



**WRITTEN TESTIMONY
SUBMITTED TO THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

for the March 25, 2025 Oversight Hearing

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

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity. My name is Kandi Tillman. My journey here today began 18 years ago when I met a recently separated junior enlisted veteran. He had been a professional athlete, he had a college degree, enlisted after 9/11 and served in the elite Ranger Regiment - clearly he had significant skills. His initial plan was to pursue a Masters Degree to support his career pivot but he did not have education benefits.

I will never forget the day he said, *“What can I do except shoot a gun or swing a bat?”* The personal uncertainty was devastating. It took him nearly three years to find steady employment. I also remember the day in 2008 when I called a random line at the Phoenix VA in desperation.

At the time and having worked in private industry for several years, I knew there were so many things he could do. But he had a lack of awareness of how civilian industry worked & he lacked meaningful connections to those that would understand his military skills. And while his personal reality was heartbreaking, the macro issue was the talent loss for our community - and worse, the lost economic potential for our society. Back then, there was no strong Transition Assistance Program (TAP), no SkillBridge, and little enthusiasm from employers to engage with what they did not understand. Military transition looked very different than it does today. We must not go back.

I am grateful for the steadfast efforts of so many over the past two decades to ensure that service members leaving the military today have a stronger ecosystem of support. Is there more to do? Of course. And we must have a clear and informed understanding of what military transition needs for today.

In 2018, a veteran working at a Fortune 500 company well-known in the military community shared a business challenge with me:

“We want to hire more transitioning military and student veterans nationwide. But we can't reach them efficiently to even share our opportunities.”

And it wasn't an isolated statement. I was hearing similar scenarios from many employers, including big defense contractors and small mom & pop employers.

Caring about this community wasn't enough; understanding business fundamentals and bridging the gap for employers - who have jobs to offer - was essential.

As a civilian with 20 years of business experience across both Fortune 500 companies and small companies working in this community, I often bring a different perspective to veteran employment beyond traditional case management solutions.

I later married the veteran I mentioned earlier. In 2020, my husband Kevin and I founded **50strong**. Our vision was to create solutions that support strong employers in **all 50 states**, enabling them to build strong pathways for military-affiliated job seekers and to connect with strong military talent.

50strong is a **small business with a big mission**, dedicated to maximizing social impact by facilitating **easy, casual, virtual connections**. I often describe our work as **small and scrappy and running at the speed of industry** - always focused on finding smart solutions while doing as much good as we can.

In 2024, our funding was exclusively from 13 large employer partners. Through their support, 50strong provides **no-fee engagement tools** to more than 250 employers & DoD-authorized SkillBridge partners and over 100 higher education institutions.

Today, we are honored that many TAP leaders **organically refer transitioning service members** to engage with 50strong's **accessible and virtual** efforts. We are also honored to be a Department of Labor ENPP referral partner and we have supported employer roundtables with DoD Military-Civilian Transition Office, DoL VETS and several Congressional offices. Most importantly, we operate **at no cost** to transitioning service members and **without using any taxpayer dollars**.

In 2024, approximately 13,000 transitioning service members & military-affiliated jobseekers registered for our virtual events. Of those:

- approximately 25% were active duty
- approximately 55% were currently-enrolled military students in "extended military transition".
- approximately 25% were E1-E4 ranks, which is important because this group is less likely to opt in to efforts than other ranks.¹

As a recent example, last Thursday and after just one 90 min virtual meetup that included several hundred military-affiliated jobseekers:

- 56% joined for the very first time
- nearly 90% say they learned about new pathways
- 98% recommend 50strong to other military-affiliated jobseekers

We often hear feedback such as the following:

¹Post-9/11 Veteran Transitions to Civilian Life: Predictors of the Use of Employment Programs. Journal of Veterans Studies, <https://journal-veterans-studies.org/articles/10.21061/jvs.v5i1.127>

“Such an amazing event that’s filled with QUALITY content, partners and program information. The doors of opportunity just flung wide open!”

“The fact that I was previously pigeon-holing myself to only about 10 different companies let’s me know that there are many more opportunities than I originally thought.”

Importantly, this is model that is easily scalable.

We also re-invest our profits to build new solutions for our community. In 2022, we launched the 50strong Opportunity Marketplace². This portal includes SkillBridge, Student Veteran and Apprenticeship opportunities at CITY LEVEL offering employer-driven, real-time updates for CITY-LEVEL opportunity sharing for ANY DoD-authorized SkillBridge & employer partner that wishes to collaborate at NO FEE. *There are currently tens of thousands of full-time roles and over 13,000 SkillBridge opportunities publicly available for service members to leverage.*

As we continue to identify & invest in new solutions, we are honored to have direct input from thousands of military-affiliated jobseekers and employers and education partners. In this context, I’d like to offer four insights and recommendations for ways in which we can improve military transition together.

INSIGHT #1

While TAP and Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) provide essential individualized career counseling and support, the involvement of employers in industry-led career preparation is equally vital. Employment is a pivotal component of a successful transition, especially given that 73% of those leaving active duty separate vs retire.³ ***Post-military employment largely relies on private industry employers.***

Unfortunately employer engagement is often treated as an afterthought. To date, our national efforts have predominantly focused on enabling the individual via TAP and various VSOs without as much emphasis on the importance of the HOW for employers that seek to engage in military transition. The reality of requiring employers to navigate the military services, various TAP leads and the 40,000 VSOs within in the ecosystem⁴ is as complicated for employers as it is for individual jobseekers.

According to a 2024 RAND report, employment-focused transition efforts are minimal as “..very few programs and a small amount of funding are dedicated to helping service members and veterans translate their military skills to the civilian labor market, find civilian apprenticeships or jobs, or connect with civilian employers.” Further “the Big Four programs accounted for \$13.5 billion out of \$14.3 billion total, whereas funding for the TAP, which serves all transitioning

² 50strong, www.50-strong.us/marketplace

³ Military OneSource, <https://demographics.militaryonesource.mil/chapter-2-personnel-separations>

⁴ Charting the Sea of Goodwill, https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/hero/documents/VeteransPhilanthropy_151207_rev.pdf

service members, was approximately \$140 million.”⁵ It is therefore important that we protect the TAP investment in the context of total transition spending.

But we must look for smart ways to improve it and we can do this by further engaging private industry employers early and often and intimately into TAP. We must do this efficiently and at-scale across hundreds of military installations globally and for the approximately 170,000 service members that separate annually. This requires more than bi-annual on-base hiring fairs or physical flyers to hand out or 2-3 employers at monthly transition classes or government-run job boards that are cumbersome for employers. It requires an efficient, always-on, 24/7 approach to a variety of employers for civilian industry engagement that leverages technology.

Quite simply, employers must be enabled to be part of the discussion, processes, or policies that support transition. Otherwise, any systems developed may inherently favor a government, education or nonprofit intermediary involved in all employment activities - a situation unlike that for any other part of the labor force.

As we often tell service members when they come to 50strong:

*“We do not have jobs. Employers have jobs. Employers are here.
We do NOT want to be an unnecessary bottleneck for you.”*

Our recommendations include:

- Ensure that strong, thought-leading employer voices are included for all Congressional hearings & roundtables & policy discussions *alongside* government agencies and veteran-serving organizations.
- Encourage all government agencies to enable **direct employer engagement** to ensure any program changes or policy iterations are mindful of impacts to employers of all sizes, establishing employer advisories to provide ongoing input for TAP, SkillBridge, Jobs for Veterans State Grants, VR&E and all other transition-related programs.
- Protect current investments in TAP while reviewing latest TAP curriculum and ensuring cross-industry employer input to drive improvements.
- Importantly, we must identify ways to further incorporate & leverage INDUSTRY-DRIVEN virtual career preparation into TAP curriculum at scale and across installations.

INSIGHT #2

In the last 6 years, SkillBridge has indeed revolutionized employer participation in military transition. SkillBridge directly enables Military Talent Teams to offer training toward strong employment and to internally demonstrate to hiring teams the capability of military talent in a way that is aligned to their workforce needs, thus reducing their risk in hiring talent and/or creating pathways that may not have been possible in direct hiring efforts. Once value is demonstrated, employers are eager to open more pathways. Essentially, SkillBridge serves as an entry point for employers.

⁵ Rand “Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions”, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html

Everyday we hear about strong outcomes that are directly enabled via SkillBridge, helping transitioning service members get into roles they would have never even considered if not for this program.

According to our tracking - since 2019, the number of Authorized Partners has grown by approximately 5000%⁶ which demonstrates industry's eagerness & momentum overall; as with any rapidly growing program, it is critical to ensure expansion while maintaining meaningful employment outcomes via program guidelines and best practice sharing.

I would like to thank the bipartisan leadership and support of the past three administrations and numerous Congressional leaders which have made SkillBridge the great program that it is today. And I applaud Dr. Neaves and the current team at the DoD Military-Civilian Transition Office for their 2024 updates that are now underway that will directly drive program sustainability & strong outcomes by ensuring clear guidelines and reporting efforts.

As one strong example, one of our closest partners, **Lowe's**, has established a best-practice SkillBridge program that enables fellowship opportunities at any of their locations across the country. Their 12-week program, which begins at the start of each month, is designed to help service members bring their skills and military experience to leadership positions in the civilian sector, regardless of their education level. Last year, 90% of their fellows received a full-time job offer at the end of their fellowship.⁷ *This means that a service member returning home to Oshkosh, Wisconsin or Bedford, New Hampshire or Buckeye, Arizona after serving a 4-year enlistment has a pathway to a bright future in their own community on Day 1 of their post-Active Duty service.*

I'll also highlight another strong employer **Cushman & Wakefield**. They are a global commercial real estate services B2B company and a much lesser known entity to the military. They utilize SkillBridge to train service members into virtually any role from a variety of military occupations that don't often have a direct civilian equivalent. *They've taken on more than 100 Skillbridge interns into over 30 different types of roles with a 90%+ full time offer rate.*

Unfortunately, it should be noted that there are also DoD-authorized SkillBridge providers whose programs do not necessarily meet the full intent of the program to provide robust experiential learning that leads to employment, and instead focus on giving the servicemember free time to use as they wish. These are often referred to as "SkillBridge vacations". Unfortunately, this erodes commanders' trust in the program and leads to endless frustration for the service members when there is no opportunity for employment on the backend. Again, I am grateful for efforts underway to prevent this.

We must also ensure that we continue to enable "on ramps" for new employers, especially smaller employers; these yield new SkillBridge internship opportunities for service members and help remove DoD burden of unexpected unemployment expenses. To date, this has been accomplished through individual employer-based internships via Army Career Skills Program,

⁶ 50strong tracking of DoD SkillBridge website data over time, not DoD-provided or DoD-sponsored data; 2019: ~120 partners & 2025: ~6200 partners

⁷ Lowe's, <https://talent.lowes.com/us/en/csp-dod-skillbridge>

U.S Chamber of Commerce’s Hiring our Heroes and other reputable “third party” intermediary SkillBridge partners that facilitate new employer-driven internships.

Our recommendations include:

- Continue to champion the 2024 efforts now underway by DoD’s Military-Civilian Transition Office⁸ to ensure that all SkillBridge partners are working toward strong employment outcomes.
- Efforts are also underway by DoD’s Military-Civilian Transition Office toward centralization of command approvals across Services. We applaud the team’s efforts and encourage continued support for efforts that will drive efficient approval processes.
- We do recommend modifying the most recent SkillBridge MOU language in an effort to prevent adding unnecessary bureaucracy for a process that has long-been producing strong outcomes for DoD, employers & service members. This includes updating SkillBridge policy to delay Section 4.3.4 (individual MOU requirements for host employers) until a future date but mandate employment outcomes reporting immediately as outlined in Section 4.3.3.⁹ This will ensure reporting visibility to DoD on an immediate time frame without instituting unnecessary bureaucracy and without incurring DoD costs to resources while also ensuring individual internships are enabled via trusted entities that are skilled at providing this service.

INSIGHT #3

While many Fortune 500 companies have strong military talent efforts to support their business needs, we must find solutions that work for Small Business employers. This includes the more than 33 million small businesses in the U.S. that employ 47% of all private sector employees.¹⁰ It is these small employers that we must call upon to help support strong military transitions for separating service members and to shrink the military-civilian divide throughout an individual’s service.

Today, it can be incredibly difficult for any small business to engage with military talent. They often lack resources to physically travel to installations and/or they often lack internal knowledge of how to engage various transition programs and/or they are often thwarted by the idea of government bureaucracy.

As noted in a 2024 Rand report, “GAO catalogued 45 such programs that are overseen by 11 federal agencies..”¹¹ which all support various aspects of military transition. It is cumbersome at best for even large employers to navigate and it can be nearly impossible for a small employer.

⁸ DoD SkillBridge MOU, updated August 2024, https://skillbridge.osd.mil/docs/DoD_SkillBridge_MOU_Aug_2024_Release.pdf

⁹ DoD SkillBridge MOU, updated August 2024, https://skillbridge.osd.mil/docs/DoD_SkillBridge_MOU_Aug_2024_Release.pdf

¹⁰ U.S. Small Business Administration, <https://advocacy.sba.gov/2023/03/07/frequently-asked-questions-about-small-business-2023/#:~:text=Most%20businesses%20are%20small%2D%2099.9,46.4%25%20of%20private%20sector%20employees>

¹¹ Rand “Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions”, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html

Therefore, state & local chambers of commerce and industry-driven business associations are often critical. I was honored recently to join Governor Laura Kelly of Kansas as she convened a roundtable with business leaders and military commands to discuss how to best support Kansas employers.

As another example, John Deere has a unique approach that enables over 1500 privately-owned dealer locations across the country, many of which are small businesses, to connect with transitioning service members. The John Deere national military team serves as the “front porch” and then collaborates across all their individual dealers to align location-based job matching of service members with local workforce needs. As of 2024, John Deere hired approximately 500 veterans & transitioning service members into their dealerships thanks to this incredible effort.

At the local and regional level, it is often business and trade associations which are best positioned to provide education and resources to employers, employment connections to transitioning servicemembers, and regional advocacy to ensure these two groups have regular opportunities to engage each other. Chambers of Commerce are highly invested in ensuring their employer base is connected to the highly skilled transitioning military community to retain or attract newly separated servicemembers and their families as productive members of the area workforce and economy. An example of this is the North San Diego Business Chamber, where their robust activities around veteran employment include providing direct education to transitioning servicemembers and 1 free year of membership in the Chamber to have the opportunity to build strong networks of professional relationships with a wide variety of regional and national employers. The North San Diego Business Chamber also hosts an annual regional Military Summit which provides education and resources for not only transitioning military, veterans, and military families, but for employers as well. Across our nation, the needs, challenges, and opportunities are varied and often distinctly unique, just as are the needs of transitioning servicemembers in varied locations. There is no "one size fits all" program that can address these unique needs nationally, and local and regional efforts are an essential enabler.

Our recommendations include:

- For small, local employers, DoD SkillBridge is often their entry point. Again, we must ensure that there exists an easy on-ramp for individual internships that do not require MOU agreements with DoD. As above, these yield new SkillBridge internship opportunities for service members and help remove DoD burden of unexpected unemployment expenses and they can be incredibly important for local enablement, especially for small employers.
- TAP leads should continue to collaborate with their local chambers of commerce to support opportunities with small businesses near their installations and also with national employers with opportunities across the country. This collaboration should be encouraged by national leadership and the DoD. *Congressional offices can lend their leadership to drive these conversations.*

INSIGHT #4

Military transition must account for the fact that half of all veterans enroll in school after leaving the military¹² - highlighting an “extended transition”. Yet, despite the very large federal investment, there is no at-scale support for translating their military skills when they enter the workforce, actual support offered via schools may be severely limited and there also is minimal reporting of outcomes.

It is important to consider that:

- 53% of service members join the military for education benefits¹³
- 90% of student veterans come from enlisted ranks¹⁴
- 86% of those veterans cite career/job opportunities as their reason for pursuing higher education¹⁵

For these reasons, Post-9/11 GI Bill Benefits can be critical to a bright future for a service member in “extended transition”. We can only fulfill our national promise of a strong post-military future if employment is an aligned outcome and if we honor the use of these funds to support those it intends to support.

Unfortunately, while Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits are the highest expenditure “military transition” program with hundreds of thousands of participating veterans, “...little is known about the program’s effects on military recruitment, retention, military-to-civilian transitions, or civilian-employment outcomes for veterans.”¹⁶

It is too easy to promote more training or education. But without meaningful translation to a job on the backend, this means that veterans may use their hard-earned benefits with little benefit.

Further, there is minimal direction provided to schools on how they use VA funds once students are enrolled. We believe that any school accepting VA funds should have a responsibility in providing veteran-focused support services to ensure outcomes & employment while also acknowledging that they know what needs their students may have.

Recently, I was asked to submit a letter of support for a \$2 million grant - intended to provide military-supportive services to a school that already receives millions in Post-9/11 GI Bill funding annually. I declined because their current VA payments seem to be going into a general fund rather than directly supporting military-affiliated students with programming that improves their outcomes. I certainly hope that I am wrong.

Similarly, a Veteran Center leader at another reputable university shared with me that they have to externally fundraise for every supportive service they offer to military-affiliated students. They

¹² Pew Research 2019,

<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/09/10/the-transition-to-post-military-employment/>

¹³ Institute for Veteran & Military Families,

<https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/student-veterans-a-valuable-asset-to-higher-education/>

¹⁴ Student Veterans of American annual report 2020,

<https://studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/SVA-2020-Annual-Report.pdf>

¹⁵ Institute for Veteran & Military Families,

<https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/student-veterans-a-valuable-asset-to-higher-education/>

¹⁶ Rand “Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions”,

https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html

also mentioned that at least one of their currently-enrolled student veterans is homeless - even as the school receives millions in VA tuition revenue from the hard-earned education benefits of those students that served.

Given the annual \$10.6 billion taxpayer investment spent on Education Benefits¹⁷ with the intent of education benefits being, as stated in the 2021 VA Report: "...to enhance the Nation's competitiveness through the development of a more highly educated and more productive workforce"¹⁸, we must find new ways drive & measure employment outcomes.

It is important to note that of our total 50strong event registrants, 54% are currently-enrolled military-affiliated students seeking industry-led career prep & exploration. Many of them are encouraged to come by their Campus Veterans Centers. We recognize that Higher Ed Veteran Centers often have very limited budgets and we work hard to offer no-fee tools to any Education Partner as they seek to support their military-affiliated students. We are grateful to our 100+ education partners that are tapping into our no-fee services to help support their students and we are grateful to the employers that make them possible.

As one student veteran recently shared,

"I was on the internship search for several months, trying to market my military experience to university recruiters...I received a plethora of rejections....I stumbled upon 50strong when I saw a posting for summer internships and was able to meet with AWS. The process has been amazing..They already knew the value my military service brought."

I am proud to share that we will host our first 50strong StudentConnect event on April 3. This virtual event is especially for student veterans and will include employers eager to highlight internship, part-time and new graduate opportunities. We will also host virtual share sessions specially meant to further enable Veteran Center leaders this year.

Our specific recommendations for this Subcommittee include:

- Ensure TAP Education tracks are inclusive of employers vs focusing on education partners that may only have an enrollment-focused intent.
- Establish a centralized tracking of employment outcomes for student veterans for any school accepting Post-9/11 GI Bill payments.
- Recommend that all Education partners that receive Post-9/11 GI Bill payments allocate a certain percentage of funds to directly support programming & services for student veterans and allow for public reporting & transparency of this contribution.
- Ask VA to establish an employer advisory council to support employment outcomes for PGIB beneficiaries and any new education-focused programs, including VETTEC.

¹⁷ FY2021 Annual Benefits Report – VA Education
https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/docs/2021_education.pdf; <https://www.dodmou.com/TADECIDE>

¹⁸ FY2021 Annual Benefits Report – VA Education
https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/docs/2021_education.pdf

Again, I thank this Committee for the opportunity to share these recommendations. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.