

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
FOR THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
ON "COORDINATING TRANSITION RESOURCES"
AUGUST 28, 2020**

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and members of the Subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit our views on how outside organizations can support service members in the transition process. PVA is uniquely suited to comment on the challenges veterans face when transitioning following acquiring a catastrophic disability such as a spinal cord injury or disorder (SCI/D).

Transitioning from the military is a complicated process for many service members. It is the start of a new life that introduces a variety of questions about what comes next. Where will I live? What should my next job be? Should I go back to school? The list of "what if's" goes on and on. For veterans who have acquired catastrophic disabilities, the transition is even more complicated.

To better prepare service members for this transition, the Departments of Defense (DOD), Veteran Affairs (VA), and Labor (DOL) work collaboratively with other government organizations on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) to provide service members with the skills necessary to effectively resume their civilian lives. The current program lasts twelve months for most, but in cases where service members are retiring with twenty years or more of service, the process can begin up to twenty-four months before separation.

TAP is comprised of five sections: initial counseling, pre-separation briefings, DOD Transition Day (single day of briefings focusing on subjects like resiliency, how your individual service occupational specialty translates to the civilian world, and financial literacy), and a TAP capstone (verification that the transitioning service member has met the TAP Career Readiness Standards and has a viable transition plan and is prepared to transition to civilian life). Each year 200,000 service members transition to

civilian life, and according to DOD, roughly 90 percent participated in the TAP program in 2018.¹

PVA's Paving Access for Veterans Employment program (PAVE) provides one-on-one interactions between counselors and employment analysts with veterans and active service members. Through these interactions, we have learned of some gaps and needed updates for the TAP program, especially for individuals who have acquired disabilities while in service.

While TAP is intended to provide all service members with the career resources, skills, and other information needed to assist them as they transition to the civilian workforce, information relevant to veterans with disabilities is minimal at best. Veterans with disabilities must be made aware of, and have access to, resources that will assist them in meeting their short- and long-term employment goals.

Current Gaps in the Transition Process

Programming focused on transition from military to civilian life should begin well before service members decide to separate and continue long after their last day in uniform. Any formal military to civilian transition programs, including TAP, should be framed as a way to help the veteran understand transition is a process rather than a task to be completed, which is how the two-week course is currently presented.

When service members attend TAP courses, numerous distractors like potential excitement or anxiety about their future, continued work expectations, out-processing, medical appointments, a potential move, and other requirements related to leaving the military, can lead to lack of attention when attending courses.

TAP has the correct goals in sight, but is not presented in a way that maximizes engagement for the broader transitioning population. PVA recommends that transition information be presented in three major categories: employment information and knowledge, skills for education, and information focused on both service-connected and non-service connected disabilities.

The impact of service members' choices as they transition from the service has lasting impacts on their lives. Whether their decision is to go back to school or find a job, the decision needs to be well thought out. Service members with disabilities also have to make these difficult choices and TAP must provide the resources necessary for the success of all service members no matter their desired goals. This can be accomplished via clear and well thought out courses that encourage and force transitioning service members to spend time planning.

There is more to the military to civilian transition process than finding a job, but this is often a consuming focus for those transitioning from active duty. Studies have shown

¹ Gurkin, C., Giese, D., Roark, C., Morehouse, C., Amare, H., Anderson, N., . . . Spencer, A. (2019). Transitioning Servicemembers: Information on Military Employment Assistance Centers (pp. 1-20) (United States, Congress, US Government Accountability Office). Washington, District of Columbia: US GAO.

that up to a third of Post-9/11 veterans state they are not employed to their objective skill level. Information related to transition should focus on a multitude of relevant information, including briefings on industries, job skills, types of positions, state benefits.² Additionally, transitioning service members must be briefed on the many career and skill building programs available to them very early in the transition process, including DOD's SkillBridge program, apprenticeship programs, and skill building programs offered by many non-governmental organizations.

As of August 2019, 4.7 million veterans, or 25 percent of the veteran population, had a service-connected disability.³ Twenty-nine percent reported a combined disability rating of less than 30 percent, while 41 percent reported a rating of higher than 60 percent.⁴ And a recent Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) National Network study found that 57 percent of veterans with a disability feared they would be discriminated against in hiring because of their disability.⁵

It is essential TAP include relevant information on what it means to live with a disability, including information on quality of life and accommodations/support services at work and in post-secondary education. A disabled Army officer who is working with our PAVE program in the process of transitioning out of the military stated the following about virtual PAVE programs, "The Army transition program maybe addresses a lot of things, but doesn't address the position that I'm in right now. So, I would never have known about reasonable accommodations, but with the nature of the PAVE program, reasonable accommodations just naturally came up and we started talking about some of those things that really allowed me to get a lot of questions answered. So, when I start my next career I'll know how to ask for what I need to succeed."

All transitioning service members should be educated on the ADA, the protections it provides, and how it might functionally impact their lives. This information, along with information on Social Security programs such as Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and the Ticket to Work program (a no fee, voluntary employment program for people ages 18 through 64 who are receiving disability benefits under Social Security's Supplemental Security Income program and/or SSDI aimed at assisting beneficiaries in obtaining employment and working towards becoming financially independent), is especially important for service members who transition out from their respective service wounded or injured programs such as the Army Wounded Warrior Program, USMC Wounded Warrior Regiment, Navy Safe Harbor, or Air Force Wounded Warrior Program.

² ZipRecruiter and the Call of Duty™ Endowment Release Ground Breaking Research. (2017, November 09). Retrieved August 24, 2020, from <https://www.callofdutyendowment.org/news/archives/ziprecruiter-and-the-call-of-dutyendowment-release-ground-breaking-research>

³ Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2020, March 19). EMPLOYMENT SITUATION OF VETERANS — 2019. Retrieved August 26, 2020, from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/vet.pdf>

⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2020, March 19).

⁵ ADA. (2017). Employment Data for Veterans with Disabilities. Retrieved August 25, 2020, from <https://adata.org/factsheet/employment-data-veterans-disabilities>

To create a process that works for all veterans, these challenges and information gaps must be first addressed. TAP must provide veterans, including those with disabilities, with the tools needed to reach their goals and understand their benefits. The program should also focus on setting expectations for transitioning—salary, job title, and translation of their military skills.

Many transitioning service members pursue higher education. The Forever GI Bill provides funding to pay for full tuition and fees for public colleges and universities or a set rate for private institutions, a monthly housing allowance, and a stipend for books and supplies. The GI Bill is so widely used, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) reported in 2018 they spent about \$10.7 billion on nearly 700,000 students.⁶

The GI Bill is an indispensable benefit for transitioning service members and veterans and must be adequately explained both in terms of the technical use and how to make prudent decisions for future success. More information and resources should be provided to assist future student veterans with selecting the right school or course of study for a fulfilling career. Veterans who pursue higher education are often older than the traditional student, many are first generation college students, and because many have responsibilities such as families or caring for aging parents, they lack the same opportunity to make mistakes or major changes in their education plans as a young adult straight out of high school.⁷

It is vital they not waste the precious resources and opportunities the GI Bill provides. Information must be communicated in a way that stresses the importance of how current choices contribute to their future success. We encourage DOD and VA to provide more education for transitioning service members and future student veterans on how to use labor market resources, their chosen industry outlook, and ways to analyze school graduation and successful employment rates.

Individuals with disabilities that significantly impact their lives face additional challenges in the transition process. For example, veterans with disabilities pursuing higher education need to understand the different options they have on campus and how to access reasonable accommodations via their disability resources offices. TAP must include information about the ADA, what it is, how it works, and what protections it provides to veterans with disabilities. It is also essential for transitioning service members with disabilities to understand the different state by state disability benefits for life after service.

TAP must also include information on mental health. According to a recent study by the RAND Center for Military Health Policy Research, 20 percent of veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan are living with either major depression or post-traumatic stress

⁶ Department of Veterans Affairs of. (2019, February). Post-9/11 GI Bill: General Information. Retrieved August 26, 2020, from https://benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/education/Post-911_General_info.pdf

⁷ Congressional Budget Office. (2019, May 07). The Post-9/11 GI Bill: Beneficiaries, Choices, and Cost. Retrieved August 26, 2020, from <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/55179>

disorder.⁸ PAVE clients who are veterans with both a mental health illness or disorder plus physical disabilities have communicated to the PAVE team that there is a need for a focus on the diversity of options, benefits, and possibilities for service members as they leave service. Many veterans with disabilities are often not aware of the different ADA accommodations that are available to them.

We would also like to see more transition programs, such as DOD's SkillBridge program, DOL apprenticeships, and similar opportunities, extended to veterans with significant disabilities who are transitioning out of the military. These programs, coupled with counseling on the short-term and long-term benefits of continuing to work, can have a positive impact on disabled veterans and how they integrate into their local community.

In order to better serve veterans with disabilities transitioning to employment, PVA also recommends that DOL's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) program continue to focus on the broader veteran population by developing more paid training and apprenticeship programs for veterans who have already entered the workforce, significantly disabled veterans, non-service-connected disabled veterans, and those in remote areas. Additionally, PVA recommends swift implementation of the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program within DOL VETS that Congress approved last year (Public Law No: 116-93). The crux of this program is to help monitor and highlight the employment struggles and job opportunities for veterans with disabilities and to coordinate and promote federal data, research, and services aimed at addressing this ongoing challenge. We believe that this office is essential to the employment success of disabled veterans.

A cohort that should never be excluded from the discussion on transition, are those service members who are unable to attend school or obtain employment directly following their military service. These are individuals who are still in the process of recovering from injuries or illnesses, and those who are leaving service to become caregivers to their parents, children, or partners or spouses. Currently, the level of services and supports for these individuals is minimal. Whether a veteran considers him or herself to be a paralyzed veteran, disabled veteran, wounded warrior, or other term, it is imperative these veterans understand their civil rights as a person with a disability and the accommodations and services available to them as such. This approach must be a joint effort between DOL, DOD, and VA.

Solutions for Success

To meet the needs of transitioning service members, it is imperative that the process provides relevant information at an appropriate pace for each service member. In order for DOD and DOL to appropriately prepare transitioning service members for their civilian lives, transition must be treated like a process, not an event. To facilitate the

⁸ Tanielian, Terri, Lisa H. Jaycox, Terry L. Schell, Grant N. Marshall, M. Audrey Burnam, Christine Eibner, Benjamin Karney, Lisa S. Meredith, Jeanne S. Ringel, and Mary E. Vaiana, *Invisible Wounds: Mental Health and Cognitive Care Needs of America's Returning Veterans*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RB-9336-CCF, 2008. As of August 25, 2020: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9336.html

shift from transition as an event to a process, veterans service organizations (VSOs) and non-profit organizations should be deeply involved in the transition process.

By allowing service members to engage with experts from a variety of organizations such as VSOs and non-profits, transitioning service members will get the information needed for success after service. Currently, there are numerous VSOs that provide career support for transitioning service members and veterans after they've finished TAP, including PVA through our PAVE program. VSOs also understand the challenges faced by transitioning service members and especially those with disabilities. There are also a large number of organizations that focus on disability rights for veterans that can be utilized to help transitioning service members understand their options.

When looking to harness VSOs and other nonprofits, it is important to ensure that these organizations have a demonstrated history of helping service members successfully transition, with a strong understanding of military and veteran culture and what resources are available to them. These organizations must be reputable and have a proven track record of work in the veteran transition space.

Conclusion

PVA calls upon Congress to make changes to the current transition process to better prepare service members with disabilities for productive lives after the military. This will involve treating transition as a process and not an event, helping veterans understand and make the most of their rehabilitative benefits, and harnessing the expertise and experience of VSOs and non-profit organizations that specialize in transition and career services.

To better prepare transitioning service members with disabilities for life after the military, Congress, DOD, VA, and DOL must work to improve the TAP program to provide relevant information for individuals who have acquired disabilities during military service. By working with organizations in the veteran transition space, TAP can become a program that provides ALL transitioning service members with the needed support for future success. An improved program will be beneficial to service members and their families. PVA encourages Congress to push for a long-term program that is inclusive of service members and veterans with disabilities.

PVA would once again like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit our views on coordinating transition resources. We would be happy to take any questions you have for the record.

Information Required by Rule XI 2(g) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI 2(g) of the House of Representatives, the following information is provided regarding federal grants and contracts.

Fiscal Year 2020

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$253,337.

Fiscal Year 2019

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$193,247.

Fiscal Year 2018

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$181,000.

Disclosure of Foreign Payments

Paralyzed Veterans of America is largely supported by donations from the general public. However, in some very rare cases we receive direct donations from foreign nationals. In addition, we receive funding from corporations and foundations which in some cases are U.S. subsidiaries of non-U.S. companies.