

**STATEMENT OF JAMES D. RODRIGUEZ, ASSISTANT SECRETARY
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Introduction

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished Members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss veteran mental health, and the “warm handover” processes that occur between agencies and programs, that help ensure that veterans receive timely and effective mental health support as they reintegrate into civilian life.

DOL is the lead federal department for employment and training programs. Successful employment is one key to economic success, and can strongly impact physical and mental health, life expectancy, and the quality of life.¹ Veterans with service-connected disabilities, including mental health conditions, often experience relatively low labor participation rates and high unemployment compared to their non-disabled counterparts.² Furthermore, veterans with mental health challenges, such as depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use, and anxiety, may find it difficult to maintain regular work attendance.³ Research indicates that unemployment can adversely affect mental health and is associated with a higher risk of suicide among veterans.⁴ Additionally, veterans with mental health conditions, particularly those at risk of or experiencing homelessness, may face increased risk of suicide following job loss.⁵

VETS' mission is to prepare America's veterans, Service members, and military spouses for meaningful careers, provide them with employment resources and expertise, protect their employment rights, and promote their employment opportunities. VETS administers programs designed to address the employment, training, and job security needs of over 196,000 military Service members who transition to civilian life each year, 8.6 million military veterans in the U.S. civilian labor force,⁶ over 760,901 National Guard and Reserve members,⁷ and 923,668 military spouses (578,952 active duty and 344,716 Guard and Reserve spouses).⁸

VETS administers the employment component of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), which includes warm handovers (person-to-person connections) of transitioning Service members to American Job Centers and other partners when needed. DOL's American Job Centers are one-stop locations that offer a broad range of career and supportive services to the

¹ See for examples: <https://health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health/literature-summaries/employment>

² <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/vet.nr0.htm>

³ <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/HVRPEval-VeteranPerspectives.pdf>

⁴ https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/FSTP-Employment-Status-and-Suicide-Risk.pdf

⁵ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies/Homeless-Veterans-Reintegration-Program-Impact-Evaluation>

⁶ <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat48.htm>

⁷ <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>

⁸ <https://demographics.militaryonesource.mil/>

public. Veterans receive priority of service for all DOL-funded training programs in American Job Centers. Along with our partners, we are committed to ensuring the best transition for our Service members and their families and connecting them to the mental health and other services that they need.

TAP Employment Services and Warm Handovers

TAP provides training, resources, and assistance to separating and retiring Service members on active duty, Guard, Reserve, and their spouses, as authorized under 10 U.S.C. § 1144. TAP is a cooperative effort between VETS, the Department of Defense (DoD), Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Department of Education, Department of Homeland Security (U.S. Coast Guard), Small Business Administration, and Office of Personnel Management.

There are three core VETS TAP employment workshops. First, VETS is responsible for the delivery of the Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition (EFCT) Workshop, which is a mandatory, one-day course for employment preparation. In addition, based on Service members' individual needs, VETS offers two elective tracks to acquire additional skills through a two-day workshop: (1) the DOL Employment Workshop, and (2) the Career and Credential Exploration Workshop. Transitioning Service members must elect one two-day track during their individual counseling. However, they are encouraged to attend any additional track(s) and attend the courses more than once (as their unit missions allow) to prepare them for their transition.

As defined in the DoD Instruction⁹ 1332.35, a warm handover is a Capstone process between the respective military department and appropriate interagency parties, resulting in the person-to-person connection of transitioning Service members to services and follow-up resources, as needed. The warm handover provides a confirmed introduction and assurance that the appropriate interagency party acknowledges that an eligible Service member needs post-military assistance, and the interagency partner follows through on providing assistance to meet the needs of transitioning Service members, mitigate risks, and assist them in attaining their post-transition goals and a successful transition.

Capstone is a two-stage process consisting of a review and verification of a transitioning Service member meeting Career Readiness Standards that takes place no later than 90 days prior to separation. Stage one is an in-depth review of the transitioning Service member's Individual Transition Plan (ITP) and Career Readiness Standards, which is conducted by the military Service's TAP staff. Stage two consists of the commander or commander's designee verifying that the transitioning Service member has a viable ITP. If the commander or their designee determines that the transitioning Service member does not have a viable ITP, he or she must confirm that a warm handover takes place with the appropriate interagency partners, as needed. For DOL, the Career Readiness Standards for those completing the employment track are either a completed resume or confirmation of employment, while a completed comparison of technical training institutions is required for those pursuing the vocational track. If a Service member fails to meet the Career Readiness Standards at Capstone, they are provided a warm handover to

⁹ <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/133235p.pdf>

DOL.

DOL currently has two different warm handover procedures: (1) Employment Navigator and Partnership Program¹⁰ (ENPP) site warm handover procedures, and (2) non-ENPP site warm handover procedures.

ENPP began as a pilot under the TAP program at 13 military installations worldwide on April 1, 2021. The pilot was designed in response to feedback from veterans who stated that, while their TAP classroom experience was educational, they desired a more personalized approach. Leveraging the Secretary's authority (10 U.S.C. § 1144), ENPP provides one-on-one, tailored services for transitioning Service members and their spouses, helping them identify and connect with meaningful employment and training opportunities. In FY 2023, 5,747 transitioning Service members and 383 military spouses received services through ENPP with more than 18,100 being served by this program to date.

Currently at 36 locations, our Employment Navigator staff and our partner organizations work with ENPP clients to assist them with their resumes, provide career direction, and provide additional employment-related personalized support. At ENPP sites, the lead Employment Navigator serves as the initial point-of-contact for those transitioning Service members who are receiving a warm handover for either an employment or vocation track. During a warm handover at ENPP sites, Employment Navigators connect transitioning Service members to a designated American Job Center point-of-contact who verifies with DOL that they have received the contact information and reached out to the client to offer assistance. In addition to being connected with the American Job Center in the community where they plan to reside after transition, many Service members receiving a warm handover continue to receive services from our Employment Navigators and partner organizations.

ENPP partners are required to select a primary service from nine possible categories of services, which include: digital employment opportunity matching, training services, employment mentorship, hiring events, employment networking, Registered Apprenticeship opportunities, referrals to employment opportunities, placement services, and wrap-around services. Many of our ENPP partners who provide wrap-around services assist Service members in getting connected to critical healthcare-related services. ENPP partner organization services are provided at no cost to transitioning Service members or their spouses through no-cost agreements between DOL and partner organizations. A list of our current partners can be found on the VETS ENPP Partner Page,¹¹ and organizations that are interested in partnering with us can submit an application.¹² In coordination with our partners, VETS will continue to extend ENPP to serve as many transitioning Service members and their spouses as funding allows.

Notably, preliminary descriptive findings¹³ show that transitioning Service members who received ENPP services have had better employment outcomes than those who did not receive ENPP services. For example, median quarterly wages were 11% higher (\$11,370) for enlisted transitioning Service members who participated in ENPP compared to their counterparts (\$10,248) who did not participate. And transitioning Service members who received ENPP

¹⁰ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap/employment-navigator-partnership>

¹¹ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap/employment-navigator-partnership/enpp-partnerships>

¹² <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/VETS/files/tap/DOLVETSENPPPotentialPartnerApplicationForm.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/VETS/files/ENPP-Factsheet-2024-08-05.pdf>

services were employed about two months faster than those who did not. VETS will continue to gather and analyze data and will be able to provide more nuanced information as this program continues.

At non-ENPP sites, the military Service's TAP staff will connect transitioning Service members receiving a warm handover for employment or vocation with a staff member at an American Job Center near where the transitioning Service member will move to after separating. As of March 31, 2024, 3,493 transitioning Service members in FY 2024 have engaged with an American Job Center through Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG) or Employment Service (Wagner-Peyser) staff, approximately 564 of whom (16.1%) indicated that they were engaging with the American Job Center as part of a warm handover.

Separate from ENPP, VETS TAP offers the Wounded Warrior and Caregiver Employment Workshop (WWCEW) to accommodate the individual needs of transitioning Service members, including individuals with mental health conditions. Each year¹⁴ there are approximately 20,000 transitioning Service members who are considered wounded, ill, and/or injured, transitioning either through their Service branch's warrior care or military recovery units or through the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES). In April 2022, VETS launched the WWCEW for those being evaluated for a disability rating through IDES as an alternative to the required one-day EFCT. Disabled Service members face barriers to completing the traditional EFCT, such as coordinating class schedules with medical appointments, long class duration, working with medical and health restrictions, and requiring caregiver attendance. The curriculum includes six self-paced online modules that participants can complete at their own pace, and the course interface enables users to register for a virtual meeting with a VETS facilitator to ask questions and to discuss activities and course content. As of July 31, over 9,600 participants have attended WWCEW in FY 2024.

It is also important to provide multiple pathways to assistance, so that there is no wrong door for veterans to knock on when they're seeking help. On January 11, 2022, VETS announced the launch of a five-year Off-Base Transition Training (OBTT) pilot program, in accordance with section 4303 of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-315). The intent of this law was to improve health outcomes, and the OBTT pilot helps support mental health by improving economic stability for veterans and their families. Not all employment journeys are linear, and as noted above, unemployment can adversely affect mental health and is associated with a higher risk of suicide among veterans. Which is why OBTT meets veterans where they are in their post-service life to provide support whenever it's needed. OBTT provides TAP to veterans and the spouses of veterans at locations other than active military installations, in order to improve employment-related outcomes in areas with high veteran unemployment. OBTT features ten two-hour and three one-hour, instructor-led employment skills and workforce development workshops, provided in classrooms and virtually. OBTT also offers another important opportunity for veterans and their spouses to be connected to other services they may need, including mental health services in their local community. In FY 2023, 6,293 veterans or spouses of veterans were provided employment-related training through OBTT.

¹⁴ As of 2022: <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/data-research-and-statistics/military-community-demographics/2022-demographics-profile/>

American Job Center Resources

DOL's Employment and Training Administration (ETA) administers the public workforce system, which includes nearly 2,250 American Job Centers across the country. These one-stop locations offer a broad range of career and wrap-around supportive services to the public, such as job training programs, employment services, adult basic education and literacy, vocational rehabilitation for individuals with disabilities, childcare, transportation assistance, housing assistance, legal aid services, unemployment compensation (including the Unemployment Compensation for ex-Service members (UCX) program), as well as referrals and linkages to physical and mental health care, suicide prevention services, addiction counseling, and other services and programs in their local communities. In most states, American Job Centers coordinate with or co-locate eligibility determination services for programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and other partner programs, ensuring streamlined access for veterans and eligible persons seeking support. Veterans receive priority of service for all workforce training programs funded in whole or in part by DOL, as established by the Jobs for Veterans Act of 2002 (38 U.S.C. § 4215).

VETS administers the Jobs for Veterans State Grant (JVSG) program, which provides funding for dedicated staff who work in the American Job Centers to provide individualized career and training-related services to eligible veterans and eligible persons with significant barriers to employment, and other eligible populations¹⁵, and to assist employers to fill their workforce needs with job-seeking veterans. This includes veterans who self-identify as having a physical and/or mental health disability, as well as veterans experiencing homelessness, or economically disadvantaged. JVSG supports Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists, Local Veterans' Employment Representatives (LVER), and dual-role Consolidated DVOP/LVER staff, located in 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. DVOP specialists provide individualized career services and facilitate employment placements to meet the employment needs of veterans and eligible populations, ensuring that they receive the customized services that they need. Individualized career services may include comprehensive and specialized job readiness assessments, resume development, interview preparation, development of individual employment plans, career guidance, employment assistance, referrals to other programs, and other related services. LVER staff conduct outreach and advocacy efforts with local businesses to increase employment opportunities for veterans. LVER staff facilitate and support veterans in gaining and retaining employment and maintain cooperative working relationships with community organizations that provide complementary services and reciprocal referrals. Consolidated positions perform both DVOP and LVER staff functions. These services are critical to veterans, especially those struggling with unemployment, which can negatively impact mental health and create difficult experiences.

¹⁵ As defined in 38 U.S.C. § 4101. In addition, beginning with the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014, annual appropriations for JVSG have made three additional groups eligible for JVSG services: Transition members of the Armed Forces who have been identified as in need of intensive service; members of the Armed Forces who are wounded ill, or injured and receiving treatment in military treatment facilities or warrior transition units; and the spouses or other family caregivers of such a wounded, ill, or injured member.

Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP)

Veterans experiencing homelessness and those at risk of experiencing homelessness face specific challenges, including higher prevalence rates of PTSD, a condition that can emerge from experiencing traumatic events, as well as physical disabilities and challenges in transitioning to civilian life.¹⁶ VETS administers the HVRP program, which is designed to address these barriers and empower veterans to secure good jobs in stable and high-demand occupations paying livable wages. HVRP is the only federal grant to focus exclusively on competitive employment for veterans experiencing or at risk of homelessness. HVRP programs partner closely with their local American Job Centers, helping veterans experiencing homelessness and those at risk of experiencing homelessness reintegrate into the workforce by providing employment and wrap-around services, including mental health care, suicide prevention services, and addiction counseling. In FY 2023, HVRP awarded more than \$58 million to 159 grantees and served over 17,300 veterans. Over half (55%) of participants were employed upon completion, with an average hourly wage of \$18.34 at placement.

HVRP grantees work one-on-one with veterans and their families to help them obtain sustainable employment and stable housing, which in turn improves their mental, physical, and emotional well-being. One such story comes to us from a 55-year-old Navy veteran in Maryland who found herself homeless after losing her job with a sub-contractor shortly after transitioning out of the military. Her recent job loss, lack of savings and support network, and inability to pay her rent caused her to experience severe bouts of anxiety and depression. After enrolling in the HVRP program, her case manager helped her enroll into mental health counseling and helped her address her immediate mental health needs, while providing her with the emotional support necessary to continue her job search with renewed energy. After participating in numerous interviews and refining her resume and job scope with the HVRP case manager, she was offered a position as a Program Analyst with an IT firm. This opportunity marked a significant turning point in her mental health journey, as the new job provided her with the stability and security she had been seeking. Her story is a testament to the power of the comprehensive support systems our agency offers to veterans facing a myriad of difficult challenges.

National Veterans' Training Institute (NVTI)

VETS established NVTI¹⁷ in 1986 to provide specialized training and professional skills enhancement of American Job Center and other veteran service providers' staff. NVTI provides high-quality and relevant training, ensuring that veterans receive the best possible assistance in their transition to civilian careers. NVTI trains nearly 4,000 participants annually, including JVSG-funded state staff and other federal agency staff. NVTI fosters a community of practice among veteran service providers, enabling them to share best practices, resources, and innovations. This includes supporting the development and hosting of interagency resources and reports on mental health, suicide prevention, and burnout prevention.¹⁸

¹⁶ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies/Homeless-Veterans-Reintegration-Program-Impact-Evaluation>

¹⁷ <https://www.nvti.org/>

¹⁸ <https://www.nvti.org/Resources/Useful-Resources/Suicide-Prevention-Mental-Health-and-Burnout/>

For example, NVTI offers the course, *Preventing and Healing Burnout in Veteran Service Providers*¹⁹, a one-day virtual course for veteran service organizations and providers to define and provide strategies for addressing burnout in veteran service providers. Course participants engage in several self-reflective activities and discussions to enable them to identify signs of burnout, understand their stress level, and understand where they are on the burnout spectrum. Participants also discuss resources and strategies for preventing and overcoming burnout.

Interagency Collaboration

President Obama's Executive Order 13625, "Improving Access to Mental Health Services for Veterans, Service Members, and Military Families," established the Interagency Task Force (ITF) on Military and Veterans Mental Health. The ITF has a primary goal of coordinating and supporting interagency programs and activities related to mental health, suicide prevention, substance use, and expanding access to mental health care. DOL is an active participant, and I serve as co-chair of the ITF's Evidence-Based Treatment Access and Engagement workgroup, which is tasked with evaluating access and engagement barriers to evidence-based mental health care for Service members, veterans, and their families. As a result of this work, NVTI has expanded its resources related to suicide and burnout prevention.

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY 2024 (P.L. 118-31, §1805) codified DOL as a member with DoD and VA on the TAP Joint Executive Committee. This enhanced DOL's preexisting collaboration with DoD and VA, with VETS co-chairing the Transition Executive Committee, Senior Transition Steering Group, Transition Working Group, and six functional working groups. Interagency members and the military Services meet and coordinate on a regular basis to ensure that the partners are supporting and advancing TAP, as well as to reduce redundancy, better serve unique populations, and improve coordination of services across program areas.

Conclusion

The mental health of our veterans, Service members, and military spouses is a critical concern, especially during their transition to civilian life and a post-military career. Understandably, financial struggles, employment barriers, and the stress of reintegration can take a toll on a person's mental health and make finding meaningful employment that much more difficult. As the lead agency on veteran employment, VETS recognizes the importance of addressing these challenges and works to address them in close coordination with our interagency partners. We look forward to working with this Subcommittee and our many partners and stakeholders to create opportunities to ensure that all veterans, Service members, and their spouses can have a good job and opportunity for advancement. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my statement. Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this hearing, and I welcome your questions.

¹⁹ <https://www.nvti.org/training/class-descriptions/#:-:~:text=9612%3A%20Preventing%20and%20Healing%20Burnout%20in%20Veteran%20Service%20Providers>