



Mission Incomplete: Strengthening the TAP Program to Ensure a Smoother Transition to Civilian Life for Tomorrow's Veterans

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Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

Testimony by:

D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University

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Introduction: Our Work and Policy Priorities

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today about transition and the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) on behalf of the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families' (IVMF) at Syracuse University.

About the IVMF

The IVMF was founded in 2011, as higher-education's first interdisciplinary academic institute singularly focused on advancing economic, social, and wellness outcomes on behalf of the nation's military, veterans, and their families. In support of that mission, the IVMF team designs and delivers class-leading programs and supportive services to the military-connected community, positioning them for a successful transition from military to civilian life. Each year, more than 20,000 service members, veterans, and family members engage IVMF programs and services, which are provided at largely no cost to participants. Our offerings span a variety of categories, from entrepreneurship and career training to connecting individuals with local resources in their communities. The IVMF's programs are underpinned by the Institute's sustained and robust data collection, applied research on the most pressing issues impacting veteran well-being, and evaluation services for public and private partners who also serve the military-connected population.

Accordingly, the IVMF's policy priorities are directly informed by insights from our programmatic, research, and evaluation efforts, as well as from engagements with the IVMF's many external partners including from the public sector, higher education, national and community nonprofits, philanthropy, and the private sector. We remain committed to contributing

to the effort to knit together the patchwork of government and non-government support greatly needed to support successful transition.

Key Message

We commend the Committee's continued dedication and progress to the improvement of TAP and the broader transition process, including the attention to measurement and oversight. While important strides have been made, more must be done to ensure veterans and their families are equipped to thrive in their post-service lives.

Below, we offer for consideration:

- **Relevant insights from the available evidence** about the transition experience and associated outcomes, as well as the limits of what TAP alone can achieve.
 - **Key takeaway:** Successful transition is essential to individual and family wellbeing and our national security.
 - **Key takeaway:** Transition can be difficult, but preparation and support beyond TAP are associated with better outcomes.
- **Recommendations for changes that would optimize TAP given its role in the overall transition process**, based on areas where TAP currently provides value and where it falls short in its design, implementation, and results.
 - **Key takeaway:** TAP remains an important part of the transition process and therefore requires greater accountability through compliance, standards, and evaluation.
 - **Key takeaway:** TAP should be part of a broader connected system of support that includes high quality public, nonprofit, and private sector programs that align with transitioning service member needs.

State of Current Evidence

Defining the Problem

Every year, an [estimated 200,000](#) service members transition out of the military. When we include military spouses, National Guard members, and reservists, the number of individuals navigating this transition each year is even higher. Many face challenges during the critical first three years outside the service, and [data shows](#) that more than half of veterans find the transition to civilian life difficult. Researchers from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have even referred to the first year after separation as “[the deadly gap](#)” for transitioning veterans due to an even more elevated risk for death by suicide. The ability to establish meaningful employment and financial stability are critical to a service member's successful transition from active duty to civilian life, and can help avoid enormous economic, social, and personal costs.

These costs have broader implications for our national security. There is evidence to suggest hesitancy to recommend or pursue military service for the younger generation, which in turn

influences our ability to recruit and sustain a robust All-Volunteer Force. In the most recent annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS) [report](#), a collaboration with Blue Star Families, we found that while seven in ten respondents say military service has added value to their family's life, only one-third would recommend military service to a young family member. Additionally, [recent data published by Ipsos](#) with Call of Duty Endowment and Mission Roll Call indicated that 55% of adults are unlikely to recommend military careers to teens, and that 80% of teens are uninterested in military service as a viable career path—despite positive perceptions of veterans overall. The study also found that roughly half of adult respondents believed challenges in military recruitment pose a significant risk to national security.

Transition and the Programmatic Landscape

Data shows that most veterans are seeking employment after service, even those also interested in school or starting a business. Further, about [62% of veterans are underemployed after 6.5 years](#). Yet, per a [recent report](#) from RAND, 95% of federal spending on military-to-civilian transition programs focus on general education services despite those services being utilized by just 41% of participants.

More broadly, per [U.S. Government Accountability Office](#) (GAO) classifications, there are 45 federal programs overseen by 11 federal agencies that help veterans transition—now 46 with the addition of the new Veteran and Spouse Transitional Assistance Grant Program—which RAND estimated collectively represent over \$13 billion of expenditures per year.

Critically, RAND found it difficult to compile dependable budget information about these programs, and that almost none have been rigorously or independently evaluated, including 27 programs that serve few individuals and for which almost no budget or performance data exists.

RAND's assessment made clear that the current state of federal programming includes overlaps across the existing programs, but also noted that gaps remain, particularly with employment assistance. Nonprofits have created programs that fill these and other gaps that TAP and the federal government may not be best suited to address. For example, eight years ago the IVMF launched the [Onward to Opportunity](#) (O2O) program. O2O provides career exploration and employability skills training, along with access to industry-recognized certifications to over 10,000 transitioning service members, veterans, and spouses every year at no cost. The program operates on 19 military communities, reaching over 70 installations across the country and provides virtual training to participants in all 50 states.

Importantly, O2O is the only program that has undergone a [rigorous third-party evaluation](#) to prove its efficacy at helping transitioning service members—especially those leaving the military from junior enlisted ranks—secure better salaries. While a [second report from RAND](#) noted challenges nonprofits face with measurement of their employment services, some are already tracking spending and performance to a fair extent. This data suggests there are currently organizations that deliver evidence-based programs more efficiently than the government.

Relatedly, the Ipsos study found there were high levels of support for enhancing certain services for former service members. Specifically, despite generally believing veterans are employed in jobs appropriate for their experience and education, respondents still overwhelmingly backed the expansion of programs focused on job placement.

Transition Experience for Individuals in Context

Our programmatic support and advocacy for those who have served acknowledge that there are differing needs among transitioning service members. We also recognize that the timeline to military transition can vary from one individual to another. Specifically, and in reference to an earlier section of this testimony, we know that even in the best of circumstances, the military transition process can be difficult. Cross-sectional annual data from the MFLS demonstrate that year after year, roughly half of veteran respondents described their transition experience as “difficult” or “very difficult.” This finding is dismaying. Yet, further data supports that “preparedness” lessens the challenges associated with military transition.

There are multiple ways to foster preparation for military transition. First is through giving transitioning service members more time for this change. For example, 61% of veterans agreed with the statement “I needed time to figure out what to do with my life during my transition.” Additionally, while many veterans do not get a lot of lead time before separation, preliminary data also show that 82% of veterans who prepared for transition three or more years before separating felt “prepared.” Among those veterans who said they were not able to prepare for transition, only 21% felt prepared.

Another aspect of having enough time for military transition is recognizing that the transition process can extend beyond the specific moment of military separation. Additional evidence from [The Veteran Metrics Initiative](#) (TVMI), a national longitudinal study of post-9/11 veterans managed by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Pennsylvania State University, found prevalent utilization of transition support programs and services from approximately a year prior to separation through three years after separation. Furthermore, even at five years post-service, only 81% of veterans say they felt fully transitioned, demonstrating that military transition can be a lengthy and uneven process for many service members and veterans.

As outlined above, there is compelling evidence to validate that transitioning out of the military presents challenges and is more than a moment in time, which requires us to think more broadly about military transition. We know that veterans and their families have varying needs before, during, and after the point of transition. They also require different levels of support to meet these needs and struggle to navigate to the right programs at the right time. Preliminary evidence shows that being prepared for military transition can pave the way for a smooth transition but at the same time, we must acknowledge the Department of Defense (DoD) priority of warfighting. This dichotomy highlights an inherent tension between prioritizing mission readiness and focusing on preparation for post-service life.

TAP Challenges and Opportunities

Compliance and Evaluation

TAP has significantly changed over the years and will continue to require adjustment to meet the needs of different generations of veterans in years to come. This necessary evolution means what is and is not working will also shift over time. This fact, coupled with TAP being the transition intervention available to the broadest swath of transitioning service members, reinforces how vital it is to monitor compliance and formally evaluate it for effectiveness.

While improving compliance has been a stated focus of DoD and a priority of this committee, data suggests that many service members still fail to begin TAP as early as required by law, and that a subset fail to attend the required portion at all. We know this varies by service branch and installation, and acknowledge the challenges faced at smaller or more remote locations. However, GAO reports have consistently recommended that DoD identify and address reasons for non-participation, including reducing the reliance on waivers.

In addition to making ongoing monitoring and reporting of key measures at the installation level more robust, other options should be explored to better support and hold commanders accountable for achieving compliance. Options should preserve flexibility to ensure transition can be prioritized in parallel with mission readiness, but also be paired with more consequences for noncompliance, such as integrating TAP participation into performance evaluations.

To date, potentially because of past periods where veteran unemployment rates were quite high, the bar for a successful transition was accordingly set quite low: employed vs. not employed and unemployment compensation spending. We should aspire to more than this bare minimum. Walking out of the service, veterans should be able to get jobs that reflect and respect their service and training, without assuming those jobs should be the same as the ones they did in the military. That is not to say that the first job out of the service will or needs to be the perfect long-term fit; it is to say that it's unacceptable to have to take huge leaps backwards or start over, and it's certainly unacceptable to be underemployed after six years.

However, TAP is one of the few transition programs to have undergone more formal evaluation. Results have generally been mixed, though there appear to be some important long-term benefits, such as higher labor force participation. One study found that Department of Labor (DOL) employment workshop participants comparatively found jobs more quickly and remained employed longer—but, they had significantly lower wages. Wages were higher if participants also attended sessions on VA benefits and completed the workshops earlier, reinforcing ways TAP might be structured to help with preparation.

Overall, it is time to build on existing evaluations and standardize metrics for TAP, using measures validated by existing evidence. As programs outside the government continue to adopt these measures, this approach will increase oversight, comparability, and ultimately help us improve the overall system of transition supports.

Value of TAP and Transition Programs

It is important to consider the role TAP plays during the transition process. There is data to indicate the circumstances under which it may offer the most value, as well as how it can be augmented to offer further value.

One way TAP has value for preparedness is through provision of necessary resources. MFLS data shows that veteran respondents tend to turn to multiple sources (e.g., word of mouth, TAP, engagement with veteran- and military-serving organizations) to gather information about military transition. And among those veterans who used these needed resources during military separation, 41% indicated that the resources were shared with them at TAP. However, despite the broad availability of transition resources, data from TVMI also showed that of the 19% who did not feel fully transitioned, many were not using services, specifically citing lack of awareness of what was available and confusion about their eligibility.

TVMI findings also show that during the first three months after transition, 66% of veterans use at least one program aside from TAP and 33% of veterans use multiple programs and services. These additional programs include both public and private offerings, and veterans who utilized more programs experienced better outcomes.

Empowering family members, such as spouses, to be part of the process of military transition through TAP can also create more capacity to tackle the transition process. Unpublished data from the 2024 MFLS showed that among veteran spouses who have experienced military transition, 32% are already engaging with resources through TAP and found it helpful.

At the same time, 17% of veteran spouses said they used TAP but found it unhelpful, and 51% said that they did not engage with TAP during their family's military transition. Anecdotally, spouses of veterans and separating service members have cited numerous reasons for not engaging with TAP, including scheduling difficulties, lack of understanding about what TAP is, and/or little to no knowledge that their attendance is encouraged.

Additionally, among those spouses who had been through this process, 36% indicated that they found the varying sets of transition resources they used through information given to them at TAP. So, while families deploy many informal networks (such as friends, coworkers, neighbors, etc.) in their transition information-seeking process, formal channels such as TAP remain important and relevant, particularly for those who may not necessarily have a robust informal network of supports.

To provide tailored and more useful support, Congress might explore options to work with MSOs and VSOs to develop a separate or targeted transition program for spouses and family members. A program specifically for this population—not a duplication of TAP—would improve awareness of and connection to resources, both at the point of separation and beyond. Congress might also consider legislative solutions that make it easier for military spouses to navigate to TAP and other resources, as they are often the ones managing household finances and their

children’s education goals. In general, providing opportunities for spouses may distribute responsibility and resources across the family unit in ways that help with preparation.

Taken together, these insights underscore that TAP can be an essential component for both veterans and their families, but they also demonstrate the clear need for additional and complementary supports.

Connections Outside DoD

Given the importance of connecting transitioning service members and their families to public and private offerings alongside TAP and after separation, we need to make warm handoffs easier between DoD, VA, and DOL, as well as between the federal government to states, counties and communities—the places where individuals in fact transition into civilian life.

These linkages can be integral to crisis prevention. When they are unaware of a veteran’s presence, government and community services cannot effectively address needs in a timely manner. We encourage Congress to come to an agreement on recent legislative proposals that would support data sharing and enrollment in benefits and services at the VA, DOL, state, and local levels for those that choose to do so once they officially separate from the military. To do this efficiently and effectively, we need to decrease barriers for the individual to move between the DoD and new systems of care. Doing so has the added benefit of empowering better oversight and evaluation long-term.

Conclusion

In light of the available evidence, our collective approach to transition requires us to consider interventions further upstream and downstream, moving beyond TAP and government alone. We must also implement more oversight to set veterans and their families up for success during what we know is a critical time.

Finally, setting measurement standards and evaluating TAP and other federal programs against these standards will help us restructure and enact holistic, systemwide reforms that put resources to their first best use. This system should also include stronger connective tissue between agencies and with the nonprofit sector, including ways to empower allocation of resources to effective, evidence-based nonprofit programs that deliver positive outcomes.

The ability of veterans and their families to thrive in their post-service lives depends on getting transition right. Doing so not only impacts their wellbeing. Successful transitions benefit our communities, preserve our All-Volunteer Force, and ultimately strengthen our national security.

We thank the Committee again for the opportunity to provide testimony on this topic, and for your enduring commitment to improve transition. We stand ready to continue sharing insights from our research and programs in support of this vital goal.