

**STATEMENT OF CHERYL RAWLS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
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VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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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 governance 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 fiscal year 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% 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 reintegration, 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% successful connection rate by achieving a rate of 64%. As a subset of this group, VA Solid Start successfully connected with 29,042, or 78%, 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% (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 fiscal year 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 towards 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.