

**STATEMENT
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READINESS
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE
BEFORE THE
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SUBCOMMITTEE
ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
HEARING
ON THE
TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM**

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Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the status of the implementation of the re-designed Transition Assistance Program (TAP), as requested by the Committee.

Re-designing this program in collaboration with the Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA), Labor (DOL), Education (ED), the Small Business Administration (SBA), and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) brings together for the Department of Defense (DoD) a unique set of capabilities that will directly affect the approximately one million Service members who will separate from active duty over the next four years. These capabilities are now synchronized into a single program enabling successful transitions from Active Duty to civilian life, or, as in the case of our National Guard and Reserve Service members, a return to Reserve status.

The Veterans Employment Initiative Task Force, led by DoD and VA, recently stood down after investing two years re-designing the TAP to be a cohesive and outcome-based program that provides standardized curriculum, training, and services. A new TAP governance structure was established on October 1, 2013, with senior leaders from each federal agency partner participating as members of the TAP Inter-Agency Executive Council (EC) and Senior Steering Group (SSG). The EC and SSG are comprised of representatives of every Military Service, together with the Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This structure commits all partners to the joint oversight and execution of TAP, while providing a means to continuously evaluate and improve the program to ensure it meets the needs of Service members.

The Department, together with our partner agencies, continues to make significant progress. One example is the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in January 2014 to record the long-term commitment of each partner to staff and resource their delivery of

the TAP at 206 military installations worldwide. This is a tremendous commitment. Our priority for the TAP redesign is to assist all eligible Service members, including members of the National Guard and Reserve, whether they are pursuing higher education, credentialing, finding a job, or starting a business.

REDESIGNED TAP

The Department of Defense, the Military Services, the U.S. Coast Guard, and our inter-agency partners are fully engaged in the implementation of the redesigned TAP. Previous testimony explained that the re-designed TAP complies with the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011, now codified in Title 10 of the United States Code. This law requires Service members who are being discharged or released from Active Duty after the completion of that member's first 180 days of Active Duty (including members of the National Guard and Reserve) to participate in Pre-separation Counseling, VA Benefits Briefings, and the Department of Labor Employment Workshop (DOLEW).

Career Readiness Standards (CRS) are at the foundation of the re-designed TAP. The desired end state for all Service members is to meet CRS for their chosen civilian career path upon their departure from Military Service. The CRS are a set of documented activities that demonstrate the Service member is prepared to pursue personal post-separation career goals. An example is the preparation of a 12-month post-separation budget. These standards are verified during a "Capstone" event that should occur no later than 90 days prior to the Service member's separation date. If a Service member has not met the CRS, there is still time for further training or a "warm handover" to one or more of our inter-agency partners, who then will ensure that the

Service member receives all necessary and appropriate assistance, post-separation, to meet that individual's transition needs.

Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success) is a robust curriculum available to all Service members prior to separation. The Transition GPS curriculum builds the skills needed by every transitioning Service member to meet CRS and has been fully implemented across 206 Military installations in the United States and overseas. In addition to the VOW Act-mandated requirements, described above, Transition GPS includes course-work modules in Transition Overview, Resilient Transitions, Personal Financial Planning for Transition, and Military Occupational Code Crosswalk. During the curriculum sessions, Service members and transition staff also review a Service member's Individual Transition Plan (ITP), a document that is created, evolves, and is maintained by each Service members as he or she performs detailed assessments of their personal preparedness to achieve career goals after separation.

Recognizing the challenges that our Service members face as they separate, we developed three career-building training tracks: Accessing Higher Education, Career Technical Training, and Entrepreneurship. Transitioning Service members are provided the opportunity to participate in, and are strongly encouraged to take advantage of, one or more of these tracks as they align with a Service member's individual transition goals. The Accessing Higher Education Track curriculum (provided by DoD) is for Service members pursuing higher education. After completing this track, Service members are prepared to complete an application to an accredited educational institution, schedule a session with a counselor from an academic institution, or meet individually with education counselors. In the Career Technical Training Track curriculum (provided by VA), Service members pursuing career technical training receive guidance in selecting technical training schools or programs that will lead to a license or certification in their

chosen technical career field. Service members interested in pursuing self-employment attend the SBA “Boots to Business” Entrepreneurship Track, where they receive information about the benefits and challenges of starting one’s own business. Upon completion of “Boots to Business,” Service members will have developed the initial components of a business feasibility plan. Graduates of “Boots to Business” are afforded the further opportunity to enroll in an eight-week online, SBA-sponsored entrepreneurship course in which, under the instruction of renowned business educators, they will develop a viable business plan.

To ensure our curriculum remains relevant for all Service members, we established a process to collect Service member and subject matter expert feedback. We share this feedback and our analysis of it with our federal inter-agency partners through subject matter expert working groups. We use the input we received to revise the Transition GPS curriculum at regular intervals, ensuring that we deliver the best product and services possible to our transitioning Service members. The Senior Steering Group completed the first curriculum review in July 2014 and will repeat this review process annually. The results of the 2014 review are being applied to refresh the Transition GPS curriculum. All revised curriculum will be in place for access by Service members by the end of February 2015 in both brick and mortar and virtual delivery.

VIRTUAL CURRICULUM

Our Service members have access to the Transition GPS curriculum, regardless of their duty station or location. We have duplicated all components of the “brick and mortar” classroom Transition GPS curriculum in a virtual curriculum (VC). Those Service members who might otherwise miss the opportunity to participate in Transition GPS, while on a ship at sea or

assigned to a remote duty station anywhere across the globe, now have an interactive VC designed with the principles of adult learning in mind. This virtual curriculum meets all of the same standards and learning objectives as the “brick and mortar” Transition GPS sessions. The curriculum includes knowledge checks to ensure Service members are learning and benefitting from their “virtual” experience. This VC capability was an inter-agency undertaking, and the Department is grateful to our partners for their significant contributions to this effort.

DoD uses its Joint Knowledge Online (JKO) website to host the Transition GPS VC. We deliberately chose a virtual platform that we knew Service members already used for online military training. The choice of JKO conveys the message that Service members will be expected to complete transition preparation training just as they are required to complete other military training while on Active Duty. Veterans and military spouses also have access to the VC, which is hosted on both the VA eBenefits and the DOL Veterans Employment Training Service (VETS) websites. The Transition GPS VC was launched in October 2013. To date, more than 50,000 Service members have accessed the Transition GPS VC and have completed more than 185,000 curriculum modules.

MILITARY LIFE CYCLE MODEL

The last component of the re-designed TAP is the implementation of the Military Life Cycle (MLC) transition model. This will mark a major cultural shift for the Department. Rather than concentrating all transition preparation in the final months of service, the MLC model will align key transition preparation activities with pre-determined “touch points” built into the Service member’s life-cycle process unique to each Military Service.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, TAP inter-agency partners and the Office of the Secretary of Defense agreed to those critical touch points throughout a Service member's career at which transition preparation would occur. The individual Services then developed their MLC implementation plans to incorporate transition-related activity at the following key touch points:

- (1) First permanent duty station (AC)/First home station (RC)
- (2) Re-enlistment
- (3) Promotion
- (4) Deployment, redeployment, mobilization/activation, demobilization/deactivation
- (5) Change of duty station
- (6) Major life events (e.g., change in family status), and
- (7) Retirement, separation, or release from active duty

Each Service's implementation plan also outlined how leaders and Service members would be held accountable for attaining CRS throughout the MLC transition preparation, and provided each Service's strategy for messaging this "transition preparation" culture change. For example, at the beginning of their military careers, all Service members will develop an Individual Development Plan (IDP), complete financial education requirements, and register for VA benefits on the eBenefits website. In December 2014, the Military Services reported to the White House that the MLC transition preparation was fully implemented at their installations.

The MLC model will involve new responsibilities for our inter-agency partners and participating Service members and leaders. Partner agencies will have the responsibility to keep their curriculum and services for transitioning Service members relevant and effective. Service members will have a responsibility to acquire and master career skills while actively filling gaps between their military duties and civilian goals. Commanders or their designees have the

responsibility to verify that each Service member in their chain of command is prepared for transition to civilian life. They do this by verifying Service members have met CRS and have a viable Individual Transition Program (ITP), or by ensuring that the Service member is provided a “warm handover” to the appropriate inter-agency partner.

INTER-AGENCY TAP EVALUATION STRATEGY

It is estimated that approximately 250,000 Service members will transition annually from Military Service to civilian employment over each of the next few years. In Fiscal Year 2014, 249,161 Service members transitioned from Active duty. Thus far, in Fiscal Year 2015 (between October 2014 and November 2014), more than 37,000 Service members have transitioned.

DoD, in collaboration with our inter-agency partners, developed a comprehensive interagency TAP evaluation strategy to address three overarching goals: accountability to ensure the program is delivered on military installations in accordance with law, policy, and leadership intent; customer satisfaction; and program effectiveness. Our plan focuses on the Transition GPS participant assessment, the use of site visits, and established performance measures. Additional long-term, outcome-oriented evaluations are also in development by VA, DOL, and SBA to further strengthen the inter-agency evaluation approach and ensure that TAP is continuously improved.

TRANSITION GPS PARTICIPANT ASSESSMENT RESULTS

The Transition GPS curriculum is currently taught in “brick and mortar” classrooms on military installations, as well as via the virtual curriculum (VC) on JKO. At the completion of each Transition GPS module, and again at the end of the entire program, each Service member is

asked to complete a voluntary, anonymous online assessment. This assessment gathers Service member feedback on the effectiveness and value of Transition GPS, the quality of the facilitators and learning resources, and Service members' intent to apply their learning toward their transition preparation and confidence in their ability to do so.

More than 198,000 Service members responded to this assessment from April 2013 to September 2014. Of the more than 42,000 Service members responding most recently to this assessment during the last quarter of Fiscal Year 2014, 84 percent of the respondents were enlisted Service members, with approximately half (43 percent) at the rank of E1 to E4. Sixty-four percent of the respondents had 10 years or fewer of military service.

These demographics reinforce the importance of transition preparation. The majority of respondents were enlisted Service members with limited military experience, who might not have had the opportunity to establish a network of contacts in the civilian world and might not be fully aware of their post-military career options. Transition GPS is likely their first and primary source of information. These demographics drive home the critical importance of ensuring that the content of the Transition GPS meets participant needs. In addition, the modules must help transitioning Service members fully comprehend this information rapidly; 71 percent of the assessment respondents were six months or less away from their planned separation.

Service members responding to the assessment reported that the program was valuable to them. Specifically, 79 percent reported that Transition GPS was beneficial in helping them gain the information and skills they needed better to plan their transition and that they will use what they learned in their own transition planning. Seventy-eight percent reported that the program enhanced their confidence in transition planning, while 75 percent reported that it prepared them to transition from Active Duty in a career-ready status.

Respondents were also asked about each Transition GPS module in terms of their intent to apply material learned during the module and their confidence in doing so, as well as the quality of the facilitators and learning resources. Across all modules, 83 percent of transitioning Service members reported that the modules enhanced their confidence in transition planning. Likewise, across all of the modules, 86 percent of transitioning Service members reported that they would use what they learned in their own transition planning.

DoD and its partners provided extensive facilitation training to prepare staff to lead the Transition GPS modules, and feedback has been extremely positive. Across all modules, Service members reported that the facilitators for the Transition GPS program were professional (94 percent), knowledgeable (94 percent), and interacted well with the Service members completing the program (93 percent).

The learning resources for the Transition GPS program also were viewed favorably as a whole. Across all modules, 92 percent of respondents reported that they found the learning resources useful, including notes, handouts, and audio-visuais. Finally, it is important to note that Service members intend to revisit the materials provided during Transition GPS. Eighty-one percent of respondents reported that they now know how to access the necessary resources to find answers to transition questions that may arise in the next several months. We are pleased with this customer and program feedback, but we know that much work remains to be done.

SITE VISITS AND VIEWS FROM THE FIELD

As with the implementation of any large-scale program redesign, especially one requiring a significant culture shift, the biggest challenge to success is the effective communication of program changes and shifts required to adopt these changes and to make them work. DoD has

made a concerted effort with our partners to solicit feedback from the field and staff to monitor this cultural shift.

We have conducted interviews, traveled as observation teams during Staff Assistance Visits (SAV), interviewed Commanders, and convened Service member, staff, and Senior Enlisted Advisor and Commander focus groups. We also receive regular feedback from TAP staff in the United States and overseas.

We have learned that Service members are aware of the redesigned TAP workshops and are eager to participate. Those who have attended the workshops serve as “champions,” encouraging their peers to attend the Transition GPS modules and tracks.

Commanders at installations with high throughput of transitioning Service members are putting forth their best efforts to meet new, tough standards, such as the limit of 50 students per TAP class. At some installations, this might mean offering five or six Transition GPS classes a week, concurrently, at various locations across the installation. For some installations, finding adequate class space can be a challenge, as is access to sufficient numbers of individual laptops and enough bandwidth to ensure continuous internet access for all participating Service members. We will continue to address these important issues throughout 2015.

The field’s input also conveyed a recurring lesson: one of relationships. The ultimate success of the TAP redesign will depend upon a high level of meaningful interaction between Commanders, the chain of command, and their TAP staffs. Commanders must understand their responsibility to ensure that Service members meet CRS and how the TAP staff is integral to fulfilling that responsibility. The TAP staff must embrace increased coordination, counseling, and training responsibilities, as well as their consultative role to Commanders in reviewing CRS in anticipation of “Capstone.” Most importantly, Service members need to understand and act on

their responsibility to meet CRS and the availability of TAP to maximize their own preparation for transition. The TAP Executive Council will continue to engage the Services to ensure military leadership, TAP staff, and individual Service members are equipped with the knowledge and information to succeed.

The DoD Transition to Veterans Program Office (TVPO) has initiated regular and recurring meetings with representatives of Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs). The first such meeting was on May 5, 2014 and featured an update on the re-designed TAP. The VSOs have agreed to meet quarterly with us. As we continue to implement the MLC transition model and collect lessons learned at each stage, the perspectives of the VSOs will be beneficial in so many ways.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

A mandate of the TAP evaluation strategy is outcome measures, beginning with VOW Act compliance and CRS requirements. For this world-wide program, the data flow to the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC), to document compliance for every eligible Service member, must be flawless. The Department is working expeditiously and diligently to overcome the delays associated with sequestration on our data collection process. Our “Get-Well Plan” to facilitate the accurate reporting of VOW Act compliance and the attainment of CRS goals is to continue engaging senior DoD leaders, who are actively overseeing and monitoring monthly VOW Act compliance, while our data capturing efforts continue to improve.

Based upon DMDC verified data for Fiscal Year to Date 2015 the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force verified VOW Act compliance for their Active Duty Service members was 91.2 percent, 92.2 percent, 94.0 percent, and 97.5 percent, respectively. The results account for

three quarters of the separating members. We realize we must work hard to close the remaining reporting gap. Achieving VOW Act compliance for the members of the Reserve Components (RCs) presents unique challenges. A dedicated “RC Team” is meeting to assess the extant processes and procedures, identify gaps and anomalies, and determine if the current system effectively meets the needs of the transitioning RC members. These meetings may result in specific legislative proposals and policy changes focused on RC TAP requirements.

DoD will use a new web service to make data available to our partner agencies and allow them to measure program outcomes in the longer-term, as Service members shift into Veteran status. These proposed outcomes include successful use of the Post-9/11 GI Bill for certifications and completion of a college degree. Our partners are currently building their business cases and Information Technology (IT) infrastructure to access and analyze the data we will make available.

For the purpose of monitoring a driver of the re-designed TAP program success (i.e., culture change), the Department inserted TAP-related questions in the 2014 Status of Forces Survey. These questions are designed to assess Service members’ attitudes towards post-military career planning and leadership support for such planning across the Military Life Cycle. These questions will serve as a “baseline” for understanding Service members’ views prior to the Department’s full execution of transition preparation across the touch points of the MLC model. This annual survey will enable us to gauge Service member awareness of the TAP and their individual transition responsibilities, as well as the support they receive from their leadership and peers in preparing for transition. This survey was launched in September 2014, and results will be provided by DMDC to TVPO in Spring 2015.

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE REPORT

In March 2014, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released its report entitled, “Transitioning Veterans – Improved Oversight Needed to Enhance Implementation of Transition Assistance Program.” This report included three recommendations for executive action. The first recommendation directed the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (USD(P&R)) to require that all Services provide unit Commanders and their leaders with information on the TAP participation levels of Service members under their command. The report recognized that Army and Air Force are already doing this; thus, the way forward on this recommendation will focus predominantly on the Navy and Marine Corps. DoD non-concurred with this requirement and recommendation, as it pertained to the USD(P&R) issuing a directive, because the Services were already putting accountability systems in place.

DoD has developed and deployed the necessary IT infrastructure to support the Services transition programs. The Navy is now funding Information Technology system upgrades that will enable analysis of program compliance down to the Unit Identification Code level (unit level). Meanwhile, the Marine Corps has mandated TAP participation since the program’s inception and Commanders leverage the capabilities of the personnel system to identify eligible Marines and schedule their TAP attendance. The Marine Corps, too, is exploring which personnel systems and processes are most appropriate to facilitate commander notification. Business processes for collecting data resulting from documentation are in the final stages of refinement. As the DoD and our inter-agency partners execute the MLC in 2015, we will gather and analyze lessons learned with a view to improving further our ability to address accountability requirements.

The second recommendation directed the USD(P&R) to work with our partner agencies to develop a written strategy for determining which components and tracks to evaluate, and the most appropriate evaluation methods. The DoD concurred with this recommendation and, in response, developed an Inter-agency TAP Evaluation Strategy, in full collaboration with VA, DOL, and SBA. The TVPO briefed this strategy to the Office of Management and Budget and the White House staff in May 2014. Based on our progress to date with participant assessments and visits to the field, we are confident that this strategy will enable us to improve accountability, VOW Act compliance, and the attainment of CRS.

The third recommendation required the Secretary of Defense to direct the USD(P&R) to systematically collect information on any challenges facing demobilizing members of the National Guard and Reserves regarding the logistics of the timing and location at which to attend TAP. The Department understands that the National Guard and Reserves operate under different logistical constraints and schedules than does the Active Component. Several processes are already in place to identify and rectify misalignments, to include Executive Council working groups with representation from both the Reserve Components and the pool of TAP managers with large Reserve populations to serve. A dedicated Reserve Component Team routinely meets to assess processes and determine if current requirements are meeting the transition needs of Reserve Component Service members. During Fiscal Year 2015, the Reserve Component Team will focus on lessons learned from RC implementation of the TAP redesign and make recommendations for improvement as we move to implement the MLC fully across the RCs. At our request, the National Guard Bureau assigned Command Sergeant Major Clements, from the great State of Illinois, to the Transition to Veterans Program Office in order to strengthen the voice of our National Guard Service members in these deliberations. The Transition GPS

participant assessment also provides an opportunity for RC Service members to voice concerns regarding their ability to participate in TAP. Additionally, the DMDC Status of Forces Survey will provide us the ability to assess the MLC touch points associated with Reserve and Guard participation in the TAP. Our objective is to ensure a full commitment to this culture change across all components for the long-term.

WAY FORWARD

Fiscal Year 2014 was an exciting and challenging year for DoD, our inter-agency partners, the Military Services, and the U.S. Coast Guard, as we implemented the Transition GPS curriculum and planned for the MLC model. We made great strides and will continue actively to monitor our progress as we move forward to implement the MLC model.

We are also very pleased by the standup of the Veterans Employment Center (VEC) under the auspices of the VA, and with the help of DOL. One cannot overstate the value of a single portal to which all federal partners can direct Service members for skills translation, resume building, and connection to employers. We are confident that the VEC will provide our Service members and employers across the government and the private sector with high quality tools that are easy to use and effective in achieving our objectives.

The Department's priority focus on transition assistance is being acknowledged, and acted on at the highest levels of the military Services. In fact, many now acknowledge that preparing Service members for transition is an imperative for the All-Volunteer Force. The 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review noted that the strength of the All-Volunteer Force would be maintained by providing the best possible assistance to Service members transitioning into civilian life.

In September of 2014, we conducted a comprehensive TAP communications campaign to reinforce key program messages, generate awareness and understanding, and strengthen the message of the cultural change required to inculcate TAP across the Military Life Cycle, at every level of the Military. The campaign consisted of a combination of print, digital, and social media, with a view to reaching Service members, their Commanders, and other leaders, in both the Active and Reserve Components, across the globe. A package of our campaign materials has been provided to each member of the Subcommittee.

During Fiscal Year 2015, we will continue to assess the needs and requirements of our Reserve Component Service members; work to improve system integration, data sharing, and reporting; and strengthen relationships with our partners across the inter-agency and with other stakeholders and contributors, including the VSOs, employers, and other non-federal entities.

Our Service members are a vital component of our Nation's employment and talent pipeline. We are working harder to encourage employers to recognize the unique and valued skill sets that Service members departing the military will bring to every industry and sector. We encourage employers to continue the offerings of training, credentialing, and career pathways that create viable post-service options for Service members who have given so much to our Nation, and who have much to contribute in their civilian capacities.

The Department acknowledges the requirements in section 557, "*Enhancement of Information Provided to Members of the Armed Forces and Veterans regarding use of Post-9/11 Educational Assistance and Federal Financial Aid through the TAP,*" and section 558 "*Procedures for Provisions of Certain Information to State Veterans Agencies to Facilitate the Transition of Members of the Armed Forces from Military Services to Civilian Life*" of the FY15

National Defense Authorization Act. We are currently evaluating strategies that will address these requirements.

The Department appreciates the stalwart commitment by all of our inter-agency partners to the TAP redesign. This is an unprecedented effort and our collective dedication has never wavered. As thousands of our men and women return from service on the ground in contingency operations, separate from Active Duty, and go home to their communities, holding to this steadfast commitment will become all the more important.

Likewise, your continued support is greatly appreciated as we continue to roll out and deliver the redesigned TAP to our men and women in uniform undergoing transition. They are most deserving of our best efforts to make them career-ready and to enable them to achieve their aspirations.