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Statement of
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before the
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
“Mission Incomplete: Strengthening the TAP Program
to Ensure a Smoother Transition to Civilian Life for Tomorrow's Veterans.”
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Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the collaborative relationship between the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Labor (DOL), and our other federal agency partners.

DoD and our partners are working closely to improve the effectiveness, quality, timeliness, and efficiency of the delivery of military-to-civilian transition support and services, while enhancing interoperability and efficiency in our joint operations. We advance these goals primarily through the Joint Executive Committee (JEC), a VA-DoD interagency collaborative body co-chaired by the VA Deputy Secretary and the DoD Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness, and the JEC's subordinate Transition Executive Committee (TEC). As a result of the JEC and TEC, we moved past the historically bifurcated view that DoD's role ends when the Service member separates from military service, to embrace a new appreciation of overlapping interests and dependent responsibilities across the Service member and Veteran journey.

Joint Framework for Transition Success

The JEC is responsible for oversight and implementation of the Military to Civilian Readiness (M2C Ready) framework, which brings all interagency programs under one overarching umbrella, ensuring that transitioning Service members receive the necessary interconnected resources and support throughout the critical 365-days pre- to 365-days post-separation. The TEC, co-chaired by DoD, VA, and DOL, includes the Departments of Education and Homeland Security, the Small Business Administration, the Office of Personnel Management, and the Military Departments. The TEC is supported by tiered interagency collaborative groups that include a senior transition steering group, an overarching transition working group, a DoD/Military Departments transition coordinating council, and six standing focus area working groups (Employment, Performance Management, Curriculum, Integrated Reserve Components, Data Sharing/Information Technology, and Strategic Communications). and. In November 2024, the TEC established a subordinate interagency Mental Health Task Force to identify TEC inter-agency and intra-agency mental health touchpoints, resources, and tools; and assess information or data sharing connectivity and/or gaps across the full transition

continuum. The desired outcome is synchronization closing the gap between clinical and non-clinical mental health support and services.

The JEC and TEC partnerships are best-in-class examples of effective federal interagency collaboration and service delivery, providing leadership synergy and subject matter expertise that prioritizes our joint strategic goals, identifies challenges, and guides solutions to ensure continuous, meaningful improvement in TAP. The JEC and TEC support DoD's mission by ensuring readiness of our force; this includes preparing Services members and their families for transition. Over the last seven years, DoD and our interagency partners have hosted numerous Military to Civilian Transition Summits that yielded two key outcomes: (1) we aligned disparate DoD and interagency transition activities into one overarching transition framework, and (2) we designated the year before and year after separation as the "critical transition period." These summits led to the development of the Military to Civilian Readiness (M2C Ready) Framework.

Under the auspices of the JEC and TEC, the Departments began implementation of a more interconnected and efficient transition process that aligns military-to-civilian transition activities along a continuum during the critical 365 days before separation and extending through the critical 365 days after separation. This 365-pre and 365-post transition time provides for comprehensive, standardized, and individualized assessments across DoD, VA, and the military services; and reinforces development of an individualized transition plan according to a Service member's unique circumstances.

As the new administration sets its priorities, there is a renewed commitment to working with our joint partners to establish new, bold, and transformative initiatives in transition support. The focus will be on creating a seamless continuum of care and assistance, leveraging data-driven insights, and strengthening partnerships to address emerging challenges. This collaborative vision will ensure that Service members, veterans, and their families receive holistic and adaptive support as they transition into civilian life. Through the JEC's stewardship of M2C Ready, and the TEC's collaborative forums, these priorities will drive forward-looking policies that enhance the long-term success of the transitioning military community.

Military to Civilian Readiness (M2C Ready) Framework

M2C Ready is an overarching framework that aligns all the various activities during transition to provide transitioning Service members with an understanding of, and easy access to,

all the benefits, services, and resources they are entitled to. Further, M2C Ready provides interagency support to facilitate a holistic and successful transition, and it guides policymakers towards areas of the process that need additional attention without creating duplicative programs or activities. The M2C Ready framework assists in identifying gaps in the transition process and facilitating agency efforts aimed at advancing the health, benefits, and support of Service members, Veterans, and their families.

Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

DoD is committed to supporting our Warfighters and their families as they complete their active military service and navigate the transition from military to civilian life. TAP is the foundation of that support, setting the conditions for successful transition by providing approximately 200,000 Service members each year with a common level of support—regardless of location, Service, or component—at over 200 locations around the globe. TAP is proactive in championing and implementing change; is markedly different and exponentially more effective than the program of 10, 5, or even 3 years ago; and provides Service members more comprehensive transition preparation, information, support, and services than at any time during our Nation’s history.

TAP is first and foremost a Military Departments’ Secretary and Commander program executed while Service members are on active duty. TAP is a statutorily mandated program that Service members are required to attend upon meeting eligibility requirements. To be eligible, and thereby required to attend TAP, Service members must have completed 180 days or more of continuous active duty in Title 10 active-duty status, to include Reserve Component members on active-duty orders. In the case of an anticipated retirement, pre-separation counseling must commence as soon as possible during the 24-month period preceding the anticipated retirement date. In the case of a separation other than a retirement, pre-separation counseling must commence not later than 365 days before the anticipated date. If a retirement or other separation is unanticipated with less than 365 before the anticipated retirement or separation date, or in the event a member of a reserve component is demobilized or deactivated when, as determined by the Secretary concerned, operational requirements make the 365-day requirement unfeasible, pre-separation counseling must begin as soon as possible within the remaining period of service.

The Secretaries and Commanders are committed to supporting TAP as both a Service member support program and a strategic readiness program. DoD supports the Secretaries and Commanders by leading collaborative interagency development and delivery of TAP. This design ensures fully informed prioritization and preservation of national defense strategic, operational, and tactical priorities governing active duty Service member requirements balanced with effective and timely TAP delivery supporting individual transition goals. The results directly support and enhance readiness, transition, recruiting, retention, reserve component affiliation, and sustainment of the All-Volunteer Force.

The John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 transformed TAP from a one-size fits all program to an individualized approach providing comprehensive, holistic, timely transition support focused on the Service member's needs and transition goals. Groups or cohorts transition on common timelines, but military-to-civilian transition is an individual activity. The unique personal circumstances, experiences, needs, and post-transition goals of each Service member determine whether that Service member requires employment, education, entrepreneurial, financial, housing, healthcare, or peer-to-peer support during their transition.

Today, TAP is agile and dynamic, and ensures both flexibility and relevance supporting Service member achievement of individual transition goals. Tailoring of the transition process to individual needs and goals provides flexibility. Service members receive information and resources that best support their individualized preparation for transition. Relevance, predicated on preparation for civilian life, ensures Service members' buy-in and active participation. Flexibility, relevance, and individualization ensure TAP works and empowers transitioning Service members to become successful veterans who attain their goals and reach their potential in their chosen civilian career paths, and in so doing, strengthens their local communities and the nation.

Today's TAP is an individualized, robust program with alternate pathways and multiple levels of assistance. At each step of the process, Service members have access to trained counselors who guide the Service member and tailor the program, allowing Service members to be in control of their transition and use programs, resources, and information that fit their specific needs and align with their post-transition goals.

TAP Initial Counseling

For Service members with an anticipated retirement or separation, the TAP journey begins with an Initial Counseling (IC) session initiated no later than 365 days prior to their separation or retirement. DoD strongly encourages Service members with an anticipated retirement to initiate IC as soon as possible during the 24 months preceding retirement. Service members with an unanticipated separation or retirement initiate IC as soon as possible within their remaining period of service.

In 2022, the Military Departments developed Corrective Action Plans (CAP) to improve IC timeliness. The CAPs have already produced marked improvement with 65% of Service members meeting IC timeliness requirements in 2023, including 52% of those with anticipated separations or retirements beginning TAP no later than 365 days prior to separation or retirement. The CAPs include updates to internal Service administrative regulations and changes to the Inspector General checklist to provide for stricter grading criteria on timeliness. CAPs also include marketing to Service members to ensure understanding, training for commanders and senior leaders on the requirement as well as the benefits of attending TAP early, and additional training for TAP counselors. The full impact of implementing the CAP changes will not be manifested in the data until 2026 at the earliest.

During the individualized counseling session with a trained TAP counselor, the Service member completes an Individual Self-Assessment and begins development of an Individual Transition Plan (ITP). Based on the self-assessment, counseling, and ITP, the TAP counselor assigns the Service member to a transition tier level. The assigned tier level—one (minimal assistance), two (medium assistance), or three (most assistance)—determines the transition assistance a Service member needs. Each individual Service member's tier assignment details which TAP components, courses, two-day tracks, and Career Readiness Standards are mandatory.

TAP Pre-Separation Brief

Once the IC and assessment are complete, the Service member attends the Pre-Separation Brief (Pre-Sep). Pre-Sep informs the Service member of various services, benefits, and resources available during and after transition. The Pre-Sep also familiarizes the Service member with available resources and content within the TAP courses. Pre-Sep provides the Service member

with the knowledge and flexibility to determine when to use services based on their individual needs and transition timeline. October 2024 updates to Pre-Sep included addition of information on the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service programs and an interactive pdf resource guide.

TAP Courses and Tracks

During TAP, Service members complete five core courses: Managing Your Transition, Military Occupational Code Crosswalk, Financial Planning for Transition, VA Benefits and Services, and DOL Employment Fundamentals for Career Transition. In 2024, the VA Benefits and Services course incorporated participation by Veteran Service Organizations identified by the VA.

Along with the core curriculum, TAP includes four two-day workshops (tracks) to provide focused information and resources aligned with individual post-transition goals. The four tracks are Employment, Managing Your (MY) Education, Vocational (Career and Credential Exploration), and Entrepreneurship (Boots to Business). During initial counseling and regardless of their designated tier, Service members must elect a track based on individual post-transition goals and are encouraged to attend the track-specific course.

Only Service members designated as Tier Level 3 are required to attend the elected track. In 2022, the Military Departments developed Corrective Action Plans (CAP) to increase Tier 3 track attendance. The CAPs have already produced marked improvement with 83% (29.8K of 35.9K) of Tier 3 Service members attending a track in 2023. The CAPs include training for TAP counselors; reports for commanders identifying Service members who had attended and those who need to attend a track; and inclusion of track attendance in Inspector General checklists. The full impact of implementing the CAP changes will not be manifested in the data until 2026 at the earliest.

Military Departments may exempt Service members designated as Tier Level 2 from track attendance based on the results of their IC and self-assessment. Service members determined as Tier Level 1 are exempt from track attendance. In 2023 over fifty thousand Tier 1 and Tier 2 Service members attended a track (50.1K of 135K). Regardless of tier designation, DoD encourages every Service member to attend any or all the tracks in preparation for transition.

TAP Capstone

Conducted no later than 90 days before transition from active duty, Capstone is the final component of TAP. During Capstone, the Commander, or Commander's designee, reviews the Service member's transition journey to determine completion of all applicable components and individual preparedness for transition. Service members identified as needing additional support require a warm handover by the Commander or designee. These warm handovers may include connection to Military OneSource for peer support, VA for housing assistance, or DOL for employment assistance. A warm handover creates a connection between the Service member and the appropriate partner or agency with the resources to assist in transition and beyond. Service members may also request a warm handover from the TAP counselor if they have a concern with their preparedness for transition beyond any identified by the TAP Counselor or Commander.

TAP Assessment

DoD uses the Transition Assistance Participant Assessment (TAPA) to capture Service member experiences and knowledge gained throughout the TAP process. TAPA, along with assessments from both governmental and non-governmental entities, allows DoD to evaluate TAP, the perception of TAP, and the quality of the counseling and instruction provided. The TAPA also captures basic demographics, such as Service, component, grade, length of service, location, and sex. Participation in the TAPA is voluntary and anonymous. However, DoD encourages Service members to complete the TAPA after each TAP course to ensure continuous program improvement. 2023 TAPA results demonstrate that Service members perceived TAP as valuable and of high quality. 89% understand how to access post-transition resources; 87% plan to use what they've learned; and 86% feel prepared to meet their transition goals.

The TAPA also provides Service members the opportunity to self-identify barriers to TAP, with a three-year average of only 1% of respondents perceiving a barrier (e.g., not allowed time away from work duties to attend TAP). While many operational, administrative, and individual factors contribute to this small percentage, DoD, Service Secretaries, and Commanders are focused on mitigating, reducing, and eliminating barriers.

Future TAP Enterprise Individual Self-Assessment

In 2024, DoD completed a year-long pilot at 17 military installations of an Enterprise Individual Self-Assessment (EISA) to replace the current Individual Self-Assessment. EISA is a standardized, evidence-based self-assessment tool that will assist in determining the likelihood the Service member will face major readjustment, health care, employment, or other transition-related challenges across nine life domains: social & relational, resiliency, hope, financial, employment, housing, sense of belonging, mental health resource awareness, and physical health resource awareness. The Military Departments will administer EISA twice, during IC at the beginning and during Capstone at the end of TAP, to inform and improve counseling, risk mitigation, support connections, and warm handover protocols. DoD contracted development of a modernized transition and reintegration information technology capability that will support EISA world-wide implementation in 2026.

Transition Support

SkillBridge

The highly popular SkillBridge program permits interested Service members to gain valuable civilian employment skills by providing job training, including apprenticeship programs, with defense industrial base employers as well as federal, state, local, and private sector employers. In return, these businesses have access to the world's most highly trained and motivated workforce and can evaluate participants' suitability for future employment within their company. The program is voluntary, with the scope and individual participation defined by Service operational needs, force structure policy, and Service member interest.

In 2023, DoD realigned SkillBridge within the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs to improve program stability, governance, evaluation, and management. Those efforts include enhanced information systems, data collection, and data analysis. The DoD is conducting employer and stakeholder outreach engagements to ensure that the next evolution of SkillBridge is fully informed by DoD, Military Departments, Service member, and industry partner assessments and requirements.

Financial Readiness

DoD's financial readiness program provides mandatory financial literacy training to

members at specific milestones across the military lifecycle, including transition, following the best practices outlined by the congressionally established Financial Literacy Education Commission. DoD programs provide trusted, factual, objective, and unbiased education and counseling support to members and spouses free of conflict-of-interest, delivered in a nonjudgmental manner, allowing individuals to make informed financial decisions to meet their goals and navigate potential financial challenges.

Eligibility for Military OneSource After Separation

Military OneSource's 24/7 call center, website, and mobile app with access to over 100+ support services for transitioning Service members and their dependents, are available for 365 days after separation. Military OneSource is a familiar and trusted resource for Service members and their families. The top three services requested by transitioning Service members and their families are non-medical counseling (relationship and readjustment counseling), tax services, and hometown information and referral services.

InTransition

DoD's InTransition Program assists Service members who have used behavioral health care services while on active duty in finding new providers and maintaining continuity of care across transitions—including when relocating to another assignment, returning from deployment, transitioning from active duty to the reserve, transitioning from the reserve to active duty, or preparing to leave military service. This assistance takes the shape of world-wide, specialized, telephonic transition coaching to facilitate the connection to a new provider, such as VA, community, or other providers.

Benefits Delivery at Discharge

DoD and VA encourage Service members to apply for VA Disability compensation benefits prior to separation and therefore coordinate closely in the execution of the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program. BDD allows Service members who are separating and applying for VA disability to file their claim as early as 180 days prior to separation. DoD and VA are leveraging electronic pre-separation service treatment records as a foundation for considering Service members' applications for BDD. This eliminates burdensome requirements

for Service members to obtain and transmit records to VA, reduces time-consuming administration at military medical treatment facilities, and speeds the application process.

Common Separation Health Assessment

Improved collaboration across agencies and within DoD has led to a single, common Separation Health Assessment. This unified assessment supports both the VA disability compensation process and the required DoD health assessment at separation. By adopting a shared form for use by both VA and DoD, the need for Service members to complete multiple assessments is reduced. This change enhances the overall separation experience and boosts efficiency. The creation of a single Separation Health Assessment emerged from the JEC. Its purpose is to ensure continuity in both mental and physical healthcare during transition, increase awareness of the health effects of military service, and support Service members' eligibility for VA disability compensation, benefits, and services.

Enhanced Statement of Benefits

After separation, a Service member is provided with a list of all the benefits, services, and health care to which they may be entitled, though that list is not tailored to each individual Service member. Under the direction of the JEC, DoD and VA are developing an online, authoritative, and individualized Enhanced Statement of Benefits, which will be hosted on VA.gov. This tailored, searchable listing of eligible DoD, VA, and DOL post-separation benefits will make it easier and faster for Veterans to identify eligibility; search for benefits, services, and health care; and apply for benefits.

VA Solid Start

As a result of DoD, VA, and DOL's collaboration on M2C Ready, the VA's Solid Start program was launched in 2021. Solid Start contacts Veterans at three critical points during the first year of transition at the 90-, 180-, and 360-day mark in order to achieve early and consistent contact and support the transition to civilian life—from help getting a home loan, to health care, to returning to work to mental health support. Additionally, DoD data provided to Solid Start assists VA counselors in prioritizing outreach to Veterans.

DOL Employment Navigator and Partnership Program (ENPP)

In response to feedback from Veterans who stated that, while their TAP classroom experience was educational, they desired a more personalized approach, DOL developed, piloted, and implemented the ENPP. DOL Employment Navigators provide one-on-one, tailored career guidance and job seeking skills support to transitioning Service members and their spouses, as well as referrals to vetted partner organizations. ENPP is currently available at 40 military installations worldwide and is expanding.

States: An Integral Partner in Transition

State Department of Veterans Affairs (SDVA) offices play a critical role in transition as they have been tasked to specifically manage Veterans' affairs on behalf of their Governor and carry out the responsibility for Veteran services and programs in their respective states or territories. Additionally, SDVA's welcome Veterans and connect them to federal and state benefits, support, high-quality care, and recognition they have earned. TAP curriculum includes introductory information and links to SDVAs for 54 states and territories and the District of Columbia.

Recognizing the importance of data, in both outreach and connecting Veterans to services and resources, DoD updated our data-sharing Memoranda of Understanding with SDVAs. In addition to sharing DD Form 214: Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty data with SDVAs, Service members can also share contact information from the DoD Form 2648: PreSeparation Counseling Checklist with SDVAs up to a year prior to separation, providing SDVAs the ability to proactively engage with and support Service members' transition experience.

Conclusion

As illustrated in our recent Report to Congress and highlighted in this statement, the Military Departments achieved significant improvements in IC timeliness and Tier 3 track attendance. Additionally, the number of Service members reporting a perceived barrier to TAP remains low, demonstrating Commanders' commitment, prioritization, and support of TAP and their transitioning Service members. DoD will work with the Military Departments to ensure

continuous improvement across TAP and are confident that improvements evidenced in 2023 will continue and further validate the positive steps the Military Departments put into place.

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss the Transition Assistance Program. Military to civilian transition is an ever-evolving, complex, and multi-faceted environment in which the diversity of individual goals equals the number of transitioning Service members. TAP is and must remain adaptive while vigilantly maintaining programmatic focus on three foundational and complimentary tenets: effective counseling, Service member buy-in, and meaningful support connections throughout the transition period. Correspondingly, TAP will sustain emphasis on an individualized approach that best meets each Service member's post-transition goals. To that end, TAP will remain innovative, proactive, transparent, and collaborative. DoD, working closely with the Service members, Military Departments, interagency partners, and Congress, will continuously improve transition services while building upon current successes to achieve ever-improving outcomes for Service members through TAP.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I thank you, the Ranking Member, and the members of this Subcommittee for your outstanding and unwavering support of the men and women who proudly wear the uniform in defense of our great Nation.