

Good Afternoon House Committee on Veterans Affairs,

Thank you all for the opportunity to speak at the hearing regarding the “Coordinating Transition Resources,” for the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. I hope to support your efforts to identify gaps in coordination and opportunities for synergy among the resources available to Veterans through VA and other federal and nongovernmental entities.

My name is Daniel Romero and I serve as a Senior Program Director at SAY San Diego, a civilian-based nonprofit organization dedicated to partnering with youth, adults, families, and communities in reaching their fullest potential. One of these communities that SAY San Diego works to support includes the Active Duty Military Community and the Veteran Community residing in San Diego County. Through my work at SAY San Diego, I have had the privilege of gaining a better understanding of the challenges that military and Veteran families face as well as learning of the numerous groups that have surfaced to address many of these challenges through my oversight of the “San Diego Military Family Collaborative,” a community collaborative convened by SAY San Diego.

The San Diego Military Family Collaborative (SDMFC) has a 10-year history and now convenes over 200 organizations reaching over 500 participants annually through attendance of at least one of our convenings and/or community activities/workshops. SDMFC’s collective body consists of nonprofit/community organizations (Military and Veteran Serving Organizations), local government representatives, Command Leadership, Ombudsmen, Veterans, military spouses, and more. All members of the community are welcome to our activities, including civilians, as we aim to support the military and Veteran connected community through education, advocacy, and engagement.

In my four years of service to SDMFC, I have seen many needs of military families surface from behavioral health needs, to substance abuse issues, to uncovering legal resources for military families, to understanding the rights of foreign-born spouses, and other pertinent topics military families face in their daily lives. Monthly, SDMFC brings awareness to these topics by convening and sharing insight on each issue through a panel discussion consisting of service providers who work on the front lines of these issues to better inform our audience of key insights and resources. Panelists also share common questions they receive from military families as well as highlighting various resources that can address these needs, whenever possible. Following the panel discussion, audience members are encouraged to utilize their newfound knowledge on the subject matter in small group discussions and/or activities to encourage personal exchanges and interconnections among the audience leading to rapport building and trust from this shared experience. It is through these exchanges where service providers gain contacts for future referrals and establish new collaborative methods to support military families.

SDMFC utilizes a collective impact model to forge these relationships building a network of support where providers learn to collaborate by avoid duplication in services and streamline referrals whenever possible. This “no wrong door” approach encourages providers to cross-refer clients so that military families are not “lost in the shuffle of military life.” Most importantly, SDMFC’s collaborative work has shown me how a community can rally together to solve complex problems in better serving those who serve us every day.

One of the critical issues that SDMFC has worked to address since 2014 is the topic of “Transition” from “Active Duty to Civilian Life.” In 2014, leaders of San Diego’s local military and

veteran community came together to discuss this critical juncture of a service member's career as service members reported they were unprepared for their transition through the Transition Assistance Program, "TAPs." These individuals indicated that the information regarding their transition was provided too later in their transition process leaving service members frantic and confused. Unable to digest/decipher the information being shared in TAPs courses, service members expressed feeling lost when it came to navigating these complex systems and benefits on their own. It was during these discussions, which would later be known as, "Military Transition Support Project (MTSP) " led by San Diego Grantmakers (<https://sdgrantmakers.org/MTSP#:~:text=The%20Military%20Transition%20Support%20Project,for%20Veterans%2C%20and%20to%20connect>) where SDMFC leaders holistically looked at the transition process. Through the MTSP, SDMFC leadership learned that part of this complex issue of transition is rooted in how transitional information is disseminated in the community is often directed solely to the service member alone rather than the family; most notably the military spouse/partner.

While TAPs is open to military spouses to attend, SDMFC leadership found that for many military families the spouse/partner was oftentimes the family's co-decisionmaker voicing their opinions on the trajectory or direction of the service member's career, yet these spouses/partners were unaware of TAPs courses. In a duty station like San Diego, it is common for many military families to live off-base or outside of military housing making awareness of such transitional supports on-base even more challenging. Moreover, SDMFC leadership found that these classes were not easily accessed for military spouses due to two major barriers: "childcare" and "time off" required to attend these workshops. Stay at home spouses/partners often need childcare to attend TAPs for children below school-age and the cost of childcare incurred to attend the 3 to 5 days of workshops could be considered a financial hardship. Additionally, access to local Child Development Centers (CDC's) and Drop-In Centers are currently impacted by large waitlists that do not always accommodate these families in need.

Additionally, for military spouses, in a duty-station/city like San Diego, where the cost of living is well above the national average, spouses may seek out employment to support their family as their wages may be necessary to comfortably live at the local Area Median Income (AMI), which in San Diego is listed as \$92,700/annually (<https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/sdhcd/rental-assistance/income-limits-ami/>). For these families, military spouses may not have the flexibility in their work schedules or the time necessary to take off to be in attendance of TAPs classes. With this in mind, the family is reliant upon the service member alone to absorb the transitional information, which is often overwhelming. This dynamic where the service member is the only attendee of TAPs causes concern as the service member is oftentimes focused on their mission and readiness preparing their future replacement to absorb their duties for the next mission rather than dedicating the own time to prepare for their own transition. Needless to say, Active Duty members have expressed the overwhelming feeling of, "drinking out of a fire hose," when trying to learn all the intricate details of the transition process.

For these reasons, the San Diego Military Family Collaborative created an Action Team known as, "Military Transition: The Spouse Edition," or "MTSE" led by strong female leaders with lived experience as Veterans, military spouses, and professionals working in the military and Veteran arena from both DoD and civilian organizations. In 2014, MTSE began gathering community leaders from local installations (Fleet and Family Support Center, Marine Corps Community

Services), local government (Department of Labor and County of San Diego), community organizations (Courage to Call, SAY San Diego, Zero8Hundred), and others in an effort to discuss how to better serve these families experiencing transition. The MTSE Action Team discussed how the community could work with one another sharing contacts of potential speakers, sharing various resources for transition, and in time created a resource binder and a workshop so that military families could begin their preparation for transition well in advance. The MTSE workshop was created to be a free, mini-briefing workshop to inform military spouses from all service branches in a one-day workshop format (either day or evening hours) where childcare, a meal, a resource binder and access to subject matter experts are made available to those in attendance eliminating barriers of participation. MTSE encourages the entire family to attend including the service member so that the family can proactively gain the same understanding of the "road" to a successful transition. These small measures have gone a long way in providing military spouses with access to bite-size information on transition intended not to overwhelm the audience, but rather develop a roadmap of transition for military families to take home and begin discussing as a family their future transition plans. MTSE also leaves contact information for each speaker in the resource binder to have participants follow up with these experts asking their personal questions on transition as each family will have different challenges and/or set of circumstances. Finally, MTSE was created so that families can attend the workshop as many times as necessary to absorb the information, and some of our participants have shared that they are engaging these workshops upwards of 2+ years away from the service member's possible separation or retirement.

It should be noted that many of the subject matter of our course is intended to mirror the on-base briefs including information focusing on "Relocation," "Finances," "Healthcare" (TRICARE), "VA Benefits," "Education," and "Employment." Additionally, many of the presenters are the same presenters providing TAPs briefings. These relationships were formed through relationships garnered at SDMFC convenings and these relationships created access to key transitional supports in the community. For many groups (DoD connected or community based) operating the transitional space, the measure of success often is found in the number of individuals that attend each workshop and/or events. Once service providers were realized that instead of competing with one another that they could actually serve more individuals and save on resources by sharing the stage with one another is when our partners stopped working in silos and started exercising collective impact. MTSE offers providers the chance to share their expertise in a given subject area with program participants for a predetermined length of time and following the segment, another presenter utilizes their time to explain another transition topic. To participate as a speaker, presenters must attend action team meetings, maintain and update resource binder content sharing all resources related to a given topic, as well as support the marketing and messaging of the workshop through flyer distributions and social media messaging casting a wider net to reach a greater number of possible participants. Through this synergy, community partners have also been given more visibility on-base through the various invitations to participate in specific committees, briefings, and community-focused events such as Ombudsmen Fairs and holiday events. This visibility is imperative in helping military families find these community resources supporting transition and we are fortunate to have this relationship with local base installations.

Over the last four years of supporting MTSE, I can attest that participants identify two main areas that cause stress and anxiety coming into our workshops, which include the topics of Healthcare and VA Benefits. Therefore, it was imperative to secure speakers who could

demonstrate their knowledge of the subject area in a short period of time, so we are fortunate to have these representatives from our local VA and TRICARE. Additionally, many service members indicate that they are actually well-informed about employment and educational options following service due to on-base briefings like TAPs and guest speakers from the surrounding community who may share on these employment/educational possibilities as well as apprenticeships and certification programs. Conversely, our participants indicate the area of least concern is often the topic of "Social-Emotional Wellness." MTSE has chosen to emphasize this topic during workshops at great length as participants have shared feelings of anxiety, stress, conflict, depression, and more when dealing with their impending transition. Also, each member of the family unit has different feelings on transition varying from the service member, to the spouse/partner, to the child and dependent. Taking time to surface these emotions is important, but it is also important to share resources and/or groups to connect with during and following transition as a transition can feel like a loss of identity. Many families have expressed that their way of life, their friendships, their values, and their understanding of the world around them are directly connected to their status of being a "military family." Through transition, this way of life is drastically changed as it is difficult to maintain relationships and share in the same experiences with other military families once exited from service. Veteran families have also shared that civilians can sometimes be unaware or unable to comprehend the meaning, sacrifice, and magnitude of their service leaving an incongruence in their core values leaving these families feeling disconnected or "on another planet." Therefore, MTSE showcases peer navigators who can support families staying local to San Diego (Courage to Call), local to Southern California (Zero8Hundred), or those who may be relocating across the country (Military OneSource). These "peer navigators" can help families navigate systems and challenges of transition and often are those who have the same lived experience as a past service member, military spouse/partner, and/or have been a military child.

Statistically speaking for the last four years, SDMFC has surveyed MTSE workshop participants through a retrospective post-assessment of the workshop asking military spouses to rate their level of preparation for transition and their knowledge of community resources to support their transition prior to and following the MTSE course. Over the years, our workshop participants have indicated that before the course approximately 30% of participants felt prepared for transition while following this workshop upwards of 80% have felt prepared for this transition. Similarly, approximately 35% of our audience expressed feeling knowledgeable about community resources who can help support their transition but following the course upwards of 95% of the audience felt they were now informed of these community and DoD connected resources.

While I am aware of and applaud some of the more recent improvements to the TAPs courses including more "touchpoints" with service members up to 365 days out from their potential end of service date, these measures require command leadership to coordinate time off so the service member can attend this course, which is not always possible. Therefore, SDMFC is in support of measures to offer more transition support to service members and their families well in advance (2 years out from end of service) and the establishment of a formalized system to provide these workshops around the calendar and virtually whenever a service member is deployed much in the same way as the current measures being taken under COVID-19 conditions for VTAP (Virtual TAP). With an advanced marker in time, service members will not be rushed through the process, but rather have the time required to navigate complex resources and benefits. This process should also be made available to Veteran families who have already

made their transition into civilian life much in the same way that our MTSE course is offered eliminating common barriers of attendance. While I will offer that stress and anxiety of transition can also be attributed to employment and fiscal management, that these areas, at least in San Diego, have numerous community organizations, local nonprofits, career centers, and local businesses supporting service members secure gainful employment. SDMFC believes more needs to be done to prepare families for the financial piece of transition as well as the social-emotional wellness previously discussed.

Finally, SDMFC is also aware of recent activities to provide TAPs information through virtual briefings during COVID-19. MTSE has also gone virtual in our workshops connecting our audience with virtual our presenters, but I will say that while these virtual workshops offered through VTAPs and MTSE are informative, the relationships created in-person workshops often entice a military family or a veteran family to follow up with a presenter and ask private and difficult questions about their own transition, which is difficult to recreate in a virtual environment. Finally, during times of COVID-19, we have found that private foundations often shift giving priorities to basic needs assistance for those directly impacted by the pandemic making it difficult to sustain programs like MTSE and the coordination of care required to follow up with participants. Therefore, SDMFC encourages a bill supporting community focused transition courses to help ensure that military and Veteran families continue to receive quality ongoing support creating the conditions of a successful transition even when the service member crosses the “blue line.”

Unfortunately, unsuccessful transitions have serious consequences subjecting these families to conflict and fractures (separation/divorce), financial insecurity through unemployment, possible bouts of homelessness, and in grave situations suicidal ideation from the loss of identity/lifestyle or mental illness that may go untreated. It is for these reasons why additional care must be invested in creating additional supports for military and Veteran families to access transitional support when in need. I have witnessed the frustration of families in their navigation of complex issues like healthcare and VA benefits seeking to get the support they need in a one-stop hub, but currently, these entities operate independently rather than interdependently from one another, which is why workshops like MTSE must continue to exist in the community to congregate all the key pieces of transition together in the same space with contact information for participants to follow-up with rather than attempting to navigate each system separately. Finally, SDMFC also understands that service members may also transition to an area void of a large military presence without a plethora of service organizations ready to support a family through transition so future planning needs to be dedicated to creating a singular repository online for all transition information to be accessed with the ability to receive peer navigation, even if virtually. We owe it to those who serve us every day to create a more fluid process of transition where military and veteran families can get supported through coordinated services and collective impact where community and DoD connected agencies can share the stage together.

I would like to thank you all once again for the opportunity to share my experience and observations in hopes that you see the need to continue supporting community efforts to support military and veteran families in their transition to civilian life.

Sincerely,

*Daniel Romero*

*SAY San Diego/San Diego Military Family Collaborative*