

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

**“Reducing Veteran Suicide by Addressing Economic Risk Factors”**

**June 15, 2022**

**Introduction**

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the Department of Labor (DOL), I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear today to discuss how the programs and resources provided by DOL's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) support the whole-of-government approach to reduce veteran suicide. Death by suicide is a tragedy that impacts entire families and communities. Each veteran's circumstances are unique and the issues that lead to these tragedies are complex. VETS recognizes that employment is a critical factor to reduce veteran suicide because meaningful careers facilitate social connectedness, sense of purpose, and financial stability. With VETS' focus on economic wellbeing, we are dedicated to doing our part, along with our partners, to make sure our nation's veterans and their families have the support they need to thrive and prosper.

In January 2022, Secretary Marty Walsh unveiled the “Good Jobs Initiative” to advance job quality for all Americans in the workforce, including those who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC); lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+); women; people with disabilities; individuals in rural communities; or among our nation's veterans. DOL acknowledges that job quality overall is a crucial social determinant of health. People with steady employment are less likely to live in poverty and more likely to be healthy. However, even today many people with steady work still do not earn a family-sustaining wage to afford the things they need or have access to the benefits they deserve to stay healthy. The “Good Jobs Initiative” focuses on empowering working people by providing workers with easily accessible information about their rights, including the right to bargain collectively and form a union; and engages with state, local, and employer stakeholders as partners to improve job quality, working conditions, and workforce pathways to good jobs that all of America's workers and working families deserve. By improving job quality for all Americans, DOL is seeking to improve quality of life and mitigate preventable negative health outcomes including suicidal ideation.

## Addressing Economic Disparity Among At-Risk Veterans

As the lead Federal agency on veteran employment, VETS' mission is to prepare America's veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses for rewarding careers, provide them with employment resources and expertise, protect their employment rights, and promote their employment opportunities. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2021, our VETS team of over 2,800 DOL- and VETS-funded employees served over 331,000 veterans and military spouses across all VETS programs. I am grateful for the efforts of the VETS team, including our grantees, stakeholders and partners across the United States and globally, for their tireless efforts to support the employment needs of transitioning service members, veterans, and their spouses. I am passionate about veteran employment and reducing veteran suicide and honored to be before you. I am encouraged by the work this Committee does on behalf of veterans and look forward to working together in support of veterans and their families, particularly for those at risk of suicide.

Through the collective, sustained efforts and partnerships of many public and private organizations, the employment situation for veterans continues to improve as veterans' unemployment rates are trending down. The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for veterans has fallen from a COVID pandemic high of 12.1 percent in April 2020 to 2.9 percent in May 2022.<sup>1</sup> Despite the positive trend in veteran unemployment, there are still over 264,000 unemployed veterans (seasonally adjusted), and others seeking better opportunities. Our vision is to enable *all* veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses to reach their full potential in the workplace. By beginning to engage during the military-to-civilian transition process and harnessing America's collective support for our veterans, VETS is fully committed to providing programs and resources to support veterans and their families. The call to "Address Upstream Risk and Protective Factors" within the Biden-Harris Administration's national strategy on "Reducing Military and Veteran Suicide: Advancing Comprehensive, Cross-Sector, Evidence-Informed Public Health Approach" further amplified the importance of early mitigation measures for the risk factors of unemployment, financial strain, lack of housing, food insecurity, and legal issues. With recent studies further demonstrating the links between unemployment, housing instability, financial problems, and lack of access to health care with veteran suicidal ideations and attempts, VETS acknowledges the importance of addressing these risks early and consistently throughout a veteran's lifetime.<sup>2</sup> At VETS, we are well aware that no Federal agency can operate alone in this ecosystem. I am impressed with the integration and partnerships that VETS has established and continues to develop at the Federal, local, state, and national levels, under the leadership of this Administration. VETS is working with other interagency partners to take all necessary actions to reduce veteran suicide while keeping our veterans, transitioning service members, and their families in the forefront and their economic prospects intact.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

<sup>2</sup> Blosnich, J. R., Montgomery, A. E., Dichter, M. E., Gordon, A. J., Kavalieratos, D., Taylor, L., Ketterer, B., & Bossarte, R. M. (2020). Social Determinants and Military Veterans' Suicide Ideation and Attempt: A Cross-sectional Analysis of Electronic Health Record Data. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 35(6), 1759–1767. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-019-05447-z>

## **Interagency Collaboration**

In May 2021, the White House Domestic Policy Council (DPC) convened the Interagency Policy Committee (IPC) to collectively address suicide. A sub-IPC was also convened and charge with establishing a strategy specifically to combat military and veteran suicide. The sub-IPC is comprised of multiple Federal agencies, including the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Department of Defense (DOD), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Justice (DOJ), and DOL. In creating a plan for a whole of government approach to mitigate veteran and military suicide, the sub-IPC was responsible for collaborating to assess all forms of barriers to access for veterans at elevated risk for suicide, including mental health care and engagement in evidence-based mental health treatment. In November 2021, the White House released “Reducing Military and Veteran Suicide: Advancing a Comprehensive, Cross-Sector, Evidence-Informed Approach,” outlining efforts that would drive federal suicide prevention efforts going forward. The strategy charged the Interagency Task Force (ITF) for Military and Veteran Mental Health with implementation and oversight of the strategy.

In 2012, Executive Order 13625, “Improving Access to Mental Health Services for Veterans, Service Members, and Military Families,” formed the Interagency Task Force (ITF) on Military and Veterans Mental Health, led by HHS, DOD, and VA. The ITF has a primary goal of coordinating and supporting interagency programs and activities related to mental health, suicide prevention, substance use, and expanding access to mental health care. The early work of the ITF involved facilitating interagency work and increasing awareness of connecting veterans and service members to resources and support. The ITF Co-Chairs recently extended ITF membership to DOL along with DOJ and DHS. As co-leads of the Evidence-based Treatment Access and Engagement workgroup, DOL, DHS, and the VA are tasked with evaluating access and engagement barriers to evidence-based mental health care for service members, veterans, and their families at elevated risk for suicide. While co-leading the Evidence-based Treatment Access Engagement workgroup, DOL is collaborating with HHS, DOD, VA, DHS, and DOJ to produce a report on actions taken to improve access to mental health care along with additional recommendations for future action. The report is scheduled for release in November 2022.

The ITF will continue to implement federal, state, and local public and private partnerships with a specific focus on addressing risk and protective factors for suicide. This will include increased emphasis on promoting economic well-being and addressing the full spectrum of the social determinants of health for service members, veterans, and their families. It will also entail efforts to implement safe messaging and adopting appropriate postvention strategies in the aftermath of suicide in order to prevent future risks. In addition, the ITF will address other factors relevant to increased social capital, decreased social fragmentation, and decreased population and community deprivation levels through the review and implementation of policy and programs. DOL will consult with VA and DOD to survey existing reports and data to determine the availability of existing information to complete this requirement. DOL’s recent data-sharing agreement with National Directory of New Hires (NDNH) would potentially provide the required data needed to support this effort.

In addition to the Interagency Task Force collaboration efforts, VETS, as a DOL representative, participates in the Transition Assistance Program Executive Council (TAP-EC). Housed under the Joint Executive Committee with the mission of enhancing the overall social, physical, emotional, mental health and well-being of service members, veterans, and their eligible beneficiaries throughout the duration of their military life cycle journey, the TAP-EC is co-chaired by VETS, DOD, and VA, and includes membership from the Small Business Administration, DHS, the Department of Education (ED), and the Office of Personnel Management. The TAP-EC is continuing its efforts to identify and expand mental health touchpoints while implementing procedures for data exchange and conducting warm handoffs of high-risk transitioning service members.

In an effort to ensure veterans located in rural areas are connected to broadband and have access to online education, training, health care, other critical services, DOL has partnered with the Federal Communications Commission, ED, and the National Telecommunications Infrastructure Administration to collaborate and identify the current and future needs of the telecommunications industry workforce, including making sure telecommunications workers have the skills needed to install networks in challenging areas. Pursuant to the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the Telecommunications Workforce Interagency Group will ultimately prepare a report to Congress on its recommendations by January 14, 2023.

### **Roles of DOL and VETS in Addressing Economic Risk Factors**

Too many of America's veterans experience the burdens of significant barriers to employment, such as long-term unemployment, various disabilities that resulted from their military service, or involvement with the justice system. In accordance with the Biden-Harris Administration's national strategy on "Reducing Military and Veteran Suicide: Advancing Comprehensive, Cross-Sector, Evidence-Informed Public Health Approach," DOL has been tasked with expanding federal, state, territory, Tribal, and local public and private partnerships to address risk and protective factors for suicide. This includes an increased emphasis on promoting economic well-being, reducing housing and food insecurity, and supporting service members, veterans, and their families. VETS addresses these concerns through a series of grants and programs that begins with assisting and supporting service members explore, prepare for, and find civilian careers up to a year *before* their transition out of the military.

"Getting the military-to-civilian transition right" is a top priority of VETS. As the consequences of a successful, or unsuccessful, transition compound over time, it is critical that we provide service members with the resources and opportunities necessary to successfully transition into civilian employment. Under the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), authorized under 10 U.S.C. § 1144, VETS assists service members and their spouses in making a successful transition into meaningful civilian careers. Within TAP, VETS conducts a one-day employment preparation workshop that is mandatory for all transitioning service members, and two optional two-day workshops for career exploration and technical career preparation, or general employment preparation. Beginning with a DOD TAP counselor assessment, transitioning service members are categorized into one of three tiers based on their assessed level of readiness for transition. Utilizing the tier system allows the service member and the TAP counselor to

tailor TAP to the member's specific needs. Furthermore, it allows TAP counselors to focus on service members identified as needing more individualized attention to prepare for transition.

In Fiscal Year 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact the overall TAP participation and courses delivered; however, the major impact was a shift from in-person courses to on-line courses. As DoD has increased the number of courses available for in-person instruction, course delivery and participation in the DOL one-day Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition workshop had a 20 percent increase in participants from FY 2020. In addition, participation in DOL's two-day career track workshops increased significantly over FY 2020. Participation in DOL's two-day Employment Workshop increased by 73 percent, and participation in DOL's two-day Career and Credential Exploration workshop increased 64 percent. In some cases, due to space and other reasons, military spouses are not able to access the TAP curriculum and classroom in the same manner as service members; therefore, VETS created TAP pilot programs that are also fully accessible to military spouses.

VETS has also launched two pilot programs since April 2021 that provide individualized support and increase access to the traditional TAP program. The Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot (ENPP) began at select military installations worldwide on April 1, 2021. This pilot will track and publicly report participant outcomes for it and the traditional TAP program by no later than FY 2023 to be able to determine whether Employment Navigators at brick-and-mortar installations is an effective and efficient use of resources. The pilot was designed in response to feedback from veterans that, while their TAP experience was educational, they desired a more personalized approach. ENPP provides one-on-one, tailored services for transitioning service members and military spouses. They receive assistance with their resumes, career direction, and referrals to vetted partner organizations and American Job Centers (AJC) that can provide additional, personalized support. Our partners provide a wide array of services, including such specialized support as mentoring and wrap-around services. From April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2022, ENPP served over 3,900 transitioning service members and 261 military spouses.

VETS launched the second pilot, the Off-Base Transition Training Pilot Program (OBTT), in January 2022 to extend employment readiness curriculum to veterans, including those veterans currently serving in the Reserve Component (National Guard and Reserve members), and their spouses. OBTT consists of 10 separate, two-hour employment-focused workshops created to meet the employment preparation needs of the target audience. Four of the workshops are offered in person in the pilot states, and all 10 workshops are available virtually with live, instructor-led facilitation as an alternate to in-person workshops or for participants not in the pilot states. Beginning in five states, OBTT is expected to expand to no less than 20 states, at no less than 50 locations over the course of the five-year pilot.

In addition to serving transitioning service members directly with their employment needs, VETS recognizes that the impact of frequent moves on military spouse employment can also add stressors to service members, who become the primary breadwinners. That is why VETS invests in the employment needs of military spouses. Our Transition Employment Assistance for Military Spouses (TEAMS) workshops help military spouses plan and prepare for their job search in pursuit of their employment goals. VETS began offering the full suite of these instructor-led virtual workshops in October 2021, including such services as resume

development, career exploration, interview techniques and more, with the additional option for installations to host in-person workshops.

Beyond the military-to-civilian transition, DOL provides services to veterans and their families anytime they need support for the rest of their lives. These services are provided through the workforce system and the network of approximately 2,400 AJCs authorized under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and overseen by DOL's Employment and Training Administration. AJCs provide a full range of assistance to job seekers under one roof, including training referrals, career counseling, job listings, and similar employment-related services. Veterans and eligible spouses receive priority of service for all DOL-funded job training programs, and veterans and their family members can obtain services by visiting an AJC in person or connecting to the center's information online or through kiosk remote access.

The Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG) program, as authorized under 38 U.S.C. § 4102A(b)(5), provides federal funding through a formula grant to 54 State Workforce Agencies (SWAs) to work in many of the AJCs across the country. JVSG-funded staff are dedicated to providing individualized career and training-related services to veterans and eligible persons with significant barriers to employment and to assist employers fill their workforce needs with job-seeking veterans. These positions include the Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) specialist, Local Veterans' Employment Representative (LVER) staff, and Consolidated Positions. DVOP specialists provide individualized career services to veterans with significant barriers to employment, with the maximum emphasis directed toward serving veterans who are economically or educationally disadvantaged. Significant barriers include service-connected disabilities, homelessness, low income, recent release from incarceration, or lacking a high school diploma. Additionally, recently separated service members who have experienced at least 27 weeks of unemployment in the previous 12 months are also eligible for DVOP services. JVSG assistance may include job search services, career planning and counseling, and job training. DVOPs may also connect veterans to the VA for mental health and other services when these needs are identified through case management. Further, all veterans receive priority of service in all DOL-funded services, regardless of whether they are eligible for JVSG services. In Program Year 2020, over 42,000 veterans began their journey with JVSG staff, and each of them faced significant barriers to employment, such as the 16,000 who identified low income as one of their barriers. The JVSG grant funded nearly 1,100 trained specialists across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and territories who provided individualized career services to these veterans. The grant also funded nearly 500 local veteran employment representatives who worked with employers in their communities to promote and facilitate veteran hiring.

Ensuring veterans are cognizant of the resources available to them through AJCs requires consistent outreach efforts. VETS collaborated with the VA's Solid Start program, which was established to improve mental health care and access to suicide prevention resources for recently transitioned service members, by providing resources available through the AJC network. VA Solid Start representatives can use this information to refer recently transitioned service members to AJC services for their employment needs, when appropriate.

VETS serves one of the most vulnerable populations of veterans, those who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of it. Often facing multiple significant barriers to employment, these veterans face the double crises of income insecurity and not having suitable housing for

themselves and their families. VETS' Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP), authorized under 38 U.S.C. § 2021, is an employment-focused competitive grant program, the only federal grant to focus exclusively on competitive employment for veterans who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of it. In addition to employment services, grantees collaborate with public and private partners at local, state, and federal levels to provide supportive services, access to housing, and connections with the VA for mental health services. In FY 2021, VETS awarded over \$53 million to 156 HVRP grantees, 76 of whom were new grant recipients and 80 were continuing their grant for the second or third year. With an average hourly wage at placement over \$16.00, more than 61 percent of the over 14,700 HVRP veterans served were employed when they completed the program. More than 10,000 of the veterans served by HVRP were also enrolled in programs offered through AJCs. A strength of HVRP is its employment focus and "hands-on" approach where veterans experiencing homelessness receive customized employment and training services. VETS also invested nearly a quarter of a million dollars in 28 Stand Down events that were held in local communities around the country to provide a variety of social services to veterans experiencing homelessness and introduce them to additional benefits and services available to them, from housing to employment. The latest President's budget request included additional funding for HVRP that will allow nearly 1,200 more veterans to be served by this grant program.

Members of the military Reserve Components and National Guard may face economic risk factors and associated stress related to deployments that take them away from their families and their jobs. VETS protects veterans' employment and reemployment rights provided by the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994 (USERRA) under 38 U.S.C. 4301-4335. USERRA ensures the jobs of veterans and service members, including members of the Reserves and National Guard, will not be jeopardized by their military service. It protects against employment discrimination due to military membership or service; provides reemployment rights and benefits to individuals who leave civilian jobs to perform military service; and entitles employees to certain rights and benefits while they are away for military service. VETS investigates claims submitted by persons experiencing problems with their civilian employment related to their military service, determines whether those claims are substantiated by evidence, and attempts to resolve those claims when appropriate. VETS also attempts to mitigate potential future violations by providing information about USERRA to employers, service members, professional associations, educational entities, and the general public. In FY 2020 VETS investigated and subsequently closed 1,016 USERRA cases, of which 83.3 percent were closed within 90 days.

Veterans seeking social connection in a new, unfamiliar civilian workplace are assisted through another VETS-administered program. The HIRE Vets Medallion Award Program, enacted by the Honoring Investments in Recruiting and Employing American Military Veterans Act (HIRE Vets Act) of 2017, recognizes employer efforts to recruit, employ, and retain veterans. In addition to veteran hiring and retention criteria required to earn a HIRE Vets Medallion Award, employers are also required to have in place a veteran integration assistance program. The presence of veteran organizations or resource groups, leadership programs, human resources veterans' initiatives, pay differential programs, and tuition assistance programs in the workplace can help reduce stress and strengthen resiliency among veteran employees seeking connection.

Employers who earn the award are highlighted for veterans to find at [www.hirevets.gov/awardees](http://www.hirevets.gov/awardees).

VETS' top priorities are (1) improving the military-to-civilian transition, (2) leveraging the right strategic partnerships to maximize employment outcomes, and (3) advancing equity and inclusion in our underserved veteran communities. VETS helps veterans identify careers that align with their talents and skills to facilitate meaningful careers with family-sustaining wages. In addressing economic disparity among at-risk veterans, JVSG and HVRP are two examples of VETS connecting veterans of marginalized groups with services they need to reenter the job market. VETS is taking a new and proactive approach by reaching out to underserved veteran communities, such as veterans of color, women veterans, and LGBTQ+ veterans, who have not traditionally engaged with DOL and other segments of the federal government at the same rate as other veteran communities. By engaging with these new partners, we will increase awareness of VETS programs and work towards removing barriers to equitable access. VETS is also continuing to improve its data maturity to strengthen the analytical capabilities needed to better serve and publicly report outcomes for historically excluded and underserved veterans. While excellent work has been done to support transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses, we recognize that there is always more work to do. We are consistently reviewing our programs to determine areas where we can improve our customers' experiences and employment outcomes and ensure that veterans are able to access our services.

### **Conclusion**

VETS looks forward to working with the Subcommittee to reduce veteran suicide by ensuring that our transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses can overcome economic risk factors. We recognize that preventing veteran suicide requires extensive collaboration among Federal, state, and local governments, as well as with non-governmental partners. VETS is committed to continuing our active engagement in these collaborative efforts to ensure that our veteran community and their families have awareness of, and access to, the wide array of services to support their overall wellbeing.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for the opportunity to highlight the important work VETS is doing to generate opportunities for all veterans to have a good career, with opportunity for advancement, economic prosperity and health security. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.