

**STATEMENT OF MS. LOURDES TIGLAO, DIRECTOR  
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BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**"A WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT APPROACH IN SUPPORT OF SERVICE WOMEN"**

**OCTOBER 26, 2021**

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore and other members of the Subcommittee, we appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss how the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) serves as a key participant in the whole of Government approach to support Service women and women Veterans. Joining me today is Dr. Lawrencia Pierce, Deputy Director, Office of Outreach, Transition and Economic Development, Veterans Benefits Administration.

An important component to providing Service women with the benefits and services they have earned and deserve, is ensuring that we have access to the supplies necessary to support Veterans. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed global and US supply chain weaknesses and we expect the manufacturing and distribution disruptions to extend into Fiscal Year (FY) 2023. As the virus spread, overall consumer demand decreased and industrial activity, in turn, decreased due to the lower consumer demand and effects of COVID-19. With the increasing level of vaccination globally and the end of lockdowns in many nations, consumer demand increased dramatically, while supply chains continue to face big challenges, including worker shortages and limitations in access to raw materials and key components. VA is actively addressing these challenges, implementing near-term methods to ensure internal VA supply chain resiliency, including increased demand signal monitoring, identification of alternatives for preferred products, and treating medical products as enterprise assets. Effective national response requires a resilient public health supply chain, anchored in domestic manufacturing capabilities so that care and preventive measures can reach patients. Sustaining the resilience of the supply chain is critical for national security, and VA is working with the White House and Executive Branch agencies to develop and implement the actions identified in the National Strategy for a Resilient Public Health Supply Chain.

Women are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. Veteran population, and the number of women Veteran users increased by 51.8% since 2008. We are proud of our efforts to provide quality care to women Veterans, remaining responsive to the specific needs of Service women is more important than ever.

Since the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) was established in 1990, VA has worked with our interagency partners to prepare all Service members for a successful transition into civilian life. While much has changed since then – most notably, the increased contribution women are making to the defense of the Nation – our commitment to facilitating a successful

transition into civilian life has not. VA is grateful to work alongside our agency partners every day to identify and seize opportunities to deliver improved services to those who serve us in uniform.

### **VA TAP Support to Interagency TAP Programs**

VA works collaboratively with our interagency partners to maintain the TAP governance structure. As outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between VA, the Departments of Defense (DoD), Education, Labor (DOL), Homeland Security (on behalf of the United States Coast Guard), the U.S. Small Business Administration, and the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, each MOU partner agrees to certain collaborative activities. These activities include collaborating and coordinating with other entities that have special programs missions and initiatives for women Service members. TAP MOU members also partner with Military Service Organizations, Veterans Service Organizations, State Departments of Veterans Affairs, State Workforce Personnel, and public and private institutions in a collaborative effort to support women Service members as they transition to civilian life.

VA works diligently to safely and securely use data to assess, understand and improve the TAP program. While the MOU solidifies collaborative partnerships for TAP, it also governs how we collect, use, maintain and disseminate information on women program participants. This information is used to study, learn and adapt for continuous program improvement. We believe this commitment is essential to gaining the trust of all Service members – especially women – as we support their transition to civilian life. VA must continue our focus on providing Service women with the benefits and services they've earned and deserve.

### **TAP Services**

#### **VA Benefits and Services (VA TAP) Curriculum *and* One-on-One Assistance**

The VA Benefits and Services course (VA TAP) is designed and delivered so that our VA Benefits Advisors can personalize the curriculum to an individual Service member's transition journey – no two transitions are the same. The ability to create a modular curriculum allows for individualized delivery of information based on the Service member's specific situation.

Additionally, VA also implemented one-on-one assistance with TAP VA Benefits Advisors. This one-on-one assistance provides Service members and their families during any stage of the military lifecycle a personalized experience to answer questions, explain benefits, and supply connections to helpful resources. Military spouses are also encouraged to meet one-on-one with VA Benefits Advisors to better understand how the whole family can use available VA benefits. VA adapted during the pandemic, as VA Benefits Advisors have been available to provide remote one-on-one assistance by phone or email, if preferred.

#### **Women's Health Transition Training (WHTT)**

In accordance with the "*Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020*" (P.L. 116-315), the WHTT program was set to continue only through January 2022. However, since WHTT continues to positively impact Service women by providing gender-specific explanations of benefits and services provided by the VA health care system; the VA/DoD Joint Executive Committee (JEC) voted to make WHTT a

permanent voluntary component of TAP in fiscal year 2019. These self-paced, online training sessions help Service women understand VA's gender-specific health care services and how to enroll in VA health care as quickly as possible after separation. VA encourages all Service women who are currently serving or have previously served in the military to take WHTT. WHTT is a five-phase course which can be taken anytime, anywhere and is open to all Service women and women Veterans. Topics include transitioning to civilian life, health benefits (with an emphasis on women-specific needs), mental well-being, VA care models, VA culture, managing health care, eligibility, enrolling in VA and transition assistance resources. The participants' responses demonstrate that WHTT is providing a return on investment with nearly 200 Active-Duty Service women participants who completed WHTT between February and July 2021. As a result, 54% of WHTT participants enrolled in VA health care after separation from service. Out of those who enrolled, nearly three out of four WHTT participants said the training influenced their decision to enroll.

### **SkillBridge**

The DoD SkillBridge program is an opportunity for Service members to gain valuable civilian work experience through specific industry training, apprenticeships, or internships during the last 180 days of service. While Service members participate in SkillBridge, they continue to receive their military salary and benefits. More than 1,000 organizations, in both private and public sectors, participate in SkillBridge. In December 2019, VA and DoD entered into an MOU to expand SkillBridge across additional VA lines of business. VA has successfully piloted SkillBridge programs in healthcare, claims processing and cemetery roles. For example, the Warrior Training Advancement Course (WARTAC), to provide training to transitioning Service members for roles in VBA claims processing. Additionally, SkillBridge programs enable transitioning Service women and military spouses the opportunity to transfer to civilian careers by leveraging their valuable skills and experiences gained through their military careers.

### **Research**

In January 2021, as a result of the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the Center for Women Veterans (CWV) undertook a study on examining why Post-9/11 women Veterans experience higher rates of unemployment than their previous era, male and non-Veteran counterparts. Our analysis includes data from veterans as well as data from recently-transitioned Service members. In addition, the survey examines the TAP program, asking questions about whether the Veteran participated, the length of the program and, on a Likert scale, whether they found the program to be effective and how they measure their success because of participation. The survey also measures length of time since transition, branch of service, physical and behavioral health issues, as well as employment and social supports the Veteran may or may not have received during or post transition. The survey analysis will be included in the overall data analysis, and the resulting report will be delivered to Congress in June 2022.

Although not required by the NDAA, the report will include recommendations resulting from the survey and data analysis. These will be policy recommendations that include a path forward on how to coordinate and improve services both within VA and among stakeholders, to include DOL.

### **Employment/Retraining Assistance**

Historically, CWV has developed various initiatives to support women Veterans. Currently, CWV sponsors The Trailblazers Initiative, an annual campaign celebrating the contributions of remarkable women Veterans, during and after their military service. The campaign showcases the Trailblazers' impact on a single event or action or demonstrated over time in the areas of education, employment, entrepreneurship, homelessness, law, mental health, and wellness. Through these partnerships with Trailblazers, CWV will work with the Trailblazers to support transitioning Servicewomen and women Veterans find retraining opportunities and/or roles across various industries.

Additionally, in July 2020, CWV signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the National Association of State Women Veteran Coordinators (NASWVC), who work under the State Departments of Veterans Affairs. The members of this national organization provide resources, outreach, advocacy, transition assistance and supportive services to all women Veterans and Service members in the U.S. and its territories. As part of the long-term partnership, CWV will engage with State Departments of Veterans Affairs and Women Veteran Coordinators to develop outreach and engagement plans to advance best practices in connecting women Servicemembers with employment opportunities.

The COVID-2019 pandemic has left Americans, women Veterans included, facing high-stress situations and complex changes in many facets of their lives. There is help for women Veterans who were impacted by the pandemic and need help getting back into the workforce. VA launched the Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP) to offer Veterans retraining assistance for exciting new careers. Through VRRAP, women Veterans can develop new professional skills for high-demand careers. It provides up to 12 months of tuition, fees and monthly housing allowance payments, based on Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. The program covers both education and training programs approved under the GI Bill and Veteran Employment through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC). If there are women Veterans interested in pursuing a career in health care, education or technology, VRRAP may be able to help.

### **Veteran Employment through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC)**

In April 2019, VA announced the VET TEC pilot program to provide training for approved high-demand areas in computer software, computer programming, data processing, information science and media applications. Women Veterans may qualify for both tuition and money for housing during their training. The VET TEC program does not count against the Veteran's GI Bill entitlement, and they need only 1 day of unexpired GI Bill benefits to participate. The goal is to provide participants with fast-tracked training by experts in the field

followed by assistance in obtaining meaningful and relevant employment. Additionally, the “Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020” increased program funding, from \$15 million each year to \$45 million, and expanded VET TEC eligibility to include transitioning Service members within 180 days of their separation, making this another great opportunity for our Service women and women Veterans to develop high-tech skills and advance their careers or find meaningful employment.

### **Workforce Development and Self Employment**

Women often leave the military with existing skills in technology, yet they may not continue to a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) field, even with this experience. CWV is developing a relationship with U.S. Digital Corp to support increasing the number of women Veterans and Service members who enter STEM fields. This increase will be cultivated through educational programs that increase the skills women already have, connecting them to their educational benefits so they can enter a STEM field without experience, or by matching women with jobs that align with their current skills in the technology field.

In 2020, CWV developed an internal partnership with the VA Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization (OSDBU) to begin supporting minority women Veterans and transitioning Service members who are entrepreneurs by giving them education that will help them become more successful. OSDBU has a strong training program to help increase those opportunities, and CWV’s partnership will help support the growth of women Veterans and Service members into this program by providing access to Trailblazers who can provide training to women Veterans and transitioning Service women on entrepreneurship. Future efforts will include expanding access to entrepreneurship training rendered by Trailblazers and OSDBU.

### **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today to discuss how VA serves as a key participant in the whole of Government approach to support Service women and women Veterans. Dr. Pierce and I are happy to respond to any questions you may have.