



THE HONOR FOUNDATION

Statement of
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With Respect To

Military Transition During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, thank you for the opportunity to submit the following testimony on the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Military Transition. I would like to thank you all for your willingness to take meaningful action and make the military transition assistance programs better for our nation's warriors.

As a 26-year Navy SEAL veteran, including our post 9/11 conflicts in the Middle East (with 10 deployments total to Afghanistan and Iraq), and the current CEO of The Honor Foundation, I am personally grateful for your leadership in the passage of the "H.R. 2326 — 116th Congress: Navy SEAL Chief Petty Officer William "Bill" Mulder (Ret.) Transition Improvement Act of 2019" and your continued efforts to enhance the Transition Assistance Programs (TAP) for all service members leaving active duty service. I have many friends and former teammates who are hopeful that the result of your hard work will be decisive and impactful change to the current transition assistance programs.

Transitioning out of the cloth of our nation's military is hard for everyone. It is an extremely stressful time in one's life and it doesn't discriminate based on age, rank, time in service, who you are or what you've achieved. The fact of the matter is your last act with the military will be one of rejection. Either you will be telling the military that you no longer wish to serve; or the military institution will tell you that your time in uniform has come to an end. Those circumstances could be due to mandatory retirement age, maximum time in service, medical reasons, performance reasons or conduct reasons. Regardless of why, it is an act of finality.





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THE HONOR FOUNDATION MISSION, VISION, HISTORY AND KEY METRICS

Founded in 2013 as a national 501(c)3 non-profit organization in San Diego, CA with the support of the Navy SEAL Foundation, The Honor Foundation (THF) is a transformative program built to help U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) successfully navigate the career transition from elite warrior to civilian leader and to find honor, purpose, and passion in the next chapters of their lives.

THF's mission is to serve others with honor, for life, so their next mission is always clear and continues to impact the world. We firmly believe our nation's veterans have a lot more to give and will continue to do great things for our country.

Just as U.S. SOF serve as the vanguard to test, evaluate, and innovate equipment, tactics, techniques, and procedures for the general-purpose military forces; The Honor Foundation's vision is to be the catalyst to transform, improve and become a model for the entire military transition enterprise.

Approximately 66,000 uniformed servicemen and women serve in the U.S. Special Operations Forces community across the world - forming the Tip of the Spear of the U.S. military. They are selfless, servant-leaders who operate in complex dynamic team environments to achieve no-fail missions.

Despite being amongst the highest performing veterans transitioning out of military service, many have struggled through underemployment, unemployment, and unhappiness.¹ Being a member of an elite military unit; a Green Beret, a Ranger, a SEAL, a Marine Raider, a Combat Controller, a PJ, a SOF Aviator (to name a few), is synonymous with their identity. For this and other reasons, 91% said transitioning from the military to civilian life is the hardest thing they've ever done, harder even than combat deployments and family separation. Furthermore, 97% stated that they do not have the necessary tools to translate their military experience for the private sector and only 13% had a job lined up the day they left military service. Many also leave without a support system with 94% stating that there was no effective "alumni" network available to them.²

The Honor Foundation's program helps Special Operators navigate the stressful change from military to civilian life through a three-month, executive-education style transition

¹ [Identity Development and Loss in Military Transitions from Special Operations Forces to Civilian Life](#), by Jessica D. Garner, PsyD

² THF 2013 survey of 215 Special Operators





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curriculum that combines a deep introspective reflection on personal values, strengths, and priorities, one-on-one executive coaching, classroom instruction, practical application, industry mentoring, and access to a world-class nationwide professional network. Classes are run twice a week, in the evenings after work, and each participant receives approximately 120 hours of education and coaching. Transition doesn't happen effectively overnight, in a weekend seminar or in a one-week program overscheduled with classes. Transition takes time. Time to think, reflect and formulate plans.

THF currently has physical campuses located in San Diego, CA; Virginia Beach, VA; Camp Lejeune, NC, and a virtual campus. We will open a new campus near Fort Bragg, NC in 2021. To date, THF has graduated 1,049 transitioning service members through our full program and served an additional 490 through shorter seminars and tailored support. Our model is scalable, adaptable, and flexible and can be applied to general purpose forces across the globe.

One of the primary goals of The Honor Foundation is to help our alumni find fulfillment. Fulfillment is a very personal choice for each and every person. THF's program does not steer individuals to a particular field, but it does help the transitioning service members figure out what their own fulfillment path will look like, then, THF helps them develop a roadmap to achieve it. THF defines fulfillment as follows: Within 90 days of leaving active duty service, our graduates have done one of the following:

1. Secured a job of their choosing, in a location of their choosing
2. Started their own business
3. Pursued higher education
4. Taken a sabbatical on their own terms

THF's fulfillment rate for our program graduates consistently ranks at 95%. The average starting salary of a THF program graduate is approximately 50% higher than non-THF graduates from the SOF community.

THF receives 100% positive feedback on the value of our program from our alumni. Some key metrics that THF tracks through surveys at the beginning and end of the program show:

- 65% improvement in understanding one's value outside the military
- 42% increase in transition readiness confidence
- 19% decrease in fear of giving up the security that the military offers





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THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 ON TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Designing, implementing, and executing a successful transition program for 200,000+ transitioning service members annually is a monumentally difficult endeavor in the best of times. The transition out of the military - whether voluntary or involuntary - is one of, if not the most stressful times in a service member's professional life. Most veterans will face at least some of the following: loss of identity, loss of purpose, loss of camaraderie (i.e. loss of the brotherhood/sisterhood), loss of trust, loss of team/tribe, change in professional status, unsure of where they might "fit in", unsure of what they want to do professionally, lack of structure, potential for loss of a steady income, changing family dynamics, lack of trust with civilians and overcoming the stigma attached to Veterans by some civilians. The transition process can be further complicated by biological, sociological, environmental, and cultural factors including physical and psychological injuries.³

Transition is a difficult process that takes years to successfully navigate, and the cost of failure may be catastrophic. According to a recent study, 44% of veterans experience high levels of difficulty when reintegrating into civilian life, and veterans who experience the highest difficulty during their transition are 5.4 times more likely to experience suicidal ideation. In fact, the suicide rate is significantly higher among post-9/11 veterans, which comprise the 18-34 age group. Those rates have more than doubled from 2006 to 2016 — out-pacing all other age groups — despite improvements in mental health services and long-term care.⁴

To effectively address and overcome those stressors, the Transition Readiness Program, should be high-touch, high-impact, high-quality, and high-technology. Based on my own personal transition experience and having assisted over 1,000 service members in the THF program, the two most critical factors most veterans face during transition are:

1. Figuring out what they want to do next
2. Understanding the value of their personal military experience, independent of the team, and learning how to craft their personal narrative

TAP, in its current form, does not address these issues. It focuses, instead, on basic tactical tools such as information required to depart the military, building a basic budget, crafting a resume, how to dress, how to file a Veteran's Affairs (VA) claim, available VA

³ [Identity Development and Loss in Military Transitions from Special Operations Forces to Civilian Life](#), by Jessica D. Garner, PsyD

⁴ [Why veterans need more than Transition Assistance Programs](#), Military Times. By Louis, M. J. (2020, May 11)





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benefits, picking life insurance, etc. All of which are useful, but arguably not the most important topics. The quality of some TAP instruction lends to the perception that the program was contracted in a “lowest-priced, technically acceptable” manner, rather than “best value”.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the existing challenges and stressors presented to transitioning service members and increased the difficulty of executing a TAP program. In the spring of 2020, the TAP programs were forced to cease all in person classes. After a brief adjustment period, they transitioned to all virtual delivery. The Honor Foundation also pivoted to full online and virtual program delivery in March 2020.

THF approached the ambiguity and chaos of the pandemic as an opportunity to accelerate our learning, figure out how to become more efficient and effective, maintain a high-touch, high-impact, high-quality program and serve even more transitioning service members. THF was in the midst of running four separate cohorts across the country when it became clear that further in-person instruction was infeasible. THF pivoted to an all-virtual delivery in one working day and efficiently communicated with all faculty nationwide to align efforts and ensure engagement remained equally high as in-person. THF did not skip a beat, miss a class, or change the content of the program. In fact, THF throughput increased by 66% in 2020.

“The skills and knowledge I gained from THF has been priceless! Most of all, THF helped me identify my blind spots, whereby working on my weaknesses, but focusing on my strengths. Through a process of introspection, THF Coaches and Mentors have facilitated in helping me to identify what I am passionate about, which is entrepreneurship and helping disadvantaged youth, long before my transition from the Navy.”

-RB, Navy SEAL

LESSONS LEARNED DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Virtual vs. In-person

THF found that the service members who started in our virtual campus did not undergo any changes and therefore noticed no difference in programming or quality based on the pandemic. Those who started THF’s program in person but were forced to transition to virtual delivery due to the pandemic had an adjustment period and did not initially feel that the virtual classes were as beneficial as the in-person classes. While in-person





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program delivery is always preferred, THF found that the virtual program closely matched the in-person experience.

Start with Why

THF begins each cohort with a deep investigation into what makes each person “tick” as a human, what their purpose in life is, what their “Why” is, and what their priorities are. THF spends a month of the program encouraging each program participant to “get comfortable being uncomfortable”. THF has proven that if this is understood first, then the rest of the process will flow more easily. This philosophy did not change during the pandemic.

Value of the Cohort Experience

THF continued to execute our transition program on schedule, in a cohort environment during the pandemic, because we’ve learned that tackling a stressful transition with teammates/colleagues of similar backgrounds and shared experiences is psychologically beneficial. THF creates a safe emotional environment for its participants to have conversations about traumatic events, stressors, and feelings.

Transition is a Team Sport

THF has witnessed that transition is best achieved as a family evolution, not just as an individual service member’s burden to bear. Throughout the pandemic, THF continued to allow spouses and significant others to attend all of our classes. With this approach, the service members gained more support from their families as they prepared for their transition. Being solely virtual likely made this easier logistically for the families.

Strengths Assessments

THF leverages the Gallup Strengths Assessment prior to starting each cohort in addition to a Career Leader Assessment. Both assessments are useful starting reference points in one’s transition, a point of departure from which to deviate from or build upon.

Technology

THF leveraged the best technology available for our audience, the Special Operations Forces Community. Our audience responds best when they can see each other, interact in small breakout groups and work through difficult conversations with a teammate. During the pandemic, this has been possible using a combination of video tele-conferencing and webinars.

Time

THF continued to encourage transitioning service members to start their transition journey 12-24 months prior to actual separation. Transition takes time, is frustrating and





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accelerates quickly in the final stages as people stack medical, dental, VA, and administrative appointments on top of one another.

Cultural Competence

It is critical that the people handling the transition program be culturally competent, i.e., understand the background of the individuals transitioning. A transition assistance employee who doesn't have the life experience or credibility to relate to those they are serving is a recipe for failure. THF's staff consists of former Special Operators and others connected to the military community. THF hires the best faculty from world-class universities, businesses, and subject matter experts to teach individual blocks of instruction.

Public-Private Partnerships

THF leverages corporate partnerships to bolster our volunteer network. Our volunteers serve a critical role in helping THF staff and faculty conduct resume reviews, mock interviews, networking, cups of coffee, coaching and mentoring. It is an invaluable part of our program that builds trust between civilians and the military community

Follow up

A critical element to THF's success is its People Team. Our People Team consists of seasoned Career Services/HR/Talent Acquisition professionals who get to know every single person coming through the program. They seek to understand each service member's desires and requirements for future fulfillment. Simultaneously, the People Team works with potential employer partners to educate them on the value of high-performing veterans. They act as connectors.

Internships

The DoD Skill Bridge program and others like it from SOCOM are immensely powerful and successful programs that provide exposure for transitioning Veterans to investigate where they might "fit in" in the private sector. We encourage our alumni to take advantage of these opportunities and receive universally positive feedback from those that can participate. Many businesses offered virtual internship opportunities.

"THF taught me how to interpret my military experience and leverage my skills in order to secure a job that I otherwise would not have realized I was qualified for. THF was vital to my success... I can rely on The Honor Foundation staff and Alumni network to support me with the same passion and dedication that I experienced during my first transition out of the military."

- C.J., Marine Raider





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THE WAY FORWARD

The Honor Foundation has developed a recipe that works extremely well for high-performing transitioning service members. Our vision is to change the dynamic in the military transition space to make it better for every single transitioning veteran who wants help.

THF offers to serve as a pilot program based on best practices, past success, and lessons learned from COVID-19 for this body to study and make informed decisions on changes to the TAP program. It may then implement a new era in support to our nation's most valuable resource - its veterans!

THF offers to work in partnership with DoD, DoL and the VA, to pioneer a new era in content creation to more effectively engage every single transitioning service member coming out of the military. THF, as well as many colleges, universities, and professional organizations, has figured out how to create incredibly engaging online content in the form of classes, videos, recordings, and readings.

THF recommends that certain comprehensive transition programs be recognized as the standard of excellence. To be designated "comprehensive" a program must include reflection and analysis on post-military direction and purpose, which serve to support overall well-being and happiness, as well as tactical tools such as resume writing, interview skills and networking opportunities, etc.

THF further recommends that only comprehensive transition programs, like ours, be certified as valid alternatives to attending the services TAP programs. If a transitioning service member attends THF's three-month program, they would validate the TAP program and be given credit. This would save money, reduce stress on the government programs, and offer high quality services to those who desire a more comprehensive transition program.





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SUMMARY AND CLOSING

The Honor Foundation is a small but mighty team, laser-focused on providing the best-in-class career transition program for U.S. Special Operations Forces to effectively translate their elite military service to the private sector and help create the next generation of corporate and community leaders. This program was built by the desire to serve others with honor for life, so that their next mission is always clear and continues to impact the world. Every step is dedicated to preparing these outstanding men and women to continue to realize their maximum potential during and after their military careers.

The Honor Foundation is poised to exponentially grow its impact, reaching all members of the Special Operations Forces community through its programs and support. THF will continue to strive to achieve its vision of being a catalyst for enhancing the greater military transition programs and to help as many veterans as possible have successful and graceful transitions.

A service member's last act of service to our country while in uniform should be to have an exceptionally positive transition. He/She should set the example for all of those in the next generation, as this will reinforce the idea to all who follow that the military as an institution "has their backs." This concept is ideal for recruiting, great for retention, and even better for the morale of those remaining in uniform.

I appreciate the opportunity to submit this testimony on the topic of Military Transition during the COVID-19 Pandemic, and to represent all The Honor Foundation staff, faculty, coaches, mentors, volunteers, supporters, alumni, and teammates who share our commitment to providing the absolute best transition services on the planet for as many veterans as possible.

