



**MILITARY & VETERANS SERVICES**

**Easter Seals Military and Veterans Services & Easter Seals Dixon Center  
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## **Written Testimony of:**

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**Before the**

**Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
United States House of Representatives**

**On**

**“A Review of the Transition Assistance Program”**

**January 27, 2015**

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to discuss the transition and reintegration needs of America's service members and the public-private community partnerships needed to help make a soldier's transition to civilian life seamless and, ultimately, successful.

My name is David Sutherland. I am representing Easter Seals Dixon Center as an independent contractor. I serve as the Chairman of Easter Seals Dixon Center, a catalyst for forging community partnerships and harnessing local supports to assist veterans and their families to succeed where they live. Easter Seals is a leading non-profit organization that provides local services and supports to empower veterans, people with disabilities and others to reach their potential. Annually, Easter Seals provides direct services to about 165,000 veterans and military families. I co-founded Easter Seals Dixon Center in 2012 to leverage Easter Seals' nationwide network of community-based program locations and to work with private and public sector leaders across the U.S to create better ways for our veterans and military families to succeed in meaningful employment, education and overall wellness. During that time, Easter Seals Dixon Center has impacted the quality of life of nearly one million veterans and military families.

Before my work with Easter Seals Dixon Center, I had the privilege of serving in the United States Army for nearly three decades, including several combat tours in Desert Shield/Desert Storm and as a Brigade Commander during surge operations in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. My final assignment was as direct report and Special Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) from January 2010 through June 2012, where I focused on Warrior and Family Support and co-authored a white paper, *The Sea of Goodwill: Matching Donors to Needs*. In *The Sea of Goodwill*, my co-author, Major John Copeland, and I described a reintegration trinity of education, employment and access to health care which serves to improve the quality of life for returning service members and their families.

Through my JCS work with Admiral Michael Mullen and General Martin Dempsey and now as Chairman of Easter Seals Dixon Center, I regularly meet with service members (as they prepare to transition into communities), veterans and their families as well as with leaders of government, business and the social services network from the very communities these separating service members and their families will return to and call home. My team and I have also visited and worked with nearly 600 communities in the past five years to assist efforts to build public awareness, encourage community involvement, and promote community services. Our work with private, public and social organizations have been the inspiration for programs such as the Administration's Joining Forces initiative, JP Morgan Chase 100,000 jobs initiative, Robin Hood Foundation's Veterans Initiative in New York City, Rally Point 6 outside the gates of Joint Base Lewis McCord in Washington state, and thousands of other supportive efforts. **This experience and these coordinated efforts confirm my belief that the solution to the successful transition of service members lies in America's communities.** I found that what typically separates a transition success story from a transition story of struggle and crisis lies in how a community welcomes, connects with, and responds to service members leaving the military. We don't need more organizations but rather we need to harness existing community-based programs and get organizations from across society to be inclusive of those touched by military service – to use our leadership, locally, to bring these organizations together to achieve collective impact.

The federal government has a vital responsibility to ensure transitioning service members are prepared for their next, post-military step. Recent efforts to expand and improve the Transition

Assistance Program (TAP) are critically important. However, completion of TAP should be viewed as the beginning, not the end of the federal government's involvement in the reintegration process. The hardest work begins once the service members leave their final TAP session and after they have received the commander's Capstone blessing. The minute they step off the military base, they are in community. That is where the community transition starts. My testimony will highlight innovative community solutions that promote successful reintegration and will share ways the federal government – through congressional action and influence – can further support effective public-private partnerships to increase access to education, employment and health care for transitioning service members, veterans and their families. As an independent contractor, I have been authorized by Easter Seals, Inc. to present this testimony on behalf of their Military and Veterans Services.

### **REDESIGNED TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM A HEALTHY START:**

The federal government's primary tool in helping service members transition into civilian life is the Transition Assistance Program. I commend Congress and the Administration for its recent steps to improve TAP, both in making it mandatory through the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) to Hire Heroes Act and in redesigning TAP to include optional, tailored tracks focused on education, entrepreneurship and technical training. The updated TAP program is an improvement over the previous version. The sessions on translating military skills to civilian occupations (MOC Crosswalk) and on developing a budget and a plan for retirement (Personal Financial Planning) are essential components. The addition of specific next-step tracks that offer tailored instruction based on whether the individual plans to pursue a college education, seek an industry-recognized credential or start a business is also very valuable. Easter Seals would support proposals aimed at providing service members with greater flexibility and relevant tools they will need for a smooth and successful transition.

My own transition experience came before many of the TAP improvements were implemented. I attended TAP sessions at Fort Belvoir in Virginia, not far from where we are today. I will never forget the experience – not because of the valuable information I received but rather for who I was paired with during my transition training. In the chair to my left was a young corporal. To my right, an Army staff sergeant. We were all about to enter the civilian world after serving in uniform. But that was where our similarities ended. I was a 29 year Army veteran with a Master's degree who had commanded at all levels, from platoon to brigade combat team. The young corporal enlisted fresh out of high school and also honorably served our nation. On this day, we received the same curriculum, the same benefits briefing and the same employment advice, despite our vastly different military experiences, educational backgrounds and the fact we were positioned to join the civilian labor force at different entry points. We did not benefit from the more focused, tailored training options that are now available under TAP.

### **MORE FOCUS NEEDED ON DESTINATION AND OUTCOMES:**

I met a young Marine Lance Corporal named Gary who participated in the redesigned transition program. Gary attended TAP courses over a two-week period, including in-depth training on employment and the career technical training track. "Overall, the information was good. I'd rate it a B-minus or C-plus," Gary told me. "It'd earn a higher grade had it been more specific to where I was going – even just sending me off with a list of key resources, such as the location of the VA or the job service." The Kentucky native and his wife decided to put down roots in Cincinnati, which

was only an hour north of the small town he was raised. However, Gary's transition training – which he received in North Carolina – lacked any specific information or guidance on the destination of his transition to civilian life, other than an exercise where he had to identify three open jobs in Cincinnati from which he then developed a tailored resume and participated in a mock interview. The redesigned transition program Gary went through is known as Transition GPS. The “GPS” in the name stands for goals, plans and success. In the civilian world, the acronym stands for global positioning system. Nearly every driver owns a vehicle GPS device to help them find their destination. That's really the point of a car GPS: to help you get to where you are going. Yet in Gary's Transition GPS training, his destination was merely a footnote. Gary was equipped with basic tools, but there was never instruction, strategies or next steps for connecting to the community he would soon call home. More needs to be done to localize the TAP training for transitioning service members. In addition, TAP could be improved if the program measured outcomes instead of simply completion. A focus on TAP outcomes was part of U.S. House legislation that would later become the VOW to Hire Heroes Act. Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Jeff Miller's Veterans Opportunity to Work Act<sup>1</sup> (H.R. 2433 – 112<sup>th</sup> Congress) included a section on “Transition Assistance Program Outcomes” that required the Secretaries of Labor and Defense to develop a method to measure TAP outcomes, including length of unemployment of a separated service member, beginning salary of first civilian job, and length of time enrolled in college or training following military separation. The provision focused on participation as well as the next-step outcomes. As best I can tell, this provision did not make it into the final VOW to Hire Heroes Act (P.L. 112-56) that was eventually approved by Congress and signed into law on November 21, 2011.

***Easter Seals Dixon Center Recommendation:** Congress should adopt outcome measures for the Transition Assistance Program to ensure that the information and tools service members receive during TAP are effective, including a post-TAP follow-up to track whether the service member is employed, is starting a business or is receiving education and training. In addition, TAP should be expanded to offer exiting service members the option of attending a post-service community connection session in the actual community they now reside to introduce them to the resources, services and supports in that community (to address the lack of community information identified by Gary's experience). The optional community connection classes could be organized in collaboration with community and veterans service organizations or other government agencies.*

## **FACILIATING CONNECTIONS TO THE COMMUNITY FOR REINTGRATION:**

Under current TAP standards, Gary – the young Marine whom I mentioned earlier – would have been recorded as a transition success. He attended TAP and demonstrated he met career readiness standards. He developed an integrated 12 month post-separation budget, identified his desired employment field and the training (commercial driver's license) he would need to secure his ideal job, and completed a professional resume and references. Gary was self-motivated and anxious to start his new life in Ohio with his wife and son. He and his wife had their own family transition plan and saved for the expenses of moving their belongings from North Carolina to Cincinnati. Part of their plan was to use his final military check (due on October 1, 2013) to cover transition bills, including the first month's rent and deposit for an apartment he lined up for his family while still in North Carolina. The paycheck would also include a lump sum payment for his unused paid

<sup>1</sup> Veterans Opportunity to Work Act of 2011, H.R. 2433, 112<sup>th</sup> Congress, <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d112:h.r.2433>:

leave and was more than enough to cover these initial expenses. Once Gary was settled, he had a plan and the personal motivation to aggressively pursue full-time employment.

Unfortunately, Gary's smooth transition derailed while en route to Cincinnati. Gary and his family pulled up to the apartment in their moving truck only to learn his check bounced. His automatic deposit didn't go through and so they couldn't move in and unload their belongings as they had planned. Gary learned later that the hiccup was a result of a processing delay due to the 2013 federal government shutdown. The matter would eventually get resolved but not before the deposit delay left he and his family homeless, broke and in crisis. They couldn't afford to keep the rental truck and so they unloaded their belongings in cheaper storage outside of Cincinnati. For the next two weeks Gary, his wife and son resorted to sofa surfing from one friend and family member to another, often having to sleep in separate locations due to space limitations. The transient and remote nature of their temporary living arrangements complicated Gary's job hunt.

Marines are known for their honor, courage and determination. And so asking for help and admitting struggle were especially hard for Gary. But with no options and a strong desire to get his life back on track, Gary made a call... a call to his community. "I'll never forget it," Gary said. "It was 2:30 in the morning. I was on a friend's sofa, wide-awake, when I made the call." He called United Way's 211 and asked for help. Less than six hours after placing his call, Gary received a follow up phone call from a specialist from Operation Vets THRIVE, an Easter Seals TriState program I helped to form that connects Cincinnati area veterans with local services and supports to help during their transition. The Easter Seals specialist learned of Gary's financial situation and quickly connected him to three community organizations that provided immediate assistance for the first month's rent, the initial security deposit and other pressing needs. He was then introduced to an Easter Seals Operation Vet THRIVE employment developer who had an immediate lead for a temporary work assignment in his chosen field: transportation. Gary jumped in his car and drove to the company, where he filled out a job application. Within the week, Gary was hired and working 40 hours a week. He slowly built up his resources and confidence. Easter Seals and the Cincinnati community rallied to assist Gary and his family to turn their situation around in a positive and dramatic way. Gary sent me an update last week with the news that he completed accredited training, secured his commercial driver's license and is working full time as an over-the-road truck driver. Gary is firmly on the path toward greatness thanks to a little community support during his transition. Gary and his generation of veterans are wired to serve and represent the best of our society. They have accepted the call to duty and have honorably served our nation against defying odds and enormous challenges. Easter Seals Dixon Center believes our transitioning service members, veterans and their families can thrive where they live and that communities play a key role in the reintegration.

I was drawn to the work of Easter Seals for its national scope and its long-standing commitment to serving veterans and military families. Easter Seals began serving veterans following World War II to address gaps in service to veterans returning home with service-connected disabilities. Today, our nation's veterans face similar challenges and once again Easter Seals is there, this time by mobilizing its national network of 73 affiliates and 550 community-based service sites through employment, caregiving, and transition services. Easter Seals was selected by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to train family caregivers of seriously injured Post-9/11 veterans through a program authorized by Congress. Since 2011, Easter Seals has trained more than 26,500 family caregivers across the country and we continue to expand our impact in this area through partnerships with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, USO and others. Easter Seals also specializes in

helping veterans, homeless veterans, and military spouses develop new work skills and find jobs in their communities through existing programs and new efforts I've helped grow in Ohio, Indiana, New York, Minnesota, the District of Columbia, Virginia and California. And Easter Seals has developed and expanded its Veterans Count philanthropic effort to raise local private dollars to provide critical and timely financial assistance to veterans, service members and their families when no government or other resources are available throughout New England. Veterans Count started as an idea by an Easter Seals volunteer in New Hampshire who had served in the military and wanted a way to help service members and veterans who were struggling and just needed a little assistance during transition. Easter Seals Veterans Count now operates in multiple communities across two states.

Easter Seals Dixon Center is helping to further Easter Seals' efforts by working in communities to build partnerships and share innovative approaches to assist those who have served. Simply put, we believe we are stronger by working with other like-minded organizations. The sea of goodwill exists across the country with groups like Easter Seals Dixon Center who are willing to work together for the greater good within their local communities. We saw it in Cincinnati in its response to the needs of one young Marine and we are seeing it in towns and cities across the United States.

### **COMMUNITY COLLABORATION CREATES EFFECTIVE TRANSITION MODELS:**

Operation Vet THRIVE in Cincinnati was developed with the support of community foundations that recognized the tremendous needs of America's service members and veterans. One of the first action steps we took in launching Operation Vets THRIVE was to host a series of community convening meetings to mobilize the community in support of veterans by identifying existing social programs and gaps in services. This year-long community asset mapping process brought together more than 60 agencies and 200 individuals who regularly communicated and collaborated to identify opportunities and needs around employment, education, health, housing, and family support. In May 2014, the community work group released an extensive community report that included, among other things, a resource inventory and recommendations for continued and more effective collaborations. We were pleased that Chairman Wenstrup shared his personal transition experience in the introduction of this community report. As you may recall, when Gary made his call in the middle of the night, he did not call Easter Seals directly. He called United Way, one of the collaborators in this community process. Recognizing Gary's needs, United Way made a warm handoff to Easter Seals TriState, which also connected to other community organizations, including Goodwill, The Thank You Foundation and USA Cares, for the emergency financial assistance. The veteran made a single call but behind the scenes that veteran was connected to the organizations and programs in that community that best matched his needs. This is the no-wrong-door approach to veteran services that we are facilitating through Easter Seals Dixon Center.

Over the past four years, the leadership of Easter Seals Dixon Center has worked with more than 560 communities, over 20,000 organizations and thousands of like-minded individuals. We understand the grassroots, community-based solutions that work, and those that do not. We completed comprehensive community asset mapping processes in Indianapolis, Indiana and St. Cloud, Minnesota as a result of support through Newman's Own Foundation, the foundation created by the late actor, Paul Newman. These collaborations are already leading to new and more effective reintegration services for veterans and transitioning service members, including a recent

federal grant award to Easter Seals Crossroads in Indianapolis to help address the employment and support needs of unemployed veterans who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness.

Like in the case of Gary, the community became the final catchall after all other systems and programs missed. Unfortunately, there is no mechanism for the social service network and other community organizations to actively engage in support of these service members. While we are creating warm handoffs in the private sector, there is no warm handoff between TAP and the community. There needs to be a more effective way of connecting the separating service member to the community he or she is planning to go – either prior to or during their transition. The Department of Defense, for example, is not designed to provide these follow-along community supports, but some type of handoff within the community to the state director of veteran services, American Job Center staff or local veteran service organizations could help promote smoother transitions. This handoff could be an optional follow-along for service members who sign a personal information disclosure form stating they want to disclose their information to the community they are transitioning into for additional community-based assistance during their transition. This disclosure form could also be the mechanism to help implement my earlier recommendation of an optional community connection TAP session held in the community where the recently transitioned service member lives.

***Easter Seals Dixon Center Recommendation:** Congress should authorize and allocate funding to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to support communities in asset mapping and community collaboration around veteran services and programs to ensure that however a veteran connects to the community their call for assistance is answered and effectively addressed locally. In addition, Congress should push for changes to TAP to give service members the options of sharing their contact information to the community they are transitioning into to promote greater transition success.*

### **VETERAN REINTEGRATION NEEDS BEYOND TRANSITION:**

While this hearing is focused on the immediate transition needs of separating service members I want to raise a growing gap in services that exists for veterans who are experiencing serious reintegration challenges long after their combat missions and separations from the military. While the federal government and communities can and must do more to assist those who have recently transitioned or are scheduled to exit the military, we must also recognize that reintegration challenges often surface months or years after the initial transition. Communities need to be there to support these veterans and their families before their situations turn crisis and require more intensive and expensive interventions. VA Secretary Robert McDonald described at the National Press Club<sup>2</sup> that the peak demand for VA services from a veteran who served in a war occurs 40 years from the end of the war. However, early intervention and regular access to community-based services throughout the lifetime of a veteran can help minimize or alleviate this peak demand.

Easter Seals works regularly with veterans where challenges surface years after they served our nation. Their initial transition was smooth and seamless but issues rise later on – often when they feel under siege on the home front due to a broken relationship, lost job or other stress. These veterans rely on and often turn to their communities for assistance to help them thrive again. Some communities are prepared to embrace them and connect them to the services and supports they

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert McDonald, National Press Club speech, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?322615-1/national-press-club-luncheon-veterans-affairs-secretary-robert-mcdonald>



need to succeed. Others remain unprepared or lack resources to intervene in an effective way. The federal government should support these communities by expanding and funding care coordination models that can effectively connect with and meet the needs of veterans and their families before their situations turn crisis, including direct referrals to the VA or other community services.

Congress has done an effective job in developing and funding programs to assist veterans through community-based services and supports when they have hit crisis. For example, the Supportive Services for Veterans Families (SSVF) at the Department of Veterans Affairs provides grants to community organizations to provide care coordination and supportive services to veteran families who are homeless or at-risk for homeless. The Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) at the U.S. Department of Labor provides grants to community organizations to provide employment supports and supportive services to unemployed veterans who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness. Both programs are effective because of the public-private care coordination model that recognizes the myriad reasons a veteran can become homeless, from poverty and lack of support from family or friends to substance use or mental health challenges.

However, both of these programs target veterans when they have hit a crisis situation and when they are the hardest-to-serve. All veterans that seek help in their communities should have access to early intervention and supportive services through a SSVF/HVRP-like community model. Easter Seals welcomes the VA's implementation of the Section 506 pilot program authorized through Public Law 111-163 to increase the coordination of services and benefits to assist veterans who are transitioning from military service to civilian life. Congress authorized four types of locations in the P.L. 111-163 pilot: rural areas, areas with populations that have a high proportion of minority group representation, areas with populations that have a high proportion of individuals who have limited access to health care, and areas that are not in close proximity to an active duty military installation. The two-year pilot (which the VA has implemented as the Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot) is further recognition that reintegration success lies in communities and that the federal government has a responsibility to help those communities effectively respond to the needs of their residents who are veterans.

***Easter Seals Dixon Center Recommendation:** Congress should expand community-based care management and supportive services models to address the unmet needs of veteran families. Congress could take immediate steps by extending the time-limited Section 506 pilot program (P.L. 111-163) and by expanding the pilot to all authorized community locations, including the use of multi-service site grants to test service delivery efficiencies.*

## **CONCLUSION:**

My military service over two wars informs me about the difficult challenges facing America's transitioning service members and veterans and motivates me to help empower them to achieve their capacity for greatness. Effectively addressing the reintegration needs of transitioning service members and veterans will require attention, energy and resources. But every veteran matters. Communities are trying to respond but they need additional support from Congress to promote public-private partnerships and to increase access to community-based services and supports. As I discussed, Congress can start by:

- Establishing outcome measurements and increasing community connection within TAP, including an optional community-connection follow along session;



- Authorizing and funding asset mapping grants to communities and community organizations; and
- Extending and expanding programs such as the Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot (P.L. 111-163 Section 506 pilot) to address ongoing reintegration needs through community-based care coordination and supportive services.

Thank you for your leadership and for all you have done to help improve the transition and reintegration of America's service members and veterans. This is important work, but the reward of our hard work is in the altered lives of veterans like Gary. Their lives are better because of our collective efforts and attention. Their successes are what motivate us to continue our expansion of public-private partnerships to make sure all veterans and transitioning service members get the assistance they need during transition to thrive and grow in their communities. Thank you again. I am pleased to take your questions.

**David W. Sutherland, U.S. Army, Retired**  
**Co-Founder and Chairman, Easter Seals Dixon Center**  
**Founder and President, Sutherland Partnership**

Colonel David W. Sutherland is the co-founder and Chairman of Easter Seals Dixon Center and actively contributes to numerous national veteran and military family committees and boards. Sutherland speaks in communities at universities, businesses and conferences around the country as a vocal advocate and leader for transformational change. He is a vocal advocate for our service members, military veterans, their families, and the families of our fallen.

Colonel Sutherland culminated his 29 years of service following Brigade Command, as the Special Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff with principle focus on Warrior and Family Support. By visiting hundreds of communities and assisting thousands of organizations, he created a nationwide network of support utilizing grassroots solutions for veterans and their families.

Awards and decorations include, among others, the Bronze Star Medal with oak leaf cluster, Purple Heart, Ranger Tab, Combat Infantryman's Badge Second Award and Senior Parachutist Badge. He is also the 2008 Freedom Award recipient presented by the No Greater Sacrifice Foundation and the 2011 Meritorious Service Award recipient presented by the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans for his work on behalf of returning service members, veterans, military families and families of the fallen.

He holds a Bachelor's degree from Bowling Green State University in History and Economics and a Masters in Strategic Studies.

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