

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD OF  
JAMES D. RODRIGUEZ, PRINCIPAL DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY  
VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR  
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**May 26, 2021**

**Introduction**

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide a statement, on behalf of the Department of Labor (DOL), regarding veteran employment during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am truly inspired by the work of this Subcommittee, the Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), and our Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) partners. I am also grateful for the efforts of the Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) team, including our grantees across the United States, for their tireless efforts to support the employment needs of our Nation's transitioning service members, veterans and their spouses. Finally, I am proud of VETS for taking an introspective look at its activities and programs to determine if barriers exist that limit access for underrepresented veterans, while prioritizing outreach efforts to these populations.

**COVID-19 Impacts and Partnerships**

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly challenged the effort to reduce the veteran unemployment rate. Like many, VETS was disheartened and experienced a decreased sense of satisfaction observing the unemployment rate increase from the historic lows in 2019 and early 2020 to the spike in April 2020 to 11.9 percent. The COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder of just how dynamic the American economy is and how quickly the environment can change due to unforeseen circumstances. However, it is often in times of uncertainty and great hardship that we realize we have the ability to adapt and overcome adversity. I share the pride in knowing that VETS' relationships with numerous partners have been reinforced during this difficult period in American history.

As we build back the economy, we cannot simply recreate the same structures that have alienated and failed to adequately serve many Americans in the past, including veterans from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. This pandemic has exacerbated existing economic inequalities. For example, the average African American veteran unemployment rate in 2020 was 7.5 percent, while the average unemployment rate for white veterans in 2020 was 6.1 percent.<sup>1</sup> To build back better, VETS is taking a proactive approach by reaching out to underserved veteran communities, such as LGBTQ veterans, veterans of color, and female veterans, who have not traditionally interacted with DOL and other segments of the federal government at the same rate as other veteran communities. By engaging with new partners, we will increase awareness of VETS programs and actively work towards removing any barriers to equitable access.

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<sup>1</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021 March 18), "Employment Situation of Veterans News Release." Economic News Release. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/vet.htm>

The pandemic initially had a system-wide impact on many VETS grantees under our Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) and Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG) program. The closure of government and partner offices, such as American Job Centers, where JVSG employees work, significantly limited access to services and resources, resulting in decreased referrals to over 150 HVRP grantees across the United States. However, many HVRP grantees developed new methods to continue providing services, while simultaneously leveraging new or reinvigorated relationships in the fight against veteran homelessness. For example, a Florida Human Resources professional and U.S. Army veteran, who lost his job during the pandemic due to downsizing, was able to connect with an HVRP grantee through VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families. This led to his hiring as a full-time senior recruiter at a nearby company, where he now makes \$50 an hour.

VETS has maintained ongoing collaboration during the pandemic with VA and DOD on how best to continue and improve the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), and the Department has collaborated with VA on initiatives such as Veteran Readiness and Employment apprenticeships, the Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program, and veteran employer referrals. In addition, our State Directors of Veterans' Employment and Training have also coordinated with VA on their Economic Development Initiatives in locations such as Puerto Rico, Washington, and Texas, as well as provided competent candidates in support of VA's efforts to hire more veterans.

Another example of a positive partnership is between the VETS Compliance office that administers the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) and DOD's Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve. USERRA protects veteran employment rights and seeks to reduce the number of USERRA violation claims. The VETS Compliance office conducts outreach and education programs, including with DOD's Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve, to provide technical assistance to the public, military units, and professional organizations.

I am impressed with the integration and partnerships that VETS has established and continues to develop at the local, state, and national level. The decline in the seasonally adjusted veteran unemployment rate from 11.9 percent in April 2020 to 4.4 percent in May 2021 is due in part to the work by VETS' and its partners' to connect employers – eager for the skills and value our veterans provide – to our nation's service members, veterans, and spouses, who have proven their resiliency time and time again.<sup>2</sup>

### **Ongoing Transition Assistance Program Initiatives**

I recently testified before this Subcommittee, and discussed the 4,482 virtual instructor-led and 4,455 in person TAP workshops that VETS conducted, between March 1, 2020 and March 31, 2021, for more than 154,000 transitioning service members and spouses. To be able to improve, track, and publicly report TAP outcomes, the Administration continues to deploy several pilot initiatives that aim to determine whether they improve employment outcomes, including employment and earnings rates after program exit, for transitioning service members and military spouses. These are described below.

Recognizing the evidence base on Registered Apprenticeships, on April 1, 2020, VETS launched an

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<sup>2</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021, June 4). Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Series Title: (Seas) Unemployment Rate – Veterans, 18 years and over. Databases, Tables & Calculations by Subject. [https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14049526&series\\_id=LNS14049601](https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14049526&series_id=LNS14049601)

Apprenticeship Pilot at eight military installations to provide transitioning service members, and their spouses, opportunities to be hired into apprenticeship positions, including Registered Apprenticeships, prior to separation, in industries and locations that match their interests. Apprenticeship Placement Counselors (APC) leveraged their networks of prospective employers, industry associations, and stakeholders to connect pilot participants to opportunities across the country. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, VETS shifted this pilot to virtual delivery, in conjunction with our virtual TAP workshops, to meet the needs of transitioning service members and their spouses, as well as to strengthen employer connections. During the pilot that concluded on March 31, 2021, APCs received a total of 371 apprenticeship applications from 275 applicants. In total, 82 transitioning service members and 3 military spouses were placed into apprenticeships. We continue to maintain a virtual APC capacity to assist service members and spouses still active in the program. VETS also launched a career workshop curriculum for transitioning military spouses known as the Transition Employment Assistance for Military Spouses curriculum, or “TEAMS”. The TEAMS workshops are designed to help military spouses plan and prepare for a job search. Including components such as resume development, career exploration, and interview techniques, four workshops have been offered since February 2021, and we are piloting an additional five workshops during May 2021. For more information on the pilot, please visit: <https://www.veterans.gov/MilSpouses/Events/>

On April 1, 2021, the Department launched the Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot (ENPP) that will staff contracted Employment Navigators (ENs) at select brick-and-mortar military installations to determine whether in-person assistance at installations is an effective and efficient use of taxpayer resources. The pilot is in addition to our TAP workshops and will provide participants with direct, one-on-one career assistance outside the formal TAP classroom instruction. Following the completion of self-assessments, skills testing, and high-demand occupation exploration, ENs will assist the pilot’s participants in selecting career pathways and connect them to partners and resources. The ENPP will run through Spring 2022 at 13 military installations worldwide.

In FY 2022, the Department intends to develop a transition assistance curriculum designed specifically to address the employment needs of wounded warriors. In coordination with the Department’s Office of Disability Employment Policy, the curriculum will focus on job accommodation resources so wounded warriors are able to realize their potential in the workplace despite injuries they incurred in service. Additionally, recent legislation extends existing authority to conduct an off-base transition training (OBTT) pilot. VETS is in the planning stage of this pilot.

### **VETS Grant Programs**

JVSG, as authorized under title 38 United States Code § 4102A(b)(5), is a formula grant available to 54 State Workforce Agencies to fund 1,510 employees in FY 2021 across three staffing categories at American Job Centers: Disabled Veterans’ Outreach Program specialists, Local Veterans’ Employment Representatives, and Consolidated Positions who perform a combination of both services. In FY 2021, JVSG funds 988 Disabled Veteran Outreach Program specialists who provide individualized career and training-related services to veterans with significant barriers to employment, with prioritized emphasis directed toward serving veterans who are economically or educationally disadvantaged. Veterans with significant barriers to employment include those:

- with a 30 percent or higher disability rating,
- experiencing homelessness,

- recently separated and who have been unemployed for 27 or more consecutive weeks,
- incarcerated and released in the past 12 months,
- lacking a high school diploma or GED, or
- with low income.

In FY 2021, JVSG funds 466 Local Veterans' Employment Representatives who conduct outreach to employers and business associations, as well as engage in advocacy efforts with hiring executives to increase employment opportunities for all veterans.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most American Job Centers had to close their doors and many JVSG staff were temporarily reassigned to support the significant increases in unemployment insurance claims. In response, VETS, in collaboration with the National Association of State Workforce Agencies, began hosting weekly teleconferences to clarify policy-related questions and share ideas and best practices on how to continue virtual and in-person services. Last year, 208,856 veterans received employment services via the DOL-funded American Job Center network, of whom 64,623 received employment services from JVSG-funded personnel.

HVRP is a competitive grant program administered by VETS and has two core objectives:

- provide services to reintegrate veterans experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness into employment; and
- stimulate the development of effective service delivery systems that address the complex challenges facing veterans experiencing homelessness.

To expedite the reintegration of veterans experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, HVRP grantees provide counseling, placement services, and job training targeted to industries, occupations, and skills that are in demand locally.

Although continued funding for HVRP grant recipients is contingent on successful performance outcomes, for program year 2021, VETS used quarterly and previous annual reporting results to expand noncompetitive funding to grantees who were on track to meet or exceed performance goals if not for the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar to our JVSG response, VETS maximized communication and transparency with HVRP grantees by conducting frequent teleconferences alongside the National Veterans' Technical Assistance Center, which is funded by VETS, to clarify policies and procedures in light of the pandemic and to share best practices among grantees. Many grantees were able to adjust the delivery of services to veterans experiencing homelessness by coordinating with other federal and community partners. In fiscal year 2020, the Department awarded \$55 million in grants, contributing to over 53 percent of participants making an average of \$15.22 an hour while also providing services to over 17,000 veterans who were homeless or at risk of homelessness.

### **Conclusion**

The state of the entire U.S. economy will influence how veteran unemployment rates trend in the future. Through the great recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, veteran unemployment rates have consistently been lower than those of non-veterans, but tend to follow general population trends. Strong partnerships and productive collaborations have sustained our collective efforts and contributed to our effectiveness during the COVID-19 pandemic. As we transition from response to

recovery in an evolving economy, I trust that we will arrive at the most effective solutions to serve the needs of our veterans. Employment is part of our core mission and competency.

As the lead Federal agency on veteran employment, VETS looks forward to working with this Subcommittee and our many partners and stakeholders to create opportunities that allow all service members, veterans, and their spouses to reach their full potential in the workplace. I thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit this statement and look forward to any questions for the record and our future engagements.