



WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT

Statement for the Record

On

“Strengthening the Workforce of Veterans in America: Non-Traditional Education and Training”

**Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Committee on Veterans’ Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives**

December 2, 2025

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and Members of the Subcommittee – thank you for the opportunity to share Wounded Warrior Project’s (WWP) perspective on opportunities to improve employment pathways for veterans. We appreciate the Subcommittee’s leadership in examining how military-to-civilian transition, education, and employment programs can better support veterans pursuing non-traditional, skills-based professions.

Supporting long-term financial independence has been an enduring component of WWP’s mission to honor and empower wounded warriors. Beyond the services WWP offers to support veterans’ mental and physical wellbeing, our Warriors to Work program provides high-touch, career coaching services to warriors and family support members to prepare them for employment and enhance their overall financial wellness. In fiscal year 2025, we provided over 62,000 services to help over 1,200 warriors and family members achieve employment. Our national service officers and partnership network extend our impact even further – all free of cost to those we serve. Collectively, our engagements with warriors across the country have shaped our perspective on how the community is meeting veterans’ employment needs, including for those pursuing high-skilled vocations and apprenticeships.

The modern labor market increasingly rewards skills, credentials, apprenticeships, and hands-on training. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 60 percent of new jobs created between 2020 and 2030 will be in occupations that do not require a college degree.¹ Many of the fastest-growing, best-paying jobs, such as wind turbine technicians, solar installers, industrial machinery mechanics, commercial pilots, and community health workers, are built on

¹ U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STAT., CAREER OUTLOOK: FAST-GROWING OCCUPATIONS THAT PAY WELL AND DON’T REQUIRE A COLLEGE DEGREE (June 2022), *available at* <https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2022/article/occupations-that-dont-require-a-degree.htm>.

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apprenticeships, on-the-job training (OJT), or short-term credentials rather than four-year degrees.²

Despite these trends, many of the federal systems designed to prepare veterans transitioning to civilian life remain oriented toward a “college-first” model. Commitments to higher education at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) can and should continue; however, to keep pace with labor-market realities, Congress can help set new strategies to optimize veterans’ chances of finding successful and fulfilling careers after military service. We believe that meaningful progress can be made by reversing underutilization trends for OJT and apprenticeships; creating more consistency in VA’s Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E) program; and embracing innovation in connecting veterans to jobs in emerging fields.

Underutilization of OJT and Apprenticeships

Veterans have several avenues to pursue non-traditional careers, but current outcomes and observations suggest that existing structures are funneling fewer individuals towards these opportunities than might be expected. Across the past five fiscal years (FY2020–FY2024), participation in GI Bill OJT and apprenticeship programs has remained strikingly low, averaging only 1,700–2,300 veterans per year, representing well under one-half of one percent of all GI Bill users in any year.³ In FY 2024, those figures broke down to approximately 776 apprenticeships and 1,008 OJT participants under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, versus 454,179 veterans and Service members using the GI Bill in that fiscal year.⁴

These results may be explained by how responsible federal agencies coordinate their efforts. The Department of Defense (DoD) oversees the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), a multi-day event attended by Service members as a part of their out-processing from the military that includes several briefings, including Department of Labor (DOL) workshops, Small Business Administration information on entrepreneurship, Office of Personnel Management Federal employment information, and a VA-led seminar on VA benefits.⁵ While these three programs aim to support transitioning veterans and their families, these programs lack interoperability and consistent communication, often leaving veterans and their families alone to piece together fragmented resources across three separate cabinet-level agencies. Further, RAND and Government Accountability Office (GAO) have both noted a commonality among these programs – that they have historically emphasized college enrollment over helping veterans translate military skills into civilian jobs or apprenticeships.^{6,7} RAND also found that more than

² *Id.*

³ U.S. DEP’T OF VET. AFF., VET. BENEFITS ADMIN. – ANNUAL BENEFITS REPORT FISCAL YEAR 2024 157 (2025); U.S. DEP’T OF VET. AFF., VET. BENEFITS ADMIN. – ANNUAL BENEFITS REPORT FISCAL YEAR 2023 154 (2024); U.S. DEP’T OF VET. AFF., VET. BENEFITS ADMIN. – ANNUAL BENEFITS REPORT FISCAL YEAR 2022 154 (2023); U.S. DEP’T OF VET. AFF., VET. BENEFITS ADMIN. – ANNUAL BENEFITS REPORT FISCAL YEAR 2021 150 (2022); U.S. DEP’T OF VET. AFF., VET. BENEFITS ADMIN. – ANNUAL BENEFITS REPORT FISCAL YEAR 2020 151 (2021).

⁴ U.S. DEP’T OF VET. AFF., VET. BENEFITS ADMIN. – ANNUAL BENEFITS REPORT FISCAL YEAR 2024 157 (2025).

⁵ *Transition Assistance Program*, U.S. Department of Labor <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap>.

⁶ U.S. GOV’T ACCOUNTABILITY OFF., GAO-16-51, VA BENEFITS: INCREASING OUTREACH AND MEASURING OUTCOMES WOULD IMPROVE POST-9/11 GI BILL ON-THE-JOB TRAINING AND APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS 2 (2015).

⁷ Meredith Kleykamp et al., RAND, FEDERAL PROGRAMS TO ASSIST MILITARY-TO-CIVILIAN EMPLOYMENT TRANSITIONS LIMITED SCRUTINY AND SUBSTANTIAL INVESTMENT IN EDUCATION PROGRAMS 51 (2024), *available at* https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html.

95% of federal transition program funding goes to education-related programs, while very few resources support direct employment or vocational pathways.⁸

Fortunately, improvements are underway. TAP has undergone reforms and now includes a standardized curriculum. DoD provides optional in-depth workshops to prepare Service members for civilian employment through advanced job search strategies and networking (Employment Track) and to guide them in exploring technical careers and obtaining necessary certifications (Vocational Track). DOL VETS administers three employment-focused workshops worldwide. The Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition (EFCT) is a mandatory, one-day course that provides all transitioning Service members with foundational employment preparation, including labor-market awareness, transferable skills identification, and basic resume concepts. After completing EFCT, Service members may participate in optional two-day workshops. The Department of Labor Employment Workshop (DOLEW) offers in-depth instruction on resume development, interviewing, and networking. The Career and Credential Exploration (C2E) track uses structured assessments to guide participants toward vocational pathways, apprenticeships, and industry-recognized credentials. All three workshops are delivered by DOL VETS facilitators through in-person, virtual, and online learning formats. These modules constitute the employment and skills-development components of TAP and are intended to support Service members in meeting DoD's Career Readiness Standards. EFCT is typically delivered early in the TAP sequence, immediately after initial counseling and DoD's "Transition Day." DOLEW and C2E are scheduled later based on the Service member's tier level and Individual Transition Plan.

While these programs provide high level links to information on GI Bill OJT/apprenticeships, non-degree training, and licensure/certification reimbursement, they do not go deeply into navigation of these benefits, nor do they cover programs such as Compensated Work Therapy (CWT), Individual Placement and Support (IPS), or VetSuccess on Campus counseling. Anecdotal evidence from WWP's Warriors to Work program indicates that many warriors are unaware of the available benefits – which in this context may include VR&E services, GI Bill OJT/apprenticeships and non-degree training, licensure/certification reimbursements, VetSuccess on Campus counseling, CWT and supported employment programs, and TAP-related career services – and do not learn that these benefits exist until years after separation. This concern was underscored in a Government Accountability Office (GAO) 2015 report, which found that VA's mandatory TAP benefits briefings heavily emphasized degree programs while offering limited practical guidance on apprenticeships or OJT.⁹

VA has since implemented GAO's recommendations by expanding OJT and apprenticeship content in TAP (a separate offering from DoD's Career and Credential Exploration track); publishing an employer guide on DoD and Department of Labor – VETS webpages; allowing electronic submission of employer monthly certifications confirming the veteran's participation; and, as of August 2020, modifying its data system so it can track how many veterans complete their OJT or apprenticeship experience.¹⁰ Despite this progress, many veterans continue to have an incomplete picture of the opportunities available to them due, in

⁸ *Id.* at 55.

⁹ GAO-16-51 at 2.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 22-23.

part, to inconsistent counseling and limited real-time information presented during TAP about non-degree employment routes.

To improve outcomes, DoD's TAP transition counselors should ensure they are guiding veterans to options that match their goals, disability profiles, family circumstances, and local workforce needs, especially when a skills-based pathway would be more appropriate than a degree program.¹¹ Even if warriors are aware of these nontraditional avenues, a 2023 GAO report explained that some institutions (with nontraditional training such as outdoor recreation certificate programs) are unable to accept GI Bill funding because they are concerned about the administrative burden pursuing GI Bill approval may create.¹² Thus, multiple factors are operating to move veterans away from pursuing tracks to high-skilled apprenticeships and vocational trades. While VA has tools that can help veterans explore and pursue those options, many service-connected disabled veterans remain unaware about VR&E and specifically the other program features that the GI Bill does not offer, including special equipment to help them mitigate or overcome the effects of their disability, such as mobility aids and voice recognition software.¹³ Moreover, approval processes are slow, guidance is inconsistent, and modern credential programs often fall outside VA GI Bill eligibility rules even when employer demand is strong.

In conclusion, veterans cannot take advantage of pathways they do not know exist, are unsure how to access, or are pushed towards programs that are not the right fit or do not lead to viable careers. To improve use of apprenticeships, OJT, and other non-degree routes, DoD, DOL, and VA could modernize their outreach, strengthen TAP counseling, and ensure veterans receive clear, reliable information long after separation. Doing so will allow more warriors to pursue employment options that match their skills, health needs, and family realities.

Inconsistencies with Veteran Readiness & Employment

Among VA's most notable occupational training programs, VR&E provides job training, employment, resume development, and job-seeking skills coaching for veterans whose service-connected disabilities make it hard to prepare for, obtain, or maintain employment. A meaningful number of WWP warriors – one in five (21.1%) – have used, or are using, the VR&E program according to 2023 Warrior Survey data. VR&E's recent challenges with high counselor-to-veteran ratios and geographic wait time disparities are becoming more pronounced, but there are other issues which deserve attention.

While VR&E has great potential to help veterans, inconsistent VA VR&E counselor guidance and decision-making can materially shape veterans' long-term employment outcomes. Highly variable experiences with VR&E counselors – ranging from those who fully support OJT/apprenticeships to others who strongly steer toward degree programs – lead to structural barriers and unequal access to the full range of employment opportunities veterans are entitled to

¹¹ *Id.* at 21.

¹² U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFF., GAO-23-106149, VETERANS EMPLOYMENT: GI BILL BENEFITS CAN HELP LEAD TO OUTDOOR RECREATION CAREERS 9 (2023).

¹³ U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFF., GAO-21-450, VA COULD BETTER INFORM VETERANS WITH DISABILITIES ABOUT THEIR EDUCATION BENEFIT OPTIONS 8 (2021).

consider. In 2019, GAO found inconsistent decision-making among counselors where veterans with similar disabilities, experiences, and goals may receive entirely different training plans based solely on individual counselor discretion.¹⁴ Labor-market data is not incorporated consistently, which can result in veterans being guided toward degree programs even when apprenticeships or OJT would better align with regional workforce needs as well as the veteran's own strengths.

GAO also found that VR&E lacked a mechanism to assess whether counselors were applying common planning factors consistently, raising concerns about unequal treatment of similarly situated veterans who may be denied benefits in a non-standard and arbitrary manner. VA subsequently conducted a counselor consistency study in early 2020 and provided targeted refresher training later that year, leading GAO to close its recommendation as implemented.¹⁵ Even so, VR&E still does not measure or publish outcomes by training track, making it difficult to evaluate whether degree, OJT, credential, or apprenticeship channels produce the strongest long-term results. Without transparent outcomes across training types, veterans cannot make fully informed choices, and Congress cannot effectively oversee and evaluate the programs it funds. Even employers who are deeply committed to hiring veterans tell us the process to participate in VA-supported OJT/apprenticeships is confusing, administratively burdensome, and unpredictable. Small and mid-sized employers frequently cite administrative burdens and consistently lack the human resource capacity to navigate VA paperwork, limiting the number of veterans who can access these options.

The impact of the VA VR&E inconsistencies is even more pronounced for warriors with the highest support needs. WWP's Independence Program participants, many of whom live with severe physical, cognitive, or psychological injuries, face unique barriers in traditional classroom environments. Yet structured employment, supported apprenticeships, and individualized technical training models have shown strong promise when paired with coaching, memory supports, workplace accommodations, and employer education regarding invisible injuries. These models can open channels to independence for warriors who might otherwise be excluded from the workforce, yet they remain difficult to access through current VA programs.

Current VR&E eligibility rules are also limiting the program's potential for improving the lives of veterans who are seeking to return to work as their disability picture changes. Under current law, veterans who left the military prior to January 1, 2013, must apply for VR&E benefits within 12 years of separation (38 U.S.C. § 3103), which means every Post-9/11 veteran who got out prior to this date has now passed that window of eligibility.¹⁶ For many wounded, ill, and injured veterans, this window may have closed just as they reached the point of stability needed to pursue retraining.

Veterans registering for WWP services do so on average 9 years after discharge, and nearly half of veterans responding to our most recent Warrior Survey report chronic physical or mental health conditions that worsen over time. GAO and VA longitudinal data similarly

¹⁴ U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFF., GAO-20-28, VA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT: ADDITIONAL ASSESSMENT COULD ENHANCE CONSISTENCY AMONG COUNSELORS 7 (2019).

¹⁵ *Id.* at 13.

¹⁶ 38 C.F.R. § 21.41.

indicate that veterans with traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic pain, and other complex conditions often delay pursuing education or employment services until well beyond the 10-year mark due to extended treatment cycles and fluctuating symptoms.¹⁷ As a result, many veterans become ready for apprenticeships, OJT, or industry credentials only after their VR&E eligibility has expired.

Eliminating the delimiting eligibility date would ensure veterans can access training when they are medically and functionally prepared to benefit from it, rather than losing eligibility because recovery took longer than the statute anticipates. To bring parity across all generations of service, we believe that the 12-year delimiting date should be removed for all veterans. VA already has the authority to waive the 12-year rule on a case-by-case basis if the veteran is determined to have a “serious employment handicap.” However, the standards used to make that determination are not clear and, without specific guidance to follow, a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) is left to make a subjective decision whether to grant the veteran eligibility to the program. Wider and more predictable participation should be the goal.

Wounded Warrior Project is grateful for legislative progress already being made on several of these issues. We are proud to support Representative Hamadeh’s bill, H.R. 1793, the *Veterans Readiness and Employment Transparency Act*, which would improve outreach by requiring informational sessions, and enhancing reporting measures to ensure better veteran outcomes. Furthermore, we thank this Committee and bill sponsor Representative Ciscomani for advancing H.R. 3579, the *Veterans Readiness and Employment Program Integrity Act* out of the House of Representatives this year; this bill seeks to impose limits to protect VR&E counselor workloads and to require the publication of current wait times sorted by regional office. We are hopeful that both pieces of legislation are signed into law during this 119th Congress.

Innovative Approaches as Gateways to Employment

Innovative approaches to employment include short-term, industry-recognized credentials that open doors to high-growth careers without requiring a traditional degree. Entry-level information technology and cybersecurity roles increasingly rely on certifications such as the Computing Technology Industry Association (CompTIA) Information Technology Fundamentals (ITF+), CompTIA A+, or CompTIA Network+, rather than two- or four-year programs. Skilled trades and infrastructure employers prioritize Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)-10, OSHA-30, and National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) Core credentials to demonstrate safety and job readiness. Cloud computing pathways, one of the fastest-growing sectors in the economy, often begin with the Amazon Web Services (AWS) Cloud Practitioner certification. Process-improvement roles across healthcare, logistics, and government frequently accept Lean Six Sigma Yellow Belt, while emergency response and healthcare careers open through short-term credentials such as Emergency Medical Technician–Basic (EMT-Basic). These programs can be completed in weeks, not years, yet lead to stable, well-paid careers, reinforcing that many of today’s strongest labor-market opportunities are built on skills and credentials rather than traditional degrees.

¹⁷ See, e.g., U.S. DEP’T OF VET. AFF., POST-SEPARATION TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM OUTCOME STUDY: 2021 LONGITUDINAL SURVEY REPORT (2022).

As we work to ensure VA's education and employment systems reflect the opportunities available in today's labor market, we must ensure more veterans are entering high-growth, skills-based occupations; have shorter periods between separation and stable employment; improve outcomes for historically underserved populations; and have clear, reliable data demonstrating that non-degree channels can produce wages and career progression comparable to or greater than those achieved through traditional degrees.

One example of how innovative, non-traditional training models can meet these needs in the field is Wounded Warrior Project's Drone Certification initiative, which demonstrates how innovative, non-traditional career avenues can support veterans' whole health while opening doors to meaningful employment. Through WWP's new Drone Initiative, warriors receive hands-on, employer-aligned training that prepares them for FAA Part 107 commercial drone certification, an accessible credential that does not require prior drone experience or a traditional college degree. This model directly addresses several of the most persistent barriers veterans face in the civilian workforce, including difficulty translating military skills, limited exposure to emerging technical fields, and uncertainty navigating nontraditional career ladders. By embedding this program within Warriors to Work, WWP ensures veterans receive not only skills-based training but also career counseling, resume writing support, and a bridge to employment opportunities in sectors such as construction, infrastructure inspection, public safety, agriculture, and environmental mapping.

Most importantly, the program's impact extends beyond career readiness to veterans' mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing. Drone operations promote focus, reduce stress, encourage outdoor activity, and stimulate cognitive engagement – benefits comparable to mindfulness practices and rehabilitative therapy. The WWP Warrior Survey found that warriors report renewed confidence, restored purpose, and meaningful social connection through team-based instruction and peer engagement. The program is also highly adaptable for veterans with physical injuries or mobility limitations, allowing them to develop technical expertise, contribute to mission-driven work such as disaster response or search-and-rescue, and retain a sense of service and identity. In short, WWP's Drone Initiative is more than a skills program – it is a holistic model that strengthens wellness, reduces barriers to employment, and empowers veterans to succeed in rapidly growing, nontraditional industries.

In conclusion, innovative, skills-based pathways like drone certification illustrate why VA's education and employment systems must be flexible enough to meet veterans where they are, aligning training choices with each veteran's goals, disability profile, family circumstances, and the workforce needs of their local community. By modernizing these systems to recognize short-term credentials, employer-aligned training, and holistic supports, we can ensure more veterans access meaningful careers that honor their service and sustain long-term wellbeing.

Concluding Remarks

Wounded Warrior Project stands ready to support the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee's efforts and to work alongside VA, DoD, DOL, employers, and our fellow veteran service organizations (VSO) to ensure every warrior can pursue the training pathway that best fits their goals and circumstances. Veterans bring extraordinary potential to America's workforce, and our systems must help unlock it. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record. We look forward to working with you to help improve employment outcomes for veterans.