

**STATEMENT OF  
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BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY OF THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
ON  
"A REVIEW OF THE TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (TAP)"**

**JANUARY 27, 2015**

On behalf of our National Commander, Michael Helm, and the 2.4 million members of The American Legion, we thank you for this opportunity to testify at this hearing on improving the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), and veteran transition in general.

The new TAP, authorized as part of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 – now Public Law 112-56 – is an important step toward providing transitioning servicemembers with the information and skills they need to successfully transition into civilian life. The VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (VOW Act of 2011) resulted in the establishment of the Veterans Employment Initiative (VEI) Task Force recommendations for improving and standardizing transition activities among the Services. The standardization includes the development and implementation of Career Readiness Standards (CRS); institutionalizing Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success) revamped program curriculum; and integrating a culminating Capstone event prior to service members transition or retirement, implementation of a Military Life Cycle (MLC) model to maximize the benefits of interagency and joint interoperability.

Over the past two years, The American Legion has intensely scrutinized the new program, observing it in operation at Ft. Hood, Ft. Sam Houston, Randolph Air Force Base, Ft. Bragg, MCB Quantico, Walter Reed Medical Center and Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay. We have observed both the five-day mandatory portion, as well as the specialized capstone courses that comprise Transition GPS. The testimony we present today reflects this scrutiny, and provides some observations as well as some recommendations for improvement.

**Positives of the Program**

**Overall Impression**

In general The American Legion was highly impressed both by the amount and the quality of information that was conveyed, particularly in such a relatively short period of time. The information was presented by instructors who were contracted by the Department of Labor and Department of Veterans Affairs. These instructors seemed to have a very good grasp on the material being presented, and were able to answer nearly all questions. The student interaction was excellent, especially compared with the pilot versions of the program, which may be due to the smaller class size in the fully implemented program – less than 30 individuals, in most cases.

Allowing servicemembers to attend class in business casual attire seemed to contribute to the learning environment by providing a more relaxed atmosphere.

### **Veteran Service Organization Involvement**

The American Legion has long advocated for the inclusion of congressionally chartered Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) into TAP.<sup>1</sup> VSOs provide services to transitioning servicemembers, including claims assistance.

During both the VA and DOL portions of the TAP sessions that we observed, the attendees were referred to VSOs by the instructors for help filing claims.

The utilization of veterans as instructors is a good practice because they were able to impart first-hand knowledge of how the VSOs help. In one class, an instructor specifically mentioned The American Legion, as the Legion had assisted him with his own VA medical claim and as such, he was familiar with the services veterans' service organizations provide.

On October 23, 2013, a letter from the Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Benefits requested that the Veterans Affairs "part of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) classes include VSOs from the local areas who want to attend." This letter further mandated that VA Briefers "welcome and introduce VSO representatives in the classroom during VA's portion of the TAP briefing."

The Secretary of Defense recognizes "national Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) and Military Service Organizations (MSOs) are a critical component of our overall framework of care for our servicemembers throughout all phases of their military service."<sup>2</sup> The American Legion completely supports the Department of Defense (DOD) maintaining a strong relationship with VSOs/MSOs approved and recognized by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) for the preparation, presentation, and prosecution of VA claims.

The American Legion has access to DOD Installations for the purpose of VA-accredited representation services under section 2670 of title 10, U.S.C. The Secretary of Defense memorandum dated December 23, 2014 reemphasizes this privilege under the law, directed additional measures to facilitate VSOs consistent delivery across DOD Installations, and provided clarity to installation commanders on adjudicating requests for access. "Commanders are authorized to use official command communication channels to include the Transition Assistance Program materials, to inform Service members about the availability of VA-accredited presentation services provided by VSOs/MSOs operating under the provisions of stated memorandum."

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution No. 20: Service Officers Participation in the Transition Goals, Plans and Success (GPS) Program (National Convention, 2014)

<sup>2</sup> SECDEF Memo dated 23Dec2014 signed by Sec. Hagel

## **Recommendations for Improvement**

### **Lack of Focus on Soft Skills**

The vast majority of the personnel leaving the armed services after their first or second enlistment have not had significant experience working in a civilian workplace setting as compared to their civilian counterparts. They lack the ‘soft skills’ that are most commonly learned by spending a substantial part of one’s adult life in a civilian work environment.

By “soft skills” we mean personal qualities, habits, attitudes, and social graces that can make an individual employable. Human resource staff value ‘soft skills’ because research shows that these skills are an important indicator of job performance.

From our observations, we believe that while TAP includes ample focus on the translation of military skills and experiences into core-competencies in the private sector, insufficient emphasis is placed on these soft skills.

It is impossible for transitioning servicemembers to quickly rid themselves of the habits they acquired in order to thrive in service. While many of these habits are also conducive to thriving in a civilian workplace environment, many are not. We, of course, recognize that a five day course cannot hope to inculcate etiquette and behaviors obtained by spending a substantial part of one’s adult life in a civilian workplace environment.

However, we believe that TAP would be improved if accompanied by some kind of program that would allow the veteran to gradually assimilate to the civilian office environment or if it at least included private sector companies to discuss office and/or workplace culture. The American Legion cannot stress how crucial it is that more emphasis and instruction be provided to the servicemember on this matter.<sup>3</sup>

### **Improvement Needed in the “Accessing Higher Education” (AHE) GPS Portion**

Since the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2009, every transitioning servicemember now has access to the opportunity to attend a higher education program of their choice. Even if they do not plan to utilize that benefit immediately upon exiting the military, The American Legion believes that it is important that all servicemembers be informed of the benefit, and be given a basic understanding of how to use it, particularly in conjunction with Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment and Title IV benefits.

As such, The American Legion recommends that the Transition GPS education track be reevaluated for content and that it incorporate more input from the Department of Education. Further, we recommend that the education GPS track be made mandatory for all servicemembers attending TAP.

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<sup>3</sup> Resolution No. 310: Improve Transition Assistance Program (2014 National Convention)

## **What We are Doing to Help**

It is often stated by the VSOs and echoed by the administration that veterans' unemployment cannot be solved by government alone. The American Legion believes the solution lies in a collaboration between government entities and the private sector. The American Legion has responded by working with the US Chamber of Commerce, various large and small businesses and TAP facilitators to bring employment workshops and hiring events to transitioning servicemembers. Our Employment & Empowerment Summit is a two-day workshop intensive event that ends with a Hiring our Heroes Job Fair. We host this Summit in various cities and provide transportation and lodging for transitioning servicemembers going through TAP.

Servicemembers attending our events have the chance to learn about various opportunities in multiple types of businesses ranging from the banking industry to the trades. They are exposed to the distinct corporate culture of the companies in attendance, they are encouraged to network with executives and hiring managers from these companies and they receive one-on-one resume assistance for applying to jobs within these companies from their decision makers, and are able to receive some preliminary instruction on the aforementioned soft skills needed to gain and maintain employment.

## **Improvement Needed in Contracts**

Unfortunately, we are consistently met with resistance from contracted ACAP/TAP facilitators in some of the bases we've contacted, for example Ft. Bragg, Ft. Jackson and Camp Lejeune. We were informed by DOD personnel that contractually, TAP facilitators are evaluated based on a limited scope of performance measures, that only involve the administration of their programs, and as such, there is a lack of incentive for them to work outside the parameters.

The American Legion believes that this situation hinders the provision of important services to transitioning servicemembers. Amending DOD contracts for TAP facilitators to include a section regarding required collaboration with trusted private sector employers and service providers would solve this problem fairly easily.

## **Improving Transition in General**

Improving the transition experience of servicemembers is an ongoing process with many components to consider. Many issues could be mentioned, from the creation of a lifetime medical record to the improvement of credentialing for military experience. However, I would like to highlight one issue that we are particularly concerned about, and that we feel would be a fairly simple fix.

The American Legion recognizes that one of TAP's main roles is to be an introduction to the services and programs available to veterans, and to provide a "warm handoff" to the agencies that administer those programs.

We have become aware of an issue affecting veteran employment services that are funded by the Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG) and administered through the Department of Labor's

(DOL) Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS). Last spring, DOL issued a directive creating a hard distinction between the Disabled Veteran Outreach Program representatives (DVOPs) and the Local Veteran Employment Representatives (LVERs), which are funded by the JVSG grants, and are located at DOL job centers across the country. Essentially, this disallows DVOPs from seeing non-service disabled veterans, *even if they have extra time in which they could do so*.

Granted that in many job centers, there is little spare time. This, however, is not the case in every location. The DOL's restrictive regulation undermines the flexibility that is needed to best serve veterans who are in need of employment services.

In one instance, a blind veteran was escorted out of an American Job Center after he became upset that he no longer qualifies to meet with the DVOP he has been working with under the new regulation, because his disability was not service-connected. The American Legion believes a disabled veteran has significant barriers to employment regardless of whether the disability was resultant from their service or not. The categories imposed by the JVSG restructuring of veteran eligible to seek DVOP services are too restrictive. Some DVOPs have even noted to The American Legion that in the aftermath of this well-intentioned-but-misguided regulation the majority of veterans now receive a 'priority of greeting' but not the 'priority of service' mandated by law.

The American Legion has organized meetings and roundtable discussions with the majority of the stakeholders. There is a consensus in the veteran community that this regulation is problematic, and should be changed. Requiring this regulatory change by DOL would, in the opinion of The American Legion, provide a significant improvement to one of the major transition services available to veterans: the JVSG program.

## **Conclusion**

The American Legion believes strongly that the new TAP program represents an important step toward providing transitioning servicemembers with the information that they need to become successful and productive members of society once they complete their military service. While there exist some shortcomings that require attention, the program overall appears to be successful, and the implementation has been commendable.

The American Legion looks forward to continue to work with the agencies and with Congress to continue to improve this valuable resource for our transitioning servicemembers.