

**STATEMENT OF MR. WILLIAM R. MANSELL, Jr., DIRECTOR
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BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you for this oversight hearing on, “Military Transition during the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

My statement will focus on the current state of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) as it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic. TAP is a collaborative effort for delivery between the Department of Defense (DoD), Department of Labor (DOL), Department of Veteran’s Affairs (VA), and Small Business Administration (SBA), each with a primary area of responsibility and focus. However, the program succeeds due to a robust interagency collaboration, which encompasses the four agencies listed above and three additional agencies, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Department of Education (ED), and the U.S Office of Personnel Management (OPM), to provide synergy, consistency, and collaboration across the program.

The seven federal agencies, which comprise the TAP, are committed to supporting and facilitating transition success for Service members as they enter civilian life. The TAP interagency governance structure oversees and monitors the program through the interagency coordination. The TAP governance structure consists of:

- Joint Executive Committee (JEC): The JEC is a DoD-VA interagency committee, co-chaired by the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness and Deputy Secretary of the VA with members from various agencies to assist DoD and VA to facilitate the needs of Service members. The JEC serves as the primary Federal interagency body for overseeing and supporting transition assistance activities and initiatives for Active Duty, National Guard, and Reserve Armed Forces.
- TAP Executive Council (TAP EC): The EC is composed of Senior Executive and Flag Officer leaders and other designated officials from DoD (including Military Components), DOL, ED, VA, DHS, SBA, and OPM who collaborate and coordinate the delivery of transition services to eligible Active and Reserve Component (RC) Service members. The EC provides oversight and strategic guidance for the TAP Interagency Governance structure.
- Senior Steering Group (SSG): The SSG consists of members from DoD (including Military Components), DOL, ED, VA, DHS, SBA, and OPM. The SSG resolves issues, concerns, and friction points among agencies providing transition assistance and coordinates with internal agency leaders as appropriate. The SSG reports to the EC.
- Transition Assistance Interagency Working Group (TAIWG): The TAIWG consists of representatives from all agencies and military components participating in TAP. This interagency working group reviews the procedures and guidance developed by

the subordinate working groups to promote alignment of effort, measure progress, apply synergies and improvements, and ensures legal review of proposed actions. The TAIWG serves as the Action Officer level providing approval for procedures, guidance and actions within TAP. Senior leaders receive information from the TAIWG, via participation in the SSG. There are six subordinate work groups that report to the TAIWG;

- The Curriculum Work Group, Data Sharing/Information Technology Work Group, Performance Management Work Group, Strategic Communications Work Group, Employment Work Group, and the Reserve Component Work Group.

I will focus the remainder of my statement on the Department's implementation of TAP leading up to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before COVID-19, the majority of transitioning Service members (TSM) completed TAP in-person. TAP began when the respective Service notified eligible TSMs of their need to attend TAP based on their expected date of separation. TSMs then contacted their local TAP center to complete in-person individualized initial counseling (IC). This crucial counseling session allows the TSM and TAP counselor to establish rapport, determine the individual needs of the TSM, and plan for the rest of the individualized process. During IC, the counselor and TSM begin the development of the individual transition plan (ITP), registers for Pre-Separation Counseling, TAP curriculum, and Capstone. The IC, Pre-Separation counseling, and Capstone were all conducted in-person, with few exceptions. In-person attendance for TAP curriculum was the primary and preferred option, with the ability to utilize Joint Knowledge Online (JKO) as an alternative method of delivery, refresher training, and for spouses of transitioning Service members.

In March 2020, COVID-19 severely inhibited our ability to provide TAP utilizing the same manner and delivery modes as before. As installations closed and communities instituted COVID-19 protocols, we had to adapt and evolve a TAP process designed around face-to-face interaction, personal connection, and the ability to network with peers. DoD, the Services, and the TAP interagency partners quickly responded with flexible options and tailored support. By the end of March 2020, JKO and virtual platforms delivered nearly 100% of the TAP classes.

RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Since March 8, 2020, the Department continues to issue guidance and updates to the Military Departments, DoD component heads, and military commanders on how to respond to the implications of COVID-19. This guidance includes the risk-based measures issued by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) related to health and hygiene, travel, social distancing, mask requirements, quarantining when exposed, and maximizing telework possibilities.

The Department continues to monitor the impacts of COVID-19 on the transition and reintegration populations. The Department provided support to the Services and interagency partners through the TAP governance structure, specifically through the TAIWG. This working

group supported efforts of the Services and partner agencies by facilitating and coordinating information exchange between the Services, partner agencies and DoD, to discuss concerns, share successes, and provide recommendations.

CURRENT STATE OF TAP

COVID-19 manifests differently depending on the location and thus produces different responses. Correspondingly, installation Commanders determine the mandates, requirements, and restrictions on their installation, in accordance with DoD, CDC, state, and local guidelines. These geographic differences drove exploration and development of alternate modes of delivery for TAP. Each installation is empowered with the flexibility to identify and use the mode(s) that best align with their needs and situation.

As previously mentioned, by the end of March 2020, installation closures caused nearly 100% of TAP curriculum completion through Joint Knowledge Online (JKO) and required TAP counselors to conduct telephone interviews for other TAP components, such as, IC, Pre-Separation Counseling, and Capstone. However, the Services and installations, encouraged by the Department, quickly adapted delivery of all components of TAP into a live-online virtual environment, utilizing platforms such as MS Teams, Zoom, GoToMeetings, and Adobe Connect. These new formats allowed for face-to-face interaction between the TAP Managers and counselors and the population they serve. Once the installations were successful in delivery of their own TAP components (IC, Pre-Separation Counseling, DoD Transition Day, and Capstone), they invited the interagency partners to conduct instructor-led courses using the online platform. This new instructor-led online delivery mode ensures the congressionally mandated components of TAP delivery are as effective as possible, utilizing a format that encourages interaction through discussion and questions between the instructors and participants.

As installations began to reopen, in-person delivery of TAP also opened; however, due to restrictions in place for social distancing, classes were limited in capacity. These modifications were necessary to accommodate TAP staff and TSMs, and resulted in further modification of TAP delivery into a hybrid-delivery model. A hybrid-delivery model includes a set number of participants learning in-person, while other participants learn virtually. This occurs simultaneously with both groups having the same live instructor. This hybrid mode of delivery allows for the natural discussion of an in-person class, while also enabling those online to hear the discussion and participate via chat or messenger, resulting in greater interaction between the instructor and participants.

At this time, we deliver TAP curricula using four types of delivery modes:

- *In-seat or in-person:* Instruction with COVID-19 restrictions in place. The TAP center either made accommodations for safety practices or moved TAP delivery to a larger room/auditorium.
- *Instructor-led virtual:* Instruction through an online platform, such as MS Teams, Zoom, etc. The instructor is live and able to answer questions posed by the Service members during the class.

- *Hybrid*: Instruction given as a combination of the in-person and instructor-led, where a group is with the instructor in the classroom, and the rest of the class is online through the platform provided. This method generally requires two individuals to conduct the class, an instructor to lead the class and a moderator to liaise with the online group to pose questions to the instructor from those online.
- *Asynchronous online*: Instruction through a learning management system (LMS), on-demand when needed, by using a CAC to register and launch the class.

When COVID-19 began in March 2020, the Department was in the process of developing a new LMS, Transition Online Learning (TOL). This new LMS replaced JKO, which was sunset for TAP in October 2020. TOL provides a user-friendly learning environment for Service members, and enables family members, veterans, and caregivers easy access to all curriculum within TAP. Through collaboration with the interagency partners, by the development of the online courses for the new platform, TOL had a full complement of TAP courses for the full launch in October 2020. As of April 2021, TOL has 320,263 total completions across the 9-core TAP curriculum; similarly, JKO had 410,467 completions from March – December 2020. TOL is available at <https://www.tapevents.org/courses>.

Through all methods of delivery, the option to complete the Transition Assistance Curriculum Participant Assessment (TACPA) is available. This allows the Department to continue to evaluate TAP, the perception of TAP, and the quality of the counseling and instruction provided in these new modes of delivery. The TACPA compiles participant satisfaction on the quality of instruction, content, facilities, and includes measures of participants' knowledge of the information presented during training. Participation in the TACPA is voluntary and anonymous.

In calendar year 2020, over 193K transitioning Service members became eligible to attend TAP, indicating they were within 365 days of their expected separation date. Of this population, 67.8% responded to some portion of the TACPA, providing valuable feedback on their TAP experience during the time of COVID-19. Information and encouragement to respond to the TACPA is included within all delivery methods. Based on the percentages shown below, the overwhelming majority of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the TAP statements.

The input provided by Service members who responded to the TACPA concerning their experiences indicates:

- 86.6% agreed or strongly agreed they know how to access relevant resources.
- 83.9% agreed or strongly agreed the program helped them gain the information and skills they need to plan their transition.
- 82.8% agreed or strongly agreed the classroom facilities (or virtual environments) were adequate for the program.
- 83.0% agreed or strongly agreed the program enhanced their confidence in transition planning.
- 84.3% agreed or strongly agreed they will use what they learned in the program in their transition planning.

- 82.5% agreed or strongly agreed that the program has prepared them to meet their post-transition goals (employment, education, entrepreneurship goals).

In addition to COVID-19 impacting TAP delivery, it also required modifications to the delivery of the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (YRRP). COVID-19 caused YRRP to halt in-person events and provide online events using the online curriculum available through the YRRP website (www.yellowribbon.mil). National Guard and Reserve members seeking to attend TAP, per the Service specific policy, sought assistance through the local TAP office utilizing the same process and methods as the Active Duty members.

WAY FORWARD FOR TAP

After adapting quickly to a new mode of delivery and as installations begin to reopen, the Services requested to continue offering an instructor-led virtual option to complete the components of TAP. The Department is supporting this effort by facilitating discussions at the TAIWG providing guidance on the policy and procedures required to maintain this mode of delivery. We are also incorporating these adjustments in the Interagency TAP MOU, currently in draft form, as well as detailed policy and instructions to be included within the Military-Civilian Transition Office Department of Defense Instruction, which is currently in development.

CONCLUSION

We are committed to supporting our Warfighters and their families as they navigate the process of transitioning to civilian life. Despite the challenges presented by COVID-19, DoD, the Military Components, and the interagency partners continue to prepare Service members for the challenges and opportunities presented as they transition from active duty to our civilian communities. We will continue to provide adaptable and flexible transition support as we develop new approaches, procedures, and processes to ensure success.

Continuing to provide transitioning Service members with the resources they need, both before and after transition, enables and empowers them to be successful, visible, and contributing Veterans who reach their full potential and strengthen their communities. TAP will continue to provide the services, resources, and support necessary, no matter the challenge. The challenges presented by COVID-19 provide the agencies who support TAP and the Service members in transition an opportunity for growth. These lessons in adaptability and resilience are a reminder that it is possible to adapt, overcome, and succeed.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I thank you, the Ranking Member, and the members of this Subcommittee for your outstanding and continuing support of the men and women who proudly wear the uniform in defense of our great Nation.