

**STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

January 27, 2015

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and other Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss VA's implementation and current status of the revised Transition Assistance Program (TAP). Accompanying me today is Ms. Rosye Cloud, Acting Director of the VBA/Department of Defense (DoD) Program Office.

Background

It is critical that today's Servicemembers are appropriately prepared to transition to civilian life as they seek a productive post-military career. In November 2011, Congress passed and the President signed the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (VOW Act), which included steps to improve the existing TAP for Servicemembers. Among other things, the VOW Act made participation in TAP mandatory for all Servicemembers (except in certain limited circumstances). Mandatory components of TAP now include pre-separation counseling, two VA briefings on benefits, and a Department of Labor (DOL) Employment Workshop. Under the auspices of a memorandum of understanding executed in 2014, VA, DOL, DoD, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Education (ED), Small Business Administration (SBA), U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and other stakeholders are coordinating on the implementation of the redesigned TAP program to help strengthen and expand information, counseling, and support available to transitioning Servicemembers.

In December 2011, a joint Veterans Employment Initiative Task Force provided four major recommendations for a redesigned TAP:

- Adopt career-readiness standards for transitioning Servicemembers that capitalize on the skills and experiences that Servicemembers gain during military service, and align them with personal goals.
- Implement a revamped TAP curriculum, now known as Transition GPS, to provide Servicemembers with a set of value-added training programs, and services to equip them with the skills they need to successfully pursue post-military goals.
- Implement a Capstone event to verify and validate the outcomes of the training provided in the Transition GPS construct.

- Implement a Military Life Cycle transition model to prepare Servicemembers for transition over the entire span of their military career, rather than during just the last few months of their service in the military.

Implementation of these overarching recommendations is currently transforming our support of Servicemembers' transition to Veteran status into a well-planned, organized progression that prepares them to make informed career decisions and advances them toward achievement of their goals.

Implementation of VA's Portion of Transition GPS

VA continues to proactively support all transitioning Servicemembers to include Active Duty, National Guard, and Reserve Component, as mandated by the VOW Act. VA required assistance in developing the new Transition GPS curricula to adhere to recommended adult-learning principles, a facilitator training program, and a quality assurance program to monitor briefer performance. A contract vehicle was put in place to provide the resources and expertise to develop the new program elements and to deploy VA Benefits Advisors worldwide. Responsibilities of the Benefits Advisors include delivering the mandatory VA Benefits Briefings, facilitating the Career Technical Training Track (CTTT), supporting Capstone and Military Life Cycle events and briefings, and providing individual assistance to transitioning Servicemembers upon request. We have deployed over 300 Benefits Advisors to provide transition support to over 250 military installations worldwide. Our contractor shares VA's commitment to Veteran employment, as the current network of contract VA Benefits Advisors is comprised of over 95 percent Veterans and 4 percent military spouses.

VA met the requirements of the VOW Act by making its legacy TAP briefings available to 100 percent of transitioning Servicemembers effective November 21, 2012, while concurrently developing and deploying a revised TAP curriculum through a phased roll-out expansion. The revised curriculum now consists of the new 4-hour VA Benefits I Briefing, an overview of all VA benefits, and the 2-hour VA Benefits II Briefing, which provides in-depth focus on health care, eBenefits, and disability compensation. VA fully deployed the revised briefings, through a phased roll-out, to all military installations worldwide as of December 2013. Additionally, in March 2014, VA, with support on the curriculum design from partner agencies, fully deployed the additional CTTT, a course designed for Servicemembers wishing to transition into technical fields that may require additional credentials, but not a 4-year degree.

To meet the needs of National Guard and Reserve Component members, VA deployed Benefits Advisors to all formal demobilization locations (Fort Bliss, Fort Hood, and Joint-Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst). In addition, VA rapidly responds to Service requests for briefings at Yellow Ribbon and community-based events, as well as to short notice (same-day notification) demobilization events on installations.

VA's Portion of Transition GPS Curriculum

Benefits Briefings

VA Benefits I Briefing includes information on education, health care, compensation, life insurance, and home loans, as well as vocational rehabilitation and employment benefits. VA Benefits II Briefing provides an overview of VA health care and services and the disability compensation process and explores MyHealthVet, the eBenefits portal, VA's Web-based benefits application system, and the new Veterans Employment Center. The theme for each program is eligibility requirements and the application process.

VA is responsible for the development and delivery of the 2-day CTTT workshop designed for those seeking job-ready skills and industry-recognized credentials in shorter-term training programs, but not 4-year degree programs. The workshop guides Servicemembers through a variety of decisions involved in identifying a technical career, determining credentialing requirements, researching and applying to training programs, exploring funding options, to include VA benefits that may assist in reaching their goals, and finally creating a plan for success.

VA and its partner agencies also developed a virtual curriculum that is hosted on the Joint Knowledge Online Web site, enabling Servicemembers to access the curriculum from remote locations and allowing participants to access the courses according to their own schedules and review the training at their own pace. VA posted the complete Transition GPS curriculum on the eBenefits portal, so Veterans and family members can access materials. VA also worked with the Army to deliver virtual briefings via live-meeting sessions to Servicemembers who are deployed to remote locations without access to VA Benefits Advisors.

VA Capstone Overview

Capstone is intended to serve as a standardized end-of-career experience to validate, verify, and bolster transition training and other services to prepare Servicemembers for civilian careers, including those services delivered throughout the entire span of a Servicemember's career, from accession to post-military civilian life. In order to coordinate support for Capstone events and provide support for a warm hand-over, VA has assigned a Benefits Advisor Capstone Liaison to each military installation where Transition GPS is delivered. The Capstone activity can be completed one-on-one or in group events, and VA supports both options. Benefits Advisors verify that Servicemembers previously completed the VA Benefits briefings, welcome them to the VA community, and provide local points of contact for future assistance and issues.

Individual assistance involves answering specific questions that may arise after completing the VA benefits briefings, aiding in the registration and navigation of the eBenefits portal and the Veterans Employment Center, and assisting with online benefits applications. VA Benefits Advisors also connect Servicemembers who need additional support with disability claims or other VA services to the appropriate Veterans Service Organization or VA representative at our VA regional offices, VA medical

centers, Vet Centers, or the National Call Center, and refer them to DoD points of contact and resources. The individual transition support includes services offered under the former Disability Transition Assistance Program to Servicemembers who are wounded, ill, or injured, or who may not be physically capable of sitting through the entire 6-hours VA Benefits Briefings.

VA Military Life Cycle (MLC) Overview

VA and its partner agencies continue to coordinate to refine implementation of the MLC transition model. The MLC transition model capitalizes on military training and development opportunities and leverages Transition GPS offerings to ensure that Servicemembers are fully successful. Through the use of both military career development opportunities and Transition GPS products, Servicemembers will develop the military skills they require for a successful military career, while mastering key career-readiness standards throughout military service.

VA has proposed involvement in certain MLC touch points, such as arrival at first permanent duty station, re-enlistment, promotion, deployment and redeployment, mobilization or activation, demobilization or deactivation, transfers between Active and Reserve Components, and other significant life events. The agency partners are continuing to collaborate on the appropriate touch points in the military life cycle model. We anticipate delivering customized overview briefings at these Service-coordinated touch points, to provide information on VA benefits and available contacts on installation. VA is providing MLC briefings upon request by military installation leadership.

The Veterans Employment Center

After a full review of existing employment Web sites, an interagency decision was made to use the VA-DoD eBenefits system as the logical place to house the Veterans Employment Center (VEC). The eBenefits system provides access to lifelong benefits for Servicemembers, Veterans, and their beneficiaries, to include the GI Bill that helps link education and training to employment.

The VEC is the Federal Government's single online tool for connecting transitioning Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families to meaningful career opportunities. The VEC is the first Government-wide product that brings together a reputable cadre of public and private employers with real job opportunities, and provides transitioning Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families with the tools to translate their military skills into plain language and build a profile that can be shared – in real time – with employers who have made a public commitment to hire Veterans. In connection with the First Lady and Dr. Biden's Joining Forces initiative, VA, DOL, DoD, ED, SBA, and the Office of Personnel Management collaborated to design, develop, and incorporate the best features of existing online employment tools into the VEC.

The Administration has made it a priority, and so has VA, DOL, DoD, and the Military Services. We are connecting Veterans and their spouses to more than 1.7 million jobs

that are open and waiting to be filled right now. VA also took action in June 2014, shortly after the launch of the VEC on April 23, 2014, to incorporate the VEC into all VA Transition GPS briefings and classes. All of the VA Benefits Advisors have been trained on how to work with transitioning Servicemembers to ensure they have an updated profile in the VEC. DoD and DOL updated their Transition GPS curricula with the VEC information, which was rolled out November 2014.

This addition of the VEC into the Transition GPS curriculum has already increased profiles and usage of the site. Since inception, the VEC had received nearly 2.5 million unique pageviews, and over 600,000 individuals have used the site. Our visitors are also spending more time on the site, originally only viewing about 5 pages per session to viewing over 12 pages per session currently. We are encouraged to see our visitors explore the site in more detail as they grow in familiarity to its features and the services it has to offer.

The VEC is the bridge for transitioning Servicemembers when they complete their Transition GPS curriculum and transition into the civilian workforce. They begin their search for internships, on-the-job training, apprenticeships, and jobs while still on active duty with the potential to take advantage of and gain skills through the DoD SkillBridge authority. This will only increase their economic opportunities with employers committed to hiring them, connecting them to meaningful employment and careers.

Measuring the Quality of Briefings and VA Benefits Advisors

VA is implementing a comprehensive approach for quality assurance to ensure the curriculum and training are of the utmost quality, and that the performance of VA Benefits Advisors also excels. The quality plan utilizes a robust and standardized set of processes for evaluating program activities, ensuring consistent, high-quality instruction and support. The plan sets a framework for continuous monitoring that includes planned oversight visits conducted by VA to ensure evaluation of all activities carried out in support of Transition GPS. Benefits Advisors complete a rigorous training program before being placed on the briefing rotation. Benefits I and II training consists of pre-requisite study of content knowledge and 80 hours of classroom-based instruction. Benefits Advisors are required to demonstrate their proficiency on a written examination of the materials and delivery of briefings. VA developed a standard evaluation rubric to assess Benefits Advisor performance. The rubric measures proficiency in areas such as content, knowledge of content, facilitation and platform skills, as well as professionalism and classroom preparation. Additionally, the CTTT training is highly interactive and consists of 120 hours of content study and practice.

Conclusion

VA continues to work with our partner agencies to assist with the transition of Servicemembers from military to civilian life. TAP is designed to give our Servicemembers and their families an opportunity to learn more about the benefits they have earned, identify benefits that fit their individual needs, and equip them with a plan for success outside of the military. VA continually improves the quality and breadth of our outreach services to all components – Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard. VA fully supports the efforts of the Administration and Congress to ensure that transitioning Servicemembers are ready for civilian life upon separation from the military, and will continue to implement initiatives to achieve that goal.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have.