

**STATEMENT OF  
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BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**MAY 12, 2021**

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and other members of the Subcommittee, we appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss how VA supports transitioning Service members (TSM). Accompanying me today are Dr. Lawrence Pierce, Deputy Director, Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development Service, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and Joshua Lashbrook, Assistant Director of Operations Support and Digital GI Bill Program Lead, Education Service, VBA.

**Transition Assistance Interagency Working Group**

It is critical that today's Service members are appropriately and adequately prepared to transition to civilian life and seek a meaningful post-military career. Established in 1991 and refined by the "Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) to Hire Heroes Act of 2011" (P.L. 112-56), the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is an interagency effort designed to help the approximately 250,000 Service members who separate annually successfully transition to civilian life.

Since 2014, under the auspices of a memorandum of understanding (MOU), VA, the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Education (ED), the Small Business Administration (SBA), the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and other partners coordinate the execution of TAP to provide information, counseling, resources, and tools for Service members and their families to support a smooth and successful transition from military to civilian life.

The MOU also provides a robust governance structure, including multiple working groups, to address the various aspects of the transition process. The governance structure is comprised of representatives from each branch of the military Services and interagency partners. These working groups serve as subject matter experts in areas of executive leadership or content knowledge that, when taken together, support TAP maturation efforts. The working groups meet regularly, ranging from monthly to quarterly cadences, to identify opportunities to improve TAP and the transition experience for TSM and their families.

## **VA TAP Curriculum**

As part of the TAP curriculum, the VA Benefits and Services course helps Service members understand how to navigate VA and the benefits and services they have earned through their military careers. VA TAP provides the skills, resources and tools Service members need to achieve emotional health, physical health, career readiness and economic stability in civilian life.

In addition to the VA Benefits and Services course, which gives a broad overview of available resources, Service members and their families may access Military Life Cycle (MLC) modules to plan for the future. MLC modules are 45 to 60-minute information sessions that can be taken at any time throughout a Service member's career. They are especially valuable after major events like permanent changes of station, marriage or the birth of a child. They offer connections to a lifelong support system from the first duty station to separation and beyond. Each MLC module addresses a specific in-depth topic such as benefits, education, home loans or life insurance; social and emotional health resources; integration into a civilian community; or survivor and casualty assistance.

VA is committed to addressing military to civilian transition holistically. Military spouses and caregivers are eligible to attend VA Benefits and Services briefings, as well as access MLC modules. Family members can access the courses online through [TAPevents.org](https://TAPevents.org). A Common Access Card-enabled device is not required to access the courses. VA Benefits Advisors (BA) are also available through one-on-one assistance sessions to answer questions, explain benefits and connect spouses to helpful resources, including education and employment benefits.

### **Current Status of VA TAP with Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)**

VA continues to work with interagency partners to safely deliver in-person transition courses and assistance. Our phased approach aligns with national guidance, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations, DoD and installation-specific memoranda, and state and local health departments to assess the safe return to installations across global locations with varying levels of cases. Our goal is to protect the health and safety of VA and DoD staff, Service members, Veterans and their families.

To accommodate the current virtual posture because of COVID-19, on March 8, 2021, VA launched a phased pilot program to conduct instructor-led virtual VA Benefits and Services briefings. The virtual briefings include the same content as in-person briefings. The pilot locations were selected by our DoD partners and include installations with multiple service branches that are not currently conducting in-person briefings. The pilot concluded on April 16, 2021, and received positive feedback from the participants and installations. The installations can now maximize the number of TSM and spouses who can attend the VA Benefits and Services briefings that may have been impacted by COVID-19. With the success of the pilot, VA can use instructor-led virtual VA Benefits and Services briefings as another delivery option in a post-COVID-

19 environment. We anticipate instructor-led virtual briefings will support TSM who must separate rapidly or for family members and caregivers who are unable to attend in-person briefings.

During the pilot phases, VA learned that virtual platforms require robust initial and sustainment training and participants required orientation to both Adobe Connect and Microsoft Teams. In addition, participant bandwidth, device type and participation impacted overall briefing quality. Additionally, virtual briefings required more direct engagement techniques with participants to ensure interest remained high.

VA BAs are currently supporting 332 military installations. As of April 20, 2021, we have conducted over 70 virtual TAP Benefits and Services briefings and now have full operating capacity with the capabilities to offer virtual TAP Benefits and Services at all installations. Overall, during Fiscal Year (FY) 2021, through April 20, 2021, we have conducted nearly 790 TAP Benefits and Services briefings and completed over 15,930 one-on-one engagements. VA reports customer satisfaction data for the VA Benefits and Services briefing quarterly. DoD provides the data, which consists of responses to the Transition Assistance Curriculum Participant Assessment; a series of Likert scale questions and open text responses used to assess the various TAP modules and obtain feedback. The target satisfaction rate is for 95% of transitioning Service members who respond to indicate that they agree or strongly agree that the TAP course was useful to them and the content eased their transition. VA has met or exceeded the 95% target every year since FY 2015.

## **Post Separation Transition Assistance Program Assessment**

In June 2020, VA released the 2019 Post Separation Transition Assistance Program Assessment (PSTAP) Outcome Study, a multi-year cross-sectional and longitudinal study that analyzes how participation in VA TAP affects Veterans' long-term outcomes in the life domains of employment, education, health and social relationships, financial and overall satisfaction and wellbeing. VA uses the PSTAP data to inform our transition programs and services and enhance the TSM experience. The 2020 PSTAP Outcome Study Report is scheduled to be released in June 2021.

## **TSM Equity and Diversity**

The 2019 PSTAP report found that African American Veterans experience lower overall satisfaction compared to all other demographics following their separation from service and transition to civilian life. To better understand the gaps identified in the PSTAP for African American Veterans, VBA and VA's Center for Minority Veterans developed an African American Veteran Engagement Plan. A Human-centered Design (HCD) study was completed to examine the challenges African American Veterans face and their needs. Several factors were identified as potential contributors to successful transitions, including the amount of time to transition, having a network or support system, financial stability, socioeconomic status, and gender. VBA continues to analyze

the data from the HCD study, which will be used to inform future transition support including VA TAP curriculum, other VA programs, and services.

Additionally, VA conducted an environmental scan to identify potential partnership opportunities with organizations that can empower and support African American Veterans throughout their transition. VA is researching existing internal programs and services to identify and assess external organizations that may be a good fit for partnerships. VA will share any relevant findings with relevant stakeholders and TAP interagency partners.

## **Women's Health Transition Training**

Women are the fastest-growing segment of the Veteran population in the United States. The number of women using Veterans Health Administration (VHA) services has tripled since 9/11, growing from 159,810 in FY 2000 to over 550,000 today. In response to the changing demographics of the Veteran population, VA has transformed its resources, services and culture to meet the unique health care needs of the growing population of women Veterans. To this end, in collaboration with DoD, VA developed, piloted, and deployed the Women's Health Transition Training (WHTT) course. The training sessions; led by women, help female Service members understand VA's gender-specific health care services and enroll in VA health care as quickly as possible after separation.

An online, self-paced version of the course successfully launched on the TAPevents.org platform on February 22, 2021. The five-phase course can be taken any time, any place, and covers the following: making the shift from active duty; health benefits (with an emphasis on women-specific needs); mental wellbeing; VA care models; VA culture; managing health care; eligibility and enrolling in VA; and transition assistance resources. Feedback from WHTT pilot participants shows the course increases awareness of women's health services available through VA, and the on-demand course makes this important information readily available to all transitioning Servicewomen and women Veterans.

## **Suicide Awareness and Prevention during Transition**

The first year of transition out of military service is crucial for Service members and Veterans. VA research shows that the first year following discharge from active-duty service may pose significant challenges, including homelessness, family reintegration, unemployment or under-employment, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance abuse, all of which can increase the risk for suicide.

All former Service members, including those with an Other than Honorable (OTH) discharge, have access to emergency mental health care at VA medical care facilities. Additional on-going mental health care may be provided to former Service members, including reservists, who were discharged under a condition that is not honorable, but also not dishonorable or by court martial, who meet the eligibility criteria in 38 U.S.C. §

1720I, and are not enrolled in the VA health care system. This important information, along with other mental health resources and care, is shared with TSM and Veterans in multiple touchpoints throughout their transition journey.

During the VA Benefits and Services course, BAs note that VA offers mental health care at no charge to those eligible to receive the mental health care described above. BAs discuss access to Vet Centers and VA resources available for individuals coping with traumatic events, such as PTSD or military sexual trauma (MST). The Participant Guide for the course also provides a direct link to the VA Mental Health website, which offers guidance on getting connected to mental health services. VA offers a Social and Emotional Health Resources MLC module to better educate Service members and Veterans about the importance of social and emotional health, experiences that may impact it, and other helpful resources such as the Veteran Crisis Line. This MLC module provides detailed information on resources available for mental health concerns such as MST.

### **Concierge for Care**

Service members are called within 30 days of separation to answer enrollment and benefit questions, process the VA health care enrollment application over the phone and assist Veterans with setting up their first VA medical appointment. Over the first 3 years of operations (FY 2018, FY 2019, and FY 2020) over 160,000 contacts were attempted resulting in contact with over 30% resulting in telephonic enrollments with 3%. Of the 3% enrolled, all were then offered the ability to schedule their first medical appointment with 75% accepting the offer.

### **VA Solid Start**

The first year of separation from military service poses challenges for Service members that can make it difficult to adjust to civilian life and, for some, increase their risk of suicide. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) research shows that first-year Veterans face increased challenges with homelessness, family reintegration, employment, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance abuse, all of which can increase the risk for suicide.

In response to Executive Order 13822: "Supporting Our Veterans During the Transition from Uniformed Service to Civilian Life," VA, DoD and DHS issued a Joint Action Plan to provide seamless access to mental health care and suicide prevention resources. VBA administers the VA Solid Start (VASS) program in response to Task 1.1 of the plan, which called for the establishment of early and consistent contact with TSM and recently separated Veterans.

The goal of the VASS program is to assist with Veteran suicide prevention by providing consistent and caring contact with a dedicated VASS representative at three

(3) critical points during the first year after release from active duty. Since the VASS launch in December 2019, VA connected with more than 105,000 newly separated Veterans, achieving a successful connection rate of 57.5%, exceeding the target of 40%. These connections focus on the needs of each individual Veteran and provide support to address any transition-related challenges a Veteran may be experiencing at the time of the call. VA Solid Start representatives provide information on the availability of free mental health resources for up to a year, regardless of their discharge status or service history. These specially trained VASS representatives provide priority contact for those Veterans who had a mental health care appointment during their last year of active duty, helping to lower the barrier of accessing VA mental health care. To date, VA has successfully connected with 71.9% of Veterans in this category. Feedback from Veterans and our partners have been very positive and reflects the benefits of our proactive contact approach. In response to COVID-19, VA leveraged information provided by DOL to tailor VASS content to address employment-related challenges and provide referral options that include information about unemployment benefits for newly separated Veterans. Additionally, in partnership with State Veterans Affairs Offices, VASS representatives are also able to refer Veterans to state-specific programs and services.

### **Homelessness Awareness and Prevention during Transition**

VA continues to work with its interagency partners to identify and serve TSM and Veterans at risk for homelessness—not only through referrals to appropriate Federal programs, but through help with housing solutions, employment opportunities, health care, justice and reentry-related services and more. As part of the VA Benefits and Services course during TAP, TSM are informed of several benefits available to assist in finding a place to live including facility locator tools, information on Home Loan Guaranty and housing grants, information on homeless programs and state and local benefits.

Additionally, as part of the Service member's transition process, DoD has defined Career Readiness Standards (CRS) and criteria to indicate whether a Service member achieves specific goals and is ready for transition. Additionally, as part of the Service member's transition process, DoD has defined Career Readiness Standards (CRS) and criteria to indicate whether a Service member achieves specific goals and is ready for transition. Part of the criteria validation process includes a post-transition housing plan. TSMs who are assessed as not having a viable post-transition housing plan and self-identify as being at-risk for homelessness are provided a warm handover to the appropriate Federal program for further assessment and assistance. Referrals are made to specific program sites based upon the expected geographic location of the Service member following transition.

### **SkillBridge**

To support Service members entering VA careers, VA SkillBridge successfully launched in February 2020. VA SkillBridge is the organizing umbrella for programs across VA designed to provide active duty TSM with employment training, internship

and apprenticeship opportunities during their last 180 days of service. The program provides TSM with valuable civilian work experience to better prepare them for post-separation employment. VA SkillBridge is executed in partnership with DoD via the December 2019 MOU formalizing VA's role as a Federal employment partner organization supporting the DoD SkillBridge program. VA, in collaboration with the DoD SkillBridge team, provides consultative support to VA organizations developing and implementing VA SkillBridge programs. As of April 15, 2021, VA had 16 organizations either established or interested in establishing a VA SkillBridge program for TSM under the MOU.

VA SkillBridge encountered some issues during the pandemic, where large cohorts at installation training facilities were shut down, such as the VA Security Service Training facility in Arkansas and the Warrior Training Advancement Course (WARTAC) classrooms on three DoD installations to include Fort Stewart, Fort Hood and Fort Carson. To ensure continuation of the program, VA instituted virtual curriculums. VA will continue to support VA SkillBridge programs with developing marketing materials tailored to drive program participation interest via virtual engagements with TSM, in lieu of the traditional installation-level engagement. Additionally, in an effort to ensure TSM know about VA SkillBridge, we are requiring our VA Benefits Advisors to discuss this career readiness opportunity during the "Getting Career Ready" module of the VA TAP Benefits and Services course.

## **Economic Development Initiatives**

VA knows that economic well-being for the Veteran community requires stakeholders from across the Veteran ecosystem to come together to improve opportunities as well as long-term economic sustainability. To meet this need, VA launched Economic Development Initiatives (EDI), which connect TSM, newly separated Veterans, and military spouses in specific geographic communities with information and resources that promote economic well-being. Such resources can include: Town Hall meetings, Stakeholder Roundtables, Benefits Fairs, Claims Clinics, Hiring Fairs and workshops. To date, in collaboration with Federal, state and local government partners, Veterans Service Organizations and private partners, VA has held in-person EDI in Puerto Rico and Puget Sound, WA, and has also held virtual EDI during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Houston/San Antonio area, and Jacksonville, NC. This fiscal year, VA plans to hold EDI in Maricopa, AZ in August and Baltimore, MD in September.

## **Public/Private Partnerships**

VA believes in strong partnerships with State, local and non-governmental stakeholders to assist Service members as they transition. VA recently solidified its longstanding partnership with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Hiring our Heroes (HOH) initiative through a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). The partnership between VA and HOH builds upon previous collaborative efforts to increase employment

opportunities for TSM, military spouses, Veterans, and their families.

Additionally, in January 2021, VA partnered with a non-governmental organization to provide TSM, Veterans, their families, and caregivers access to financial wellness resources to improve their economic well-being and help them reach financial stability at no cost. As part of this partnership, TSM, Veterans, their families, and caregivers have access to a Digital Financial Portal and in-person and virtual financial education seminars covering a broad range of financial topics. Financial literacy helps build a stronger understanding of personal finances that in-turn will strengthen individuals and families as they live productive lives while in the military and as they transition to civilian life.

### **Personalized Career Planning and Guidance**

On January 4, 2021, VA launched the rebranded Chapter 36-Educational and Career Counseling program, now known as Personalized Career Planning and Guidance (PCPG). PCPG provides beneficiaries with enhanced career counseling, assessment, education planning and guidance resources to achieve personal, career and education goals. VA is proud to announce that as of April 20, 2021, we received nearly 3,850 PCPG counseling applications already during FY 2021, compared to 5,407 applications received for all of FY 2020. VA has enhanced PCPG outreach to highlight Veteran and family member eligibility and to encourage PCPG benefits usage multiple times across their military to civilian and/or career lifespan for as long as they remain eligible.

Through this enhanced benefit, eligible participants are empowered to reach their educational and career goals through personalized education and career guidance. Due to COVID-19, PCPG approved the use of tele-counseling by contractors. This change allows for continuation of services and expansion to beneficiaries who reside overseas, ensuring overall program success. Beneficiaries have reported satisfaction with receiving PCPG benefits via tele-counseling; therefore, VA is currently updating program policy to include the option of tele-counseling in the future.

### **PL 116-315 Transition Provision Updates**

On January 5, 2021, the “Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020” (Public Law 116-315) was signed into law and included several provisions related to transition assistance.

Section 3005 requires the Secretary of VA to carry out the Women’s Health Transition Training (WHTT) program for at least one year after the act is enacted (January 5, 2022) and for DoD and VA to submit a joint report to Congress 10 days after the initial deadline (January 15, 2022). Accordingly, VA is offering WHTT to all Servicewomen and women Veterans. Moreover, a data sharing agreement between VBA and DoD, and a MOA between VBA and VHA are in place to collect required data and other information on VA health care enrollment and WHTT participation by military



component.

Section 4302 of this new law increased the annual funding for the Veterans technology education courses (VET TEC) high technology pilot program from \$15 million to \$45 million, and expanded eligibility to TSM who are within 180 days of separation from active duty. VA successfully implemented this provision on April 1, 2021 and has completed several outreach activities to ensure TSM are aware of their eligibility for this benefit program.

Section 4304 requires the Secretary of VA, no later than July 5, 2021 (180 days after the Act's enactment) to make grants available to eligible organizations that specialize in providing transition services to Service members who are separated, retired, or discharged, as well as their spouses. These transition services consist of resume assistance, interview training, job recruitment training and related services leading to a successful transition. In collaboration with DOL, VA has drafted a Funding Opportunity Announcement, which is the foundational document that establishes the grant program in response to section 4304.

Section 4305 requires the Secretary of VA, no later than April 5, 2021 (90 days after the Act's enactment) and in consultation with the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Labor, Administrator of the SBA, and the Secretaries of the military departments, to enter into an agreement with an appropriate entity with experience in adult education, to conduct a one-year independent assessment of TAP. VA is conducting the required assessment in two phases: Phase One covers development of the assessment plan, completion of the assessment, and delivery of the Preliminary Summary of Findings by FY 2022 quarter 3. Phase Two covers the draft and final report to meet the legislative suspense of July 4, 2022.

Section 4306 requires the Secretary of VA, no later than April 5, 2021 (90 days after the act's enactment) and in consultation with the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Labor, and the Administrator of the SBA, to conduct a 5-year longitudinal study on three cohorts of individuals going through TAP. The three cohorts must include the following: (1) a cohort that has attended counseling under TAP as implemented on the date of enactment of this Act (January 5, 2021); (2) a cohort that attends counseling under TAP after the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of Labor implement changes recommended in the report under section 4305(b); and (3) a cohort that has not attended counseling under TAP. VA plans to leverage the PSTAP Outcome Study with modifications to meet this requirement and will be completed in a phased approach. Phase One is the development of the study design and modification of the existing PSTAP survey instruments to meet the requirements, as well as the coordination of the plan with the required Interagency partners. The outcome of Phase One will provide information and details on the subsequent phases necessary to meet the legislative requirements.

## **Digital GI Bill**

To ensure we serve all Veterans and TSM seeking to use their GI Bill benefits and equip them with the tools and resources necessary to reach their academic and career goals, we are modernizing the GI Bill's information technology platform to deliver benefits faster, provide better customer service, and strengthen our compliance and oversight activities. VBA and VA's Office of Information and Technology (OIT) are developing the Digital GI Bill. On March 11, 2021, VA awarded a contract to Accenture Federal Services, who will partner with VBA and OIT to develop the Digital GI Bill, which is a modernized business platform that will feature world-class customer and financial services to enable timely and accurate delivery of payments, real-time eligibility and benefit information. This new platform will provide an end-to-end systems management perspective to ensure proper compliance and oversight of GI Bill programs, and will allow the use of data and business intelligence tools to monitor and measure school and student outcomes. Using this platform, GI Bill students will have the ability to engage with VA and their earned benefits through electronic outreach, intake, and communication tools for on-the-spot service.

### **GI Bill Equity and Diversity**

VA is currently seeking contract support to develop methods to determine the return on investment (ROI) of the GI Bill using outcome measures such as race, ethnicity, gender, and age to identify, obtain, and analyze data on the GI Bill student populations. VA will utilize these demographic factors, in conjunction with other factors, in defining specific outcomes. This will enable VA to provide TSM and their eligible dependents information to assist with making informed decisions on which educational paths may yield the best ROI as measured by civilian workforce success, income, disability and homelessness status, educational attainment, and student debt and default rates.

### **Conclusion**

Our mission at VA is to care for those "who shall have borne the battle" as well as their families, caregivers and survivors. VA appreciates the efforts of the Administration and Congress to ensure TSM who are separating from the military are ready for civilian life and have strong economic outcomes. VA will continue to strengthen our initiatives to achieve this goal.

This concludes my testimony. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and we are happy to answer any questions you may have.