all—we all probably went through it as a very, you know, unsettling time. What is unique to the veteran and what is unique, you know, just to young adults taking on a new—new identity and sense of purpose.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Dickman, what challenges do junior enlisted veterans face during transition compared to officers?

Mr. DICKMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for that question. Junior enlisted service members face some of the largest barriers in terms of their relative perceived inexperience, their overwhelming lack of degrees. Most junior enlisted service members, almost a 20 percent differential from civilians, job seekers, do not have a bachelor's degree, which impacts them in their career search. They also struggle to connect through like a no wrong door policy into organizations that can help them with the right coaching to leverage the experience they do have them in the military and the skills that they do have that translate immediately to direct hiring action. When that is done well and that they are supported from someone that understands their experience, they do tend to use more services within our organization. They use about 2.7 services compared to other clients of ours, and they get hired very well using technical skills, but it takes time to help them translate that and find the right pathways.

The CHAIRMAN. Are there other groups, I mean, obviously the difference between a junior enlisted and an officer it is just maturity and everything like that, someone who was in the military. Are there other unique areas of certain people coming out with different non skill sets or whatever that we could look at?

Mr. DICKMAN. There certainly are, Mr. Chairman. I mean we look at women veterans have unique struggles as well in terms of leveraging their experience and networks appropriately. We also see and do not want to minimize the challenges that military spouses face in their career search and the impact that has on the sustainment of the service members participation as an active-duty service member. Junior enlisted, from our research we have been doing this for 20 years as far as delivering service interventions, that is the group that has the had the most consistent struggles in obtaining equitable employment after service.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much. My time has expired and I now recognize the ranking member.

Mr. TAKANO. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman, in your rejoinder, in your remarks about the role of DoD, I just want to point out that I actually think you actually made my argument that DoD is not here. The argument is that they are

busy. Even when they are not busy, you know, DoD has not made transition services a priority regardless of which party is in control. You know, I would just submit to you that the energy and the bipartisanship behind ideas to move transition forward has come from this committee, and we should not have to do it through the NDAA. I would just request that you join me in going to our respective leaderships and ask for this change because I would rather have changes to TAP come straight from all of us here. I see you nodding, yes.

I am not calling out Pete Hegseth on this particular issue. I just say, I just think that the talent and the energy from this committee on a bipartisan basis would be better channeled if we—if we had the jurisdiction. With that I am going to ask my question to—first question to Ms. Burgess.

Last month, with no explanation, Congress, VA, and DoD announced a memorandum of understanding strengthening our partnership in service to those who serve. While DoD was asked to attend this hearing to explain this MOU, they declined testifying. My question for you is regarding the automatic enrollment into VA healthcare. My legislation EVEST requires automatic VA enrollment during transition, changing an opt in to an opt out. How would this shift service members? How would this shift serve service members and veterans?

Ms. BURGESS. Am I understanding you correctly? Your question is how would it shift the narrative, the public perception of the veterans?

Mr. TAKANO. Well, how would this shift to an opt—an opt out, meaning you are automatically enrolled in VA from an opt in where you have to go and sign up for VA. How would that, how would that shift serve service members and veterans?

Ms. BURGESS. I think it would help many of the veterans who are—who assume that they are automatically enrolled. This is a point of interest maybe to many veterans or to those who serve veterans. Many veterans do not understand that it is not an automatic process and it comes as a shock to them. Sometimes after the process, if they were already automatically enrolled, it would take out potentially some of the stress of those the first 90 days or the first 2 years of trying to scramble after they already need a service and getting into a hole of service.

Mr. TAKANO. If we have 200,000 veterans a year transitioning from military and civilian life and they were all automatically enrolled, that would mean VA could stay in touch with them, they could make sure that they knew about programs that VA had to reduce the stressors of that transition. You know, employment programs, training programs, health programs, et cetera. It also strikes me that, well, I was going to Mr. Gupta. Mr. Gupta, the GAO reported on March 2024 that younger and lower ranked service members and service members facing unanticipated separations for short notice administrative or medical separations were experienced a more difficult transition. What are some of the unique transition challenges you have observed among these groups of veterans?

Mr. GUPTA. The unique challenges across any veteran is the adaptation and accumulation back to the society with their basic

needs to be met. What we have seen, based on the data driven strategies and active feedback from our strong member audience, is navigation of the space. With Combined Arms as a technology platform which has an open-door policy, what we see is most veterans are engaged in one aspect of life like job security, resulting into other opportunities and support services which they might not have been aware of. Awareness seems to be a bigger challenge in navigating the space and how to seek assistance. That is where the platform connects and reaches out. Mention their basic needs and all life standards are met.

Mr. TAKANO. Well, thank you. Mr. Chairman, in closing, let me just say that I had hoped that both secretaries would communicate more forthrightly with members with such an important memorandum. Especially I am delighted that both secretaries are looking at some sort of automatic enrollment and doing it administratively. I would appreciate if we could get representatives from both departments to explain how this memorandum understanding would be implemented, what the details are, et cetera. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Representative Mace, you are recognized for 5 minutes of question.

Ms. MACE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the Transition Assistance Program today. An important step for our service members as they leave active duty embark on the next chapter of their lives. We owe our veterans a seamless path to success after service. For many service members, the transition from the structure of military life can be overwhelming. Every individual has different needs when it comes to leaving service, and the TAP program must equip every departing veteran with the skills they need to succeed in civilian life. When TAP succeeds, communities prosper, local businesses gain skilled employees, colleges enroll motivated students, and veterans are given the skills they need to thrive. I am particularly interested in the ways the Department of Veterans Affairs can leverage technology to improve TAP, so the bulk of my questions will be related to that today.

Modernizing TAP through digital platforms and data driven approaches greatly improves our ability to prepare service members for civilian life. By embracing technology and streamlining processes, we can deliver personalized guidance earlier, monitor outcomes more effectively, and adapt quickly to evolving needs. A more connected TAP bridges gaps, simplifies access, and ensures every veteran completes his journey ready to succeed in their next role in life and civilian life. Private companies have played an important role in modernizing and improving the TAP process to better serve our veterans. My first question is for to you, Mr. Gupta. How do your services differ from the traditional TAP experience?

Mr. GUPTA. Thank you for the question. At Combined Arms, it is an opt in model and it is a big force multiplier for any veteran or the family members seeking assistance. Like previously mentioned, we focus on the care and supporting sustaining life's healthy thriving models. Regardless of your needs, using our technology predictive analytic data driven approach, we analyze the patterns of a given veteran. Individualized care is provided based

on the frequency of the resource needed or the amount of care needed for that individual scenario.

Ms. MACE. Can you talk to a little bit about technology integration to the TAP program to leverage VA systems? How can you elaborate a little bit more on how that would work?

Mr. GUPTA. Given the predictive and data driven storytelling and overlaying of AI with a data governance and strict cadence given and only the needed data of a veteran is shared with the resource agencies, we can establish patterns and technology pathways to guide and predict the next steps in a journey of a family care.

Ms. MACE. Is that solely AI driven?

Mr. GUPTA. Oh no. AI is just a force multiplier. You can never replace a human interaction to understand that underlying cause. Entry point to a resource might be, let us say job or food assistance, but through the frequency and the nature of engagement of a veteran and the services they need, AI predictive models, prescriptive models can help analyze the pattern and the next best care made available to that veteran.

Ms. MACE. Can you talk to some of the collaboration between DoD and VA in this model?

Mr. GUPTA. Yes, early awareness.

Ms. MACE. Okay.

Mr. GUPTA. Right from preparation.

Ms. MACE. How early? When you say early awareness, how do you define early awareness?

Mr. GUPTA. Right from the engagement or the enrollment into a TAP's program or a class, streamlining the veteran community, potential community, and tying it back to geographical locations, the transitions might happen. Balancing that with the nursing natural resources care facilities in that area, made available to that veteran can help bridge this gap and make the transition very smooth.

Ms. MACE. Okay, Mr. Loomis, you got my last minute and a half. Can you speak to how your digital platform connects veterans with job opportunities and career guidance?

Mr. LOOMIS. Yes. Thank you, Congresswoman. More specifically, I think it has to do with the way the world is integrated today and becoming more and more integrated. It is understanding the service members story, what their journey is like. Everybody's journey is different and that is more specifically around what their role or their career was in the military, what their likes and preferences are, where are they geographically wanting to be located during discharge or their last destination.

More specifically, what are their objectives, what are their 5-year goals, what are they looking for in order for job placement? Then working with—we are more of an integrator where we integrate with organizations that offer job placement programs for veterans. More specifically, to the witness to my right, Mr. Dickman, it is really about enabling the veterans data to drive what the potential and the possible job opportunity that sets them up for success. You know, it is not a matter of just applying for every job that you can. It is more about what are the top five employment opportunities that were ideal for me to succeed in my career. That is really the integration point.

Ms. MACE. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Representative Pappas, I recognize you for 5 minutes.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thanks to you and the ranking member for holding this session here today on an important topic, the transition from military to civilian life. I want to thank our Panel for their contributions to this conversation. We know that TAP continues to fall short in many ways. Many service providers members report that the program feels more like a checkbox rather than a serious investment in their futures.

60 percent of post 911 veterans report difficulty adjusting to civilian life. Many relocate to entirely new communities with little support in finding housing, employment or structure. Although TAP is a multi-agency effort, I have heard from far too many veterans who complete the program only to scramble later in life for answers on benefits, job placement, and stability for their families. These gaps underscore the indispensable role of VSOs, nonprofits, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO). Your organizations are often the ones filling the void offering career prep, benefit navigation, job placement and much needed support structure along that road. I wanted to ask you a question, Mr. Dickman.

I appreciated your discussion about measuring outcomes, about skills-based hiring opportunities and public-private partnerships. SkillBridge is one program that Congress has focused its attention on over the last many years. I have seen the success of this in my district. We know that these experiences help service members build resumes, gain exposure to market relevant skills, and in many cases lead to post service employment with the same organization. In my State, partners offer opportunities in advanced manufacturing, aerospace, software development, and even public service roles with our State Department of Transportation. Congress has taken steps in recent years to expand an institutionalized SkillBridge. I am wondering if you have any observations for us in terms of what is working, what more we can do to modernize this program for today's workforce? Cut back on red tape and invite more employers to be a part of it.

Mr. DICKMAN. Thank you, sir, for the question. Yes, we are as at Hire Heroes USA, we are not a SkillBridge facilitator. We are a sort of a upstream preparation for active-duty service members and military spouses before they compete for a SkillBridge opportunity. If you think about it, SkillBridge as an internship model has the same challenges that any other veteran might encounter. They have to interview for that internship opportunity. They have to know what their skills are. They have to know what their value proposition is. They have to be able to kind of land that internship and perform well in it.

What we have seen that works really well is when service members engage in one-on-one coaching with one of our transition specialists at Hire Heroes USA for skills development, resume interviewing prep and the ability to articulate what their goals are. They perform better in their SkillBridge internship and are more likely to obtain employment afterwards. What I would encourage to improve that system is more upstream interventions that are aligned around the time sequence for what that service member might need to compete more effectively at that maximum point

closer to their transition when they are eligible for SkillBridge. Understanding how to articulate and validate their skills in a way an employer would recognize and use those to make a hiring decision that can happen upstream and does not need to happen right at the point of transition when everything's very stressful for a service member.

Mr. PAPPAS. I appreciate that and I think that responds to the statistic you cited, 61 percent of veterans that report being underemployed once separated from military service.

If I could go to you Ms. Burgess. Question about just the mental health issue that you cited in your testimony. I am wondering if you can provide any additional observations on gaps in the continuum of care from DoD to VA and what steps we should be taking to address those gaps. You talked about data sharing and coordination as important priorities. Any other observations you might have I think are incredibly helpful as we work to provide the best mental health support we can?

Ms. BURGESS. Thank you very much, Congressman, for that question and the opportunity to elaborate a little bit on that. I think that one of the most difficult things for Congress when it comes to mental health of veterans is that you cannot legislate hope, but you can legislate the things of hope. I think the things of hope for the transitioning veteran are many of the things which all of my fellow panelists were speaking about today. Are the particular programs that are rooted in especially education, employment, legal services, financial well-being, but especially what the research continues to show both in the U.S. and recent studies out of Sweden and out of the UK show that the sense of identity is the single most important element of the transitioning veteran. They are losing a very important identity which is rooted in a public, a very large sense of service and purpose.

Trying to enable them to return to refine to that sense of purpose is what each of these programs should be helping them as one rung up the ladder to be able to do so, enabling them to connect with these different programs at their own level and as they need it. This is what gets to that 24-7 model of the technology, the importance of the technology rather than thinking about a job fair for the 21st century. Where does a 21-year-old or a 25-year-old go today? They talk to their buddy or they go online and do a Google search. We need better immediate touch points, Search Engine Optimization (SEO) that enable that veteran to find the support services that they need and that come to them in a way rather than them having to go out to discover across the board what may or may not work, what may or may not be in that area.

As someone who has worked and has observed Combined Arms in the past, to me this is a model that could be scaled because it brings to the veteran kind of a clearinghouse of here are all the programs that ask you the questions that you need and you are able to input what you are looking for and then it spits back out at you and unsentimental language. Here are the different programs or government agencies that you could be connected with that could help you and then it makes those appointments, helps you find those people.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thanks for your thoughts. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Dr. Miller-MEEKS, make sure you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. MILLER-MEEKS. Thank you very much. I really want to thank Chairman Bost for having this extraordinarily important hearing. This is something that we hear about. As a 24-year army veteran who left—who left the service and to your point, Ms. Burgess, I actually left to pursue education, to go to medical school. I had hope that there was a career pathway for me outside of the military. I think how we help assist active duty to go into the veteran space or into civilian life is extraordinarily important. There is a ton of questions I would love to ask, but I now have 4 minutes and 27 seconds.

Mr. Gupta, the recently congressionally mandated report showed that 52 percent of veterans met the mandated 360-day timelines for TAP. Do you think service members would be more prepared for transition if there was accountability to actually get service members to TAP on time?

Mr. GUPTA. Thank you for the question. The accountability translates in our mind is toward awareness and the benefits and education. It is not just a matter of just a class, one class and you are done. It is more of engagement and enrollment and also outreach to the local community in terms of being readiness to accept that volume of veterans coming in. It is a two-way street and has to be coordinated appropriately.

Ms. MILLER-MEEKS. Yes. Our Governor Brandstad had did that with an initiative called Homestead Iowa. We have communities all throughout that prepare to receive veterans and veteran spouses. In your testimony you mentioned that combining technology integration into the TAP program to leverage VA systems would be beneficial. Can you elaborate—elaborate on how this would practically work?

Mr. GUPTA. Yes. Through the transition, the biggest challenge is adaptation and education and acceptance and through technology, not only veterans who can be made aware of social services and community events or any kind of campaigns going on, but it is also important for the community to be aware of the veteran's skill set coming in, the hardships they have gone through and how do we translate a military life to a civilian life. That partnership really helps.

Ms. MILLER-MEEKS. I am going to follow up on that with Mr. Dickman. With over 100,000 successful hires, how does Hire Heroes USA, what do you do to find opportunities for veterans and help them stay employed? Do you track attrition rates?

Mr. DICKMAN. Thank you for the question, Congresswoman. Actually, probably as we are speaking today, we will pass 110,000 unique service members and military spouses put into work through our program. The way we work on that is through a one-on-one personalized care model where a member of our staff is both their coach, their guide, and at times the uncomfortable truth teller that a service member might need to hear about how do they need to leverage their skills and apply in their job search.

Running behind them in the back end that the veteran may or may not be aware of is a complicated series of both searches, placement activity and employer engagement systems that are aligning

that skill experience. That we are running searches in the background based on the experience and data that we have. We also then tap into forward facing and more active searches so webinars and engagements directly with employers so they can build that connective tissue.

We do track attrition and we have seen that when placed well, veterans stay longer and employers and are promoted faster. It is that first role that tends to be the most critical. The challenge point that we see is, especially with long delay in seeking services and support, is that often veterans have to make a choice of getting a job now versus finding that right job where their skills are going to be put to the best use.

Ms. MILLER-MEEKS. Mentioning that nonprofits currently bear a lot of the burden of assisting veterans and transitioning service members. Mr. Loomis, the veteran post transition outcome data is lacking and is one of the main reasons it is been so hard to get government agencies to prioritize TAP. How can TurboVets help fill this gap?

Mr. LOOMIS. Thank you Congresswoman for the question. The priority really comes down to the collaboration and the first time we are really driving the idea that the DoD and the VA need to be working together and to integrate this new technology. There is no way that historically it is been done—it has always been a very siloed approach where one owned one version or phase of it and then another agency owned the next phase. That disconnection really the veteran or the service member would feel the most. Our collaboration of working with the Secretary of Defense's office as well as the Secretary of VA's office more specifically to focus on that integration of being able to connect their data of what the DoD has for the service member, integrating that into the job market and then integrating that also into the veteran status role model. Our approach is getting the veteran to sign up for VA benefits automatically with our product. Whether we can get the law and the acts passed and the policy endorsed in order to make that happen, we are doing it for them because we want to get the veterans.

Ms. MILLER-MEEKS. That is an excellent point. My time has expired and I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Representative Budzinski.

Ms. BUDZINSKI. Thank you, Chairman. Thank you, Chairman, and thank you, Ranking Member Takano for holding this hearing. I want to thank the witnesses for being here as well. I am really glad that this committee is spending time focusing on that transition period for active-duty military into civilian life. We do know, and I know it is been mentioned, there have been a number of improvements made to the TAP program. We also acknowledge that we still have work to do in this space. I would share with you, I have heard from my Women Veterans Advisory Council and recent reports from the Wounded Warrior Project, Disabled American Veterans (DAV) and others confirm that women veterans are among the most vulnerable in the transition process.

I am especially concerned about the mental health challenges veterans face, obviously during this transition. That is why I introduced a bipartisan bill, the VA Mental Health Outreach and Engagement Act with Congressman Edwards, which would expand

VA's outreach to veterans about the mental health services that are available to them. There is bipartisan consensus that too many transitioning service members and recently separated veterans are still falling through the gaps. Organizations like those represented here today help fill those gaps by connecting veterans with peer support, career services, and assistance navigating VA benefits. We are missing the opportunity today, which is disappointing to hear from the Department of Defense directly, which is, I understand, declined to join today's hearing.

It is incumbent upon DoD, in partnership with VA and the Department of Labor, to ensure that every service member, every veteran is afforded transition counseling and supports that they need to flourish in civilian life. The Federal Government must lead this using key performance indicators and outcome measures to improve transparency and accountability. During the previous administration, governmentwide work on navigating the transition to civilian life produced valuable insights. Now we must use these insights to take action to reshape the transition experience, so that it is easier and more tailored for each service member's individual needs and goals. My question is for Ms. Burgess.

Your testimony highlights that women, minorities and junior enlisted veterans face the steepest post service challenges. You bring up the need for better demographic data to research and understand this. What would you recommend to reduce those gaps? Could you also speak to what key performance indicators would you recommend to access to assess improvement?

Ms. BURGESS. Thank you very much, Congresswoman, for your comments and your question. I think one of the most important things when it comes to women veterans, again, we suffer so much in this area from a lack of actual data or access to data. For those of us who live in the research world and want to understand this, especially if you do not have a background in actual military service. The other thing is changing the narrative about mental health itself. That for a veteran, accessing mental health care is not about giving yourself a life sentence. We have completely distorted what happens to a veteran after their terms of service. In fact, maybe only 10 percent actually experience Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS), where most transitioning veterans actually experience something called transition stress. Then there is something else that many of our special operators especially experience, which is operator syndrome. All of these have these new. Medical research has made leaps and bounds about how to address access these things.

For most of the American public and most of the transitioning veterans, the idea is that if you seek mental health, you are acknowledging to yourself that you have this life sentence ahead of you. Women especially shrink back from that type of a label for themselves. While we have also found through some research of just social data bases that women veterans are frequently the most to express some of their concerns socially, among social media, they actually are less frequent to find and actually do something about it for themselves. That can also just go back to some of the other support services that, you know, are out there that should be identified for them because they have a lack of access to childcare or their caregiver in addition to maybe going to school. It is identi-

fyng which of those other underlying issues might be there that is preventing them from actually seeking the health care provider, or is it simply not understanding that there is an online component that they could avail themselves of.

That is one aspect and something that could help us understand whether it is kind of financial and local to a region versus in general is what I mentioned in my testimony, which is connecting VA and DoD identity repository data base with information from the Social Security Administration that is specific to the payroll at the zip code level. That could tell us so much information that we could then isolate out even types of service, whether it is National Guard, which none of us have mentioned today, about the struggles of National Guardsmen or women coming back versus reservists, active-duty, et cetera. That is one idea. Could go on all day, but I will—

Ms. BUDZINSKI. That is really wonderful. Thank you, that is helpful. Would love to hear more of your ideas too after today. Thank you. Thank you and I will yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Representative Luttrell is recognized by the Chairman.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Thank you, Ranking Member and Chairman Bost. You know, we would not have the veteran community if we did not have DoD, and we would not have DoD if we did not have the veteran community. You, most of you, the Panel has said it, there needs to be a relationship between the two. It seems like it has fallen short or has fallen short. I will just be brutally honest. It has fallen short.

There is a lot of intangibles, a lot of pitfalls between there and here when it comes to DoD and the VA. You know, we need to take a hard look at, and I call them children, but they are grown men and women, when they enlist in the military, especially our junior enlisted service members, and they will come out of high school at 17 years old, 18 years old, spend a short amount of time or extended period of time in the military, and then they are kind of cast out into the civilian population.

Well, there is a lot that happens. If you leave high school and you go to college and your parents kind of put you in this position here, you learn how to be an adult. I do not have a better way to say it, but you have the—nobody's paying for your—nobody's paying for where you are, you know, when you go out at night, paying your bills, your car payment, you take that responsibility. Junior enlisted service members, they are taught how to walk, talk, shoot, do all the other kind of stuff. Give them a place to live, give them a place to eat, no matter what, they are taken care of. Then when their time is up, here we go, and welcome to the real world. Now, if they are married with children, if they have a disability, that is a lot to shoulder the second that you step off that train that is traveling down the track. When we were talking about transition assistance and the platform itself and how do we assist these members there is, I do not know how you, and I do not mean this in a negative connotation, but how do you teach somebody how to be a responsible adult in a way that when you are in the civilian world, when you have not had to do that more or less when you are in the military, again, because it is provided for you a lot of

times. That is another one of those things that we are going to have to figure out.

Now, when we are populating the digital footprint in your organizations, I want to make sure that everybody is specifically, that we focus on each individual specifically. Like if my resume or my portfolio is inside the organization and his is inside the organization, his and I are very similar, but we are very different people. I am obviously a way better congressional member than this guy. I was a way better seal at the time.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. This is not true.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Mr. Gupta, I heard you speak on the personal relationships that you have inside your organizations with those members. Now, I think that we should start transitioning a member's resume from the time they complete basic training until the time that they exit the military. That way, when you are talking to a Marines, like, "Hey, what did you do?" The response from the Marine is, "Look show me bad man. I take bad man away." You know, that is kind of an infantry Marine's response. That is their job, and that is their responsibility. How does that translate into the civilian world? We are responsible for making that articulation the day that we leave. Hey, here you go. Thanks for playing. Figure it out.

The communication breakdown in between these organizations is one of my primary concerns, from start to finish again. Mr. Loomis, can you—can you kind of walk me through what you think the best way to have VA and DoD communicate? Again, two very large organizations that live on different platforms, and this committee always runs into whomever we are speaking to it is like we do not talk to each other very well. If we are creating a digital footprint to assist our veterans, how does that—how can that work?

Mr. LOOMIS. Thank you, Congressman. I think, it goes back to your point about when people join the military and then having something that they can build a relationship with along through their journey of military service, including their goal and their career goal aspirations while they are in the military. I do believe that the way that we are talking with the VA and the DoD right now is to build a ecosystem that essentially allows a service member to understand what benefits there are in the military and staying in the military, as well as the benefits of going into civilian life. I think that is not presented well when it comes to service members when they are going through TAP, including what pitfalls there are, what difficulties, what opportunities there are to retain certain talent to stay in the military.

I think the integration that is going on today between the DoD and the VA is more around the service member's journey. What is this service member doing? What are their goals, and can we match those goals? Can the DoD aid in keeping that service member enlisted to join and achieve their goals? If they cannot, then what can the VA do to help that service member achieve their goals? Whether it is a career in technology, whether it is owning your own business, going through the vocational readiness program. I think it is more about the way that the data is shared, right? The DoD does not share data with the VA very well, including the service member. They do not get their DoD data very eas-

ily. I think that the way that the data connectivity is with working with our platform is to build that career, the service member has their data with them 24–7, 365 from the day they join the military to the day they transition to the day that they need any kind of benefits.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Ms. Brownley.

Ms. BROWNLEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to each of you for what you do for our Nation's veterans. I am not sure what our system would look like without you, so I am very, very grateful. Ms. Burgess, I appreciate how in your testimony you describe the role veterans play as the unacknowledged, but permanent Ambassador of national service and how they are treated after service can have a big impact on public perception and recruitment for our country's all volunteer force. Clearly, high quality health care is a solemn promise that we make to our Nation's veterans. That is certainly why the VA benefits and service brief during the TAP course is required and so consequential for transitioning service members.

I would like, Mr. Chairman, I would like to ask unanimous consent to enter into the record an article from the Guardian published on June 18, 2025 titled, "VA Hospitals Remove Politics and Marital Status from Guidelines Protecting Patients from Discrimination."

The CHAIRMAN. Without objection.

Ms. BROWNLEY. Are you familiar, Ms. Burgess, with the new medical staff bylaws language discussion in this article that eliminates the requirement for healthcare professionals to care for veterans regardless of their politics and marital status?

Ms. BURGESS. Unfortunately, I have not kept up quite on that aspect of.

Ms. BROWNLEY. Okay, all right. Assuming that it is true, and it is true that the VA has changed the bylaws in their language, they that would allow the VA medical professionals to the bylaws at least eliminate the requirement for healthcare professionals to care for veterans regardless of politics and marital status. What that really means is it could be that individual providers could now decline care for patients based on their personal characteristics or their marital status and that would not be protected under the law. Do you think a change like that should be brought to service members attention during the TAP program, during the VA benefit and service brief?

Ms. BURGESS. I think one of the difficulties is when they are in those TAP programs, they feel so inundated by information that it goes in one ear out one ear and they do not remember any of those particular particulars. I would like to say while in theory, maybe, when else would they understand that or be presented with it. In reality, they are not going, that will be so far down on their list of concerns outside of a few where their lifestyles might have them particularly attuned to that type of issue.

Ms. BROWNLEY. I think probably the more important question is what do you think the impact will be on perception and recruitment if members leaving the service, transitioning to be in veteran status now learns that they could be discriminated against based

on their marital status or their political beliefs by medical professionals within the VA?

Ms. BURGESS. I think, again, that will vary by kind of subsets of culture within the military. Many of those who might be already concerned about those questions might never think about joining the military in the first place because they might see it as not conducive.

Ms. BROWNLEY. Do you think they have the right to be, to know and understand that they may be denied care?

Ms. BURGESS. I am sure we all have every American should understand their rights in terms of accessing health care. I do think, though, on the health care side, I will just—I will yield back right now.

Ms. BROWNLEY. Okay. All right. Well, Mr. Chairman, I bring this up because I find that this policy is really outrageous and it is a concern. I mean, it is not just their political views in one direction or the other. It does not matter in terms of what your political views are. If a medical professional believes and does not like that political view, he or she can deny care. Simple as that.

The CHAIRMAN. The Chair—the secretary did give a full video explaining that that was not the case—

Ms. BROWNLEY. I do not know why they published it in their by-laws to say that. It—

The CHAIRMAN. Just telling you what is the other—

Ms. BROWNLEY. I think it is consistent with the Trump administration that they are inconsistent in their message messages. I will just leave it at that. I will—well, it looks like my time is up, but I will leave it at that. Again, I am very, very concerned that our Nation's veterans could be denied care based on their political beliefs and or their marital status. I will yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Representative King-Hinds, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Ranking Member. Thank you to all of you for being here today. I just wanted to see what the interplay is with regards to your organizations. Are you in some sort of a data base or a data bank where a vet, for example, can, going to your point about a la carte services, is there a one stop shop or a site where, if I was a vet and I was looking for different options or different services that are available through nonprofits, is there a site that I can go where I can pull that information or resource?

Mr. GUPTA. Thank you for that question. At Combined Arms we have a very vigorous vetting process for all the VSOs. It is at no charge to the veteran and the organizations will never charge the veteran. Through full transparency and an open-door policy, a veteran coming in can reach out to any organization, seek any resource, and the agencies are under Combined Arms agreement to help them to the best they can and forward on the veteran to other agencies without them having to search and start all over again.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Okay, did you want to share—

Mr. DICKMAN. Thank you, Representative for the question. For example, our organization is one of the vetted organizations that is partnered with Combined Arms.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Okay.

Mr. DICKMAN. If a service member in Texas joins Combined Arms Network and is curious or needs help with their job search, their filters would then direct them to us for support and our one-on-one transition specialist would support that veteran with their career search. We are only an employment service delivery organization, so we carry a network of about 1600 referral partners who serve other need areas such as housing or financial insecurity, food insecurity, any other area that we have also vetted, and we will refer them to. There is a variety of open-source websites that attempt to serve as sort of a catch all index of veteran service organizations, but with about 45,000 out there, the closest are probably some of the more tailored lists that stick to the top 100 or 200.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Do you service places outside of the continent of the United States, like the territories? I am from the Northern Marianas where access to services is very limited. Is there an opportunity to be able to provide folks with the resources that you currently provide, whether through online platforms or whatever other mediums?

Mr. DICKMAN. Thank you, Representative. Yes, at Hire Heroes USA we serve any veteran, any service member, any military spouse. It does not matter when they served, how long they served, what rank, the constitution of their service or where they live. Any member of your constituency as long as they served 1 day in uniform or were married or partnered with a service member is eligible for our services all through our web-based platform. Then our online coaching is a distributed and remote model.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Okay.

Mr. GUPTA. Just to add to that, currently at Combined Arms we do have active veteran and military family profiles leveraging the platform from Indian territories and other states, Puerto Rico, Guam, equally.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Okay, great.

Mr. GUPTA. They—all services available either regionally or at national level to them.

Ms. KING-HINDS. Okay, that is good to hear. Did you want to chime in?

Mr. LOOMIS. Yes ma'am. More specifically, we want to talk about what our focus is unlike the witnesses here is to really how benefits application process and management goes. We are more on the benefits and application process for all benefits across all different services. It could be disability, vocational readiness, GI Bill, healthcare, even active-duty service members wanting a VA loan. We are working on automating the VA loan to lower cost to the service members as well being very disruptive of how all benefits operate on a single unified platform.

While we handle all the technology of benefits management, when it comes to services and support nonprofits, integrations like working with Hire Heroes or Combined Arms, which we are in conversations with, is to elevate that there is too much repetition in the nonprofit and services community. I quite frankly think it should be combined in order to remove the redundancy and combine, really do a force multiplier. I also think that, when it comes to recruitment and how to do recruitment and how do service members have access to services that they do not even know they have.

Like when you are active-duty, there is education benefits that you can use for continuing education that most service members do not know they have. That is the benefit of putting all the benefits on one unified platform that we are building.

Ms. KING-HINDS. All right, well, may I yield the balance of my time?

Mr. GUPTA. Dr. Conaway, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. CONAWAY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have listening intently and I guess where I would start with Ms. Burgess, do you have a thought or an opinion about how the, the yearlong educational process on the transition of veterans from the service works? You know, the data that they provided to us suggests that, I guess despite this long transition education there is a low uptake of completion of those services. Do you have thoughts about how we want to change that process to raise the number of veterans transitioning from the service, actually complete the training so that they can successfully transition from the service?

Ms. BURGESS. Yes. Thank you for the question. Though I am not a specialist in all of the nitty gritty of all the top ins and outs, I would say one, there is a radical solution that I would love to put on the table, which is to think of the end of service with a 30-day leave. You do not just say that you are going to exit the service and then be gone and then be in uniform 1 day. Now you have 30 days in which you could really get through each one of those aspects of reintegrating into civilian service, as in try and figure out where you are going to live, where the jobs are that you want to be, et cetera.

The other is that it seems very anecdotally. Again, this is one of the issues of the data. Much of this is anecdotal from individual soldiers and those from other branches coming back telling us that the yearlong, when they start, they forget the information that they may have received and they forget at when—at which point in that year it would be the most helpful to apply some of that, especially regarding enrollment in, say, VA healthcare type issues. Perhaps, you know, it needs to be thought of as a more condensed issue at one particular point rather than over that year. Though, in general—

Mr. CONAWAY. Thank you. I just want to reclaim my time because you have answers, I think you will agree have been quite long. Any comment from the other—other members of the Panel? Good, because let me move on. I just certainly want to say that I am concerned about the statistics that 60 percent of veterans are having difficulty finding employment after 6 and half years. Clearly we need to do more. I am hopeful that our committee here in the Congress and other interested Members of Congress will address that issue.

I do have a concern about privacy in particular. This question is to Mr. Loomis.

As I understand it, you are leveraging data to help veterans apply for services and the like. You know, I am a data privacy legislator. I am very concerned about access by private entities to personal data and how that might be misused. In fact, I have introduced the VA Data Act, which would restrict special government

employees from accessing and extracting data in possession of Veterans Affairs. I am concerned about data.

Could you just describe to me and the Committee how you access and get access to the data that you are using to help veterans access the services that you are offering in your program, Mr. Loomis?

Mr. LOOMIS. Thank you, Congressman. The data access is through technology. It is through secure communication between the VA data base systems and our data base systems. That is done through a program called Lighthouse. It is a Lighthouse team that goes through a rigorous program of terms of service. What is used with that data? The data is never used. It is never, never repopulated. There is no advertising of the data. It is never sold to any organization. The veteran owns their own data. They can delete their own data. They can consent to the data extraction from the VA in order to apply for benefits and aid them with it. More specifically, because of my cybersecurity background, data security is a very big, serious concern for us as well. More and more importantly, we are working on hosting the platform inside of the Federal ramp, which is the government cloud, so that this data is not out in the commercial marketplace. It is in a protected environment behind the government infrastructure so that government systems can securely communicate to each other.

Mr. CONAWAY. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Mr. Van. Or Representative Van Orden.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Unfortunately, you know, I have got a bunch of stuff I want to ask, but I got to counter what my Democrat colleagues have been saying.

This is a—this is an email from the VA that directly disputes that bullshit article from The Guardian. I am sorry for using that profanity, sir. I want this with—I would like this entered into the record.

The CHAIRMAN. Without objection.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. What Ms. Brownley, who I respect tremendously, said is an absolute flat out lie. We are not going to take that when—when my Democrat colleagues did decide to lie like that. It makes people not want to go to the VA and that increases the risk of suicide, and that is unacceptable. My Democrat colleagues also have seemed to rail against President Trump deciding to take out the Iranian nuclear problem. I do not recall any of them, and many of which were in Congress when President Obama executed 4 American citizens with drone strikes. Enough is enough. We should not politicize this. I am the chairman of the Subcommittee for Echo, or for Economic Opportunity (EO). I would like to thank Chase, Holly and Ali. They are my subcommittee staff, so I take personal responsibility for the TAP program. I do not mean them. I do not mean this committee. I mean me. The DoD has testified twice in front of my subcommittee, so maybe they do not like the folks on the other side of the aisle. They have been here, and they have showed up and I appreciate that tremendously. I got to ask some very pointy questions. Mr. Gupta, how much money do you receive from the Federal Government for your programs?

Mr. GUPTA. I am sorry, I do not have the information top of my hand, but we can get back that to you.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You received money from the Federal Government?

Mr. GUPTA. We work at a State level.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You do? Okay, good. Dickman, how about you?

Mr. DICKMAN. Thank you for the question, Mr. Congressman. It makes up the smallest portion of our total revenue.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. How much?

Mr. DICKMAN. It is about 5 percent for Homeless Veterans Reservation program.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. How much is that give me dollar?

Mr. DICKMAN. It is less than \$700,000.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. How about you, Loomis?

Mr. LOOMIS. Zero. We are privately funded organizations.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Ms. Burgess.

Ms. BURGESS. Zero.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Are you guys familiar with the Muddy Oaks Warrior Foundation?

You are? Okay. They are the most successful program that has ever existed to prevent veteran suicide. They receive zero money from the Federal Government. The answer to my colleagues on the other side of this dais is not Federal dollars, it is the application of will. Ma'am, you talked about hope. You want hope, you are going to find it in faith. You are not going to find it in a Federal dollar. I just want to bring us all down to zero and understand that if in fact, we have very, very successful programs that receive zero money from the Federal Government, we should look at that and we should apply those same things. Mr. Gupta, how many veterans do you serve?

Mr. GUPTA. We have over 85,000 veterans on the platform, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Mr. Dickman.

Mr. DICKMAN. We serve 25,000 annually.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Mr. Loomis, what are you looking to serve?

Mr. LOOMIS. Every veteran service member we are aimed to put on the platform for free of charge.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Ms. Burgess.

Ms. BURGESS. 18 million veterans alive and all those coming.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Are you guys familiar with the enlisted ladder? That is a program. It takes a person when they join the Navy to a 30-year career. What I would like to do, and if you are not doing this, you should take that from the 30-year career into your entire lifetime. I think that is very, it would be valorous if we were able to do that.

I am looking forward to working with all of you guys in the future. Listen, I do not care if you are a private, public thing. If you are a public thing or a private thing, I do not care. If you are helping our veterans, I am with you. On that note, I have 43 seconds. Will everybody here in the audience raise their hand if you are a veteran? How many people went through the TAP program? How many people thought it was worth. Yes, thanks. Well, Mr. Chairman, maybe I should resign because that is my failure. I want to thank you all for coming here. My office is always open for you

cats. Jason, thanks for showing up, pal. There is another frogman there, too.

With that, I will yield back, sir.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Yes.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Mr. Chairman, does the Committee have rules on decorum? Personally—

The CHAIRMAN. It does. I was going to express my concern that decorum should be followed as. The rules are that way, regardless how frustrated you are with that. Representative Ramirez, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you, Chairman. This weekend, many of us watched, appalled, as the President launched an illegal and unauthorized attack on Iran that had put our country and our service members in harm's way. He justified taking us to the brink of war with the same excuses his predecessors used to send service members to endless wars. This administration is fully committed to undermining our democracy, undermining our security and our safety through reckless disregard of the Constitution, irresponsible and unpredictable governance, dangerous and unaccountable decision-making. The way he approached foreign affairs this weekend is not unlike how this administration has approached veterans care. You see there is a pattern here. Reckless disregard of VA workers, 30 percent of whom are veterans, by the way, irresponsible and unpredictable rulemaking, dangerous and unaccountable empowerment of Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to make unproven changes across agencies. While the administration is running around bombs out and middle fingers up. We as Members of Congress still have a promise to uphold for our veterans. Veterans deserve to know that we are doing everything, everything to ensure their peace and safety when they return home.

The transition to civilian life is complex. Many service members return with physical injuries and mental health challenges that require so much more than the transitional to do's and checklist. The Transition Assistance Program, we know, is a vital means of ensuring that veterans achieve peace, fulfillment and safety after service. We know that from employment assistance to health services, housing support and continued education, our veterans deserve an integrated education and streamlined, comprehensive approach to TAP that provides them with the resources and the supports that they need to succeed. It is why you are here.

TAP should be a gateway to stability to opportunity and dignity for every service member leaving active-duty, not just some as we saw a moment ago. Nearly 70 percent, 70 percent of service members are still not accessing the program on time. To me, that is systemic failure that Congress has to rectify. I want to talk about SkillBridge.

Last week I met with previously approved SkillBridge providers in my district who were recently and without notice, without notice, removed from the SkillBridge provider website. They still do not know the exact date or reason why they were unlisted. They did not get no notice, no explanation. You and I both know that the SkillBridge is an important component of TAP. Ms. Burgess, can you explain what it means for veterans if trusted SkillBridge pro-

viders are being quietly removed? My follow up to that, how will this affect service members transition into your program?

Ms. BURGESS. Thank you for your question. I do not have a program. I am a researcher, PhD and I look at the whole ecosystem. From kind of that 10,000-foot view, I would say probably my colleagues at this table have better, more detailed, tangible answers to you. In general, though, of course, it will affect whichever employers, potential employers that were dropped, any of those individuals who are interested in those particular types of employment.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you, Ms. Burgess. Let me ask you then, Mr. Loomis, Mr. Dickman or Mr. Gupta, what can Congress do to ensure that service members have the greatest level of access to SkillBridge approved organizations?

Mr. LOOMIS. I think a strong public-private partnership that is endorsed and supported regardless of administration that allows private organizations and nonprofits to be able to work with government to do the heavy lifting. I think that is been proven that innovation and disruption comes from the outside in the commercial markets and really is the only way to integrate. I believe TAP should start probably 12 months prior to discharge, primarily so that you can either retain the individual for a military service career because it is a good opportunity for them, or to start the transition process, including repair, financial viability, credit repair, all that stuff takes time. 30 days is not going to solve that.

Ms. RAMIREZ. You recommend 12 months?

Mr. LOOMIS. At least 12 months in advance.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you. What about you, Mr. Dickman, and Mr. Gupta?

Mr. DICKMAN. Thank you for the question, Congresswoman. I would recommend to the constituents who that had their SkillBridge removed to obviously keep pursuing that discussion with the Department of Defense. Unfortunately, I am not an expert on SkillBridge administration, so I would not be able to advise them on what rules that they would have to follow. I would encourage them as well to expand their talent pipeline considerations for veterans transitioning military and military spouses. There are numerous other direct hiring actions that they could take that plug into already separated veterans or military spouses or others who are not eligible for SkillBridge who equally are struggling with underemployment that they could—

Ms. RAMIREZ. My time is up. Mr. Gupta, if you want to do 3 seconds before.

Mr. GUPTA. Yes, I would agree with our speaker s here. Then focusing on the need and the feedback from the veteran on where the lack is, is a primary target and focus how we serve them better. If it is education, extensive partnerships, as long as they are geared and supported to the veteran well-being.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you, Mr. Gupta. Look, I know my time is up, so Chairman, I am going to yield back and just remind us that we have to make sure that these programs are effectively helping every one of our veterans. It is actually how we honor their service with action. Thank you. With that, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Representative Hamadeh, you are recognized 5 minutes.

Mr. HAMADEH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As a veteran myself and I also serve on the Armed Services and Veteran Affairs Committee and you know this program I have been through it as a former Army Reservist, when I was getting off my deployment of 14 months, I did not find it all that useful, especially because I was a reservist going back to my civilian job. I think we got to have some common sense in a lot of this policies. We also need personalization.

I want to first ask my question to you, Mr. Loomis. Your Arizona-based company, TurboVets, aims to make TAP technology driven and personalized. One complaint I consistently hear is that the TAP program feels like a one size fits all checkbox. You have spoken about customization and in your view, what steps could the DoD and VA take to make it a little bit more personalized?

Mr. LOOMIS. Thank you, Congressman. The personalization comes from the individuality of the person that is going through TAP. That includes their upbringing, their service connective services that they did, their career that they did in the military, their desires, their interests. TAP needs to be built on what their inadequacies are and what their goals are. More specifically, that changes by the individual. The individual, that is the problem. With AI today and the ability to consume lots of data and being able to build a roadmap, we like to build a custom curriculum per individual that specifically focuses on 5-year goals, what their career in the military was, what their weak points are, what their strengths are so that they can have good job placement, but they can also work on their—what they are struggling with. If they have got, you know, weak financial viability, they need to have, you know, put together a program about budgeting, you know, financial saving, credit repair. You know, all of these things are required prior to discharge. You know, if you try to get an apartment or a home after military service and you have got bad credit, that is going to be a real problem. That is the goal of financial literacy is a very, very strong component to individualizing everybody's transition.

Mr. HAMADEH. Yes, I like that. I think a lot of the innovation comes from the private sector. Keep it up. Another question, Mr. Loomis. I am also concerned about the classroom approach and how it fails to resonate with a lot of the transitioning service members. How do we bridge that civilian military gap and what would a technology enabled TAP program actually look like on the ground?

Mr. LOOMIS. On the ground, thank you, Congressman, for the additional question. On the ground, it is more about partnerships. We are working with the Medal of Honor Museum in Arlington, Texas. We are working with popular podcasters that are out there, Mr. Ryan, who is obviously a Navy SEAL as well, to really personalize the experience where these are service members talking to future veterans. That connectivity of personalizing it, getting, you know, digital learning is different today than it was 25 years ago. You know, people are looking at 5-minute clips of video to gather and consume the data rather than reading a chapter of a book. You have to kind of keep up with time. On the ground, it is about building that digital platform to be able to have one, the content that is changing to the market. We cannot—we cannot sell and teach

based on PowerPoint anymore. People lose their attention. They will be thinking about what they want to do tomorrow. More importantly, it is about staying with relevant with data. Then obviously good stakeholder's human effect. We do not need AI teaching everybody everything. We really need to have good content from video creators and obviously social media platforms.

Mr. HAMADEH. Very good. Ms. Burgess, I got a question for you. In your testimony, you mentioned that a majority of the potential employers believe that veterans need more training or additional education on soft skills before they are ready to maintain a career in the civilian sector. Can you elaborate on that, how we can better prepare the soft skills aspect of it?

Ms. BURGESS. Sure. Thank you for the question. Essentially, it comes down to translating the skills that they had in the military into more civilian speak. Communication skills is often considered the first or most principle of this. In terms of how do you do an interview, how do you present yourself in an interview, in a civilian interview, elaborate about your personal characteristics and what you bring to an employment location.

Mr. HAMADEH. Very good. I know there is a lot of foreign investments coming to United States. Every single one of these companies that have met with me I encourage them to hire Americans and hire veterans specifically because there is always, they always mention the challenge of our workforce. I know the veterans are the hardest workers. As the chairman said earlier, they show up on time, they are disciplined, and I think they make the best employees.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Representative Cherfilus-McCormick, you are recognized for 5 minutes for question.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you so much for your service and being here in helping our veterans.

We have talked extensively about the TAP program and the problems with it. I wanted to deep into, take a deep dive into some of the services that you provide, especially some of your software. Now, we know the most critical thing is connecting our former service workers into jobs that they want, where they can leverage their talents.

My first question is for Mr. Loomis. I understand that your company is currently designing and testing a product that helps transitioning service members to identify employers that want to hire our veterans. Can you walk us through the product and what has the preliminary feedback been from our veterans and also their employers?

Mr. LOOMIS. Thank you, Congresswoman. The preliminary feedback is that it is a high-speed solution right now and it is customized. Transition is a very tricky thing because everybody's transition is different. Right. Some might going through it with no financial literacy and no financial stability. I think the institutionalization that happens when you are a service member, we take for granted that we are being paid, fed and housed without thinking about it. No matter what problem comes up, when you are military

service, you have a chain of command that will help you solve that problem.

I think with transition, it is really preparation. Do people and individuals going through the service, through the TAP program as service members, do they understand those differentiations that you are going to have to provide for yourself, you are going to have to feed yourself, you are always going to have to house yourself? I think we take that for granted. Even for myself, it was a big change to make that. The feedback that we are receiving is the individuality that comes from everybody's situation is different. It should start 12 months prior to discharge because. If someone has made a bad loan when they were young and they did not know that 30 percent loan that they did not pay ruined their credit, that is going to be a problem when they are in the civilian world. It takes time, as we all know in this committee to repair your credit. The time and the accessibility of solutions that is key. That, you know, with technology we can connect those dots. We connect with partners that are on this Panel as well.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Now, with looking at that feedback, is there any recommendations you would make directly to Congress that we can institute to help you also in your feedback and what you are finding to help our soldiers transition?

Mr. LOOMIS. Yes, the 12-month requirement. I also think that 1 day, one or a few hours a week per command endorsement, we find that a lot of commands do not really support the TAP program because the individual might be a high performer and that individual then does not really get any time off. They kind of leverage them to the day they get off. I think that it would be important, important that every command in the U.S. Military endorses and supports an individual spending and doing their TAP. They really need to back them in that second transition from the first. I do not think that is happening today. I think that the command sometimes will just disregard that as not important compared to the mission itself.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Now, has there been any negative feedback that you have gotten from your application?

Mr. LOOMIS. No, the only negative feedback is when can we have more features. Everybody is pretty impatient with when can I, when can you have more stuff in your product roadmap come on-line?

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Well, one of the biggest complaints I hear from my veterans in my district is that the military assumes they want to continue the same or similar jobs that they have been doing when they were civilian workforce. What do you—is there a filter that helps matches them? They might have other talents that they would like to explore. How are you actually bridging that gap for our veterans who feel the same? Feel that way?

Mr. LOOMIS. Yes. That is the partnership with like, you know, here's for hire. Also there is another company called OpLine that actually does the matching. The other thing is a lot of veterans and service members do not realize that you can also contract back to the military for your same job. There is an opportunity. If you have a very specialized skill set, like working on certain aircraft that only the military has, there are contracting opportunities for those individuals to continue their service in the civilian world.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Another question that I get also is that we hear a lot about how veterans are being exploited for a profit by claim sharks. How does the TurboVets product prevent veterans from the predatory practices of claim sharks? What safeguards are in place to prevent the claim sharks from accessing this?

Mr. LOOMIS. Thank you. That is our number one driver is to eliminate the vulnerability that exists with veterans that do not know that there is free help out there. There is good help with the disabled, American veterans, American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW), all have VSOs, and the county veterans service officers, Texas Veterans Commission, all have free services to help these veterans. Our goal is to build a shielded environment. We are shielded from access of anybody of a claim shark. For example, we work with a company called ID.me, which all veterans are familiar with. We use it to log into va.gov. Blake Hall is a very good friend. We only allow veterans or validated individuals, including accredited agents or VSOs access to our platform. There is no cross selling, there is no poaching, there is no manipulation. Our goal is to eliminate the claim shark business whatsoever altogether in its entirety. There is no need for veterans to be giving up their compensation for getting their forms filled out and for the proper things done.

Ms. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Well, thank you so much. My time is up and I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Representative Kiggans, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. KIGGANS. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for giving us your time today and sharing how Congress can help the men and women who served our Nation transition into civilian life more easily. As a Navy veteran, the wife of a retired Navy veteran, and the Representative who represents a very large veteran population down in Hampton Roads, Virginia, I understand the challenges service members and their families face when transitioning from a mission driven career into everyday civilian life outside of the uniform. I hear it time and time again just when I am out and about in the community about the challenges just of leaving service and leaving that really the job we do every day and taking on a new life. They are very communicative and I appreciate just being part of the solution. Thank you for your work.

It is estimated that 200,000 service members transition from the military into civilian life each year. It is getting harder and harder for them to do so. Nearly 60 percent of the post 911 veterans have reported difficulty adjusting to civilian life, compared to 25 percent of veterans from earlier eras. You must support programs that make the transition from the service to civilian life as smooth as possible.

I am excited to announce today we have introduced the Veterans Energy Transition Act, or the VET Act. This legislation will create a Department of Labor grant program for employers in the energy and advanced manufacturing sectors to train and hire eligible veterans and transitioning service members, addressing workforce shortages in these critical sectors, as well as ensuring our veterans have ample opportunities for gainful employment. This bill directly

complements the mission that many of you have here today. I thank you again for being here to discuss how we can establish new and improve existing programs to make this transition period smoother for our Nation's veterans. I have a question for Mr. Dickman. Mr. Dickman, one of the main goals of Hire Heroes USA is to help veterans secure employment after their time in service through one-on-one support that aims to help them. Can you elaborate on the sort of skills that many veterans leave the service with and how those match up with what skills employers are looking for? How often are employers in the energy and manufacturing sectors looking to connect with skilled veterans?

Mr. DICKMAN. Thank you so much for the question, Congresswoman. One of the things that we have learned and learned through our partnerships with McKinsey as well is that junior enlisted and enlisted service members have really strong representative technical skills that employers make hiring decisions off of really quickly. In the manufacturing sector, in the logistics sector, in the healthcare sector, and in the energy sector, anything dealing with manual labor or cyber-Information Technology (IT), those inform hiring manager decisions and those enlisted service members get hired on those skills really quickly. Where they tend to struggle is that their leadership or personal or soft skills are not recognized as much. They struggle to be upwardly mobile within those organizations. More senior service members, their leadership skills, decision-making, product management, program management, those are more recognized and are way more into hiring manager decisions for those more senior and executive type of transitioning military, but they are not often hired on technical roles in those types of industries.

Ms. KIGGANS. Great. We will, continue to work on that. During a service members transition, what does this period look like for the family? How does Hire Heroes USA make the families of service members leaving the military just help them to make the adjustment as well?

Mr. DICKMAN. Thank you for the continued question, Congresswoman. It is extremely stressful on the family. You know, not only is the service member leaving that culture that they are part of, but the military spouse and children are leaving that tight knit community as well. We do work with military spouses, any military spouse, regardless when they met their partner, if they are still partnered with them or not. Any marriage to a service member affects the career trajectory of that spouse and has long-term effect. We encourage military members that we are working with to have their partner or spouse sign up with us as well for continued career support, especially if they are moving to a new area. We are happy to say that a lot of our referrals come from partners of an already existing client.

Ms. KIGGANS. Great. Thank you for that. As a military spouse, that is important. As a mom to future veterans, I know that will be important to them as well. Thank you for that work.

Last question for Ms. Burgess. Ms. Burgess, in your testimony you noted that around 200,000 service members exit the military each year. As well as that there are around 45,000 registered veterans, service focused nonprofit organizations, that is one nonprofit

for almost every 4 veterans. The issue is obviously not with the amount of organizations but rather access to or the coordination of programs.

How can government agencies better focus on employment services for veterans to create a more efficient experience? How can we streamline the existing landscape to perhaps put things more in one place?

Ms. BURGESS. I will echo some of the—some of the other witnesses on this testimony. I think that it comes down to public-private partnerships and leveraging what each side—each side is doing best. I think more importantly is we need to start with measuring outcomes, not outputs. That is something that is directly something that Congress can mandate for all of these VA programs. We are not going to know what works best unless we know what the outcomes are. To know what the best outcomes are, first we have to determine what it is that Congress wants out of all of these programs. Thank you.

Ms. KIGGANS. We will continue to do our part as well. Thank you so much. I yield back, Mr. Chair.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Representative Cherfilus-McCormick, is there any closing statement you need to make for the—

All right, then. First off, I want to say thank you to our witnesses. As you know, this is a very important issue to each of us on this Panel. Sometimes I think we should stay focused on the issue out here than bringing up the other issues around that kind of cause havoc in that. Let me say this. I would agree with the ranking member in his statement earlier that regardless whether Republican or Democrat, whichever administration there, it has been difficult to get the DoD to communicate with the VA on this issue. I am hoping that we are working with the administration to try to find that common ground. Remember DoD, and when I look at our veterans that are sitting at the table there, remember DoD's job is to put a bullet down range or support those who do.

Trying to find that window and trying to convince commanding officers that how important the TAP program is, is a challenge for all of us. We want to make sure that we do that in a way, as I explained in my opening statement, that it is got better, but by no means are we done yet. Okay? It is vitally important. I have watched my own nephews, grandson go through this. I was blessed in the fact that I went home to a family business, knew what I was going to do. Believe me, by the time my, this will stick into your mind, by the time I had my mullet and curly perm grown out, I had already transitioned. No problem. Not everybody does that. Okay? We need to make sure that TAP program is there and that our military personnel are advised. I also want to bring up that, you know, when we went out and visited the TAP program in Twentynine Palms, one thing that they did that was very wise is they did bring the spouse in. Quite often our military personnel, when they get ready, especially junior, when they are getting, if they are married, they are getting ready to leave, they just want to get out, their spouse quite often is more worried about the landing zone than they are.

Trying to put this together, this is vitally important. I hope that we will sit down with both secretaries and try to find that place

and through their employees so that we can find that place where we can focus on making sure there is plenty of time for the TAP program.

With that, I want to say thank you again, and we are looking forward to continue to work. I ask unanimous consent that all members have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material.

Hearing no objection. So, ordered.

The hearing is now adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:15 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENTS OF WITNESSES

Prepared Statement of Manish Gupta

Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for inviting Combined Arms to testify and for your unwavering commitment to our veterans. As Chief Technology Officer of Combined Arms, I lead a network that harnesses advanced technology to streamline veterans' transitions. Our digital platform, proven by connecting a veteran to housing and job resources in mere minutes, showcases the power of applying innovative data strategies to streamline access to essential help, delivering an "Amazon shopping cart"-style approach to navigating social services. With enhanced collaboration from the DoD, VA, and DoL, Combined Arms' platform could serve as a force multiplier for the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), transforming its ability to deliver seamless, personalized support to servicemembers.

TAP is a vital bridge, guiding veterans to civilian resources. Combined Arms' platform, spanning all 50 states, integrates 650 vetted organizations, including 76 national partners, to amplify TAP's impact through innovative technology and robust agency partnerships.

Our platform is a closed-loop, data-powered digital marketplace designed to enhance TAP's efficiency. Veterans complete secure profiles—detailing service history, skills, and wellness needs—enabling personalized support pathways to match them to resources, serving as a one-stop shop for social services. DoD collaboration could provide early service data, allowing TAP to tailor pre-separation career and benefit plans. Veterans select services, such as job training or mental health support, using intuitive filters for location and category. Real-time analytics track delivery, ensuring accountability, while quick connections to over 650 service agencies drive efficiency. Our platform's ability to serve over 85,000 clients, connecting them to over 190,000 social services demonstrate its capacity to scale TAP's resource delivery.

The platform fosters multi-sector collaboration to broaden TAP's reach. Equipped with provider interfaces—featuring case management, interagency referrals, digitized forms, and ADA/508 compliance—it streamlines coordination, as endorsed by the VA and George W. Bush Institute.

VA integration could accelerate benefit access, linking veterans to healthcare or education support. DoL partnerships could enhance job pipelines, integrating programs like SkillBridge to boost employment outcomes. Our USO pilot, engaging veterans 18 months pre-separation, aligns with TAP's early intervention goals. We recommend standardized VA liaisons, flexible policies for community innovations like mentorship, and a National Community of Practice. This digital hub would enable TAP stakeholders to share best practices, leveraging our 220,000-strong audience reach to drive continuous improvement.

Our platform strengthens TAP's outcome measurement—employment, mental health, and civilian satisfaction. Advanced analytics, which facilitated 14,406 career placements since 2020, layer client data with public metrics to generate county-level heat maps, identifying service gaps in rural or underserved areas. With DoD, VA, and DoL data sharing, TAP could dynamically allocate resources and track long-term well-being, ensuring adaptability to veterans' evolving needs, as recognized by the VA. These analytics empower data-driven decisions, optimizing TAP's effectiveness across diverse veteran communities.

To realize this vision, Combined Arms recommends:

1. Fund technology integration with the TAP platform, leveraging VA systems for cost-efficient, personalized support.
2. Establish a VA-led task force to standardize collaboration and integrate private-sector networks.
3. Support pilot programs to test these solutions, with metrics tracking employment and well-being.

In conclusion, with robust DoD, VA, and DoL collaboration, Combined Arms' platform could serve as a force multiplier for TAP, revolutionizing veteran transitions through technology. We stand ready to partner with this Committee and stakeholders to build a future where every servicemember thrives. Thank you, and I welcome your questions.

Prepared Statement of Ross Dickman

Introduction

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today on improving outcomes for veterans and transitioning service members. Leaving the military is a shared experience for those who serve, but each servicemember's journey is unique. Ensuring the Federal Transition Assistance Program is tailored to meet the needs of all those transitioning, while standardizing effective outcome measures is essential to improving the transition process. The sustainable future of the all-volunteer force relies on providing the right care to veterans as they exit, and through their post-service careers.

Background

Hire Heroes USA is the Nation's leading veteran and military spouse employment nonprofit. Headquartered in Alpharetta, Georgia, we are proud of our nationwide presence, serving clients in all 50 states and abroad. Hire Heroes USA offers comprehensive, one-on-one employment services to 25,000 transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses annually. Founded in 2005, we are celebrating our 20th anniversary this year and have helped secure employment for nearly 110,000 unique individuals.

The scope and scale of our client population provides us with robust insights into the myriad employment barriers veterans face after they leave the military. Approximately 60 percent of our clients registered for assistance while still on active duty, and 32 percent registered after their separation from the military. Around 8 percent of our annual clients are military spouses.¹ This individualized model grants us a unique lens on interventions both pre-and post-separation. I am honored to elevate our clients' experiences for the committee today, especially those related to evaluating and improving the transition process. The transition process must incorporate policy reforms that support the right solutions and outcomes.

The Transition System: A Fragmented Landscape

Each veteran experiences a unique journey after service, including education, embarking on a career path, starting a business, or continuing service to their community. Due to the variety of pathways available when leaving active duty, developing a standardized method of measuring every veteran's success can have its challenges. However, we can effectively evaluate indicators of well-being for veterans in their civilian lives. Data from key nonprofit and research entities in this sector propose solutions for not only assessing but improving outcomes in veteran programming. These datasets reveal several key contextual factors that policymakers should consider when seeking to reform military to civilian transitions: (1) transition is a process, (2) specific needs exist at critical intervals throughout that process, and (3) needs vary based on each individual; and those needs could be impacted by their rank, education, timeline, experience, and other unique factors at time of separation.

First, transition is a process that can extend well beyond the point of separation from the military. Data from The Veterans Metric Initiative (TVMI) longitudinal study conducted by Penn State University's Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness studied the well-being of over 10,000 individuals who separated from the military in 2016. The study examined seven domains of well-being: employment, education, financial security, legal issues, social connectedness, physical health, and mental health. A key finding from the research is that transition from military to civilian life is a process—not a single moment in time. While 65 percent of veterans

¹ "Hire Heroes Report," 2023, <https://www.hireheroesusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2023-Hire-Heroes-Report.pdf>.

reported feeling fully transitioned within 3 years of separation, 19 percent still did not feel fully transitioned even six and a half years later.²

The study also highlights that the first 2 years post-separation are critical for intervention, revealing that specific needs exist at critical intervals throughout the transition process. During this time, 65 percent of transitioning service members accessed at least one program offering specialized services across the well-being domains.³ Most veterans used multiple services throughout their transition journey, with financial security emerging as a primary concern. Although many pursued higher education after leaving the military, they often did so while simultaneously seeking employment to stabilize their financial situation.⁴

Finally, multiple factors contribute to the unique circumstances surrounding a service member's transition, though rank often serves as a key indicator of transition success. AEI's April 2025 Report highlighted that Junior Enlisted veterans (ranks E1 to E4) face the most challenges post-service, including high unemployment, poor economic outcomes, and low utilization of existing services. It further says that despite the robust network of support services available to this group, measurable results are not being achieved.⁵

Supporting these findings, our data indicates that 28 percent of clients classified as in active duty, reserve, or veteran status, have a rank between E-1 and E-4 (Junior Enlisted). Their top self-identified barriers to employment were Education (27.9 percent), Lack of Experience (27.6 percent), Career Change (21.5 percent), and License and Certification Requirements (18.6 percent). Our Junior Enlisted clients also report higher rates of unemployment and underemployment compared to other rank categories, and when given access partake in multiple services at a high rate—an average of 2.69 services per client. In 2023, we observed this population shift from being the least likely to most likely to utilize services.⁶

The Need for an Individualized Approach

Individualized employment services—and other educational and vocational resources—are an essential complement to the Federal Transition Assistance Program (TAP). A joint initiative led by the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and other Federal agencies, TAP has played an integral part in gradually improving employment and various other outcomes for transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses. However, TAP is an insufficiently individualized process that is not dynamic enough to address the unique employment barriers veterans face. TAP has faced no shortage of challenges in its more than 20-year history, many of which still remain despite recognition by Congress, the military, and the veteran community. A recent GAO report reveals concerning findings about TAP, including a lack of timely completion of pre-separation counseling requirements and inadequate attendance at career-track classes for service members most at risk.⁷

The sheer volume of transitioning service members each year coupled with DoD resource constraints makes a fully one-on-one model exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, for the government to implement on their own. Individualized employment services and vocational resources are an essential complement of Federal military to civilian transition services, notes the RAND Corporation's recent investigation into the Federal and nonprofit landscape. Their June 2024 report found that the Federal Government spends over \$13 billion annually on 45 different programs across 11 agencies to support military transition. Approximately 97 percent of these funds are allocated to education services rather than employment services, despite the fact that employment services are frequently the number one requested support for transitioning service members. Upon further investigation into the role of nonprofit organizations in the transition process, RAND found that these organizations

² Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness The Pennsylvania State University, *An Overview of the Typical Veteran in Transition* (2025), https://veteranetwork.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/TVMI-VETS_Transitioning-Veteran-Infographic_2025Mar26.pdf.

³ The Pennsylvania State University, "An Overview of the Typical Veteran in Transition."

⁴ The Pennsylvania State University, "An Overview of the Typical Veteran in Transition."

⁵ Matt Amidon and Brent Orrell, "Sustaining a National Treasure: Veteran Transitions and the Life Cycle of the All-Volunteer Force" (American Enterprise Institute, April 2025), https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/RPT_Amidon_Orrell_Sustaining-a-National-Treasure-Veteran-Transitions-and-the-Life-Cycle-of-the-All-Volunteer-Force_April-2025-5.pdf?x85095.

⁶ "Hire Heroes Report."

⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Could Enhance the Transition Assistance Program by Better Leveraging Performance Information* U.S. GAO, (Nov. 9, 2023), <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-106793>.

fill a critical gap to supplement Federal transition programs, particularly in providing individualized employment services.⁸

Data collected and analyzed by research institutions and nonprofit entities show the importance of individualized service delivery during the transition process. Such data should inform future partnerships and collaborations when discussing and determining how best to measure success for our Nation's warfighters once they become civilians. Today's veterans and the labor market do not look like those of an age gone by—neither should our transition programs. We need a transition system that fits the challenges of today's veterans and provides opportunities for individuals to overcome challenges and barriers to a successful civilian life.

The Persistence of Underemployment

Absent from much of the data on veteran transition, the less visible and harder to track trend of underemployment is a persistent problem for veterans in the civilian workforce. According to Penn State University's Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness, underemployment occurs "when veterans' skills, education, and experiences are not fully utilized or maximized in a current job role."⁹ The Veterans Metric Initiative (TVMI) data illustrates that 61 percent of veterans report underemployment 3 years after separation from the military. This number only drops slightly to 60 percent of veterans reporting underemployment at six and a half years post-separation.¹⁰

Many veterans experience underemployment because there is not always a direct translation of skills gained from their military experience. Skills translation is especially critical given that 74 percent of nonveterans hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to just 54 percent of veterans.¹¹ Hire Heroes USA's data reflect this with approximately 26 percent of 2023 registrants having a 4-year degree and around 17 percent having a 2-year degree. The largest share of those jobseekers (40 percent) enter the job market with degree attainment lower than a bachelor's. When compared with analysis from the Occupational Information Network (O*NET), TVMI's research found that 40 percent of veterans were underemployed according to O*NET job education requirements.^{12, 13} Perceived insufficient level of educational attainment, regardless of skills and experience, prohibits veterans from landing jobs where they are challenged and fulfilled. This perceived education gap can follow veterans throughout their career—significantly impacting earnings and career progression—and reaffirming the need for career support services far beyond the point of transition.

Opportunities in Skills-Based Hiring

The persistence of underemployment among veterans demonstrates a need for realigning outcome measures. Skills-based hiring presents a promising solution to mitigate this. Skills-based hiring refers to "the hiring or promotion of workers around skills, knowledge and abilities that workers can demonstrate they have, regardless of how or where they attained those skills."¹⁴ A 2023 study from McKinsey notes that "unleashing the value of veterans' work experience through skills-based hiring could reach almost \$15 billion over 10 years."¹⁵ Our private sector partners recognize this untapped economic potential. According to the National Skills Coalition, 52 percent of jobs require training beyond high school, but not a 4-year de-

⁸*Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions: Limited Scrutiny and Substantial Investment in Education Programs* (RAND Corporation, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1363-12>.

⁹"Policy Brief: Mitigating Veteran Underemployment," October 2023, https://veteranetwork.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/PSU_Mitigating-Veteran-Underemployment_OCT-2023-FINAL.pdf.

¹⁰The Pennsylvania State University, "An Overview of the Typical Veteran in Transition."

¹¹"Table 3. Employment Status of People 25 Years and over by Veteran Status, Period of Service, and Educational Attainment, 2024 Annual Averages—2024 A01 Results," Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/vet.t03.htm>.

¹²"US Departments of Labor, Commerce Release Skills-First Hiring Guide to Help Employers Hire, Promote Workers Based on Skill, Knowledge," DOL, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/osec/osec20241113>.

¹³The Pennsylvania State University, "An Overview of the Typical Veteran in Transition."

¹⁴"US Departments of Labor, Commerce Release Skills-First Hiring Guide to Help Employers Hire, Promote Workers Based on Skill, Knowledge," DOL, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/osec/osec20241113>.

¹⁵"Hiring Veterans Can Help Reduce the US Labor Gap McKinsey," accessed June 12, 2025, <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/from-the-military-to-the-workforce-how-to-leverage-veterans-skills>.

gree.¹⁶ Opportunity @ Work, a nonprofit working across sectors to implement skills-based hiring, promisingly reports that ~600,000 jobs have opened up for STAR (Skilled Through Alternative Routes) jobseekers as 26 states removed degree requirements from government job descriptions between 2022 and 2025.¹⁷ This crucial step in removing degree barriers in employment opportunities is an important development for all of our clients, but particularly for the 78 percent of Hire Heroes USA's Junior Enlisted clients (ranks E1-E4) without a bachelor's degree.

While the concept of skills-based hiring is not entirely new—every role inherently requires specific skills—validating and leveraging skills has been an uncommon practice until recently. At Hire Heroes USA, elements to support a skills-validation framework were already in place, but much had to be developed. Over the past 2 years, we collaborated with skill development and validation organizations, job seekers, career coaches, and employers to integrate skills-based work throughout our efforts. Hire Heroes USA's clients consistently report that they find skills validation valuable for enhancing career development; in fact, 66 percent of respondents indicated they felt more confident in their job search following a skills-based search webinar.¹⁸ There is clear interest among employers and in emphasizing skills and competencies that would allow job seekers to demonstrate their value more effectively; however, a definitive and market-wide framework has yet to emerge. Ensuring widespread standardization and adoption of this practice will require continued collaboration between employers, nonprofits, validation platforms, and the Federal Government. Decision-makers at all levels must actively join the movement to remove employment barriers for more than 70 million Americans.¹⁹

The Value of Nonprofit Organizations and Opportunities to Expand Public-Private Partnerships

In addition to the formal Transition Assistance Program, the Federal Government provides other military transition programs at no cost to the service member. One such program is the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment Navigator & Partnership Pilot (ENPP) program.²⁰ ENPP provides one-on-one career assistance to transitioning service members and their spouses at select military installations. The program shows great potential as initial reports indicate ENPP participants experienced 2 months less time from separation to employment and 11 percent higher wages than those who did not participate in ENPP.²¹

The success of ENPP is due in large part to the nonprofit partners that execute service delivery for the program at no cost to the Federal Government. Since launching in 2021, Hire Heroes USA has served almost 2,000 veterans, resulting in over 1,125 hired veterans. For Hire Heroes USA's ENPP referrals, the 2024 average salary upon hire was \$64,485. More recently, Hire Heroes USA has participated with the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs, Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E) office. Through this relationship, VR&E case managers refer veterans most in need of individualized employment services to us for support, and we work diligently with the VA system to ensure a smooth client experience.

Behind Hire Heroes USA's success is our highly individualized approach, where employment services are tailored to the unique needs of each client. Our industry-leading employment model is centered around a team of trained Transition Specialists who work one-on-one with their assigned 'client' throughout their employment journey. Our approach not only results in better employment outcomes for veterans and military spouses, but it also leads to higher levels of satisfaction and earnings that surpass the national average for veterans by over 30 percent.²²

There is a need for more 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

¹⁶ "Skills Mismatch," *National Skills Coalition* (blog), accessed June 12, 2025, <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/skills-mismatch/>.

¹⁷ Chris Francica, "Three Years In: Tracking the State of the Paper Ceiling," Medium, March 25, 2025, <https://blog.opportunityatwork.org/three-years-in-tracking-the-state-of-the-paper-ceiling-f24450273266>.

¹⁸ "Skills-Based Hiring White Paper Report," 2024, <https://www.hireheroesusa.org/skills-based-white-paper/>.

¹⁹ "Advocate for Skills-First Government Policies Opportunity@Work," accessed June 12, 2025, <https://www.opportunityatwork.org/topics/skills-first-government-policies>.

²⁰ "Employment Navigator & Partnership Program (ENPP)," DOL, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap/employment-navigator-partnership>.

²¹ Witness Statement, (2025), <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20250325/118028/HHRG-119-VR10-Wstate-DevlinM-20250325.pdf>.

²² "Hire Heroes Annual Report 2022," accessed June 4, 2025, https://www.hireheroesusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Hire-Heroes_Annual-Report-Digital-2022-V3.pdf.

that are already producing positive outcomes for those they serve. This position has been supported by multiple industry leaders, including the RAND Corporation²³ and AEI²⁴ which cite the need for nonprofit partners to be appropriately funded to do this work. Private organizations, relying on philanthropic support, have filled TAP's shortcomings, but declining resources jeopardize the private sector's continued sustainment of individualized employment programs. Nonprofits continue to absorb an increasing share of the management and measurement of the transition process. The Federal Government must incentivize their long-term sustainable participation in these programs through mechanisms other than philanthropic support, including contractual agreements, grants, and other arrangements. These collaborations are critical to ensuring service members have access to all the resources they need in a timely manner.

In addition to effective partnerships and individualized service delivery, there is also a need for standardization in data measurement and program evaluation across both private and public programs. We need to move beyond simply counting outputs, such as job placement and starting salary, to outcomes, such as underemployment, and predictors for long-term financial security. Importantly, these outcomes must account for factors such as rank at separation, educational attainment, and existing support systems.

Moving past a one-size-fits-all approach to transition services and toward individualized solutions is key to ensuring that service members are set up for long-term career success, not just temporary jobs. Under the status quo, the success box for veteran employment is checked without building sustainable pathways for upward mobility. Unfulfilling job hopping without career progression is not a successful outcome in our books. However, current guidelines and objectives used by TAP evaluators consider these outputs successful.

Conclusion

This concludes my statement. Chairman Bost and Ranking Member Takano, and Members of the Committee, I once again thank you on behalf of Hire Heroes USA for your leadership on these pressing issues. We are honored to submit our perspective on improving employment outcomes for the thousands of transitioning military members, veterans, and military spouses we serve. We welcome any questions you may have.

Prepared Statement of Joseph Loomis

Chairman, Ranking Member, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Joseph Loomis. I am a Navy veteran and the Founder / CEO of TurboVets, a veteran-focused technology company committed to improving how service members and veterans apply for, manage, and access their benefits and services, at no cost, for the entirety of their lives. Over the past 20 years, I've led innovation in cybersecurity and advanced technology, building companies that solve complex challenges through automation and systems integration.

At TurboVets, our mission is to close the gap between policy and technology, ensuring that service members and veterans experience a streamlined, supportive, and successful transition into civilian life and beyond.

The current Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is fragmented, outdated, and insufficient in addressing the actual needs of today's transitioning service members. Despite the efforts of dedicated agencies, the structure often leaves veterans without the clarity, relevant instruction, support, or resources necessary to succeed.

Like many veterans, I experienced firsthand the challenges of navigating a maze of disconnected systems, outdated portals, and impersonal content. The process can feel like 'death by PowerPoint,' and the consequences are and have been significant. Today, we face rising rates of unemployment, financial hardship, mental health crises, and increasing homelessness within the veteran community. Most concerning of all, we continue to lose over 6,000 veterans to suicide each year. This is not just a number, it was the call to action to why my team and I started TurboVets; a prob-

²³ *The Role, Effectiveness, and Sustainability of Nonprofit Organizations That Provide Employment Support for Veterans* (RAND Corporation, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1363-10>.

²⁴ Amidon and Orrell, "Sustaining a National Treasure: Veteran Transitions and the Life Cycle of the All-Volunteer Force."

lem we must solve together with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Department of Defense (DoD).

TAP must be reimagined as the beginning of a long-term, personalized journey rooted in trust, capability and support. This transformation requires a public-private partnership that integrates technology at every stage of the service members transition process. Servicemembers need more than briefings, they need continuous access to tailored tools, podcasts, relatable video instruction, personal mentorship, and transparent, real-time systems.

We must envision a secure, centralized digital platform, a true 'one-stop shop,' where service members can view and access their benefits, monitor application progress, explore career guidance, online resume and networking, as well as job opportunities, and even consider military reenlistment/retention offers to remain in service. This platform must seamlessly integrate with government systems, providing real-time data, automating eligibility verification, and removing the burdens that currently deter many from seeking help.

This vision is the foundation upon which we built TurboVets. Our veteran-led team uses AI, automation, and system integration to bridge the gaps between agencies and those they serve. We are committed to delivering a customized experience that reduces delays, improves accuracy, fosters trust, and combats fraud, waste, and loss.

Technology is no longer a luxury anymore; it is a necessity to integrate and exist in the world today. My team and I as well as my fellow Americans owe our veterans not just gratitude, but effective, modern solutions that deliver meaningful outcomes. It is our duty to serve those who served us, and I have committed my life to partnering with government agencies to fulfill that responsibility.

I am confident that, under the leadership of the VA and DoD, and in collaboration with TurboVets, we can transform TAP into a foundation for long-term success, retention, and national security.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share this vision. I look forward to the work ahead and the chance to make it a reality.

Prepared Statement of Rebecca Burgess

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of the Committee:

Thank you for your leadership in convening this hearing on rethinking the transition process from military service to civilian life. Too often, veterans' issues are treated as merely human-interest stories—tales to invigorate or innervate the heart; to lighten the pocketbook; to castigate government—rather than as serious policy issues of national importance. As a Nation, we too often take symbolic action rather than substantive actions when it comes to taking care of those who have worn the Nation's uniform, their families, survivors, and caregivers.¹ That symbolism is now exorbitantly expensive; the evidence now also suggests that it has been largely ineffective.² And this continues to have adverse impacts on our national security: A nation that struggles to staff adequately each of the separate branches of its military, because of false or mythologized impressions of any lasting effects of military service at the individual level, is a nation that cannot remain secure and strong for long.³

Understanding the DoD-VA Landscape

For 250 years, beginning with the Continental Army, every branch of the U.S. Armed Forces has had one consistent output, the military veteran, and yet for 250 years, our Nation has never articulated a national veterans' strategy. Not even when we professionalized military service and returned to our voluntary service roots with the creation of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973, did we officially recognize the importance—to the Nation, and especially to the military itself—of the well-

¹ Symbolic, even when immensely expensive and to the tune of \$400 billion (the 2025 budget of the Department of Veterans Affairs alone). For a detailed expose of this dynamic, see Rebecca Burgess, "Triaging the VA," *National Review Magazine*, July 2024, <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2024/07/triaging-the-va/>.

² Meredith Kleykamp et al., *Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions: Limited Scrutiny and Substantial Investment in Education Programs*, RAND Corporation, June 11, 2024, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html.

³ Bradley Bowman, Marcus Ruzek, and Dan Goldenberg, "Veterans and American National Security," *Foreign Policy*, February 21, 2025, <https://www.fdd.org/podcasts/2025/02/21/veterans-and-american-national-security/>.

transitioned military veteran.⁴ Every recruitment cycle since that has been overshadowed in concerns about meeting even lowered required enlistment numbers is proof of this embarrassing inattention.

An all-volunteer force is not a self-sustaining institution. Because we never asked ourselves as a nation what it might take societally to sustain a volunteer, professional military, we seem to have failed to understand that there is a lifecycle to military recruitment that both begins and ends with the military veteran. As I have repeatedly argued, the veteran is the unacknowledged but permanent ambassador of national service: How we publicly portray veterans—by how we treat them, legislate about them, talk about them—directly relates to how society conceptualizes military service, including what happens to an individual during that service.⁵

As a Nation, we have consistently failed to recognize that there is a societal “continuum” or lifecycle between the veteran and the potential military recruit. Perhaps we come by this failure honestly and despite the best of intentions, as a byproduct of our government structure. Unlike in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Singapore, and several other countries, in the United States we have created a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that is an executive agency that is independent in every meaningful way from the Department of Defense (DoD), from physical buildings to budgets, to personnel, to programs.⁶ This physical, structural breaking apart seems to have resulted in a mental breaking apart, among those especially employed in the Defense Department, of treating soldiers as proper national security concerns but dismissing veterans as domestic policy concerns, and as almost entirely healthcare policy concerns.⁷

There is a long-running attitude—however informally articulated—within DoD that essentially treats anyone handed a DD214 form as a failure of retention and thus as deadweight. That perception must be reshaped. Such a mindset is not only outdated, but it directly negatively impacts the health of each service branch. It is a mindset in drastic need of re-education, in order to recognize the reality that every veteran who succeeds or fails to reintegrate healthily into civilian society represents investment funds or withdrawals (as it were) from the future military, in the form of potential recruits. Every failed reintegration of a veteran into civilian life is a disincentive and discouragement from joining the Army, Navy, Marine Corp, Air Force, Space Force, or Coast Guard; every successful reintegration is equally if not more an incentive to join one of those same service branches.⁸ Veterans are just as much alumni of their alma mater service branch as any college graduate is of their college or university. And if there is one thing that alumni represent for their alma mater, it is a walking advertisement for enrollment. Or, as Brent Orrell and Matt Amidon recently put it, “veterans are recruitment influencers.”⁹

The military, and thus DoD, must be brought to recognize these societal dynamics. The Defense Department must understand that it has a vested interest in the successful transition or reintegration into civilian living and society of each veteran after their active or reserve duty is completed. And thus the several service branches and their secretaries must also understand that they have a vested interest in the Nation having a coherent, modernized, effective, and efficient suite of programs and services to make up that transition process for all veterans, but especially the most vulnerable veterans, including young veterans and junior enlisted veterans.

Mapping the Transition to Civilian Life

Some 200,000 service members exit the military and re-begin their civilian journey every year, having access to some 45,000 registered nonprofit veterans service organizations, numerous VA benefits such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, DoD SkillBridge

⁴ Rebecca Burgess, “Saluting Those Who Freely Serve,” *Law and Liberty*, August 22, 2023, <https://lawliberty.org/features/saluting-those-who-freely-serve/>.

⁵ See, for instance, Rebecca Burgess, “From a Social Deficit to a Social Asset Model: How Congress and the VA Can Empower Veterans and Reverse the ‘Broken Veteran’ Narrative,” Statement before the House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Hearing on Pending Legislation, April 9, 2019, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20190409/109258/HHRG-116-VR10-Wstate-BurgessR-20190409.pdf>.

⁶ Institute for Defense and Government Advancement, “Five Countries: Five Approaches to Veteran Programs,” VA *Healthcare* 2018, https://eco-cdn.iqpc.com/gfiles/SXIJAFive_countries_five_approaches_to_veterans_programs_whitepaper.pdf.

⁷ I use “soldiers” here collectively for all those serving in the armed forces.

⁸ See Brent Orrell and Matthew Amidon, “Sustaining a National Treasure: Veteran Transitions and the Life Cycle of the All-Volunteer Force,” American Enterprise Institute, April 24, 2025, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/sustaining-a-national-treasure-veteran-transitions-and-the-life-cycle-of-the-all-volunteer-force/#scrollSection0>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

apprenticeship and immersive career programs, and corporate hiring initiatives. Many if not most of these services and programs have come about haphazardly. The result is that the “current institutional framework governing the scope of challenges affecting veterans remains far to disparate, reactive, and administratively marginalized.”¹⁰ What we need for an improved transition from soldier to civilian and a strengthened transition assistance program for veterans is not more programs or more money, but better coordination, data sharing, and outcome measurement of existing programs and initiatives.

More than 20 years ago, the 1996 Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance conducted the most comprehensive review of veterans’ benefits since the Bradley Commission in 1956. Since many of the benefits and services were established in the waning days of World War II, Congress tasked the commission to examine everything meant to help service members transition to civilian life. The commission was then to propose modernizing measures and improvements, including consolidating and eliminating the administering organizations.¹¹

The commission acknowledged the success of the original GI Bill’s education and employment provisions. These included traditional education assistance and vocational training for nondisabled veterans; rehabilitation training; home, business, and farm loans; job counseling and employment placement services; and an unemployment benefit. But the commission bridged the post-Industrial Revolution time span between 1944 and 1996 with a declaration: “If employment is the door to a successful transition to civilian life, education will be the key to employment in the information age.”¹² Still in a pre-9/11, pre- War on Terror atmosphere, the commission was concerned that the 20th-century structural system of benefits the VA oversaw was outmatched by the actual needs of veterans in the 21st century.

The commission found “in some cases, benefits and services have become so outdated, and program management so ineffective that they break faith with those who served, and currently serve, their Nation in uniform.”¹³ The commission therefore distinguished between benefits and services that directly help service members readjust to civilian life and those that offered mitigated or delayed compensation “for the hardships of military duty,” opportunities lost or deferred by performing military service, or treatment or rehabilitation for injuries incurred while on active duty.

The Nation and its veterans historically have shifted emphasis between these types of programs according to the concerns of the moment. After World War I, the 1918 Smith-Sears Veterans Rehabilitation Act, also known as the Soldiers Rehabilitation Act, recognized the demands that a rapidly growing manufacturing economy placed on individuals’ commercial abilities. It emphasized vocational rehabilitation courses for injured soldiers, so that they could return to their old jobs or enter new occupations and “carry on a gainful occupation.”¹⁴ This was bookended by compensation legislation specifically addressing financial and personal opportunities perceived to be lost by performing military service. The post-World War II GI Bill further shifted post-service benefits toward education in general. In fact, the Congressional Research Service dates the VA’s education assistance benefits as beginning with the 1944 bill. The Congressional Research Service notes that a consistent theme of all GI Bill-type programs since 1944 is to “promote development of work-related skills to facilitate entry or re-entry into the civilian workforce.”¹⁵ It is this theme that the 1996 Transition Commission stresses.

“Returning to private life after serving in the military is a very complex undertaking,” former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Military Community and Family Policy) Leslye Arsht observed in response to the Transition Commission recommendations. “To assist them in doing so, we must empower servicemembers with the tools and information they need to fashion individual solutions to the challenges

¹⁰Nicholas J. Armstrong and Michael Haynie, “A National Veterans Strategy: The Economic, Social and Security Imperative,” Institute for Veterans and Military Families and Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism, Syracuse University, February 19, 2013, <https://securitypolicy.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/National-Strategy-PublicationFINAL.pdf>.

¹¹Veterans’ Benefits Improvements Act of 1996, Pub. L. 104-275 (1996), <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/PLAW-104publ275>.

¹²Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance, “Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance Final Report,” January 14, 1999, 3 <https://ntrl.ntis.gov/NTRL/dashboard/searchResults/titleDetail/PB2006113212.xhtml>.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Smith-Sears Veterans Rehabilitation Act, Pub. L. 65-178 (1918).

¹⁵Congressional Research Service, “GI Bills Enacted Prior to 2008 and Related Veterans’ Educational Assistance Programs.”

they will face in civilian life.”¹⁶ Anthony Principi, the former chairman of the Transition Commission and former VA secretary, added: “The ultimate measure of successful transition from military to civilian life is long-term, sustained employment.”¹⁷

Ten years after the Transition Commission was formed, both Arsht and Principi were concerned that the VA’s suite of resources was still tailored to “the needs of a century gone by.” Rather than helping veterans reenter an economy based on manufacturing and agriculture, the VA needed to orient its programs toward a services-and information-dominated economy. Furthermore, the VA needed to be taking into account the fault line that seemed to have developed between those who volunteered to serve and decision-makers in government, business, labor, academia, and the media, as the Gulf War and post-9/11 conflicts reinforced America’s reliance on a professional all-volunteer force and avoidance of conscription. Echoing the Transition Commission, Arsht and Principi emphasized that, with this in mind, Congress, the DOD, and the VA needed to especially rethink education assistance as a benefit of service to potential recruits.

Beyond anecdotal evidence that this remains true in 2025, a wealth of scholarship and empirical data gathered from diverse surveys reinforces how pivotal the framing of the VA’s education benefits is for the VA’s message of 21st-century economic opportunity for veterans. It is equally pivotal for civilian employers and the taxpayer community at large to see veterans as a unique national resource in order for the Nation to capitalize on its investment in its soldiers’ training and development. It is illuminating in this regard to examine veteran employment through the lens of the military-civilian divide. This reveals how education is the crossroads for both veterans and employers.

Two decades of veteran employment research show that both individual-and group-level factors, involving psychological elements for the person and cultural elements tied to group functioning, work to “ease or impede” veterans’ successful transition from the military to civilian workforce.¹⁸ This is bidirectional, reflecting both the veteran employee’s and the civilian employer’s perspectives. The veteran perceives his or her transition as having to negotiate military-civilian identities while navigating a civilian society and integrating into a civilian workforce. The employer may or may not know how to translate the veterans’ military skills and experience to the workplace (generally the employer does not feel adequate to do this), but he or she does believe that the veteran lacks communication skills.¹⁹ A majority of potential employers express openness to hiring veterans yet also some concern about veterans as employees, often linked to their perceived lack of translatable skills but sometimes linked to the “broken veteran” narrative.

In summary, the majority of potential employers believe veterans need more training or additional education, particularly in “soft skills” such as communication, before they are ready for careers in the civilian sector. Veterans tend to agree with this assessment, while 50 percent of current service members believe their military experience and skills are easily transferable to the private sector. Regardless, both veterans and employers nearly unanimously agree on the benefit of internship or apprenticeship programs for veterans as they seek to reenter the civilian workforce—both traditional employment learning paths. Post-9/11 veterans especially see education as crucial to their continued success.

Truly, as the Transition Commission noted, education is the key to employment in the 21st century, and employment is the door to a successful transition to civilian life. Given this reality, it behooves the Nation to “provide transitioning service members with the means and opportunity to succeed in their civilian lives and to invest their talent and ability in the American economy.”²⁰ Existing VA programs already

¹⁶ Leslye A. Arsht, testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Oversight, Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, US House of Representatives, December 7, 2006, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-109hhrg31325/html/CHRG-109hhrg31325.htm>.

¹⁷ Anthony J. Principi, testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Oversight, Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, US House of Representatives, December 7, 2006, 6, [chrome-extension://bdfenmeidppjeaggnmidamkiddifkdb/viewer.html?file=https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-109hhrg31325/pdf/CHRG-109hhrg31325.pdf](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-109hhrg31325/pdf/CHRG-109hhrg31325.pdf).

¹⁸ Hazel R. Atuel et al., “Veteran Employment in the 21st Century,” in *The Civilian Lives of U.S. Veterans: Issues and Identities*, vol. 1, eds. Louis Hicks, Eugenia L. Weiss, and Jose E. Coll (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2017), 161–79.

¹⁹ Martin Berman-Gorvine, “Skills Translation’ Crucial for Hiring Veterans,” *Berkshire Associates*, October 2, 2017, <https://www.berkshireassociates.com/>.

²⁰ Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance, “Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance Final Report, 2.

have the infrastructure to do this. All that is lacking is a structural reorientation of these programs in alignment with 21st-century realities.

Recommendations for a 21st-Century Strengthened Transition Process

In the 21st-century information age, education is key to employment, and employment is the door to a successful transition to civilian life. Education and employment combined give veterans the crucial tools to reforge civilian identities stronger even than their military ones. The psychic rewards of work, productivity, and a career cannot be underestimated, which is corroborated by the true veteran narrative: Veterans, it turns out, are immensely successful. Empirical data shore that up by showing how veterans with increased levels of education are wealthier, healthier, and more civically engaged than even their civilian peers over the life course. Additional research established the links between these outcomes and reduces rates of dependence, disability, and criminality.

But in 2025, outside of these more 10,000 foot observations and bits of knowledge, we also know a few additional, essential things when it comes to veterans transitioning into civilian life, in terms of where the gaps in our knowledge are and where the challenges exist. Here, I echo some of the findings and observations that are helpfully condensed in the recently published report by the American Enterprise Institute, “Sustaining a National Treasure: Veteran Transitions and the Life Cycle of the All-Volunteer Force,” for which I provided some thoughts, observations, and advice.

We know that transition is both an event and a process, taking up to 10 years for some individuals. Generally speaking, the bulk of the reintegrating “work” occurs in the initial 2-year period after receiving one’s DD214, though significant numbers of at least Post-9/11 veterans have felt that they were not entirely “fully” transitioned at even 6.5 years after service. Mental health, employment, and making and keeping friends are profound concerns for the typical veteran during this process. The Veterans Metrics Initiative has identified seven domains that are “critical” to success in transition: employment, education, finances, legal security, social connections, and physical and mental health.

We also know that that initial 2-year period post-transition is the most impactful for intervention, and that those programs are the most impactful that allow for customized and timely support geared toward improving employment and well-being outcomes. Furthermore, we know that currently, our junior enlisted, women, and minority veterans are facing the steepest post-service challenges, which are exacerbated by low utilization of existing employment services. Explanations for why there is the low utilization by those who most stand to profit from accessing them include the fact that the veteran support system as it currently exists is fragmented. But further insight continues to elude us, because of this pervasive problem when it comes to veteran-serving programs: a lack of data transparency, and a lack of data about veterans, simply.

High-quality information on veteran demographics and locations is scarce, hindering efficient resource allocation. Enhanced data sharing among the DoD, VA, and other entities is essential. Connecting the VA/DoD Identity Repository Database and information available from the Social Security Administration specific to payroll information at the zip code level, for instance, would go a far way toward enabling a better delivery of resources targeted to regions of the country with enduring economic challenges.

When it comes to the lack of data transparency, our Nation’s veterans are ill-served by programs that are never meaningfully held to account via a true measurement of their outcomes. The majority of VA programs, for instance, appear only to measure outputs, rather than outcomes. This leaves us in the dark about whether the billions of dollars that are annually allocated for these programs are accomplishing anything other than smoke from how quickly the monies are consumed. Any funding should therefore be directed to programs that effectively improve veteran outcomes and have concrete evidence of the same, including partnerships with successful nonprofit and private initiatives.

Currently, neither VA nor Congress (for the VA) have articulated any key performance indicators to measure key transition goals. The result is that there is no standardized set of outcomes and impact measures for veterans-serving programs. Mandating evidence-based funding and third-party oversight to ensure alignment with measurable goals via implementing a “Veteran Impact Dashboard” would be one step toward answering this conundrum. Such a dashboard would allow for the tracking of the effectiveness of the aforementioned investments in support programs for government-delivered and nonprofit and private organizations that receive Federal dollars.

What might boost such efforts to improve veterans' transition assistance programs would be better, and serious, attention paid to them coming from the Department of Defense. Reestablishing the Chairman's Office of Reintegration would enable the return of DoD leadership to the transition process. Rather than distributing the responsibility and authority for transition success across multiple government entities, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff needs to fund and lead high-quality reintegrations. Reestablishing the Chairman's Office of Reintegration would highlight to all stakeholders that transition outcomes are crucial to the sustainment of the AVF. And perhaps this step is what is needed to get both the Senate and the House Armed Services Committees to hold joint hearings with the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees.

Since the birth of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973, our Nation has never thought to seriously examine the dynamics that do exist—and that must exist—between our society, our government, and our military branches in order to sustain an entirely volunteer military. A national veterans strategy that reestablishes in the minds of our national security sector, our public officials in the executive branch as well as in Congress, and in the American public at large, the reality that the veteran is the beginning point as much as the end point of military service, is crucial for the continued health of these United States.

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD

Prepared Statement of Schultz Family Foundation

Introduction

In the initial years following the September 11, 2001, attacks, many of the men and women who answered the call to serve returned home to uncertain futures. Unemployment for this group soared to nearly 12 percent, far exceeding that of non-veterans.

Over the past two decades, however, employment outcomes for veterans have improved significantly. A key reason is because the private and philanthropic sectors have played an outsized role in supporting the transition to civilian employment. Among the critical contributions of philanthropy has been to help spur the growth of innovative veteran-service organizations, which pioneered new skill-conversion and job-placement programs that have been instrumental in pushing the unemployment rate for veterans below the overall national average. Corporate hiring also has helped to create a post-9/11 society where returning veterans were greeted with gratitude and respect, not stigma.

The Schultz Family Foundation, founded by Sheri and Howard Schultz, has been at the forefront of this philanthropic movement, investing \$64 million since 2014 to support our Nation's veterans, with a specific focus on junior enlisted service members who are transitioning into civilian life.

The role of philanthropy

The Center for a New American Security, in a 2015 paper, described the support for veterans from corporate and philanthropic donors as a "sea of goodwill." As a result of this support, "Nonprofit service organizations and grantmaking entities alike grew up around the country, particularly as the unique needs of and issues facing post-9/11 service members and their families emerged."¹

Over the last decade, the Schultz Family Foundation has flowed substantial resources into this sea, investing in more than 50 veteran service organizations, including those that encourage veterans to reconnect and serve in their community, those who support families and spouses of those who served, and those who enable veteran entrepreneurship. Our core focus has been connecting veterans to employment. We believe that when veterans have good jobs, they are more likely to have structure, purpose, and financial stability—all keys to a successful transition after military service. We also recognize that veterans bring a set of skills, experience, and perspective that our public and private sector institutions can benefit from, including leadership, discipline, problem solving, and teamwork.

Our largest investment, at nearly \$24 million, has been to support the launch of the *Onward to Opportunity* (O2O) initiative, launched through partnership with Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) and JP Morgan Chase. O2O is now active at 15 military and regional locations and is available virtually to transitioning servicemembers globally. It offers free, industry-backed career-training and certification programs in high-demand fields such as information technology, cybersecurity, business, and customer service and reaches about 22,000—more than 10 percent of all—transitioning service members a year.

In 2023, IVMF commissioned an impact evaluation study from the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at The Pennsylvania State University. Using The Veterans Metrics Initiative, a longitudinal study, the evaluations found that participation in O2O led to a higher salary, an increased likelihood to leave a job for better opportunity, and a strong benefit for the junior enlisted population. O2O is now the only veteran career-training program, including those sponsored by the Department of Labor through the SkillBridge program, that can demonstrate third-party validated efficacy for program participation.

In total, the Foundation's support has helped:

¹ files.cnas.org/hero/documents/VeteransPhilanthropy__151207__rev.pdf

- 71,000 veterans secure employment
- 73,000 veterans receive additional skills or credentials
- 25,000 veterans connect to a mentor
- 17,000 veterans engage in community service post-transition

The foundation also has supported the USO's development of a master data management system (MDM) that enables a "warm handoff" of young veterans from the time of separation to a veterans service organization best situated to meet their employment needs. In its first year of operation, the USO Pathfinder program, which generates service member data to populate the MDM, more than tripled engagement with junior enlisted clients—jumping from 3,000 a year to more than 10,500 a year. We expect this system to not only expand the number of junior enlisted being served and improve the experience and outcomes for young veterans, but also to deliver data to all stakeholders that offers a holistic view of the broader transition ecosystem.

A shrinking sea

As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan fade further into our national rear-view mirror, other priorities are capturing the attention of philanthropies and corporations. From our perspective as a funder that interacts with other funders, we clearly see the level of support for veterans' employment transitions—and all veterans-related initiatives—heading for a significant reduction. Several leading veterans organizations already have reported a significant diminution in grants and other commitments from philanthropic and corporate funders.

This should be unsurprising. Philanthropy and the business community stepped up when we were a nation at war and facing a short-term challenge in successfully transitioning legions of troops who served overseas. But private funders should not be expected to sustain their war footing at a time of peace.

Our military and its interagency partners, including the Department of Labor and the Department of Veterans Affairs, should bear principal responsibility for supporting service members in transitioning successfully and achieving gainful employment. Given the role successful transitions play in sustaining the all-volunteer force, as Brent Orrell and Matthew Amidon have written in the American Enterprise Institute paper "Sustaining a National Treasure: Veteran Transitions and the Life Cycle of the All-Volunteer Force,"² greater engagement from the Department of Defense is essential. We do not leave the feeding of active-duty troops to the goodwill of citizens living next to military installations. The responsibility for employment transition should not depend so significantly on the goodwill of philanthropists and businesses.

A new model

This is not a call for new funding. The good news is that the best nonprofit programs incubated with philanthropic funds have pioneered new models of helping veterans. Although government job-navigation programs have improved in recent years, they remain costly and relatively ineffective compared to what nonprofit veterans organizations offer. Far more veterans have been aided in employment transitions over the past several years by nongovernmental organizations than efforts run by government agencies and their direct contractors.

We believe a greater share of Federal funds devoted to veterans employment transitions should be directed toward the most effective nonprofit and private initiatives. Doing so would provide greater benefit to our transitioning service members with no additional cost to taxpayers.

To be sure, many of those leaving the military today did not serve in Iraq or Afghanistan—they are products of a peacetime armed forces. But to simply let veterans organizations and their programs atrophy would be more than a disservice to those who have worn the cloth of the Nation. These organizations are critical for three reasons:

- Facilitating successful employment transitions among service members is critical to the health of our all-volunteer force, which is 52 years old this year. If we wish to recruit the best and brightest into our military, we need to show that those who serve go on to successful post-military careers.
- The full employment of our veterans helps our overall economy. Unemployment payments to veterans who are jobless in their first year out of the military are borne by the Pentagon, sapping money that would otherwise be used for oper-

² <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/sustaining-a-national-treasure-veteran-transitions-and-the-life-cycle-of-the-all-volunteer-force/>

ations and readiness. In addition, veterans bring valuable leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork to the American workplace, benefiting everyone.

- Should our Nation be at war again, we will need the services of our best-performing, most-impactful veterans organizations. Too many veterans fell through the cracks in the years before this infrastructure developed.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion. The Schultz Family Foundation looks forward to working with the subcommittee and the executive branch to improve services and outcomes for all who have served our country.

Prepared Statement of Blue Star Families

Chairman Bost and Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on “Strengthening the Transition Assistance Program: Exploring Outcomes to Improve the Transition to Civilian Life.”

Blue Star Families is the Nation’s largest military and veteran family support organization, with nearly 380,000 families in our membership and impacting more than 1.5 million military family members every year. By cultivating innovative programs and partnerships, Blue Star Families seeks to ensure that our military and veteran families always feel connected, supported, and empowered to thrive, wherever their service or post-service life takes them, in order to ensure military readiness, retention, and recruiting.

Blue Star Families’ research calls attention to the unique experiences and challenges faced by military and veteran families. Our annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS)—developed in partnership with Syracuse University’s D’Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) and fielded since 2009—is the largest annual comprehensive survey of military and veteran families, providing millions of data points to date. Data from the MFLS and other research by Blue Star Families has been used at every level of government to help inform those tasked with making policy decisions that impact our military-connected communities.

Blue Star Families maintains a nationwide footprint through 13 strategically located chapters, offering both virtual and in-person support to active-duty, Guard, Reserve, and veteran families. These chapters serve as trusted local hubs—delivering innovative programs, hosting community events, and providing essential services that foster connection and belonging. By building bridges between military families and their local neighbors, institutions, and community organizations, we work to ensure that those who serve and their families are fully integrated into the communities where they live.

The last 2 years marked a significant milestone in our efforts to enhance the well-being of veteran and military families. Craig Newmark, founder of Craigslist, demonstrated extraordinary leadership and commitment by pledging \$100 million to address urgent issues such as mental health and suicide prevention, housing and homelessness, and food insecurity. Blue Star Families is deeply honored to be among the beneficiaries of Mr. Newmark’s generosity, which includes a direct investment in the establishment of three to five new chapters and 25 **Blue Star Families Outposts**.

These new outposts will build upon our existing chapter infrastructure and expand our reach into additional communities. Through partnerships with local organizations, we will bring programs, services, and trusted resources even closer to where veterans and military families live. This expansion represents the power of public-private collaboration to strengthen communities, improve mental health outcomes, and create a more connected and resilient support network for those who serve.

At Blue Star Families, we recognize that behind every data point lies a deeply personal story. It is an honor to bring both evidence and lived experience to this discussion as we examine veteran suicide prevention and highlight the impact of our community-based initiative, Blue Star Support Circles/Upstream Solutions to Crisis. Our work is grounded in both rigorous data and the real-world voices of those affected—and we believe both are essential to informing effective policy solutions.

Veterans Transition Experiences

The enduring collaboration between Blue Star Families and IVMF over the past decade has provided invaluable insights into the experiences of military and veteran

families. Our annual MFLS has served as a powerful tool, unraveling the intricate tapestry of the transition and post-service life for veterans and their families.

One consistent and sobering revelation from the survey is the persistent challenge veterans face during their transition. In the most recent 2024 MFLS, approximately half of the veteran respondents described their overall transition as “difficult” or “very difficult.”¹ This statistic underscores the profound and complex nature of the hurdles encountered by veterans as they navigate the shift from military to civilian life.

The Department of Defense’s Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is intended to serve as a foundational resource for service members as they prepare to separate from military service and reintegrate into civilian life. However, recent data indicates that TAP is underutilized and inconsistently effective among the veteran population.

According to the 2024 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, only 28 percent of veteran respondents reported using TAP resources and finding them helpful, while 23 percent reported using them but not finding them helpful, and a notable 49 percent did not use TAP resources at all during their transition.² Under current DoD policy, service members are eligible to begin TAP up to 12 months prior to separation, or up to 24 months prior to retirement, providing a meaningful window of opportunity to prepare for civilian life.³ Despite this flexibility, the low engagement rates suggest a need to improve both awareness and relevance of the program to better meet the evolving needs of transitioning service members and their families.

While the actual timing of participation in TAP may vary among service members, the VA strongly advocates for an early engagement with the program. The rationale behind this encouragement lies in the belief that early participation equips transitioning service members with the necessary tools, information, and skills to make a successful and smoother transition into civilian life.

Insights from our 2023 MFLS shed light on the perceived preparedness of veterans for the military-to-civilian transition. We found that when veteran respondents have more time to get ready to separate from the military, they feel more prepared for a successful transition. Yet retired veteran respondents generally report more time to prepare than non-retired veterans with non-retired Veterans reporting “I did not or was not able to prepare for my transition.”⁴

Furthermore, a significant proportion of all veterans respondents, regardless of retirement status, had “less than a year before separating” despite the DoD and VA recommendations. Some of this may be due to unit mission and staffing demands, but it is important to consider from a sustainability perspective.

The quality of the military-to-civilian transition experience has a measurable impact on how veterans perceive their service—and critically, whether they would recommend military service to the next generation. The 2023 MFLS revealed a statistically significant difference in veterans’ likelihood to recommend military service based on their transition experience. Veterans who reported a smooth transition were more likely to recommend service to a young person in their family ($M = 6.90$, $SD = 3.18$, $n = 766$) compared to those who experienced a difficult transition ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 3.41$, $n = 1,080$).⁵

These findings illuminate the broader implications of transition support—not only for individual well-being but also for the long-term sustainability of the All-Volunteer Force. Improving the transition experience may be a key factor in restoring confidence in military service and strengthening future recruitment pipelines.

This underscores the importance of effective transition programs and support mechanisms in not only facilitating a smoother shift to civilian life, but also in influencing veterans’ perceptions of the overall value and benefits of military service. Early engagement with programs like TAP could support a smoother transition for veterans. By initiating the transition preparation process well in advance, veterans may be better equipped with the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to face the unique challenges associated with post-service life and, in turn, contribute positively to the perception and recommendation of military service to future generations.

¹ Blue Star Families. 2025. “2024 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report.” https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/BSF_MFLS24_Comp_Report_Full-v2.pdf

² Ibid

³ Vergun, David. 2023. “Military Well Prepared for Civilian Transition.” U.S. Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3561651/military-well-prepared-for-civilian-transition-official-says/>.

⁴ Blue Star Families. 2024. “2023 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report.” https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/BSF_MFLS_Comp_Report_Full_Digital.pdf

⁵ Ibid

Families' Experiences with Transition

The transition from military to civilian life is often framed as an individual journey for the service member; however, in reality, the entire family undergoes this transition. Military spouses and children are deeply affected by the shift in structure, identity, and support systems that accompany separation from service.

Findings from our 2024 MFLS highlight this reality, with more than 60 percent of respondents reporting that they experienced the military-to-civilian transition as a military spouse.⁶ These spouses often shoulder the emotional and logistical burden of the transition while supporting their service member and managing the needs of the household.

Moreover, additional research underscores the potential long-term consequences of this transition on family well-being. Military spouses who have undergone the transition have been shown to experience poorer mental health outcomes and diminished family relationship quality over time. Specifically, studies have identified increased symptoms of PTSD, declines in marital satisfaction, and greater work-family conflict from baseline to follow up.⁷ These outcomes suggest that the transition process can introduce or exacerbate stressors that affect the entire family unit—not just the service member.

Military spouses play a vital and often underrecognized role in sustaining the well-being and stability of the military family unit, particularly during and after the transition to civilian life. They frequently serve as the primary caregivers for both children and veterans—especially when physical injuries, psychological trauma, or service-related health conditions are present. This caregiving role becomes even more critical when veterans are managing the aftereffects of combat exposure,⁸ which can introduce complex challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, or chronic pain.

Families in which the service member has been exposed to combat are significantly more likely to encounter difficulties during the reintegration process. These difficulties may include strained family relationships, disrupted communication, and an increased caregiving burden for spouses, all of which can undermine long-term family functioning and well-being.

Reintegration plays a foundational role in shaping how military families adapt to life after service.⁹ The military-to-civilian transition requires the renegotiation of roles, routines, and family structures, as families shift away from the predictability and institutional support of military life. The success of this transition varies widely and is influenced by how effectively each family member—particularly the spouse—adapts to these new demands and responsibilities.¹⁰

While the health and well-being of spouses play a critical role in the successful transition of service members, many spousal support services are discontinued at the point of separation—precisely when families may need them most.¹¹ Although TAP resources are technically available to spouses, they are often insufficiently marketed or tailored to their unique needs.¹² This gap in outreach and support leaves many spouses underprepared for the challenges of military-to-civilian transition.

These findings reinforce the need for holistic transition support strategies that include spouses and family members—not only as caregivers, but as individuals with their own unique transition-related needs. Recognizing and addressing the unique role of military spouses and the broader family unit is essential to a comprehensive approach to transition support. A successful transition is not solely defined by the

⁶Blue Star Families. 2025. “2024 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report.” https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/BSF_MFLS24_Comp_Report_Full-v2.pdf

⁷Corry, Nida H., Rayan Joneydi, Hope S. McMaster, Christianna S. Williams, Shirley Glynn, Christopher Spera, and Valerie A. Stander. 2022. “Families Serve Too: Military Spouse Well-Being after Separation from Active-Duty Service.” *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping* 35 (5): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615806.2022.2038788>.

⁸Pfieger, Jacqueline C., Cynthia A. LeardMann, Hope S. McMaster, Carrie J. Donoho, and Lyndon A. Riviere. 2018. “The Impact of Military and Nonmilitary Experiences on Marriage: Examining the Military Spouse’s Perspective.” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 31 (5): 719–29. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22321>.

⁹O’Neal, Catherine Walker, and Justin A. Lavner. 2021. “Military-Related Stress and Family Well-Being among Active Duty Army Families.” *Family Relations* 70 (4). <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12561>.

¹⁰Elnitsky, Christine A., Cara L. Blevins, Michael P. Fisher, and Kathryn Magruder. 2017. “Military Service Member and Veteran Reintegration: A Critical Review and Adapted Ecological Model.” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 87 (2): 114–28. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000244>.

¹¹Graham, Emily. 2024. “The US Military Does Not Adequately Prepare Members for Transition from Service.” <https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1251&context=lerner>

¹²Ibid

veteran's employment or benefits access, but also by the family's ability to remain connected, stable, and supported as they navigate the shift to civilian life.

Family Support Circles Transition Together

Throughout TAP training, the potential psychological impacts of transitioning from military to civilian life are largely overlooked.¹³ Many service members report a profound sense of loss—of family, community, and purpose—following military separation.¹⁴ However, TAP often approaches transition as a career shift rather than a transformation of identity, leaving veterans underprepared for the emotional challenges that may arise.¹⁵

During the separation process, veterans and their families consistently report feeling overwhelmed and stressed, despite the availability of numerous resources.^{16, 17} A primary challenge lies in identifying their specific needs and navigating the complex landscape of programs and organizations to find appropriate support.¹⁸

In the 2024 MFLS, veteran respondents identified “discussions with peers”—including conversations with colleagues, neighbors, and friends—as one of the most frequently used and effective methods for seeking and obtaining information about available resources with 42 percent reporting this method was helpful.¹⁹

In addition to understanding which resources are utilized during the military-to-civilian transition, it is equally important to examine how those resources are discovered. Among veteran respondents who reported using resources during separation (n=610), the majority (54 percent) indicated that they identified these resources through peer-to-peer interactions, underscoring the critical role of informal networks in facilitating access to support services.²⁰

Given the clear gap in emotional, psychological, and overall family support during the transition process—and the demonstrated value of peer-to-peer connections—there is a critical need for programs that center community, identity, and shared experience. Blue Star Families' *Family Support Circles Transition Together* program directly addresses this need by offering structured, peer-based support for families navigating the military-to-civilian transition. This innovative initiative recognizes that the transition is not just a professional shift, but a profound personal and familial transformation. By equipping participants with psychoeducation, peer connection, and practical tools, the program provides an upstream, community-rooted model that complements TAP and strengthens the overall transition ecosystem.

Core Components of the Program

Family Transition Workshops

As part of a comprehensive approach to military-to-civilian transition, Family Transition Workshops can offer vital support to service members and their families by fostering emotional wellness, strengthening interpersonal dynamics, and encouraging a proactive outlook on civilian life. These workshops could include the following core components:

- **Mindfulness and Stress Management:** Introduce evidence-based techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation to help families reduce stress and manage the emotional uncertainty that often accompanies transition.
- **Strengthening Communication:** Provide practical exercises aimed at enhancing communication among spouses and family members. These sessions help cultivate empathy, patience, and understanding as familial roles and expectations evolve post-service.
- **Goal Setting and Vision Building:** Support families in identifying and articulating shared goals for their civilian lives. This may include developing a “fam-

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Wounded Warrior Project. 2025. “Strategies for a Smoother Transition from Military Service.” <https://newsroom.woundedwarriorproject.org/Strategies-for-a-Smoother-Transition-from-Military-Service>

¹⁷ Markowitz, Fred E., Sara Kintzle, and Carl A. Castro. 2022. “Military-To-Civilian Transition Strains and Risky Behavior among Post-9/11 Veterans.” *Military Psychology* 35 (1): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2022.2065177>.

¹⁸ Kleykamp, Meredith, Jeffrey B Wenger, Elizabeth Hastings Roer, Matthew Kubasak, and Travis Hubble. 2024. “Federal Programs to Assist Military-To-Civilian Employment Transitions.” RAND. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html.

¹⁹ Blue Star Families. 2025. “2024 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report.” https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/BSF_MFLS24_Comp_Report_Full-v2.pdf

²⁰ Ibid

ily mission statement” to promote unity, purpose, and a positive forward-looking perspective.

These workshops reflect an upstream, family-centered model that acknowledges the broader impact of transition and empowers military families to navigate change with confidence and resilience.

Peer Support Groups

Peer support groups are a vital component of promoting mental health, fostering resilience, and enhancing social integration during the military-to-civilian transition. These groups—organized separately for service members, spouses, and children—create safe, inclusive environments where participants can share experiences, express concerns, and receive guidance from trained peer facilitators. Tailored group sessions may include:

- **Managing Role Changes:** Assist spouses in navigating evolving family dynamics and responsibilities as the service member reintegrates into the home, helping to reduce tension and promote stability.
- **Building New Routines:** Provide practical strategies and peer-driven insights on creating consistent daily routines that reflect new employment, education, or community schedules—strengthening a sense of predictability and support across the household.
- **Coping with Change:** Equip children and adolescents with age-appropriate tools to process and adapt to the changes associated with a parent’s separation from service, ensuring their emotional well-being is not overlooked.

By leveraging the power of shared experience and trusted peer connections, these groups serve as a critical supplement to formal services, addressing the emotional and relational dimensions of transition often missed in traditional programs.

Community-Building Activities

The loss of established social networks following separation from military service can lead to feelings of isolation for both service members and their families. To address this challenge, community-building activities are essential for fostering connection, belonging, and resilience during the transition to civilian life. Suggested initiatives include:

- **Social Events and Family Outings:** Organize family friendly outdoor experiences and community gatherings to encourage exploration, recreation, and bonding. Initiatives such as “outdoor adventure boxes” can promote accessible engagement with nature, while community service projects create opportunities for families to connect with neighbors and strengthen local ties through shared purpose.
- **Buddy Program:** Establish a peer mentorship initiative that pairs transitioning families with those who have successfully navigated the shift to civilian life. This informal model provides practical guidance and emotional support, helping families build confidence and connection through shared lived experience.

These community-based efforts promote social integration and reduce the sense of disconnection that often accompanies transition, reinforcing the importance of relational support as a core component of successful reintegration.

Resource Navigation Hub—Blue Star Neighborhood

One of the persistent challenges facing families after separation from military service is the lack of awareness and access to available resources. To address this gap, the Blue Star Neighborhood would serve as a centralized Resource Navigation Hub, offering streamlined access to nonclinical wellness tools, practical support, and community connections. Key components of the program include:

- **Digital Resource Portal:** A user-friendly, centralized platform where families can access a wide range of resources, including:
 - Financial planning tools to support long-term stability.
 - Employment workshops and webinars to assist with career transitions.
 - Continuing education opportunities for spouses and veterans.
 - Self-care resources, including toolkits that promote holistic wellness through exercise, nutrition, and sleep hygiene
- **Community Support Networks:** The Neighborhood would also help families locate and engage with local veteran-serving organizations, recreational activities,

and community groups—strengthening social ties and fostering a sense of belonging in their new civilian environments.

By consolidating critical information and reducing the complexity of navigating post-service life, this model empowers military families to access the tools and support they need to thrive.

The military-to-civilian transition is one of the most critical—and vulnerable—periods in the life of a military family. While existing programs like TAP provide important career-focused resources, they often fall short in addressing the emotional, relational, and identity-based challenges that service members and their families face during this time. As our research and experience show, families are not just passive observers of transition—they are active participants who also carry the weight of change.

Blue Star Families' *Family Support Circles Transition Together* program fills a crucial gap by offering a comprehensive, upstream approach rooted in community, peer connection, and proactive wellness. Through family transition workshops, peer support groups, community-building activities, and a centralized resource navigation hub, this program meets families where they are—emotionally, socially, and geographically.

We urge Congress to act this year to improve the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) by formally including families as a core part of the transition process. Successful reintegration is not solely about securing employment or accessing benefits—it is about strengthening family resilience, preventing isolation, and ensuring the long-term well-being of those who have served and the loved ones who have served alongside them. By modernizing TAP to be family centered, Congress has the opportunity to make a lasting investment in the health, stability, and continued success of our veteran families.

On behalf of Blue Star Families and the communities we serve, thank you for your commitment to bridging the gap and ensuring that every veteran and their family has access to the resources, support, and hope they need to thrive.

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you once again for the opportunity to share the work and insights of Blue Star Families in support of our Nation's veterans and their families.

Document for the Record Submitted by Derrick Van Orden

Clark, Jon

From: Flynn, Katy
Sent: Wednesday, June 18, 2025 11:56 AM
To: HVAC - Republicans
Subject: FW: RFI Response: Guardian Article
Importance: High

FYI

From: Owens, Darrell R. <Darrell.Owens@va.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, June 18, 2025 11:52 AM
To: Owens, Darrell R. <Darrell.Owens@va.gov>
Cc: Bergin, Donald J. <Donald.Bergin@va.gov>; Katz, Joel N. <Joel.Katz@va.gov>; Lauder, Jon M. <Jon.Lauder@va.gov>
Subject: RFI Response: Guardian Article
Importance: High

Staff Directors -

There have been a lot of inquiries and questions regarding the recent Guardian article. The sensational allegations in the article are false. The official VA response is below.

Thanks! Very respectfully,

- Darrell

Darrell Owens
 Deputy Assistant Secretary
 Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs
 Department of Veterans Affairs
 (202) 436-2003 – mobile
 (202) 461-6458 – office
darrell.owens@va.gov

VA RESPONSE: The Guardian story is false, VA has asked the outlet to retract it, and the Guardian is now conducting an internal investigation into the article. See here for more info:
<https://x.com/SecVetAffairs/status/1935063451182731455>

Here are the facts:

- VA recently updated its medical center bylaws to ensure compliance with White House executive orders, such as the order on [Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism And Restoring Biological Truth To The Federal Government](#).
- These updates will have no impact whatsoever on who VA treats or employs.

- The Guardian’s premise that simple changes made to VA bylaws – changes that are entirely consistent with longstanding existing federal laws and VA policies – are “extremely disturbing and unethical” is a specious argument that is not only false, but defamatory.
- The fact that the Guardian is misrepresenting these changes as anything more than a formality underscores its extreme liberal bias and steadfast commitment to spreading disinformation.

Q: What prohibits VA from doing what the Guardian story alleges?

A: 5 U.S.C. sec. 2302, for example, prohibits discrimination on the basis of marital status or political affiliation; 5 USC 7102 governs union participation rights, including barring interference with those rights. Health care eligibility is based on 38 U.S.C. secs. 1710 and 1705, not on categories such as political affiliation or marital status. Thus, on that statutory basis, VHA Directive 1019, which governs all medical services provided by VA, prohibits discrimination in the provision of services on the basis of marital status or political affiliation.

Guardian Allegation: “Doctors at Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospitals nationwide could refuse to treat unmarried veterans and Democrats under new hospital guidelines imposed following an executive order by Donald Trump.”

Response: False. Federal law and VHA Directive 1019 prohibit that. All eligible Veterans will always be welcome at VA and will always receive the benefits and services they’ve earned under the law.

Guardian Allegation: “But individual workers are now free to decline to care for patients based on personal characteristics not explicitly prohibited by federal law.”

Response: False. Federal law and VHA Directive 1019 prohibit that.

Guardian Allegation: “Doctors and other medical staff can also be barred from working at VA hospitals based on their marital status, political party affiliation or union activity, documents reviewed by the Guardian show.”

Response: False. Federal law and VHA Directive 1019 prohibit that.

Guardian Allegation: Similarly, the bylaw on “decisions regarding medical staff membership” no longer forbids VA hospitals from discriminating against candidates for staff positions based on national origin, sexual orientation, marital status, membership in a labor organization or “lawful political party affiliation”.

Response: False. Federal law and VHA Directive 1019 prohibit that.

Guardian Allegation: “Under the new policy, some may have to register at a hospital in another region and travel more than a hundred miles to see a doctor.”

Response: False. Federal law prohibits that, and VA will always follow federal law. All eligible Veterans will always be welcome at VA and will always receive the benefits and services they’ve earned under the law.

###

**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and U.S. Department of Defense
Memorandum of Understanding**



OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
1000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-1000

MAY 26 2025

MEMORANDUM FOR EXECUTIVE SECRETARY, DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS
AFFAIRS

SUBJECT: Memorandum of Understanding

The Secretary of Defense has signed the now jointly-signed Memorandum of
Understanding between the Secretaries of Defense and Veterans Affairs – Strengthening Our
Partnership in Service to Those Who Serve. Attached is a copy for your information/action.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Kelly Bullmer Ross".

Kelly Bullmer Ross
Executive Secretary

Attachment:
As stated

cc:
USD(P&R)

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN THE SECRETARIES OF DEFENSE AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

Strengthening Our Partnership in Service to Those Who Serve

As we approach Memorial Day, a time when our Nation solemnly honors the brave men and women who gave their lives in service, we are reminded of the enduring duty we hold to all who wear or have worn the uniform.

The Departments of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) are united by more than law. We are bound by an enduring commitment to the well-being of Service members, Veterans, their families, and caregivers. Though our core missions differ, our collective purpose is deeply intertwined: supporting those who sacrifice for our Nation.

The relationship between our Departments continues to strengthen as we recognize that our roles are intertwined, starting early in a Service member's journey. From the first time a recruit dons the uniform, they begin a lifelong journey connected to both Departments—through educational benefits, life insurance, home loans, and health care. Our partnership begins early and must remain strong throughout.

In the spirit of collaboration, we are reaffirming our joint commitment to a strengthened partnership between the DoD and VA, with a focus on delivering quality health care and the seamless delivery of benefits and services. Together, we will:

Optimize Shared Use of Health Care Resources, Facilities, and Workforce

DoD and VA, together, manage the two largest health care systems in the Nation serving overlapping populations. Ensuring we provide patient-centered health care that delivers excellent quality, access, satisfaction, and value is a priority of both Departments. By jointly planning and sharing infrastructure and expertise, we will improve care, enhance readiness, and deliver better value for the American people. This collaboration allows for greater flexibility, maximizes taxpayer investment, and ensures that both Departments remain prepared to meet the evolving health care needs of today's Service members and tomorrow's Veterans.

Enable Enrollment into VA for Uninterrupted Health Care

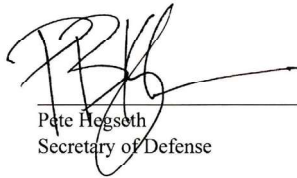
Each year, approximately 200,000 Service members transition to civilian life, a period often marked by uncertainty and stress for them and their families. To ensure no Veteran falls through the cracks, DoD and VA are working to provide Service members the option to elect to enroll in VA health care prior to separation. This approach ensures continuous access to care, reduces administrative burdens, and supports long-term health and well-being during a critical life transition.

Provide Comprehensive and Continuous Mental Health Treatment

Mental health care must be a continuous thread throughout a Service member's journey. DoD and VA are committed to identifying transitioning Service Members, who may be at higher risk for mental health challenges, and ensuring they are not only referred to care, but warmly handed off to providers at VA. Service members may see this as communication between care teams or pre-scheduled appointments. Providing continuity of care is more than just policy; it will help save lives.

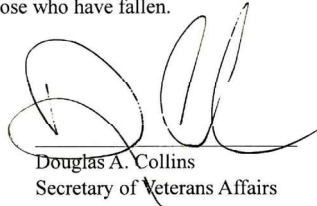
This is only the beginning. From a unified electronic health record and a joint Separation Health Assessment to strengthened suicide prevention initiatives, our Departments will continue breaking down barriers to better serve those who serve. This commitment and our enhanced collaboration will set a new standard of excellence in how we support Service members, Veterans, their families, and caregivers. We pledge to advance this partnership with urgency, unity, and unwavering respect for all who defend our freedom.

God Bless America, our Warriors, and those who have fallen.



Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense

5-23-25
Date



Douglas A. Collins
Secretary of Veterans Affairs

5-23-25
Date

**Prepared Statements of Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at
Penn State (Clearinghouse)**

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

Prepared for:

House Committee on Veterans
Affairs Subcommittee on Economic
Opportunity

Testimony by:

Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State (Clearinghouse)

June 24, 2025

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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**Post-9/11 Veteran Transitions to Civilian Life:
The Education-Employment Continuum**

Prepared for:

House Committee on Veterans Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

Testimony by:

Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State (Clearinghouse)

June 24, 2025

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 for its continued dedication and progress to the improvement of military-to-civilian transitions, including the attention to educational attainment and other critical well-being domains such as employment, financial health, and social integration. While important strides have been made in supports provided to veterans as they pursue further education, more must be done to ensure veterans, and their families are equipped to thrive in their post-service lives. Note that information we provide 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 educational attainment of veterans as they transition from military to civilian life.
 - **Key finding #1:** Being in the military provides an important route to educational attainment (e.g., a significantly higher proportion of veterans obtains a bachelor’s degrees compared to their civilian same-age peers; veterans are more likely to obtain advanced degrees). Nearly half of the veterans obtained at least some additional education within 3 years of separation (most starting school within 3-months).
 - **Key finding #2:** A relatively small proportion of these veterans pursue professional

certificates and technical degrees and hence are not qualified for skilled trade and technical jobs which are in high demand and pay excellent wages (e.g., construction, transportation, electricians, HVAC technicians, plumbers, welders, construction managers, wind turbine technicians).

- **Key finding #3:** There are more than 300 different pathways veterans have taken to obtain higher education degrees, and these pathways are often complex and lengthy with people going in and out of school, work, and family life.
- **Key finding #4:** Veterans who reported having financial problems or mental health problems upon leaving the military were significantly more likely to leave school compared to those not reporting financial problems or symptoms of depression.
- **Key finding #5:** Veterans who engage with veteran centers or veteran student groups were significantly more likely to graduate within 4 years compared to those veterans not engaged.
- **Recommendations for changes that would enhance educational attainment of transitioning post-9/11 veterans** based on research findings.
 - **Recommendation for key findings #1:** Restrictions on the Post-9/11 GI Bill's use – e.g., funds only available for 36-months, no funding during winter or summer breaks lead veterans having to step away from their education – should be lifted so that the program becomes increasingly helpful to more veterans, particularly for those who report financial problems.
 - **Recommendation for key findings #2:** Service members and veterans who have occupational interest in skilled trade and technical jobs should be identified (e.g., by using occupational interest questionnaire or screener) and educated about post-secondary educational pathways (e.g., certificates, technical training, licensure programs) leading to skilled trade and technical employment.
 - **Recommendation for key finding #3:** The sheer number of pathways to post-secondary education suggest that individualized plans of support are needed to enhance degree completion (e.g., periodic respite support for students with families or who work, childcare subsidies, or emergency financial assistance to help pay monthly bills, low-cost loans so they can afford to take more classes and finish their degrees more quickly). Since the post-9/11 GI bill only pays benefits while the student is enrolled and not over the entire 12 months of the year, some veterans will experience financial hardships which can result in dropping out.
 - **Recommendation for key finding #4:** Meaningful screenings for service members and veterans should be implemented, such as the Veteran Transition Screener (VTS), to help identify risks to post-secondary education (e.g. financial problems, mental health concerns). Then referrals from a broad and robust coordinated system of sustainable transition support is required to connect veterans to necessary services as early in the transition as possible.
 - **Recommendation for key finding #5:** Investment should be made to support university veteran centers and veteran student groups, particularly for institutions that do not have these support resources. Institutions should work closely with veteran-serving and other non-governmental organizations in their communities that can help veterans who are in school, such as Student Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion and Disabled Veterans of America.

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 – of a steady job, valued benefits, close friendships, and a structured and purposeful organizational culture¹. After leaving the military, post-9/11 veterans prioritize obtaining more education³ as evidenced by the fact that more than 100,000 veterans enroll in higher education each year. There has been significant interest and investment in the

educational attainment of veterans. According to a [RAND report](#), 95% of federal funds spent on America's veterans address educational needs of veterans, totaling approximately \$13 billion annually. However, these programs tend to be underutilized and have been rarely evaluated.

The interest veterans' educational attainment is warranted. Educational attainment is associated with a host of benefits for individuals, families, and communities. More highly educated people obtain career-mobility jobs and have higher incomes than their less educated counterparts. They also experience better health and well-being and live longer. The importance of obtaining more education appears to be intensifying as jobs in the "new global economy" and advances in information and communication technologies, e-commerce, and artificial intelligence (AI) all require a more educated labor force. In addition, a [McKinsey report](#) illustrates that companies with manufacturing and construction operations are facing record high shortages of skilled labor. The Joint Center for Housing Studies [reported](#) that there are 1 million fewer skilled laborers today than in 2007.

There is evidence that the transition from the military to postsecondary education can be difficult for some veterans compared to non-veterans. Most of these difficulties mimic those of other adult learners (ALs). Unlike traditional college students (TCSs) who typically go directly from high school to college, ALs are more likely to (a) come from backgrounds that have historically been disadvantaged in the pursuit of post-secondary education; (b) have lower academic performance in high school; (c) have parents who did not go to college; (d) have financial challenges and responsibilities; (e) have families; (f) work while in school; and (g) encounter social challenges. Veterans may also experience service-connected mental and physical health challenges. All these factors are associated with poorer educational attainment and extend the time it takes to graduate.

Post-9/11 Veteran Educational Attainment Over the First 6.5 Years of Their Transition

Clearinghouse researchers have examined the pursuit of post-secondary education of a large sample of veterans over the first 6.5 years of their transition to civilian life. Much of this research is encouraging. For example, within 4 years of leaving the military, nearly 70% of veterans from the enlisted pay grades pursued post-secondary education. Fifty-six percent pursued their bachelor's degree, 37% an associate's degree, 16% a master's degree, and 18% pursued a technical or vocational degree.

Among enlisted veterans who pursued higher education after separation, 58% went on to attain at least one degree or obtained some professional training within approximately six years. Only 8% of enlisted veterans obtained a vocational or technical training degree, while 18% attained an associate's degree, 25% received a bachelor's degree, 11% a master's, professional or doctorate degree.

Veterans with mental health and financial problems experienced significant struggles pursuing post-secondary education. For example, veterans experiencing depressive symptoms were nearly 10 times more likely to leave school than those who did not report depressive symptoms. Veterans who reported depressive symptoms were 4 times more likely to leave school due to academic challenges compared to those who did not report symptoms. Financial problems also interfered with the successful pursuit of post-secondary education. Compared to veterans who did not report financial problems within 3 months of leaving the military, those who reported financial problems at that time were 2.5 times more likely to leave school due to academic concerns.

Clearinghouse research demonstrates that social connection was a strong protective factor for veterans pursuing post-secondary education. For example, veterans who pursued an associate's degree and who used a veterans' center or a veteran-student organization between shortly after leaving the military were 2.2 times and 2.3 times, respectively, more likely to obtain their degree within 4 years of separation compared to those who did not use these resources. Veterans who pursued a bachelor's degree and

who used a veterans' center early in their MCTs were 2.9 times more likely to attain their degree by 4 years after separating from military than those who did not use a veterans' center.

Understanding Pathways Veterans Take to Post-Secondary Educational Attainment

There is also preliminary evidence from Clearinghouse research that post-9/11 veterans take as many as 300 different pathways to degree attainment – going to school full-time or part-time, working full-time and going to school, taking one class a semester, and leaving school for a period to have a family or to work (Mitchell, et al., in review). The most common pathway to obtaining a bachelor's degree within the first 4 to 27-months after leaving the military was among a group of veterans that was enrolled in school within three months post-separation and graduated nine months later. However, this pattern was only true for 8% of the sample. There was tremendous variation in pathways taken. For example, Eleanor T., a 28-year-old African American veteran who left the military from the most junior enlisted ranks began her journey by enrolling in a bachelor's degree program within three months of leaving the military. She worked part-time while enrolled. Six months later, she was no longer enrolled in school but was working full-time. After working for approximately six months, she became unemployed. Six months later she re-enrolled in the bachelor's degree. Eleanor obtained her degree approximately 24 months later while working part-time and full-time. This demonstrates that the prevailing notions that veterans enter school full-time and remain continuously enrolled until graduation are inaccurate. As such, tailored supports and services would be beneficial.

Veterans also fall on a work-school continuum. On the extremes are those veterans who never work while in school and those who continuously work full-time while in school. In between these extremes, veterans evidence varied patterns of working and going to school (e.g., continuously working part-time, periodically working part-time, periodically working full-time). Veterans who go to school while working and/or take care of a family may need periodic respite support, childcare subsidies, or emergency financial assistance to help pay monthly bills, as well as low-cost loans to cover more of their expenses so they can afford to take more classes and finish their degrees more quickly. This is important because earnings increase as time to completion decreases. In addition, the post-9/11 GI bill only pays benefits while the student is enrolled and not over the entire 12 months of the year. Therefore, some veterans will have gaps in which they may experience a financial crunch.

Federal Support of Post-Secondary Educational Attainment

There are numerous programs designed to support service members who want to obtain further education after they leave the military. These include the Post-9/11 GI Bill (PGB), DoD's Tuition Assistance Program, Veteran Readiness and Employment, and Survivors' and Dependents Educational Assistance. These four programs consume 94% of the \$14.3 billion spent by the federal government on MCTs each year.

Federal programs appear to help veterans obtain higher education. A [recent report](#) indicated that veterans who use the PGB earned \$1,700 per year more than those who did not. Approximately 41% of veterans who used the PGB to attend a four-year, for-profit university earned a degree within six years, while 58% and 61% who earned a degree in six years attended a four-year public or non-profit institution, respectively. [Another report](#) found that veterans obtaining a two-year degree from a for-profit institution earned \$32,800 compared to those who attended a public institution (\$38,600). In addition, for-profits cost twice as much as two-year public colleges.

The National Veteran Education Success Tracker (NVEST) Project is the first comprehensive in-depth study of the academic success of the modern student veteran using the Post-9/11 GI Bill. [NVEST](#) found the overall success rate (defined as post-secondary completion and student veteran enrolled in classes in the term preceding data collection) was 71.6%. The postsecondary completion rate was 53.6%. The attrition rate was 28.4%. Most veterans working on a certificate take two terms to complete it but ranged

from one to 20 terms. The number of terms it takes to earn an associate's degree decreases from one term to three, but sharply thereafter to its peak at six terms before steadily sloping downward. The peak of six terms is higher than the national average which is four terms. The time to completion of a bachelor's degree reaches a peak between nine and 11 academic terms. This is slightly longer than the eight semester terms it normatively takes to complete a bachelor's degree. Approximately 12% held full-time enrollment status for every academic term they were enrolled, while 55.4% maintained at least three-quarters full-time enrollment. There is also evidence from NVEST that after student veterans begin using the PGB, their enrollment status significantly increases, although only slightly.

Conclusions

The available evidence leads to several conclusions:

1. The PGB and other programmatic supports of veteran education should be revised to address the unique challenges and circumstances of post-9/11 veterans.
2. Helping to (a) get veterans into post-secondary education early in their transition increases the likelihood of academic attainment; (b) providing support and resources so that veterans can complete their academic pursuits in less time will result in higher wages for veterans; and (c) developing strategies (such as occupational screening) that encourage veterans to pursue skilled labor and technical fields will open many additional employment opportunities for veterans.
3. Screening for mental health and financial problems early will identify veterans who are at substantially higher risk for leaving school prematurely, and those with these challenges must be provided with federal, state, and private resources that will assist them.
4. Building social support networks for student veterans are critical and will increase the proportion of veterans staying in school.

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 goal.

