

**STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
ON
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, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss how we can strengthen the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). Accompanying me today is Ms. Regina Yount, Assistant Director, Outreach, Transition, and Economic Development, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). I appreciate your continued support of the Nation's Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. Within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), our focus will always remain on keeping Veterans and their families at the center of everything we do.

The military to civilian transition period can present many challenges for Service members, including increased risk for suicide, homelessness, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance use disorders, to name just a few. Connecting Veterans to the benefits and services they have earned and deserve serves as protective factors, guarding against threats to their overall mental, physical, and financial well-being. VA recognizes that transition starts well before a Service member leaves the military and continues for months or even years, as they seek stability at home, at work, and in their community.

Established in 1991, TAP is an interagency effort, led by the Department of Defense (DoD) and designed to help more than 200,000 transitioning Service members annually. Together, with interagency partners such as the Department of Labor (DoL), Small Business Administration, Office of Personnel Management, Department of Education, and Department of Homeland Security, TAP helps equip transitioning Service members with the tools they need to succeed in civilian life, including needed access to benefits and services. In partnership with these agencies, VA takes a comprehensive approach, ensuring the implementation of a tailored program that evolves with the changing needs of transitioning Service members. The connections VA makes during the TAP course are building blocks for the relationship we aspire to have with Veterans for a lifetime, as their needs evolve and change.

During classroom instruction, VA leads a 1-day Benefits and Services Course that helps Service members understand how to navigate resources available within VA, as well as how to access the benefits and services they have earned through their military service. Spouses and caregivers are also invited to participate in the course, as VA recognizes and values them. During fiscal year (FY) 2024, Benefits Advisors assisted over 206,000 transitioning Service members by delivering 6,039 Benefits and Services Courses (5,767 in-person and 272 instructor led virtual) to over 153,000 transitioning Service members, Veterans, their families, and caregivers. Additionally, 52,898 individuals completed the eLearning online VA Benefits and Services course through the VA Transition Online Learning at tapevents.mil. During the same period, the VA Benefits and Services Course had a satisfaction rate of 96.3% for in-person instruction and 93.6% for virtual classes.

As the needs of transitioning Service members evolve, so must the delivery of our transition services. To that end, VA has made the following updates to the 1-day Benefits and Services Course.

VA understands the integral role Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) have in assisting transitioning Service members. Knowing the importance of fostering supportive relationships, in January 2024, VA began inviting accredited VSO representatives (working on or near military installations) to directly connect with attendees during the VA Benefits and Services Course. The goal of these interactions is to increase benefit utilization through information sharing and by creating lasting connections with VSOs. Since the start of this initiative, VSOs have connected with over 53,000 transitioning Service members through the VA Benefits and Services Course. Surveyed course participants have an overall satisfaction rate of 95.7% for these VSO interactions.

TAP also goes beyond classroom instruction. VA Benefits Advisors provide one-on-one sessions for transitioning Service members and their families that are based on each individual's specific or unique needs. In FY 2024, VA conducted more than 54,000 one-on-one sessions.

The most prevalent topics during one-on-one appointments with Benefits Advisors have been education benefits, disability compensation, and health care questions. The percentages of each topic are the following:

- 42% (over 22,800) on claims and application support;
- 42% (over 22,700) on education and training program benefits; and
- 34.5% (over 16,000) on health care benefits and support services.

To increase direct connections for transitioning Service members, VA modernized the sign-up process for one-on-one appointments. As of October 2024, Benefits Advisors are using Quick Response (QR) Codes to enable Service members to connect directly with them via e-mail to ask questions or to request a one-on-one session. Based on this enhancement, VA has seen an increase in the number of one-

on-one appointments made, from 33% in quarter one of FY 2024 to 40% in quarter one of FY 2025.

VA continues to enhance access to critical information outside of the Benefits and Services Course. Military Life Cycles are 45- to 60-minute information sessions that can be accessed anytime throughout a Service member's career or after separation. Transitioning Service members and their spouses, who may need to refer to the information provided during the TAP week, can access information at their leisure.

In 2024, VA added a session for Service members discharged for Other Than Honorable conditions. Along with this new course, during the same period, 21,282 Service members, Veterans, and their spouses utilized Military Life Cycles that covered the following:

- Reserve Component Dual Payments;
- Social and Emotional Health Resources;
- Survivor and Casualty Assistance Resources;
- VA Benefits 101;
- VA Education Benefits;
- VA Home Loan Guaranty Program;
- VA Life Insurance Benefits;
- Vet Centers;
- Community Integration Resources;
- VA Education and Training Benefits for Spouses and Dependents;
- Mental Health for Families; and
- Disability Compensation.

VA understands that major life transitions, including separation from the military, can lead to an increased risk of suicide. To address the increased risk, the Transition Executive Council has created a VA-DoD-DoL Task Force. Established in December 2024, the Task Force has been charged with the following:

- (1) Identifying and refining the mental health touchpoints along the transition continuum.
- (2) Evaluating the effectiveness of the mental health touchpoints connection through referral and warm handover processes to resources and tools for mental health services during the critical 365 days pre-separation to 365-days post-separation.
- (3) Establishing a standardized referral process between VA and DoD, which may leverage programs including inTransition,¹ Military OneSource,² and Solid Start, among others.

¹ <https://www.health.mil/Military-Health-Topics/Centers-of-Excellence/Psychological-Health-Center-of-Excellence/inTransition>

² <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/>

Further, VBA has been diligently working on updating communication to Veterans, to include trauma-sensitive written correspondence and forms. VA made several updates to letters including those addressed to Veterans who have experienced military sexual trauma. VBA is continuing to update its letter inventory to ensure a customer-centric approach.

VA's support of transitioning Service members does not end with separation. VA continues our support during the critical first year following release from active duty through the VA Solid Start Program.

VA research shows that during the first-year of transition, Veterans face increased challenges with homelessness, family reintegration, employment, PTSD, and substance abuse, all of which can increase the risk for suicide. The VA launched the Solid Start Program on December 2, 2019, to make early, consistent, and caring contact with newly separated Service members. On October 17, 2022, Solid Start was signed into law (P.L. 117-205), permanently authorizing VA to continue the program with DoD coordination.

In Solid Start, VA calls all eligible, recently separated Service members, regardless of their character of discharge, at three key stages (90-, 180-, and 365-days after separation) during their first year after separation from active duty. Using data provided by DoD, Solid Start provides priority contact to individuals meeting certain mental health risk factors, supporting continuity of care, and lowering any barriers to accessing mental health care treatment and support through VA. These representatives receive specialized training to recognize the signs of crisis and, when needed, can provide a warm transfer to the Veterans and Military Crisis Line for additional support. Since the launch of Solid Start through January 2025, VA has reached 57 Veterans who were actively in crisis at the time of the call and successfully connected them to the crisis line for support.

Solid Start representatives address challenges recently separated Service members may be facing by connecting the individual with the appropriate benefits or resources for assistance. Solid Start calls are not scripted, and they do not have any talk time limitations. Representatives ask open-ended questions that seek to establish the individual's status and potential needs. Follow-up materials or connected resources are also driven by these individualized calls and are unique to the Veteran's needs. By establishing a personal, one-on-one relationship with VA in the first critical year post-separation from active duty, Solid Start aims to increase the likelihood that transitioning Service members will stay connected to VA and utilize VA benefits and services, including mental health resources when needed. Since the launch of the program, Veterans who successfully connected with Solid Start have shown increased benefit utilization compared to those with whom Solid Start was unable to successfully connect.

Since its launch, through January 2025, Solid Start has successfully connected with 556,702 recently separated Service members, representing a 74.3% successful connection rate. In addition to improving successful connection rates year over year, VA analyzes benefit utilization rates for Solid Start-eligible, recently separated Service

members. For those who had successful connections, benefit utilization of compensation, education, health care, home loan, Veteran Readiness and Employment, and Personalized Career Planning and Guidance (PCPG) are higher than for those who did not successfully connect with a VASS representative.

To continue improving connections between active duty and Solid Start, TAP will be launching one-on-one data sharing with Solid Start using the Visitor Engagement Reporting Application (VERA) by April 2025. During one-on-one engagements with Benefits Advisors, transitioning Service members will be able to share information with Solid Start regarding VA benefits they are interested in or plan to enroll in or apply for. The goal is to provide Solid Start representatives with enhanced individualized information that enables VA to get to know the transitioning Service member and their interests before they separate.

Part of ensuring transitioning Service members, Veterans, and their families are cared for and experience a smooth transition into civilian life involves providing them with access to tools needed to address their overall economic well-being and enable their success as valuable community members and leaders. While multiple programs within VA provide pathways to financial well-being such as Education and Veteran Readiness and Employment services, two additional programs that help in this area are highlighted below.

The PCPG program is a critical VA benefit that provides career counseling, assessment, education planning, and guidance resources. This service is customized to each Veteran's needs, supporting them in achieving their personal, career, and education goals. PCPG, also known as Chapter 36 services, fulfills 38 U.S.C. § 3697A requirements by providing these services to transitioning Service members, Veterans, and qualified dependents, who are within 6 months of leaving the military, to Veterans who have left the military within the past 12 months, or at any time to individuals who are eligible to use a VA education benefit. PCPG career and education counseling services include resumé support, education and employment planning, detailed skills assessment, a personalized action plan to achieve education and career goals, adjustment counseling to successfully transition to civilian employment, and a direct connection to VA benefits and services. In FY 2024, PCPG processed 14,931 applications requesting services.

The Veteran and Spouse Transitional Grant Program (VSTAGP) is a new five-year grant program which was established to provide sustainable employment transition assistance services to former members of the Armed Forces who are separated, retired, or discharged from the Armed Forces and to their spouses. Transition services include resumé assistance, interview training, job recruitment training, apprenticeships, employment training and education, and employment referrals, including placement and related services that may contribute to a successful transition into civilian life. FY 2025 is the first year of performance for VSTAGP, which has 13 geographically dispersed recipients providing services to former Service members and spouses. As of January 2025, all grantees are signing up applicants and providing services, and, while VA

expects our first performance data metrics from grantees to be available in April 2025, we already have some good news stories to share.

For example, a Veteran believed he was ineligible for VA services. After experiencing homelessness alongside his wife and two children, he felt hopeless, struggling to face his family under the weight of their circumstances. Fortunately, he learned about VSTAGP and connected with the Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) Southern California. Through their employment services, he not only regained confidence but also secured a stable job as a non-emergency ambulance driver, earning \$24.22 per hour. Additionally, JVS was able to leverage other Veteran support programs to help the family secure permanent housing, providing them with the fresh start they so desperately needed. This story and many others like it exemplify the lifelong connection to VA that we are seeking to build so they know to come to us during the downturns in life.

VA also recognizes that the full transition to civilian life does not have a set end date and differs from individual to individual. VA ensures a Veteran, spouse, family member, or survivor can connect with VA at any time in their life journey by building positive lasting relationships with them before and after leaving active service.

Through a robust outreach program, VA provides a variety of benefits and services that can help reduce risk factors associated with suicide and promote protective factors for some Veterans. Outreach is conducted in local and regional areas by VA regional office personnel through in-person or virtual events. During these events, VA representatives address VA's benefits and services such as disability compensation, pension, and education/GI Bill benefits while also connecting them to healthcare resources. During FY 2024, VBA conducted 62,661 hours of outreach across 18,526 events. Out of these events, 1,003 were held at military installations, demonstrating VA's continued dedication to providing access across the transition continuum.

In addition to the VA-led efforts for outreach, VA supports DoL's Off-Base Transition Training (OBTT) Program. VA facilitates virtual, bi-weekly 45-minute VA benefits overview sessions providing active-duty Service members, Veterans, spouses, survivors, and their families with the information they need to access their earned benefits. Each session includes time for questions to be answered and participants receive a resource list to connect them with more information on the benefits and topics that were discussed during the session. Since launching the collaborative effort in June 2024, VA has facilitated 16 VA benefits overview sessions. VA and DoL will continue to collaborate and improve the OBTT program.

VA transition support has undergone major enhancements since the inception of TAP in 1991. Ongoing program modifications ensure VA's support continues to meet the changing needs of all transitioning Service members. VA is committed to ensuring that the partnership between VA and DoD is aligned, enduring and strong, with a shared focus on putting the needs of Service members, Veterans, and their families first. We

seek continuous improvements, recognizing the driving factors are the major life events impacting Veterans and their families today.

Conclusion

VA shares Congress' goal of ensuring Service members and their families are supported as they transition from military to civilian life and will remain dedicated to strengthening our transition initiatives. Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, this concludes my testimony. I am happy to respond to any questions you or the Subcommittee members may have.