

**EXAMINING TRANSITIONING
SERVICEMEMBERS EXPERIENCE**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITY**

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:03 a.m., University of Wisconsin La Crosse (UWL) Cleary Alumni & Friends Center, Great Hall, 615 East Avenue N., La Crosse, WI, Hon. Derek Van Orden, (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Van Orden, Grothman, and Levin.

OPENING STATEMENT OF DERRICK VAN ORDEN, CHAIRMAN

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The subcommittee will come to order. Good morning.

First of all, I want to thank everybody for joining us in this field hearing for the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Veterans Affairs.

To the best of our knowledge this is the first official congressional hearing that has ever taken place in the Third congressional District of the State of Wisconsin.

I really want to thank you all for coming here, and there will be more of this. I want everybody that is here to be more connected with what is taking place in DC, and I sure as hell want everyone in DC to be more connected with what is taking place here, and this is a function of that. Thank you so much.

I am Derek Van Orden. It is my pleasure to not only serve as your Congressman but also to serve as the chairman of the subcommittee, and I set the pace in this Congress that this is not a bipartisan committee. This is a nonpartisan committee and I am very proud of Ranking Member Levin and the staff are strictly adhering to this policy, and there is certainly enough garbage politically taking place around the country right now and there is absolutely no place for politics at all when we are discussing our veterans.

Thank you very much, Mike. I appreciate that greatly.

I also want to thank the students, faculty, staff at the University of Wisconsin La Crosse for being here at this field hearing.

Chancellor Beeby, I do not know if he had a chance to be here but thank you very much for having us here. David Tubb, Nate Wolfe from the Veterans Center, thank you for hosting us in your space.

This is a unique space around the country. You guys do an incredible job for supporting our veterans so thank you so much for that.

I also want to thank the Greater Driftless Area businesses for hosting our staff during our stay here. I believe that they have consumed their body's weight of cheese curds, which I appreciate greatly.

Mike just got here because he was down in Chicago. There was something going on there. I did not read the papers this morning. Apparently, there was something going on in Chicago, but it is great to have him up here.

It is wonderful to see a school like this integrating veterans who have served our country and protected us into their campus culture and that does not happen everywhere around the country, and so I deeply appreciate that.

Again, I would like to thank Ranking Member Levin. He is not just the ranking member of this committee. He is actually a friend of mine. We did the first subcommittee hearing—that was the first one in Congress at all—was at Mike's district.

He represents Oceanside, California. They have the highest population of veterans homelessness in the Nation and it is Mike's number-one priority to help alleviate veterans' homelessness and he makes a very, very strong effort in doing so, and so thank you for coming to my neighborhood.

This summer it is great to have everybody here in the State of Wisconsin. We are the largest producer of cheese. You can take notes if you want. Cheese, cranberries, horseradish, ginseng, prepared meats, bovine—dairy bovine genetics. I will tell you what that means later. Of course, mink pelts. Mink pelts.

If anybody is in the market for bovine genetics or mink pelts, please see my staff after the subcommittee hearing.

I want to thank you all, especially Mike, for traveling here to the great State of Wisconsin and we are going to listen to the people from Wisconsin and also from the Veterans Affairs Committee to try to make sure that we can understand what the heck is going on.

Before we get rolling, I am just going to ask everybody that has served this Nation in their uniform please stand up. Holy beans.

[Applause.]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you. Who is watching the world right now?

[Laughter.]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. It is a valid question. I see my commander here, Sarah. Doug is here from Monroe County. Awesome guy. We have an active duty service member. He is a specialist. I do not know if he wants to be on camera or not but he is around here somewhere. Pretty good dude. I know his dad, who was a Marine. He joined the Army. His dad is mad at him still.

I also want to thank the staff. There is so much work that goes into having these, especially outside of DC, so I want to thank the majority staff. I want to thank the minority staff for coming out here.

It is just amazing. They leave their families to come out here to make sure that you guys understand what is going on.

If any of you are having issues with the Veterans Affairs Administration, and I am your Congressman, or if Glenn is your Congressman—Congressman Grothman—I am going to introduce him in a second—I want you to—my staff, raise your hand. Hands.

Okay. If you are having a problem with the Veterans Affairs Administration, everything from getting enrolled into ID Me, which we have got some groups here, or if you are having problems with claims and disabilities and stuff we are here for you today but we will also be here for you tomorrow and the next day and the next day and the next, okay, and that is an open invitation.

The format for today's event is set up to allow you guys to see what proceedings in Washington, DC, look like. It is not a town hall but, again, we have just identified everybody from the staff. If you have issues please bring them up with them or me following, or with Ranking Member Levin.

My top priority as a member of the Veterans Affairs Committee is suicide prevention, and as the chairman of the subcommittee I have decided to take a novel approach to doing this by ensuring that our service members' transition from the military to civilian life is successful.

We have a program called the Transition Assistance Program, or TAP, in order to help with this, and I have chosen to focus on TAP because those 24 months after someone leaves the service is, unfortunately, when a lot of our veterans decide to commit suicide and that is because in a blink of eye they lose their rank and their uniform. They lose their social status. They lose authority and anywhere from half to all of their paycheck and it is incredibly stressful.

I decided to use our authority as Members of Congress to make the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) take alternative and innovative approaches to preventing veteran suicide as what they are doing is simply—it is just not working.

Congress has provided over \$120 billion since 9/11, \$16.5 billion in this last Fiscal Year for veteran suicide prevention and the veteran suicide rate is increasing. What the VA is doing is not working. That is an objective fact.

This is another way to approach this problem set and I say make because, unfortunately, many times the Veterans Affairs Administration drags its feet when it comes to institutional change and they are not alone.

The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) has not been exceptionally helpful in this matter either and no department, agency, or individual will ever be given any slack by this subcommittee if they are protecting their institutions at the expense of our veterans.

If you read the papers around here you know that I can get a bit salty when I am adamant about an issue and this is no different.

Getting TAP right is an upstream solution that will hopefully mitigate so many of the negative issues that faces our vets today and potentially help Ranking Member Levin's number-one issue, keeping them off the street to begin with.

What we are going to do here is we are going to look at TAP very specifically. Having served for 26 years myself I know how difficult the transition to being a civilian can be.

I introduced the TAP—legislation to enhance the TAP program, which is very well intended but, unfortunately, it does not always meet the mark.

A recent U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) study found that more than 4,300 at-risk service members did not receive the warm handover assistance that was needed—4,300 of our brothers and sisters—and too many of them were falling through the cracks.

We will be doing a better job to make sure that there is a concrete plan set from when they take off that uniform to put on a suit or if they put on a tool belt to get to work.

My bill increases the accountability within the DOD and requires more data collection within TAP. My bill also refine changes the committee made in the past the DOD did not follow. Again, they are not being helpful.

No two service members have the same life experience as their career in the military and we should do all we can to help personalize the transition experience that we provide to each of them to meet their needs, not the department's needs.

We are here today to listen, and I am pleased that we have a great panel of witnesses with us today to talk about the transition from the perspective of western Wisconsin.

Our panelists today do not do the work they do for money or for fame but to help our veterans, and I want to thank the panelists who are here today and I look forward to today's discussion.

Once again, I thank Ranking Member Levin for attending this field hearing here in the beautiful Third District of the State of Wisconsin. I yield back.

I now yield to the ranking member for his opening remarks.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MIKE LEVIN, RANKING MEMBER

Mr. LEVIN. Well, thank you so much to Chairman Van Orden for having me. Thank you to everyone for your hospitality. I understand if I am here I have to cheer for the Packers, not the Vikings. That is what I have been told. Thank you also to my colleague Glenn Grothman.

I am Mike Levin from Southern California. I have the great honor to represent Camp Pendleton. I do not know if we have any Marines here but it has been my privilege and honor to serve these last 6 years and, you know, I can tell you when you get to Congress you have the opportunity to serve on a variety of different committees, a lot of the committees that you probably see on cable news, people screaming and yelling at each other, not really getting anything done, not being productive.

Your Congress member, Derek Van Orden, after his honorable service as a SEAL decided to continue that service in the House of Representatives and made a choice to be part of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, which is probably the last bastion of—you can call it nonpartisanship. You can call it camaraderie. You can call it, you know, actually trying to get something done for people rather than just point fingers and yell.

Sometimes we all point fingers at the VA. I am sorry about that. We do it—at least we do it in a bipartisan way, in a friendly way most of the time.

Look, we are making great progress and I am really hopeful that working with the chairman and working with my colleagues that the staff will continue to work in a very collaborative way as well to get major veterans legislation passed this year.

There is no reason we cannot do it. We have to prioritize it. We are making great progress as it pertains to veteran homelessness. I was very excited to work with VA, U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD), and Treasury a recent change, a very big rule for veterans who are on the brink of homelessness or have become homeless.

If you are—if you get disability compensation that used to be counted as income toward getting housing assistance. That is no longer the case. This is a very big deal.

The Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act is another very big deal, and as I was making the turn into La Crosse I saw a big old billboard for the PACT Act and wanted to ask the chairman how he pulled that off. I want one of those billboards in Oceanside, California.

I know that we are here to talk about TAP and I just want to agree with what the chairman said. There is no one size fits all for transitioning a service member. It simply does not work.

We have to individually tailor TAP for each service member's needs as best we can. I have had the honor to go and participate in the TAP classes at Camp Pendleton and they throw so much at our transitioning service members all at once in so many acronyms, so many programs.

They expect everybody to know everything after, you know, basically feeding it all to them. It is like cramming for an exam, right.

We have some bills that, hopefully, would help. There is one that I introduced called the Transition Improvement by Estimating Risk, or TIER Act, which will add new screening criteria to better understand the risk factors each transitioning service member faces.

It was passed in the House National Defense Authorization Act so we passed that in a bipartisan way but then it goes to the Senate and we know that—I see Senator Baldwin's staff here so I cannot say too many bad things about the Senate—but that is not always where good things get done. We need help with that.

Ranking Member Takano has the Ensuring Veterans Smooth Transition Act that would automatically enroll transitioning veterans into VA health care. I think that is a very good idea.

We have been, you know, working in a bipartisan way, non-partisan way, to address the problems with TAP and I think your Congress member is spot on in the desire for us to work together and to improve things. We have to. We are going to continue to do it and I hope we can get some stuff done this year.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I will yield back. Go Packers.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Now, he asked me, should you cheer for the Packers or the Vikings. Now you know we are working in a truly bipartisan manner because he would have opened up with—he would have opened up with a skull this would have been a—

Mr. LEVIN. I would have said Go Rams but nobody here would have liked that. They would not—throw me out of here.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Ranking Member Levin.

I will now introduce the witness panel. Our witnesses for the first panel are from the Department of Veterans Affairs—from the Department of Veterans Affairs include Mr. Duane Honeycutt, executive director of the Milwaukee VA regional office, who is accompanied by Mr. Nick Pamperin, executive director of Veterans Readiness and Employment (VR&E), and Ms. Melissa Cohen, executive director of outreach, transition and economics.

I would ask the individuals to please stand and raise their hands.

Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to provide is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

[Witnesses are sworn.]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you very much. The record will reflect that the witnesses have answered in the affirmative.

Please take your seat. In accordance with the Committee Rule 5(e) I ask unanimous consent that Representative Glenn Grothman from the great State of Wisconsin be permitted to participate in today's subcommittee hearing.

Hearing no objections, we will proceed.

Mr. Honeycutt, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony on behalf of the VA witnesses.

STATEMENT OF DUANE HONEYCUTT

Mr. HONEYCUTT. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss transitioning service members' experience with the Department of Veterans Affairs and the services and benefits available to them.

Accompanying me today is Melissa Cohen, executive director of outreach, transition and economic development, and Nick Pamperin, executive director of veteran readiness and employment.

Within VA our focus is on increasing transparency, improving collaboration, and keeping veterans at the center of everything we do. The VR&E benefit is truly one of the most life transformative programs for our veterans that VA has.

The Milwaukee VR&E division comprised of three VR&E out-based offices—Eau Claire, Green Bay and Madison—as well as the Vet Success on Campus program at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, the VR&E benefit is truly one of the most life transformative programs our veterans have.

At the Milwaukee VA regional office, or RO, we have focused on positive veteran outcomes, communication with our partners about VR&E benefits and outreach. Locational rehabilitation counselors have already achieved a positive outcome for 166 veterans this Fiscal Year of which 141 have received an employment outcome.

Of those 25 have reached maximum rehabilitation gain, which means the veteran participant has reached full employability potential based on the limitations of their disabilities.

Potential like Darren, a marine from Milwaukee who shared, "Peng, my VR&E counselor, guided me straight into a vocational field appropriate for my life experience. Her motivation pushed me to do better than I believed I could. I completed my degree and began a new construction safety manager career. My service-con-

nected disability had limited my future earning potential. Peng facilitated a plan for myself and my family to move forward.”

We cannot be fully successful without the support of our partners. The Milwaukee RO regularly provides training and monthly briefings to county veteran service officers and veteran service organization partners about all aspects of RO operations including VR&E.

In addition to assisting veterans who are actually seeking employment the Milwaukee RO collaborates with Federal, State, and county and city partners, and in this Fiscal Year the Milwaukee RO assisted veterans with job placement into 20 Federal, three State, three county, and six city positions.

We also want to ensure we are doing our best to outreach to veterans themselves. The Milwaukee VR&E division has taken a proactive role in presenting virtual meetings and events open to veterans throughout the State.

The VR&E division continues its active involvement with the Department of Workforce Development. In Fiscal Year 2024 we have had over 1,214 VR&E applicants, the most claims the VR&E division in Milwaukee has ever processed.

The Milwaukee RO maintains a strong outreach presence across the State of Wisconsin including to transitioning service members.

During Fiscal Year 2023 the RO participated in 14 Reserve and Guard outreach events and five thus far in Fiscal Year 2024, assisting veterans and transitioning service members at events such as resource fairs and Yellow Ribbon programs throughout the State.

I want to express my appreciation for your continued support and continue to improve our service to transitioning our Nation’s veterans, their families, their caregivers and survivors.

VA remains committed to increasing transparency and continued collaboration with you and our stakeholders.

Chairman, this concludes my statement. My colleagues and I would be happy to answer any questions to you or any other members of the subcommittee may have.

Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF DUANE HONEYCUTT APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields back.

The chair now recognizes Ms. Cohen for 5 minutes for her testimony, and the written testimony of Mr. Honeycutt will be entered into the hearing record.

Well, I guess we will not be doing that, Ms. Cohen. You guys all got together ahead of time. All right.

Well, I will now proceed to a question and ask the members and witnesses to please respect the 5-minute rule. Actually, I am not going to ask you. I am telling you. I am shutting the microphone off at 5 minutes. Sorry, that is the senior chief in me. Anyone in the Navy gets that.

I now recognize Ranking Member Levin for 5 minutes to question witnesses.

Mr. LEVIN. Well, thank you, Chairman. I got a readout of the annual VA military civilian transition summit and one thing that concerned me was that very little—at least as I understand, very little

was discussed about the Veteran Readiness and Employment, or VR&E, program.

This has been a underutilized program for my five-plus years in the Congress and I have been trying to figure out why that is and how we can improve.

I think the role that the program plays with service members transitioning out of the military due to an illness or injury is incredibly important. It provides something called IDES, Integrated Disability Evaluation System, counselors that can help transitioning service members with automatic enrollment. Again, I think that is important if they are being discharged due to illness or injury.

Mr. Honeycutt, how does the VA ensure awareness of the VR&E program and IDES counselors located on military installations?

Mr. HONEYCUTT. Thank you for that question. I believe Ms. Cohen would be able to provide a complete response.

Ms. COHEN. Thank you for the question.

We make transitioning service members, first and foremost, aware of VR&E in our TAP course. We have module four. It is within getting career ready. It is an 80-minute course.

Subsequent to that we provide one-on-one benefit advisor appointments. A new initiative we are starting is that you can—we show a Quick Response (QR) code during your TAP course so you can make the appointment right there during TAP so you can talk with a benefit advisor individually.

Also Solid Start. We are going to reach out to veterans three times in that first year and we stand ready to answer VR&E-related questions and to—we have access to what services they have accessed or not and can share VR&E information there.

We also have many military lifestyle modules as well so there are a myriad of avenues we try to make sure we do that. Last, too our outreach efforts—we do include it in our—in our outreach talking points.

Mr. LEVIN. Do you think that today VR&E is utilized effectively by transitioning service members? Are you satisfied with the rate with which VR&E is used?

Ms. COHEN. If I would, I would defer that to Mr. Pamperin with the VR&E program.

Mr. PAMPERIN. It is a great question, sir.

What I will tell you is we have seen record growth within VR&E, growth that we have never seen historically before. We are up over 45 percent in applications, over 38 percent in active participants. We are at over 160,000 veterans within our program.

Our program is not for every veteran. You do have to have that service-connected disability and an employment barrier. In my two and a half years in this program, when I first came on board we were hovering at around 117,000, 120,000. I think as part of outreach, as part of the PACT Act, part of all of the efforts that we have made, we have seen tremendous growth.

Mr. LEVIN. How many veterans, roughly, do you think could avail themselves of VR&E if they knew to sign up and, you know, were given the adequate information to do? What does that rough number look like? It is 160,000 out of how many?

Mr. PAMPERIN. Honestly, sir, I would have to take that one back for the record because it is a two-part process. You have got to have the service-connected and character of discharge for eligibility and then you are seen by a counselor and they are the ones who make that professional designation—is that—is there a barrier to your employment and things of that nature. I would be happy to—

Mr. LEVIN. I am encouraged to hear the spike, you know, 38 percent you said from a hundred—you said, roughly, 117,000 and 160,000 but, again, the question is out of how many and what I have heard is that it is a lot. You know, we are talking about several hundred thousand potentially that could, you know, take advantage of that program.

I guess the—I am encouraged to hear about a QR code—that is good. What else can you do differently? It sounds like things are improving. Obviously, with the PACT Act they are improving. What else can you do differently? What creative ideas or suggestions do you have?

Ms. COHEN. A few initiatives. We have launched—we have collaborated with U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) with our off-base transition training. We have done—

Mr. LEVIN. That was our bill. Appreciate that.

Ms. COHEN. Absolutely. That is another opportunity where we are messaging services. Also with our Solid Start—that is new too—is we are reaching out where they can schedule the call in advance, and while Solid Start already has a more than 70 percent connection rate we are finding that when people—when veterans can schedule that call in advance they are answering that call on the first instead of the third call and the length of the conversation we are finding is twice as long.

We continue to work every avenue we can to make sure we have that direct connect.

Mr. LEVIN. With the chairman's permission I will ask one more question. He is tough with his gavel, though. Or we can come back for a second round if you want.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Mike, please go ahead and we are going to extend your window here.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Of course, it is only because you rooted for the Packers.

[Laughter.]

Mr. LEVIN. The other program I wanted to ask you about is the Vet Success on Campus and the VSOC counselors. There are not enough of them. Lots of campuses do not have them.

I think I read here in the Milwaukee area you—or in the region, rather, you have one at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, but you do not have any in lots of other areas.

The question is how does your VR&E office manage what are supposed to be personalized career planning and Chapter 36 counseling requests at all these other campuses when you only have one counselor for this whole region. It is a big region. We are a long way from Milwaukee.

Mr. HONEYCUTT. Thank you for that question.

The determination of how many VSOCs we have in Wisconsin, unfortunately, is not made by me. It is determined nationally and I believe Mr. Pamperin could expound on that as to why.

Mr. PAMPERIN. Sure. Be happy to.

I know VSOC is requested at a lot of states and universities across the country. We do have a wait list of over—of about 300 universities that have requested them.

To your point, first, on the Chapter 36 portion, for any veteran who is seeking 36 services that does not have a VSOC we do have what—our Personalized Career Planning and Guidance Program (PCPG) contract that does provide that counseling service to those veterans on those campus for schools that have requested.

We have, unfortunately, been constrained by who we are allowed to hire for a VSOC. Right now, due to our record growth our first priority is to ensure that veterans are seen by a counselor. We do have that legislative requirement of one counselor per 125 veterans.

We recently added 342 Full-time Equivalent (FTE) to the VR&E program this year alone just to maintain that ratio. The VSOC counselors on campus provide an immense benefit to veterans and to military dependents and spouses on that campus but 76 percent of the work that they do is not VR&E related.

We are constrained by—we are required to hire that master's-educated counselor that has one of five degrees.

Makes it incredibly difficult to recruit and, respectfully, my first priority has to be getting those veterans that are in the 31 pipeline, that massive growth that we have seen, seen by a counselor.

That is where our primary focus has been.

Mr. LEVIN. Do you know if that—my last question—if that master's requirement is a statutory requirement or is that something that you have put in place via regulation?

Mr. PAMPERIN. It is statutory, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. We can—we will take that back. That is a very helpful feedback.

Mr. PAMPERIN. I would love to work with you and the committee on finding some relief so that we can potentially change that barrier that we have so that we could look to add more or provide, you know, the service to colleges.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you. Yield back. He is going to get this gavel.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman's time has expired. The chair now recognizes Hon. Glenn Grothman, my very good friend from the great State of Wisconsin, for 5 minutes.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Thank you. Okay. I would like to thank Congressman Van Orden for having this hearing.

You know, most of the Congress is—in August because we are not in Washington is kind of on break so I was very happy to see that Derek Van Orden was bringing a little bit of Congress here, and his office happens to be next to mine.

I can tell you for a freshman he already has developed a reputation for kind of, at least on the Republican side of the aisle, one of the two or three guys who is the go-to guy on veterans issues and I certainly—not having been in the military myself I certainly rely a great deal on Congressman Van Orden for how to handle veterans issues.

Now, a couple questions here. I was interested that you just told me that we have restrictions on who can become a counselor. Do you think those restrictions should be removed?

Mr. PAMPERIN. Sir, for clarification, the restrictions on the Vet Success on Campus counselor position?

Mr. GROTHMAN. Yes.

Mr. PAMPERIN. It is my opinion that they—those restrictions should be removed so that they can provide the general benefits VA assistance. Opens up the door for us to hire a whole different cadre than a small group of counselors.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Okay.

Next question. Congressman Van Orden led off by talking a little bit about the high suicide rate among veterans. Does any of you feel qualified to talk about the number of suicides and why they are going up?

I mean, we are certainly putting more and more money into counselors, which I guess proves that somebody who is putting money into a problem does not solve the problem. If you want to give us a shot as to why the number of suicides keeps going up anyway?

Mr. HONEYCUTT. Thank you for the question.

I could not really respond to that. I can tell you some—I can outline the training our employees have over the—at least at the regional office level to attempt to impact that in a positive way.

We have approximately 850 full time employees at the Milwaukee regional office. They are required to undergo annual training on suicide prevention which includes referrals to identifying if they—if they identify it a potential to refer to specialists a suicide crisis hotline in the hospital.

Our public-facing employees actually have training twice a year on this issue provided by Melissa's staff and I will let Melissa expound on that.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Okay. I will tell you which direction I am going.

First of all, if the number of suicides is going up is it greater than for the general population? Say, veterans who are in their 30's compared to the population as a whole in their 30's, are veterans committing suicide at a higher rate?

Ms. COHEN. I cannot speak to that specific question. I can tell you a little bit about some of the services within my area of responsibility that may help with the general topic if that is helpful for you.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Okay, sure. Well, do you know when a veteran commits suicide does it go into some sort of data bank somewhere where we can follow up and see what would have happened there?

Ms. COHEN. I do not have that particular portfolio. I cannot answer that question. I can tell you that DOD flags for us when there is a transitioning service member that has certain risk factors and we will reach out.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Yes. Does anybody have an answer to that question?

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I do, yes. Sorry, I recognize myself for—can we have a colloquy here?

Yes, Congressman Grothman, what happens is that the Veterans Affairs Administration catalogs this but they are—they are not cat-

along several different types of deaths of veterans including drug and alcohol overdoses and also accidents related to drug and alcohol overdose.

They are mischaracterizing the amount of veterans that are actually committing suicide. We have had multiple hearings about this in Congress and the issue is that they are not using different types of—they call them evidence-based treatment modalities.

We are going to have—as a matter of fact, I would like to invite you and you. In September we are going to have another hearing for nontraditional and nonevidence-based treatment modalities to prevent veteran suicide.

That is the long answer to your question. The short answer is yes.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Okay. Well, very good.

Do you find as the number of people you treat has gone up that the number of suicides has dropped, or what is the correlation between the number of veterans you touch and the number of disasters we have?

Mr. HONEYCUTT. Thank you for that question. I really do not believe that I would be able to answer that question. I think that would be better directed toward our Veterans Health Administration (VHA) counterparts.

Give you an example. You know, I said we have—in the regional office we have about 850 FTE. Only about 10 percent of those actually do face-to-face contact with veterans. The rest of them are actually, you know, doing other services, looking at—basically deciding claims, different things.

They may see flags within a claims file that there is a suicide potential and they do referrals or it is not unusual for the national call center, which is not in Milwaukee, to refer a call from a Wisconsin veteran that there is this flag for suicide potential or—and it goes through a protocol referral process to the hospital, to the suicide hotline, up and to include welfare checks. There is a whole litany of process there.

To your base question, I do not feel I would have the knowledge to answer it.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Okay. I guess my 5 minutes is up.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman's time has expired. Glenn, if you want to do a second we are here all day.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Okay.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The chair now recognizes himself for 5 minutes.

Yes, I just referred to myself in the third person. That is what you are supposed to do here in Congress. That is part of the problem.

Okay. How many vets do we have here again? Raise your hand. Okay. Keep your hand up if you know what VR&E is. Okay. That is actually more than I anticipated but it is about half.

That is an issue. If we have our veterans that do not even understand or know what this program is or that it exists that is the problem. You know, we got a big surge. We are getting 200 more vets a month because of the PACT Act and all that coming up.

We cannot forget about those who have served that are not going to go through TAP and it has been a consistent issue that I have had with the VA is that we do try to get things done for the now

retiring veterans but we cannot forget the people that made it so we are not conducting this hearing in German. You know what I mean?

We need to do a better job of getting this pushed out to the people that look like me and some of the other folks. I want to do a follow up with Mike's question and what I have noticed and I am sure that Mike—Mike was the chairman of this subcommittee the last Congress and I am sure that he has noticed that the Veterans Affairs Administration does a terrible job of framing a problem. Like, the problem is not framed well, and so what is your current budget now for this? VR&E—what is the current budget?

Mr. PAMPERIN. I believe our current budget is, to include expenditures, \$1.2 billion.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. \$1.2 billion-ish, right? Okay.

Are you sufficiently funded?

I know it is—never ask a government bureaucrat if they are sufficiently funded. You cannot see behind you but we can and everyone was, like—yes.

Mr. PAMPERIN. Right. Obviously, within our program, and I do want to just quick mention something about suicide. One thing that truly makes VR&E great is veterans in our program by our longitudinal study have higher rates of healthcare utilization. To your point—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. That is what we are trying to do.

Mr. PAMPERIN [continuing]. we need to make sure that we are funded for the staffing levels so that we have counselors to be able to serve veterans.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. Mike asked you a real specific question, how many folks are eligible for this, and you could not answer the question, which leads back to my original statement.

The Veterans Affairs Administration does a terrible job of framing a problem. You cannot tell me how much money you need for X amount of staff persons if you do not know how many staff persons you need because you do not know how many veterans need to be serviced.

You guys approach this—and it is not just you. I am not bagging on you specifically. You guys approach this thing the wrong way. You try to build this huge model. You do not understand what needs to take place.

Until you have an actual survey, until you have a census of the amount of veterans that are currently enrolled, the amount of veterans that can potentially be enrolled, you cannot reasonably ask us for the appropriate on money which it is our job to write the budget to give you the money if you do not have the data points required.

I really hope that when you leave here, because we will follow up, that we get the answer how many veterans are potentially or how many veterans can potentially be enrolled in this problem? It is not that hard. What is the disability rating, 30 percent?

Ms. COHEN. Ten.

Mr. Van Orden. Ten? It is 10 percent so a 10 percent rating, right, and then they have to have certain restrictions, right? You tie that directly to their diagnosis when they come out to get that rating.

It is really not that complicated. It just is not. I used this program to go to law school. I have used every single educational program from tuition assistance to VR&E. I have used the entire spectrum.

No one can snow the snowman. I know you guys are trying to do your best but we have to do a better job of framing these problems and we have to do a better job of educating the people sitting behind you, which leads me to this question.

What is your interface with our CVSOs, our county veteran service officers? What type of interface do you have with them? Is it a regular meeting? Is it a quarterly thing? Is it bimonthly? Is it a newsletter?

How do you guys interface with the troops on the front line which are our county veteran service officers?

Mr. HONEYCUTT. Thank you so much for that question.

I can tell you in the 10 years that I have been the director of the Milwaukee VA regional office I have a—I feel, and I will let them speak for themselves—I feel I have a very close relationship with our Wisconsin County Veterans Service Officer Association.

We have monthly conference calls. We have—twice a year they have their convention, which I am involved in speaking to. I will tell you where we can do better is we usually spend the majority time updating changes in the PACT Act, changes in benefit entitlement.

We have not spent as much time as I feel we should on VR&E type ancillary benefits and I will make you that commitment. We have a—we have a meeting coming up or a convention coming up in October. I will make that forefront of my interaction with our CVSOs.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Honeycutt, and we will check my schedule and if I am not in DC, I will be there. With that, my time has expired and, Congressman Grothman, do you want to do a second round of questioning?

Mr. GROTHMAN. Sure.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. We will do a second round of questioning. Ranking Member Levin, do you have any questions you would like to ask?

The chair now recognizes Hon. Glenn Grothman for 5 minutes.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Yes, I asked a couple questions about suicide before and, you know, when our veterans take their own life I hope that is something we are all—all realize what a catastrophe it is and what we are doing, and I am a little concerned maybe we are not getting the appropriate data we can.

I am going to throw out some questions. Maybe you do not know the answers. We all should know the answers. It is a concern that we do not. If we do not Congressman Van Orden is going to have hearings later, and maybe you know the type of things that I think Congress is looking for.

When you do find suicides, you know, percentage wise how many have had contact with the VA beforehand?

Mr. HONEYCUTT. Thank you for that question. I do not know that answer. What I will do is take back and interface with our VHA counterparts that would know that data and I can provide it for you.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Do we have to—the question is do we—do we have that data? Does somebody keep track of that?

Mr. HONEYCUTT. I am sure that is in VHA, yes, in the hospital side.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Okay. Next question is if someone does commit suicide do we have data on whether or not they received treatment for depression and do we have data as to whether that veteran was on any sort of medication?

Mr. HONEYCUTT. Thank you for the question. I believe that data exists. I will do every—make every attempt to get that for you.

Mr. GROTHMAN. I will tell the reason I am asking the question. Sometimes, because of Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) requirements, we are told that information we would like to have is not available. I do not even know whether you have the ability to get that information. If we, for example, find out that a veteran committed suicide do we have the capability of knowing whether or not that person was on medication or not?

Mr. HONEYCUTT. I am unable to answer that question. I apologize. I really do not—I really—I am not in a position to be able to speak to that.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Okay. I guess what I am getting to, if we are going to solve this problem we have to know certain answers, right? We cannot just throw money at the situation because you throw money at the situation you do not solve the problem, and if the treatment they are receiving is ineffective or poor we have got to know that.

We have got to know, you know, what is done, was this veteran flagged for potential problems, if—after he dies was he receiving counseling for depression within the VA? Was he receiving counseling for depression outside the VA?

Do you not think those are things that we ought to know if we are going to be serious about solving this problem?

Mr. HONEYCUTT. I do not disagree with you whatsoever, Congressman.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Okay. Any of the other two folks up there have a comment?

Ms. COHEN. I agree with Mr. Honeycutt that VHA does own, typically, the suicide portfolio. Under my purview I will just give you an example going back to Solid Start. This is—it is an initiative. When we understand someone has risk factors for suicide—the Department of Defense tells us that—we prioritize calling those veterans in that first year—that first transition year.

We will make up to 21 calls. For those three times we call seven times to make sure we make that connection. We have connected with 90,000 people since Solid Start has launched, 90,000 at-risk veterans to make sure that we connect them with all the resources we can, to the crisis line, and to make sure that we offer them support.

Mr. GROTHMAN. I will give you one more follow-up question on that.

Ms. COHEN. Please.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Of course, they can ask for help through the VA and I am sure many people ask for help outside the VA, and I am sure many people do not ask for any help at all.

My guess, though I do not know, is because of HIPAA requirements we may find it impossible to know whether or not people have received medication for problems or not or if that medication is effective because there are a lot of people out there more skeptical of medication and think maybe it is even counterproductive.

Do you think if you cannot get the answers to these questions that we should maybe put a hole in the HIPAA law to allow us to do research just to see how many veterans commit suicide, whether they were on antidepressants?

Ms. COHEN. I am sorry. I cannot speak to that specific HIPAA topic.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Okay. Well, okay. Well, thank you for allowing me to go over and—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman—

Mr. GROTHMAN. I will yield.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields.

Before we dismiss you guys I just want everyone in the audience to understand that Mr. Pamperin, Mr. Honeycutt, and Ms. Cohen are not dodging anything. This is not what you hear on TV. This is not the bureaucratic dodge.

What it does demonstrate is that the Veterans Affairs Administration has built itself on a series of pillars of excellence, or you know them as stovepipes, because there is part of the VHA, Glenn, that they do not even know this stuff.

They do not cross pollinate. It is because the Veterans Affairs Administration is the second largest bureaucracy on the planet, the first one being our own DOD.

I just want to be very clear with everybody here that these three folks are not dodging anything. They have been very forthcoming and—but it is great to demonstrate the fact that these would be great things to know if we do frame the problem and we kind of readjust ourselves.

It is not just—it is not pushing a veteran through to get an education. It is pushing a veteran through to make sure that they are alive to get the education and that once they get the education they become a productive member of society as a civilian just as they were a productive member of society as a member of the military.

I want to thank you guys very much. Are you driving back? Can you hang on for the second panel?

Mr. VAN ORDEN. You are all good? Okay. Well, with that, I want to thank you all and you are excused. I hope you will and you will be sticking around for the second panel. We will be in recess until we get ourselves set up here for the second panel.

[Recess.]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Take your seats, please. Take your seats, please.

In our second panel we have representatives from several local community organizations and student veterans: Mr. Joe Quackenboss—great name—veteran service officer from Trempealeau County; Mr. Dustin Schultz, a veteran specialist at Western Tech College; and Ms. Dana Luba, The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. (VFW) commander in Wisconsin.

Then we also have Ms. Kaytlyn Brown, student veteran from Western Tech—good morning, ma'am—and Mr. Adrian Moreno, a student veteran at the University of Wisconsin La Crosse.

I would like to welcome you all and please stand and raise your right hand.

Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to provide is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

[All witnesses answer in the affirmative.]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you very much. Let the record reflect that all witnesses have answered in affirmative. Please take your seats.

Mr. Quackenboss, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF JOE QUACKENBOSS

Mr. QUACKENBOSS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As a military veteran, transitioning from active duty to civilian life is a journey filled with both challenges and opportunities, especially when it comes to navigating the academic landscape.

My experience transitioning both on and off the school campus has been a mix of triumphs and tribulations but through it all I have identified key areas where support from various entities could significantly have enhanced the process for veterans like myself.

On campus one of the biggest hurdles I faced was adjusting to the academic environment. Coming from a structured military setting to the more independent and sometimes overwhelming nature of college classes was a significant shift.

Many veterans, myself included, could benefit from tailored orientation programs that not only introduce us to academic resources but also provide guidance on time management, study skills and access to tutoring services.

Furthermore, the Department of Veteran Affairs plays a crucial role in supporting veterans through educational benefits. While the GI bill offers valuable assistance the bureaucracy and delays in processing claims can be very frustrating and discouraging for a lot of veterans.

Streamlining the application process and the disbursement of funds process could alleviate a lot of stress and ensure that veterans receive the entitled benefits in a more timely manner.

In addition to institutional support, veteran service organizations like the American Legion, the different CVSOs, things like that, they provide valuable resources for veterans transitioning to civilian lifestyle

These organizations can offer a sense of camaraderie, something that a lot of us left behind, that peer support and access to valuable resources such as career counseling, networking opportunities and mental health services.

However, that greater collaboration between Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) and educational facilities I feel like needs to be enhanced to ensure veterans are aware and connected to the vital resources they have.

There is a gap between what even myself as a CVSO knows about the veteran benefits available for education and what there is for veterans when they step foot on campus.

Community members also play a very high role in supporting veterans during the transition. Many employers, for instance, can implement veteran hiring initiatives and provide mentorship programs to help veterans navigate within the community. This can help combat the stigma and create a more inclusive environment for reintegration of veterans.

In conclusion, the transition from military service to civilian life, particularly within the academic setting, is a complex process that requires support from multiple stakeholders.

By improving access to resources, streamlining bureaucratic—I am sorry, bureaucratic processes, fostering collaboration between institutions and organizations, and cultivating a supportive community environment we can enhance the transition for veterans to ensure they thrive in post-service endeavors.

Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOE QUACKENBOSS APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields back. Thank you, Mr. Quackenboss. The written statement of Mr. Quackenboss will be entered into the record.

Mr. Schultz, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF DUSTIN SCHULTZ

Mr. SCHULTZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

My name is Dustin Schultz. I am a veteran specialist for Western Technical College (WTC) and have been in my position for 3 years.

Prior to this role, I was a veteran service officer and a nonprofit director for a veteran mentorship program where we worked with our local veterans treatment court and justice involved veterans. Last, I am an honorably discharged U.S. Army veteran and served overseas during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

I will be providing remarks on the struggles I have witnessed as service members transition from the military.

Current programs like the Transition Assistance Program and the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program—TAP—are great tools for help and service members transition into education and employment.

However, senior leadership are often beyond this stage in their life. Officers already have a college degree and senior noncommissioned officers often elect to transfer their education benefit to their dependents.

Retiring senior leadership may choose not to return to the workforce at all. This is a disconnect between those providing these preventative services and the lower enlisted service members who do not share the same circumstance, and from my experience lower enlisted service members struggle to transition the most.

Veterans report that timing is a problem for the current transitional services. They see these programs as a series of checked boxes positioned between them and their release from the military.

This causes participation to be rushed. Service members are not honest about what issues they may have to deal with upon their return and do not foresee the challenges ahead of them.

Veterans report that these programs are provided at the end of their time in the military and do not allow much time to consider the challenges that they may face. I believe there should be more efforts to start the transitional services much earlier in their careers.

Service members are returning to a home where parents, a spouse, or other loved ones have taken on some of their responsibilities in their absence. They may struggle to find their role in the home, leading to relationship issues like divorce and thus compounding emotional, financial and social hardship.

Services should include the families who are critical to successful transition and help prevent those compounding issues.

Current service programs seem to lack follow up after leaving the military. This can leave the veteran feeling discarded and devalued. Coordination with other services and programs is lacking. There are thousands of nonprofit organizations that can help.

Services or support that is not specific to veterans are often overlooked. For example, we have veterans that are not aware that they can utilize the free application for Federal student aid, FAFSA.

I believe the case management approach that is proactively assessing the service members and their families as they transition back into the civilian life would be helpful. Incorporate all effective forms of support such as faith-based programs, peer support, and others that are personalized to the individual.

Exit services could be provided by a reintegration counselor similar to that of the Veteran Readiness and Employment program Chapter 31 who can assist the service member and connect them to the appropriate resources.

Veterans who die by suicide are alarming figures but they often do not include those who die of accidental death due to things like poor decision-making, recklessness, or unintentional drug overdoses.

The service member does not know how they will handle the freedoms of civilian life until they experience it. I feel there should be an additional emphasis on making good decisions and minimizing risky behavior.

Last, education benefits are a major reason many decide to join the military and often the first endeavor for a service member after they transition.

A common issue people report is the financial instability due to prorated housing payments. For instance, if a student begins spring term January 8 the VA will prorate their monthly housing stipend and reduce their housing payment.

When the term ends the payment is again prorated excluding days at the end of the month that the student is not enrolled.

I believe these inconsistent housing payments cause unnecessary hardship to students, student veterans, and their families.

Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF DUSTIN SCHULTZ APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Schultz.

I just want to say something. I know the three of you pretty well and I told Mike the first time I ever met Dustin he gave me the razz, like, what are you doing? I mean, like, hardcore.

I was—and I told him what we are doing, and we have talked repeatedly and I really like the initial adversarial approach that you have taken and by your testimony here you have shown you actually know what you are talking about, as do you, Mr. Quackenboss, obviously.

Then, Ms. Luba, I would like to let everyone to know that this is my Veterans of Foreign Wars post commander. Thank you for coming today, Commander.

We are both members of Legion Post 1530 here in La Crosse and you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony, Ms. Commander.

STATEMENT OF DANIELLE LUBA

Ms. LUBA. Thank you.

House of Representatives, Committee on Veteran Affairs and Congressman Van Orden, thank you for the opportunity to let me speak on my behalf regarding my transition from the military to my civilian life.

I would first like to explain that I am an almost 17-year veteran of the world's greatest Air Force. Most of my career has been as an Air National Guard member. I have always worn two hats, my military cover and my civilian cover. They both coexist with one another.

My transition to using my educational benefits was a challenge for myself. For most of your entire young life into adulthood it is controlled by somebody else. They help you to make decisions of your day to day.

When you join the military, you are shifting it from a family member's job to help you decide to the military making those decisions for you. They set your day for you based on what is best for the mission.

When I was given the opportunity post training I immediately enrolled into Western Technical College. I had no idea what I was doing. I just kept hearing this is your opportunity—take it and run with it, and in the ideal world of knowing exactly what you want that would have worked out perfectly.

I spent 2 years using my GI bill for a career that I do not think I ever wanted. I then proceeded to continue to use it at a 4-year university with the same outcome. It was not until my first deployment in 2012 that I had time to sit and think in a once again extremely structured environment that I found what my forever idea was.

After I returned I continued to another 4-year school and completed my bachelor's degree. One of the main benefits that the military will use as a recruiting tool is your school is paid for and that statement is correct if you have the proper guidance to ensure that it is used correctly.

Here I sit, an almost 17-year veteran with over \$30,000 in student loan debt. I am very grateful for the opportunity to serve my country and do what I am doing but it would have been nice to have better guidance when I was younger.

They always say once you get older you will understand. I now fully understand the need for proper assistance when someone is beginning the chapter for their educational benefits.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars support the efforts to making veterans' transition a smoother process and assisting them in all ways. Veterans have given their worlds to ensure ours and to be able to help them now should be everyone's goal.

I would like to thank you for your time and listening to my experience.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF DANIELLE LUBA APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentlelady yields back.

Ms. Brown, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF KAYTLYN BROWN

Ms. BROWN. I would like to thank you all for this opportunity to come here and speak to you guys about my experiences.

My name is Kaytlyn Brown. I served in the United States Navy from November 2014 to September 2023. I opted to do the in-person TAP class on board Naval Station Norfolk and I personally did not find the week-long class to be beneficial.

Day one when I showed up on the desks were stack of books containing everything and anything, and we had what basically a lot of us in the Navy love to call death by PowerPoint.

Basically, it skimmed over. We did have some guest speakers come in and they just regurgitated what was on the PowerPoints and were not actually able to answer any of the questions that myself and my fellow military members had, and it is still the same for my friends who are going through TAP class currently because I did ask them about that.

Sorry, I have a lot of anxiety.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Ms. Brown, you have all the time you need.

Ms. BROWN. Then just going into my transition experience through my last command, which was mid-Atlantic Regional Maintenance Center in Norfolk, I did not have a lot of help from them. They just kind of do the usual, hey, you are transitioning out. You are separating. We do not really want to deal with you.

They just do not like to help you. I had a, I do believe, a 4-month out-serve, so a lot of my stuff on the tail end of my contract did not show up when I actually had to file my separation paperwork.

I had to actually beg another E7 to argue my leave chit for me so I can take leave from July to September to finish out my end of contract here at home and, thankfully, he took pity on me and did go argue with the higher ups and the officers and be, like, hey, you know this is her case.

She has everything. You know, she did the math. She has all the paperwork to show you that she has these days of leave occurred to take this full amount even though it does not actually reflect in our web pages.

Then my next biggest issue was dealing with my household good moves. I had to go through the Suddath moving company and about a couple months after I got home, you know, I had a couple

months left to actually file all my paperwork and they changed the entire system.

I did not have numbers I needed to actually enter in and to try and get paid for stuff they damaged like my washing machine. It looks like it fell down the highway. Still works somehow but it looks horrible.

You know, they managed to break a couple—a TV, a couple other odds and ends and I am just, like, this is kind of fantastic that I cannot get reimbursed because you guys changed everything.

You know, it is just a lot of these service members, you know, myself, I do not know about them but a lot of our issues stem directly while we are still in the military trying to actually get out, prepare ourselves, and we are not getting the adequate help or support even from our last commands.

You know, I have seen it across every single command I have been at. I first served on U.S. Stout DDG-55. Those people separating they had issues there. Then I next served on USS Gerald R. Ford CVN-78—still had issues. 27 Merrimack they did get a little bit better but still a lot of issues with these separating service members, and I find it extremely disappointing, especially after myself being a child of an Army veteran and Air Force veteran.

I watched both my parents struggle and now I understand that struggle and I find it still disappointing, you know, 20 years later it is still happening.

Thank you for your time.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF KAYTLYN BROWN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentlelady yields back.

Ms. Brown, thank you very much for coming. I will talk to you later.

Mr. Moreno, the chair now recognizes you for 5 minutes to deliver your testimony.

STATEMENT OF ADRIAN MORENO

Mr. MORENO. All right. Good morning.

Thank you, Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee of Economic Opportunity for allowing me to testify today on the critical issue of the transition experience for veterans like us going into—going on and off campus.

My name is Adrian Miguel Marino. I am a senior here at the University of Wisconsin La Crosse. I am the leader of—sorry, president of the prelaw society here as well as the philosophy club.

Outside of that, I have done youth sports coaching as a volunteer for the past four or 5 years since I have been here. Before this I served in the Mississippi National Guard straight out of high school and after that the Wisconsin National Guard and worked for the State of Wisconsin in a civilian capacity for my last two or three remaining years serving with the Guard.

I come before you today as a person of Hispanic descent, a person of color, as well as a veteran to express concerns on behalf of those who are accustomed to being underrepresented.

I come before all you today because our service members face a unique battle transitioning into life as students. It is crucial that

we as a society through our institutions provide comprehensive support to these veterans to ensure their transition.

Transitioning service members, particularly those who are first-generation students like myself, often lack proper academic guidance despite never even having stepped foot on a college campus.

While veterans undoubtedly possess valuable skills such as adaptability and resilience, these alone are not nearly sufficient enough to sustain academic performance. The result can often be discouragement, isolation, and abandonment of educational goals.

In my own experience, transitioning from the military service to civilian life and academia was a process of trial and error. I found myself job hopping, trying to find a role that suited my skills and interest.

This period was challenging and very often discouraging. The need that I had for structured guidance and support went consistently unmet and because of that to say that I struggled immensely would be an understatement.

Good, distinguished members of the committee, we need to equip veterans with tools and resources to explore different career paths and understand how their skills can translate into these civilian roles and not just speak about them.

I have personally experienced these difficulties and was fortunate enough to meet civilians who provided crucial support, not because I was a veteran but just because they saw how hard I was working to even stay on campus day in and day out.

Unfortunately, many service members do not have the same experience. To address this issue I propose that we empower our service members with the same level of interest and guidance that the universities here offer first-year students.

Specifically, I recommend the introduction of first-year experience courses tailored for veteran students. I also advocate for institutions to provide and promote career advising and skill translation services.

These measures can help veterans translate their military skills into academic and civilian settings, fostering a smoother and more successful transition.

In support of these proposed solutions research often shows that the most significant barrier to pursuing a college degree after service is that we are often outliers in the classroom.

Everything that we know is from personal endeavors and not from structured guidance. A first-year experience course tailored for veterans could help them navigate their classes and on college campuses manage their time more effectively and understand the resources available to them.

Such a course could also provide a supportive community either for or comprised of veterans to prevent many of these feelings of isolation and, more importantly, prevent many avoidable failures.

In conclusion, we must provide comprehensive support to these veterans transitioning into civilian life and academia. Again, I recommend the introduction of a first-year experience course tailored for veteran students and the promotion of career advising and skilled translation services.

While the parking spaces are great, a little guidance can go a very long way and these measures can provide veterans with just

that, allowing them to translate their military skills into academic and civilian roles to lead society, not just be a part of it.

I come to you today in a very privileged position to talk about something that is very personal to me—my failures, not my victories—because I had the right people that helped me just in time to get through here, and like one of our service members here, despite having the support I am in \$30,000-plus of debt and I am not even through graduate school and I plan on going to law school after this.

I am willing to answer any questions that you have about these recommendations. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on this important issue.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF ADRIAN MORENO APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Thank you, Mr. Moreno.

Before we get into questions I just got to tell you we are different. We are different. Brown, Luba, Schultz, Quackenboss, Moreno, me, the rest of the screwballs behind you—we are just different, and I think that that makes us unique and we have the ability to tell these younger people that have rolled out of high school and what the world really looks like, and they get to see commitment and they get to get inspired by your experiences.

Nothing is ever going to make you a civilian again and there is good and bad with that, but I appreciate it and I will get to more of you in question. Thank you for your testimony.

All of the witnesses' testimonies will be entered into the official record. I now recognize Ranking Member Levin for 5 minutes. Apparently it is 8 minutes today. I do not know what is happening.

Mr. LEVIN. This is unusual for him.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. It is crazy.

Mr. LEVIN. I want to thank everybody just for their exceptionally good testimony. You know, we do hearings all the time and everybody was heartfelt and on point and I am very grateful for it.

I want to thank our CVSOs, really, you know, across the country. San Diego—they are huge the work that they do. We have a bill—I think you know about this—but with Cathy McMorris Rodgers, Brad Finstad, and myself called the CVSO Act to help provide some funds your way. County VSOs are spread thin and we are very grateful for the work you are doing.

Mr. Schultz, I want to thank you for the comments particularly about junior enlisted service members. Back home seeing our junior enlisted Marines at Camp Pendleton what they are dealing with on a daily basis, you know, we tried—in fact, in the National Defense Authorization Act we got a 20 percent pay increase for junior enlisted service members and, again, it went to the Senate—I am looking at you over there—and, you know, unfortunately, we could not get it across the finish line and there was actually pushback from the administration saying, well, we do not want too much compression between the junior enlisted and everybody else.

You know, what do I say to my junior enlisted Marines who can barely make ends meet living in a place like San Diego, California? It is just ridiculous.

I very much appreciate your comments.

Commander, thank you, and by the way, thank you to the VFW again everywhere for all that you are doing. I want to—I am going to come back to you but I want to start with the students. Both of you spoke so articulately and you offered some good suggestions.

My question for you is if you were in our shoes and you could make changes—legal changes—to the way TAP works what would you do if you were in our shoes, if you had that opportunity? I will start with you, since you are going to law school.

Mr. MORENO. Let us hope I make it, huh?

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Oh, you are going to make it. You are going to make it.

Mr. MORENO. I personally did not even know about TAP going in. I did not know, frankly, about anything. It was more just like Ms. Brown says, hey, congrats. You are out. Take advantage of the opportunity. You know, beat it.

I personally would—you know, I agree with the death by PowerPoint. The courses just, frankly, do not do much outside of I checked that box—let me get out of here because clearly they want me out of here.

On campus for these freshmen they make them go to mandatory Eagle fest, student involvement, and even though most of them do not care some of them do. They get the opportunity to at least see this stuff in front of them.

They get to see it in action. They get to see people just as enthused as them about the opportunity to go to school and if they do not know it is fine because most people do not, frankly, know what they want to do for the rest of their lives by the time they are 20 anyways.

This should not be an obstacle to success and I feel as though a first-year course that assists these freshmen greatly and at least ensuring that they are not going way off course while trying to achieve academic goals would definitely help a lot more.

Making it a mandatory thing for first-years. I just know that making the veterans office in—on campuses easier to find would be helpful as well. It always feels like a scavenger hunt trying to find wherever a VA is.

Mr. LEVIN. Great suggestions. I will ask you the same question.

Ms. BROWN. Honestly, I think that the TAP program it has the correct intentions but how it manifests is not there.

I think instead of it being a week-long course that it needs to be expanded so you can actually go in depth and make sure that everyone that is going through the program actually understands what is being presented to them because, you know, death by PowerPoint they are just like, okay, here in speed talk for about 15 to 20 minutes and then they are, like, okay, see you. Bye.

It is not beneficial for everyone. We are just—it goes in one ear and completely out the other side. I think it would greatly benefit from being lengthened. You know, by that time most commands are like, okay, well, you know, we know you are on the out. You need to do this class. We think it should be longer and they are already preparing to essentially replace you anyways. So—

Mr. LEVIN. We are—so Jodey Arrington, who is a good friend from Texas—he is now chairman of the Budget Committee—he and

I passed a bill that is now law for this off-base transition pilot and the idea is to try to do some of what you are saying.

We have not really seen the results and, frankly, our friends are still here from VA—it took, like, 3 years to get the thing going. We have had—that sometimes happens, too. We will pass a law and then we will say, okay, now we—you know, now we are good and then it takes 3 years for them—two, three, four—just to get the thing running.

There are some things happening. I just really want to thank you both, and I will end with you, Commander.

I guess what are you hearing from your new members

—you know, your new transitioning service members, you know, who are, you know, in my experience looking to serve in a different capacity, looking to just figure it out. What are you hearing?

Ms. LUBA. That is kind of the problem with the VFW. Now, we are trying to reshift our image. It used to be a good old boys club and it was all the men that would go to the bar and hang out with their friends, and really what we are trying to do now is we are trying to shift it.

I would say Dustin and I are the youngest members there by 30 years. No offense if any of them are listening to me but it is true. No, you are there—you are there.

[Laughter.]

Mr. LEVIN. I am right here. I am literally sitting in front of you.

Ms. LUBA. The thing is we are trying to shift that. One thing that I have worked with Dustin is reintegrating our scholarship program and so we get them out to Viterbo, to TC, and to UW Well and we try to get veterans that are qualified for the VFW with their DD-214s if they submit a letter, and it can be on any topic, really. We do not really pick it but we want to know why this would be beneficial. That is how we got Dustin in the VFW is he did the scholarship and he has been stuck ever since and he cannot leave now.

You know, the other things that we try to do is we try to get out into the community a little bit more. I try to make sure that I try to be at as many things as I can because I am younger by 30 years. Somebody will see me there and they will see a woman that is commander because the VFW was not always the most kind to females especially.

In the State of Wisconsin we started a female committee—a female veteran committee that we are trying to work with all the VFWs to get questions out there. Do you feel welcomed at your VFW? Do you feel like you are heard at your VFW? Then from there we just keep pushing forward.

Mr. LEVIN. Well, I am out of time but I commend you for doing that. I encourage you all, you know, think of creative ideas and suggestions for us.

I know you have a very receptive Member of Congress right here and, you know, we need your ideas. We need your input, and I am just grateful to you all for your service and for your testimony today. This was outstanding.

Thank you.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Does the gentleman yield?

Mr. LEVIN. I do.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields.

The chair now recognizes Hon. Glenn Grothman from the great State of Wisconsin for 5 minutes.

Mr. GROTHMAN. A couple questions. I have an idea of doing something.

I get around to a lot of the employers in my district, particularly the manufacturers. They almost routinely tell me that we have too many people getting 4-year degrees out there and they are not getting a lot of value out of them.

Do you think it would be beneficial to give veterans an option when they leave the service, and some people could take the GI Bill and other people could take, you know, just, say, a down payment on a house which would help you in another part of your life, given that I think it is almost universally acknowledged among people we probably have too many 4-year degrees out there today?

Mr. MORENO. While I am not in a position to be buying a house anytime soon, I found that my struggle often was off campus, if this helps.

Most of the time when I was not able to show up for class or I was not able to complete work was that, to be frank, sir, most employers are a little discouraged and when they see National Guard even at the—you are still serving they are a bit less inclined, at least outwardly, to—or inwardly, I am sorry—to hire because now they have to accommodate for you being out at drill.

I do not say this as a suspicion. I say this because I know and been told this by an employer that picked me up. Like, I kind of was a little nervous about hiring you at first because of this and this and this and that.

I do not know if the issue is a lack of funding because I always hear about so many programs that the program—that are out there it is just what do you do when you get out.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Well, you see my point. I mean, right now—I will say we do not talk veterans for 1 second

—in society as a whole I again and again hear from employers that they wish they had people get a skill than get a 4-year marketing degree or something and I thought about that with regard to the veterans. I mean, the GI Bill has been a long time. We should never get rid of the GI Bill.

I wondered if, you know, perhaps there are veterans out there who would be better off with a cash stipend that they can use to help them in life rather than a 4-year degree when we at least, according to the employers in my district, we probably have more than enough of.

You do not have an opinion on that. Your mind is a blank.

Ms. LUBA. A benefit to the Air Force is while you are in you can get your CCAF, your Community College of the Air Force degree. It is a 2-year degree that comes through your training.

I have obtained that but, again, when you are a young airman or a young enlisted you are told to take those education benefits and go with them. That is—the number-one perk that the military uses as recruiting is your college is paid for.

I think trying to change the mindset in a young adult thinking that, you know, your push toward education, trying to change it more into a skill, I think that is happening. Like, TC does that

with their 2-year degree, you know, and that is more hands-on based and it is not a 4-year degree, but that still would be paid for by their GI Bill. It is still beneficial.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Correct.

Yes, Ms. Brown.

Ms. BROWN. I do believe Mr. Van Orden would have a better understanding on how the Navy works, obviously. The Navy does not like to actually give us any type of degrees.

We will maybe get a couple semester credits and that is about it. Whereas, you know, my job in the Navy I was a hull maintenance technician. I was a welder and plumber.

I do not even have—you know, with my almost 9 years of experience I do not even have a full degree just even for welding or even qualify for a journeyman unless I actually go through and manually log every single hour I have done through a MAPS program.

If we could actually change it so those schools would actually give us an actual degree we would have more technical diplomas and more skilled trades out in the world.

Most of us that want to go into jobs that are well paying we do not have access to that and we would have to go through school just to get those qualifications we already have and a lot of us consider it a complete waste of time. Thank you.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Okay. I will make one other comment. You talked about a stigma. Usually when I associate veterans looking for a job it is uniformly a positive, okay. I have hired veterans in my office. I can tell you it jumps off the page if you are a veteran.

I am not sure I would spend a lot of time talking about a stigma because if there is a stigma it has got to be a tiny segment of the population that has a stigma on hiring veterans.

I think everybody that I know would consider a person who is a veteran it is a positive in hiring them and just

—that is just a little comment.

I guess I am over my time. Thank you for giving me an extra 12 seconds.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Does the gentleman yield?

Mr. GROTHMAN. I yield.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields back.

Mr. Moreno was referring to being a National Guardsman where you have to—you are continuing working. You are correct.

Oh, sorry, the chair now recognizes himself for 5 minutes.

Right. Glenn, that is what he was talking about. As opposed to being like a straight up veteran I am no longer serving I am now still in the National Guard and at some point, you are going to have to go do drill and then deploy. I got you. Check.

Mr. Quackenboss, Mr. Honeycutt was here and he said that you guys have pretty good communications. Is that, in fact, a true statement from their perspective, sir? It is?

Mr. QUACKENBOSS. That is absolutely a good statement.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay.

Mr. QUACKENBOSS. Monthly we sit in our meetings together. Not only that but we also have been stepping into more of the case management as well where VA will ask community members like CVSOs what cases do you want to bring forward—what is going on in your area.

I sat in on a couple of those even just last week that were absolutely fantastic, just going through the names of veterans who—in our community who needed assistance or who had applied for something—there was an issue.

Well, how can VA help? Who do we need to get in contact with who would help them? Being able to sit in on those, being a community member, being a CVSO, and being able to touch each of those veterans in those ways and being able to move forward and say, hey, we were able to get in touch with VA. VA is going to reach out to you. That is the best part.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Roger that. Okay. Why that is so important is Trempealeau County is on the opposite side of the State of Milwaukee. To bring that up to you, Mike, that is an excellent thing to hear.

Mr. Schultz, you nailed it. There is a massive disparity between the officer and enlisted ranks. There simply are. Mike said this. It was actually, I think, 23 percent increase that we had written into the—our bill from the House.

Then the administration—the current administration—did not want to do that, which, to me, is fantastically stupid, and then it did not get through the Senate. Sorry, if we could talk to Tammy about that I would appreciate that.

Right now how many QuikTrips are within a mile radius here? The answer is 50, right. You can go to a QuikTrip right now as a 17-year-old, sign up for QuikTrip. You are going to get paid more, your benefits are going to be equal, and you do not have to leave your family and no one is shooting at you unless you are getting robbed.

Okay. Compare that to a junior enlisted person in the military and it is not right.

I was part of a task force. We are trying to fix this. That is where it came out of. We have got a lot of really very serious veterans who have walked this walk in Congress or like Mr. Garcia from California 25 he was an officer but he gets it because he is connected with his enlisted folks and he sees that we struggled.

My wife and I were using WIC. You guys know what that is—Women, Infants and Children—to buy milk for our kids when I am getting shot at overseas fighting al-Qaeda. That is not okay.

Thank you for pointing that out.

Ms. Luba, we are working on it—oh, sorry, Commander. We want people to have a better understanding of what they are trying to enter into in a second career and the problem is the Department of Defense.

That is—I was referencing that directly in my opening statement. The Department of Defense is the problem, and they think that if we set up a smooth transition and a good off ramp for active duty military people that people are going to get out of the military and that has been proven wrong by my fellow Navy SEALs.

Naval Special Warfare started this transition assistance—the TAP program—and it is a 24-month thing that starts 2 years before you are getting out of the service, to address Ms. Brown's concern, and there was no increase of Navy SEALs getting out of the military because they had an understanding of what they are going to do when they got out.

That is a fallacy and it is wrong, and I have spoken directly to the secretary via letter. I will say it again right now. If you are Lloyd Austin—Secretary Austin, if you are listening, your people are not doing what is right for our service members because eventually they are going to become veterans, and I was looking into the camera on purpose. There you are.

Ms. Brown, you have shown incredible courage today and I see how stressful this is to get up here and I am telling you the old crusty, salty senior chief that probably uses inappropriate language too often is telling you I am proud of you.

There is no way in hell you should ever have to go to a chief outside your division to advocate for you and that is the problem I am talking about. Okay.

I was a command career counselor for two different commands and I told every one of my guys, all my frogmen, if you are thinking about getting out of the military I am the only person you are going to tell.

Do not tell anybody, and I helped set them up, get everything aligned for them. Guess what? I had a 100 percent retention rate because I showed those people I actually cared about them wearing the uniform and not.

We have to get over this culture of you are a piece of trash when you no longer can be in the service. There is a man sitting behind you who is a National Guardsman for the Minnesota National Guard that when he got out they just threw him out like he is garbage. Served his country and his unit. He is no longer welcome. Door is closed. Am I paraphrasing—that is accurate, sir?

Okay, so check me out. That is not okay. You go into my office all the service seals are on the wall. You know what is the far right, right there? You know what that is? It is the Wisconsin National Guard. I hold them at the same level of reverence that I do all of our active duty servicemen and women.

There is 50 Pennsylvania National Guardsmen that are directly responsible for me being alive today because they protected me and my platoon in Iraq. I know half the room wished they were not there but the other half does.

Our National Guardsmen and women are doing the job and we have introduced bills together to make sure that we get parity in educational benefits and many things across the board because we respect your service tremendously.

I am sorry that you were treated that way, sir, in Minnesota. At least you are now on the right side of the river. That is all I am going to say.

[Laughter.]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Mr. Moreno, it is an excellent idea but it is too late. By the time a student enrolls in a college it is too late because you are going to run into what the commander is talking about here.

They are going to get involved in a program. They are going to think it is what they want to do. They are going to get 6 months or a year into it and then they have blown a year of their GI Bill.

That is why the Department of Defense has to get off their ass and realize that we are here for the full life cycle of the sailor, Ma-

rine, soldier, airmen. That is from the time you join the military to the time you are done and past that. That is a life cycle.

What I would like to do is incorporate, because what you are talking about is very smart, but take the actual programs from the universities that our young servicemen and women are going to go to and inject that into the cycle when they are still active duty because then by the time they show up they are going to go through the rest of the matriculation process at the college but they have an 80 percent chance of getting the right degree to begin with.

Here is the—here is the problem that we are working at. Ms. Brown, this will—this speaks directly to you because that has not changed since I was in the Navy and, you know, ships were made of wood and men were steel. Now—that is an old Navy joke because I am an old Navy guy. Has not changed and this is why.

Naval officers and Army officers—our officer corps—is not held accountable. They are not held accountable for their troops or their sailors or their airmen for not going through these programs. They are not held accountable for the follow-on. They are just not.

I have proposed, and I have spoken to some of my other Democrat colleagues, making this a block on a Fitness Report (FITREP). That is what they call it in the Navy—it is a Officer Evaluation Report (OER) in the Army—and it specifically states how many of their troops have not gone through this program, and they get docked and they do not get promoted and that is the only way this is going to change is holding our officer corps accountable for not taking care of their sailors.

That is it. That is the real answer. Skip to the end. Mr. Grothman, do you have any more questions you would like to ask?

Mr. GROTHMAN. No. I would just say you put together a great—

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Well, I will get to you then. I just want to make sure you did not want to do a second panel, and we will do closing statements.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Okay. No.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Do you have any more?

Mr. LEVIN. No, sir.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. Okay. With that, I would like to recognize the ranking member for any closing statement he would like to make.

Mr. LEVIN. Well, I want to thank the chairman for his leadership on our committee this Congress, and as has been said for a freshmen he knows an awful lot and he is very dedicated and passionate about serving you all and I hope you know that.

I can tell you it is my great honor to get to serve on this committee as well. When I got to Congress I did not know it would be the most rewarding work that I did but it is by a lot.

We actually—despite maybe some of the delays we actually see the fruit of our labor a lot quicker and a lot more directly than you see, again, in virtually any other committee in the Congress and I hope it will always stay that way.

You know, we have an opportunity here. We are getting very close to the election. It is silly season, right, in political speak, and it gets harder and harder to get things done in Washington before an election.

Whether it is before the election or before the end of the year in what they call the lame duck session we have, I believe, a moral obligation to get a veterans package done for this Congress and I have got a couple bills in there including the CVSO Act, including the Get Rewarding Outdoor Work for our Veterans (GROW) Act, which is a bill that will hopefully get lots and lots of veterans employed at the Department of Interior in conservation jobs across the country. That is something that is very important to me as well.

We have got to get it done. We have got to work together and I thank the chairman and I thank Representative Grothman for their work in this regard.

I yield back.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields back.

The chair now recognizes Hon. Glenn Grothman for any closing statement he may wish to make.

Mr. GROTHMAN. I would just like to thank you for putting together these great panels. I think we learned a lot today.

I think we learned there is some more questions we want to have answered in the future, particularly with regard to the cause or what we can do about suicide.

You know, one more time I learned a little bit more about the veterans' situation from Congressman Van Orden and, again, I would like to thank all you folks for taking time out of your busy days to come down here and educate us a little bit.

Mr. VAN ORDEN. The gentleman yields back.

Well, thank you very much, everybody, for coming. I got to tell you I hope everybody noticed a couple things that happened today that you are never going to see in the press.

You are never going to see members of the veterans community writ large openly praising the Veterans Affairs Administration. You just do not see that.

They are the easiest can to kick around, and I want you to understand that there are a tremendous amount of professionals at the VA that are trying very, very hard to get things done and you saw that witnessed today, which is fantastic.

From the health care side of the VA I get all my healthcare through the VA, including these awesome glasses.

[Laughter.]

Mr. VAN ORDEN. I get seen here in La Crosse and at Tomah and I am very, very proud of them. Is anybody here from the health side today? Okay. Thank you, ma'am. Oh, hey, what is up?

Listen, I am very, very proud of them and people need to understand that, that there are—the Veterans Administration there is a lot of people that are trying to do what is best.

Unfortunately, the higher you get up the more convoluted it gets and people start protecting institutional equities and not the veterans. That does not happen here in La Crosse and it does not happen over in Tomah either for whatever you have heard.

I just want to be crystal clear that I am exceptionally proud of our people that work at the VA in particular in the health care side because, I mean, look at me. Spring chicken right here.

You guys are a key component, especially our VSOs and our CVSOs. We have to be able to sit across the table and if that has to be at the bar across the street or if it is an office in a county

building, and look each other in the eye because then we are going to know if something is okay or something is wrong.

Every single person here that has managed a single troop can look at a sailor or a soldier, an airman or a Marine in the eye for a millisecond and go, hey, dude or gal, sit down, get a cup of coffee and tell me what is going on.

Without a direct connection from the VFW, from the American Legion, Disabled Veterans of America, and all these groups, and without our CVSOs we are going to keep having a problem with our veterans committing suicide because they are disconnected.

I want you to walk away, and I kind of thought we are going to yell at people because I am good at that—I want you to walk away today understanding that there are people in the Federal Government that are trying to help and I also want you to walk away with the complete understanding that we know that we fall short a lot and we recognize that.

With that said, I want to thank Ranking Member Levin for coming out from the great State of California. I want to thank Congressman Grothman from coming out from the even greater State of Wisconsin and for everybody here that has come out.

With that—sorry, I have to say some more magic words. Here they are.

I ask unanimous consent that all members may have five legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous materials. Without objection so ordered.

This hearing is now adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:48 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENTS OF WITNESSES

Prepared Statement of Duane Honeycutt

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the transitioning Service members' experience with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the services and benefits available to them. Accompanying me today is Melissa Cohen, Executive Director, Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development, and Nick Pamperin, Executive Director, Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Service. 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.

Transition Support

Transition Assistance Program

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

As part of TAP, VA works to inform transitioning Service members of the education and training benefits available to them. Specifically for the VR&E benefit, Module 4 (titled "Getting Career Ready"), presented during the mandatory VA Benefits and Services course, provides a comprehensive overview of VR&E and education benefits, and discusses how to apply for VR&E services online, by mail, and in person.

Further, the VA Education Benefits Military Life Cycle (MLC) module enables VA to connect with Service members well before transition so they can gain an early understanding of their benefits and plan for their futures. This module also overviews VA education benefits and the VR&E Program. The Online Resource Guide provides VA.gov links to apply for VR&E directly.

VA Benefits and Services course and the VA Education Benefits MLC Module also provide information about the GI Bill Comparison Tool. This tool enables Service members to research approved schools and employers. Moreover, during the VA Benefits and Services course, Benefits Advisors discuss the importance of using the GI Bill Comparison Tool to locate institutions that accept the GI Bill, compare the benefits of chosen institutions, and learn which Veterans programs are available at their selected institutions.

During DoD Capstone, a mandatory component of the TAP process, a commander or commander's designee verifies that the transitioning Service member has met TAP Career Readiness Standards, has a viable Individual Transition Plan (ITP), and is prepared to transition to civilian life. During this process, Benefits Advisors are available to support individual Service members who have questions or need assistance with VA education benefits. Benefits Advisors assist with connecting Service members with VA's Personalized Career and Planning Guidance (PCPG) Program and VR&E, and with researching available Veteran programs on the campus the member plans to attend.

VA TAP also provides one-on-one sessions with a Benefits Advisor, offering Service members individualized assistance. One-on-one assistance sessions are based on the individual's needs and are driven by the information covered during the VA Benefits and Services course. The typical discussion topics include housing insecurity, education benefits, and disability compensation. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2023, VA

conducted more than 53,000 one-on-one sessions, with more than 43 percent (22,800+ Service members) of those sessions including discussions on education and training program benefits. More than 14 percent (7,400+ Service members) of these sessions also discussed VR&E services.

VA Solid Start

The VA Solid Start (VASS) Program launched on December 2, 2019, as part of the Military to Civilian Readiness Pathway, to make early, consistent, and caring contact with newly separated Veterans. With the signing of VASS law (P.L. 117-205) on October 17, 2022, VA is permanently authorized to expand VASS with DoD coordination. VASS 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, VASS provides priority contact to Veterans, meeting certain mental health risk factors, supporting continuity of care, and lowering any barriers to access to mental health care treatment and support through VA. VASS representatives address challenges the Veteran may be facing at the time of the call by connecting the Veteran with the appropriate benefits 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.

VASS agents have the necessary access, information, and training to support to recently separated Service members with VR&E-related issues and concerns. When appropriate, based on the Veteran's specific situation at the time of the VASS engagement, VASS agents will discuss the possible availability of VR&E benefits to assist with the issue or concern raised by the Veteran. In calendar year (CY) 2023, VASS provided information on VR&E over 62,500 times.

From the program launch in December 2019 through July 2024, VASS has successfully connected with 501,640 (73.7 percent) recently separated Veterans, helping them connect with the benefits and services they have earned. For example, in CY 2023, of Veterans who had a successful VASS connection, 1.13 percent applied for VR&E benefits, 60.24 percent applied for Education benefits, and 0.05 percent applied for PCPG benefits. Veterans who did not have a successful connection with VASS had utilization rates of 0.43 percent, 32.56 percent, and 0.03 percent, respectively. Additionally, in July 2023, VASS launched a VSignals survey to assess Veteran satisfaction with the VASS program and since the launch, VASS-eligible Veterans evaluated their satisfaction with the VASS program as 4.5 on a 5-point Likert scale.

Personalized Career Planning and Guidance (PCPG) Program

The PCPG Program, also known as Chapter 36 services, fulfills 38 U.S.C. § 3697A requirements by supporting transitioning Service members, Veterans, and qualified dependents. PCPG services are designed to provide participants with personalized counseling and support to help guide career paths, ensure the most effective use of VA benefits, and achieve educational and career goals.

The PCPG Program provides career and education counseling to transitioning Service members within 6 months of leaving the military, Veterans who have left the military within the past 12 months, or at any time to individuals eligible to use a VA education benefit. PCPG career and education counseling services include résumé support, education and employment planning, detailed skills assessment, a personalized action plan to achieve education and career goals, adjustment counseling to transition to civilian employment successfully, and a direct connection to VA benefits and services. For Fiscal Year 2024 through July 2024, PCPG received 7,308 applications requesting PCPG services. Since Fiscal Year 2022, PCPG has seen an increase in applications received. In Fiscal Year 2022, it was 6,665 applications received and in Fiscal Year 2023, PCPG received 7,714 applications for services.

Milwaukee Regional Office Outreach to Transitioning Service members

The Milwaukee Regional Office (RO) maintains a strong outreach presence across the Wisconsin, including transitioning Service members. During FY 2023, the RO participated in 14 Reserve and Guard outreach events and six to date in Fiscal Year 2024, assisting Veterans and transitioning Service members at events such as resource fairs and Yellow Ribbon Programs throughout the State. Specific to the La Crosse area, the Milwaukee RO has participated in the La Crosse Veterans Bonanza event, hailed as the "largest Veteran event in the tri-State area," for the past 2 years, and which is typically held the first weekend in November. Last year, the Milwaukee RO reached approximately 300 individuals at the event, providing information and assistance on VA benefits and services. In Fiscal Year 2024, the Mil-

waukee RO active-duty outreach has resulted in over 3,000 direct engagements with Veterans.

Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Program Overview

The VR&E Program's mission is to assist Service members and Veterans with a service-connected disability that limits their ability to work or prevents them from working to prepare for, find, and maintain suitable careers or maintain a life of independence. VR&E achieves this mission by providing Veterans with hands-on counseling services to ensure Veteran's goals are not only achievable but attained. VR&E employs nearly 1,000 professional vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRC) and delivers services through a network of almost 350 office locations. Our service delivery model works to support Veterans where they are located and includes operations at all 56 ROs, approximately 142 out-based sites, 70 Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) installations, and 104 VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) schools/campuses.

The Milwaukee VR&E division continues to demonstrate strong performance in support of Veterans, encouraging and counseling them toward continued education and career goals. There are VR&E out-based offices in Wisconsin (Eau Claire, Green Bay, and Madison), and a VSOC Program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

The Milwaukee RO regularly provides training and monthly briefings to county Veterans Service Officers and Veterans Service Organization partners about all aspects of RO operations, including VR&E. For Fiscal Year 2024, as of July 16, 2024, there have been over 861 VR&E applicants with 159 positive outcomes and 135 employment rehabilitations for Veterans in Wisconsin. Positive outcomes indicate successful program completion.

VR&E Benefits

VR&E benefits are available for Veterans who received an honorable or other than dishonorable discharge, have a VA service-connected disability rating of at least 10 percent or more, and apply for services. After eligibility is found, entitlement must be determined and is based on the establishment that barriers to employment exist resulting from a service-connected disability. For those rated at 10 percent, barriers of a more severe nature must be established.

Active-duty Service members are eligible for the VR&E Program if they expect to receive an honorable discharge upon separation from active duty, apply for VR&E services, and have a proposed IDES rating from VA. Section 1631 of P.L. 110-181 authorized VR&E eligibility and automatic entitlement for Service members with a severe injury or illness before a VA rating is issued. Section 126 of P.L. 115-251 made this authority permanent on September 29, 2018. From October 2023 through June 2024, 11,612 Service members have a plan of VR&E service through the VR&E IDES Program. Of these, 9,318 have separated from the military and are currently using their VR&E benefits, while 2,294 remain in service and are at various stages in the VR&E Program. This participation allows Service members to identify their career goals and established a plan of VR&E service upon transitioning from the military.

Additionally, in Fiscal Year 2024, 4,664 Service members began receiving services through IDES but discontinued the VR&E program, while 850 completed their rehabilitation through the VR&E IDES program. In total, 17,126 Service members received or continue to receive VR&E services through IDES in 2024.

During Fiscal Year 2023, VR&E provided services to 132,687 Veterans and Service members, as well as achieved 17,135 positive outcomes for Veterans and paid over \$1.6 billion in benefits. As of June 30, 2024, VR&E currently has 158,897 Veteran participants with 93,661 enrolled in Long-Term Services. This is a significant increase of 20 percent since the August 2022 implementation of the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022 (P.L. 117-168). Approximately 12 percent of our current participants have toxic exposure related disabilities, and this is expected to increase over the next few years. VBA continues to utilize the multi-year Toxic Exposures Fund appropriations to reduce claims inventory and restore pre-pandemic timeliness. VBA's aggressive hiring initiatives resulted in an increase of more than 18 percent in Fiscal Year 2023 allowing VBA to significantly increase claims processing capacity. VBA also continues to work closely with military archivists to obtain access to records at the National Archives and Records Administration and at their branch archival facilities to support claim research and is adding additional staff to accelerate research requests with military partners.

The need for VR&E services has increased in recent years. When comparing Fiscal Year 2022 to Fiscal Year 2023, there was a 29.8 percent growth in applications

and a 27 percent increase in Veterans entering benefits plans. In Fiscal Year 2024, VR&E is expecting an additional 23 percent increase in Veteran applications and an additional 5 percent growth in separating Service members. Year over year, the number of eligible applicants processed in Milwaukee has been increasing. For example, last calendar year, from January to June 2023, the local division received 815 eligible applications. During the same time in 2024, the Milwaukee local division received 861 eligible applications. As of June 30, 2024, there are 1,339 Veterans participating in the VR&E Program in Wisconsin.

The VR&E Division continues its active involvement with the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. In addition to assisting Veterans who are “actively seeking employment,” the Milwaukee RO collaborates with Federal, State, county, and city partners. In Fiscal Year 2024, as of July 31, 2024, the RO assisted Veterans with job placement into 20 Federal, three State, three county, and six city positions. Recognition of outstanding VR&E counselors from the Milwaukee RO has been received from Veterans describing exceptional and responsive services and kind care to assist them with training and education in new career paths. As one Veteran stated, his VR&E counselor motivated and pushed him to do better than he believed he could. He completed his degree and began a new career in construction safety management. He stated his VR&E counselor provided him dignity and direction for a positive future.

VetSuccess on Campus

The VSOC Program is designed to help student Veterans succeed and thrive through a coordinated delivery of on-campus benefits assistance and counseling. The goal is to ensure that student Veterans complete their education with the preparation necessary to enter the labor market into viable careers. The VSOC Program offers various benefits to eligible individuals including adjustment counseling, vocational testing, educational and career counseling, and VA benefits coaching. However, VSOC counselors will try to assist all student Veterans, Service members, and Veteran dependents by referring them to other resources and helping them register for healthcare services, regardless of VA benefit eligibility, utilization, or enrollment status. In Fiscal Year 2023, VSOC counselors had 20,043 contacts with Veterans, Service members, and Veterans’ dependents nationwide. From the beginning of Fiscal Year 2024 until July 1, 2024, VSOC counselors have had 15,412 contacts with Veterans, Service members, and dependents nationwide.

Another component of the VSOC Program is the outreach efforts to connect student Veterans with information about training and employment services available under Chapter 31. VSOC counselors present information about VR&E and other VA services at all new student orientations on VSOC campuses, and other events where student Veterans may be present. Career fairs, resume workshops, and student organization meetings are examples of other outreach events a VSOC counselor may host or attend. VSOC counselors are the “face of VA” and make referrals to other VA and non-VA services, such as VA health care, disability services, financial aid, debt management, and peer mentoring programs.

VSOC counselors are vital to ensuring that the student Veterans can effectively use their earned benefits to attend school and receive the most value out of their entitlement. A VSOC counselor on campus strengthens VA’s partnership with the school. It improves VA’s opportunity to provide outreach and transition services during a student Veteran’s or Service member’s transition from the military to college life. VRCs and VSOC counselors are also available to assist dependents using VA benefits.

The Milwaukee VR&E division has an ongoing presence at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee campus through the VSOC Program. The VSOC counselor has assisted over 166 students in Fiscal Year 2023 through June 2024.

Veteran Employment

VA recognizes that there are more needs to be met in the employment space to ensure that Veterans are ready to enter the labor market upon completion of the VR&E Program as well as receive all the assistance necessary to obtain suitable employment. To support this identified need, VA works with the Department of Labor Veterans’ Employment and Training Service for more time sensitive, local labor market and job referral expertise for Veterans enrolled in the VR&E program. In June, VA embarked on an employment pilot for VR&E focused on standardizing training and improving the consistency of the employment coordinator (EC) function. The pilot consists of a total of eight ROs (two per district). The EC position is critical in assisting Veterans achieve suitable employment. In Fiscal Year 2023, with the assistance of the nationally located ECs, VR&E achieved 17,134 positive outcomes and 10,686 employment outcomes. At the Milwaukee RO, ECs assisted in

achieving a positive outcome for 170 Veterans in Fiscal Year 2023, of which 126 of those received an employment outcome. This pilot will leverage labor market expertise to focus on education and training Veterans for in-demand jobs; expanding specialized partnerships with employers through the increased utilization of non-paid work experience (NPWE); on-the-job training (OJT); apprenticeships; and special employer incentives (SEI). Introducing this consistency in the use of ECs is designed to improve customer service, business partnerships, and consultative services between VR&E staff, resulting in the development of more well-supported rehabilitation plans and increased employment outcomes. It is anticipated the pilot will run for 7 months. At the conclusion of the pilot, VA expects that Veterans will have improved access to NPWE, OJT, apprenticeship, and SEI opportunities.

VR&E Longitudinal Study Report 2023

The Longitudinal Study, required by 38 U.S.C. § 3122, follows three cohorts of former participants over a 20-year period and details the current employment metrics of individuals who complete the program. The primary goal of the Longitudinal Study is to determine the long-term outcomes in four major areas: employment, income, home ownership, and use of other programs and services. The Longitudinal Study¹ is published annually, and findings suggest stability and better outcomes for rehabilitated Veterans compared to Veterans who discontinued their VR&E Program, as well as steady improvement of post-program outcomes over time. The 2023 Longitudinal Study finds that the median annual income of rehabilitated Veterans is \$95,000, which is 67 percent higher than that of Veterans who did not complete the VR&E program. Additionally, rehabilitated Veterans have home ownership rates of 76 percent, which is 15 percentage points higher than Veterans who do not complete the program. VA recognizes that individuals who choose to discontinue the program may have characteristics that are distinct from those who achieve rehabilitation, limiting the lessons that can be learned from the study. Moreover, the VR&E Longitudinal Study lacks a comparison group, so it is not possible to attribute any differences in Veterans' outcomes to participating in the program.

VR&E Staffing, Recruitment, and Retention

The VR&E Service has placed emphasis on the recruitment and retention of staff to ensure the quality delivery of service. In July 2023, VR&E expanded the qualifying education requirement to be a counselor by accepting five additional Master's degrees which have duties closely aligned with a counselor's duties. This effort increased the number of individuals eligible to deliver VR&E benefits. Since the expansion of the degrees accepted, VR&E field staff has grown, and recently, VR&E completed new counselor training for 68 new counselors, the largest training class in VR&E history.

Additionally, a new position has been added to support case management of Veterans in the Chapter 31 program. The Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist position provides direct case management services to Veterans, ensures timely payments, addresses academic issues, and ensures Veterans have access to professional services.

VR&E added over 260 new vocational rehabilitation counselors and specialist staff to address the dramatic growth in the VR&E Program since the passage of the PACT Act. This additional staff reduces the ratio of counselors to Veterans to 1:115, ensuring compliance with the legislative requirements in section 254 of P.L. 114–223. The additional staff will ensure that Veterans in the VR&E Program have access to their counselor and the benefits and services they earned and deserve.

Technology to Improve the Veteran Experience

VR&E is implementing technology improvements to reduce staff administrative tasks as well as improve the Veteran experience. VR&E modernized its electronic virtual assistant (e-VA) to allow counselors to send all letters and forms directly to their clients. Veterans also gained the ability to sign and return documents to VA electronically. The integration of e-VA with the Veterans Benefits Management System, and the integration with Veterans Benefits Administration's Package Manager/e-VA streamlines administrative tasks for counselors, freeing up an average of 10 hours per week per counselor. This efficiency benefits Veterans by allowing counselors to dedicate more time to providing personalized support and expediting case processing. Since the implementation of e-VA, Veterans are now being placed into plans of service, on average, 46 days faster, ensuring quicker access to vital resources. Additionally, e-VA facilitates improved communication channels between

¹ VR&E Longitudinal Study—Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) (va.gov) (Found at <https://www.benefits.va.gov/VOCREHAB/VRELongitudinalStudy.asp>).

staff and Veterans, enhancing accessibility and support beyond traditional means. With the deployment in May 2024, these advancements underscore a commitment to enhancing Veterans' experiences through efficient, technology-driven solutions.

The Readiness and Employment System (RES) will replace VR&E's 25-year-old legacy case management system with a web-based platform that integrates over 20 VA systems and data sources to deliver services and benefits to veterans more timely and efficiently. The legacy system needs many of VA's modernization efforts such as the document repository and training facilities data base. RES automates repeatable administrative processes, saving staff time interacting with the Veterans they serve. The system will automate complex awards calculations for more accurate payments to Veterans while providing intelligent document handling that eliminates staff needing to download, upload, or email individual documents. This new system, through technology, will reduce the administrative functions of counselors, allowing them to focus on counseling Veterans, including creating practical training and independent living plan.

Conclusion

VA appreciates Congress' continued support in improving our support for transitioning Service members and the benefits available to them. VA remains committed to increasing transparency and continuing collaboration with you and our stakeholders. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. My colleagues and I would be happy to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.

Prepared Statement of Joe Quackenboss

As a military veteran, transitioning from active duty to civilian life is a journey filled with both challenges and opportunities, especially when it comes to navigating the academic landscape. My experience transitioning both on and off the school campus has been a mix of triumphs and tribulations, but through it all, I've identified key areas where support from various entities could significantly enhance the process for veterans like myself.

On campus, one of the biggest hurdles I faced was adjusting to the academic environment. Coming from a structured military setting to the more independent and sometimes overwhelming nature of college classes was a significant shift. Many veterans, myself included, could benefit from tailored orientation programs that not only introduce us to academic resources but also provide guidance on time management, study skills, and access to tutoring services.

Furthermore, the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) plays a crucial role in supporting veterans through educational benefits. While the GI Bill offers valuable assistance, the bureaucracy and delays in processing claims can be frustrating and discouraging. Streamlining the application and disbursement process would alleviate stress and ensure that veterans receive their entitled benefits in a timely manner.

In addition to institutional support, veteran service organizations (VSOs) are invaluable resources for veterans transitioning to civilian life. These organizations offer a sense of camaraderie, peer support, and access to valuable resources such as career counseling, networking opportunities, and mental health services. However, greater collaboration between VSOs and educational institutions could enhance their impact by ensuring that veterans are aware of and connected to these vital resources from the moment they step foot on campus.

Community members also have a role to play in supporting veterans during their transition. Employers, for instance, can implement veteran hiring initiatives and provide mentorship programs to help veterans navigate the civilian job market. Moreover, fostering a culture of understanding and appreciation for veterans within the community can combat stigma and create a more inclusive environment for reintegration.

In conclusion, the transition from military service to civilian life, particularly within the academic setting, is a complex process that requires support from multiple stakeholders. By improving access to resources, streamlining bureaucratic processes, fostering collaboration between institutions and organizations, and cultivating a supportive community environment, we can enhance the transition experience for veterans and ensure they thrive in their post-service endeavors.

Prepared Statement of Dustin Schultz

My name is Dustin Schultz, I am a Veteran Specialist for Western Technical College and have been in this position for 3 years. Prior to this role, I was a Veteran Service Officer and a nonprofit Director for a Veteran Mentorship Program where we worked with our local Veterans Treatment Court and justice involved veterans. Last, I am also an honorably discharged US Army Veteran and served overseas during Operation Iraqi Freedom. I will be providing remarks on the struggles I've witnessed as service members transition from the military.

Current programs like Transition Assistance Program and the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (TAP/ YRRP) are great tools for helping service members transition into education or employment.

- However, senior leadership are often beyond this stage in their life. Officers already have a college degree, and senior noncommissioned officers often elect to transfer their education benefits to their dependents. Retiring senior leadership may choose not to return to the workforce at all.
- This is a disconnect between those providing these preventative services and the lower enlisted service members who do not share the same circumstances.
- From my experience, lower enlisted service members struggle to transition the most.
- Veterans report that timing is a problem for current transitional services. They see these programs as a series of “check boxes” positioned between them and their release from the military.
 - This causes participation to be rushed, service members are not honest about what issues they may have to deal with upon their return, or do not foresee the challenges ahead of them.
 - Veterans report that these programs are provided at the end of the service members' time in the military and don't allow for much time to consider what challenges may arise in transitioning.
 - I believe there should be efforts to start transitional services much earlier in the service member's career.
- Service members are returning to a home where parents, a spouse, or other loved ones have taken on some of their responsibilities in their absence.
- They may struggle to find their role in the home leading to relationship issues like divorce and thus compounding emotional, financial, and social hardship.
 - Services could include families who are critical to successful transition and help prevent compounding issues.
- Current services and programs seem to lack follow up after leaving the military.
 - This can leave the veteran feeling discarded or devalued.
- Coordination with other services or programs
 - Thousands of nonprofit organizations that can help.
 - Services or support that is not specific to veterans are overlooked. I have had veterans that are not aware that they can apply for FAFSA.

I believe we need more of a case management approach that is proactively assessing the service members and their families as they transition back into civilian life.

- Incorporate all effective forms of support such as faith-based programs, peer support and other options that are personalized to the individual.
- Exit services could be provided by a “reintegration counselor” similar to the Veteran Readiness & Employment program (Chapter 31) who can assist the service member or connect them to appropriate resources.
- Veteran suicides each day are alarming figures, but do not include those that die of accidental death due to other things like poor decision-making, recklessness or unintentional drug overdose.
- The service member doesn't know how they will handle the freedoms of civilian life until they experience it.
 - I feel there should be additional emphasis on making good decisions and minimizing risky behavior.
- Last, education benefits are a major reason many decide to join the military and often the first endeavor for service members after transition. A common issue people report is financial instability due to pro-rated housing payments.

- For instance, if a student begins a Spring term on January 8th, the VA will prorate their monthly housing stipend and reduce the housing payment. When the term ends, the payment is again pro-rated to exclude any days of the month the student is not enrolled.
- I believe these inconsistent payments cause undue hardship on student veterans and their families.

Thank you.

Prepared Statement of Danielle Luba

House of Representatives, Committee on Veteran Affairs, and Congressman Van Orden,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on my behalf in regard to my transition from the military to my civilian life. I would like to first explain that I am an almost 17 year veteran of the worlds greatest Air Force. Most of my career has been as an Air National Guard member. I have always worn two hats; my military cover, and my civilian life. They both coexist with one another.

My transition to using my educational military benefits was a challenge for myself. For most your entire young life into adulthood is controlled by someone else. They help to make the decision of your day-to-day life. When you join the military, you are shifting it from a family members job to help you decide to the military making those decisions for you. They set your day for you based on what is best for the mission. When I was given the opportunity post training, I immediately enrolled into WTC for school. I had no idea what I was doing. I just kept hearing “this is your opportunity, take it and run with it.” And in the ideal world of knowing exactly what you want that would’ve worked out perfectly. I spent 2 years using my GI Bill for a career that I don’t think I ever wanted. I then proceeded to continue to use it at a 4-year university with the same outcome.

It wasn’t until my first deployment in 2012 that I had time to sit and think, in a once again extremely structured environment, that I found what my forever idea was. After I returned, I continued to another 4-year school and completed my bachelor’s degree. One of the main benefits that the military will use as a recruiting tool is “your school is paid for.” And that statement is correct if you have the proper guidance to ensure it is used correctly.

Here I sit an almost 17-year veteran, with over \$30,000 in student loan debt. I am very grateful for the opportunity to serve my county and do what I am doing, but it would’ve been nice to have better guidance when I was younger. They always say “once you get older you will understand.” I know fully understand the need for proper assistance when someone is beginning the chapter for their educational benefits.

I would like to thank you for your time and listening to my life experience.

Prepared Statement of Kaytlyn Brown

I served active duty in the Navy from November 2014 to September 2023. I started the transition from being an active duty Sailor to a civilian in December 2022.

I opted to do the in person TAPs class in Naval Station Norfolk. I didn’t find the week long class to be overly helpful since majority of the required topics that had to be covered were merely skimmed over with in person guest speakers to not be knowledgeable enough to answer majority of the questions that were asked me and fellow transition military members. The guest speakers just “regurgitated” what was on the slides in the PowerPoint that was shown to us by the speaker. The class has good intentions, but it is not nearly long as it should be to ensure that we have a good understanding in what is available to us while transitioning and to us as we became veterans.

My transition experience with my last command was not pleasant for me. My leadership was not very helpful. I ended my contract on a obliserve. I took 76 days of “separation” leave which took me from the 10th of July 2023 to the end of my contract on the 23d of September 2023. When I had to file my leave chit, my obliserve accumulated leave days were not in the system and I had to provide many extra documents to prove that I had those the days to take for leave. Many of the leadership that had to approve my chit, didn’t understand or simply didn’t care to

read the provided documents to understand my situation and kept rejecting it until I finally begged an E-7 that technically wasn't in my chain of command to help me and explain it to the people who kept rejecting my request for leave. That E-7 got leave chit approved for me.

My next biggest issue was dealing Suddath for shipping my personal household goods from Hampton, Virginia to Warrens, Wisconsin. The movers in VA didn't know how to pack things, so my mother and I had to go in behind them and repack-age fragile items, such as glassware and dinnerware. They stood on my washing machine, that survived two prior moves in the area, and I had to bend the lid back close to its original shape. They placed one of my TVs in a way that the screen broke. And on top of it all, I was never able to get reimbursed for my damaged items because they changed their system and I couldn't get into it and submit anything cause they were asking for codes and numbers that I didn't have.

I thank you for your time and for the opportunity to share my experience of transitioning from active duty to being a civilian.

Kaytlyn M. Brown

Prepared Statement of Adrian Moreno

Improving the Transition Experience for Veterans: A Personal Perspective

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the critical issue of improving the transition experience for veterans both on and off campus. My name is Adrian Miguel Moreno, a senior at the University of Wisconsin La Crosse, double majoring in History & Philosophy with a minor in Legal Studies. I am also the President of the Pre-Law Society and the Vice President of the Philosophy Club at the university. Outside of academics, I volunteer as a youth sports coach. Before this, I served in the Mississippi National Guard and the Wisconsin National Guard and worked for the state of Wisconsin in a civilian capacity during my final years in the National Guard. I come before you today as a person of color as well as a veteran because I believe that our service members face a unique battle transitioning into life as students. It is crucial that we, as a society and through our institutions, provide comprehensive support to these veterans to ensure their successful transition.

Transitioning servicemembers, particularly those who are first-generation students, often lack proper academic guidance. While veterans undoubtedly possess valuable skills such as adaptability and resilience, these alone are not sufficient to sustain academic performance. The result can be discouragement, isolation, and abandonment of educational goals. In my own experience, transitioning from military service to civilian life and academia was a process of trial and error. I found myself job hopping, trying to find a role that suited my skills and interests. This period was challenging and at times discouraging. The need I had for structured guidance and support went consistently unmet and because of that, I struggled immensely. We need to equip veterans with the tools and resources to explore different career paths and understand how their skills translate into civilian roles. I have personally experienced these difficulties and was fortunate to meet individuals who provided crucial support. Unfortunately, many service members do not share this experience.

To address this issue, I propose that we empower our servicemembers with the same level of interest and guidance that universities offer to first-year students. Specifically, I recommend the introduction of first-year experience courses tailored for veteran students. I also advocate for institutions to provide and promote career advising and skill translation services. These measures can help veterans translate their military skills into academic and civilian contexts, fostering a smoother and more successful transition. In support of these proposed solutions, research shows that one of the most significant barriers to pursuing a college degree after service is that we are often outliers in the classroom, everything we know is from personal endeavors rather than structured guidance. A first-year experience course tailored for veterans could help them navigate their classes and college campuses, manage time effectively, and understand the resources available to them. Such a course could also provide a supportive community of fellow veterans, which could help alleviate feelings of isolation.

In conclusion, we must provide comprehensive support to veterans transitioning to civilian life and academia. I recommend the introduction of first-year experience courses tailored for veteran students and the promotion of career advising and skill translation services. These measures can help veterans translate their military skills into academic and civilian contexts, fostering a smoother and more successful transition. I am willing to answer any questions you may have about these recommendations. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on this important issue.

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STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD

Prepared Statement of Disabled American Veterans



Department of Wisconsin

*STATEMENT OF
AI LABELLE
BENEFITS PROTECTION TEAM LEADER
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
DEPARTMENT OF WISCONSIN
FOR THE RECORD OF THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
OVERSIGHT FIELD HEARING
"EXAMINING TRANSITION SERVICEMEMBERS EXPERIENCE"
LACROSSE, WISCONSIN
AUGUST 23, 2024*

Chairman Van Orden and Ranking Member Levin:

Currently, I serve as the DAV (Disabled American Veterans) Wisconsin Benefits Protection Team Leader (BPTL) and Chairman of the DAV National Interim Legislation Committee, a position that I have held for the past nine (9) years.

As you are aware, DAV is a Congressionally Chartered, VA Accredited, non-profit charitable veterans service organization (VSO) comprised of over one million wartime service-disabled veterans, nationwide. In Wisconsin, we have over 14,000 members.

For more than a century, DAV has been dedicated to a single purpose: empowering our nation's heroes and their families by helping to provide the resources they need and ensuring our nation keeps the promises made to them.

All our members are wartime wounded, injured or ill veterans, many of them severely. They have sacrificed much in defense of our freedoms. Chairman Van Orden, I suspect that you understand the extent of these sacrifices, given your military background.

Mr. Chairman, your authorship of eleven (11) DAV-supported bills and cosponsoring of twenty-six (26) DAV-supported bills in the 118th Congress is evidence of this understanding. Ranking Member Levin your authorship of four (4) DAV-supported bills and cosponsoring of thirty-five (35) DAV-supported bills in the 118th Congress shows the same understanding. The No. and Title of the bills can be found in the Appendix.

Thank you for the opportunity to relay my transition experience from active-duty United States Navy to the civilian sector. I enlisted in the United States Naval Reserves on 3 December 1965 and went immediately on active duty. My main duty station was the *USS Okinawa LPH-3*, an aircraft carrier strictly for helicopters.

In my first year, we were homeported in Norfolk, Virginia and were part of the Atlantic Fleet (LANTFLT). In December 1966, it was announced that *Okinawa* would be transferred to the Pacific Fleet (PACFLT), homeported in San Diego, California.

On 24 January 1967, the ship left Norfolk and arrived in San Diego on 8 February 1967, after transverseing the Panama Canal. Eventually, the ship arrived On Station off the coast of Vietnam on 25 April 1967 as part of Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) Alpha.

Over the next seven (7) months, we performed nine (9) amphibious landing operations, flying marines inland into northern Vietnam near the DMZ and when the operations concluded flew them back. During the operation, the *Okinawa* became a Combat Medical Hospital with the wounded on the port side of the hangar deck and the KIAs (Killed-in-Action) on the starboard side.

We returned to San Diego on 5 December 1967, and I was discharged from active duty on 15 December 1967.

One of my duties while on active duty was working in the Personnel Office as a Personnelman (PN). This entailed discharging service members from active duty. At that time, the process was short and sweet. It included a brief interview, signing of some forms with a physical liability waiver being one of them, and ended with the individual being given his discharge papers including a DD 214.

Usually, the person being discharged, called a 'short timer,' was rarely focused on the process. They couldn't wait to get back to the 'world.' When I was discharged, I received my discharge papers, a plane ticket, and told 'Good Luck.' Today, the discharge process is more professional.

Congress established the military Transition Assistance Program (TAP) in the 1991 National Defense Administration Act (NDAA). Initially, TAP was aimed at helping service members who were involuntarily separated due to forced withdrawals. Over time, TAP has expanded to offer pre-separation counseling and various two-day track courses on employment, education, and entrepreneurship.

The TAP format is guided by:

- Title 10, U.S.C. Sections 1142, 1143, and 114
- National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) Fiscal Year (FY) 19 – John S. McCain – Section 552 – Improvement to TAP
- NDAA FY 20 – Sections 570c, 570f

The format can be found in Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 1332.35 – Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for Military Personnel.

It is my belief and the belief of DAV that TAP will be more effective with the mandated participation of DAV and other VSOs. Currently, VSO participation is at the discretion of the commanding officer at the military installation which has led to minimal participation.

VSOs are valuable resources for assistance and guidance. They provide advocacy, education, and other support for the unique issues facing veterans. Many have their own job referral and registration services, sponsor job fairs, and provide mentors and networking opportunities. VSOs also offer a wide variety of other services.

Chairman Van Orden, you recognized the value of VSOs by introducing H.R. 3933: TAP Promotion Act on June 7, 2023. The bill amends title 10, United States Code, Section 1142(b) to authorize representatives of veterans service organizations to promote certain benefits available to veterans in the course of pre-separation counseling under the Transition Assistance program of the Department of Defense. The presentation must be standardized and should not exceed one hour. The House VA Committee marked up the bill on July 26, 2023.

Subsequently, the language of H.R. 3933 was incorporated into H.R. 7732: ETS Act or Enhancing the Transitioning Servicemember's Experience Act, which was introduced by you, Mr. Chairman, on March 19, 2024. The bill was forwarded by the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity by voice vote to the full Committee on Veterans' Affairs on April 17, 2024.

TAP offers an avalanche of information to separating members of the Armed Forces, perhaps too much. Human nature being what it is, I suspect the lack of focus which was prevalent nearly sixty (60) years ago, may still exist in some today.

In my opinion, the inclusion of a VSO presentation in the TAP Program will help make the transition of separating Armed Forces members into the civilian sector more successful.

As DAV testified on March 20, 2024, before the House VA Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity on a draft of H.R. 7732, "Participation by veteran service organizations, like DAV and others in the TAP program is essential for service members to gain a full understanding of entitlements and free assistance and representation available to them upon discharge from military service." The full testimony can be found in the Appendix.

The passage of H.R. 3933 or H.R. 7732 is vital for the improvement of TAP.

Respectfully Submitted,

Sincerely,



Al Labelle

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United States House of Representative – Wisconsin

Rep. Derrick Van Orden (CD3) – 37

Sponsor (Bill's Author) – 11

1. H.R. 7971: To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide timely equitable relief to an individual who suffers a loss based on an administrative error by the Secretary, and for other purposes.
2. H.R. 7732: ETS Act
3. H.R. 3933: TAP Promotion Act
4. H.R. 8646: Modernizing the Veterans On-Campus Experience Act of 2024
5. H.R. 8592: Warriors to Workforce Act
6. H.R. 5914: VETT Act
7. H.R. 7920: AG VETS Act
8. H.R. 7323: To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to disapprove courses of education offered by a public institution of higher learning that does not charge the in-State tuition rate to a veteran using certain educational assistance under title 10 of such Code.
9. H.R. 1799: EMPLOY VETS Act Affairs
10. H.R. 7347: To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to report on whether the Secretary will include certain psychedelic drugs in the formulary of the Department of Veterans Affairs.
11. H. Res. 535: Expressing support for the designation of November 12, 2023, as "National Warrior Call Day" and recognizing the importance of connecting warriors in the United States to support structures necessary to transition from the battlefield.

Cosponsor – 26

1. H.R. 1282: Major Richard Star Act
2. H.R. 1609: Survivor Benefits Fairness Act
3. H.R. 984: Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act

4. H.R. 1753: To ensure that certain members of the Armed Forces who served in female cultural support teams receive proper credit for such service.
5. H.R. 3790: Justice for ALS Veterans Act of 2023
6. H.R. 3651: Love Lives on Act of 2023
7. H.R. 542: Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act of 2023
8. H.R. 6531: TRAIN VA Employees Act
9. H.R. 7896: VETS Opportunity Act of 2024
- 10.H.R. 7543: Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act of 2024
- 11.H.R. 6380: Wings for Veterans Act
- 12.H.R. 5702: Expanding Access for Online Students Act
- 13.H.R. 5147: Investing in VETS Act
- 14.H.R. 1669: VET-TEC Authorization Act of 2023
- 15.H.R. 2830: Veteran Improvement Commercial Driver License Act of 2023.R
- 16.H.R. 6916: To require the Comptroller General of the United States to submit a report regarding outreach provided to veterans about the availability of supplemental nutrition assistance program benefits under the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008.
- 17.H.R. 6373: Veterans STAND Act
- 18.H.R. 5530: VA Emergency Transportation Access Act
- 19.H.R. 522: Deliver for Veterans Act
- 20.H.R. 2809: EHR Program RESET Act of 2023
- 21.H.R. 6538: VA Correct Compensation Act of 2023
- 22.H.R. 4278: Restore Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability Act of 2023
- 23.H.R. 7163: SCHEDULES Act of 2023
- 24.H.R. 6873: To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to include information relating to the rate of suicide among covered Reserves in each National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report of the Office Mental Health and Suicide Prevention of the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- 25.H.R. 6330: Veterans' Sentinel Act
- 26.H.R. 3811: Veterans Mental and Behavioral Health Quality of Care

United States House of Representative – California

Rep. Mike Levin (CD49) – 39

Sponsor (Bill's Author) – 4

1. H.R. 984: Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act
2. H.R. 7543: Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act of 2024
3. H.R. 1786: GROW Act
4. H.R. 6916: To require the Comptroller General of the United States to submit a report regarding outreach provided to veterans about the availability of supplemental nutrition assistance program benefits under the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008.

Cosponsor – 35

1. H.R. 1282: Major Richard Star Act
2. H.R. 3933: TAP Promotion Act
3. H.R. 3489: Restore Veterans' Compensation Act of 2023
4. H.R. 2971: Veterans Claims Education Act of 2023
5. H.R. 1139: GUARD VA Benefits Act
6. H.R. 3651: Love Lives on Act of 2023
7. H.R. 1083: Caring for Survivors Act of 2023
8. H.R. 542: Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act of 2023
9. H.R. 6531: TRAIN VA Employees Act
10. H.R. 1767: Student Veteran Benefit Restoration Act
11. H.R. 3738: Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition
12. H.R. 6492: EXPLORE Act
13. H.R. 7490: Hire Veterans Act
14. H.R. 3981: Isakson-Roe Education Oversight Expansion Act
15. H.R. 5014: Employing Veterans to Feed America Act
16. H.R. 3601: Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act
17. H.R. 1169: VA E-Notification Enhancement Act
18. H.R. 5530: VA Emergency Transportation Access Act
19. H.R. 2414: CHAMPVA Children's Care Protection Act of 2023
20. H.R. 1278: DRIVE Act
21. H.R. 522: Deliver for Veterans Act

- 22.H.R. 3698: Feed Hungry Veterans Act of 2023
- 23.H.R. 2410: VET CARE Act of 2023
- 24.H.R. 6538: VA Correct Compensation Act of 2023
- 25.H.R. 3677: Veterans Healthcare Improvement Act
- 26.H.R. 645: Healthy Foundations for Homeless Veterans Act
- 27.H.R. 491: Return Home to Housing Act
- 28.H.R. 5492: Veteran Families Health Services Act of 2023
- 29.H.Res. 851: Expressing the support of the House of Representatives for the naming of new or undedicated facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs after women veterans and minority veterans in order to reflect the diversity of all who have served in the Armed Forces of the United States.
- 30.H.R. 8442: Setting the Table for Transition Act
- 31.H.R. 8340: Housing Unhoused Disabled Veterans Act
- 32.H.R. 4569: Veteran Service Recognition Act of 2023
- 33.H.R. 8418: Lethal Means Safety Training Act
- 34.H.R. 4157: Not Just a Number Act
- 35.H.R. 8560: End Veteran Homelessness

**STATEMENT OF MARQUIS D. BAREFIELD
DAV ASSISTANT NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MARCH 20, 2024**

Draft bill to make improvements to certain programs for a member nearing separation, or for a veteran who recently separated, from the Armed Forces

The transition from military service to civilian life is very difficult for many veterans who must overcome obstacles to successfully obtain employment. Current law authorizes comprehensive transition assistance benefits and services for separating service members and their spouses. The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) program was created to help our separating service members successfully transition to the civilian workforce, start a business, or pursue training or higher education and is now mandatory for active-duty personnel.

This draft legislation would make changes to the program parameters of TAP. Based on certain criteria, a member may have up to three to five days of entitlement to the program. Certain members of the reserve component can request a waiver for pre-separation counseling if they have received pre-separation counseling during the three-year period preceding such request.

TAP counseling would not be given by a member of the armed forces or a civilian employee. Pre-separation counseling must be provided in person to the extent possible. If the member cannot appear in person, then counseling can be provided remotely. As part of the pre-separation process, a member that is separating, retiring or is discharged from service will have their contact information and a determination by the releasing branch of service provided to the VA as part of the VA Solid Start Program.

Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) are allowed to provide an hour-long presentation during pre-separation briefings. VSO briefings provide information on how the organization can assist the member obtain benefits from the VA and are not permitted to encourage a member to join their organization during the briefing. Participation by veteran service organizations, like DAV and others in the TAP program is essential for service members to gain a full understanding of entitlements and free assistance and representation available to them upon discharge from military service. An annual report is required to be furnished for TAP participation and VSO presentations.

This legislation has a Department of Labor (DOL) portion that encourages the use of its Employment Navigator and Partnership Program. The DOL program has various

components, to include private sector culture, resume writing, career networking and opportunities for spouses to use the program.

This legislation would also implement a three-year pilot program for military spouses. This program would be on a voluntary basis and include a curriculum, counseling and be carried out on not less than four military bases. At the conclusion of the program, a report would be required by the Department of Defense on the success of the pilot program and note if it should be made permanent.

An area of concern for DAV is the provision in this draft legislation that mentions "No member shall be provided with their DD Form 214 [military discharge document] until they have completed their pre-separation counseling. The only exceptions are for members who are being retired or separated for disability and those who are receiving discharges that are not characterized as honorable or general." Besides the noted exceptions, it is not clear how the program would handle a situation beyond the service member's control that would prevent them from finishing the required counseling. As such, it appears this legislation would punish the service member by not allowing them to receive their DD-214 in a timely manner.

In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 113, we support this draft legislation and urge Congress to provide comprehensive oversight of the TAP program, its workshops, training methodology and delivery of services, and the collection and analysis of course critiques. We recommend changes to the DD-214 section of this draft legislation as noted above.

