

**Written Testimony of  
Lt Col James Lorraine, USAF (retired)  
President & CEO  
America's Warrior Partnership (AWP)  
Augusta, GA**

**Before the  
U.S. House Committee on Veterans Affairs  
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity**

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**Testimony on “The Transition Assistance Program: Steps to  
Ensure Success for Servicemembers as they Enter Civilian  
Life.”**

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.

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% 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 growing 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.

Lastly, 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.