

Field Hearing October 29, 2021

Veterans Affairs Economic Opportunity Subcommittee

Chairman Mike Levin, Ranking Member Barry Moore, members of the Veteran Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and submit the following testimony regarding Veteran employment and transition. As a Veteran I am very appreciative for the actions taken to ensure Veteran transition and employment are done effectively for America's heroes.

Transitioning is a daunting task to even the most well-prepared Veteran. Transitioning has improved exponentially since I retired from the Army after 21 years. In 2004 the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) was very basic and focused on preparing the transitioning service member to apply for employment in the civilian workforce. TAP at this point also provided basic information on benefits that service member would be entitled to after leaving the Military.

Today TAP provides an abundant amount of information for the transitioning service member in the areas of employment, resources, and benefits. Despite this programs growth and much improved information provided to the transitioning service member there are gaps in the transitioning process that are filled by community-based organizations or public / private partnerships. I would like to discuss how these partnerships in Southern Alabama assist in filling the gaps in the transition process for transitioning service members.

Public Partners:

Alabama Department of Labor:

At the Alabama Department of Labor (ADOL), we can assist transitioning service members in several ways. Initially, we attempt to bridge the financial gap by providing qualified service members with unemployment compensation. The Employment Service Division of ADOL provides employment services to transitioning service members and Veterans either through the internet or in-person through the Alabama Career Center System. All transitioning service members and Veterans are eligible for these free Career Center services if they have received any discharge other than dishonorable. ADOL provides these services through three grants: Wagner-Pyser (W/P), Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and the Jobs for Veterans State Grant (JVSG). These services are provided regardless of residency status in Alabama. Initially, services are provided by Wagner/Pyser staff. Upon entering the Career Center an initial assessment is conducted to determine what services the service member may need. Service members also receive basic employment services such as labor market information for the service member's intended career path. This information is provided by ADOL's Labor Market Information Division. The W/P staff will assist the service member in producing an initial résumé. Once the service member determines specific career field they are interested in, the W/P staff will work with the service member to develop a more focused résumé. If the service member is going to reside in Alabama, then W/P staff will assist them with job referrals or, if eligible, referrals to WIOA staff for employment training. If it is determined by W/P staff that the service member may need more one-on-

one assistance they will provide case management until employment is obtained or the service member terminates the case management. If W/P staff and the service member determine that additional training in a WIOA eligible program is needed, the service member will be transferred to WIOA staff to determine eligibility and apply for that specific training. If approved, WIOA staff will case manage the service member until training is complete. There are On the Job training and Apprenticeships also available through the WIOA grant. Service members in need of intensive services are eligible for services with a Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialist.

My current position is the Jobs for Veterans State Grant (JVSG) Coordinator for the State of Alabama. I also serve on a national Veterans employment committee with the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA). The Federal statute that covers the JVSG program is Title 38 Chapter 41, section 4103A. The JVSG funds two types of positions to aid Veterans with their employment goals. The Local Veterans Employment Representative (LVER) represents Veterans seeking employment through the state workforce system to employers. LVERS are eligible to work with any Veteran that walks into each state's Career Centers. The other position is the Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialist, which provides intensive services and case management for Veterans with barriers to employment. These barriers are listed in US. Department of Labor veteran program letter 03-14 with changes 1 and 2 (see attached). The role of the DVOP is to resolve the Veterans' barriers to employment and provide intensive services. These services include a comprehensive assessment, individualized employment plan, and career counseling. The individualized employment plan is developed by the DVOP and the Veteran and includes specific steps for the Veteran to follow to accomplish the desired career goal. The major role of the DVOP is to provide career services to Veteran Administration's Veteran Readiness and Employment Chapter 31 veterans. Once the training is complete an official referral is sent from the VA to the intensive service coordinator (ISC) to be assigned to a DVOP for individualized services. These Veterans are then case managed by the DVOP until satisfactory employment is secured or the VA terminates the referral. Once satisfactory employment has been secured the DVOP will contact the Veteran (and in some instances the employer) for 60 days to conduct a follow-up to ensure all is well in the Veteran's new position. The LVER's responsibility is to get the Veteran's résumé and take it to potential employer to represent the Veteran.

If a service member is not residing in Alabama, the Jobs for Veterans state coordinator provides POC information for the career center in the state and city the service member wishes to reside.

In some cases, in order to help DVOPs resolve the Veteran's employment barriers, we must rely on partner services and resources, such as the following:

Alabama Department of Veteran Affairs

The Alabama Department of Veteran Affairs has county service offices, 61 offices in 60 of Alabama's 67 counties. The service officers are specially trained to assist Veterans and their dependents in filing for and receiving the benefits they have earned. They will also assist the Veteran in contacting community resources where government benefits are not available, or if the Veteran prefers a community source.

The Office of Engagement was created to better inform and serve Veterans. Too often Veterans are unaware of the benefits and services provided, especially the existence of the the county officers, and what details regarding federal benefits. With the newly hired full-time Veterans Wellbeing Program

Manager, there is now an organic resource with a social sciences background to tackle the larger issues, such as Veteran suicide and homelessness, but can also help connect individual Veterans with resources.

The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs works to foster and support community Veteran groups. Regardless of whether these are MyVA groups, CVEB groups, or just a bunch of folks trying to help, these are community-based entities and individuals who work collaboratively to provide support to Veterans in need. Fostering these groups is critical, in my opinion. Younger Veterans are not becoming members of our traditional VSOs. Historically, these groups have served as the community support as well as the voice for Veterans at the state and local levels. As these groups dwindle, we will have to rely on other, less structured organizations such as these community-based Veteran groups.

Alabama Department of Rehabilitation

Services from the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation can be utilized when the individual has a permanent physical or mental impairment which interferes with the ability to work and vocational rehabilitation services are necessary for the individual to prepare for, enter, engage in, or maintain gainful (paid) employment.

ADRS is also not limited in their provision of service due to service-connected disability or rating level of service connection. Service provision by ADRS is not limited by a 12-year restricted entitlement eligibility for VR&E Services. ADRS is not limited by types of military discharges. Services are provided for those discharged with: Honorable, General Discharge under honorable conditions, Other than honorable, Dishonorable discharge.

The State Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (ADRS) can provide services to active-duty service members, transitioning service members of the Alabama National Guard and Reserves (including those who have acquired their disability after service) and Veterans leading to employment outcome. Comparable benefits and financial eligibility are required for some services, accommodations, auxiliary aids, and training.

Post 9/11 Military 2 VA (M2VA) Case Management

Overview: ADRS partners with the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System M2VA and the Birmingham VA Medical Center's M2VA team. Recently transitioning service members who are severely injured or not severely injured are typically waiting on a service connection. They are also beginning the process of entering the civilian world and need additional supports. These service members may have a variety of disabilities that are impacting them but are not service connected. Not all service members connect with VR&E as they are not yet service-connected and need support that ADRS can provide as it relates to disability. We receive a robust number of referrals, all of whom have disabilities. With proper documentation, we can make them eligible for our services the same day and support them during the critical transition period as they enter civilian life connecting to VA services and our partner agencies.

Benefits for Transitioning Service members from M2VA:

- Disability- related counseling
- Referral and Collaboration (Connection to services they are entitled to)

- Referral for Benefits Counseling
- Résumé assistance, job readiness, job search assistance, job referral, job placement, job retention

The Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services is a public partner that fills the gaps either before or while waiting on a VA rating. They also provide services that are not offered by the VA for transitioning service members or qualifying Veterans.

Private Partners:

Still Serving Veterans

Still Serving Veterans is headquartered in Huntsville and has a regional office in Phenix City, Alabama. They provide services statewide via the internet. They provide one-on-one career counseling, job search skills workshops, and life and career transition workshops. Still Serving Veterans assists in filing VA claims and benefits. They have accredited Veteran Service Officers.

Wiregrass Wounded Veteran Committee

The Wiregrass Wounded Veteran Committee provides resources to wounded and disabled Veterans. They also work with Ft. Rucker’s Directorate of Family, Morale, and Welfare to fund events for wounded and disabled Veterans.

Enterprise Chamber of Commerce

Each month the chamber has a Military and Veterans Committee meeting to discuss community activities that could include Veterans and plan jobs fairs that are also marketed on Ft. Rucker.

This is just a short list of private partners there are many more we count on to fulfill our outreach efforts and request for resources. There are also Veteran committees throughout the state that that assist with resources and as a source for Veteran outreach.

*This list for support and services for transitioning service members and Veterans is not a complete list.

We would like to make some recommendations that would help provide better support to transitioning service members.

Recommendations:

1. The Alabama Department of Veteran Affairs recommends that ADVA staff be present during the TAP briefings given at our active-duty bases and posts. Regardless of Alabama residency status, informing them that a county office should be nearby to provide one-on-one support whenever they need it is critical as their need may arise years after separation.
2. The Alabama Department of Labor, Veteran Services Section recommends that ADOL Veterans staff also be present during TAP briefings to inform the transitioning service members of our services. We can also provide contact information similar services in whatever state the veteran will eventually reside.
3. Additionally, the Veterans staff at ADOL has recently been trained in strategic networking via LinkedIn. We recommend that this training be expanded to all Veterans in their TAP briefings.

While setting up a LinkedIn profile is already covered in TAP briefings, we believe that by implementing this training, Veterans will be provided with real-time mentoring and labor market information. Service members can search for Veterans (or Civilians) working in the career field at same location where they are eventually going to reside. They can make these connections which have proven be invaluable to the Veterans we work with after the have transitioned from the Military.

4. Civilian credentials that correlate with military training: For example, if the military member finish advanced individual training (AIT) in HVAC there should be a way to give that service member the correlating civilian credentials. This will give transitioning service members (TSMs) the certifications they need to go straight to work without having to attend school after military service.

Thank you for allowing me to speak to this committee to provide information on services that the state can provide all transitioning service members throughout the state.

