

**THE TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM:
STEPS TO ENSURE SUCCESS FOR
SERVICEMEMBERS AS THEY ENTER
CIVILIAN LIFE**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITY**

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

WEDNESDAY, MAY 17, 2023

Serial No. 118-15

Printed for the use of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs



Available via <http://govinfo.gov>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

WASHINGTON : 2024

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

MIKE BOST, Illinois, *Chairman*

AUMUA AMATA COLEMAN RADEWAGEN, American Samoa, <i>Vice-Chairwoman</i>	MARK TAKANO, California, <i>Ranking Member</i>
JACK BERGMAN, Michigan	JULIA BROWNLEY, California
NANCY MACE, South Carolina	MIKE LEVIN, California
MATTHEW M. ROSENDALE, SR., Montana	CHRIS PAPPAS, New Hampshire
MARIANNETTE MILLER-MEEKS, Iowa	FRANK J. MRVAN, Indiana
GREGORY F. MURPHY, North Carolina	SHEILA CHERFILUS-MCCORMICK, Florida
C. SCOTT FRANKLIN, Florida	CHRISTOPHER R. DELUZIO, Pennsylvania
DERRICK VAN ORDEN, Wisconsin	MORGAN MCGARVEY, Kentucky
MORGAN LUTTRELL, Texas	DELIA C. RAMIREZ, Illinois
JUAN CISCOMANI, Arizona	GREG LANDSMAN, Ohio
ELLJAH CRANE, Arizona	NIKKI BUDZINSKI, Illinois
KEITH SELF, Texas	
JENNIFER A. KIGGANS, Virginia	

JON CLARK, *Staff Director*

MATT REEL, *Democratic Staff Director*

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

DERRICK VAN ORDEN, Wisconsin, *Chairman*

NANCY MACE, South Carolina	MIKE LEVIN, California <i>Ranking Member</i>
C. SCOTT FRANKLIN, Florida	FRANK J. MRVAN, Indiana
JUAN CISCOMANI, Arizona	MORGAN MCGARVEY, Kentucky
ELLJAH CRANE, Arizona	DELIA C. RAMIREZ, Illinois

Pursuant to clause 2(e)(4) of Rule XI of the Rules of the House, public hearing records of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs are also published in electronic form. **The printed hearing record remains the official version.** Because electronic submissions are used to prepare both printed and electronic versions of the hearing record, the process of converting between various electronic formats may introduce unintentional errors or omissions. Such occurrences are inherent in the current publication process and should diminish as the process is further refined.

C O N T E N T S

WEDNESDAY, MAY 17, 2023

	Page
OPENING STATEMENTS	
The Honorable Derrick Van Orden, Chairman	1
The Honorable Mike Levin, Ranking Member	3
WITNESSES	
PANEL 1	
Mr. Alex Baird, Acting Director of the Defense Support Services Center, Department of Defense	5
Ms. Cheryl J. Rawls, Executive Director, Outreach, Transition and Economic Development, Department of Veteran Affairs	6
Ms. Margarita Devlin, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Department of Labor	7
Ms. Dawn Locke, Director, Strategic Studies, Government Accountability Of- fice	9
PANEL 2	
Ms. Brittany Dymond, Associate Director, National Security and Foreign Affairs Directorate, Veterans of Foreign Wars	22
Mr. Michael Quinn, Chief Executive Officer, Hire Military & Tenova LLC	23
Dr. Abby Kinch, PhD, Chief of Staff, Student Veterans of America	25
Mr. Jim Lorraine, President and CEO, America's Warrior Partnership	27
Mr. Hernàn Luis y Prado, Founder and CEO, Workshop for Warriors	28
APPENDIX	
PREPARED STATEMENTS OF WITNESSES	
Mr. Alex Baird Prepared Statement	39
Ms. Cheryl J. Rawls Prepared Statement	41
Ms. Margarita Devlin Prepared Statement	47
Ms. Dawn Locke Prepared Statement	54
Ms. Brittany Dymond Prepared Statement	71
Mr. Michael Quinn Prepared Statement	76
Dr. Abby Kinch, PhD Prepared Statement	79
Mr. Jim Lorraine Prepared Statement	83
Mr. Hernàn Luis y Prado Prepared Statement	86

**THE TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM:
STEPS TO ENSURE SUCCESS FOR
SERVICEMEMBERS AS THEY ENTER
CIVILIAN LIFE**

WEDNESDAY, MAY 17, 2023

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
Washington, D.C.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 3:02 p.m., in room 360, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Derrick Van Orden (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Van Orden, Mace, Franklin, Ciscomani, Crane, Levin, Mrvan, Ramirez, and McGarvey.

OPENING STATEMENT OF DERRICK VAN ORDEN, CHAIRMAN

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Is this the second? There we go, thank you. The subcommittee will come to order. I believe this is the second Veterans Administration Committee hearing that we have had since the renovation? I believe this is the fourth. I want to thank everybody for coming today. I want to thank our witnesses. It is great to see you for being here today to discuss the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the role that each department plays in helping service members take this monumental step in their lives. As you may know, I am a former Navy Seal. I did 26 years in the military. I have firsthand knowledge of the difficulties that can come with making the change from being an active-duty service member to a veteran.

Over 200,000 military personnel leave the service each year. For many service members, this can be a time when they take on new challenges and hopefully build a promising new life. For others, this year-long process is filled with uncertainty and anxiety. Having had a job, a strong community, and a sense of purpose for many years, these service members must redefine who they are, and their new purpose will be the minute they step off their base or ship. That is when that starts.

If they do not have a well-thought-out plan in place, they can find themselves without the necessities of life, income, food, shelter, and it can happen very, very quickly.

As we learned in our field hearing in San Diego earlier this month, there is approximately 33,000 homeless veterans in the United States, and this simply should not happen. One homeless veteran is too many, and we owe these men and women who sac-

rifice so much for us more than that, especially when we think of veterans being thrown out of lodging to make room for illegal immigrants. Even though the Veterans Administration has assured us that they were not funding this program that is still shameful on all levels.

I am committed to solving this problem and doing right by our veterans. This Transition Assistance Program is a big tool in our toolbox to help address this problem. Service members who have a job lined up after separation from the military or a clear path for their future are much less likely to experience homelessness. Service members who are aware and have already signed up for the benefits they are entitled to and understand how to access them are much less likely to end up in dire straits. Service members who have community or family support are less likely to end up in a state of mental distress and commit suicide. That is why this is my primary legislative agenda.

The current TAP program, while well intended, is not meeting the needs of our service members. Too many of them are falling through the cracks, and we have got to do better by helping them build a concrete plan for their life after service.

Oh, here you go. I ask unanimous consent to enter into the record a memo that we picked up in San Diego. It is called the R4-ST. That is a Readiness for Special Operations Transition Program. This is now an MF4-P11 program, which means it is a fully funded program through the Special Operations Command.

Without objection, so ordered.

In June 2019, this committee worked incredibly hard to modernize the transition assistance program under your leadership. Many of these proposals were thought during the hearing, much like the ones we are having today. However, what Congress intended and what the Department of Defense implemented ended up being wildly different. We are here again today with the same organizations in the room discussing an improved TAP, but also a program that is still not up to spec for our service members.

While some veterans speak highly of TAP, we have heard many more veterans refer to the current TAP program as nothing more than a resume writing workshop. While having an up-to-date resume tool is an important tool for finding a job, there are so many other tools that we can build into TAP to ensure the transition progress is easier.

We have heard of the successful SkillBridge program in helping transitioning service members connect with employment. We have heard of the need for more mental health counseling. We have heard of the need for more individualized training sessions. We have heard of the need for a warm handoff for service members that are at risk of being homeless and food insecure. We need to be creating more connections like these for our service members. We need to ensure that the transition process is started when it is legally required to ensure service members can take advantage of all the tools that are offered to them.

It is my understanding that 70 percent of service members are not beginning this process a year in advance. Delaying the start of transition puts these service members at a distinct disadvantage.

It is a disservice to those who have risked their lives for our wonderful country.

Finally, we need to be building in more one-on-one counseling for transition. This should not be a check the box situation. It should be dedicated to helping each individual service member have the tools they need to successfully transition. We owe it to each and every one of them. I hope to hear from you today, our witnesses in the first panel about what has improved since 2019 and what continues to need work. It is important that all agencies, as well as Congress work together, especially on this issue. I also welcome the second panel later this afternoon and hope to hear about the improvements we can make to TAP from their perspective. As I said during my first hearing as chairman back in March, this subcommittee is not bipartisan. It is nonpartisan. This topic reflects that more than any other topic I believe that we handle every day. I now yield to the ranking member for his opening remarks.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MIKE LEVIN, RANKING MEMBER

Mr. LEVIN. I thank my friend the chairman and I thank him particularly for coming to visit our district recently. We had a great hearing out there. I want to thank our witnesses and our viewers. I want to thank all the capital staff that worked on this beautiful hearing room that we have been waiting a while to move back into.

Today we are going to address a matter that is crucial to the well-being and success of our service members, the transition out of the military. It is my honor to advocate for the brave men and women in uniform. Today as we hear from our Federal partners and organizational leaders, I hope we can focus on two key issues that require immediate attention. First, the need for a personalized transition process and the necessity of granting our service members more time to prepare for civilian life.

Each individual who serves in our armed forces has unique experiences, skills, and aspirations, every single service member. Each individual prepares to begin a civilian life in a wholly individual and unique way. Recognizing this, we have got to strive to create a transition process that is tailored to the specific needs of each service member. Put another way, a one size fits all approach simply does not suffice. It is crucial that we develop personalized plans that consider factors such as career goals, educational pursuits, physical health, mental health, and financial, and familial obligations.

The reforms made in the Fiscal Year 2019 National Defense Authorization Act were a great start. However, as we are going to hear today, those reforms are still not fully implemented. I recognize that COVID-19 contributed to this by forcing TAP to pivot to a lot of remote programming. However, Department of Defense (DoD) began moving away from remote TAP over a year ago. Last week, as I think we all know, the President ended the public health emergency.

As far as I am concerned, the time for excuses is over. We lost too much time already. Too many service members have missed the value of a full transition process. Look, if it is a matter of resources, let us know. That is why we are here. It is no secret that Congress has not met the Department of Labor's funding request

for TAP staffing. That is true. Does DoD need more? What about VA?

Our duty as legislators is to deliver resources to accomplish our shared goal, but we can only do so if our partners make us aware of what is needed. Today we look at how we achieve full implementation of current law, but we also look forward. We have got to look forward by discussing and working on the next improvements to TAP. That is why I have introduced the Tier Act. The Tier Act expands examination of a service member's needs during the TAP process to cover things like childcare requirements, spouse employment status, duty station location, service members operating tempo, and if the service member is a Native American, the eligibility for additional benefits. With these basic fixes to help prepare service members for transition, we can significantly improve the program.

It is also vital that we recognize the limited timeframe currently allotted for in this critical period in a service member's life. Far too often, our brave men and women are rushed through this transition phase, resulting in unnecessary hardships and increased vulnerability. The numbers that Government Accountability Office (GAO) will present today are simply stunning. Too many veterans have been waved out of their two-day track, missed out on employment, and education information.

Look, I am aware of the challenges that our commanders face in giving their unit members time to prepare for civilian life while balancing the vast responsibility of providing for our Nation's defense. I have heard those challenges firsthand, representing Camp Pendleton, for example. That is why we have got to have a serious conversation about how service branches handle force structure. It is unacceptable for a transitioning service member to be told they are irreplaceable and therefore can not attend a TAP class.

It is our duty as a grateful Nation to provide our service members with the support and the time that they need to successfully transition into civilian life. By personalizing the transition process, by guaranteeing the time, we can empower our veterans to not only reintegrate into society, but also thrive in their post military careers, which is ultimately what we all want to see. With that, I will yield back to the chairman.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ranking Member Levin. I will now introduce our witness panels. Our first witness is from the Department of Defense, Mr. Alex Baird, the Acting Director of Defense Support Services Center at the Department of Defense. Our next witness is Ms. Cheryl Rawls, the Executive Director of Outreach, Transition and Economic Development at the Department of Veterans Affairs. Our third witness is Ms. Margarita Devlin, the Deputy Assistant Secretary at the Department of Labor. Our final witness for this panel is Ms. Dawn Locke, the Director of Strategic Studies at the Government Accountability Office. I would ask the witnesses to please stand and raise your right hand.

[Witnesses sworn]

Thank you. Let the record reflect that the witnesses have answered in the affirmative. Please take your seats. Hey, so I am a retired Navy Seal Senior Chief. You are going to see a clock that is going to be in front of you. It is going to be 5 minutes, and that

is exactly how long you will be talking. I have read all of your written testimony, and it is fantastic in its entirety, but we want to keep this moving at a steady clip. Is that good? That is a deal right there. Mr. Baird, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony on behalf of the Department of Defense.

STATEMENT OF ALEX BAIRD

Mr. BAIRD. Sir, I will start by telling you I was raised by a Marine, so I never go overtime. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before this oversight hearing on the Transition Assistance Program, TAP. The Department is committed to supporting our warfighters and their families as they navigate the transition from military to civilian life.

TAP is the essential foundation of that support and sets the conditions for successful transition. Each year, TAP provides approximately 200,000 service members with a common level of support, regardless of location, service, or component, at over 200 locations around the globe. The overarching result is that today's TAP provides service members more comprehensive transition preparation, information, support, and services than at any other time during our Nation's history. TAP provides broad ranging information, training, resources, and support that effectively prepare service members for success as they navigate through the challenges and opportunities presented during the transition from active duty to civilian life.

This support enables and empowers service members to leverage their skills, knowledge, and abilities to reach their full potential, achieve individual post transition goals, and to continue serving our Nation as successful veterans who strengthen our communities. Since its inception in 1991, TAP has undergone sweeping changes. These changes have ensured that TAP is relevant, progressive, and ever improving to meet the needs of transitioning service members. The flexibility afforded by the current TAP design allows tailoring of the transition process to individual needs and goals, while ensuring that service members receive information and resources that best support individualized preparation for transition. The relevance of TAP focused on the preparation for civilian life ensures service member buy in and active participation in TAP. In short, TAP works.

TAP works in large part because of the TAP interagency dynamic partnership, a best-in-class example of effective Federal agency collaboration and service delivery. The TAP interagency delivers TAP as an individualized, robust program with alternative pathways and multiple levels of assistance. Each step of the process is guided by TAP counselors trained in providing service members with—training service members, allowing them to be in control of their transition, and to utilize program resources and information that best fit their needs in line with their post transition goals.

TAP is and must remain adaptive while ensuring programmatic focus on two fundamental and complementary tenets, effective counseling and service member buy in. Correspondingly, TAP will sustain emphasis on individualized approach that best meets the service members post traumatic—post transition goals. To that

end, TAP will remain innovative, responsive, transparent, and collaborative. The Department, working with the service members, military services, interagency partners, nongovernmental entities, and Congress, will continuously improve transition service and support. Together, we will build upon current successes and achieve our ever-improving outcomes for all TAP eligible service members from all components.

We will achieve this by providing agile, adaptive, and individualized support and services while addressing barriers that prevent successful transition to civilian life. In closing, Mr. Chairman, I thank you and the ranking member and the members of the subcommittee for your outstanding and continuing support of the men and women who proudly wear the uniform in defense of our great Nation.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF ALEX BAIRD APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Well done, sir. Thank you, Mr. Baird. The written statement of Mr. Baird will be entered into the hearing record. Ms. Rawls, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF CHERYL RAWLS

Ms. RAWLS. Thank you very much. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and the distinguished members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the support the Department of Veterans Affairs provides to service members as they prepare to enter civilian life and beyond. I want to express my appreciation for your continued support of VA's mission to care for those who have served in our Nation's military and for their families, caregivers, and survivors.

Support for transitioning service members is an interagency effort between Department of Defense, Department of labor, the Small Business Administration, and other agencies. In 2019, the interagency partners approved the Military to Civilian Ready Pathway, a six-step framework encompassing holistic programs and services provided by Federal interagency partners, veteran service organizations, VA State directors, and local community resources.

Also in 2019, the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act required service members to begin the Transition Assistance Program no later than 365 days prior to separation and as soon as possible in the 24 months prior to retirement. The VA One-Day Benefits and Services course is provided during TAP and orients the 200,000 transitioning service members annually to all VA benefits and services. Additionally, VA provides military lifecycle modules and opportunities to meet individually with benefits advisors.

Through human-centered design and survey results, we identified additional special emphasis areas for future military lifecycle modules, including LGBTQ-plus, minority, rural, military sexual trauma, National Guard, and Reserve component. VA continues to offer the Women's Health Transition Training course, which is an online course that emphasizes women veterans' specific needs.

VA acknowledges the first year of transition out of the military may pose significant challenges. It is with this thought in mind

that VA created the VA Solid Start program that connects with recently separated veterans at three critical points after transitioning 90, 180, and 365 days during the first year. In Fiscal Year 2022, VA Solid Start successfully connected with over 175,000 recently separated veterans.

VA frequently assesses the need for changes and opportunities for growth. We use stakeholder engagements like the VA Transition Forum and the Military to Civilian Transition Summit to bring VA, public, and private stakeholders together to learn more about transition programs and ways to better coordinate transition services while strengthening community relationships. In Fiscal Year 2022, VA partnered with the DoD and Department of Labor (DOL) in a human-centered design project designed to better understand the experiential needs and desires of transitioning service members, recently separated veterans, and their families for navigating military transition. The results of this research are and will be used to enhance transition. There is a need for increased collaboration with veteran service organizations, and state departments, better data sharing opportunities, and increased spousal and family engagement. VA continues working toward making improvements in these areas by removing barriers and developing communication tools for spouses.

In conclusion, legislation has enabled VA and our interagency partners to become a robust transition program with alternate pathways and multiple levels of assistance, allowing service members to utilize the programs, resources, and information that fits their needs aligned with their post transition goals. However, VA recognizes the need for continuous improvement and remains dedicated to strengthening military to civilian transition outcomes. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, this concludes my testimony, and I am happy to respond to any questions you or the subcommittee may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF CHERYL RAWLS APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ms. Rawls. Yes, Ms. Rawls' testimony will be entered into the record. Ms. Devlin, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF MARGARITA DEVLIN

Ms. DEVLIN. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, thank you for this opportunity to testify about the Transition Assistance Program and what Department of Labor Veterans' Employment and Training Services (DOL VETS) is doing to transform and modernize it. I have spent my entire Federal career working with veterans and serving veterans. This is my passion, so I am really happy to be here.

VETS' mission is to prepare America's veterans, service members and military spouses for meaningful careers, provide them with employment resources, protect their employment rights, and promote their employment opportunities. VETS administers employment programs through the Transition Assistance program.

I would like to highlight five areas that I think will be of interest to this committee, to the subcommittee. First, service members are attending TAP employment workshops in record breaking numbers.

VETS administers three core TAP employment workshops: the one-day Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition, the two-day DOL Employment Workshop, and the two-day Career and Credential Exploration Workshop.

In Fiscal Year 2022, we provided instruction to over 266,000 participants, which is over a 40 percent increase from the previous workshop record in Fiscal Year 2021. Our participant survey results are encouraging. In Fiscal Year 2023, 97 percent of participants indicated they would use what they learned in their own transition planning, and 95 percent reported that their confidence in transition planning was enhanced.

Second topic, VETS is leading the way to transform the TAP employment space. In response to consistent feedback that service members want more personalized support beyond the classroom environment, VETS created the Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot, or ENPP. Since its original launch at 13 military installations, ENPP has served over 10,000 participants. Our contract Employment Navigators provide personalized one-on-one assistance with resumes, career direction, and referrals to vetted partner organizations and American job centers.

As of March 31, 2023, 96 percent of ENPP survey respondents reported positive feelings after meeting with their Employment Navigator and would recommend ENPP to a colleague. Additionally, 98 percent felt ENPP partners met or exceeded their employment-related expectations. I want to share just one quote from a participant. He said, the value of the Employment Navigator is having a one-on-one conversation to go back over the plethora of information you received in TAP classes and give guidance and recommendations specific to your situation.

Third topic, VETS asks Congress to consider expanding the Off-Base Transition Training pilot. Currently, veterans and their spouses are eligible to receive support modeled after our TAP curriculum at locations other than active military installations in areas with high veteran unemployment. Congress may wish to consider expanding OBTT eligibility to current serving members of the Guard and Reserve, regardless of their veteran status, and their spouses.

Fourth topic, VETS will leverage data to improve TAP outcomes. Traditionally, VETS has only had access to data about TAP workshops and those workshop participants. However, new initiatives, such as the Employment Navigator Partnership Pilot, have enabled VETS to access employment outcome information on our transitioning service members through the National Directory of New Hires at the Department of Health and Human Services. DOL is leveraging this information to improve program delivery and employment outcomes, and we look forward to sharing this information and these outcomes when it is available.

Fifth, we ask that Congress appropriate the full amount requested in the President's Fiscal Year 2024 budget for VETS. We appreciate the funding increases appropriated by Congress for TAP. However, Congress has not appropriated the full amount requested by the President's budget and needed for VETS, Federal Administration, and Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA). This appropriation is the one that

funds all VETS staff and enforcement activities. This reduction presents a great risk to all VETS programs, including TAP.

In conclusion, our long-term strategic goal for TAP is for the Nation as a whole to recognize military service as a path to a high-quality civilian career. The future of the country's all volunteer force depends on it. We look forward to working with this committee and appreciate the support to be able to create opportunities that ensure all veterans can have a good job and opportunity for advancement. Thank you again for the opportunity to be a part of this hearing, and I welcome your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MARGARITA DEVLIN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ms. Devlin. Ms. Devlin's written statement will now be entered into the record. Ms. Locke, you are recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF DAWN LOCKE

Ms. LOCKE. Thank you, Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and members of the Subcommittee. I am so pleased to be here today to discuss our work on the Transition Assistance Program, or TAP. Over the next couple of years, almost half a million service members will transition into civilian life. These transitioning individuals are required to go through TAP to get the support they need, whether it is finding a job, going to school, or taking advantage of other resources. Today, I will be discussing our most recent work on the TAP counseling pathways. The three areas I will cover are whether the pathways have been implemented, service member participation in the pathways, and finally, how effectively TAP is working.

For the first area on implementation, I am pleased to report that the pathways have been fully implemented by all DoD services. As you know, the pathways consist of one-on-one counseling, self-assessments, goal setting, placement into one of three tiers depending on the level of support needed, and three core classes, followed by a two-day tailored course. We heard generally positive feedback about these pathways and how they are now more customized versus being that one size fits all approach.

As for the second area related to participation, we found that more than 90 percent of service members went through TAP and attended the three-day courses. Unfortunately, the story was very different for the additional two-day courses that dive deeper into various aspects of employment and higher education. The services waived the 2-day courses requirement for 53 percent of service members. That is a little more than 64,000 men and women. Notably, 22 percent of tier three service members did not attend a two-day class as required. Now, keep in mind, the tier three service members are those who are most vulnerable for transition challenges, and nearly a quarter of them are not taking the two-day class.

Another important aspect of TAP participation has to do with timeliness. The law generally requires that service members start at least a year before they separate, but we found that only 25 percent started on time. The reason this is an issue is because service members who begin TAP late may miss opportunities, such as ap-

plying for disability benefits before leaving military service or taking advantage of DoD's on-the-job training programs with civilian employers.

It is unclear why there is low attendance for the two-day classes or why most service members start TAP late. We were told it could be due to various factors, such as medical discharges, deployments, or a lack of command support, but it is hard to be sure. While DoD and the services collect data on timeliness and two-day class attendance, they do not use these data to get at root causes. We therefore recommended that they leverage the data they already have to determine the reasons for-and how to fix-the issues with attendance and timeliness.

For the third area of our review on TAP effectiveness, we found that DoD and its interagency partners, such as the VA and the Department of Labor, are sponsoring a number of studies on TAP's long-term outcomes. While not yet complete, the studies aim to show whether TAP leads to favorable results, such as how quickly veterans get a job and how much they earn.

I do not have to tell anyone on this subcommittee how critical it is that we now protect the individuals who have spent so many years protecting us. They must be given the time and support needed to access transition resources. DoD and the services can help do this by making better use of their data to determine deficiencies and adjust accordingly. We will also be looking for the TAP agency partners to leverage upcoming evaluation results to verify what is working and what could be improved so veterans can better transition into healthy, sustainable lives. This concludes my statement. I look forward to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF DAWN LOCKE APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ms. Locke. The written statement of Ms. Locke will be entered into the hearing record. We will now proceed to questionings, and I recognize myself for exactly 5 minutes. Mr. Baird, do you consider the TAP program successful?

Mr. BAIRD. Yes, sir, I do consider the TAP program successful.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Are you aware that in a December 2022 report the Government Accountability Office stated that the majority, which is 70 percent of transitioning veteran service members, did not begin TAP at least 365 days before leaving military service?

Mr. BAIRD. Yes, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Why has the Department of Defense failed to implement the law as mandated by Congress?

Mr. BAIRD. Mr. Chairman, we were in the process of implementing the law when COVID started. At that time, 95 to 98 percent of our courses were in brick and mortar. We had to shift to a virtual environment, as did our Federal partners.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. All right. Okay. What are the DoD service branches doing to ensure that installation leadership and unit commanders are held accountable to ensure the timeline of TAP is met?

Mr. BAIRD. Sir, each of the service has a corrective action plan for how they will get their numbers back on track. We agree with you. The most important thing is that people start at 365.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Are you aware of any other Department of Defense programs that are performing at a 25 percent success rate, and would you consider those successful that are?

Mr. BAIRD. No, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Now, Ms. Locke, in your testimony, you said that generally someone is held accountable. A unit commander, generally, they are not held accountable. That means if someone generally has specifically, there should be somebody who has been held accountable for this. Can you tell me how many commanders have been held accountable for their troops not attending TAP?

Ms. LOCKE. We did not look into data on commander accountability, but what we did hear across the services and installations we visited was that commanders are not being held accountable. It was suggested to us ways that this could be improved by, for example, incorporating TAP into commander performance metrics, because we know what gets measured is what gets done. We have also been told given the idea to incorporate TAP into DoD's mission, because, as we all know, there is zero room for failure when it comes to the mission. If TAP were part of that mission, it might be given a higher priority.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I strongly recommend that you do that because no one is going to get to—you can only get to functional 365. There is going to be something that comes up, rapid deployment. These service members and the Department of Defense will not take this program seriously until commanders are held accountable, which means them not getting promoted. That is the only thing that this is going to happen. This model that we gave from Naval Special Warfare, they actually start 2 years out. It is a 24-year cycle because they understand 1 year is not enough time because stuff comes up. It is a fantastic model. We will make sure you get that. Ms. Baird, you said the 22 percent, that is 11,000 service members who are placed in the tier three require the maximum transition assistance, they did not attend this class. Is that correct?

Ms. LOCKE. Was that for, me?

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Yes, I am sorry.

Ms. LOCKE. Okay, that is correct. 11,000 in that tier three category did not attend a 2-day class. Again, those tier three service members are those who are most vulnerable to housing insecurity and food insecurity—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay.

Ms. LOCKE [continuing]. or other things like that and they are not attending the course as required.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Then Mr. Baird, as a representative of the Department of Defense, can you explain to me why the service members in the greatest danger of becoming homeless and starving to death are being granted waivers by their commanders?

Mr. BAIRD. Sir, I cannot answer for each of the commanders. What I can tell you is that it is a commander's program. It is a service secretary program. During COVID we put the priority on operating in a virtual environment. In March 2022, we put the emphasis back on the Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) 19, making sure we implemented all the components of NDA 19 and we are putting the emphasis back on the services. We report that informa-

tion back up through the JEC structure, the Joint Executive Council.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I got it.

Mr. BAIRD. We will also have that information to you this fall in our report to Congress.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Mr. Baird, with that information that you give back to Congress the number of tier three folks that are not meeting this 2-day thing, I want a list of the commanding officers' names and their command sergeant majors or command master chiefs or command chiefs. I want their names because this has got to stop. If someone's being lazy and not running a person through this program, they need to be held directly accountable.

The last thing is this, would you be opposed to having the Veterans Administration become the lead agency for the Transition Assistance Program? The lead. It is a huge, convoluted chain of command. I would posit that this program and our service members would be better served if in fact the Veterans Administration was the lead agency. Would you support that?

Mr. BAIRD. Mr. Chairman, the three of us work as a team. I do not know that it makes any difference who you make lead.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. My time has expired. I now recognize Ranking Member Levin.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you Mr. Chairman. Mr. Baird, it was nice meeting you in my office recently. I want to thank you for joining us today. We do not often have DoD testify before us, so I have got some questions for you. DoD's mission statement is to provide the military forces needed to deter war and ensure our Nation's security. How does service member transition fall into that mission?

Mr. BAIRD. Ranking Member Levin, it is a key component of the entire military service process. It is key to recruitment and retention in that my service was based on my father's experience in the United States Marine Corps. My daughter's experience was based on my time in the Air Force. She is now a first lieutenant in the Air Force. It is inherent that the Department of Defense has got to make a smooth transition so that those people leave, continue to recruit for us.

Mr. LEVIN. VA's mission is to fulfill President Lincoln's promise to care for those who have served in our Nation's military and for their families, caregivers, and survivors. Would you say that VA's mission more adequately encompasses a service member's transition?

Mr. BAIRD. I think it is a partnership between the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans.

Mr. LEVIN. I understand that, but of the two mission statements, which do you think better encompasses transition?

Mr. BAIRD. The veterans, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you for that. As we talked about when we met with Undersecretary Cisneros as well, and as I said in my opening remarks, I was frankly stunned to hear some of the numbers from GAO, and these have been repeated. 25 percent of service members in the highest risk level that did not attend the mandatory 2-day class, 70 percent of service members did not start TAP at least 1 year before separation. My question for you is to what extent, if at

all, does TAP participation affect commanders' performance ratings and promotion potential?

Mr. BAIRD. Mr. Ranking Member, that is part of each of the services' corrective action plan. How are they going to make this a commander's program and hold commanders responsible?

Mr. LEVIN. What is the consequence for a commander that does not ensure service members under their command start TAP on time, or that all tier three service members take the two-day class?

Mr. BAIRD. Sir, I could take that for the record, but I can not speak for the services.

Mr. LEVIN. It is fair to say it is all over the place. Some may have consequences, some may not. Is that a fair statement?

Mr. BAIRD. Again, Mr. Ranking Member, I can not speak for the services and how they would answer that.

Mr. LEVIN. Okay. Well, some of them might say there are consequences, some of them might say there are not, correct?

Mr. BAIRD. Correct.

Mr. LEVIN. Correct. Ms. Locke, I will turn to you. The goal of TAP is to ensure service members transitioning from active duty are prepared for their next step in life. Do you know whether the program is effective?

Ms. LOCKE. You know what, we do not. That is because we do not have the outcome data. There is a lot of output data on participation. The TAP interagency partners are collecting surveys and they are telling us that, for example, service members think the 3-day courses are useful or that they think the 2-day courses are helpful. They do not have actual outcomes on the service members who have gone through TAP and how they are now living as veterans.

What is encouraging is that these partners have interagency agreements to share data with, for example, the Census Bureau, or the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), or, as Ms. Devlin said, the Health and Human Services new hire data. Hopefully, eventually, those data will be able to show us that a TAP graduate was able to get a job, keep a job, how much they earned, and whether they had to collect unemployment. Right now, we just do not have those data.

Mr. LEVIN. Just to be clear, we have no data to understand the effectiveness of TAP?

Ms. LOCKE. That is correct.

Mr. LEVIN. That is something we all need to work on together. Let me turn back to you, Mr. Baird, I have a minute here. How does the existing TAP structure work for Guard and Reserve members?

Mr. BAIRD. For Guard and Reserve members, it works exactly like it does for active duty. One of the things we did is we incorporated a work group as part of the TAP governance structure that is a Guard and Reserve working group so they can elevate their members. Additionally, we have members at each level of the Senior Steering Group (SSG) and the Transition Assistance Program Executive Council (TAP EC) from the Guard and Reserve.

Mr. LEVIN. You think it is working effectively?

Mr. BAIRD. I think it could work better. It is a difficult thing. Having spent many years working for the National Guard, if they

deploy for 180 days, they are already behind the power curve the day they arrive at their deployed location. One of the things we want to continue to look at is how can we best integrate both the Transition Assistance Program and the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program to be effective.

Mr. LEVIN. I appreciate that, and, you know, I just want to say, make no mistake, we are truly grateful for the work that you do for our veterans, our transitioning service members. It does not mean we can not improve. We all want to hopefully work together. We might be a little biased here on House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC), thinking that this fits more within the VA wheelhouse, but we need the support of the DoD. We need the support of the chain of command, make sure that this is a top priority. We need some accountability and transparency on how the results are whether this is working or not. I suspect we know what the outcome of such analysis would be, but the sooner we get to the bottom of it, the better. With that, I will yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you Ranking Member Levin. I now recognize Mr. Ciscomani for 5 minutes.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you again to all the witnesses for coming here to testify. I am proud to represent Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, which is in Tucson and Fort Huachuca in Sierra Vista, both in Arizona's Sixth District, my district. Between both installations, thousands of service members can call Southeast Arizona home. Ensuring that they are successful after their service in the country is a huge priority for me. My questions are going to be in that line here for both them and their spouses.

My first one will be to you, Mr. Baird. Now, the service members leaving the military are required to participate in the Transition Assistance Program, or TAP, which includes a combination of pre-separation counseling and 5 days of classroom, which is classroom-based instruction. However, the Department of Defense has interpreted the five-day TAP course differently, and each military branch and military base commander has the authority to waive the optional two-day class. Do you think that 3 days is enough for a service member to take in all the information needed to prepare for a civilian life? I know that we went through a two-week orientation here, and there was a lot more to cover and a lot of information that is thrown our way in any kind of orientation, I can just imagine the amount of information that our service members would need before hitting civilian life and 3 days with the option of waiving two. What do you think about that?

Mr. BAIRD. That is a great question, Representative. In my case, 3 days was enough. I was 24 years in the United States Air Force. I had a job before I started terminal leave. The Marine Corps has chosen that everyone who is a first termee will be a category three, will be a tier three because they need more information. The key is we have got to get to 365 days so that I have got a full year to address any of the issues I have for my transition.

Mr. CISCOMANI. You have found—what is the feedback from the service members saying back? What I am hearing is that it is not enough. Perhaps in your case it sounds like it was and that worked out. For a lot of the members that I am talking to it just does not

seem to be enough for what they can recall is not only the days but is the amount of information. How do you think Congress can improve TAP to ensure the positive outcomes on the transitioning of service members? I am hearing here from my colleagues as well, there is always room for improvement. It might have worked for you, it may work for others like you, but it does not work for a lot of people out there as well. What are the opportunities here for growth and improvement?

Mr. BAIRD. Sir, what I would tell you is TAP today is better than it was yesterday and TAP tomorrow will be better than it is today. It is a continuous, evolving environment and a learning environment. The 2019 National Defense Authorization Committee (NDAA) changed the entire program. Before that, it was just about compliance. Everybody got the same information. There are so many benefits out there for our service members as they transition that it is hard to know all the benefits. What we have been teaching them is where to go to get the additional information. An advantage of going to a virtual environment is a service member who is now a veteran can still go back and retake—

Mr. CISCOMANI. I am sorry to interrupt here because I only have a minute and a half left, but I understand that part. I want to hear from you is what are improvements that you think we can still make? As good as you are describing the program, I am sure there are ways and areas where you and I could agree that we have to improve. Please cover that.

Mr. BAIRD. It is where I need to improve, sir. It is where I need to get all of our commanders to 365 days. It is where I need to get the IT infrastructure in place to support the long-term data.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Thank you for that. I only have a little over a minute. Ms. Devlin, if I can address you with the question here quickly around spouses. In the testimony, you described the Transition Employment Assistance for Military Spouses, or TEAMS, to help military spouses find employment when their spouses leave the military. Based on the information from the Department of Labor, military spouses have higher unemployment rates compared to national averages, and many can only find part-time work. What takeaways does the Department of Labor have from the military spouse employment curriculum, and are there any plans to scale up this program?

Ms. DEVLIN. Thank you so much for that question. It is very important that we work with military spouses to eliminate their unemployment and eliminate the barriers that they have to continued employment due the multiple deployments with their spouses. The TEAMS program has been popular, but it is new and, you know, people are just gaining awareness. We also have services for military spouses at our American Job Centers through the American Job Center network. What we are learning is that we need to get to them early enough. We need to give them the information and the resources so that they do not have gaps in employment with each change in duty station.

Mr. CISCOMANI. Thank you so much. Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Ciscomani. I now recognize my friend Ms. Ramirez for 5 minutes.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you, friend Chairman Van Orden, and Ranking Member Levin for today's hearing. I additionally want to thank all of you who are here today as our witnesses, Ms. Rawls, Mr. Baird, Ms. Devlin, and Ms. Locke for coming before the committee to engage in what is a critical discussion about service member transition and how the Transition Assistance Program is an essential tool to empower veterans to make the most informed decisions regarding their post service life.

When we talk about service member transition into veteran life, we tend to focus primarily on education and employment with good reason. That is not the whole picture. As some of you have heard me speak before, I spent many years running a social service agency in Chicago, and I cannot emphasize enough how important wraparound services are. Mr. Baird, to what extent does TAP make service members aware of other resources beyond employment and education? For example, how does TAP help with mental health or food or housing assistance that might further support service members during their transition?

Mr. BAIRD. Thank you for that question. TAP was designed to prepare the service member for transition. We do avail them of opportunities of where to get additional information. The Department of Veterans Affairs does that quite nicely. We do not address those social needs after they are out of the service. That is difficult for us because we do not have that control. The best we can do is teach people what is available so they can go post service when they are a veteran, they can go out and seek those opportunities out.

Ms. RAMIREZ. I know that in testimony, one of you talked about how they are supposed to go through this 2-day orientation of services within that year before they are returning, but about 70 percent of them do not participate a year prior. Usually there are housing issues when they are going to be coming back or there are other resources they need. That period of time would help. Why do you think so many are not participating within the year prior for them transitioning back to civilian life?

Mr. BAIRD. I think part of it was during the COVID period, people just—commanders were not pushing as hard. That is got to change. There are many reasons why somebody would be given a waiver. If I have already enrolled in education, if I am enrolled at a university, I do not need to go through the education track because I already know how to do that. If I already have a job, I do not need to go through the employment track because I have already got employment.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Got it. Let me go back. I have been talking a lot about housing, and certainly I also feel like it is important to highlight our women veterans. Women veterans have specific health needs, including reproductive healthcare needs. I understand that the Department of Veteran Affairs currently offers women's health transition training to help support our women veterans' transition.

Ms. Rawls, as you know, less than half of eligible women veterans are enrolled in VA healthcare. We also know that women veterans face a higher rate of some health-related challenges after military service compared to men. That includes chronic pain, depression, and the list goes on. How can the Women's Health Tran-

sition Training program be improved to reach more women veterans and increase VA Healthcare enrollment?

Ms. RAWLS. Thank you very much for that question, ma'am. One of the things that can help improve this offering is for us to be able to have it virtually instructor led so the women have an opportunity to engage. I want to make it very clear that the information that is provided in the Women's Health Transition Training, all of the information is provided in the VA one-day services. The big distinction between the Women's Health Transition Training is that it provides a forum to connect to services that VA offers particularly for women. By me asking to have an opportunity to have it instructor led virtually, I think that is going to have an effect on women to be able to talk about what is happening instead of just viewing the information again.

Ms. RAMIREZ. Thank you. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ms. Ramirez. I recognize my friend Mr. Crane from Arizona for 5 minutes.

Mr. CRANE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I always appreciate that. Juan's egging me on over here. He wants me to say something nasty to you. I do not know what it is about this place.

Thank you guys for being here. This is something that is near and dear to me as a veteran myself, watching many friends of mine struggle getting out of the service. I went through TAP class and I also volunteered a good amount of my time and resources to help other members transition out of the military. I have a couple of questions for you guys. I wanted to know if when you are doing TAP class, Mr. Baird, you guys bring in experts or representatives in some of the trades and other industries that veterans might be able to pipeline into, like construction, IT, entrepreneurship, banking, law enforcement, tech, et cetera, so that they might be able to actually get connected with somebody in a field, a national field that might actually help them place in a job.

Mr. BAIRD. Congressman, we do not. There is the ability through the SkillBridge program for them to make that connection.

Mr. CRANE. Through the what program?

Mr. BAIRD. SkillBridge.

Mr. CRANE. Are they informed about that during TAP?

Mr. BAIRD. Yes, sir.

Mr. CRANE. Great. Thank you, sir. One of the other things that I wanted to mention and see if this is a part of the curriculum at all, often successful transitions are not just about finding a job, income, housing, et cetera, but a lot of veterans do not even realize how hardwired they are for service. Is there any information put out to these individuals going through TAP to how they can get plugged in and serve in their community, in their state, and possibly at higher levels?

Mr. BAIRD. Mr. Representative, it happens both through the DoD part and also through our partners. We emphasize the important skills that they bring. That is one of the reasons—we just met with Bank of America a couple of weeks ago. One hundred percent of the people who do SkillBridge with them, they hire. What we are finding is, if we can make that connection between corporate America and our veterans, then they get hired.

Mr. CRANE. Okay, well, then let me just make a suggestion, because this is one of the biggest things that I see, one of the biggest reasons I see veterans fail is because after a certain point of time, maybe 6 months, a year, they eventually land the job and they can pay the bills. Like I said, a lot of veterans are hardwired for service and they do not even know it, which is why they actually went into the military to begin with. Once that mission is missing from their life, they feel lost. You know, and so, just a suggestion that might be something you guys take a look at is helping them not only understand that, but possibly getting plugged into mission-based, you know, type things when they get out might be helpful.

The next question I have is for Ms. Dawn Locke. Why are so few service members starting TAP on time? What are some of the consequences to service members of starting TAP later than required by law?

Ms. LOCKE. Sure. We have been told that the reason why people are starting TAP so late is because there is mission need. They could be on deployment. They could be hospitalized. Or again, we heard that there might be a lack of command support. The reason why it is important to be timely with TAP is so that the service members can take advantage of the resources that are provided to them. For example, they would have the time to take advantage of SkillBridge. SkillBridge is a 6-month long program and to apply and to interview, it takes time. For those service members that are starting TAP too late, they miss out on that opportunity.

In addition, what we heard from a number of service members is that the VA benefits is a very complicated process and it is a lot being thrown at them. They need time to research their benefits and to apply. It is helpful if they apply and get approved while they are still in the service because they are able to be directly connected to those resources. In addition to that, if they are approved while they are in the service, that means they immediately start collecting those benefits once they leave the service.

Mr. CRANE. Thank you. Mr. Baird, in 2019, NDAA, Congress mandated that TAP would consist of a 5-day class to give service members more time to disseminate information. However, Congress has since learned that the service branches have waived attendance. Why has DoD decided not to implement law mandated by Congress? What could a service member miss during those extra 2 days?

Mr. BAIRD. Representative, we believe the law gave us the flexibility to tailor TAP to each individual. There are some people who do not need to go through all 5 days. As I described myself before I separated from the service, I had a job.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman's time has expired. I now recognize the distinguished gentleman from Indiana, Mr. Mrvan.

Mr. MRVAN. Thank you, Chairman. I am going to do everything I can to be introduced as your friend going forward. If you want to meet for a cup of coffee after this.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I now recognize my friend, Mr. Mrvan, from Indiana.

Mr. MRVAN. Sweet. I will get to the point. Mr. Baird, my question is, and Ms. Locke had a phenomenal point that I think needs to be emphasized, if you cut short the time of the 365 days and the

SkillBridge program takes time in order to ramp up, then in essence, you are eliminating a program that is successful. Now we know statistically less veterans are able to participate in that because of awareness and because of the ramp of time of which they are doing that.

I guess my direct question is, when it comes to veteran benefits, I have a specific case at my office right now, and I am going to just go through the scenario very quickly. The veteran was leaving, did not know that if he did not transfer his GI bill for the education component to his daughter, he could not do that unless he reenlisted or did four additional years or the additional service that he did. He gets out, he tries giving it to his daughter, he calls my office and said, I was not aware of that. Now, generally, he should be, but the fact of the matter is, if he did not participate in that program because of command not telling him that he had to go, then he is unaware of it. That is a benefit that he is out of that he was depending on.

What I am trying to say is there are real people and veterans on the other end of that that you know of. Can you explain, if you had a magic wand, what would you do in order for the veterans, besides the command, what other steps would you take so that the veterans themselves are aware and they know what they are missing?

Mr. BAIRD. That is a great question. We are very fortunate right now that our Undersecretary for Personnel Readiness is an advocate of the TAP process, and he is vowed to help us push those commanders to make sure that they are hitting that 365 so that people have enough time. We are going to continue to leverage the online services available to make TAP open to not just the service member, but also to their spouses.

Mr. MRVAN. Okay. Thank you. Ms. Devlin, how is the Department of Labor engaging with employers and industry representatives to create more employment opportunities specifically targeted at transitioning service members?

Ms. DEVLIN. Thank you so much for that question. Several different ways. We have a Honoring Investments in Recruiting and Employing American Military Veterans Act of 2017 (HIRE) Veterans Medallion Program which recognizes employers who hire veterans. There is strict criteria for it, and it is the only Federal Government program that recognizes employers for hiring veterans and retaining them.

Mr. MRVAN. What does that mean that they are recognized?

Ms. DEVLIN. Correct. They can apply to be recognized. We verify based on the statistics of their organization. If they meet the requirements for hiring, retention, and development of veterans, they can get this recognition as a HIRE Veterans Medallion Program awardee.

Then in the TAP program, when transitioning service members are learning about their employment options, we tell them about this. There was actually one example in TAP class where we had a service member leave the TAP class and go contact one of the employers in the Hire Vets Medallion Program and actually got a job after separation. That is one way in which we market to employers that, hey, it is not only great that you hire veterans, but

you need to get the message out that you are hiring veterans so that transitioning service members will know to come find you and come work for you.

Mr. MRVAN. For my own education, where does SkillBridge fall under? Who is in charge of SkillBridge?

Ms. DEVLIN. Department of Defense.

Mr. MRVAN. I guess I have a minute—28. If you are in charge of a program but not giving people enough time, do you see how the frustration we all have that we put these forward? Corporations are saying we want to participate. All the individuals that participate, your own words at 100 percent. 100 percent go into that program, get jobs. The ones that are missing are the ones that are missing that opportunity. I am asking you to go back and to keep that in mind when you are advocating for the veterans on how important it is, because we have a program that people are unaware of that has 100 percent placement.

Mr. BAIRD. If I can Representative. Overall, the program has 70 percent placement. It was Bank of America that is 100 percent.

Mr. MRVAN. Okay.

Mr. BAIRD. I just want to make sure I do not—

Mr. MRVAN. Seventy percent.

Mr. BAIRD. I am excited to say that as of 1 May, the program now belongs to us. It was in a separate department within P&R, Personnel and Readiness. It was not fully incorporated into the TAP process. We believe bringing it into the TAP process will allow us to use that to leverage commanders to get people in earlier so they can take advantage of the SkillBridge.

Mr. MRVAN. Thank you. With that, I yield back my time.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Mrvan. Now, I recognize my distinguished colleague and great friend, Mr. McGarvey from Kentucky.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate that. I will take my 5 minutes. I appreciate you all being here today and obviously talking about how we can help our veterans. That is the purpose of this committee is how can we better help our veterans honestly get what they have earned and what they deserve from this panel. I was a little troubled by the answers to the questions that Mr. Levin was asking earlier and certainly look for follow up from that. Do want to continue to talk about TAP and its importance.

As you all know, there are all kinds of challenges veterans face when transitioning out of the service and coming into being civilians. The TAP is a big part of helping veterans be able to succeed. Nearly 2/3 of our student veterans are first generation college students. Not only are they facing a transition out of the military, they are facing a potential transition with TAP into a world that they do not know. Certainly, we should be there to help them and their families. We must do more for first generation college students across the board, but particularly our veterans.

In light of all the testimony today, just think about this, what actions do you recommend Congress take to improve TAP and transition as a whole to better support service members in attaining higher education?

Mr. BAIRD. Thank you for that question. We believe we have all the tools right now that were given to us in the NDA 2019. Now it is our responsibility to continue and to implement them and use them.

Mr. MCGARVEY. If you have all the tools you need, what is the problem?

Mr. BAIRD. The problem was coming out of a COVID environment where the services had different priorities, to be bluntly, honest. Now, the priorities got to be back on taking care of our service members as they transition.

Mr. MCGARVEY. How do you plan to do that?

Mr. BAIRD. We plan to do that through our TAP corporate structure. We have services at every level of that and we are holding them accountable. This committee is holding them accountable because they know we have got a report due that will come over to Congress in the fall. We will continue to use the structure we have to put the pressure on the services. They get very competitive as one starts achieving numbers that somebody else has not.

Mr. MCGARVEY. Again, to what Mr. Levin was discussing, you know, we certainly want to see that report. We want to get this data back. We want to make sure if you do have all the tools that you need, these programs are in fact working and that they are working for our veterans to give them again what they have earned, what they deserve, what they need to continue to find success. With that, Mr. Chairman, I will yield back the rest of my time.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you very much, Mr. McGarvey. Before we close out here, I just want to follow up on one thing. When I asked you if you would be opposed, Mr. Baird, of the Department of Veterans Affairs taking lead on this issue for transition, the reason I asked that is because you have to have a captain of a ship. When you work collaboratively, what you do and I have looked at the—I would love to see a line and block chart of how this is organized because it appears to be a mess. There needs to be a desk where the buck can stop, as President Truman would say.

I want to talk to you again after this. I understood that you went and saw Mr. Levin. I appreciate that. I would like to meet you personally in my office to talk about making sure we understand that there is a single point of contact. If anybody has any issues that they know who to go to, not a board. We govern by consensus. I would not use the word nimble to describe it, Congress.

With that, thank you all very much for coming. I appreciate your time very much. The witnesses are now excused.

I hope you stick around and listen to the next panel. It would be awesome. Thank you. We will take a short recess.

[Recess]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Well, thank you all for coming. Mr. Luis y Prado, if you can have a seat, please. Our second panel we will be hearing from today Ms. Brittany Dymond, the Associate Director of National Security and Foreign Affairs Directorate from the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). I left my hat in my office. Mr. Michael Quinn, Chief Executive Officer of Higher Military and Tenova, LLC. Dr. Abby Knish, Kinch? Say it again?

Ms. KINCH. Kinch.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Kinch, PhD, Chief of Staff of Student Veterans of America (SVA). We have had you guys over a few times. Mr. Jim Lorraine, the President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of America's Warrior Partnership (AWP), and Mr. Hernan Luis y Prado, the founder and CEO of Workshops for Warriors.

I would like to welcome you all here to our second panel, and I would ask you to please stand and raise your right hand.

[Witnesses sworn]

Thank you. Let the record reflect all witnesses have answered in the affirmative. Ms. Dymond, you guys see us. I do not know if you were all here earlier, but we will be talking for exactly 5 minutes. Ms. Dymond, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF BRITTANY DYMOND

Ms. DYMOND. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the VFW, we thank you for the opportunity to provide our remarks on this vital topic. The critical nature of military transition cannot be understated. For many transitioning service members, the change from military to civilian life represents a complete personal and professional shift not previously experienced as adults. Additionally, leaving service is often complicated by service-related ailments, family needs, loss of identity and support networks, and the need for retraining to enter a new career field. Sadly, the initial year following discharge also comes with increased suicide risk among new veterans, bolstering the need to ensure all transition stakeholders work to get it right.

Some of the best resources service members have during transition are accredited representatives like those in the VFW's Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program, also known as BDD. Through BDD, individuals can file expedited VA claims and complete medical evaluations before leaving service, enabling VA to provide disability ratings upon or shortly after discharge. Receiving expedited claims decisions means BDD participants are better able to minimize gaps in essential care like mental health counseling and medication management, and use resources like the VA's Veteran Readiness and Employment Program.

For these reasons, the VFW believes there is untold value in incorporating accredited representatives into the TAP curriculum. Specifically, we would like to see these individuals facilitate complementary course materials that cover VA benefits and services where practical, with an emphasis toward those that can be applied for prior to discharge. Accredited representatives would not only be able to highlight the BDD program, but also help transitioning service members file claims to aid in the seamless delivery of care and benefits once they return to civilian life. Claims assistance is a task that VA contract employees, who largely teach the VA curriculum legally cannot do.

Currently, however, representatives like the VFW's BDD employees experience wide variability in how, if at all, they could engage TAP participants. This is because no statute or policy exists that requires installation commanders and site managers to permit their entry into and participation in any element of the course. As a result, site managers vary in their willingness to allow represent-

atives in TAP, and if entry is permitted, managers also differ in how they will allow them to interact with attendees.

While not the rule, TAP managers often do not see the value in having accredited representative present, or they assert that there simply is not enough time to allow them to speak to service members. We have even been told that we can get better help from outside of TAP, which is completely false, especially in the context of needing to meet service members where they are. As such, the VFW believes VA must utilize representatives as tools in their TAP toolkit to the maximum practical extent.

Another area of major concern is community connections. The VFW also believes it is crucial for Congress to clarify how it defines resources located in communities, as outlined in Section 1142 of Title 10. Within the Fiscal Year 2019 TAP reforms, Congress mandated that all transitioning service members be connected to resources in the communities in which they plan to live after service. However, DoD is not doing this consistently or effectively.

As written, the requirement is too ambiguous since the statute does not articulate how resources should be identified or what it actually means to connect service members. Respondents to the VFW's BDD program survey are asked whether they received those community connections. Between September 2022 and May 2023, one-third of more than 1,000 respondents indicated that they either were not or did not know if they received those connections during individualized counseling.

As the law requires, we would like Congress to ensure connections are being consistently made between transitioning service members and resources in the communities to which they are transitioning. One option Congress can designate for identifying connection points is the National Resource Directory. This resource contains vetted organizations that span the transition spectrum from career assistance to caregiver support. The transition program's generalist nature is not a flaw of the system, but rather a feature of the system. TAP is neither designed for nor able to address everyone's unique needs, so community resources fill the void that its curriculum cannot. In other words, community organizations are the transition program's force multiplier, but only if connections to those organizations are effectively made. Chairman Van Orden and Ranking Member Levin, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to take any questions you or members of the subcommittee may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF BRITTANY DYMOND APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ms. Dymond. The written statement of Ms. Dymond will be entered into the hearing record. Mr. Quinn, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL QUINN

Mr. QUINN. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, distinguished members of the subpanel—subcommittee, my apologies. I am a retired sergeant major. I retired November 1, 2017. I am a little direct. I apologize if that offends anyone. I am assuming it is okay with Mr. Chairman. TAP is personal to me. I was a top performer in my entire career. I was promoted first almost my entire career,

special mission units. I led security for the White House Communications Agency. In my last job, I led the operations for 17,000 people in 45 countries. I was planning on doing another 7 years. I brought the list of assignments home to my former spouse, and she said, yes, I am not moving. She had moved seven times in 9 years, and she had finally gotten a good job and was near where she had support. That goes into the military spouse employment piece as well.

I thought with a top-secret Sensitive Compartmented Information (SCI) clearance, my last job, all the intel experience that I had in the D.C. area, it was going to be a breeze. I went to TAP and did everything they taught me. I went to my first job fair and I spent 6 hours talking to 41 employers. All 41 employers said, check our careers page and apply online, and actually broke contact with me so that I could not ask follow-on questions.

It was a gut punch. Luckily, a little bit of the sergeant major came out of me in recruiter number 40, and I said, no, look back here. How do I follow up with you? They told me to connect with them on LinkedIn, and I did.

I will tell you, that tool, that resource, it is not social media. It was a networking tool for me. It was a way to get information outside of TAP. I dove in. I did over 200 informational interviews to figure out what I wanted to do, what I was qualified to do, and how I could make myself a best candidate, and to find the mentors that I needed to open doors for me.

You know, when we talk about TAP, I will tell you that TAP was the hardest year of my life. Harder than Iraq, harder than Afghanistan, Bosnia, Philippines, Guantanamo Bay, because of the uncertainty at the end, not knowing how I was going to take care of my family. I had a retirement. When I tell you it is personal, I mean, I lived it. It is been my life to give back.

What I want to say is that I acknowledge that the four leaders here that spoke before us are all very passionate and they are doing their best about the program. I know that the interagency council is really working hard to improve TAP. I have seen it improve since 2017 when I got out. Somebody needs to be in charge. It is an interagency council. They default back to their own specific elements. You can not hold anybody accountable if it is not getting fixed. You can not drive innovation. I sat in on a briefing by a VA, defense fellow at the VA on May 3rd, and he shared the numbers of people not attending. The VA can not really do anything about that. No one is in charge. Somebody has to be in charge of the program for it to be effective, for it to continue to grow.

Number two, I would say that the military lifecycle transition was mandated starting back, I believe, in the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) Act and again in 2017, which means that service members get transition related training throughout their entire career, not just the 1 week of training at the end when it is too much. It is been mandated by Congress. DoD's never implemented it. There is even a website. I will tell you that the services are not providing it. If you provided training at key Permanent Change in Stations (PCSs), at leadership schools over the course of a career, not only will it not be the first time they see it, leaders will be able

to mentor their service members and provide access to resources that they need to find their success.

The third part is TAP delivery. Seven hundred facilitators around the world reading PowerPoint for 2 to 3 days is overkill, and how much of that can you really retain? What I will say is that the pandemic taught us how to be remote. I will tell you that the vast majority of our transitioning service members would love to be able to access content whenever they need it on their mobile devices with some earbuds in. There should be an Learning Management System (LMS) with all the training they want. They could take it as often as they have it. You can track performance along the way, along with on demand, expert driven classes that they can get live classes on. That is TAP delivery.

Then the last part is, this is hard coming from the Army, but we have got to hold DoD accountable. It is comical that if a soldier, God forbid, does not get their dental checkup, it is coming down from the installation through all the command levels, and a first arm's marching them to the dental center. We can not get people in the TAP training. I recommend holding them accountable using UCX, Unemployed Compensation for Ex-Service Members, to track performance and fiscal repercussions. Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MICHAEL QUINN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you. The sergeant major's time has expired. I now recognize Ms. Kinch for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF ABBY KINCH

Ms. KINCH. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America to submit testimony on the topic of the Transition Assistance Program. I want to talk to you today from the perspective of a former student veteran representing the post-911 generation of veterans currently in classrooms across the country.

While there have been some attempts to improve TAP, the program is still lacking, particularly when it comes to helping transitioning service members prepare to use their education benefits as a means to transition into civilian life. Primarily, this programmatic deficit is due to a lack of emphasis placed on the education portion of TAP, which has manifested culturally within units, as well as impacted the decisions available when transitioning through higher education.

First, the transition track of TAP is simply not sufficient for anyone entering higher education. Imagine a high school student sitting down with a guidance counselor to prepare for college. They often start 1, 2, sometimes 4 years out, and these visits are frequent, including a comprehensive assessment of majors, college selection, housing, financial aid, and more. TAP's Education Workshop provides service members with 2 days or online 240 minutes of counseling without individualized attention. The deficit brought by this disparity leaves service members and their families to make sometimes poor decisions that cost them time and money.

Student veterans are more than twice as likely as traditional students to change their degree major because of ill informed decisions or simple unknowns. They are also likely to incur debt, as more

than half are married, more than half have children, 20 percent are single parents. While they are successful in the classroom, they often do not take advantage of opportunities outside of the classroom or on campus because they feel isolated by age and experience.

If proper interventions started sooner and with more emphasis on education, degree major changes would be reduced, the GI bill could be used on longer Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) degrees, and Temporary Assistance (TA) dollars could be more appropriately used to take courses that transfer or that are housed in the destination school.

More holistically, student veterans find that isolation greatly contributed to transition stress. However, our survey feedback shows that a vast majority of student veterans felt TAP did not prepare them for these type of social and psychological struggles. Combating common feelings of isolation for student veterans with the camaraderie provided by an SVA chapter also exposes these students to the larger campus community. We have noted that student veterans who have engaged with their SVA chapter are more likely to engage with other areas of campus.

Additionally, a 2016 survey found that most student veterans have some level of service-connected disability, though virtually none at the time were using disability offices or accommodations to support their academic experience. When that same study was repeated in 2022, the number of student veterans utilizing these services had increased to 26 percent. Not only are SVA chapters a front door to other campus organizations, but they serve as a gateway to needed campus and VA services. Most student veterans, unfortunately, do not discover their SVA chapter until late in their college career. If veteran service organizations such as SVA connected with transitioning service members during TAP or earlier, this timeline to discovering support is shortened, and we may see real impact that continues beyond immediate transition and education.

Finally, the culture around the importance of TAP. There is an imbalance in the emphasis placed on transition tracks, anecdotally and in response to surveys, some student veterans report that their unit's culture is unsupportive regarding TAP and education. Some service members do not understand the importance of the program because it is not stressed to them by their command, who themselves do not see TAP as important for transitioning service members, as was pointed to in the GAO report.

The short optional track, the lack of involvement of the Department of Education in the career portion of TAP, and the minimal discussion of education opportunities post service when compared to career opportunities, demonstrates to everyone that higher education is not the intended destination for service members. Because of this, the education portion of TAP, noting that service members in large numbers are transitioning through higher education, must be improved. Not only should TAP begin earlier in the transition process, but it should be robust enough to follow a service member from the decision to separate through education and into a meaningful career. For SVA, transition services are not a bridge from one point to another, from inside the DoD to out, but through the

entirety of the transition process to include all departments. Thank you, Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and the members of the subcommittee for this opportunity. I look forward to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF ABBY KINCH APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Dr. Kinch. I now recognize Mr. Lorraine for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF JIM LORRAINE

Mr. LORRAINE. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to testify to you today. The topic of veterans employment and transition is a very important one. We all know that transition between jobs is one of the most volatile times in a life, but even more so when you are involved with a change of culture, a change in routine, a change in location, the loss of camaraderie, the loss of financial security, and sometimes the loss of a sense of purpose. Together, this has repeatedly shown to lead to feelings of hopelessness, and the loss of hope is one of the largest contributing factors to veteran suicide.

At America's Warrior Partnership, our mission is to partner with communities to prevent veteran suicide. Ensuring veterans have purpose and are financially stable are the ultimate issues that we are here to address today. The greatest indictment of the military is often how we treat our veterans and the next generation's watching. When 15-to 17-year-olds see how veterans are struggling with transition and jobs after service, many quickly choose not to join the military.

At AWP, we found that most companies did not know how to utilize or help veterans and their families who were already in the workforce. In response, AWP began the Corporate Veteran Initiative (CVI), which is powered by our AWP network consisting of thousands of partners. Most of them are communities. CVI raises morale and productivity of the veterans and helps employee retention and recruitment. It is a win win. Companies such as Wells Fargo, Union Bank of Switzerland (UBS), and Peraton, to name a few, have made the choice to act.

For those in transition, underemployment and financial insecurity are major issues. Programs led in coordination by the Department of Defense, VA, and DOL have made significant progress in helping veterans navigate this transition better, but they have a long way to go. However, most of this process is DoD heavy, yet, the VA and DOL will be with these former service members from discharge on. DOL and the VA must play a bigger role. When everyone's in charge, no one's in charge.

The DOL's Veterans Employment & Training Service, DOL VETS, has a program called Employee Navigator Partnership Pilot, or ENPP. Utilizing the ENPP those can look to job markets, research geographic regions, craft resumes and other pre-career functions in partnership with major employers and Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) to assist. Importantly, ENPP is open to spouses. ENPP must be expanded and given additional funding to

add more to the communities. I think my colleague with the VFW said it best.

While the GI bill is well known, the VA Apprenticeship Program is not. With such a high potential for the Apprenticeship Program, it needs to be updated and reformed. First, the VA Apprenticeship Program needs to be updated to a cost of living paid to the students. Currently, it is a percentage of what is paid for using the GI Bill. That needs to end. There should be parity. Second, this program should not in any way use their GI Bill benefits. The student should not risk losing their GI bill.

Next, more needs to be done to ensure the cost of apprenticeships do not fall on the employers, including costs of certifications and licensures. We must make it easier for employers to find partners who are participating students.

Finally, I am here to applaud the SkillBridge program and offer some recommendations. SkillBridge needs to be consistent across the Department of Defense, available everywhere, and more companies need to know how this program works and provide no cost opportunities to transition service members without excessive bureaucracy. I suggest SkillBridge program moves to the Department of Labor for a full execution and integration into the employer space.

Last, I would also like to point out that veterans protected status is only selected for a few, not open to everyone. By changing the veterans protected status for all who served in the National Guard, Reserve, active duty were discharged in a status other than dishonorable, you can protect the rights of veteran employees across the board. Again, I thank you to everyone on the subcommittee, and I look forward to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JIM LORRAINE APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Lorraine. The written statements of Dr. Kinch, Sergeant Major Quinn, and Mr. Lorraine will all be entered into the hearing record. Thank you. I now recognize Mr. Luis y Prado for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF HERNÀN LUIS Y PRADO

Mr. LUIS Y PRADO. Good afternoon, Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Hernàn Luis y Prado, the founder and CEO of Workshops for Warriors, headquartered in San Diego, California. I would like to share with you a way to provide those that have served an opportunity to be trained and placed into dignified, lifelong careers, increase our military readiness, and continue serving our Nation.

What got me here? Have you ever struggled or lost your footing? Do you remember how it felt to suddenly lose a job or even worse, a loved one? I am a 15-year Navy veteran with combat tours in Afghanistan and Iraq. I knew that on any given day, more than 20 of us were dying from suicide. Why was I losing more friends to suicide than to bombs and bullets overseas? When you are in the military, you are part of America's suit of armor. In this purpose-driven tapestry, each of us knows what is expected and what to expect from others.

When your service ends, you are suddenly ripped out of this fabric and you find yourself alone, adrift, and without a mission. The sudden lack of income, purpose, and identity are overwhelming because you have never been trained or equipped for this new set of challenges. When I came back from my first tour in Iraq, many of my injured marines convalescing at National Naval Medical Center would come to my house, gather in my garage to tinker with tools and pass the time. Spending time together made me realize how worried these combat veterans were about the scariest thing they had ever encountered, their imminent transition to civilian life.

Our numbers grew, and soon my garage became crowded with Marines welding, machining, and fabricating, the underpinnings of manufacturing. This was just a diversion. I needed to find a long-term solution for the veteran crisis, as well as another looming problem.

While we were distracted in not one but two wars, China overtook America and became the world's number one manufacturing nation. In 2010, China had 56 submarines. By 2030, they will have 76. We need to build three submarines a year just to catch up. We can currently build one. In short, manufacturing dominance had long been America's economic and military backbone, but now it was no longer our superpower. I began to wonder, could we harness the tremendous human capital that our veterans contain by retraining them to help America regain her economic, manufacturing, and military prowess? What if we gave every veteran the opportunity to rebuild America's manufacturing workforce, to have a dignified life, to be part of the American dream? Sounds great, right? I just did not know how.

In 2006, I was in a mall when I heard a familiar voice call out, Doc. I turned to see one of my Marines, who I had served with, coming toward me. He told me that he had lost both of his legs to an improvised explosive device in Iraq. I remembered his dream of being a Marine Corps lifer. As he wheeled away from me, I was devastated. Not just by him, but because he represented the lost dreams and aspirations of all of my injured comrades in arms. My knees literally melted, and as I sank to the ground, I had a life changing epiphany that has driven my life ever since. I grabbed my wife Rachel's arm and said, we are going to sell everything we have and do something. To Rachel's huge credit, she said yes.

We sold our home, vehicles, and cashed in our retirement to create an advanced manufacturing training center so that our veterans could be trained for a viable future. We named it Workshops for Warriors. Workshops for Warriors is the only accredited non-profit in the U.S. dedicated to accelerated and compressed training and placement of veterans and transitioning service members in welding, fabrication, Computer Numerical Control (CNC), machining, 3D printing, robotics, and computer aided design careers. Our graduates leave with nationally recognized portable and stackable credentials.

I am married, I am married to a statistician and survey methodologist, so here are the facts. Our school has grown 350 times our original footprint and is about to expand nationally. Workshops has graduated more than 1,125 veterans, who have earned more than 12,000 nationally recognized credentials. Our graduates work in

every State of our Nation for companies like Boeing, SpaceX, and Ford. Since 2011, we have a 94 percent average placement rate, with an average starting salary of \$60,000 a year.

You could help veterans become America's force multiplier. We know that TAP and SkillBridge can work. We know that retraining veterans works, and it could solve our Nation's manufacturing crisis while giving veterans purpose and an opportunity to serve our Nation again.

So, what is the issue? Since 2015, 40 percent of Workshops for Warriors graduates found out about our program through the Transition Assistance Program. Fifty-six percent attended by using SkillBridge. For every graduate that used SkillBridge, three times that number said their command denied their requests and, as a result, could not enroll.

In January 2023, Deloitte confirmed that America has 803,000 unfilled manufacturing jobs due to lack of skilled labor, and that number is rising to 2.1 million. We should take advantage of this to train our veterans to make America the world's manufacturing and military superpower again. Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT HERNÁN LUIS Y PRADO APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thanks, Doc. By the way, my title used to be HMCS Van Orden in case you were wondering. That means you are cleaning the toilets when we get done here, Prado.

Mr. Luis y Prado's testimony, written statement will now be entered into the record.

Before we get started with this questioning here, I would like to recognize someone who is sitting in the front row there, Mr. Romesha, Staff Sergeant, 1H Medal of Honor recipient. Just made me smile.

All right, we will now start our questions. I will recognize myself for 5 minutes.

My number one legislative priority is to prevent veteran suicide. That is what I am doing. I have got an email on my desk. It was written to me by a service member's brother who committed suicide. I spent my first day in Congress calling his widow, his brother, and his father and apologizing for the department or the Federal Government's inability to schedule a medical appointment.

My Ranking Member Levin's number one legislative priority is preventing veterans homelessness. I am afraid that we catch up on these things too late. What we are talking about here and what you are discussing is an upstream solution, because once someone has food insecurity or they are living in a bush on a corner, it is so much harder to get that back. I want you to know that we are taking this exceptionally seriously. That is why we went to your district in California in Oceanside, home of the Marines.

There are a couple of things here I just want to point out, Sergeant Major and Mr. Lorraine. Sergeant Major, you said someone must be in charge. Mr. Lorraine, you echoed that comment, and that is what I started with when we were speaking with our Department of Defense folks here. Someone has to be in charge. We just have to, or things do not work.

We have Senior Executive Services (SESs). We have got all these people making a ton of money. I do not know how many people are

associated with these different programs, how many agencies, and phone calls, and no one knows what is going on. It gives everybody the excuse to get nothing done. That has got to stop.

I do not agree, Mr. Lorraine, that this should be a Department of Labor issue. I think that this should reside with the Veterans Affairs Committee and with the Veterans Affairs Administration. This is why, because every single day we get up, this is all we think about. That is it. The Department—ma'am, you came to my office and I appreciate that greatly. I do not have heartburn with you at all.

What I have heartburn with is the Department of Defense appears to be dragging their feet with this. Lots of times they think that we are shanking people out of the military. That is not the case. My brothers in Naval Special Warfare produced this fantastic transition program. It clearly demonstrates unequivocally that by providing an off ramp into the civilian community, you are not making people get out of the military sooner. What you are doing is preventing them from killing themselves and becoming homeless and drug addicts and alcoholics.

That is what we are here to do. You may not be aware of this but when you joined the Navy or the Army, the Navy, or the Army, Air Force signed you up for a 30-year career. There is something called the enlisted ladder that lays out very clearly from day one of boot camp until you retire as an E-9, Sergeant Major, or Command Master Chief. This has to be integrated into that program. Then it becomes programmatic.

That is something, sir, that we can tie directly to the performance results of these officers. Until officers start getting fired for this, and senior enlisted people start getting fired for this, and SESs start getting fired for this, it is not going to change. We all know, anybody that spent 5 seconds in the military knows that. I am going to ask you just one by one here, Ms. Dymond, if you could be queen of the world for a day, who would you put in charge of running the Transition Assistance Program?

Ms. DYMOND. I would most likely say the VA, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Mr. Quinn, excuse me, Sergeant Major.

Mr. QUINN. The VA.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Doctor.

Ms. KINCH. The VA.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Mr. Lorraine.

Mr. LORRAINE. The VA. Sir, I said the ENPP program should move—or sorry, the SkillBridge—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. SkillBridge—

Mr. LORRAINE [continuing]. program should move to labor.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Yes, oh, I understand.

Mr. LORRAINE. Not the—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I am with you.

Mr. LORRAINE [continuing]. transition. Okay.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I still disagree. That is all right.

Mr. LORRAINE. Okay.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Mr. Luis y Prado.

Mr. LUIS Y PRADO. The Department—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I would start with the Department, then a person. Why are you looking for a job? Apparently you are busy already, Doc.

Mr. LUIS Y PRADO. Not me, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Did you hear that?

Mr. LUIS Y PRADO. Not me. I know some people that would be very capable—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay.

Mr. LUIS Y PRADO.—who could help us with that.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Which department do you think they should fall under?

Mr. LUIS Y PRADO. DoD, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Let the record reflect that every single member of this panel thinks that the Veterans Administration should be in charge of the Transition Assistance Program. With that, I yield back. I recognize my Ranking Member, Mr. Levin, for 5 minutes.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, chairman. I thank Mr. Luis y Prado for making the journey from San Diego to Washington D.C. today. A journey I am quite familiar with every week. Thank you for your expertise as well. Hearing from experts like you is really important. You are on the ground. You are serving veterans every day. Hearing from you and seeing what you are experiencing is really critical for the work of the subcommittee.

You urge greater SkillBridge participation. How would you suggest we drive more employers to participate in SkillBridge?

Mr. LUIS Y PRADO. Ranking Member, it is not a question of employers per se. I would say it is the wraparound services required. It is difficult to focus on studying if you are focusing on survival. The wraparound services are the most impactful way to move a transitioning service member into a viable, lifelong career. For example, we had 21 national employers at our last job fair. Every one of our graduates got a job. It is never the employers that are the issue. It is how do we take care of the young men and women that have served to provide them the wraparound services, the housing?

You can not study if you do not know where you are going to put your head at night, if you are starving. We have had to purchase housing, buy a restaurant so you can feed people. We call it Forward Operating Base (FOB) San Diego. You can not focus on what you are trying to do if you do not know where you are going to put your head down. I would say the wraparound service is the most important part of that, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. Gotcha. I appreciate that very much. The Warrior Training Advancement Course, WARTAC, a really good opportunity for transitioning service members and often leads to employment at one of Veteran Benefits Administration's (VBA's) regional offices. Would you support more programs similar to WARTAC and other Federal Government agencies for transitioning service members?

Mr. LUIS Y PRADO. I would support any program that actually holds schools and commands accountable with objectively verifiable metrics such as job placement, average starting salaries, nationally recognized credentials, time to hire. We need to have, I believe, objectively measured, and tracked metrics so we can track the effectiveness of an organization or their outputs.

Mr. LEVIN. Before I turn to others, I just wanted to expand a bit on the chairman's question about which agency should be in charge. I heard the four of you say VA. I heard you say DoD, and I wanted to ask you your rationale.

Mr. LUIS Y PRADO. DoD has people in uniform that can be held accountable. I think right now the biggest challenge is that the DoD Contracting Officers (COs) do not understand how they can navigate the friction between unit readiness, a gapped billet, and their responsibility toward helping the service members that are transitioning from their unit get into a lifelong, useful career so they can maintain their communities and rebuild our Nation. If you are able to provide them an opportunity by having some higher cover and saying, if you move this person into SkillBridge earlier, you will get that billet back. I think that would be the easiest way of making this work forward, because the people that go through our SkillBridge program are almost four times more likely to make it through the program than someone that is not.

Mr. LEVIN. I appreciate that. When you look at the mission statements of the two entities, DoD is, again is to provide the military forces needed to deter war and ensure nation's security.

Mr. LUIS Y PRADO. Yes, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. VA is to fulfill President Lincoln's promise to care for those who have served our Nation's military and for their families, caregivers, and survivors. Same question for you that I had for the last panel. Which do you think more adequately encompasses transition?

Mr. LUIS Y PRADO. I believe—

Mr. LEVIN. It is not a trick question, I promise.

Mr. LUIS Y PRADO.—the VA should have overall accountability. There should be a much tighter accountability with the DoD units that we need to mandate and control that they actually send their people to SkillBridge. I agree that the VA should hold onto it, but there has to be much tighter collaboration and accountability between the DoD and the VA.

Mr. LEVIN. Got it. I think that is where we are heading with all this. Ms. Dymond, I will turn to you. You noted that the initial year following transition poses increased risk of suicide for new veterans. Can you speak to the risk factors that contribute to this trend and any protective factors that can alleviate it?

Ms. DYMOND. Mr. Ranking Member, absolutely. Thank you for the question. In the short time we have remaining, we need to look at the social determinants of health. The protective factors. Do they have a roof over their head? Do they have food in their stomach? Can they take care of themselves and their families? Basic needs to be met. Basic needs need to be met.

In addition, as Mr. Crane noted, we also need to make sure that service members understand the challenges inherent with transition when we are talking about the loss of social support and the network that you have inherent in the military and ensuring that we are facilitating connections appropriately to community resources so that they can get those connections. Also, connections to benefits is vital.

Mr. LEVIN. I am out of time. I would just end by saying that, as the chairman mentioned, his top priority, ending veteran suicide.

Mine ending veteran homelessness. Although both, I think, are incredibly important to us both. Improving transition and the work that you are all doing is vital to both of our objectives. This is very high stakes, very important, and we really appreciate the work that you do, and I will yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ranking Member Levin. I now recognize Mr. Crane for 5 minutes.

Mr. CRANE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate that. Thank you guys for coming today. As I told the last panel, this is a very important topic to me, and I thank you for all the work that you guys are doing on this issue. I want to start with Dr. Kinch. Did I pronounce that correctly? Thank you. All right. Does Student Veterans of America have any recommendation to the education track that could improve how transitioning service members use their GI eligibility and make sure to make the correct choice?

Ms. KINCH. Yes. Thank you so much for that question. We have to start considering the education benefit as soon as someone decides to utilize tuition assistance while in service, because those credits will largely dictate where, how, and when someone can continue to use credits post service or post transition using the GI bill. If someone does not complete a degree using tuition assistance and they have gone somewhere with credits that we will say are largely untransferable, they have then wasted that money using tuition assistance and have to start over using their GI bill.

Student veterans largely go to 4-year public universities. Understanding the behavior of service members in higher education as well as veterans in higher education and understanding the transition there would be the first step. We do have a lot of ideas.

Mr. CRANE. Okay. Can somebody maybe we can start with you, Dr. Kinch, or anybody on this panel help me understand what other opportunities are available for veterans who have paid into their GI bill who might not want to go to a 4-year university, higher education, et cetera? Mr. Luis y Prado?

Mr. LUIS Y PRADO. Vocational training programs that lead to nationally recognized credentials, I would say would be my number one pick. It is an easy way for people to get average starting salary jobs of \$60,000 a year, and most importantly, it rebuilds America's manufacturing capability and readiness. Every single graduating class that I have had since 2008, I ask them the same question, when America goes to war again, sea lanes are cut, and we need DoD facilities to rebuild everything that is hard and metal that goes overseas. I want you to report to your closest DoD facility to help rebuild our manufacturing infrastructure. Would anybody here object? In 15 years, I have yet to hear a "no." They are all people that have a clear purpose, which is why they joined the military. If you provide them compressed training, nationally recognized credentials, they are happy to engage and rebuild our manufacturing infrastructure.

Mr. CRANE. Thank you. Dr. Kinch, real quick, is there any pushback from any of the VSOs up here on giving veterans more of a choice, more options on how to use their GI bill?

Ms. KINCH. Thank you for that. As far as I know, the options are extremely robust, and a majority of folks who enlist do so for the education benefits on the other side to obtain a college degree. You

can use education benefits for a number of opportunities, like my colleague said, vocational opportunities. You can get your pilot's license. There are a number of things that you can use those benefits for.

Mr. CRANE. Just to put you on the spot, ma'am, can you run me through five or six of those if you know them off the top of your head?

Ms. KINCH. I would be happy to get that to you after this hearing.

Mr. CRANE. Okay. All right. The reason I am pushing and the reason I ask is because I am big on choice. Like Mr. Luis y Prado, when I was getting out, I had the wise idea to start a bottle opening company, of all things. I was working out of my garage with a bunch of other active-duty veterans. It is where I found out, sir, that you cannot make a corkscrew in the United States of America. It blew me away. All of them are made overseas. I love what you are doing. As far as trying to bring back manufacturing into this country. Unfortunately, I do not think it is a workforce issue. I think it is a politician issue, and shipping a lot of our manufacturing overseas, which is very, very disheartening. I do want to see veterans have the opportunity, you know, when possible, to use their GI Bill, which they paid into if they decide, or if a 4-year higher education track is not what they are looking for. Mr. Lorraine.

Ms. KINCH. Sir.

Mr. CRANE. Go ahead, ma'am.

Ms. KINCH. I just wanted to clarify the current iteration as well as the post-911 GI bill are not paid into.

Mr. CRANE. Oh, really?

Ms. KINCH. Yes.

Mr. CRANE. Interesting. Okay.

Mr. LORRAINE. Just really—I brought up apprenticeships. Apprenticeships are opportunities that are a GI bill-like program. The problem is that the housing stipend decreases over time, makes it unattractive.

Mr. CRANE. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You are welcome, Mr. Crane. I appreciate it greatly. Thank you, Ranking Member Levin, for correcting that. Apparently, I am a little older than you, Doc, because I swear I heard VA. Son of a—hey, but we will sit down and talk about this, and I think you will see the clarity of thought there.

Mr. LUIS Y PRADO. Yes, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I want to thank you all. I want to thank you all for coming. I really do. This is an incredibly important topic, and you guys are doing the work, and gals, you are doing the work, and I am just so proud of you. We owe each other a debt that does not get repaid. It simply does not.

If we can, through our work up here with your work out there and with you guys in the back and I was yelling at you, sir, from the DoD, if all of us can get together and prevent one veteran from committing suicide and preventing one veteran from winding up sleeping in a bush, then all of this is worth it. I want to thank you very much.

I want you also to understand that we are not done with TAP. We will be working—bless you—we will be working diligently to make sure that we can get the best product to the most amount of people, to our brothers and sisters that have served this country. Again, thank you very much. With that, Ranking Member Levin, do you have any closing comments?

Mr. LEVIN. I just want to thank everybody for the work they do each and every day that is often overlooked. It is incredibly important, and we are grateful for it. I thank the chairman for his outstanding hearing today.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. All right. I ask unanimous consent that all members may have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous materials.

Without objection, so ordered. This hearing stands adjourned.
[Whereupon, at 4:55 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENT OF WITNESSES

Prepared Statement of Alex Baird

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you for this oversight hearing on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

The Department is committed to supporting our Warfighters and their families as they navigate the transition from military to civilian life. Required for all Service members with 180 days or more of continuous active duty, TAP is the essential foundation of that support, setting the conditions for successful transition. Each year, TAP provides approximately 200,000 Service members with a common level of support—regardless of location, Service, or component—at over 200 locations around the globe. The over-arching result is that today's TAP provides Service members and their spouses more comprehensive transition preparation, information, support, and services than at any time during our Nation's history.

TAP provides broad-ranging information, training, resources, and support that effectively prepares Service members for success as they navigate through the challenges and opportunities presented during the transition from active duty to civilian life. This support enables and empowers Service members to leverage their skills, knowledge, and abilities to reach their full potential, achieve individual post-transition goals, and continue to serve our Nation as successful Veterans who strengthen their communities.

Since its inception in 1991, TAP has undergone sweeping changes. These changes have ensured that TAP is relevant, progressive, and ever-improving to meet the needs of the transitioning Service member population. TAP's design ensures both flexibility and relevance. The flexibility afforded by the current TAP design, allowing tailoring of the transition process to individual needs and goals, ensures that Service members receive information and resources that best support individualized preparation for transition. The relevance of TAP, focused on preparation for civilian life, ensures Service member buy-in and active participation. The effectiveness of this programmatic flexibility and relevance makes the Department and the TAP Interagency Partnership confident in saying that TAP works.

TAP works in large part because of the dynamic TAP interagency Partnership, a best-in-class example of effective Federal agency collaboration and service delivery. Seven Federal agencies and the Military Services comprise the TAP Interagency Partnership. The Interagency Partnership is a formal collaborative body committed to supporting and facilitating success for transitioning Service members to civilian life by providing synergy, consistency, and synchronization in TAP design and delivery. TAP delivery is a collaborative effort between the Department of Defense and the Military Services, the Department of Labor, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Small Business Administration, each with a primary area of responsibility and focus. TAP succeeds due to a robust interagency collaboration among the four agencies and Military Services listed above, along with program development and oversight support from three additional agencies – the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Education, and the U.S. Office of Personnel Management.

TAP is an individualized, robust program with alternate pathways and multiple levels of assistance. Each step of the process is guided by trained counselors, allowing Service members to be in control of their transition and use programs, resources, and information that fit their specific needs and align with their post-transition goals.

TAP begins with an Initial Counseling (IC) session initiated no later than 365 days prior to separation, with retirees strongly encouraged to begin TAP 24 months prior to retirement. During the individualized counseling session with a trained TAP counselor, a Service member completes a personal self-assessment and begins development of an Individual Transition Plan (ITP). Based on the personal self-assessment and counseling, the TAP counselor assigns the Service member to a transition tier level. The assigned tier level—one (minimal assistance), two (medium assistance), or three (most assistance)—determines the transition assistance a Service

member needs. Each individual Service member's tier alignment details which TAP components, courses, and Career Readiness Standards (CRS) are mandatory. While the required elements associated with each tier are standardized, each Service delivers a Service-specific self-assessment, allowing maximum flexibility and alignment with the individual Service culture.

Once the IC is complete, the Service member attends the Pre-Separation Counseling Brief (Pre-Sep). Pre-Sep informs the Service member of various services, benefits, and resources available during and after transition. The Pre-Sep also familiarizes the Service member with available resources and content within the TAP courses. This provides the Service member with the knowledge and flexibility to determine when to use services based on individual needs and timeline for transition. Regardless of tier level, five core courses are mandatory for all transitioning Service members: Managing Your Transition, Military Occupational Code Crosswalk, Financial Planning for Transition, VA Benefits and Services, and DOL Employment Fundamentals for Career Transition.

Along with the core curriculum, TAP includes four two-day courses (tracks) to provide focused information and resources that are aligned with specific post-transition goals. The four tracks are employment, vocational, education, and entrepreneurship. Regardless of tier, Service members must elect a track based on individual post-transition goals and are encouraged to attend the track-specific course. However, only those determined as Tier Level 3 are required to attend the elected track. Military Departments may exempt Service members determined as Tier Level 2 from track attendance based on the results of their self-assessment and IC. Service members determined as Tier Level 1 are exempt from track attendance, but are strongly encouraged to attend their elected track. While Service members must elect one track during IC, the Department strongly encourages attendance at any additional track(s) that would provide valuable information for their transition.

Conducted no later than 90 days before transition from active duty, Capstone is the final component of TAP. During Capstone, the Commander or Commander's Designee reviews the Service member's transition journey to determine completion of all applicable components. Not fulfilling one of the identified components requires a warm handover by the Commander or designee. A warm handover facilitates the Service members' transition to the appropriate interagency partner such as the Department of Veterans Affairs or the Department of Labor. It is designed to create a connection between the Service member and the appropriate partner or agency with the resources to assist in transition and beyond. Service members may also request a warm handover from the TAP counselor.

The Department uses the Transition Assistance Participant Assessment (TAPA) to capture Service member experiences and knowledge gained. TAPA, along with diverse assessments from both governmental and non-governmental entities, allows the TAP Interagency Partnership to evaluate TAP, the perception of TAP, and the quality of the counseling and instruction provided. The TAPA measures participants' knowledge of the information presented during training and compiles participant satisfaction on the quality of instruction, content, and facilities. The TAPA also captures basic demographics, such as gender. Participation in the TAPA is voluntary and anonymous. However, the Department encourages Service members to complete the TAPA after each TAP course.

For an effective TAP, Service members must obtain training relevant to their individual post-transition goals. To assess the effectiveness of TAP, the Department examines whether Service members take the track associated with their post-transition goal and complete the associated CRS. For example, if a Service member indicates employment as a post-transition goal, the Service member may elect to attend the DOL Employment Track and provide a completed resume to meet the CRS. Attendance at the track aligned with the identified post-transition goal provides the necessary training for successful transition. To evaluate the effectiveness of the training, the Department analyzes the elected track, track attendance, alignment with post-transition goal, and the completed CRS data points.

Military-to-civilian transition is an ever-evolving, complex, and multi-faceted environment in which individual goals can be as unique as each transitioning Service member. TAP is, and must remain, adaptive while vigilantly maintaining programmatic focus on two foundational and complimentary tenets: effective counseling and Service member buy-in. Correspondingly, TAP will sustain emphasis on an individualized approach that best meets Service member's post-transition goals. To that end, TAP will remain innovative, responsive, transparent, and collaborative. The Department, working closely with the Service members, Military Services, interagency partners, and non-governmental entities, and Congress, will continuously improve transition services and support. Together, the TAP interagency partners will build on current successes and achieve ever-improving outcomes for TAP-eligible

ble Service members from all Components. This will be achieved by providing agile, adaptive, and individualized support and services, and address barriers that inhibit a successful transition to civilian life.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I thank you, the Ranking Member, and the members of this Subcommittee for your outstanding and continuing support of the men and women who proudly wear the uniform in defense of our great Nation.

Prepared Statement of Cheryl Rawls

Chairman Derrick Van Orden, Ranking Member Mike Levin, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and what steps should be made to continue modernizing and reforming the program. I want to express my appreciation for your continued support of the Nation's Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors. Within VA, our focus is on increasing transparency, improving collaboration, and keeping Veterans at the center of everything we do. This mission is personal and professional for me, having previously served my country and now serving Veterans, their loved ones and caregivers through VA.

Transition Assistance Program

Established in 1991, TAP is an interagency effort designed to help more than 200,000 transitioning Service members annually. Together with the Department of Defense (DoD), Department of Labor (DOL), the Small Business Administration (SBA), the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Education, the Office of Personnel Management and other agencies, we equip Service members with the tools they need to succeed in civilian life, and we connect them with the benefits and services they have earned and deserve. In partnership, we take a comprehensive approach to care, ensuring TAP is a tailored program that evolves with the changing needs of transitioning Service members.

To that end, TAP has a robust governance structure under the Transition Assistance Program Executive Council (TAP-EC) and Joint Executive Committee (JEC). The TAP-EC is comprised of multiple working groups that provide oversight and input into course curriculum, data sharing, employment, performance management, the Reserve Component, strategic communications, and available supportive services. The JEC co-chaired by the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness and the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs serves as the primary Federal interagency body for overseeing transition assistance activities for Active and Reserve Component Service members.

Recent legislative changes in the transition space, including the "John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019" (NDAA 2019), P.L. 115-232, have been impactful. Requiring Service members to begin TAP no later than 365 days prior to separation or release from active duty, and as soon as possible in the 24 months prior to retirement has underscored the importance of engaging in conversations about transition early and often. Shortly after NDAA 2019 was enacted on August 13, 2018, VA, in concert with our TAP interagency partners, approved the Military to Civilian Readiness (M2C Ready) Pathway, a joint agency effort designed to better connect Service members, Veterans and their families with available resources to support their transition.

Military to Civilian Readiness (M2C Ready)

In alignment with and in support of Presidential goals to improve the customer experience across Federal programs, the JEC approved the M2C Ready framework in September 2019. M2C Ready defines transition as 365-days pre-and 365-days post-separation. M2C Ready meets and builds upon several components of the President's Management Agenda. The framework ensures that transitioning Service members, recently separated Service members and Veterans (1) receive comprehensive, standardized and individualized assessments across VA and DoD, (2) are informed and educated about all post-separation VA, DOL and DoD benefits and services they are eligible for, (3) are equipped with the tools they need to succeed and reintegrate into their communities and (4) achieve sustainable economic well-being.

VA TAP Curriculum

TAP consists of five core curricula shared among the interagency partners. These courses are developed and maintained through these partnerships to ensure continuity, consistency and relevance while reducing redundancy for the transitioning Service members. VA, DoD, DOL and SBA collaborate through an annual evaluation process by reviewing and approving the TAP curricula through the interagency gov-

ernance structure. Each agency is responsible for the delivery or facilitation of its curriculum.

The 1-day VA Benefits and Services (BAS) course helps Service members and their families understand how to navigate the resources within VA, including how to access the benefits and services they have earned through their military careers. More specifically, the BAS course provides the skills, resources and tools needed to support emotional and physical health; career readiness; and economic stability in civilian life. During FY 2022 (FY 2022), VA Benefits Advisors delivered the BAS course to 160,916 transitioning Service members during an in-person classroom environment and to 84,795 transitioning Service members on a virtual platform. In addition, in FY 2022, VA Benefits Advisors conducted 335,761 individual touchpoints, following the 1-day BAS course, with Service members, military spouses, caregivers and survivors across all VA's transition assistance offerings at over 300 military installations worldwide. The BAS course currently has a 97.3 percent satisfaction rating for in-person course delivery. VA continues to seek opportunities for improvement by conducting site visits, quality assurance evaluations and, most recently, Human Centered Design research to channel direct Service member and Veteran feedback about the transition experience into action.

In addition to the BAS course, Service members and their families may access Military Life Cycle (MLC) modules to access information about VA's benefits and services at their own pace and when they need that information most. MLC modules are 45-to 60-minute information sessions that can be taken anytime throughout a Service member's career. The sessions are especially valuable after major events such as permanent changes of station, marriage or the birth of a child. Each MLC module addresses a specific in-depth topic. In FY 2022, 5,280 Service members participated in MLCs. Available MLC modules include:

- Reserve Component Dual Payments
- Social and Emotional Health Resources
- Survivor and Casualty Assistance Resources
- VA Benefits 101
- VA Education Benefits
- VA Home Loan Guaranty Program
- VA Life Insurance Benefits
- Vet Centers
- Community Integration Resources
- VA Education and Training Benefits for Spouses and Dependents
- Mental Health for Families
- Disability Compensation

Future micro-learning opportunities will cover topics related to Other than Honorable (OTH) discharge; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer plus (LGBTQ+) specific benefits; and services available to military spouses and families and will incorporate insights from our Human Centered Design research. In FY 2022, 5,490 military spouses, caregivers and Veterans attended BAS briefings, as well as accessed MLC modules in person or online through TAP events.mil. A Common Access Card-enabled device is not required to access the courses. VA Benefits Advisors also are available through one-on-one assistance sessions to answer questions, explain benefits and connect spouses to helpful resources, including education and employment benefits.

Women's Health Transition Training

The Women's Health Transition Training (WHTT) is a five-phase web-based training course that can be taken anytime, anywhere and is open to all Service women and women Veterans. Topics include transitioning to civilian life, health benefits (emphasizing women-specific needs), mental well-being, managing health care, eligibility and transition assistance resources

Separation Health Assessment

The Separation Health Assessment is an initiative of the VA/DoD that JEC designed to yield mutual benefits in support of Service members during separation. The objective is to establish a consistent opportunity for Service members to discuss events, illnesses and injuries incurred or aggravated during service. Service members must meet statutory and policy requirements for a Separation Health Assessment before transitioning from active-duty service. To ensure Service members' health care needs are addressed before separating, VA and DoD screen for medical

retainability and provide final documentation in the service treatment record that VA can use to help determine service connections in evaluating future disability claims. In January 2022, the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness signed a new Memorandum of Agreement on Separation Health Assessments that details the joint partnership for consistent application of the Separation Health Assessment. The VA-DoD agreement includes continuity of health care (physical and mental) and improvements to transition support plans. The Departments are committed to improving the efficiency of the separation examination process for transitioning Service members.

Enhanced Statement of Benefits

In September 2020, the JEC approved the concept of an enhanced individualized statement of benefits at discharge. The Enhanced Statement of Benefits will provide transitioning Service members and/or recently separated Veterans with personalized information about their specific benefits and services statement, based on their input and in one centralized application. The TAP Executive Council approved the implementation plan in March 2021 and is presently in the program development phase.

VA Health Care Support for Transitioning Service Members

The health and overall well-being of Veterans is a top priority. VA recognizes that the first year of transition out of military service is crucial for Service members and Veterans. The first year following discharge from active-duty service, in particular, may pose significant challenges, including homelessness, difficulties with family re-integration, unemployment, posttraumatic stress disorder and substance use, which can increase the risk for suicide. Veterans and former Service members with an OTH discharge in acute suicidal crisis are eligible for emergent suicide care in VA facilities and in the community. In addition, ongoing mental health care is available to former Service members with an OTH discharge, including reservists, who meet the eligibility criteria in 38 U.S.C. § 1720I. This important information and other mental health resources and care are shared with transitioning Service members and Veterans at multiple touchpoints throughout their transition journey.

VA programs like the VA Liaison and Post 9/11 Transition and Case Management bridge the gap between DoD and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) to support transitioning Service members and Post 9/11 era Veterans.

VA Solid Start

The VA Solid Start program launched on December 2, 2019, as part of the M2C Ready Pathway, to make early, consistent and caring contact with newly separated Veterans. VA Solid Start proactively calls all eligible Veterans at three key stages (90-, 180- and 365-days post-separation) during their first year after separation from active duty. Using data provided by DoD, VA Solid Start provides priority contact to Veterans meeting certain mental health risk factors, helping to target and provide access and continuity of care for mental health. VA Solid Start representatives address challenges the Veteran may be facing at the time of the call by connecting the Veteran with the appropriate benefit or resources for assistance. These representatives receive special training to recognize the signs of crisis and, when needed, can provide a direct transfer to the Veterans Crisis Line for additional support.

In FY 2022, VA Solid Start successfully connected with 175,369 recently separated Veterans, surpassing its goal of a 50 percent successful connection rate by achieving a rate of 64 percent. As a subset of this group, VA Solid Start successfully connected with 29,042, or 78 percent, of eligible Priority Veterans, helping to lower the barrier to accessing mental health care. On October 17, 2022, the Solid Start Act of 2022 was signed into law (P.L. 117-205), permanently authorizing VA to expand the Solid Start Program with DoD coordination. VBA will continue to utilize multi-channel engagement efforts to further improve the successful connection rates with all VASS-eligible Veterans.

Network of Support Pilot

The Veterans Comprehensive Prevention, Access to Care, and Treatment Act of 2020 (Veterans COMPACT Act of 2020), P.L. 116-214, was signed into law on December 5, 2020. The Veterans COMPACT Act of 2020 calls for a pilot program that allows Veterans to designate up to ten people to receive information on specified services and benefits from VA. The intent of the program is to provide each Veteran with a Network of Support made up of friends and family members they select who can help them better understand and apply for the benefits they have earned. The Network of Support pilot was launched in December 2021 and will run through December 2023. During FY 2022, VA developed and obtained Office of Management

and Budget approval for the required survey, which was conducted in December 2022 and will be conducted again December 2023.

Personalized Career Planning and Guidance

Personalized Career Planning and Guidance (PCPG), also known as Chapter 36, fulfills 38 U.S.C. § 3697A by supporting transitioning Service members, Veterans and qualified dependents by offering personalized career and academic counseling to achieve goals and ensuring the use of VA benefits. Since the inception of the PCPG program in FY 2021, PCPG has provided career and academic services to over 6,000 transitioning Service Members, Veterans and eligible dependents. Currently, for FY 2023, PCPG has received 4,700 applications.

VA SkillBridge

VA SkillBridge successfully launched in February 2020 and focuses on supporting Service members who are entering into careers with VA. VA SkillBridge provides Active Duty transitioning Service members with employment training, internship and apprenticeship opportunities during their last 180 days of service. The program offers valuable civilian work experience to better prepare Active duty transitioning Service members for post-separation employment. VA SkillBridge is executed in partnership with DoD and, since its launch in February 2020, VA has engaged with 44 organizations that have either established or are interested in establishing a VA SkillBridge program for transitioning Service members. There are currently 20 VA entities that have cohorts in progress for transitioning Service members under the Memorandum of Understanding.

Additional Post Separation Touchpoints

The last step of the M2C Ready Pathway ensures continuity of support during the 365 days post-transition and beyond. This step starts with person-to-person connections via warm handovers, where the interagency partner acknowledges that an eligible Service member requires post-military assistance. In agreement, the interagency partner follows through on assisting the needs of the Service member, mitigating risk and assisting the Service member in attaining post-transition goals and a successful transition.

The Transition Service Member Resource Connection (TSMRC) Pilot launched in May 2022 and has 30 DoD military installation participants. TSMRC provides a single point of entry for DoD TAP Managers who initiate a warm handover to VA during Capstone (90 days before separation). This single point of entry allows for near real-time tracking and validation of warm handover connections. It also supports warm handovers to VA in areas of education, disability compensation, healthcare, housing, mental health resources and other VA services. During the course of the pilot, 100 percent (116) of transitioning Service members who needed a warm handover were connected to VA by DoD TAP Managers. The pilot was recently expanded (on March 1, 2023) to support DoD's pilot, the Enterprise Individual Self-Assessment (EISA), which is expected to run until the spring of 2024.

Sexual Trauma Health Care Assistance

The Sexual Trauma Working Group was formally established as a JEC Independent Working Group in alignment with the VA-DoD Joint Strategic Plan for FY 2019-FY 2021. In FY 2022, this working group outlined three priorities to address: Sexual Trauma Health Care Assistance, Sexual Trauma Benefits Assistance and Sexual Trauma Transition Assistance. Ultimately, the primary focus of the Sexual Trauma Working Group is to maintain a standard of coordinated care for Service members who experience sexual trauma during military service. This focus includes connections and coordination between DoD Sexual Assault Response Coordinators and VHA Military Sexual Trauma Coordinators, as well as annual training to educate Sexual Assault Response Coordinators about VA services.

Statutory Updates

Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020

On January 5, 2021, the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-315) was signed into law and included several provisions related to transition assistance.

Section 4304 requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make grants available to eligible organizations that specialize in providing transition services to former Service members who are separated, retired or discharged, as well as to their spouses. These transition services consist of resume assistance, interview training,

job recruitment training and related services leading to a successful transition. VA is working rigorously to meet all requirements of this section to develop the framework for a robust Veteran Transitional Assistance Grant Program. VA continues the process to hire staff, establish a Grants Management Office and implement a technology solution. We anticipate the program will be fully implemented in early FY 2024.

Section 4305 requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, in consultation with the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Labor, Administrator of the SBA, and the Secretaries of the military departments, to enter into an agreement with an appropriate entity that has experience in adult education to conduct a 1-year independent assessment of TAP. This assessment has been completed and currently is pending final signatures before submission to Congress.

Section 4306 requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, in consultation with the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Labor, and the Administrator of SBA, to conduct a 5-year longitudinal study on three cohorts who are going through TAP and are defined by specific attributes. VA is leveraging the Post-Separation Transition Assessment (PSTAP) Outcomes to meet the requirements of section 4306. PSTAP is a multi-year study to analyze the effect of TAP participation. It seeks to assess the long-term outcomes of Veterans in the broad life domains of employment; education; health and social relationships; financial; overall satisfaction; and well-being. The first annual Congressional progress report for section 4306 is pending final signatures for submission to Congress.

Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Improvement Act of 2019

The Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019 (P.L. 116–171) was signed into law on October 17, 2020, and includes provisions regarding mental health care and suicide prevention programs. The Act includes seven titles with 34 sections.

Title I of the Act covers improvement of transition of individuals to services from VA and requires a 5-year (FY 2015–2020) retrospective, joint VA/DoD review of records of each former Service member who died by suicide within 1 year of their release from Active Duty. In completing this review with respect to a former member of the Armed Forces, DoD and VA must consider whether DoD had identified the former member as being at elevated risk of suicide during the 365 days before separation and, in the case the member was identified as being at elevated risk, whether that was communicated by DoD to VA via the Solid Start initiative or any other means. The JEC co-chairs chose to establish a working group to manage and track this effort because the requirements crossed various lanes within VA and DoD. Work to date includes cohort identification, receipt of \$2.05 million in Joint Incentive Funding for DoD contract staff and advances in planning for data acquisition, analyses and development of the Congressional report.

VA Collaborations

To improve the transition process, VA collaborates with other agencies across Federal programs, as well as with local and State agencies and other partners. One large-scale program, the Economic Development Initiatives (EDI) effort, spans across military and civilian sectors. EDI aims to connect military members, Veterans and spouses in specific geographic communities with information and resources that promote economic well-being. This effort includes hosting job fairs to link Veterans directly with resources, including disability claims clinics and career opportunities. EDI also provides support and employment assistance for military and Veteran spouses.

In FY 2022, VA in partnership with DoD and DoL applied Human Centered Design to better understand the experiential needs and desires of transitioning Service members, recently separated Veterans and their families navigating military transition. The results of this research are being used to improve and enhance programs and services internally to VA and across the Federal Government, which also strives to serve as an employer of choice for Veterans, through statutory hiring preferences/authorities and workforce initiatives.

On December 13, 2021, President Biden signed Executive Order 14058, Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government. Soon after the executive order was signed, five priority Life Experience projects were announced as opportunity areas for cross-agency partnership. The experience of Navigating Military Transition was one of the selected lifecycle journeys. DoD, the Department of Education, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, DoL, VA, the General Services Administration, the Office of Management and Budget, the Office of Personnel Management, the Small Business Administration and representation from all military

branches have partnered to use Human Centered Design to understand major pain points and design solutions that improve and simplify the transition experience.

This cross-agency collaborative currently is working to define a minimum viable product, that is a digital solution. This solution is intended to help address three of the four areas of opportunity identified in research. The cross-agency collaborative will continue work through the rest of this year in packaging recommendations for potential solutions that can be developed and implemented in the coming FY and beyond.

In addition to the cross-agency effort, VA has used the research to improve its programs and services. The improvements include the following: developing an OTH discharge Journey Map, developing more focused communication strategies, modifying the VA TAP curriculum based on Service member feedback, integrating more quick response (QR) codes into the curriculum for ease of access to benefits and services and developing 12 new special emphasis Military Life Cycle modules to include OTH, LGBTQ+, Military Sexual Trauma and Rural Veterans to name a few.

This year, VA will host its Second Annual VA Transition Symposium on July 27–28, 2023. This symposium will build upon last year’s synergies and focus on how VA can connect transitioning Service members and Veterans with community resources at the State and local levels. The forum also will provide a platform for VA stakeholders to learn more about transition supportive programs, identify opportunities to better coordinate transition services and build and strengthen community relationships.

Since 2017, VA has worked with TAP interagency partners to host and participate in the Military to Civilian Transition (MTC) summit. The MTC Summit brings together stakeholders from the public and private sectors to discuss the military to civilian transition not only for Service members and Veterans but also for their families, caregivers and survivors. VA looks forward to coordinating with DOL, this year’s host.

Opportunities for Enhancement

VA frequently assesses for needed changes and opportunities for growth. Three areas for improvement include the need for increased: Collaboration with Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), Data Sharing, and Spousal and Family Engagements.

(1) Collaboration with VSOs. VA understands the importance of collaboration with its internal and external partners, including VSOs that serve as advocates for the well-being of the Veteran community and provide exceptional support to transitioning Service members and their families. We are working toward enhancing our relationship with VSOs to ensure we integrate them into the VA TAP curriculum and provide an avenue for increased connection with transitioning Service members.

(2) Data Sharing. Currently, there are barriers to interagency data sharing and data availability that make it challenging to assess Veteran outcomes. By having the legislative authority to require other agencies to provide VA with Veteran data, VA will enhance its ability to assess Veteran outcomes holistically. In addition, we must continue to formalize and enhance data-sharing efforts with State Veterans Affairs offices to ensure that they know when Service members are relocating to their States and that Service members understand the role their States can play in their transition plans and overall well-being.

(3) Spousal and Family Engagements. VA is seeking to improve messaging and marketing to military spouses and younger Veterans about the many resources and programs available to them before, during and after their transition.

Conclusion

TAP has undergone major enhancements since its inception in 1991. These ongoing modifications have ensured that TAP remains a relevant program that meets the changing needs of the transitioning Service member population. We continue to put the transitioning Service member experience at the center of everything we do. VA is committed to ensuring that the partnership between VA and DoD is aligned, enduring and strong, with a shared focus on putting the needs of Service members, Veterans and their families first. We seek continuous improvements, recognizing the driving factors are the major life events impacting Veterans and their families today.

VA shares Congress’ goal of ensuring Service members and their families are supported as they transition from military to civilian life and will remain dedicated to strengthening our transition initiatives. Chairman Derrick Van Orden, Ranking

Member Mike Levin, this concludes my testimony. I am happy to respond to any questions you or the Subcommittee may have.

Prepared Statement of Margarita Devlin

Introduction

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the current state of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) across the armed services and the steps that should be made to continue modernizing and reforming the program. It is always a pleasure to testify before this Subcommittee. This month marks my 28th anniversary as a career federal employee, and I am honored to have served veterans for my entire tenure in government.

After almost two years serving in my current role at the Department of Labor (DOL) Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS), I have seen firsthand the passion, talent, dedication, and innovative spirit of our employees, many of whom are veterans themselves. Our partners across the interagency space are also incredibly dedicated. We have worked hard, together, to continue to improve programs in support of military to civilian transition. And, we will never stop innovating and improving because our service members and veterans deserve nothing less.

VETS' mission is to prepare America's veterans, service members, and military spouses for meaningful careers, provide them with employment resources and expertise, protect their employment rights, and promote their employment opportunities. VETS administers programs designed to address the employment, training, and job security needs of over 196,000 military service members who transition to civilian life each year,¹ 8.8 million military veterans in the U.S. civilian labor force,² over 770,000 National Guard and Reserve members,³ and nearly 950,000 military spouses (594,110 active duty and 354,255 Guard and Reserve spouses).⁴ Along with our partners, we are committed to ensuring the best transition for our service members and their families.

TAP Overview

TAP provides training, resources, and assistance to separating and retiring service members on active duty, Guard, Reserve, and their spouses, as defined in 10 U.S.C. 1144. TAP is a cooperative effort by DOL VETS, the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Education (ED), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Small Business Administration (SBA), and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

Congress originally established TAP in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year (FY) 1991 (P.L. 101-510). This enactment authorized the development of a voluntary program consisting of transition assistance counseling and employment assistance for separating service members and their spouses. In 2011, the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) Act (P.L. 112-56) mandated TAP participation for all transitioning service members—including pre-separation counseling and completion of courses provided by the newly established interagency partnerships—to start no later than 90 days prior to an anticipated date of transition. DOL, DoD, VA, and SBA collaborated to prepare new curricula and expand training, education, and transition activities to include Career Readiness Standards, a set of common and specified activities for service members to achieve.

The most recent legislative change to TAP occurred with the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2019 (P.L. 115-232), which requires TAP classes to occur no later than 365 days prior to an anticipated date of separation or release from active duty, or 24 months prior to retirement. These requirements allowed TAP to evolve from a one-size-fits-all program where service members had to transition to civilian life in a condensed timeframe to an individualized program

¹ Department of Defense (DoD), Improvements to the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Congressional Report, August 2022.

² Civilian noninstitutional population aged 18 years and over. Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) – 2022: <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat48.htm>

³ Department of Defense (DoD), Defense Manpower Data Center, Military Personnel Report, Selected Reserve Personnel by Reserve Component and Rank/Grade (Updated Monthly), September 2022: <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>

⁴ Military OneSource—Demographics Profile, 2021: <https://demographics.militaryonesource.mil/>

tailored specifically to the needs of each service member under a more suitable timeline.

Service Members Attend TAP Employment Workshops in Record-Breaking Numbers

In FY 2022, service members and military spouses attended VETS' TAP employment workshops in record-breaking numbers. TAP employment workshops provided instruction to 266,127 total participants,⁵ which is an over 40 percent increase from the previous workshop record of 188,924 total participants in FY 2021. There are three core VETS TAP employment workshops. VETS is responsible for the delivery of the Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition (EFCT) Workshop, which is a mandatory, one-day course for employment preparation.

- **One-Day EFCT Workshop:** The EFCT lays the foundation for transitioning from military to civilian life, introducing the essential tools and resources needed to evaluate career options, gain information for civilian employment, and understand the fundamentals of the employment process. In FY 2022, VETS provided EFCT workshops to 149,229 participants, which is a 35.8 percent increase compared to 109,888 EFCT participants in FY 2021.

Based on service members' individual needs, VETS offers two elective tracks to acquire additional skills via a two-day workshop: (1) the DOL Employment Workshop (DOLEW), and (2) the Career and Credential Exploration (C2E) Workshop. Service members must elect one two-day track during their individual counseling; however, they are encouraged to attend any additional track(s) and attendance to the courses more than once (as their unit missions allows) to prepare them for their transition.

- **Two-Day DOLEW:** The DOLEW is intended for those pursuing the employment track and covers emerging best practices in career employment, including in-depth training to learn interview skills, build effective resumes, and use emerging technology to network and search for employment. In FY 2022, VETS provided DOLEW workshops to 82,253 participants, which is a 21.3 percent increase compared to the 67,762 participants in FY 2021.
- **Two-Day C2E Workshop:** For those on the vocational track, the C2E workshop offers an opportunity for participants to complete a personalized career development assessment of their occupational interests and abilities. Participants are guided through a variety of career considerations, including labor market projections, educational opportunities, Registered Apprenticeships, certifications, and licensure requirements. In FY 2022, VETS provided C2E workshops to 15,341 participants, which is a 35.9 percent increase compared to the 11,284 participants in FY 2021.

In January 2023, VETS launched its revised EFCT and DOLEW curricula based on participants' feedback. Throughout FY 2022, the VETS TAP curriculum development team compiled and categorized input from stakeholders:

- TAP service members (through survey results and written comments);
- DOL TAP facilitators;
- VETS Federal field staff;
- TAP interagency curriculum subject matter experts;
- National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA); and
- Veteran Service Organizations (VSO).

The VETS TAP curriculum development team used the stakeholder input to reorganize workshop content, remove redundancies, and improve sections on resume writing, federal hiring, interviewing, and salary negotiation. VETS piloted the revised curricula at several military installations, and made further refinements based on pilot participant feedback. VETS is currently following the same process with the C2E curriculum. VETS will launch the revised C2E workshop in January 2024.

VETS workshops are highly rated by attendees. The FY 2023 first quarter Transition Assistance Participant Assessment results indicated that 97 percent would use what they learned in their own transition planning, and 95 percent reported that the EFCT enhanced their confidence in transition planning.

⁵Note that an individual service member may attend more than one workshop. References to the total number of TAP workshop participants do not track individual unique participants

VETS Designs and Implements Two Innovative Employment Workshops

In addition to the three core VETS employment workshops, VETS designed and implemented two other innovative employment workshops to address the unique needs of military spouses, caregivers, and our wounded, ill, and/or injured service members:

Military Spouse Employment Curriculum: Of course, our veterans have not served their country alone. In recognition of this, VETS developed a course curriculum specific to military spouses who are transitioning with their service member out of the service or to another installation. In February 2021, VETS announced the launch of a monthly series of career workshops to provide employment assistance to transitioning military spouses, also known as the Transition Employment Assistance for Military Spouses' (TEAMS) curriculum. The TEAMS workshops are designed to help military spouses plan and prepare for their job search in pursuit of their employment goals. Currently, VETS offers ten TEAMS courses. The courses use a combination of current curriculum components for service members, such as resume development and interviewing techniques, and components more specifically tailored to the needs of military spouses, who often face frequent moves and the complexities associated with State licensing and credentialing requirements. In FY 2022, VETS provided 270 workshops to more than 1,200 military spouses and caregivers. And, we continue to work with our partners at DoD to schedule and promote TEAMS events.

Wounded Warrior and Caregiver Employment Workshop (WWCEW): Each year, there are approximately 15,000 transitioning service members who are considered wounded, ill, and/or injured, transitioning either through their service branch's warrior care or military recovery units or through the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES).⁶ In April 2022, VETS launched the WWCEW for those being evaluated for a disability rating through IDES as an alternative to the required one-day EFCT. Disabled service members face barriers to completing the traditional EFCT, such as coordinating class schedules with medical appointments, long class duration, working with medical and health restrictions, and requiring caregiver attendance. The curriculum includes six self-paced online modules that participants can complete at their own pace, and the course interface enables users to meet online with a VETS facilitator to ask questions and to discuss activities and course content to accommodate the individual's needs. In FY 2022, the WWCEW provided instruction to 17,000 participants.

Two Employment Programs Are Transforming the Interagency Employment TAP Space

In FY 2022, almost 28,000 separating service members participated in two interagency employment programs that are rapidly transforming the TAP employment space, expanding TAP's information-sharing program to include hands-on training and assistance for service members and their spouses. 5,369 separating service members and 340 military spouses participated in the VETS Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot (ENPP), and 22,548 separating service members participated in the DoD SkillBridge Program.

Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot: The ENPP began at 13 military installations worldwide on April 1, 2021. The ENPP leverages the Secretary's authority under 10 U.S.C. 1144 to assist transitioning service members and their spouses with identifying and connecting to employment and training opportunities. The pilot was designed in response to feedback from veterans who stated that, while their TAP classroom experience was educational, they desired a more personalized approach. ENPP provides one-on-one, tailored services for transitioning service members and their spouses.

Through our full-time contract Employment Navigator staff and our employment partners, ENPP clients receive assistance with their resumes, career direction, as well as referrals to vetted partner organizations and American Job Centers (AJC) that provide additional personalized support. ENPP Partners are required to select a primary service provided across nine possible categories of services, which include: digital employment opportunity matching, training services, employment mentorship, hiring events, employment networking, Registered Apprenticeship opportunities, referrals to employment opportunities, placement services, and wrap-around services. A list of our current partners can be found on the VETS ENPP

⁶2021 DoD Demographics Profile of the Military Community: <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2021-demographics-report.pdf>

Partner Page,⁷ and organizations that are interested in partnership with us can submit an application form.⁸ As of March 31, 2023, ENPP served over 9,279 transitioning service members and 633 military spouses since its launch.

A key component of ENPP is that no later than 90 days prior to separating, transitioning service members will go through Capstone, a process by which the military service branch evaluates whether service members have met the Career Readiness Standards (CRS). To meet the employment track CRS, a service member must have either a completed resume or confirmation of employment. If a service member fails to meet the CRS, they are provided a “warm handover,” a person-to-person connection between the transitioning service member and an AJC, which connects them to designated services and followup resources as needed.

During a warm handover, Employment Navigators (ENs) connect transitioning service members to an appropriate AJC point-of-contact, who verifies with DOL that a client has connected with the AJC. In addition to being connected with the State AJCs where they reside, many service members receiving a warm handover also receive services from our ENs and partners. VETS believes that providing transitioning service members with additional support from ENs will enable more service members to meet the CRS and lead to a reduction in the number of transitioning service members who are required to receive a warm handover for employment.

According to participant surveys, the ENPP has been a great success. As of March 31, 2023, 96 percent of ENPP survey respondents reported positive feelings after meeting with their Employment Navigator and would recommend ENPP to a friend or colleague. Additionally, 98 percent felt ENPP partners met or exceeded their employment related expectations. As one ENPP survey respondent stated, “The value of the Employment Navigator is having a one-on-one conversation to go back over the plethora of information you received in TAP classes and give guidance and recommendations specific to your situation.” We are very proud of the progress that has been made through ENPP and look forward to continuing and expanding this initiative as time and budget allow.

A particularly noteworthy veteran served by ENPP is Petty Officer First Class Michael Santiago, who recently separated from the U.S. Navy in Yokosuka, Japan. Michael was hoping to stay in Japan after separating from service, but the entire transition process left him feeling overwhelmed. Michael knew he would need support to navigate the challenges of staying overseas, so he connected with an Employment Navigator. The Employment Navigator helped Michael translate his military experience into civilian terms, tailor his resume to his desired field, use job search tools, and identify additional services, as well as connected Michael to ENPP partner, American Corporate Partners (ACP). ACP matched Michael with a professional mentor, who shared career advice and guidance to help Michael in his career search. “Without the constant words of encouragement and support from my [Employment Navigator], I would have had an incredibly stressful, and miserable time trying to transition into a new career,” Michael shared. “I thought I was just going to receive basic professional services, but I received so much more and really owe a lot to my Employment Navigator for being there for me when I was alone in a foreign country trying to make it on my own.” With the help of his Employment Navigator, Michael accepted a management role with a Fortune 500 company in Tokyo. “Knowing I could reach out to my Employment Navigator at any time when I was feeling lost or not confident helped me feel empowered in my transition,” said Michael.

DoD SkillBridge Program: SkillBridge connects service members with industry partners in real-world job experiences, helping bridge the gap between the end of service and the beginning of their civilian careers. Employers participate in the SkillBridge program to provide opportunities for service members through specific industry training, Registered Apprenticeships, and internships during their last 180 days of service.

According to DoD, SkillBridge participation increased from 14,336 service members in FY 2021 to 22,548 in FY 2022, which represents the largest single year of program growth since its inception in FY 2016. Our Employment Navigators are improving their capability to provide timely and relevant career exploration support to pair service members with the most appropriate SkillBridge opportunity. Timely access to the SkillBridge program and other TAP programs and services is crucial to the transition process, especially for those who face more challenges in the civilian sector, such as junior enlisted, service members with exceptional family mem-

⁷ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap/employment-navigator-partnership/enpp-partnerships>

⁸ <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/VETS/files/tap/DOLVETSENPPTPotentialPartnerApplicationForm.pdf>

bers, and those who have unplanned transitions. DOL is proud to work with our partners at DoD and employers across the United States to promote the SkillBridge program.

DOL is excited to continue collaboration with Congress, ENPP stakeholders, the military services, and employers across the United States to annually increase employment-related TAP outcomes created by these two emerging interagency TAP employment programs.

Expanding the Off-Base Transition Training Pilot

On January 11, 2022, VETS announced the launch of a five-year Off-Base Transition Training (OBTT) pilot program, in accordance with section 4303 of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (P.L. 116–315), enacted on January 5, 2021. Section 4303 directed DOL to provide TAP to veterans and the spouses of veterans at locations other than active military installations for a period of five years to improve employment-related outcomes in areas with high veteran unemployment. The OBTT pilot launched in eight metropolitan areas across five states (California, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas). VETS is currently planning for expansion of OBTT to additional states by the end of FY 2023. VETS will select states with high rates of veteran unemployment, with preference given to states with a high rate of Unemployment Compensation for ex-servicemembers (UCX) usage by recently separated veterans.

OBTT features ten two-hour, instructor-led employment skills and workforce development workshops. The workshops cover the following topics:

- Marketing Yourself
- My Next Move
- Resume Essentials
- Resume Writing
- Employment Rights
- Federal Hiring
- Interview Skills
- LinkedIn Job Search
- LinkedIn Profiles
- Salary Negotiations

The OBTT workshops are offered in-person at various times and locations in the pilot states, as well as virtually nationwide. In 2022, 2,116 veterans or spouses of veterans were provided support through 1,947 virtual and in-person workshops through OBTT. To increase the number of annual OBTT customers and better meet their employment needs, Congress may wish to consider expanding OBTT eligibility to current serving members of the Guard and Reserve, regardless of veteran status, and their spouses.

Overall, VETS believes that OBTT has been a beneficial resource for our veterans, especially for those who have been separated from the military for over 10 years, as TAP was not mandatory for most separating service members until 2011. As one OBTT participant indicated in a survey: “Over the course of years, I have attended a myriad of workshops and acquired much valuable information during the presentations. Many of the workshops offered applicable information and materials. However, I must say that the workshop presented by OBTT, *Marketing Yourself and Other Job Search Tactics*, was the most organized, user friendly, and engaging that I have ever attended. The format of the workbooks is excellent. They are now my resource books for future questions. I feel prepared to go out and find employment that can utilize my skills and interests. Many, many kudos to you and your team! My wish and desire is that this workshop continues so others can have the opportunity I was afforded.”

Leveraging Data to Improve TAP Outcomes

Data analytics and research are the key tools we use to understand the effectiveness of our TAP services and improve employment outcomes for transitioning service members. Through changes in TAP since the passage of the FY 2019 NDAA, VETS is transforming its data collection and analysis capabilities around the transition space. Traditionally, VETS has only had access to data about TAP workshops and those workshops’ participants. However, new initiatives, such as ENPP, have enabled VETS to access employment outcome information on our transitioning serv-

ice members through the National Directory of New Hires at the Department of Health and Human Services. Overall, the past year has been a transformative time for DOL's TAP program.

In FY 2022, TAP employment workshop participation was the highest on record since the inception of modern-day TAP in 2011. FY 2022 participation in DOL TAP workshops were as follows:

- 149,229 service members participated in the one-day Employment Fundamentals of a Career Transition Workshop (EFCT).
- 82,253 service members participated in the two-day Employment Workshop (DOLEW).
- 15,341 service members participated in the two-day Vocational Workshop (C2E).
- 17,000 service members participated in the WWCEW Workshops.
- 1,200 military spouses participated in the TEAMS workshops and 1,104 military spouses participated in the three DOL TAP mandatory workshops.

Last year (FY 2022), VETS updated its data-sharing agreement with DoD (specifically, the Defense Manpower Data Center) to expand data transferred to DOL. Through the Veterans' Data Exchange Initiative (VDEI), which started in FY 2016 with DoD, the Department receives a daily refresh of information on transitioning service members collected on the DD2648 form (Pre-Separation Counseling Checklist) and TAP course attendance information. This data allows VETS to monitor DOL Benefit briefing attendance, DOL-provided TAP services, and receipt of warm handovers, and ultimately helps VETS measure program effectiveness. Additionally, in December 2021, VETS launched its case management system, the TAP Employment Navigator System (TENS), which is used by Employment Navigators (who are contracted staff), ENPP partners, and TAP Team members to capture data, develop reports, and manage ENPP processes. TENS includes an integrated client request meeting scheduler, program reporting, policy/guidance storage, and client record management.

In addition, VETS completed the required data-sharing agreements with the HHS needed to compare VDEI and ENPP data with wage and employment information from the National Directory of New Hires (NDNH) to understand employment-based outcomes for TAP and ENPP participants. Once the data comparison is completed, VETS can conduct analyses on: the correlation between employment status and timing and number of TAP courses taken; overall percentage of TAP participants becoming employed, and wages earned; the correlation between military occupation and employment status; and employment outcomes disaggregated by gender, age, race, ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics. NDNH data will provide VETS with new and powerful insights about TAP. DOL will leverage the information collected through VDEI, TENS and NDNH to improve program delivery and policies that can enhance employment outcomes for transitioning service members. These data are also being used for multiple research studies evaluating TAP and ENPP.

Successful Interdepartmental Collaboration

VETS believes that, at its core, TAP is a collaborative program that requires close coordination between our interagency partners and with our public-private partnerships to be successful in its mission. To accomplish this mission, VETS will continue to collaborate with Congress, its interagency partners, ENPP partners, DoD SkillBridge stakeholders, and employers to annually increase employment-related TAP outcomes.

VETS works with its interagency partners to provide program oversight. In conjunction with DoD and VA, VETS co-chairs the TAP Interagency Executive Council, the TAP Senior Steering Group, and six functional working groups. Interagency members meet and coordinate on a regular basis to ensure the partners are supporting and advancing TAP, as well as to reduce redundancy, better serve unique populations, and improve coordination of services across program areas.

VETS, along with all the TAP interagency partners, is participating in the President's Management Agenda Life Experience Human Centered Design (HCD) project named Navigating the Transition from Military to Civilian Life. The project lead is the VA's Veteran Experience Office. Beginning in September 2022, representatives from VETS and all the TAP interagency partners worked as a co-design team for the project. Guided by the HCD model, the first co-design sprint produced a concept for a digital solution, which will be used to deliver information and resources based on service members' own transition plans. The cross-agency collaborative will con-

tinue work through the rest of this year in packaging recommendations for potential solutions that can be developed and implemented in the coming FY and beyond.

Through the ENPP, VETS has served over 10,000 transitioning service members and their spouses. Originally launched at 13 locations, the pilot has since expanded to 26 locations at the request of the military services and has grown to over 44 partners. Employment Navigators and installation personnel meet regularly to assist with operational or policy related needs. Additionally, ENPP partners and VETS' staff meet monthly to share updates and to address best-practices and challenges. ENPP would not have succeeded without the great work that our partners are doing for our service members and their spouses, and for that we are grateful.

Through OBTT, our full-time contracted Employment Resource Coordinators (ERCs) are actively engaging with local stakeholders, including veteran and military spouse organizations. Stakeholder engagement through OBTT is essential for reaching our target audience. Each of our sites meets regularly with representatives throughout their community to leverage information, resources, and to share best practices.

Each of these emerging interagency employment programs provide positive employment outcomes that are rapidly transforming the employment TAP space. Over the next few years, VETS is excited to continue collaboration with Congress, stakeholders, the military services, and employers across the United States to annually increase employment related TAP outcomes created by these two emerging interagency TAP employment programs and initiatives.

VETS' Federal Administration and USERRA Appropriation

VETS appreciates the funding increases appropriated by Congress for the TAP program over the past several years. However, Congress did not proportionally increase funding for VETS' Federal Administration and Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) appropriation, which funds our staff, enforcement activities, performance accountability systems, outreach, engagement, and research activities for all of VETS' programs, including the TAP program. In FY 2022, the President's Budget request for the VETS Federal Administration and USERRA was \$52.5 million, but Congress only appropriated \$46 million. In FY 2023, the President's Budget request was just over \$53.7 million, but Congress only appropriated \$47 million.

The VETS Federal Administration and USERRA funds directly impact TAP activities because they pay for approximately 37 VETS employees at the national, regional, and State levels that support TAP activities. Accordingly, VETS requests that Congress appropriate the FY 2024 President's Budget request⁹ of \$347.6 million for VETS, which includes \$34.379 million for TAP and \$59.3 million for Federal Administration and USERRA.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our long-term strategic goal for TAP is for the nation as a whole to recognize military service as a path to high quality civilian careers. The future of the country's All Volunteer Force across the armed services depends upon this recognition. As the lead Federal agency on veteran employment, VETS looks forward to working with this Committee and our many partners and stakeholders to create opportunities that ensure all veterans can have a good job and opportunity for advancement.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my statement. Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this hearing, and I welcome your questions.

⁹ <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/general/budget/2024/CBJ-2024-V1-10.pdf>

Prepared Statement of Dawn Locke

United States Government Accountability Office



Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

For Release on Delivery
Expected at 3 p.m. ET
Wednesday, May 17, 2023

**SERVICEMEMBERS
TRANSITIONING TO
CIVILIAN LIFE**

**DOD Could Enhance the
Transition Assistance
Program by Better
Leveraging Performance
Information**

Statement of Dawn G. Locke, Director, Strategic Issues

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-106793](#), testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

More than half a million servicemembers are expected to participate in TAP over the next few years. TAP is a mandatory program designed to assist separating servicemembers who may face challenges in choosing a career path, finding employment, or deciding which college to attend. The program was recently tailored to meet individual servicemember needs by assigning them to counseling pathways based on how prepared they are to transition back to civilian life.

This testimony summarizes GAO's [December 2022](#) report on the TAP program, including GAO's findings on the implementation of TAP counseling pathways and transitioning servicemembers' participation in these pathways.

For that report, GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, policies, and agency documents and interviewed officials from relevant federal agencies, service branches, and five installations. The installations were selected for diversity in numbers served, location, and service branch. In addition, GAO analyzed the most recent available TAP data, and determined they were sufficiently reliable for active-duty members of the DOD service branches but not DOD reserve component or Coast Guard servicemembers.

What GAO Recommends

In its December 2022 report, GAO made eight recommendations—that the service branches and DOD TAP policy office more fully leverage the performance information they collect to develop and implement plans to improve: (1) 2-day class attendance and (2) TAP timeliness. DOD agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-23-106793](#). For more information, contact Dawn G. Locke at (202) 512-7215 or locked@gao.gov.

May 17, 2023

SERVICEMEMBERS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE

DOD Could Enhance the Transition Assistance Program by Better Leveraging Performance Information

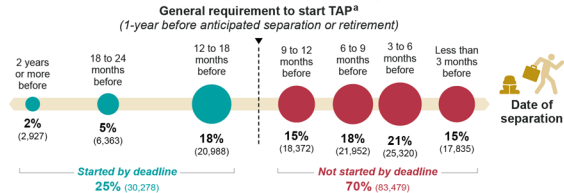
What GAO Found

To improve the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), federal law required the service branches to establish counseling pathways, among other actions. GAO found that DOD service branches had fully implemented the TAP counseling pathways. These pathways include a self-assessment, individualized initial counseling, tier assignment that reflects servicemembers' transition preparedness, and a revised core curriculum. Service branch officials, TAP staff, and servicemembers GAO interviewed from selected installations generally expressed positive feedback on the TAP counseling pathways.

Over 90 percent of transitioning servicemembers participated in the TAP counseling pathways, according to GAO's analysis of TAP data from April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022. Although participation increased in 2-day tailored classes on issues like higher education or vocational training, the service branches waived many servicemembers from attending them. Per service branch policies, servicemembers who need maximum transition support must attend a 2-day class, but GAO found that nearly a quarter of them did not. GAO also found that most servicemembers (70 percent) did not start TAP at least 1 year in advance, as generally required.

The service branches and the TAP policy office collect and review performance information on 2-day class attendance and timeliness. However, they do not leverage this information to understand and improve results, inconsistent with leading practices for using performance information. For example, DOD does not use data it collects on servicemembers who start TAP less than 1 year in advance, including why they started late. Better understanding root causes would help DOD officials to craft and implement effective corrective action plans and improve servicemembers' ability to benefit from the full range of transition resources available to them.

Time Frames for Starting the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for DOD Active-Duty Servicemembers Who Left the Military from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-23-106793

Note: For the remaining servicemembers, the timing of when the servicemember started TAP was unknown due to missing data or not applicable because the servicemember separated under short notice. The 1-year time frame does not apply when servicemembers face an unanticipated separation or retirement. Therefore, in some cases the requirement may have been met although the servicemember started TAP less than 1 year before separation or retirement.

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our work on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). More than 500,000 transitioning servicemembers are expected to participate in TAP over the next few years. TAP is a mandatory program designed to help transitioning servicemembers access veteran benefits and develop post-transition plans and goals, such as choosing a career path, finding employment, starting a business, or deciding which college or vocational school to attend.¹ In fiscal year 2021, the Department of Defense (DOD) and its interagency partners collectively reported obligating over \$160 million to implement the program.

The John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (FY 2019 NDAA) included various provisions to improve TAP.² Among other things, the new provisions required all transitioning servicemembers eligible for TAP to meet with a TAP counselor to complete a self-assessment, and to attend revised core TAP classes as well as tailored 2-day classes aligned with the servicemembers' post-transition goals.³ In addition, the FY 2019 NDAA required the service branches to establish counseling pathways, which the service branches have done by assigning servicemembers to one of three tiers depending on how prepared they are to transition and how much transition support they need.⁴ We use the phrase "TAP counseling pathways" to refer to the key program elements that were changed by the FY 2019 NDAA.⁵

My statement summarizes the findings from our December 2022 report, which addresses: (1) implementation of the TAP counseling pathways by

¹Under 10 U.S.C. § 1144, the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of Homeland Security shall require the participation of servicemembers who are being separated from active duty, with limited exceptions.

²Pub. L. No. 115-232, div. A, tit. V, § 552, 132 Stat. 1636, 1769-72 (2018).

³In general, to be eligible for TAP, servicemembers must have served 180 or more continuous days on active duty.

⁴Servicemembers deemed fully prepared to transition are assigned to tier 1. Those deemed moderately prepared to transition are assigned to tier 2. Finally, servicemembers deemed not fully prepared to transition are assigned to tier 3.

⁵FY 2019 NDAA also included a provision for GAO to review the status of the TAP counseling pathways.

service branches and selected installations; (2) the extent to which transitioning servicemembers participated in the TAP counseling pathways; and (3) DOD and its interagency partners' efforts to measure performance and assess the effectiveness of TAP counseling pathways.⁶

This statement is based on our December 2022 report on the TAP counseling pathways established by the service branches in response to FY 2019 NDAA requirements. Our report made eight recommendations to the DOD service branches and TAP policy office. DOD agreed with all eight recommendations.

For our December 2022 report, we reviewed relevant federal laws, policies, and agency documents and interviewed officials from relevant federal agencies, service branches, and five installations. We selected the installations for diversity in numbers served, location, and service branch. In addition, we analyzed TAP data on eligible servicemembers who left military service between April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022, the most recent period for which data were available at the time of our review. GAO determined these data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our review for active-duty members of the DOD service branches but not DOD reserve component or Coast Guard servicemembers. A more detailed explanation of our methodology is available in our December 2022 report. The work upon which this statement is based was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Implementation of TAP Counseling Pathways

All of the key components of the TAP counseling pathways, including the self-assessment, individualized initial counseling, and assignment of servicemembers to a tier (tier placement), have been fully implemented by the DOD service branches. The Coast Guard has partially implemented key components of the TAP counseling pathways. According to officials, the Coast Guard aims to have TAP pathways fully implemented by the end of 2023.

⁶GAO, *Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Can Better Leverage Performance Information to Improve Participation in Counseling Pathways*, [GAO-23-104538](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 12, 2022).

Table 1: Extent to Which the Service Branches Have Implemented TAP Counseling Pathways, as of November 2022

Pathway component	Service branches				
	Air Force	Army	Coast Guard	Marine Corps	Navy
Individualized initial counseling (including a self-assessment and tier placement)	●	●	◐	●	●
Revised core TAP classes	●	●	◐	●	●
Tailored 2-day TAP classes	●	●	◐	●	●

● = Fully implemented ◐ = Partially Implemented

Source: GAO analysis of service branch Transition Assistance Program (TAP) policies and interviews with Department of Defense (DOD) officials. | GAO-23-106793

Note: We define fully implemented as having met two criteria: (1) a policy had been established to guide implementation, and (2) that policy had been communicated to the local installations and was typically being followed. Partially implemented means that a policy was in place but had not yet been communicated to installations and incorporated into their TAP operations.

Service branch officials, installation staff, and servicemembers we interviewed for our December 2022 report generally expressed positive feedback about the TAP counseling pathways and said the pathways have improved the TAP program overall. For example, officials from each service branch said the addition of individualized initial counseling and tier-based placement have allowed them to tailor TAP delivery to better meet servicemembers' needs.⁷ Similarly, TAP managers and counselors at the five selected installations said they appreciated the individualized approach to transitioning over a "one-size-fits-all" approach and supported the time frames for starting TAP. In addition, more than half of the servicemembers (18 out of 34) we interviewed representing the various tiers said their experiences with TAP had been positive.

TAP Participation

Counseling Pathways and Core Curriculum

More than 90 percent of DOD active-duty transitioning servicemembers participated in the TAP counseling pathways, according to our December 2022 analysis of DOD data. Specifically, they completed their self-assessment, participated in individualized initial counseling, and were assigned to a tier based on their level of preparedness for transition. They also attended TAP's core curriculum classes: DOD Transition Day,

⁷Among TAP-eligible servicemembers who left military service between April 1, 2021 and March 31, 2022, the highest proportion (41 percent) were deemed to require maximum transition support and therefore assigned to tier 3.

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Benefits and Services, and the Department of Labor (DOL) Employment Fundamentals class.

Tailored 2-Day Classes

Attendance in tailored 2-day classes increased since the FY 2019 NDAA made servicemembers' participation in one of these classes mandatory, unless waived. Specifically, the percentage of transitioning servicemembers who attended at least one of the 2-day classes on employment, higher education, vocational training, or entrepreneurship increased from 14 percent in fiscal year 2016 to 56 percent for the year from April 2021 through March 2022.

While 2-day class attendance is now generally mandatory, the Secretary of Defense or Homeland Security, as appropriate, may waive participation for certain servicemembers.⁸ Specifically, the 2-day class requirement can be waived for "groups or classifications" of servicemembers if there is "extraordinarily high reason" to believe they are unlikely to face major challenges with readjustment, health care, employment, or other areas as they transition to civilian life.⁹ DOD policy allows the Secretaries of the military departments to determine when waivers are appropriate, and service branches' TAP policies specify which groups of servicemembers are required to attend the 2-day classes.

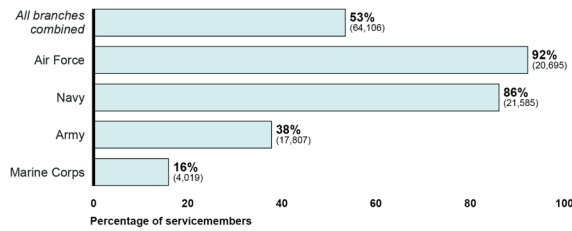
Under the service branches' TAP policies, tier 1 servicemembers, who are considered fully prepared for transition, are not required to attend tailored 2-day classes, though they may opt to do so. In contrast, the branches' policies require all tier 3 servicemembers to attend a 2-day class. However, service branch policies vary for tier 2 servicemembers. For example, tier 2 servicemembers are not required to attend a 2-day class under Air Force and Navy policy, while participation is decided on an individual basis under Army and Marine Corps policy.

⁸Under 10 U.S.C. § 1144(c)(2), program participation can be waived by the Secretary of Defense or Secretary of Homeland Security. Per DOD policy, the Secretaries of the military departments have the "delegated authority and flexibility to determine if a participation waiver is appropriate to exempt, as prescribed in Section 1144(c)(2) of Title 10, U.S.C., a servicemember from attending the 'two days of instruction' prescribed in Section 1144(F)(D) of Title 10, U.S.C. (DODI 1332.35)."

⁹10 U.S.C. § 1144(c)(2)(A). Participation may also be waived for "individual members possessing specialized skills who, due to unavoidable circumstances, are needed to support a unit's imminent deployment." 10 U.S.C. § 1144(c)(2)(B).

Our December 2022 analysis of DOD data and service branch policies shows that service branches waived attendance in a tailored 2-day class for 53 percent (64,106) of servicemembers who left military service from April 2021 through March 2022 (see fig. 1).¹⁰

Figure 1: Extent to Which the Service Branches Waived the 2-Day Class Attendance Requirement, for DOD Active-Duty Servicemembers Who Left the Military from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-23-106793

Note: In accordance with the service branches' Transition Assistance Program (TAP) policies, we counted tier 1 servicemembers as waived and tier 3 servicemembers as not waived from attending 2-day classes. We also counted tier 2 servicemembers from the Air Force and Navy as waived, per those service branches' TAP policies. Because tier 2 servicemembers in the Marines Corps and Army may be required to attend 2-day classes, we counted those branches' tier 2 servicemembers as not waived unless a waiver was documented in DOD's TAP data system.

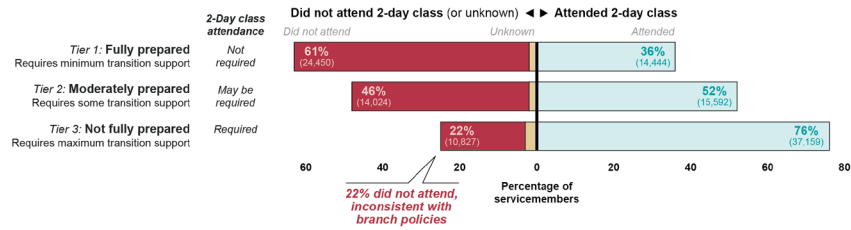
TAP staff we interviewed at two installations expressed concern that 2-day class attendance was waived for too many servicemembers, which could undermine their successful transition. For example, one TAP manager said that almost all servicemembers need more than the 3-day TAP core curriculum to prepare sufficiently for their transition.

Service branch TAP policies stipulate that all tier 3 servicemembers—those deemed to require maximum transition support—must attend at least one 2-day class, but we found nearly 11,000 (22 percent) did not (see fig. 2). Transitioning servicemembers eligible for TAP may still elect

¹⁰We considered servicemembers' attendance in a 2-day class to have been waived by the Secretary of their military department if: (1) a waiver was documented on the servicemember's eForm or (2) the servicemember was assigned to a tier for which 2-day class attendance is not required under their service branch's policy.

to attend a 2-day class, even if their service branch waived the attendance requirement for their tier, according to a TAP policy official.

Figure 2: 2-Day Class Attendance by Tier, for DOD Active-Duty Servicemembers Who Left Military Service from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-23-106793

Note: We considered 2-day class attendance unknown for servicemembers whose eForm (which documents Transition Assistance Program participation data) had not been signed.

Service branch officials cited the following reasons why some tier 3 servicemembers may not have attended a 2-day class as required: the servicemember refused to attend or was unable to attend because of hospitalization; the servicemember was undergoing a medical discharge; the servicemember was deployed immediately before leaving military service; the pandemic affected operations; and levels of command support varied. Our discussions with TAP staff at selected installations also indicated that a lack of command support may be a factor. Specifically, TAP managers and counselors at three of the five installations said that although commanders are responsible for ensuring that transitioning servicemembers under their command complete TAP requirements, commanders generally do not face consequences if requirements are not met, including 2-day class attendance.

Service branch and DOD TAP policy officials have taken steps to monitor 2-day class attendance. They collect performance information; conduct inspections; and review compliance reports, as available. Nonetheless, in our December 2022 report, we found they had not fully leveraged available data to understand and improve results, inconsistent with leading practices for using performance information and with priorities set by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to increase federal

agencies' use of data to inform their decision-making.¹¹ DOD's TAP data include information on servicemembers' characteristics, such as their years of service, rank, and the unit and installation to which they are assigned. However, DOD officials have not analyzed the data to determine whether tier 3 servicemembers who do not attend a 2-day class share common characteristics. Such analyses could help DOD officials better understand which tier 3 servicemembers are at greatest risk of not attending a 2-day class.

More fully leveraging available information would better position service branch officials to develop tailored and effective corrective action plans, and to hold entities accountable for implementing such plans, as appropriate. This could help DOD more effectively ensure that those servicemembers most at risk of struggling during their transition to civilian life attend a 2-day class and achieve their post-transition goals. In December 2022, we recommended that each of the service branches, in concert with the TAP policy office, should better leverage TAP performance information on 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate, particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support. DOD agreed with our recommendations and each service branch identified planned steps and time frames for implementation.

Timing of TAP participation

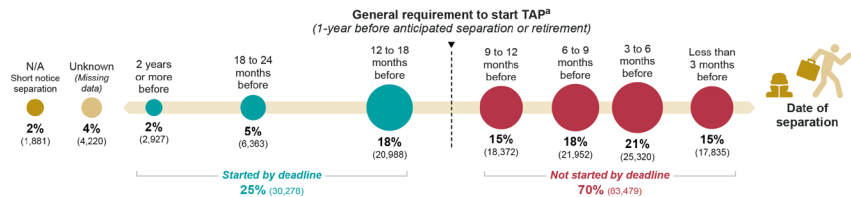
Servicemembers must generally start TAP at least 1 year before they are expected to leave military service.¹² This did not occur for the majority of transitioning servicemembers. In our December 2022 report, our data analysis showed that from April 2021 through March 2022, 25 percent of active-duty DOD servicemembers started TAP on time while 70 percent started TAP less than 1 year before their anticipated separation or

¹¹GAO has reported that performance information can help decision makers understand and improve results at federal agencies. See GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Survey Results Suggest Increased Use of Performance Information across the Federal Government*, GAO-22-103910 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 3, 2021). In that report, GAO identified various actions the Executive Branch had taken that were intended to improve agencies' use of performance information and other evidence in decision making. For additional information on leading practices for using performance information, see *Managing for Results: Enhancing Agency Use of Performance Information for Management Decision Making*, GAO-05-927 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2005).

¹²Servicemembers facing an unanticipated separation or retirement are to begin TAP as soon as possible within the remaining period of service, according to DOD TAP policy.

retirement date (see fig. 3).¹³ However, the latter group may include some servicemembers not required to meet the 1-year requirement, such as those undergoing unanticipated separations with less than 1 year of service remaining.

Figure 3: Time Frames for Starting the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), for DOD Active-Duty Servicemembers Who Left the Military from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-23-106793

Note: The 1-year time frame does not apply when servicemembers face an unanticipated separation or retirement or, for reserve component members, when demobilization operations make the time frame unfeasible. Therefore, in some cases the requirement may have been met although the servicemember started TAP less than 1 year before separation or retirement. We classified time frames for starting TAP as unknown for servicemembers with unsigned eForms (which document TAP participation data), with anticipated separation dates that preceded their individualized initial counseling dates, or for whom the individualized initial counseling or anticipated separation dates were missing. Because we found the data for DOD reserve component servicemembers unreliable, this figure does not include those groups. The percentages shown for N/A and unknown do not add to 5 percent due to rounding.

*Servicemembers start TAP by attending individualized initial counseling.

Servicemembers who start TAP less than 1 year before separating may face challenges with their transition to civilian life, according to TAP staff we interviewed at the five selected installations for our December 2022 report. For example, TAP staff at one installation said that servicemembers who start TAP late often cannot take advantage of

¹³For the remaining servicemembers, the timing of when the servicemember started TAP was unknown due to missing data (4 percent) or not applicable because the servicemember separated under short notice (2 percent). The percentages for those two categories do not add to 5 percent due to rounding. To analyze how far in advance servicemembers started TAP, we compared the date servicemembers attended individualized initial counseling to their anticipated separation or retirement date as recorded in DOD's TAP data system. GAO's analysis should not be used to draw conclusions about the service branches' legal compliance.

additional transition resources they learn about in class. One such resource is DOD's SkillBridge program that provides on-the-job training opportunities with civilian employers during the last 6 months of military service. Servicemembers who start TAP late may also miss the chance to apply for disability benefits and obtain a disability rating before leaving military service, according to TAP officials at 3 of 5 selected installations.¹⁴

TAP policy officials said the requirement to begin TAP no later than 1 year before their anticipated separation or retirement requires a significant culture change. Service branch officials cited various factors that delay start dates for TAP, including unit mission requirements, unit deployments, servicemembers' uncertainty about their futures, and lack of awareness of TAP's requirements among both servicemembers and commanders. In addition, TAP staff we interviewed at all five installations said timely participation can be challenging when support from servicemembers' immediate command or front-line supervisor is lacking. TAP officials at 2 of the 5 installations suggested additional accountability could help to ensure that servicemembers can start TAP on time.

In December 2022, we also found that a relatively low percentage of servicemembers are completing the pre-separation counseling briefing at least 1 year in advance, as generally required. Although pre-separation counseling should occur after individualized initial counseling, DOD TAP policy specifies the same deadline for both events—1 year before an anticipated separation or retirement.¹⁵ Our analysis of DOD data from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022 showed that 11 percent of servicemembers completed pre-separation counseling at least 1 year in advance and that 82 percent did not.¹⁶ However, the latter figure may

¹⁴Qualifying veterans may be eligible for disability benefit payments for service-connected disabilities. 38 U.S.C. § 1101 et seq.

¹⁵Servicemembers with unanticipated separations or retirements or, for reserve component members, when demobilization operations make time frames unfeasible, should begin TAP as soon as possible within their remaining period of service.

¹⁶The extent to which pre-separation counseling occurred at least 1 year before servicemembers were expected to leave military service was unknown for 6 percent of servicemembers due to missing data. Moreover, the 1-year requirement was not applicable for the 1 percent of servicemembers who were identified as separating on short-notice. GAO's analysis should not be used to draw conclusions about the service branches legal compliance.

include servicemembers with unanticipated separations or retirements, to whom the 1-year requirement does not apply.

The service branches and TAP policy office collect and review performance information on the timing of initial and pre-separation counseling, including reasons for the timing. However, they do not fully leverage this information to understand and improve results, inconsistent with leading practices for using performance information and with priorities set by OMB to increase federal agencies' use of data to inform their decision-making.¹⁷ These practices call for agencies to leverage performance information to improve results.

DOD collects information that could help officials understand why certain servicemembers start TAP late and leverage this information to improve performance. For example, DOD collects data on the reason certain servicemembers attended pre-separation counseling less than 1 year before their anticipated separation or retirement date but has not systematically analyzed these data, according to DOD TAP policy officials we interviewed for our December 2022 report.

Analyzing these data could help DOD officials better understand the root causes underlying timeliness performance metrics, which would better position the service branches to develop and implement effective corrective action plans. This, in turn, could improve servicemembers' ability to benefit from the full range of transition resources available to them before separating or retiring from the military. In December 2022, we recommended that each of the service branches, in concert with the TAP policy office, better leverage TAP performance information on when servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness. DOD agreed with our recommendations and each service branch identified planned actions and time frames for implementation.

¹⁷GAO-22-103910 and GAO-05-927.

TAP Performance and Effectiveness

Performance Measures

The TAP policy office has established a performance goal and measure—known as TAP Compliance—that covers all key components of the TAP counseling pathways and that is used to assess service branches' compliance with TAP requirements. To be considered TAP compliant for this performance measure, the service branch must ensure that servicemembers meet eight criteria, according to DOD TAP policy officials.¹⁸ DOD has established an annual performance target of 85 percent for TAP Compliance.¹⁹ In August 2022, DOD TAP policy officials told us the performance goal for active-duty servicemembers had not been met for servicemembers who left the military between January 1 and March 31, 2022. TAP policy officials said the main factor negatively affecting compliance is tier 3 servicemembers not attending 2-day classes as required.

In addition, for our December 2022 report, DOD's TAP policy officials said the Performance Management Work Group had recently established a new timeliness performance measure called Timeliness of TAP Requirements.²⁰ This measure tracks the extent to which the service branches are ensuring that servicemembers begin TAP at least 1 year before leaving military service and complete it at least 90 days before transitioning, as generally required.²¹

¹⁸The eight criteria include: (1) completed a self-assessment and was assigned a tier, (2) completed initial counseling, (3) completed pre-separation counseling, (4) attended a VA Benefits and Services briefing, (5) attended a DOL Employment Fundamentals class, (6) attended DOD Transition Day/pre-separation training classes, (7) attended a tailored 2-day class based on tier assignment, and (8) obtained commander's signature verifying review of TAP eForm data.

¹⁹The goal applies to active-duty servicemembers and members of the National Guard and Reserve. Coast Guard officials said it will also apply to Coast Guard servicemembers once the service branch fully implements the TAP counseling pathways. DOD officials calculate TAP compliance for DOD overall and for each service branch.

²⁰The Performance Management Work Group tracks TAP performance measures and collaborates on TAP evaluations, according to officials we interviewed who are part of the working group.

²¹The measure also includes whether servicemembers complete pre-separation counseling at least 1 year before leaving military service.

TAP Evaluations and Data Sharing Agreements

DOD and the interagency partners that participate in the Performance Management Work Group published a TAP evaluation plan in April 2021 that describes ongoing and planned evaluations of TAP's long-term outcomes, according to DOD TAP policy officials.²²

Evaluative information helps the executive branch and congressional committees make decisions about the programs they oversee; that is, evaluative information tells them whether and why a program is working well or not.²³ As part of its overarching evaluating efforts, DOD and its interagency partners are sponsoring studies examining TAP's long-term effectiveness. For details on these evaluations, see our December 2022 report.

As we reported in December 2022, DOD TAP policy officials noted several recent efforts that will improve their ability to assess how well TAP prepares veterans to achieve and retain civilian employment. These include:

- **Technology upgrades.** DOD plans to transition to a new information technology platform during fiscal year 2024 that DOD officials said will help researchers assess TAP's effectiveness and measure long-term outcomes. Among other things, officials said the new system will help them assess the extent to which TAP participation mitigates servicemembers' risk of experiencing negative post-transition outcomes, such as struggling to find employment or housing.

²²Transition Assistance Program Interagency Evaluation Plan Fiscal Year 2021-2025. Performance Management Work Group officials we interviewed said officials representing the Departments of Defense, Labor, Veterans Affairs, Homeland Security, Education, and the Small Business Administration and Office of Personnel Management serve on the group.

²³GAO, *Veterans Justice Outreach Program: VA Could Improve Management by Establishing Performance Measures and More Fully Assessing Risks*, GAO-16-393 (Washington, D.C.: Apr 28, 2016); *Military and Veteran Support: Performance Goals Could Strengthen Programs that Help Servicemembers Obtain Civilian Employment*, GAO-20-416 (Washington, D.C.: July 9, 2020); *Program Evaluation: Strategies to Facilitate Agencies' Use of Evaluation in Program Management and Policy Making*, GAO-13-570 (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2013); *Performance Measurement and Evaluation: Definitions and Relationships*, GAO-11-646SP (Washington, D.C.: May 2, 2011) and *Program Evaluation: Key Terms and Concepts*, GAO-21-404SP (Washington, D.C.: March 22, 2021).

-
- **Data sharing agreements.** To access data on veterans' long-term outcomes, TAP interagency partners have established two data sharing agreements with other federal agencies:
 - The DOD/Census Bureau Data Agreement, which allows DOD to access Census survey data on veterans' social, demographic, and economic characteristics and Internal Revenue Service federal income tax data.
 - The DOL/Department of Health and Human Services Data Agreement, which allows DOL to access National Directory of New Hires data.²⁴

According to members of the Performance Management Work Group, these agreements will allow the agencies to merge individual servicemembers' military data—including data on their TAP participation—with data on their post-transition employment and education outcomes. Among other things, the group plans to use the data to measure whether veterans attained the primary post-transition goal they identified during TAP and to determine which aspects of TAP lead to favorable post-transition outcomes, such as how quickly veterans get a job and how much they earn.

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions about this statement please contact Dawn G. Locke at (202) 512-7215 or locked@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement.

In addition to the contact named above, Meeta Engle (Assistant Director), Amy MacDonald (Analyst in Charge), Linda Keefer, Walker Adams, and Aaron Olszewski made key contributions. Also contributing to this report were Holly Dye, Benjamin Licht, and Almeta Spencer. Key contributors for the previous work on which this testimony is based are listed in the previously issued product.

²⁴The National Directory of New Hires is a centralized database of wage and employment information. It includes individual-level data on quarterly wages, unemployment benefits, and newly hired employees.

This is a work of the U.S. government and is not subject to copyright protection in the United States. The published product may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without further permission from GAO. However, because this work may contain copyrighted images or other material, permission from the copyright holder may be necessary if you wish to reproduce this material separately.

GAO's Mission	The Government Accountability Office, the audit, evaluation, and investigative arm of Congress, exists to support Congress in meeting its constitutional responsibilities and to help improve the performance and accountability of the federal government for the American people. GAO examines the use of public funds; evaluates federal programs and policies; and provides analyses, recommendations, and other assistance to help Congress make informed oversight, policy, and funding decisions. GAO's commitment to good government is reflected in its core values of accountability, integrity, and reliability.
Obtaining Copies of GAO Reports and Testimony	The fastest and easiest way to obtain copies of GAO documents at no cost is through our website. Each weekday afternoon, GAO posts on its website newly released reports, testimony, and correspondence. You can also subscribe to GAO's email updates to receive notification of newly posted products.
Order by Phone	<p>The price of each GAO publication reflects GAO's actual cost of production and distribution and depends on the number of pages in the publication and whether the publication is printed in color or black and white. Pricing and ordering information is posted on GAO's website, https://www.gao.gov/ordering.htm.</p> <p>Place orders by calling (202) 512-6000, toll free (866) 801-7077, or TDD (202) 512-2537.</p> <p>Orders may be paid for using American Express, Discover Card, MasterCard, Visa, check, or money order. Call for additional information.</p>
Connect with GAO	Connect with GAO on Facebook , Flickr , Twitter , and YouTube . Subscribe to our RSS Feeds or Email Updates . Listen to our Podcasts . Visit GAO on the web at https://www.gao.gov .
To Report Fraud, Waste, and Abuse in Federal Programs	<p>Contact FraudNet:</p> <p>Website: https://www.gao.gov/about/what-gao-does/fraudnet</p> <p>Automated answering system: (800) 424-5454 or (202) 512-7700</p>
Congressional Relations	A. Nicole Clowers, Managing Director, ClowersA@gao.gov , (202) 512-4400, U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7125, Washington, DC 20548
Public Affairs	Chuck Young, Managing Director, youngc1@gao.gov , (202) 512-4800 U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7149 Washington, DC 20548
Strategic Planning and External Liaison	Stephen J. Sanford, Managing Director, spel@gao.gov , (202) 512-4707 U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7814, Washington, DC 20548



Please Print on Recycled Paper.

Prepared Statement of Brittany Dymond

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide our remarks on this vital topic.

The critical nature of military transition cannot be understated. For many transitioning service members (TSMs), the change from military to civilian life represents a complete personal and professional shift not previously experienced during adulthood. Additionally, leaving service often is complicated by injuries or illnesses incurred while serving, unique family needs, loss of identity and support networks, and the need for education or training to enter a new career field. Sadly, the initial year following transition also comes with heightened suicide risk among new veterans, bolstering the need to ensure all stakeholders focus appropriate attention to this time period. Access to well-rounded, quality, consistent, and timely transition support is vital for the post-service well-being and success of transitioning service members and often their families.

The needs and circumstances of separating and retiring personnel vary greatly as well as the levels of preparation necessary to be successful after service. For instance, those being unexpectedly separated or retired for medical reasons experience added hurdles like compressed discharge timelines, little or no opportunities to plan, potential employment barriers, and even grief or anger. This is in deep contrast to the majority who separate after finishing their contract or retire after completing a full career. The latter groups have more predictability and expanded opportunities to plan, set, and complete goals before leaving the military, thereby easing some of the challenges inherent with returning to civilian life.

Fortunately, personnel undergoing medical and physical evaluation are heavily supported throughout the process, known as the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES). As warranted, service members in the IDES receive a preliminary disability rating from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and often are directly connected to resources and programs like VA's Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E). This comprehensive program helps IDES personnel chart a post-military career path that accommodates service-connected injuries and illnesses. Importantly, these service members are entered into the VA system *before* discharge, enabling them to begin using the VA benefits and services for which they qualify once they are separated from the military.

Being medically separated or retired from service is the closest one can get to receiving a personalized transition experience, and for good reasons. Individuals deemed medically unfit for continued military service have earned and often require that level of support. While IDES participants must complete the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) like anyone else, the tools and resources necessary for them to be successful are brought to them where they are versus having to seek them out on their own. Notably, IDES service members are removed from their operational units and are thus able to navigate transition activities without operational demands. This puts them in a noteworthy minority. No other service members are afforded the level of care and attention during transition as those receiving medical separations and retirements. Non-IDES service members are informed about post-service benefits and resources during TAP, but must proactively engage them on their own. Unfortunately, the onus put on regularly separating and retiring personnel is frequently at odds with operational requirements and other pressing transition needs like finding a new home and career.

While the VFW knows it is not currently feasible to give every service member a customized transition experience like the one inherent with IDES, we know the Department of Defense (DOD) and VA can do better to ensure more service members receive the support they need and deserve within the current TAP framework. Providing comprehensive knowledge of programs and resources and subsequent connections to them is no less important for regularly separating and retiring personnel than it is for individuals separating or retiring via IDES.

Transition Assistance Program Background

Attending TAP is mandatory for all personnel approaching separation or retirement, including those transitioning for medical reasons. Down from five mandatory days of instruction, the recently overhauled TAP is comprised of three mandatory days and two additional days, known as career tracks, that are optional for TSMs whose assigned tier allows them to forgo attending. The tier system is new, and came about as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 TAP law reforms. This structure is intended to align TAP more closely to TSMs' individual goals and needs by assigning them to one of three tiers. Tier as-

signment is based on assessed level of transition preparedness during service members' individualized initial counseling sessions, which occur before attending the TAP course itself. Service members assigned to Tier 1 are considered the most prepared to achieve their transition plan, exempting them from completing a track, while those assigned to Tier 3 are considered the least prepared, making track completion mandatory. Tracks are largely optional for Tier 2 TSMs.

Through continuous oversight and improvement, holistic transition support and services that meet TSMs where they are should be the goal of Congress, DOD, and VA. The VFW thanks each entity for taking this responsibility seriously through constant iteration and oversight such as this hearing. Under the new TAP curriculum, however, program managers have just three guaranteed days and at most 5 days with the estimated 200,000 service members who leave the military every year. This reduced window can by no means accommodate every service members' individual transition needs. Accordingly, less time with TSMs necessitates an approach that leverages external stakeholders who can provide the capacity and capabilities that the current curriculum cannot accommodate. Also vital, Congress must ensure DOD and each of the services abides by the TAP law and works to mitigate gaps and areas of ambiguity. Understanding that not all service members can receive robust transition support commensurate with what IDES TSMs receive, we have identified specific areas for Congress to focus its oversight and subsequent reforms. Such emphasis can bring the transition experiences of the majority of TSMs into closer alignment with those going through IDES, albeit via slightly different means.

VA Office of Outreach, Transition and Economic Development

The VFW is very concerned about VA's Office of Outreach, Transition and Economic Development (OTED) and how it discharges its supposed mission. We know that OTED recently revised the TAP curriculum but has never sought input from organizations like the VFW, which is present in some capacity in TAP on nearly two dozen military installations.

When we have offered support, OTED has ignored our input. This is a stark departure from how VA operated before OTED's creation. The VFW had a seat at the table during the VOW Act implementation and again consistently provided feedback on TAP curriculum up until OTED's creation. The VFW was eager to work with OTED when the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) decided to stand up the office, but we have been outright disappointed with how the business line has operated ever since. To be blunt, OTED has appeared before this subcommittee before and poorly represented VA's position on transition. At this point the VFW has to ask this subcommittee, what exactly does OTED do?

A prime example of OTED's deficiency is its lackluster implementation of Congress's mandate under the COMPACT Act for VA to institute a pilot program through which veterans could elect to receive information from networks of support after transition. OTED took it upon itself to develop a mobile application called Getting Results in Transition (GRIT) to accomplish this objective. In the VFW's opinion, this resource was hastily developed without constructive feedback from community organizations like the VFW. Instead, OTED developed the product in a vacuum, presenting a product that is highly ineffective and underutilized.

VBA has repeatedly asked our organization to promote GRIT, but we cannot in good conscience. After reviewing a demonstration of the product, it seems to be a mobile application nobody asked for to build a social network that nobody wants.

Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program Access

One of the best resources at service members' disposal during transition is the VA Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program through which individuals can file expedited VA disability claims before leaving active duty. Using the BDD program (pre-discharge claims) service members can submit their compensation claims and complete associated medical evaluations before leaving service, thereby enabling VA to provide disability ratings upon or shortly after discharge. Individuals who participate in the BDD program are subsequently better positioned to engage VA benefits and services, like IDES personnel, after leaving the military. This means TSMs can minimize gaps in essential care like mental health counseling and medication management upon discharge.

The VFW believes there is incalculable value in incorporating VA-accredited representatives into the TAP curriculum. Specifically, we would like to see these representatives facilitate complementary course materials that cover VA benefits and services where practical, with a particular emphasis on those that can be applied for prior to separation or retirement. This approach would mitigate instances of service members missing critical benefits-related details while enabling more to act

on information without needing to find a representative in their free time outside of TAP. For instance, military personnel have a very slim window (180–90 days before separation) in which they are eligible to use the BDD program. Accredited representatives would not only be able to highlight the program but also help TSMs file claims once eligible, which is a task that VA contract employees who largely teach this material are prohibited from doing. Additionally, the VFW believes the window for eligible claims should be expanded beyond the window of 180–90 days to ensure service members have adequate time to file prior to separation.

Service members generally do not learn about the BDD program until they attend TAP. Yet, individuals across service branches and installations currently have unreliable access to accredited representatives during classes, creating barriers to filing pre-discharge VA disability claims via the BDD program. Accredited representatives experience wide variability in how, *if at all*, they can engage TSMs during TAP. This is because no statute or policy exists that requires installation commanders and site managers to permit representatives' entry into and participation in any element of the curriculum. As a result, site managers vary in their willingness to allow representatives in TAP and, if entry is permitted, managers also differ in what capacities they will allow representatives to engage TSMs. Commonly, they do not see the value in having accredited representatives present or assert that there simply is not enough time to allow them to speak to service members. Also common is the belief that all veteran-and military-serving organizations are created equal, and if TAP managers allow in one organization, they have to let in all external organizations. This could not be further from the truth, as not all organizations are recognized by VA for the purposes of preparation, presentation, and prosecution of claims before the agency.

Unequal access leads to less TSMs being connected to their benefits upon separation, thereby endangering connections to VA benefits and services like mental health care. The VFW asks Congress to either direct VA to develop a tailored pre-separation benefits course in which accredited representatives actively participate, or incorporate representatives into its current TAP presentation to explain benefits that can be applied for prior to separation. We believe that VA must utilize accredited representatives as tools in their TAP toolkit to the maximum practical extent. Details about accredited representatives as well as a list of groups and individuals who have received accreditation can be found by visiting benefits.va.gov/vso.

Knowing that the initial twelve months after discharge present heightened vulnerability for veterans to die by suicide, filing a pre-discharge claim can quite literally facilitate a lifeline for recently transitioned veterans. The VA's most recent suicide report suggested a decreased veteran suicide rate per day (1.0 vs. 6.7) for individuals having any contact with VBA as compared to those having no interaction with VBA or the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). This is the first time VA has provided benefits-related suicide data in its reporting and, while high level, this suicide rate difference illustrates a vital link. For example, the Veterans Experience Office recently briefed the VFW on its customer experience work on TAP, validating that veterans who connect with VA benefit programs either before or within one year after separation are more likely to successfully reintegrate into civilian life. Accordingly, increasing BDD program participation may potentially reduce suicide deaths among new veterans.

The VFW knows VA health care and benefits improve veterans' lives, but we need more information regarding the relationship between these VA services and suicide prevention. We urge this subcommittee to introduce and pass a House companion to S. 928, *Not Just a Number Act*, which would evaluate the role benefits related to economic opportunity have on suicide prevention.

Connections to Community Resources

The VFW also believes it is essential that Congress clarifies how it defines resources located in communities as outlined in 10 U.S.C. § 1142 (2021). As part of the FY 2019 TAP law reforms, Congress mandated that all TSMs be connected to resources in the communities in which they plan to live after service. These connections are supposed to be warm handoffs that are reflective of TSMs' individual needs and enable smooth transitions to new communities, including to resources that would provide the social support and camaraderie that is often lost when exiting the military. However, DOD is not doing this consistently or effectively. As written, the requirement is too ambiguous since the statute does not articulate how resources should be identified or what it means to connect service members. As part of the VFW's Pre-Discharge Claims program survey, respondents are asked whether they received community connections. Between September 2022 and May 2023, one third of more than one thousand respondents indicated they either were not or did not know if they received connections during their individualized initial counseling. This

is problematic. The transition program's generalist nature is not a flaw of the system but rather a feature of the system. TAP is neither designed for nor able to address everyone's unique needs, so community resources fill the void that its curriculum cannot. In other words, community organizations are the transition program's force multiplier.

We question if DOD believes it is currently, at least in part, satisfying this TAP law requirement via box 10b of the DD Form 2648, which provides TSMs the ability to opt in to having their information sent to State agencies. While this would perhaps be a fair start, the opt-in nature of this approach means less service members will participate. Also, due to self-selection bias at the outset, requiring individuals to opt in potentially skews future efforts to evaluate the effect that facilitating connections has on TAP outcomes. For those who *opt in*, simply sending TSM discharge details to state agencies is not only passive and impersonal, but also not what Congress intended as being connected to community resources.

One example scenario where DOD's method is wholly inadequate is for service members with dependents enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP). The EFMP provides myriad support services to military families with special needs, but that support ceases once they leave the military. In this example, not only would the service members and their families have to navigate common transition challenges, but they also would have to identify and arrange equivalent supports in their new communities without the assistance they had via EFMP. Relying solely on box 10b would be a complete disservice to these TSMs and their families, especially since the state agencies on the receiving end are currently not allowed to engage service members until after they have been discharged. Regardless of circumstances, service members and families deserve, and the VFW demands, better.

As the law requires, we would like Congress to ensure connections are being consistently made between TSMs and resources in the communities to which they are transitioning, with an emphasis on specialized transition service organizations that receive federal grant funding. One existing tool Congress can designate for connections is the National Resource Directory (NRD), which is housed within the Defense Health Agency (DHA). A partnership between DOD, VA, and the Department of Labor, NRD contains a large repository of strictly vetted organizations that span the transition spectrum from career assistance to caregiver support.

The VFW insists connections to community resources be specifically defined and we recommend that the definition include NRD. While it is not the role of this subcommittee to authorize and appropriate funding for a DHA program, we believe Congress should evaluate and make sure the NRD team and website is properly funded and staffed to accommodate any increased workloads, capabilities, or necessary upgrades.

There are no national transition services in every city and state that support TSMs who are seeking services across all industries. However, there are a multitude of organizations that specialize in certain fields in certain areas of the country. If TSMs are seeking education opportunities, they should be connected to local Student Veterans of America chapters. If they are seeking employment in the technology industry in Texas, they should be connected to organizations like VetsinTech. If they are seeking to enter the finance world in New York City, they should be connected to FourBlock. And if they are service members separating from the Special Operations Forces, they should be connected to organizations like The Honor Foundation. Organizations with tailored transition plans for service members and veterans will not be able to offer the most value if they are underutilized and TSMs do not know they exist. TAP cannot be everything for everybody, but there are countless organizations that could offer specialized services as long as DOD makes the connections to community resources as required by law.

DOD Adherence to the Law

While our concerns about connections to community resources are largely grounded in VFW survey responses and anecdotal feedback, additional VFW survey data are consistent with recent U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) findings. A December 2022 GAO report confirmed a suspicion we already had that TSMs have overwhelmingly—at seventy percent—not been attending TAP at least twelve months prior to separation or discharge as required by law. Our survey data closely aligns. Between September 2022 and May 2023, the VFW's survey of TSMs indicated that sixty-two percent began TAP less than one year prior to separation or retirement. Of that respondent subgroup, forty-five percent reported beginning six months or less prior to discharge. These figures are highly concerning. The intent of the FY 2019 change to the TAP attendance deadline was to ensure that service members could attend TAP early *and* often. This is largely not being done.

Poor course attendance timeliness hinders members' ability to learn about, use, and/or apply for post-service benefits and programs with set deadlines, like the BDD program. Not participating in TAP on time also robs some service members of the ability to make course corrections to their transition plans as they hone goals and learn more about their post-service needs. As such, lack of timeliness in attending TAP negatively impacts service members' ability to access needed benefits after service such as VA health care, while delaying elements of the members' transition plans such as career training via the Post-9/11 GI Bill or the VR&E program. We urge Congress to hold DOD accountable to ensure TSMs complete TAP on time, while making sure each service department expeditiously implements GAO's December 2022 timeliness recommendations.

The same GAO report also bolstered our concerns regarding the tier system. Almost twenty-five percent of TSMs assigned to Tier 3 did not complete a mandatory two-day track. Meanwhile, nearly thirty-three percent of VFW survey participants did not even know to which tier they had been assigned. Under the new system, understanding one's tier is central to determining transition readiness and related goal setting. These findings suggest the tier system may not be meeting the intent of Congress. The VFW recommends evaluating the execution and effectiveness of the tier system or eliminating it entirely. In the interim, we urge Congress to make sure DOD urgently complies with GAO's recommendations regarding track attendance.

Spouse Inclusion in TAP

Our survey data also reveal that of those TSMs with spouses, more than fifteen percent of respondents either did not know their spouse could attend TAP or their spouse wanted to attend but could not. Of those who provided clarifying remarks, the spouse's job, child care challenges, being geographically separated, and being a dual-military couple (i.e., spouse has already taken or will take) were cited as reasons for spouses not attending. Military transition is an endeavor for families as much as it is for individual service members. Transition planning as a family is imperative to understand post-separation benefits, services, and needs like disability compensation, education and survivor benefits, health care, financial planning, and even career changes.

While online TAP coursework is now available to spouses and caregivers, the value of attending the course in person cannot be understated. Some ways to increase attendance include offering TAP in the evenings or over weekends when spouses are not working and more child care options are available. Additionally, TAP stakeholders can work to accommodate child care needs during regularly scheduled sessions. We call on Congress to study the factors contributing to spouses not attending TAP in person and enact legislation that mitigates or removes the identified barriers. Moreover, we would like to see Congress create a spouse TAP pilot program that not only incorporates the findings of the study but also aligns with the unique needs and challenges experienced during transition.

Incongruent Incentives and Outcomes

Within DOD, military commanders' focus understandably centers around mission readiness priorities like training, staffing, and equipment upkeep. Operational requirements generally take precedence over peripheral efforts that are not considered mission essential. This all makes sense, of course, as DOD is charged with deterring war and ensuring our Nation's security. Friction arises, however, when DOD policies and practices that prioritize and incentivize operational readiness and effectiveness are incongruent with service members who are leaving the military. Transition policies and programs are inherently incompatible with operations. Unit leaders are tasked with ensuring the mission is accomplished with the people they have, including TSMs, as service members are expected to simultaneously fulfill their regular duties and transition requirements. However, this conflict generally does not exist for personnel being medically separated or retired via IDES because they are removed from their units which allows commanders to backfill their positions.

Moreover, the prevailing military culture is not necessarily accommodating of or sympathetic to separating personnel and related policies. Evidence can be seen in the Navy's management of the DOD SkillBridge program. Although it is a lauded transition resource, the Navy recently **restricted SkillBridge access** by rank and time until discharge because service members' participation in the program impacts unit operations. Not only are commanders authorized full latitude to approve or deny SkillBridge use, but the tone of this Navy-specific administrative message, or NAVADMIN, is seemingly adversarial in nature. The Navy's policy on TSM participation in SkillBridge results in disparate outcomes among naval service men and women. The value of programs meant to facilitate smooth transitions cannot be fully realized if DOD is permitted to restrict them.

The VFW is concerned that disparate experiences are also occurring within TAP itself. For example, during the September 2022 Military-Civilian Transition Summit, the Army's TAP manager started his presentation by noting that each of the services administers TAP "a little bit" differently. Any differences in TAP implementation should be only in the margins and never interfere with the timely and equitable access to information, programs, and services. DOD must ensure any latitude the services have in implementation does not interfere with the mandates and intentions of Congress.

Transition within the Coast Guard and Reserve Components

Historically, the Coast Guard has been overlooked in discussions about TAP oversight. It does not always fall under the jurisdiction of the Armed Services Committees, and it also does not receive the same level of recognition regarding VA issues. The men and women of the Coast Guard are often overlooked, but they also serve our Nation and have needs similar to other members of the armed forces. However, the VFW has learned the Coast Guard is lacking the proper resources to administer TAP as effectively as other services. For example, the website that hosts the Coast Guard transition information has not been updated since before the FY 2019 TAP changes. We understand it is not the jurisdiction of this subcommittee to authorize or appropriate funds for the administration of Coast Guard programs, but we urge Congress to make sure this service is resourced properly so Coast Guard members are afforded equitable opportunities.

A large cohort of the armed services that is also often overlooked in the transition discussion is the reserve component. Members of the National Guard and Reserve forces do not receive the same out-processing and instruction as active duty members. Units completing major deployments are given truncated TAP-style briefings, but standard personnel who are out-processing in the rest of the reserve component do not typically receive this instruction. The VFW recommends members of the National Guard and Reserves be assigned the online version of TAP to complete before final separation, and annual VA benefits briefings be administered to units throughout the year during administrative drill days.

Chairman Van Orden and Ranking Member Levin, this concludes my testimony. Again, the VFW thanks you for the opportunity to testify on this important issue. I am prepared to take any questions you or the subcommittee members may have.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2023, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

The VFW has not received payments or contracts from any foreign governments in the current year or preceding two calendar years.

Prepared Statement of Michael Quinn

Before I talk about the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), you should understand my story.

I retired from the Army on November 1st, 2017 after a 24 year active-duty career in Military Intelligence. I was always the top-performer in my units, first-promoted almost the entire way through Sergeant Major with some unique assignments in a Special Mission Unit and as the J2 (leading all physical and personnel security) of the White House Communications Agency. I fully planned on serving for 30 years, but when my former spouse said "I'm not moving" to a list of assignments we received, I thought the transition was going to be a breeze for a top-performing intelligence professional like me in the DC area with a Top Secret clearance.

I couldn't have been more wrong as **it ended up being the hardest year of my life.**

I vividly remember my first job fair, walking in prepared with everything they taught at TAP. I was dressed in my best suit, had business cards, copies of my resumes, research on every employer and a well-practiced elevator pitch ready to show every one of the 41 employers that I would be a huge value-add to their company if they would only give me a chance.

6 hours and 41 rejections later, I walked out dejected, demoralized and wondering how I was going to find a job and take care of my family (because SGM retirement doesn't go far in the DC area). Thankfully I took notes from every rejection and one

employer, when I nagged them for follow-up information, told me to “connect with them on LinkedIn.” So I did, and it opened the world to me.

To me, LinkedIn wasn’t “social media.” It was a networking tool that gave me access to professionals with whom I had something in common all over the country and in every job/industry. Since TAP couldn’t teach me what I needed to know, I resolved to reach out to thousands of people in industry to learn the “real truth” of finding meaningful employment. After 6+ months of hard work and over 200 informational interviews with people in industry, I finally had the knowledge, relationships, and insight to frame myself as a “best candidate” and find meaningful employment at the right level for me. (Note: I’m not paid by LinkedIn, nor do I have any financial interest in the company)

Once I figured it out, I began to see the struggle of others in the transition and realized that it was my passion and calling to give back. Since my retirement from the Army, I have done so by posting tips and advice on LinkedIn almost every day, now reaching over 1.2M people (primarily in military & veteran community) a month through LinkedIn. I also hold 50+ webinars, live sessions, and in-person workshops a year to stay engaged with our community. I teach LinkedIn & Digital Networking at the official transition courses for the General Officers and Admirals of every branch of service, but also speak with the enlisted communities of every branch – giving me a fairly unique perspective as my company (HireMilitary) is a veteran and military spouse staffing company (never any cost to the service member, veteran or military spouse).

Everything I have done since early 2017 has been to fill the gaps left from the TAP, so here are my four recommendations to fix the program:

1. Put someone in charge of TAP

Bottom Line: A single Agency needs to be in charge to drive change.

TAP, as a program, is led by an Interagency Council with the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), Department of Labor (DoL), and Department of Defense (DoD) leading individual sections of the program. While there are wonderful, hard-working, and caring people at all locations, nobody is actually in charge of or held accountable for the performance of the entire program. Each agency handles their own piece, does their best, but it is hard to tie a failure to one individual component of the program. It is also nearly impossible to drive change without someone (person or organization) providing vision and leadership.

So if you want to improve TAP, the first thing you need to do is put someone in charge of the program that is going to drive change, implement your vision, track results, and accept accountability/responsibility for a program that impacts the lives of over 220,000 transitioning service members every year.

For example, on May 3rd, 2023 I received a briefing from a VA representative that included rather large percentages of service members not meeting the Congressionally mandated requirement to start TAP no later than 365 days prior to their separation from service. The VA has this information, but what can they do to ensure that the situation gets fixed?

With each Agency having their own leadership, vision, funding and contracting vehicles, how can you really develop and integrated transition assistance program? Even the individual services do it differently.

2. Ensure the Military Life Cycle Transition Process is Implemented

Bottom Line: Congress mandated the program, but it has never been implemented.

There is too much information associated with a successful transition from the military into civilian employment for it to be absorbed and implemented in a multi-day program that pushes everything through a proverbial PowerPoint firehose. Regardless of the curriculum or instructor quality, there is just too much information when coupled with other transition and life stressors. How do we fix this? It is simple: you provide transition-related training at key touchpoints **throughout an entire career**, building knowledge and sharing resources so that it is not the first time the service member sees it when they attend TAP.

This is not my idea.

Congress has mandated the Military Life Cycle Transition on several occasions, I believe starting with the original VOW Act. The DoD TAP office has the below website covering the Military Life Cycle Transition:

(from DoD TAP Website: <https://www.dodtap.mil/dodtap/app/about/mlc>)

The Military Life Cycle (MLC) is a transition model that begins a Service member's transition preparation early in their military career. Service members have various

key touch points throughout their MLC that provide them opportunities to align their military career with their civilian goals. Service members are made aware of the Career Readiness Standards (CRS) they must meet before their intended separation and remain engaged throughout their military careers in mapping and refining their individual development to achieve their goals. This enables transition to become a well-planned, organized progression that empowers Service members to make informed career decisions and take responsibility for advancing their personal goals.

But regardless of congressional mandates and DoD policies, the Military Life Cycle Transition is not being implemented. DoD put out a policy and created a website, but there was no specific requirements for reporting, dates of implementation, or other requirements to make sure it happened. And since nobody actually checked, the Military Life Cycle Transition program does not exist in the services and the first time we see anything transition-related is when attending TAP.

My recommendation? Give clear guidance to the DoD on expected implementation of the Military Life Cycle Transition with specific tasks, dates, and reporting requirements back to Congress. This should also give the services the opportunity to highlight if they need additional funding or resources to do so, but at the end of the day there needs to be confirmation that the program was implemented and is being delivered to all service members throughout their career.

3. Modernize TAP delivery

Bottom Line: We need on-demand training accessible whenever, wherever by service members on their devices, coupled with distributed, on-demand live training and support.

While the past few years have been extremely difficult, one thing that took a giant leap forward was the technology enabling us to work, meet, and deliver training remotely. This technology, coupled with a younger generation of digital natives, makes the fact that most training is delivered in “brick and mortar” schools around the world an incredible waste of resources. The DoL portion of TAP alone has close to 700 facilitators around the world, the majority of which are 1099 or part-time employees not being paid very much. I’ve seen many that just got out of active service and went right into teaching TAP, which can be unfortunate for those in their class as they have no relevant experience.

To resolve this, service members deserve access to a vast library of on-demand, transition-related content that they can watch from their devices. But since not everyone learns well from online classes, there should also be a schedule of live webinars they can register to attend and a remote center of counselors available to guide them through the process, review documents, provide feedback, and recommend additional resources.

Doing it remotely enables significant economy of scale, improving quality because it gives you the ability to hire more experienced instructors, facilitators, and counselors – while at the same time letting service members review the courses they want as often as they want.

(Note: I recommend hiring a company to advise TAP agencies on how to effectively implement the contracting process for this (it would be easier if one agency was in charge). This can’t be a lowest price technically acceptable contract, but the money already being invested in this program, in total, is certainly enough to do this.)

4. Hold DoD Accountable

Bottom Line: Take a baseline of annual Unemployment Compensation for Ex-servicemembers (UCX) expenses for each military service, then set goals for improvement with fiscal repercussions (same year budget) if they fail to do so.

Mission first is the priority for the military, and rightfully so. The problem is that nobody has truly made TAP part of the mission, explained how every poorly transitioned service member negatively impacts future military recruiting, or required the services to care about TAP.

It’s somewhat comical to see how Dental Readiness (annual dental check-up) is prioritized at all levels of Commands. It is tracked by units, driven by installations, and Command teams get absolutely hammered if their service members go longer than a year without getting their annual checkup. Why do they do this? It is because dental issues can keep service members from deploying and Commanders prioritize it.

But you have a congressionally mandated requirement to ensure all service members start TAP no later than 365 days before separation without any of the follow-

up or Command engagement that happens with Dental Readiness. And while there truly are Leaders across the force that care about TAP, it is not seen as part of the service's mission.

How do we get the Military Services engaged and driving TAP?

There needs to be clear guidance, metrics to track, and repercussions if they fail to do so.

I recommend analyzing Unemployment Compensation for Ex-servicemembers (UCX) data, by service, for the past several years and then developing a glidepath to improvement by setting goals against UCX expenses. If the services fail to meet their specific UCX goals, Congress takes back money from their same year budget authorization. (Something similar occurs in Major League Baseball with the salary cap. If any team goes over the salary cap, they are penalized (fined) millions of dollars.)

If the clear guidance, metrics and fiscal penalties are made clear, the services will implement the programs from the top down, track attendance and Commanders will become innovative in how they support the program – as it will become part of the mission.

Prepared Statement of Abby Kinch

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit testimony on the topic of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

With a mission focused on empowering student veterans, SVA is committed to providing an educational experience that goes beyond the classroom. Through a dedicated and expansive network of on-campus chapters across the country, SVA aims to inspire yesterday's warriors by connecting student veterans with a community of dedicated chapter leaders. Every day, these passionate leaders work to provide the necessary resources, network support, and advocacy to ensure student veterans can effectively connect, expand their skills, and ultimately achieve their greatest potential.

SVA greatly appreciates the opportunity to speak to our research and the experiences of student veterans regarding TAP. We know that a positive transition experience, beginning with the decision to separate from military service and continuing through the rest of a veteran's life, is essential for a successful and meaningful return to a civilian society.

Transition Assistance Program

An effective transition program is invaluable for those separating from service at any stage – an E-4 completing a single enlistment to someone retiring after 20 years of service. However, from our research both before and after the 2019 reforms TAP has been utilized more as a bridge from the moment of separation to the moment of employment or enrollment. Across all transition research, however, the recommendation is that transition programs be designed beyond that bridge.^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5} SVA recommends a "highway" approach when thinking about enhancements to TAP. It should carry transitioning servicemembers from a point well before their date of separation to well beyond their point of entry into their civilian lives.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (FY 2019 NDAA) already stipulates that transition services should start no later than one year from the servicemember's separation date, but SVA research has found that this is not always the case. After separation, our research indicates support services do not follow the then veteran through the continuation of transition. These primary issues, as well as others, are discussed below.

TAP is intended to be a robust program aiming to provide a successful holistic transition of military personnel and their spouses from military to civilian life. As

¹ Blackburn, D. (2016). Transitioning from military to civilian life: Examining the final step in a military career. *Canadian Military Journal*, 16(4), 53–61.

² Hallett, R. E., Kezar, A., Perez, R. J., & Kitchen, J. A. (2020). A typology of college transition and support programs: Situating a 2-year comprehensive college transition program within college access. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 64(3), 230–252.

³ Kintzle, S., & Castro, C. A. (2018). Examining veteran transition to the workplace through military transition theory. In *Occupational stress and well-being in military contexts* (pp. 117–127). Emerald Publishing Limited.

⁴ Pedlar, D., Thompson, J. M., & Castro, C. A. (2019). Military-to-civilian transition theories and frameworks. In *Military veteran reintegration* (pp. 21–50). Academic Press.

⁵ Zaidi, B., & Morgan, S. P. (2017). The second demographic transition theory: A review and appraisal. *Annual review of sociology*, 43, 473–492.

subject matter experts in the intersection of issues facing veterans and higher education, SVA will focus on the higher education transition portion of the program. Our testimony discusses opportunities for earlier intervention, points of interest in delivery, and the insufficient emphasis placed on transition into higher education.

Statute lists those responsible for the employment assistance, job training assistance, and other transitional services that constitute TAP. Specifically, it requires the Secretary of Labor, along with the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to “establish and maintain a program to furnish counseling, assistance in identifying employment and training opportunities, help in obtaining such employment and training, and other related information and services to members of the armed forces...”⁶ Education is an essential component to finding a career for most transitioning servicemembers, as we will demonstrate below.

The improvements made to TAP with the FY 2019 NDAA resulted in improved sentiment amongst transitioning servicemembers into higher education. SVA research prior to 2020 showed most student veterans had a negative or very negative experience with their transition programs, and a small portion had no experience with a transition program. Since the improvements were made, those sentiments have improved. In 2022, respondents indicated an increase in positive experience with TAP.⁷ The comments aligned with positive feedback were primarily focused on the increased information available in the education track.⁸

About 50 percent of enlistees at the time of enlistment indicate that they intend to use their G.I. Bill benefits after separation,⁹ but SVA estimates show that number may be closer to two-thirds, though sparse data on veterans in higher education makes that determination foggy. Nevertheless, appropriate transition support into higher education is essential for a large portion of the transitioning population, stressing the importance of the education portion of TAP.

The “Education Track” is a “two-day workshop designed to assist servicemembers in identifying the higher education requirements that support their personal career goals.”¹⁰ It “provides guidance on choosing an educational institution, preparing for the application process, and expectations upon attendance...”¹¹ SVA’s research supports this component’s mission, in that almost 60 percent of veterans seeking a higher education degree are motivated by career goals and aspirations.¹² Of those, almost 70 percent chose higher education in lieu of an immediate career because they felt that they were ill-or under-prepared for employment following military service.¹³ Less than half of student veterans’ future goals align with their military occupation,¹⁴ which may contribute to this feeling of unpreparedness. This further supports the need for a transition program designed with the lifespan of the veteran in mind.

According to the program itself, “this two-day workshop is divided into the following topic areas: learning the basics, choosing a field of study, selecting an institution, gaining admission, and funding higher education.”¹⁵ In our longitudinal study on the decision-making patterns of servicemembers from pre-to post-enlistment, one of the most striking findings is what we refer to as the “lost guidance counselor.”¹⁶ As those about to graduate high school and make their way to college, 18-year-olds around the country may spend upwards of four years with a guidance counselor discussing career options and college planning. They choose programs of study, select institutions of higher learning, explore funding sources, and navigate the admissions process. Even conservatively, the better part of a college bound student’s junior and

⁶ 10 U.S.C. § 1144(a).

⁷ 2022 SVA Census (in process). On file with authors; 2022 SVA Basic Needs and Wellness Report (in process). On file with authors.

⁸ See *id.*

⁹ From the House Hearing before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, 112 Congress, “Examining the Re-design of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP)” provided September 20, 2012

¹⁰ DoDTAP. Transition Components. DoD Education Track. <https://www.dodtap.mil/dodtap/app/transition/tracks>.

¹¹ DoD Instruction 1332.35, 5.1a(4), (6)(b).

¹² 2022 SVA Census (in process). On file with authors.

¹³ 2022 SVA Census (in process). Question asking respondents why they chose higher education as a transition medium. On file with authors.

¹⁴ 2022 SVA Census (in process). On file with authors.

¹⁵ DoDTAP. Transition Components. DoD Education Track. <https://www.dodtap.mil/dodtap/app/transition/tracks>.

¹⁶ This comes from qualitative findings in response to issues in the decision-making process from the SVA Lifecycle Atlas project. These portions of the study have not been published. On file with author.

senior years are dedicated to regularly scheduled meetings with a guidance counselor on this impactful life transition.

A two-day workshop cannot replace the support experienced by traditional students with guidance counselors transitioning into higher education. Over half of our respondents rated both the on-base education offices and TAP “below average” in providing advising services.¹⁷ While on active duty, servicemembers are often not provided adequate guidance on utilizing Tuition Assistance (TA) with transfer in mind, but with the idea that they will earn a degree while serving.¹⁸ A large portion of the spending on TA goes to three universities (one non-profit and two for-profit).¹⁹ Transferability of courses from these institutions to the schools that veterans most often select after separation is very low, meaning much of the TA budget is going to credits that cannot be used to earn degrees that are not completed while serving.^{20, 21}

With this gap in service, student veterans arrive on college campuses with a deficit in planning that leads to a higher likelihood of program change. Student veterans are almost twice as likely as traditional students to change their major or program of study multiple times.²² Even with the generous funding from the G.I. Bill, student veterans find themselves graduating with student loan debt,^{23, 24} partially due to the lack of proper preparation and advising. Were proper interventions started sooner and with more emphasis on education, TA dollars could be more appropriately used to take courses that transfer or that are housed within the destination school. This would reduce the number of program changes made by beneficiaries and allow G.I. Bill funding to be maximized for use with longer STEM degrees, ensure degree completion, or even support graduate school.

Finally, what compounds this “lost guidance counselor” phenomenon more is the fact that almost two-thirds of student veterans are first-generation college students.^{25, 26} Not only do these students not have the professional college counseling afforded to high school students, but they also lack familial guidance, which has been proven to support student transition, retention, and success.^{27, 28, 29} TAP has the opportunity, and in our opinion obligation, to fill this gap by working with college-bound servicemembers in an expanded capacity, replacing the lost guidance counselor with professional transition services into and through higher education. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) should further leverage the U.S. Department of Education, as part of the TAP interagency partnership, in providing this guidance, along with the nuanced approach not afforded currently.

More holistically, student veterans find that isolation was a large contributor to their transition stress. Much research has been conducted in examining the loss of camaraderie following separation from the military. The shared-experience, peer-support structure of our chapters is what makes them so enticing to student veterans on college campuses. Despite this, our survey feedback on transition to higher education shows that a vast majority of student veterans felt TAP did not prepare

¹⁷ 2022 SVA Basic Needs and Wellness Report (in process). On file with authors.

¹⁸ 2022 SVA Basic Needs and Wellness Report (in process). On file with authors.

¹⁹ Pulkkinen, L. (September 2021). Getting educated while on active duty is getting harder as military rolls back benefits. *The Hechinger Report*.

²⁰ This statement is only applicable to those who start coursework on TA, do not finish a degree, and then complete a degree at a different university after separation. However, because a vast majority of student veterans attend public, nonprofit universities, the assumption is that this is a common case.

²¹ This is not to say that TA is a wasted benefit; only ill-advised. TA is a powerful benefit that entices many servicemembers into service and can be leveraged to continue to draw Americans into military service.

²² Unpublished findings from the SVA Lifecycle Atlas project. On file with author.

²³ Bhattarai, R., Brees, S., & Oliff, P. (2023). Veterans Borrow for Private and Public Higher Education Despite GI Bill Benefits. Pew Charitable Trusts.

²⁴ According to the Pew study, this debt is largely to cover costs associated with living expenses. Over half of student veterans are married and over half have children. Almost 20 percent are single parents, according to our research.

²⁵ Student Veterans of America uses the U.S. Department of Education definition of “first-generation college students,” or a student who had parents with no postsecondary education experience.

²⁶ This number has been consistent since the implementation of the SVA Census in 2016. See 2016–2020 SVA Census Reports, 2022 Census Report (in progress), held with authors. <https://studentveterans.org/research/sva-census/>.

²⁷ Aruguete, M. S. (2017). Recognizing challenges and predicting success in first-generation university students. *Journal of STEM Education: Innovations and Research*, 18(2).

²⁸ Ives, J., & Castillo-Montoya, M. (2020). First-generation college students as academic learners: A systematic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 90(2), 139–178.

²⁹ Mehta, S. S., Newbold, J. J., & O'Rourke, M. A. (2011). Why do first-generation students fail?. *College Student Journal*, 45(1), 20–36.

them for these types of social and psychological struggles associated with their separation from the military.

“TAP was for getting a job. That’s it. I felt like I was leaving home and heading somewhere where I didn’t know anyone. The SVA chapter...gave me the opportunity to meet people and make connections. Without it, I would be alone.”³⁰

“Transition assistance program (TAP) was not comprehensive in addressing the actual struggles of transition out of the military (primarily psychological, financial, and medical/disability related ... [sic] did not need help writing a resume for 3 days).”³¹

Combatting common feelings of isolation for student veterans with the camaraderie provided by an SVA chapter on college campuses also exposes these students to the larger campus community. We’ve noted through chapter conversations that student veterans who engage with their SVA chapter are more likely to engage with other areas of campus: student government; Greek life; industry organizations such as a business, law, or music student group; and identity organizations such as the women’s student union or PRIDE student union. Higher education research has shown that participation in campus organizations increases student success on all measures, and we have found the same for student veterans.^{32, 33} Additionally, a survey conducted in 2016 showed that most student veterans have some level of service-connected disability,³⁴ though virtually none utilized disability offices or accommodations to support their academic experience. In a 2022 survey, the number of student veterans utilizing these services had increased to 26 percent.³⁵ Not only are SVA chapters a front door to other campus organizations, but they serve as a gateway to needed campus services.

Most student veterans, unfortunately, do not discover their SVA chapter until late in their college career.³⁶ As trained, student veterans are focused on the mission – here, graduation is the only goal – and thus, these students miss out on many opportunities found on college campuses outside of the classroom. Were SVA and other Veteran Service Organizations connected with transitioning servicemembers during TAP, or earlier, this timeline to discovering support from their SVA chapter may be shortened, and we may see real impact that continues beyond immediate transition and beyond education. SVA chapters are often the first social contact on campuses for student veterans. Chapter members provide advice, resources, and feedback on housing, childcare, employment, and other necessities of civilian life. These conversations, should they happen earlier, have the potential to not only better prepare servicemembers for their transition into higher education, but reduce the stress caused by that transition. Further, organizations like the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and America’s Warrior Partnership (AWP) provide essential services to veterans that would likewise be better served if they were introduced earlier in the transition process.

The updated TAP structure also fails to appropriately prioritize education. A straightforward comparison between the length of online workshops shows that a more robust curriculum has been developed for career-related tracks than education. At only 240 minutes, a transitioning servicemember cannot obtain the needed guidance required to make informed decisions, particularly those that carry such weight and impact on their futures. With the addition of Skillbridge, and the emphasis placed there, as well as other programs offered toward transitions into careers, servicemembers, again a majority of whom transition through higher education, are not shown the value or importance that DoD places on education transition services. There is simply an imbalance in the emphasis placed on transition tracks.

The prioritization of TAP by the chain of command is also an issue. Anecdotally and in response to surveys, some student veterans have reported that the culture

³⁰ Response to the 2022 SVA Census survey asking respondents to “please use the space below to tell us any experiences as a student veteran, military or veteran dependent, or alumni that you wish to share.” Report in progress, held with authors.

³¹ Response to the 2022 SVA Census survey asking respondents to “please use the space below to tell us any experiences as a student veteran, military or veteran dependent, or alumni that you wish to share.” Report in progress, held with authors.

³² Foley, C., Darcy, S., Hergesell, A., Almond, B., McDonald, M., Nguyen, L. T., & Morgan-Brett, E. (2023). Extracurricular activities, graduate attributes and serious leisure: competitive sport versus social-cultural clubs in campus life. *Leisure Studies*, 1–18.

³³ Morgan, N. R., Aronson, K. R., McCarthy, K. J., Balotti, B. A., & Perkins, D. F. (2023). Post-9/11 Veterans’ Pursuit and Completion of Post-secondary Education: Social Connection, Mental Health, and Finances. *Journal of Education*, 00220574231168638.

³⁴ 2016 SVA Census. <https://studentveterans.org/research/sva-census/>

³⁵ 2022 SVA Basic Needs and Wellness Report (in process), held with authors.

³⁶ 2022 SVA Basic Needs and Wellness Report (in process), held with authors.

of their unit is unsupportive when it comes to TAP. Some transitioning servicemembers do not understand the importance of the program because its importance is not stressed to them. Some within the command structure of the transitioning servicemember do not see TAP as important. For example, many survey respondents noted the struggle in making time to complete the education workshop where requests for that time were denied. This aligns with Government Accountability Office findings that roughly a quarter of transitioning servicemembers who needed maximum support did not attend a two-day class and that, overall, 70 percent of servicemembers did not begin the TAP process at least one year prior to separation.³⁷ While these are not the most common complaints and were certainly more common before the FY 2019 NDAA changes to TAP, the persistence of this mentality throughout the chain of command does not support a successful transition.

Lastly, we would be remiss if we did not take this opportunity to add that, while TAP is defined as an outcomes-based approach to transition, the lack of data available on those who make that transition through higher education – count of individuals degree choices, successes, debt, and post-graduation earnings – stands as an impediment to any outcomes assessment of a transition program aimed at successful transitions through higher education. Data sharing between the U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Education, and U.S. Department of Labor to identify the true outcomes of veterans' post-transition is imperative.

The continued success of veterans in higher education in the Post-9/11 era is no mistake or coincidence. In our Nation's history, educated veterans have always been the best of a generation and the key to solving our most complex challenges. Today's student veterans carry this legacy forward.

We thank the Chair, Ranking Member, and the Subcommittee Members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education.

Prepared Statement of Jim Lorraine

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and Members of the Subcommittee – thank you for the invitation to testify before you today.

The topic of veteran's employment and transition is a very important one. We all know that transition between jobs is one of most volatile times in a life, but even more so when it involves a change of culture. A change of routine. A change of location. The loss of camaraderie. And sometimes, the loss of a sense of purpose.

Together, this has repeatedly shown to lead to the feeling of hopelessness. And the loss of hope is one of the largest contributing factors of veteran suicide.

At America's Warrior Partnership (AWP), veteran's suicide and suicide prevention are the top priority and focus. Our entire mission at AWP is "Partnering With Communities to Prevent Veteran Suicide."

Part of this effort is understanding the veteran and getting to know each one in the community. From there, it is assessing their needs and goals. And without a doubt, meaningful and fulfilling employment is one of the top goals.

Communities recognize the opportunity veterans, and their families bring to their counties and regions. Our partner, the Permian Strategic Partnership (PSP), led by Tracee Bentley, are focused on improving the quality of life for their residence of the Permian Basin of Texas and New Mexico to improve both the quality and quantity of their workforce. In the Permian Basin, AWP is integrating TAP, GI Bill, Apprenticeship, Skillbridge and ENPP into a recruitment and community development program. The PSP serves as a model for communities who recognize that improving the lives of veterans and their families isn't just the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do.

Everyone knows veterans are exceptionally disciplined and hard-working employees. Veterans possess unique skills and experiences that are invaluable in a workplace. However, ensuring that as servicemembers are leaving the military, they are made aware of the skills they possess, the tools and resources available, and opportunities ahead of them are essential to make sure these individuals match with a career that fits their skills, needs, and goals.

³⁷U.S. GOVT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, GAO-23-104538, SERVICE MEMBERS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE 11-22 (2022).

The greatest indictment of our military is often how we treat our veterans. And the next generation is watching. The military is completely dependent on volunteer recruitment, and despite their best efforts, they are behind. This is happening despite the military being a “family business.” Many who serve have parents or siblings or grandparents that also served. And when those 15 to 17-year-olds see how their families and friends are being treated by the Department of Defense and the VA after service, many quickly chose not to join.

At America’s Warrior Partnership, we recognized this immediately. While many organizations help veterans find jobs, we found that most companies did not know how to utilize or help the veterans and their families who were already in the workforce. In response, AWP began the Corporate Veterans Initiative (CVI). This program was designed to help take care of veterans’ needs in the workplace. Whether it is help with the VA, help finding local volunteer communities, or help transitioning into a new community – AWP has programs in place to assist and work with the company to ensure the military connected employees’ needs are met.

It sounds simple – but it was necessary. And the results have been terrific. The Corporate Veterans Initiative, powered by AWP’s Network consisting of thousands of partners, raises morale and productivity for veterans – and helps employee retention and recruitment. A win-win. A happy employee is much more likely to encourage their friends and others to join the company. Meanwhile, the veteran’s success directly helps drive an ongoing narrative that veterans are successful post-service in the workplace and help foster a great working environment. Highlighting these types of successes can help drive military recruitment for the next generation.

With Veteran unemployment sitting at a historic low of 2.2 percent last month, the DOD, working with corporations and nonprofits like AWP, should shift its focus to the issue of underemployment, which is often nearly as traumatic for some as unemployment. A bad fit in a company or being underutilized at a job that does not appreciate their skills and experience, can be defeating and demoralizing. Learning what resources are available, and how skills translate to post-military employment, as well as what industries are hiring and where they have unfilled, good paying jobs are key to helping address underemployment.

In the end, unemployment, underemployment, and transition turbulence lead to loss of identity and purpose and combined with financial insecurity – all contribute to hopelessness. Ensuring veterans have a purpose and are financially stable are the ultimate issues that we are here to address today.

Programs led by a coordination of DOD, VA, and DOL have made significant progress in helping veterans navigate this transition better.

However, much of this process is DOD heavy. Many of the transitions happen while service members are still on active duty, so it is natural that DOD has the greatest sway. However, the DOD must realize that VA and DOL need more time and resources during that process – once service members leave DOD, there are few services available to them. Meanwhile, the VA and DOL will be with these former service members from that moment on.

At the Department of Labor, Veterans Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS), they have a very successful and creative program at bases around the globe. This program, called the Employment Navigator & Partnership Pilot (ENPP), is primarily aimed to provide service members with resources for understanding their skills and securing meaningful employment in communities where the veterans and their families can thrive. An important and often overlooked aspect of this program is that ENPP is also open to spouses. As these service members begin thinking about their transition, they can utilize ENPP to look at the job market, research geographic regions, craft resumes, and other pre-career functions. This program should be expanded with funding and growth in communities participating in ENPP.

At ENPP, once the service member has an idea of what they would like to do and where they would like to live, there are many ENPP partnerships that can assist. These range from Veteran Service Organizations to major employers. This is important because it is a first glimpse into what comes next in their career and helps provide a resource that they can continue to lean on during that transition. ENPP is harnessing the Sea of Goodwill.

For some service members who need assistance during their military career, they utilize existing programs such as the USO. Once they begin to transition out of the military, the USO’s partnership with America’s Warrior Partnership provides a warm handoff to ensure they are taken care in whatever community they choose.

While much has been made about the high-profile use of the GI Bill, and the ubiquitous use of the program, very little fanfare has been made of the VA Apprenticeship Program. This program provides GI Bill like funding for veterans to receive certifications in the trades. However, college isn’t for everyone. And there is a grow-

ing need and demand for skilled labor. But there is minimal use of this program due to low promotion rate and reduced living stipend as compared to those using the GI Bill. It is time to update and reform the program and make it useful for those leaving the military.

One of the biggest changes to the VA Apprenticeship program needs to be the update to the cost-of-living paid to the students. Currently, it is a percentage of what is paid to those using the GI Bill. That needs to end. There should be parity. Second – this program must not in any way use or draw down from the veterans GI Bill benefits. Many students would see the potential value of a degree and would shy away from using it on an apprenticeship – even though it was their desired career path and numerous, high-paying, jobs available.

Next, more work needs to be done to ensure the costs of the apprenticeship do not unduly fall on the employers. These include the costs of the certificates and licensure. While the cost is very small, some require specific courses to be taken and are currently paid for by the employers. Then the employers take the students for on-the-job training. In short-there is a lot required from employers already. And if opportunities continue, we must eliminate that burden and make it easier for employers to find and partner with students participating in the VA Apprenticeship program.

And finally, I am here to thoroughly applaud and commend the Skillbridge program. We have heard from veterans all over the Nation, and when the program is done correctly – it has been one of the best job placement programs we have worked with. To make it more widespread and effective, I would like to offer several recommended fixes to the Skillbridge program.

Skillbridge needs to be consistent across the DoD, available everywhere, and more companies need to know what the program is, how it works, and can provide no cost opportunities to transitioning service members without excessive bureaucracy. Every base should offer the program and every single service member should be able to fully participate to the maximum. Commanders should have only minimal input on the program and approval should be mandatory, as this is at the end of the service members' career – and is focused on transitioning out of the military. I suggest the program administration moves to the Department of Labor for full execution and integration into the Nation's employer space.

Next, more flexibility regarding billets must be given to assist with Commander's approval and to help better encourage the usage of the program. DoD must find ways to balance their recruitment and their separation numbers to ensure every service member has this opportunity. Every effort must be made to encourage junior enlisted personnel in addition to senior enlisted and officers who are utilizing the Skillbridge program at greater rates than E-5s and below. Further, many service members have issues with cashing out leave at the end of their service. Current policy forces many to either take leave before the program or create an unusual pause after the program while leave is used.

Last, there are legislative changes that must occur to support veterans in the workplace. Currently, veteran protected status is only provided to those who served on active duty and are a disabled veteran, a veteran who served during a period of war, or those within three years of active-duty discharge. By changing the veteran protected status to all who served in the National Guard, Reserve, or active-duty and were discharged in a status other than dishonorable, you would protect the employee rights of all who served our Nation in military uniform while empowering the employers to not only know, but understand, the needs of veterans in their companies who are eligible for greater support.

Again, thank you to everyone on the Committee for your invaluable work on the important topic of suicide prevention. We look forward to working with you all and stand by to assist. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

Prepared Statement of Hernàn Luis y Prado



**REBUILDING AMERICAN
MANUFACTURING,
ONE VETERAN AT A TIME®**

2970 Main Street
San Diego, CA 92113
Phone 619.550.1620
Fax 619.550.1621

May 15th, 2023

The Honorable Representative Derrick Van Orden
Chairman
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
U.S. House of Representatives
364 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Van Orden:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Wednesday the 17th of May, 2023 at 1500hrs at the oversight hearing held by your subcommittee regarding the Transition Assistance Program: Steps to Ensure Success for Servicemembers as they Enter Civilian Life.

My name is Hernàn Luis y Prado and I am the Founder and CEO of Workshops for Warriors which is located at 2970 Main Street, San Diego, CA 92113. I can be reached via telephone at 619-550-1620.

Thank you in advance for taking care of our Nation's veterans.

Attached is my written statement.

Very respectfully,

Hernàn B. Luis y Prado

Hernàn B. Luis y Prado
CEO and Founder

Transition Assistance Program: Steps to Ensure Success for Servicemembers as they Enter Civilian Life.

Written Testimony from Hernán B. Luis y Prado, CEO of Workshops for Warriors

Have you ever struggled or lost your footing? Do you remember how it felt to suddenly lose a job or even worse, a loved one? I'm a fifteen year Navy veteran with combat tours in Afghanistan and Iraq.

I knew that on any given day, more than twenty of us were dying from suicide.... Why was I losing more friends to suicide than to bombs and bullets overseas?

When you're in the military, you're part of America's suit of armor. In this purpose driven tapestry each of us knows what is expected, and what to expect from others. But when your service ends, you are suddenly ripped out of this fabric and find yourself alone...adrift...and without a mission. The sudden lack of income, purpose, and identity are overwhelming because you've never been trained or equipped for this new set of challenges.

When I came back from my first tour in Iraq, many of the injured Marines convalescing at National Naval Medical Center would come to my house, gather in my garage, to tinker with tools and pass the time. Spending time together made me realize how worried these combat veterans were about the scariest thing they had ever encountered...their imminent transition to civilian life.

Our numbers grew, and soon my garage became crowded with Marines, welding, machining, and fabricating, the underpinnings of manufacturing.

But this was just a diversion. I needed to find a long-term solution for the veteran crisis as well as another looming problem.

While we were distracted in not one but two wars, China overtook America and became the world's number one manufacturing nation. Manufacturing dominance had long been America's economic backbone...but now, it was no longer our superpower.

I began to wonder, could we retrain veterans to help America regain her economic and manufacturing prowess? What if we gave every honorably discharged veteran the opportunity to rebuild America's manufacturing workforce, to have a dignified life, to be a part of the American dream? It sounds great, right? I just didn't know how.

In 2006, I was in the mall when I heard a familiar voice call out "Doc!" I turned to see one of my Marines who I had served with coming towards me. He told me that he had lost both of his legs to an improvised explosive device in Iraq...right after I left him. I remembered his dream of being a Marine Corps "Lifer" and as he wheeled away from me, I was devastated. Not just by him, but because he represented the lost dreams and aspirations of all of my injured comrades-in-arms. My knees literally melted and as I sank to the ground I had a life changing epiphany that has driven my life ever since. I grabbed my wife Rachel's arm and said, we're going to sell everything and do something.

To Rachel's huge credit she said, yes. We sold our home, vehicles, and cashed in our retirement to create an advanced manufacturing training center so that our veterans could be trained for a viable future. We named it Workshops for Warriors.

Workshops for Warriors is the only accredited nonprofit in the US dedicated to training veterans and transitioning service members in welding, fabrication, CNC machining, 3D printing, quality assurance, metrology, machinery repair, and computer aided design. Workshops for Warriors graduates leave with nationally recognized portable and stackable STEM credentials. Due to demand, our school has grown to 350 times the size of our original footprint and is the largest advanced manufacturing training facility for veterans in the US. We have graduated more than 1125 veterans who have earned more than 12,000 nationally recognized credentials and have a 94% average placement rate. Workshops for Warriors graduates work in every state of our nation in advanced manufacturing careers for companies like SpaceX, Boeing, and Ford. The Assistant Secretary of the Navy called us the "SEAL team of manufacturing." The Administrator of the Small Business Administration called us "The most impressive facility she had visited (out of the 7,000 she had visited)."

Since 2015, approximately forty percent of Workshops for Warriors graduates found out about our program through the Transition Assistance Program and fifty-six percent of our graduates attended our school by using SkillBridge.

We know that TAP and SkillBridge work.

We know that retraining veterans works and it could solve our Nation's manufacturing crisis while giving veterans an opportunity to serve our Nation once again.

Let me share one of our success stories. Craig was living in his car with his four year old son Kane. Out of gas, with \$2 in his wallet, and no-where to go, this honorably discharged navy veteran was homeless, desperate, and losing hope. But that all changed when Craig called us. When he walked through our doors he found hope. A donor provided a scholarship for him which included tuition, housing and a stipend for food and childcare. After completing Workshops for Warriors' 16 week accelerated and accredited STEM training program in CAD/CAM programming, CNC machining and 3D printing Craig was offered a full-time position at a manufacturing company in Alabama at \$60,000 a year; but for Craig...this means that he bought his first home three months after graduating from our program and his son Kane now gets to sleep in a real bed for the first time in his life.

That's impact.

More than 1,125 veterans now have income to provide for their families... more than 1,100 veterans are now building up our nation instead of tearing themselves and their communities down through unemployment, suicide and homelessness. Like Craig, our graduates become the machinists, welders, and skilled advanced manufacturing workers that our country needs to rebuild our infrastructure while paving the way for a brighter future for all of us.

So what's the issue?

After coming out of the longest war in our Nation's history and two years of covid, we were all shocked to realize the Nation that created Henry Ford couldn't deliver vehicles. The Nation that created the world's most advanced computers couldn't manufacture microchips. The Nation that created the Salk vaccine to cure polio couldn't produce our own medications or personal protective equipment.

For the first time, America had to rely on other nations for the physical safety and wellbeing of American citizens on our own soil.

In January 2023, Deloitte and the National Association of Manufacturers confirmed that America currently has 803,000 unfilled jobs due to lack of skilled labor, with more than 2.1 million manufacturing jobs going unfilled by 2030.

This is a problem that can be solved by training our veterans.

There is a dire need for manufacturing talent, particularly in the Department of Defense and Department of Energy. If our ability to manufacture nuclear submarines, nuclear aircraft carriers, and nuclear reactors erodes, it would be exceptionally challenging to regain it.

I would urge you to consider increasing the amount of Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) and other subsidies for transitioning service members that utilize SkillBridge so that those that are capable could be trained into rebuilding our nuclear triad, particularly our Columbia Class submarines.

We should take advantage of this golden opportunity to allow competent, capable, and committed transitioning service members to focus on compressed advanced manufacturing training, and not on survival. The majority of advanced nations have nationally subsidized manufacturing and vocational training programs, except for America.

Now is the time for a new vision and decisive action. This is America's opportunity for a new New Deal. Imagine advanced manufacturing training programs that transform more than one million service members who are transitioning out of the military in the next five years into the greatest manufacturing force the world has ever known.

That millions of Americans trained for war had been retrained for a new purpose.

I am asking that Congress expand the Transition Assistance and SkillBridge programs as well as increase BAH for students attending those schools so that Americans trained for war could attend a nationally viable advanced manufacturing training program, like Workshops for Warriors, to regain their destiny and start a new career.

Let's train our veterans to make America the world's manufacturing superpower again.

Hernán B. Luis y Prado

619.800.4597
h@mfw.org**PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE****Founder and CEO, Workshops for Warriors (April 2008 - Present)**

Founded and operates a \$10M nonprofit that trains, certifies, and places Veterans and Wounded Warriors into Advanced manufacturing careers in welding, machining, and fabrication. Recognized by the White House and San Diego Mayor as the only accredited school in the Nation dedicated to training Veterans and transitioning service members. Received White House Champion of Change Award in 2012, received Keith M. Turnham Humanitarian award on 14Nov2014, won San Diego Venture Partners competition for Best Non-profit serving the Military in 2013.

Founder and CEO, VetPowered (October 2009 - Present)

Founded and operates a \$3M advanced manufacturing business to serve the shipbuilding and aerospace community. Responsible for all facets of an organization that specializes in advanced CNC machining, 3D Printing, laser cutting, water jetting, and turning operations as well as the maintenance, and repair of industrial and commercial machinery. Awarded Best CEO in San Diego 2017. Awarded "Small Business Person of the Year for California" in 2022.

Officer in Charge, Navy Cargo Handling Battalion-3 (October 2010 - 2013)

Responsible for thirty-three SeaBees and \$1M budget. Tasked with providing Expeditionary Cargo Handling to Forward Operating Bases and combat units worldwide.

Combat Systems Officer, USS MAKIN ISLAND LHD-8 (December 2006 - February 2010)

Responsible for Acquisition, Construction, Testing and Use of all Combat and Weapons Systems from Pre-commissioning to Commissioning on the Navy's first Electric Big Deck Warship.

Assistant North Area Operations Officer, Naval District Washington (July 2003 – December 2006)

Responsible for operating functions for the United States Naval Observatory (home of the Vice-President of the United States), Defense Information Systems Agency, and Bureau of Medicine. Deployed to Afghanistan for combat operations for six months.

Operations Officer/Executive Officer, USS FIREBOLT PC-10 (October 2001 - July 2003)

Responsible for twenty-eight personnel and the operation of a United States Warship attached to Naval Special Warfare Unit Four. Performed two cruises supporting the Department of Homeland Security. Transitioned into Chief Staff Officer when ordered to take tactical control of two other warships and steam to Iraq before hostilities commenced. Spent seven months inside Iraq in combat operations. Escorted first humanitarian shipment to Iraq from the HMS Sir Galahad on the 28th of March 2003. Captured 39 Prisoners of War.

Electronic Warfare Officer/Damage Control Officer, USS RAMAGE DDG-61 (December 1999 – October 2001)

Responsible for thirty-two personnel dedicated to the interception and exploitation of the electromagnetic spectrum as well as personnel dedicated to the safety and repair of the ship during routine operations, casualties, flooding, fire, grounding, explosion, and training for Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical attacks.

PATENTS & TRADEMARKS

Invented more than forty patents and trademarks listed with the U.S. Patent Office.

AWARDS

2022 "Small Business Person of the Year for California" by the Small Business Administration
 2022 "Veteran Owned Small Business of the Year for California" by the Small Business Administration
 2018 "Entrepreneur of the Year" by the San Diego Business Journal
 2017 "CEO of the Year" by the San Diego Business Journal
 2016 U.S. Congressional Recognition
 2015 "Veteran of the Year" California State Assembly
 2014 Special Commendation by Mayor Kevin Faulconer
 2014 Awarded the Keith M. Turnham Humanitarian of the Year
 2012 White House Champion of Change –Presented by President Barack Obama

EDUCATION

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF PARIS (January 1997)
 Electrical Engineering/B.A. European Cultural Studies/Philosophy

PARIS, FRANCE

LYCEE INTERNATIONAL DE SAINT-GERMAIN-EN-LAYE (June 1990)

Baccalaureate A1: Philosophy and Mathematics

SAINT-GERMAIN-EN-LAYE, FRANCE

Biography for Hernán Luis y Prado's Testimony at the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs on 20230517

Hernán Luis y Prado Chief Executive Officer & Founder, *Workshops for Warriors*

Mr. Hernán Luis y Prado served for 15 years as an enlisted Hospital Corpsman attached to the United States Marine Corps. Upon receiving his commission as a Naval Officer in 1999, he served combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. While on active duty, in 2008, he founded Workshops for Warriors (WFW) www.wfw.org, that trains, certifies, and places veterans and transitioning service members into advanced manufacturing jobs to help rebuild our nation.

Hernán Luis y Prado was recognized by the Obama White House as a "Champion of Change" for WFW's extensive efforts and notable achievements in helping veterans successfully transition from the military into advanced manufacturing careers. In 2017 he was selected as "CEO of the Year" by the San Diego Business Journal. In 2022, Mr. Luis y Prado was honored as the Small Business Administration's Small Business Person of The Year for California in 2022 and his firm, VetPowered, LLC was selected as "Veteran Owned Small Business of the Year" in 2022.

Under his leadership, WFW has grown 350 times its original footprint in San Diego and has graduated and placed more than 1,125 veterans into advanced manufacturing careers with some of the largest manufacturers in the US such as Tesla, Boeing, Ford, Caterpillar and NVIDIA.

Mr. Luis y Prado is dedicated to scaling up and replicating Workshops for Warriors' compressed advanced manufacturing training pipeline on a national level in order to "Rebuild America's Advanced Manufacturing Force...with Veterans." A cohesive advanced manufacturing training pipeline could virtually eliminate the shortage of skilled workers in the advanced manufacturing industry, increase military readiness, reduce cost, and create a stronger and safer America.

Hernán Luis y Prado is the inventor of record for over forty U.S. and international patents. He lives in San Diego, CA with his talented business partner and beautiful wife Rachel, and their two teenage children.



2970 Main Street
San Diego, CA 92113
Phone 619.550.1620

DATA AT A GLANCE

- Veteran Founded in 2008
- 501(c)3 Not-For-Profit School
- \$9.3M Operating Budget
- Post 9/11 GI Bill approved
- 94% Job Placement
- 87% of all donations go directly to programs
- \$60,000 Graduates Average Salary
- 1,125 Veterans, Transitioning Service Members and Wounded Warriors trained since 2011
- 12,794 Nationally-Recognized Credentials earned by our students
- Guidestar Platinum Certified
- Deloitte and The National Association of Manufacturing report that each \$1 invested in manufacturing will contribute \$2.74 to the economy
- 803,000 manufacturing jobs are currently unfilled due to a lack of skilled workers. By 2030, that number is expected to be 2.1M

Last updated 20230515

Watch WFW videos



**Rebuilding American Manufacturing,
One Veteran At A Time®**

“Workshops for Warriors gave me a solid career path and future.”

Staff Sergeant Dwayne Smith, USMC Ret, Purple Heart recipient for injuries sustained in Operation Enduring Freedom

Headquartered in San Diego, Workshops for Warriors has created the only **advanced manufacturing training pipeline** for veterans and transitioning service members in the nation. Our mission is to provide a nationally scalable and repeatable model that enables veterans and transitioning service members to be trained in 16 weeks and placed in their chosen advanced manufacturing career field. Veterans and Transitioning Service Members are now earning a living wage as welders, fabricators, Computer Numerically Controlled (CNC) machinists, 3D Printers, CNC mill and CNC lathe operators, Machinery Repair Technicians, Robotic Programmers, Computer-aided designers and CNC programmers throughout America.

To improve capacity and long-term impact, WFW began a \$158 million capital campaign for a two-phase expansion to a new campus-style educational facility ten times its current size without interrupting our current training. Phase one of the expansion, scheduled for completion in 2024, will allow WFW to expand the train-the-trainer program and triple the number of veterans certified each year from 162 to nearly 500. Phase two of the expansion will generate a capacity for 2,500 graduates per year.

The need has never been greater and your support has never meant more for our troops, their families, and our entire country. America’s servicemen and women have always been the first to fight, now it is our time to fight for all generations of service members. Join Workshops for Warriors’ efforts to address America’s dire need to rebuild its manufacturing capabilities. Please ask us about partnership opportunities at info@wfw.org.

wfw.org

