

**WRITTEN STATEMENT OF  
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BEFORE THE  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

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**Introduction**

Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke, and other members of this Subcommittee – thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) contribution to the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). With Veterans Day rapidly approaching, this hearing is a timely opportunity to take stock of our efforts to support transitioning Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families and caregivers, as well as explore how VA can continue to improve and evolve transition services.

VA is proud of the successes we have achieved in collaboration with our Federal agency partners. We are excited to tell you about our ongoing efforts to make TAP more holistic, relevant, and beneficial.

**Background**

In 2011, faced with increasing Veteran unemployment rates and a nationwide need for more skilled workers and entrepreneurs, the President signed the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (VOW Act), which mandated that the Department of Labor (DOL) assess the skills that Servicemembers acquire in the military and improve the translation of those skills into civilian-sector certifications. The act also authorized VA to extend eligibility for the Montgomery GI Bill and Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment benefits for one year, and expand the Special Incentive Program to encourage employers to hire and provide on-the-job training to eligible Veterans. By the same token, in November 2011, Congress passed,

and the President signed, the VOW Act, which included steps to improve TAP for Servicemembers. Representing a major shift from prior TAP execution, the VOW Act mandated participation in TAP by all transitioning Servicemembers, with a few limited exceptions, and focused training on employment and education. As a result of the VOW Act, TAP was redesigned as a cohesive, modular, outcomes-based program that standardized transition opportunities, services, and training to better prepare our Servicemembers to achieve their post-military career goals.

Achieving a successful transition from military to civilian life is a collaborative effort between Federal entities and external stakeholders. Under the auspices of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) executed in 2014, and updated in 2016, the Department of Defense (DoD), DOL, VA, Department of Education, Department of Homeland Security, Office of Personnel Management, and the Small Business Administration are coordinating the execution of the redesigned TAP to provide comprehensive transition benefits and services counseling, help strengthen and expand information, and facilitate support for transitioning Servicemembers. The MOU stipulates each agency's roles and responsibilities, puts forth the criteria for a comprehensive Transition Assistance Program to be implemented throughout the Military Life Cycle (MLC), and outlines collaboration expectations, including governance and continuous improvement of the program.

### **Overview of VA's Portion of TAP**

VA strongly believes that Congress and the responsible executive branch agencies, through the passage of the VOW Act and TAP execution, have dramatically improved Servicemembers' preparation for their military to civilian transition. We continue to see improvements in employment opportunities for Veterans. The Veteran unemployment rate, which reached a high of 9.9 percent in 2011, has been reduced to 3.0 percent as of September 2017. That said, we recognize that there is much more to be done to facilitate transitioning Servicemembers' access to available VA benefits and health care.

VA's portion of TAP is delivered at over 300 military installations (including United States Coast Guard) worldwide through the support of approximately 300 trained VA Benefits Advisors (BA). Approximately 75 percent are in the contiguous United States (CONUS). TAP courses are also available online via Joint Knowledge Online, an online portal maintained by DoD. BA responsibilities include delivering the mandatory VA Benefits Briefings, Capstone and MLC events and briefings, and providing individual assistance to transitioning Servicemembers upon request. The VA Benefits I and II briefings educate transitioning Servicemembers on the wide array of VA benefits including (but not limited to) health care, education, Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment, compensation, life insurance, home loans, as well as an orientation to online benefits portals such as eBenefits and MyHealthVet. In Fiscal year 2017, BAs also conducted over 50,000 military installation engagements in support of Servicemembers and their families. In fiscal year (FY) 2017, approximately 95 percent of BAs were either Veterans themselves or Veteran/Servicemember spouses.

To continue improving the support VA offers to transitioning Servicemembers throughout their transition journey, we have regularly updated the TAP curriculum to ensure it aligns with current laws on VA eligibility, entitlement, and available benefits and services. The curriculum also takes evolving preferences for delivery of information into account. We are collaborating with DoD to align TAP offerings with the current MLC framework, which embeds transition planning and preparation for meeting career-readiness standards throughout a Servicemember's military career. For example, as part of accession and onboarding, Servicemembers are required to establish a DoD self-service (DS) logon and create an eBenefits account. The joint VA/DoD eBenefits web portal provides resources and self-service capabilities to Servicemembers, Veterans, their families, and caregivers to apply, research, access, and manage their VA and military benefits. This provides an early connection to VA at a key MLC touchpoint.

## **Success to Date Since VOW Act**

VA BAs began conducting VA Benefits I and II Briefings, VA's core component of TAP, in FY 2013. In FY 2014, VA TAP modules became fully operational at all installations, alongside implementation of the Career Technical Training Track (CTTT), Capstone events, and one-on-one assistance.

From FY 2013 to FY 2016, VA conducted more than 172,000 events (including Benefits Briefings I and II, CTTT, one-on-one assistance, and Capstone sessions), serving more than 1.8 million Servicemembers and family members as part of TAP. Outcomes from the increased focus on education and career development by both VA and DOL TAP content can be seen reflected in the dramatic reductions in Veteran unemployment, which has steadily decreased to a low of 3.0 percent in September 2017.

During FY 2016, VA also designed a new curriculum specific to members of the National Guard and Reserve. The National Guard and Reserve components have unique needs due to their missions and mobilizations, and eligibility for VA programs is often more complex to adjudicate. The new curriculum module contains information and resources tailored to the specific needs and special circumstances of National Guard and Reserve members.

In FY 2017 (through August 2017), VA provided more than 63,000 events (including Benefits Briefings I and II, CTTT, Individual Assistance, and Capstone sessions) to more than 500,000 transitioning Servicemembers and family members as a part of TAP. VA conducted over 400 CTTT sessions in FY 2017 before moving the execution responsibility to DOL in March 2017.

DoD collects feedback from transitioning Servicemembers through the interagency Transition Goals, Plans, Success (GPS) participant assessment and shares this data with VA quarterly. This assessment collects demographic data and includes questions to assess the quality of the course curriculum, course materials, facilitators, and facilities. Participants also answer questions for VA to gauge their intent to use the information learned, confidence derived from the modules/tracks, and self-assessed

knowledge gain. As of third quarter of FY 2017, VA received 95,000 responses to the Transition GPS assessment for Benefits Briefings I and II. VA consistently receives high evaluations from Servicemembers who attend Benefits Briefings I and II, averaging 96-percent satisfaction on information learned, 96 percent on effectiveness of the facilitators, and 94 percent on confidence gained from the material.

### **VA Curriculum Redesign – Goals and Schedule**

VA's curriculum seeks to frame transition information that reflects the overarching nature of the transition experience. Interagency TAP partners collaborate on a 2-year continuous review cycle, which includes a content deep dive followed by technical reviews.

As VA approached the scheduled FY 2017 deep dive (an extensive analysis of the existing curriculum), VA made a strategic decision to do a complete redesign of our curriculum, exceeding the standard review requirement. Despite the high satisfaction ratings received by Servicemembers who participated in Benefits Briefings I and II, anecdotal information received from stakeholders and Veterans suggested that a more holistic view, including the psychosocial aspects of the transition to civilian life, would enable the VA's TAP program to have more real-life relevance and increase the quality of the overall experience. For example, instead of simply providing information on the suite of benefits and services offered for eligible veterans, VA is considering ways to facilitate a more interactive course that addresses the overall transition journey. VA is leveraging instructional design based on adult learning principles to focus the curriculum on transition decisions and actions that transitioning Servicemembers need to consider with respect to available VA services and benefits, such as health care, housing, education, and career preparation. Additionally, VA plans to include classroom time for Servicemembers to complete applications for health care and other benefits.

To successfully execute this innovative change in approach, Benefits Assistance Service (BAS) – the executive agent for TAP within VA – conducted a comprehensive review with business lines throughout the Department to ensure the VA TAP Benefits I

and II curriculum was inclusive of all relevant programs and services. Program-level subject matter experts from across VA were integrated into planning and development efforts to ensure optimal curriculum content and key messages would be delivered to TAP participants. In addition, VA engaged Veteran Service Organizations (VSO) and other Veteran-facing organizations to incorporate their input into the curriculum redesign.

Through this process, VA identified targeted areas of focus that have a particular importance to the transitioning Servicemember population, including (but not limited to) whole health, gender-specific health, mental health, suicide prevention, trauma/crisis support, career preparation, education, vocational rehabilitation, housing, homeless support, and disability benefits.

By understanding the scope of services most important to transitioning Servicemembers and their families, VA can build a more holistic and targeted approach to curriculum offerings. In consultation with the interagency partners, the revised VA curriculum will be piloted in January 2018, with planned deployment in late spring 2018 across installations worldwide. Subsequent to brick and mortar deployment, VA will develop an online module that aligns with the revised curriculum.

VA continues to integrate VA TAP content into the MLC. A module explaining how to access education benefits is in development, and we plan to deploy in FY 2018. VA continues to work with the interagency partners on the development of additional modules to incorporate into the MLC.

VA is excited to see how integration into the existing MLC model will serve as a positive introduction to VA benefits and services to strengthen the connection between VA and transitioning Servicemembers.

### **Vision for Future TAP Involvement**

VA has a clear vision for our future involvement in the military to civilian transition, which begins upon accession and continues throughout a Servicemember's

military career. We are currently transitioning to a new contract vehicle, which will build on earlier successes and support development of a more robust, data-driven TAP with a holistic approach to meeting current and future needs of transitioning Servicemembers.

During the initial phase of piloting the redesigned curriculum in January 2018, VA will deliver the revised curriculum to groups of transitioning Servicemembers at multiple military installations to gather specific participant feedback. VA, in collaboration with our interagency partners, will collect necessary feedback from this pilot to make any additional enhancements to improve the curriculum. More broadly, VA will continue to look for opportunities to further strengthen TAP for transitioning Servicemembers, their families, and caregivers to ensure VA is adequately meeting their needs.

VA will continue to strengthen the connection with transitioning Servicemembers through our integration into the MLC model. VA will inform, equip, and provide support at critical touchpoints throughout their careers, from first duty assignment, during major life events throughout transition (retirement/separation), and post-transition as transitioning Servicemembers integrate into their communities as civilians. The TAP-MLC integration will serve as a positive introduction to VA benefits and services.

To further understand the needs of transitioning Servicemembers and to strengthen TAP, VA and our interagency partners will implement a post-separation assessment in order to collect reliable and valid feedback on post-separation outcomes. In FY 2017, VA awarded a contract to design, develop, and test the post-separation assessment protocol. Final submission of the survey to the Office of Management and Budget is expected to occur in FY 2018. Additionally, VA will continue work with our TAP interagency partners to identify and develop data collection approaches for long-term outcome measures that build on current indicators. The goal is to be able to share data that provides evidence of the effectiveness of TAP and help with evaluating the overall long-term impact of interagency transition services.

VA is working closely with DoD to enhance our joint efforts to prevent suicide among Servicemembers. Each instance of suicide is a tragedy, and VA is hopeful that this increased collaboration will help us identify new policy solutions that may give added relief to those who are struggling.

VA knows that we cannot solve every problem and that solutions should be inclusive of both Federal resources and the immense network of support available in local communities across our country. VA is eager to collaborate, and we are vested in connecting with community organizations that can effectively support the transition experience. To ensure VA has a full picture of the experiences and goals of those in transition, VA is working with our VSO partners, Veterans peer groups, and other thought leaders to obtain outside input based on the feedback they hear from transitioning Servicemembers.

### **Government Accountability Office (GAO) Report**

GAO recently assessed TAP data and surveyed DoD installations and has developed a final report summarizing their findings. VA is strongly committed to working with DoD and other Federal agencies to improve TAP by strengthening the curriculum, fully integrating TAP objectives into the MLC, and analyzing post-transition survey data.

### **Conclusion**

VA is pleased to work alongside the Federal agency TAP partners to support transitioning Servicemembers, Veterans, their families, and caregivers throughout their transition journey. The partners are proud of the progress made in recent years and are excited to continue improving TAP in the years ahead.

Through our curriculum redesign and the expansion of our reach to transitioning Servicemembers through MLC, VA is poised to have greater access to all those in uniform – both Active Duty and National Guard/Reserve – and dramatically reduce the stress of transition and being overwhelmed with information about benefits and services that many transitioning Servicemembers have experienced. VA is focused on working more closely with VSOs and other stakeholders to improve the transitioning Servicemember experience throughout their transition journey. The concept is to build a more tailored experience that results in greater awareness of and ability to support the



unique needs of those in transition and improve the health, employment, and education outcomes for our Servicemembers returning to civilian life.

Thank you for allowing me to address the Committee today. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other Members of the Committee may have.