



**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
OF
STEVEN R. BETSCH
POLICY ASSOCIATE
VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION DIVISION
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
ON
"STRENGTHENING THE WORKFORCE OF VETERANS IN AMERICA"
DECEMBER 2, 2025**

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Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of this subcommittee, on behalf of National Commander Dan Wiley, and more than 1.5 million dues-paying members of The American Legion, we thank you for the opportunity to offer our statement for the record.

The American Legion is guided by active Legionnaires who dedicate their time and resources to serve veterans, service members, their families, and caregivers. As a resolution-based organization, our positions are directed by more than 106 years of advocacy and resolutions that originate at the post level of our organization. Every time The American Legion testifies, we offer a direct voice from the veteran community to Congress.

Transition Assistance Program

Attending the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is often the first time a servicemember learns about their veteran benefits, the various programs offered after military service, and the available career opportunities. TAP is an essential experience that can often be the deciding factor for a veteran's success during transition. Although the general requirement is to attend TAP one year in advance of separation, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report indicates that "70 percent [of service members] did not start TAP at least one year in advance."¹ In fact, 21 percent attended only three to six months before separation. This is not enough time to develop a sound plan for the future. Unit leaders should be held to a higher standard when it comes to TAP attendance and timing for those service members in their care.

The first obstacle that should be addressed is access to TAP, such as ensuring consistent locations, ease of site access, and widest dissemination of any changes to class information or class cancellations. During The American Legion's recent visit to MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL in August 2025, TAP officials declined to meet and discuss the program with our staff. The Veterans' Employment & Education (VE&E) Division attempted to visit the program's advertised site, but the building it was assigned to was under construction and not accessible.

¹ Locke, Dawn G. "SERVICE MEMBERS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE: DOD could improve the Transition Assistance Program by better leveraging performance information." Testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives. May 17, 2023. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-106793.pdf>

Additionally, ensuring service members have access to TAP early enough in the process to make an informed decisions about future living and working arrangements is crucial to the success of their transition. Alternative options that increase accessibility, such as the Off-Base Transition Training program and digital delivery of TAP programming, are critical to spouses and dependents who are often deeply involved in household decision-making. The American Legion strongly supports encouraging the attendance of spouses and dependents at TAP events to develop a more comprehensive transition plan for the entire family. We also support the continued development of digital tools for separating service members and their families to access guidance after separation, when new questions about benefits and programs often arise.

TAP is the critical point in the separation process, where service members assess their future and decide how best to use the benefits they have earned. Whether they pursue employment or education, consider starting a business, or explore specialized certifications, these decisions depend heavily on their understanding of the opportunities available. At this stage, the military branches of Service must provide clear guidance in order to best support service members as they evaluate their options, plan long-term goals, and make informed decisions that will set them up for lasting success after military service.

Employment

The current statistics of employment for veterans year-over-year is positive. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the veteran unemployment rate was 3.1 percent in August 2025, down from 3.4 percent in August 2024. This is nominally better than the unemployment rate for nonveterans, which was 4.2 percent in August 2025, slightly up from 4.1 percent in August 2024.²

Manufacturing jobs, however, have seen a significant loss in employment over the last year. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' current Labor Statistics report, the manufacturing industry lost 78,000 jobs in the 12 months between August 2024 and August 2025, with a month-over-month loss of over 12,000 jobs. Although employment outlook on manufacturing jobs varies by subsector, emerging trends point to other potential opportunities for veterans in the years ahead.

The trucking industry is a natural fit for many veterans transitioning from military service. As one of the nation's largest employers, the trucking industry faces major challenges with recruiting, hiring, training, and retaining sufficient workforce—including a shortage of qualified drivers that reached 78,800 in 2022.³ To help remedy the shortage, The American Legion strongly supports H.R. 2954, *the Veterans' Transition to Trucking Act of 2025*, introduced by Rep. Chris Pappas and Rep. Jen Kiggans. This legislation strengthens veterans' access to meaningful, lucrative careers by authorizing the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to approve multi-state commercial truck-driving apprenticeship programs. By eliminating outdated, state-by-state approval barriers, this bill ensures veterans can more quickly and efficiently use their earned education benefits to enter high-quality training programs—no matter where they live or relocate to.

² "Industries at a Glance." U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. November 21, 2025. <https://www.bls.gov/iag/tgs/iag31-33.htm>

³ "Driver Shortage Update 2022." American Trucking Association, Economics Department. October 25, 2022. https://talkbusiness.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ATA_Driver_Shortage_Report_2022.pdf

It is important to recognize that broader market trends in manufacturing do not dictate the future of the industry, and several interventions could prevent or reverse negative growth projections. Increased government or private-sector investment, for example, has the potential to spur job growth and revitalize the manufacturing industry. Momentum is already building around the “reshoring” efforts, with major companies publicly announcing plans to invest billions of dollars in U.S. manufacturing. Hitachi for example, announced a \$1 billion investment in U.S. manufacturing to support electrical grid infrastructure in Alamo, TX; Mount Pleasant, PA; and southwest Virginia.⁴ Johnson & Johnson invested \$2 billion to expand a manufacturing plant in Holly Springs, NC.⁵ These are only a few examples, but this level of investment can drive up employment opportunities in critical manufacturing sectors, where veterans already have many of the skills and qualifications to excel. Service members can use this type of industry-growth data to identify which regions of the country they will have the best opportunity to apply and maximize skills acquired during service. It is essential for TAP to incorporate current market and industry data alongside core programming to ensure service members make informed decisions while considering the federal programs available to them.

SkillBridge is one of the federal programs which separating service members are eligible for. This Department of Defense (DOD) program allows service members an opportunity to gain civilian work experience in the last 180 days of service by working for registered employers.⁶ The program helps service members be career-ready prior to their last day of service, creating a smoother transition from service member to veteran. SkillBridge can assist transitioning service members seeking employment in manufacturing by exposing them to the industry operations while strengthening relationships with potential employers. The American Legion often hears from veterans who wanted to use the SkillBridge program during their final months of service, but faced significant challenges receiving command approval or meeting command-specific eligibility criteria. The American Legion urges this Committee to work in partnership with the House Armed Services Committee to maintain oversight of this program and ensure service members are being given a fair opportunity to participate.

Another federal program ripe for reform is the military-to-civilian licensing and certification process through DOD. Veterans often earn technical skills through military job training and experience, however there is not an effective formal process for credentialing all these skills with a recognized civilian certification. Veterans then left with the burden of translating or proving their skills to potential employers, often placing them at a significant disadvantage to other similarly experienced civilian applicants.

The American Legion is proud to support veterans in finding gainful employment along their journey, through the National Employer Award program. Through this program, our posts and

⁴Anna Smith, “Hitachi Energy Announces \$1 Billion Investment in US Manufacturing Projects to Support the Electrical Grid,” IndustryWeek, accessed September 29, 2025, <https://www.industryweek.com/leadership/companies-executives/news/55315910/hitachi-energy-announces-1-billion-investment-in-us-manufacturing-projects-to-support-the-electrical-grid>.

⁵Daniella Genovese, “Johnson & Johnson Investing \$2B in US Manufacturing, Creating New Jobs,” Fox Business, August 21, 2025, <https://www.foxbusiness.com/lifestyle/johnson-johnson-investing-2b-us-manufacturing-creating-new-jobs>.

⁶“Program Overview,” DOD SkillBridge Program - Program Overview Page, accessed September 29, 2025, <https://skillbridge.osd.mil/program-overview.htm>.

departments nominate employers from their communities who have demonstrated a strong track record of employing veterans, and submit them for recognition at the state and national level. This program incentivizes employers to seek out veterans for their hiring process, a practice that yields long-term benefits for participating companies.

The private sector has shown a strong commitment to addressing employment gaps for veterans. Recently USAA committed \$500,000 over five years through their “Honor Through Action” program. Their investment will go toward “helping veterans and their families find meaningful careers, “strengthen the financial security of the military community”, and “prevent veteran suicide and expand support for physical health, caregivers support community connection and prevention of veteran homelessness.”⁷ USAA’s commitment to helping veterans find gainful employment is a model that other private companies can replicate through similar programs. The American Legion urges the continued development of programs that incentivize private-sector employers to actively recruit veterans in their hiring processes.

Education

Veterans use their Post 9/11 GI Bill and other VA education benefits for a variety of reasons. Some utilize non-education benefits, such as the Veteran Readiness and Employment program, to pursue academic or training opportunities. While most veterans use education benefits to attain a traditional college degree, VA education programs support far more than four-year pathways.

To strengthen career opportunities for veterans leaving military service, The American Legion supports the reimbursement of fees for approved licensing and certification exams, including preparatory courses. This should apply widely to multiple career fields, from equipment operators to licensed insurance experts, to thousands of other possible credentialing opportunities. Reimbursement for these fees removes financial barriers for veterans and open doors to more opportunities. The American Legion supports H.R. 4594, the *Military Learning for Credit Act*, sponsored by Representative Maggie Goodlander. This bill seeks to broaden the use of the Post 9/11 GI Bill to include more examinations and assessments towards degrees, licenses, and credentials. This effort would expand the ability for veterans to prove competency and qualifications in a specific skill set. The American Legion supports this bill and would be inclined to support future legislation that advances credentialing access for veterans, consistent with our long-standing policy positions.

Veterans will have the opportunity to start new civilian careers in fields not available to them during their military service. The GI Bill is often used by veterans to earn a degree in a field completely different from their military occupations. I am an example of exactly this - when I separated from the Navy as a Submarine Navigation Electronics Technician, I knew I wanted to pursue my passion for public service, advocating for those who have been forgotten or left behind. I used my Post 9/11 GI Bill at a private university in Washington, DC. and graduated in four years with no education debt and a master's degree in public administration. I now have the ability to

⁷ “USAA Launches ‘Honor Through Action,’ Committing \$500 Million Over Five Years to Champion the Military Community.” USAA. November 5, 2025. <https://newsroom.usaa360.com/news/usaa-launches-honor-through-action-committing-usd-500-million-over-five-years-to-champion-the-military-community>

pursue my passion through veteran advocacy and public policy. Without the GI Bill and educational assistance from the VA, I would not be where I am today.

Another example of use of the GI Bill outside of a traditional 4-year college degree is applying the benefits toward apprenticeship and on-the-job training programs. The International Union of Elevator Constructors Veterans Assistance Program is leading the way in this area. The American Legion representatives had the pleasure of attending their annual summit in Providence, Rhode Island in August 2025 to learn more about this program. At the summit, attendees and panelists spoke about the success and challenges union veterans are facing across the country, and one notable conversation occurred regarding the disparate and unfair monthly housing allowance limits for apprentices. The VA currently applies a percentage of MHA based on how many months a veteran-apprentice has been in training, unlike any other VA training or education program. To promote apprenticeships and alternatives to the standard 4-year degree program, Congress should direct VA to correct this unfair calculation of MHA for apprenticeships.

The chart below outlines the disparity in further detail.

MHA Rates	Months 1-6 (100%)	Months 7-12 (80%)	Months 13-18 (60%)	Months 19-24 (40%)	Months 24+ (20%)
University/college	\$2,992/mo	\$2,992/mo	\$2,992/mo	\$2,992/mo	\$2,992/mo
Apprenticeship	\$2,992/mo	\$2,393.6/mo	\$1,795.2/mo	\$1,196.8/mo	\$598.4/mo

Using the 2025 BAH rate for E-5 w/ dependents in Washington, D.C.

The university/college MHA rate stays constant for the duration of the education enrollment, while the apprentice's MHA is reduced to 80% of the MHA rate starting in month 7, and continues to decrease to 20% at month 24. This reduction disincentivizes participation in the more complex apprenticeships that can lead to higher-paying careers. The American Legion has heard concerns directly from union veterans who are using their benefits for apprenticeship programs regarding these issues, and correcting this disparity would likely encourage more veterans to pursue complex apprenticeships and increase participation in manufacturing and trade jobs.

The GI Bill is not the only option—some veterans may be eligible for the Veteran Readiness and Employment program (VR&E), which provides educational assistance for earning a degree or certification to start a new career that does not exacerbate a service-connected disability. Veterans who are interested in a manufacturing career can use this program to earn necessary certifications and recognition of skills to be successful in the industry. Although this program is incredibly effective for veterans, it is rife with operational challenges, most significantly ensuring proper staffing for the counselors who manage the program. The American Legion met with a number of student veterans to discuss common issues they face in higher education. One student mentioned that his VR&E counselor had stopped responding, and he was not able to get in contact with anyone else in the program for support. The student ultimately dropped out of college with only a few semesters remaining due to challenges that felt insurmountable without support. The American Legion urges this Committee to continue strong oversight of this program to ensure VA continues to address known issues.

The American Legion strongly supports H.R. 1458, the *Veterans Education and Technical Skills (VETS) Opportunity Act*, which expands access to high-quality, high-demand skilled trade and technical training programs for those who served. Introduced by Rep. Juan Ciscomani, this legislation ensures that GI Bill benefits can be used for in-person and hybrid skilled-trade programs. By requiring regular, substantive interaction between students and instructors, this bill protects the integrity of VA education benefits while opening the door to modern training pathways that lead directly to high-skill technical jobs. As Rep. Ciscomani noted, this common sense reform “expands the benefits veterans earned to cover the costs of high-skilled training programs,” improving the way veterans access their benefits and helping address nationwide shortages in trades like welding, HVAC, and advanced manufacturing.⁸ The Legion agrees: when veterans transition out of uniform, the nation has an obligation to provide them with every tool necessary for success in today’s workforce. The *VETS Opportunity Act* meets that test by aligning education benefits with employer demand, strengthening quality standards, and empowering veterans to pursue technical careers that sustain families and strengthen communities.

Educational benefits provide veterans with powerful opportunities to build meaningful careers, but their success depends on choosing programs that align with their interests and long-term goals. Too often, veterans enter college simply to “figure things out,” only to change direction later—wasting time and benefits in the process. Providing veterans with strong guidance early on in the transition process helps them select purposeful pathways and ultimately achieve more successful long-term outcomes.

Entrepreneurship

The entrepreneurship pathway remains the least utilized and least supported of the three TAP options, despite its significant potential for veteran success. Too often, veterans are told to simply replicate their military occupation in the civilian workforce—advice that overlooks the broader skills, leadership experience, and adaptability they gained in service. This narrow view reduces their likelihood to pursue business ownership or self-employment. Instead of directing veterans back into the same roles, we should promote entrepreneurship as a viable and empowering option. This pathway is frequently perceived as less attainable due to the high barriers to entry and lack of support, underscoring the need for stronger guidance and investment.

During The American Legion’s 2025 National Convention, the VE&E division hosted a Small Business Workshop which brought together experts and small business owners from across Florida to discuss a number of topics facing veteran owned small businesses. One major issue that was discussed was improving veterans access to capital. Due to lack of significant credit history or sufficient qualifications for loans through the Small Business Administration (SBA), many veterans find it difficult to raise the funds to establish a new business. The discussions at the event highlighted the resources available for veterans seeking to start their own business or expand their current business, and emphasized the importance of more communication and support in this space as many business owners are unsure about resources available to them. The American Legion supports expanding SBA direct lending under a modified qualification standard for veterans, which

⁸ “Ciscomani Pushes to Expand Veterans’ Access to Skilled Trade Educational Programs.” U.S. House of Representatives, Office of Juan Ciscomani. February 22, 2025. <https://ciscomani.house.gov/media/press-releases/ciscomani-pushes-expand-veterans-access-skilled-trade-educational-programs>

would significantly increase access to capital for veteran-owned small businesses and promote their growth and long-term success.

The American Legion strongly supports S. 3171, the *Veteran Entrepreneurship Empowerment Act*, introduced by Senator Markey, which removes unnecessary financial barriers that prevent veterans from starting and growing small businesses. Veteran-owned enterprises strengthen America's communities, yet veterans consistently report greater difficulty accessing capital, higher loan denial rates, and steeper financial hurdles than their non-veteran peers. This bill directly addresses those challenges by waiving SBA loan guarantee fees and lowering equity-injection requirements for loans up to \$1 million, ensuring that more veterans can secure the financing they need to launch and expand their businesses. Research shows that veterans are more likely to become entrepreneurs, that veteran-owned businesses are more resilient, and that lack of access to capital remains their top barrier to success.

This important bill reduces the upfront costs of borrowing, which can reach over \$100,000 on a typical SBA loan, and will free veterans to invest those dollars where they matter most: hiring, equipment, and local economic growth. The Legion also supports the bill's requirement for SBA to improve data transparency for veterans, reservists, and military spouses, which will help ensure federal programs are meeting their needs. The *Veteran Entrepreneurship Empowerment Act* honors veterans' service, strengthens America's small business economy, and advances the Legion's longstanding commitment to expanding access to capital for those who have worn the uniform.

The Small Business Administration Office of Veteran Business Development (OVBD) makes resources available to veterans who are interested in the entrepreneurship pathway. Veterans should first seek out Boots to Business Reboot (B2BR) classes offered by the SBA, which offers in-person and online training sessions and workshops to introduce veterans to business fundamentals.⁹ The courses provide an opportunity for veterans to learn the basics of business plan development, access to start-up capital, contracting opportunities, and other crucial skills for new business owners. Service members and veterans will find a comprehensive schedule that allows them to filter options by location and class type, and helps to overcome the knowledge barrier many veterans face when attempting to start a business. This information is crucial to inform any start-up plan, and gives veterans tools to decide if their plan is likely to be successful or if it needs more work. B2BR helps connect veterans with important resources and networks they may need in the future.

Finally, the SBA has developed the "Make Onshoring Great Again" portal, which provides a direct connection to verified U.S. manufacturers, producers, and suppliers.¹⁰ Veterans can take advantage of these timely opportunities and the important resources to become a major part of the initiative to reshore of the American manufacturing sector. The SBA's on-shoring portal and similar resources help small businesses, including veteran-owned firms, strengthen domestic supply chains, thereby reducing reliance on foreign suppliers and exposure to overseas disruptions.

⁹ "Boots to Business," SBA, accessed September 29, 2025, <https://sba.my.site.com/s/reboot-course-information>.

¹⁰ "Make Onshoring Great Again Portal," U.S. Small Business Administration, accessed September 29, 2025, <https://www.sba.gov/priorities/american-manufacturers/make-onshoring-great-again-portal>.

Veteran-owned businesses can be the future of U.S. manufacturing and now is the moment to proliferate opportunity.

Conclusion

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, The American Legion thanks you for your leadership and for allowing us the opportunity to explain the positions of our members on the importance of strengthening economic opportunities for veterans.

Veterans seeking careers in the manufacturing industry have options from all three different TAP pathways. Each step along the way, veterans can count on various support from The American Legion, veteran service organizations, the federal government, and private partners to ensure their success. However, it is up to the individual veteran to determine the pathway that best suits them and the moment. Right now, veterans looking to enter the industry as laborers may face increased challenges with employment. High tariffs and uncertain trade policies have had a chilling effect on production and manufacturing. This has led to layoffs that negatively impact employees. A veteran who is unexpectedly laid off from their job at any point in their transition may be at a higher risk for homelessness or other compounding factors that make transitioning more difficult.

Labor market trends are not definitive, and there are still indications that certain manufacturing sectors have ideal pathways for veterans. Service members who are planning on separating from the military should review all available resources to come to an informed decision about which pathway makes sense for them and their goals. For example, if the employment outlook in the government does not look promising, then a service member could seek other opportunities using their skills and credentials in the private sector. Access to information combined with the resources provided by federal, state, and local governments, private partners, and nonprofit organizations; veteran unemployment will continue to fall and outpace nonveteran unemployment numbers.

Questions concerning this testimony can be directed to Jake Corsi, Legislative Associate at jcorsi@legion.org.