

The Transition Assistance Program:

Steps to Ensure Success for Servicemembers as they Enter Civilian Life

Testimony from Michael Quinn, CEO of Tenova LLC (HireMilitary)

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:

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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>)

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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.

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(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.