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Before the Hearing

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With respect To

Military Transition During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and submit the following testimony regarding military transition, career readiness and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment opportunities for our heroes and their families. I am deeply appreciative for the actions that each of you have taken and will take in the future to address and enact meaningful legislation which is focused on making the military transition program better for our nation's warriors and their families.

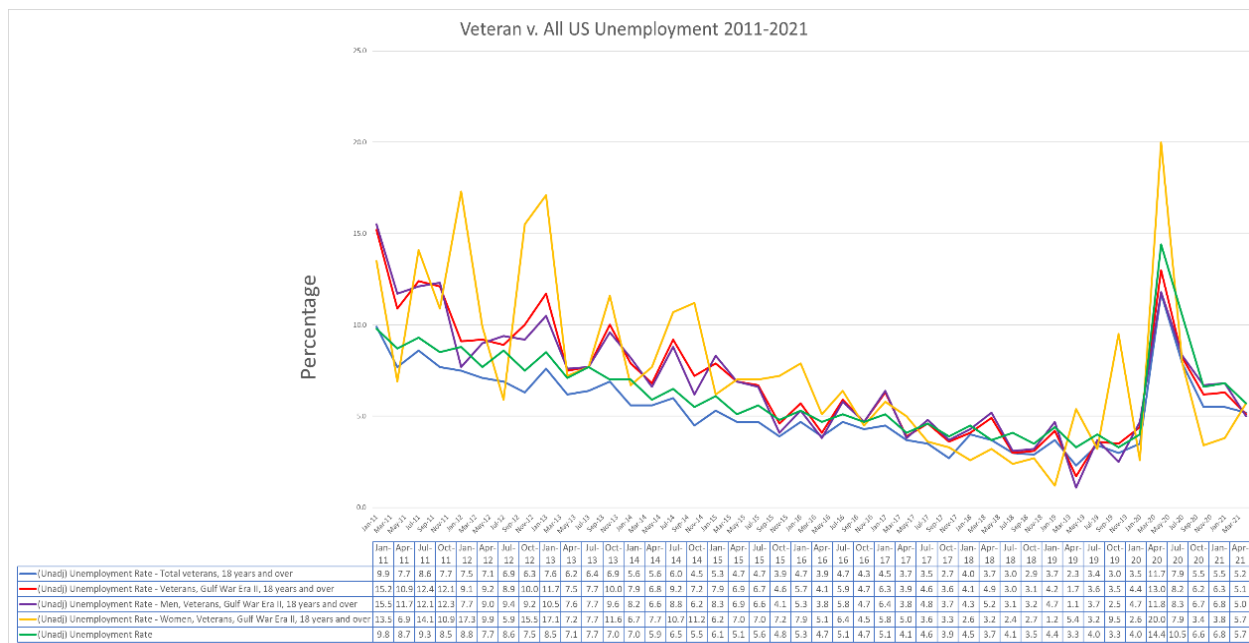
As a 30-year United States Navy veteran and a Senior Certified Human Resources professional, I have experienced the challenges of military transition from an active-duty leadership role, through my personal journey and now through my activities in support of our veterans and military families as they seek to find strong career opportunities following their military service. Since retirement, I have worked closely with thousands of military members, veterans, and military spouses and more than 1,000 industry partners to assist them in their efforts to connect transitioning service members to successful post military careers. I am also honored to serve on multiple committees and boards of directors for foundations and nonprofits in the Southern California region with a focus on creating opportunities and improving life for our veterans and the general military community. These include such organizations as the SDMAC Foundation on which I serve on the Board of Directors and the North San Diego Business Chamber for which I am the Co-Chair for the Military Affairs Advisory Council.

Re-introduction to civilian life following military service of any length is a period characterized by adjustments and expectation management. Oftentimes these expectations revolve around transitioning service members and veteran's belief that they will rapidly gain post military employment and excel in their careers utilizing and enhancing the knowledge, skills, and abilities gained during military service. The reality can be much different though. As recently as 2015², the Department of Veteran Affairs reported that greater than 50% of transitioning service members separated from military service without employment. In 2019, the Pew Research Center¹ reported that more than 50% of veterans will leave their first post military job within the first 12 months of employment. Sadly, these are statistics which continue relatively unabated and dominate the veteran employment landscape today.

The effects of a disjointed or ineffective military transition process can be felt in the lasting burdens it creates for government and non-governmental support. The steady state annual Department of Defense budget of approximately \$300 million for unemployment compensation (UCX) was punctuated in 2009 at the height of the recession when the Department of Defense faced a nearly \$1 billion UCX bill. Faced with this challenge, Congress rightly acted with a sense of urgency by revising and mandating the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and creating the DoD SkillBridge program.

1. Pew Research Center Department of Social & Demographic Trends (2019) *The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/09/10/the-american-veteran-experience-and-the-post-9-11-generation/>
2. Department of Veterans Affairs (2016) *2015 Veteran economic opportunity report U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*. Washington D.C. Retrieved from <https://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/docs/veteraneconomicopportunityreport2015.pdf>

These programs were intended to enhance career readiness and transition support to our Warriors as they separated from their period of service. These resulting outcomes have demonstrated their wisdom as veteran communities have moved from trailing national unemployment rates in 2011 to leading them in 2021.



While we celebrate the great success of programs that have been established through Congressional action and leadership within the Department of Defense and other partner organizations such as the Department of Labor and Department of Veteran Affairs, there is still much work to be done today. We cannot help but recognize that there is currently an unemployment rate amongst recently transitioned Warrior Heroes exceeding 5.5%. The result of the challenges in modern transition means that out of a population of 4.5 million Post 9/11 veterans, nearly 200,000 are unemployed and more than 900,000 have left the labor market entirely. These numbers become all the more sobering when considering that on a single night in January 2020, the Department of Veterans Affairs counted more than 37,000 homeless veterans, of which more than 15,000 were unsheltered during it’s annual “Point-in-Time Count”³.

Speaking to you today as a representative of the Southern California and Greater California business community, in partnership with Veterans Support Organizations, I cannot help but note that more than 11,000 of those homeless veterans are in California alone⁴. The next largest by population state is Florida with approximately 2,500 homeless veterans. Employers in California, especially during the COVID-19 era, are acutely aware of the challenges, but they also have a keen desire to be part of the solutions to our veteran unemployment, underemployment, and homelessness issues.

3. National Alliance to End Homelessness (2020). *How Many Veterans Experience Homelessness?* Retrieved from <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/who-experiences-homelessness/veterans/#:~:text=How%20Many%20Veterans%20Experience%20Homelessness,while%2015%2C204%20veterans%20were%20unsheltered.>
4. Statista (2021). *Estimated number of homeless veterans in the United States in 2020, by state.* Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/727819/number-of-homeless-veterans-in-the-us-by-state/>

Industry in America today stands ready to support our veterans and support the cause of successful military transitions. But industry requires strong partners to be able to accomplish this mission. With more than 24 million employers in the United States, ranging from small mom and pops to global Fortune 100 companies, the opportunities abound for our transitioning service members to find career success and meaningful opportunities beyond their time in uniform.

Today I would like to focus my time on discussing opportunities for improvement in three specific areas. The Transition Assistance Program, the DoD SkillBridge program, and a new recommendation aimed specifically at creating employment opportunities for our veterans and military spouses.

Before discussing specific recommendations for improvement, I would like to begin by expressing my admiration, respect and support for the amazing men and women, military, government civilian employees and contractors, who have been administering the transition process across all Services and around the globe. They continuously strive to provide the best services and information possible to our separating service members and their families.

With that said, the testimony and recommendations I provide today is not intended to minimize their efforts in any way, but to provide iterative improvement opportunities based on lessons learned.

Framing the Challenge

We continue to see transitioning service members who are challenged not by a lack of skills, education, or opportunity. Largely, they are challenged by a lack of understanding of the businesses and industries which they desire to join and the careers and occupations they intend to pursue. To put it quite simply, transitioning service members are walking into a foreign culture that speaks different languages, acts different ways and values different outcomes. Much emphasis and focus has previously been placed on “military occupation cross walk” identifying civilian occupations related to military skills. In truth, these are largely ineffective because no matter how closely aligned to military skill sets, most occupations in industry require vastly different understanding of how to apply those skills. There are also a significant number of veterans who specifically intend to pursue career goals that are quite different from their military occupations.

Often, our transitioning service members seek out careers which they *think* are aligned with their goals and values due to similar terminology to which they experienced in the military, only to find out that the roles and responsibilities are vastly different in industry than what they assumed.

Our veterans are adept at acquiring needed knowledge and rapidly learning to work effectively in new cultures, but there is a period of learning and adaptation required. For those who don't begin this adaptation until after military separation, the adjustment period can lead to hardships which could and should be avoided. These hardships range from personal frustration to vast expenditure of public rescue resources.

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5. Center for Innovation and Research in Veterans and Military Families, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California (2018). *Exploring U.S. Veterans' post-service employment experiences*. Retrieved from <https://cir.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Exploring-U-S-Veterans-post-service-employment-experiences.pdf>

As we address the concerns and challenges regarding mental health and our veteran population, it is also important to note that unemployment and underemployment has been directly attributed to psychological health problems⁶. Supporting successful military transitions must also be viewed as supporting mental health for veterans. It is a given within the veteran community that successful post military careers which fulfill the individual and provide opportunity for future success are related to positive mental health outcomes and reduce issues such as suicide, substance abuse and domestic violence. These are outcomes that we all should agree that we support and we all should recognize that they are directly related to the transition process.

When discussing purposes for supporting successful military transitions, we must also recognize that successful transitions significantly relate to successful recruiting. Per a Rand Corporation analysis⁷; “When it comes to making a decision about whether to enlist in the army, we asked about the influential people and factors. In that process, nearly 88% of all soldiers identified a relative - their mother, father, sibling or extended family who had served in the military.” It is our veterans by and large who influence the next generation of service members and act as our true recruiting force. Veterans with positive stories are more apt to recommend military service. If we wish to recruit, retain, and field a fighting force of tomorrow, then we must invest in supporting successful transitions today.

Considering the above, today I offer the following proposals and recommendations to address specific opportunities for improvement in the transition process.

Transition Assistance Program (title 10 U.S.C., Ch 58, §1142 and 1144)

Conversation:

The current iteration of TAP does not support successful transition processes. This is a viewpoint that is widely shared by transitioning service members and industry alike. While it is understandable that a program which supports more than 250,000 individuals per year will never have an ability to address every possible scenario, the current program is formulaic, rigid and devoid of one of the most critical elements of employment readiness, the employers and industry who will provide jobs to veterans.

“The TAP program is a great military exit and benefits brief, but it is not an employment readiness program. The information provided was often outdated and focused only on readiness for Federal GS employment.”

- Alan Nelson, USN, Retired

6. Paul, K. I., & Moser, K. (2009). Unemployment impairs mental health: Meta-analysis. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 74(3), 262-282
7. Helmus, Zimmerman, et. al, Rand Corporation (2018). *Life as a Private: A study of the Motivations and Experiences of Junior Enlisted Personnel in the U.S. Army*. Retrieved from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2252.html?adbsc=social_20180514_2345541&adbid=996038428050386944&adbpl=tw&adbpr=22545453

While personal initiative is a hallmark of successful post military careers and should be expected of all individuals, transitioning service members are simply not able to fully understand where their knowledge deficits lie. The most successful transitions are found when service members connect to non-governmental transition readiness programs in the community and directly connected to employers. Most of these programs are locally built and managed with an ability to rapidly adapt and educate on emerging hiring trends while engaging and utilizing the expertise of those companies and professionals which create jobs.

"The process I was provided by the Army as I left was very impersonal, and, in my opinion, did not set up service members for success upon leaving the military. As a retiring senior leader, I was in a "separate" course from those Soldiers who were E-6 and below. However, I think the only thing we got that was different was a briefer telling us that we were entitled to jobs that would pay us \$70K to start because we were "experienced" leaders. We were told to prepare a resume that would be checked before we were cleared to leave, but no one ever asked for it or checked it. The impression I got was that they were assuming I would just be living off of my retirement and whatever I got from the VA, and not really looking for a new full-time job.

When I was introduced to the VSO, Still Serving Veterans, I got resume assistance, LinkedIn tips, and the opportunity to go through mock interviews as often as needed. SSV went above and beyond to help me be more prepared for the transition out of the Army than TAP did, and continues to do so, even four years after my separation."

- Matt Wood., USA, Retired

I would like to highlight two extraordinarily successful programs based in the San Diego region.

The first is Operation Connect (<https://sdnef.org/operation-connect/>), a partnership between the North San Diego Business Chamber and the San Diego North Educational Foundation. Operation Connect provides transitioning service members a platform to engage directly with business owners, professionals, and community leaders. This one-day course provides information on building a successful career plan as well as information on how to market themselves to the industries they wish to join. These sessions are facilitated by leaders in those industries who can connect data to action. Information is provided on successful networking with insights into tools like LinkedIn, informational interviews and professional relationship building for opportunity. Attendees are given a six-month free membership to the Chamber's monthly business networking events which place them in direct contact with recruiters and hiring managers.

The second program I would like to highlight is Veterans Career Transition Assistance Program, otherwise known as VetCTAP (<https://www.vetcTAP.org/>). VetCTAP was founded in 2012 as a non-profit based on the personal experiences of Sandra Fichter, a former U.S. Army officer and Human Resources professional who found when reviewing resumes from transitioning service members that they did not adequately reflect skills necessary for hiring success. Ms. Fichter noted that these veterans would not be selected for jobs which they were qualified for because they did not effectively communicate their strengths and skills. Ms. Fichter partnered with Janis Whitaker, an experienced HR professional to create a program that focuses on one-on-one coaching utilizing experienced human resources professionals on topics such as skills translation, networking, interviews, and job role exploration. VetCTAP has measured a sustained 90% success rate for graduates obtaining their career of choice.

Both programs are provided at absolutely no cost to transitioning service members and both energetically engage industry partnerships. The information provided from human resources managers, recruiters and hiring managers ensures current and relevant information which provide industry insights, hiring trends and assistance to veterans in understanding how to effectively translate skills and experiences in ways which specifically address their career objectives in ways that employers can understand.

“I had the unfortunate opportunity to take TAP online due to my deployment status and the outbreak of COVID-19 shortly after my resignation from the Navy was approved. TAP is a firehose of information, pushed out in a short period of time. When completing online, there is not an opportunity to ask questions and get clarifications into a topic of interest. My issue with TAP was a lot of the information is directed to individuals getting out and trying to get a GS job following their transition. However, those jobs are few and far in-between for many trades. What TAP really lacks is a connection with industry professionals to open up job opportunities into other sectors. I also believe TAP is really geared to enlisted personnel based on some of the course content, which wasn't applicable to officers, or was presented in a way where it seemed finding anything other than a GS job wouldn't be attainable. Through non-profit organizations, (The Honor Foundation, R4ST, American Corporate Partners) I was able to get connected with civilian mentors to prep me in building a resume tailored towards the industry I wanted to work in, how to negotiate salary, prepping for interviews, and networking with industry partners. This assistance was critical in landing me 3 solid job offers months before my final day in the Navy. The resources provided by these non-profit organizations, and the vast network of working professionals, was what I leaned on heavily to make my transition easier. Even items such as submitting my VA claim, applying for the yellow ribbon program for continuing education, and earning a relevant certification for my desired career, I obtained more information from the vast network than I did through TAP. For individuals transitioning, not retiring, I felt like TAP didn't meet the mark in providing the resources I needed to be successful in my job hunt and during my transition process.”

- Krista Morris, PMP, PE (recently separated Naval Officer after 8 years)

A representative example of service member transition experience in the San Diego region during the COVID era can be seen through John Aasted's⁸ data collection of more than 100 recent military service members for his master's studies at San Diego State University in which he focused on support to military transitions and program success rates.

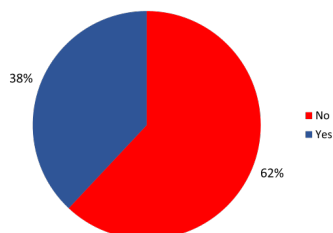


8. San Diego State University, Government & Politics (2021). *Jon Aasted Capstone: SDSU MPA Presentation, 5/12/2021.*

As Mr. Aasted demonstrated, 91% of recent transitioning service members had participated in the mandatory TAP process. Of those who participated in TAP, less than 20% rated the material provided as either high quality or very high quality. More than 25%, rated it as low quality or very low quality and 57% rated it as neither high nor low quality which, Mr. Aasted referred to as the “unenthusiastic response”.

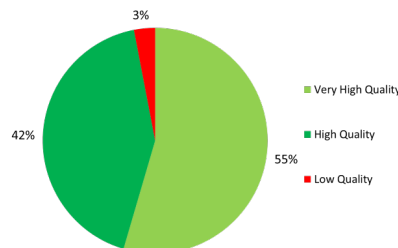
Data Analysis:

Service Members Participate in Nonprofit Transition Program



Data Analysis:

Quality of Nonprofit Transition Program



Mr. Aasted further studied those who had engaged with local transition readiness programs other than TAP. 38% had participated in one of these programs, of which 97% rated the non-profit program as high or very high quality and an equal number rated the non-profit as better than the TAP program. Clearly in the San Diego region, those service members who participate in non-TAP transition readiness programs feel they are better prepared and achieve greater success.

*“I feel as if I relied on the GPS process *alone* I would have been completely sc*****. I pushed my command to give me a bit of time off (and luckily, they obliged) so that I could attend the Onward to Opportunity program hosted by the IMVF. That was a *REMARKABLE* difference as they had actual employers come speak to the cohort, they did several mock interviews with actual hiring managers and HR reps, and the information put out by that program (to me) seemed up to date, relevant, and refined into what I actually was able to use in my transition.”*

- Dan Oliver, USN retired

Another key element of community and industry-based transition readiness programs like Operation Connect and VetCTAP are their early engagement with transitioning service members. Each program allows active-duty service members and their spouses to participate up to two years prior to separation. This early engagement is fundamental as no service member can effectively build the career understanding and professional relationships needed for post military success within their final 12 months.

Entering industry after military service does not have to equal “starting over” or entry level opportunities, but all too often, that is the effective result. It is not feasible to gain a thorough understanding of the civilian employment environment within the abbreviated time allocated for transition readiness process. Career progression in any industry requires years of developing relationships, cultural awareness and industry specific knowledge. When our service members begin this process for the first time within months of leaving military service, the results are often disappointing and disheartening.

Prior amendments to the National Defense Authorization Act have included authority to expand transition readiness training to early military service using key touchpoints, such as before or after deployments, or during permanent change of duty station assignments. Unfortunately, these have been removed prior to final passage or non-concurred by the Department of Defense who views them as extraneous and a time resource that is not necessary. This could not be further from the truth, though. Our service members need and deserve the opportunity to begin effectively building professional relationships and networks while partnering with industry well before their separation from active duty. Whether their period of service is four years or 40, we owe it to them to begin their lifelong career transition readiness at the beginning of their military service, rather than waiting until the end.

Recommendations:

1. **Restructure the TAP program as a public private partnership** recognizing and utilizing employers and organizations which have the expertise needed. Create flexibility to the TAP program to facilitate local partnerships where possible with organizations with a demonstrated pattern of success and servicemember satisfaction. Leverage private industry and organizations to provide relevant and up to date career readiness information and industry opportunity outlook.
2. **Career Length Transition Readiness.** Implement career length transition readiness training beginning at accession and repeating at major career touchpoints. Implement personal and leadership-based transition readiness training at all professional military schools. Partner when possible, with civilian industry to increase awareness and understanding of industry standards and best practices for successful post military careers. Connect voluntary service education programs (tuition assistance, credentialing assistance, etc.) to specific post military career goals. Implement industry needs assessments tied to specific career objectives to help focus voluntary education achievement and avoid unnecessary costs which don't support long term employability.
3. **Local and regional professional and industry group affiliation.** Encourage and support active-duty affiliation and participation with civilian professional organizations and associations or trade groups. Promote the building of professional relationships in civilian organizations which will accelerate lifelong career readiness and develop professional relationships which support both military career advancement and post military career readiness. Foster civilian military best practices exchanges which allow the Department of Defense to more effectively employ industry skills at all levels while enhancing industry awareness of military skills and capabilities.
4. **Reintroduce sec. 560E of H.R. 6395** as proposed by Mr. Cuellar of Texas which would require the Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Secretary of Labor, to encourage contact between servicemembers participating in the Transition Assistance Program and local communities to promote employment opportunities. This amendment was removed following conference noting that section 507F required transmitting information from a servicemember's Department of Defense Form DD-2648 to one or more state veterans' agencies. This post separation state veteran's agency information aid is not a replacement for nor sufficient to support the proactive engagement of servicemembers directly with non-governmental organizations, mentors and industry ahead of transition. Sec. 560E as originally introduced should be re-introduced, strengthened to support servicemember and industry collaboration, and adopted in the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act.

“Going into the final year of my career in the Navy, I had been planning on a career in Human Resources. I completed my master’s degree and finished a three-year tour as a Command Master Chief, so I felt confident about my chances. While at TGPS, I researched careers in HR and settled upon a goal of being a HR Director. What I didn’t understand was the career progression leading up to being a Director and the core competencies a company would reasonably expect. This is a critical part to a job search, particularly for service members who are essentially making a career pivot.

With TGPS being only one week, the amount of information is overwhelming to say the least. Looking back, the information is probably a fair starting point, but there is too much to be retained and actioned in a beneficial way. I strongly believe it takes about a year to conduct a career search, build a network within the field, and conduct informational interviews to understand the selected area.”

- Matthew Rife, USN, Retired

DoD SkillBridge (10 U.S.C §1143(e), formerly known as Job Training, Employment Skills Training, Apprenticeships and Internships (JTEST-AI)

Discussion:

One of the greatest single congressional actions in support of military transition was the establishment of the DoD SkillBridge program. This creative approach to transition readiness truly lives up to its name as a bridge between military skills and career opportunities.

Unfortunately, the utilization of this program remains limited by lack of common awareness, understanding, and engagement in industry as well as within the military. Though there has been growth since the program's inception, the numbers remain relatively restricted. In 2014, 3,200 service members participated in a DoD SkillBridge program⁹. In 2020, that number increased to 14,000. But with more than 200,000 transitioning service members each year, this still represents approximately 7% of the transitioning active-duty force, even as we continue to see greater than 50% of servicemembers separate without employment.

Likewise, we have seen growth in industry use of the DoD SkillBridge program. In 2014 there were approximately 150 companies or organizations accredited by the Department of Defense for participation. By 2020, that number had grown to more than 700 participating companies and organizations located in more than 100 distinct locations as well as remote opportunities for nationwide engagement.

While these growth numbers are encouraging, there is still an immense amount of work to be done. Organizations such as those represented by my colleagues here today on this panel have done amazing work to extend the utilization of DoD SkillBridge across the nation and I applaud their efforts and encourage their continued success and growth. Yet still, millions of companies are unaware of or unfamiliar with the SkillBridge program and the benefits it brings to our transitioning service members.

9. Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Force Education and Training). *SkillBridge Overview 210428.pptx*

Many companies who have heard of the program are hesitant and resistant to use it due to lack of understanding or misinformation regarding the program's interaction with 29 U.S.C. and other Federal, state, and local labor laws. Even within Congress itself, there is some misunderstanding of how SkillBridge interacts with employer responsibilities.

As an example, in 2020, Mrs. Fletcher of Texas offered an amendment to H.R. 6395. Her legislation, sec 560F would have amended section 1143(e) of title 10, United States Code to “authorize an eligible service member enrolled in SkillBridge programs, and who may be discharged or released from Active Duty, to continue participation in such programs until completion.” This amendment was withdrawn following conference on the grounds that conferees believe that no obstacles exist for a discharged or separated servicemember to complete a SkillBridge program begun while on Active Duty.

Though there are many benefits to the SkillBridge program, at the functional business level, the key element which enables industry participation is the continuation of active duty pay and benefits (i.e.: health care coverage, SSI contributions, unemployment compensation insurance, workers compensation/disability, etc.) to the member while participating. Without that element, a SkillBridge program would simply be classified as an unpaid internship, a status which would likely otherwise run afoul of wage and hour law.

In a practical application, any employer hosting a DoD SkillBridge candidate who completes their period of active-duty service during the internship must convert that individual to a hired intern employee compliant with all federal, state, and local labor guidelines or else terminate the internship at their active-duty completion date. The amendment as proposed by Mrs. Fletcher would not have cured employer issues with a SkillBridge program at the end of active-duty service without a concurrent extension of active-duty pay and benefits.

Likewise, the sense of the conferees to believe that there are no obstacles existing for a discharged or separated service member to complete a SkillBridge program begun while on active duty provides insight as to the confusion that can occur within the halls of Congress on the interaction of this program with labor law. It is not hard to imagine how companies and industry at large are unable to fully understand and therefore unable to fully engage the program for transitioning service members success.

A similar barrier to industry utilization of DoD SkillBridge are the myriad complexities of various Service level guidance and management practices for the administration of DoD SkillBridge. Each of the services administers the DoD SkillBridge program and approval processes in a grossly different fashion and may even have different processes based on local installation guidance or even specific to a unique command. Few companies have available capacity to dedicate to learning, understanding and navigating such variation in a process and may thus opt to forego participation as whole.

Educating, advocating, and enabling (servicemembers, services and industry) is rightly a responsibility of the Department of Defense to assure effective utilization of a program such as SkillBridge. Unfortunately, the original congressional intent that the Department of Defense shall expend no resources or allocate new programs to manage DoD SkillBridge has served to constrain effective implementation and consistent program management. This has resulted in a patchwork of organizations at the Department and service level with policy and program oversight responsibilities for DoD SkillBridge.

Operationalizing DoD SkillBridge is the responsibility of industry. Yet industry lacks a consistent and reliable partner and pathway to do so.

Finally, a lack of awareness and understanding within the services themselves continues to be a barrier to effective utilization. Commands and Commanders who have not been trained on transition related programs or initiatives, or on the strategic imperative of supporting successful transitions as a pathway to successful future recruiting, develop arbitrary reasoning for declining to support SkillBridge requests. This is not a malevolent leadership issue; it is a lack of understanding because there is no effective training and support program which assists them in making informed decisions.

Recommendations:

- 1. Fully fund and resource dedicated DoD SkillBridge program management at DoD and Service levels.** Effectively expanding the use and success of DoD SkillBridge requires dedicated staffing, support and technology to ensure that DoD can actively educate, advocate and enable both inside the Department and externally to industry who is needed as a natural partner.
- 2. Congressional mandate for a single process.** Through legislative action, direct a single process for all DoD SkillBridge activities. Intra service differences make agreement of a single process unlikely without Congressional guidance. The DoD office of SkillBridge management should become the single and authoritative source for approval and accreditation of all industry partners removing a patchwork of subprocesses, Memorandum's of Understanding, legal reviews and local approvals. Application of a single process for service member SkillBridge participation will facilitate increased industry partnership through simplification.
- 3. A single DoD SkillBridge information portal.** A single system, managed by DoD and accessible by the Services, to facilitate SkillBridge matching, approval, tracking, in-process accountability, outcomes and long-term trend analysis and data collection. Employer logins will enable real time direct transmission of valuable information and facilitate DoD oversight of industry partners. The single system will simplify processes at all levels, increase visibility to DoD, Service and Command level leadership and provide ready, relevant and actionable information on the use and outcomes of DoD SkillBridge. This single system will facilitate real time accountability of service members in case of emergency as well as provide metrics across all levels which can support future programs and decision making.

Veterans and Military Spouse SkillBridge / Post-9/11 Gi Bill (38, U.S.C)

Discussion:

Congress, the Department of Defense and multiple administrations have sought to establish a "DoD SkillBridge" like program accessible to veterans and military spouses. As discussed earlier in this paper however, the barrier to such a program has invariably revolved around the lack of wages and benefits provided by the U.S. Government during the period of internship which fundamentally makes DoD SkillBridge work.

"Unfortunately, I was not aware of the SkillBridge opportunity when I retired so I use the traditional TAP and those other sources. When I did find out about the SkillBridge and since I was already retired, I wasn't a candidate for it which made it very difficult to find a job with the bigger companies."

- Jorge Seda, USN retired

Less than 7% of the transitioning force have the opportunity, information or support required to participate in a SkillBridge program. Among those who do participate, we see a greater than 90% job placement rate. Still, greater than 50% of service members will separate from Active Duty without a job, and often without reasonable prospects of a successful career.

From 2015 through current, we have seen a decline in the utilization of Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits with more than 20% of eligible veterans leaving their benefits unused from 2016 to today¹². While there are varying theories regarding this decline in benefits utilization, it is undeniable that there are veterans and military families who do not feel that the many pathways to educational benefits are appropriate for them.

In April 2021, the Bureau of Labor Statistics¹⁰ recorded nearly 200,000 unemployed Post 9/11 veterans and more than 900,000 Post 9/11 veterans not in the labor force. The combined effect is 1.1 million modern era, working age veterans, who are unemployed seeking employment, long term unemployed, given up on employment or self-select removed from the labor market.

According to a February 2021 report by the National Military Spouse Network¹¹, military spouse unemployment was approximately 25% with analytical estimates indicating that the number may be closer to 30-35% in the COVID area. This represents from 250,000 to 350,000 unemployed spouses in search of opportunities.

We know that DoD SkillBridge is transformational in providing opportunity for transitioning service members while reducing risk for employers, enabling them to target veterans to create opportunities which might not have been possible in direct hiring. The challenge is how to convey this same opportunity to our veterans and military spouses and give industry partners a pathway to take the same risks.

"It is our continued hope that we can all work together to make real and lasting change that helps improve the lives of our military families so that their servicemembers don't have to choose between what's right for their families and what's right for our country."

- Sue Hoppin, Founder & President, National Military Spouse Network

10. Bureau of Labor Statistic (2021). *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab5.htm>

11. National Military Spouse Network (2021). *Roadman to Employment Stability for Military Spouses*. Retrieved from https://www.nationalmilitaryspousenetwork.org/public/images/2021_White_Paper_NMSN.pdf

12. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2021). *Meta-analysis. Veterans Benefits Administration Reports. Annual Benefits Report Archive*. Retrieved from <https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/archive.asp>

Today I am proposing an extension of benefits utilization under the Post 9/11 GI Bill to address this issue through the creation of a partner to the DoD SkillBridge program. This recommendation relies on civilian industry to take on more responsibility than traditional DoD SkillBridge but incentivizes participation and creation of opportunities for our veteran and military family communities.

Recommendations:

1. Creation of the G.I. Bill SkillBridge in support of America's Veterans and Military Spouses

- a. The program would be modeled on the DoD SkillBridge program with an intent on partnering with private industries to help veterans and military spouses to gain valuable civilian work experience through industry training, apprenticeships, or internships.
- b. The program would be an employment-based internship program. Unlike DoD SkillBridge, employers would hire G.I. Bill SkillBridge candidates to an internship period and be responsible for compliance with any Federal, state or local labor laws.
- c. Program is open to veterans and military spouses with up to 6 months eligible G.I. Bill benefits remaining.
- d. Eligible employers will receive G.I. Bill benefits of \$2,099 for each full eligible month of internship employment, up to a maximum of 6 months.
- e. Eligible veteran or military spouse will receive G.I. Bill BAH stipend during the period of internship employment.
- f. Eligible veterans and military spouses will be decremented 1 month of G.I. Bill eligibility for each internship employment month.
- g. The G.I. Bill SkillBridge may be used for any period up to 6 months. Not more than 6 months of total G.I. Bill benefits may be used for this program.
- h. Eligible veterans and military spouses may "stack" G.I. Bill utilization for other eligible uses during the same period for such purposes as pursuing a certificate, degree, license or other credential which supports their career pathway.
- i. Participating veterans or military spouses using concurrent "stacked" G.I. Bill benefits will not receive multiple BAH stipends, and are eligible for only one stipend at any given time regardless of program utilization.

I am deeply appreciative of the continued efforts of this Subcommittee and those that each of you make daily to support our service members, veterans and military families. It is my belief that the three main areas of focus addressed here will greatly benefit our transitioning service members and allow our great businesses and industries around the nation to continue to serve as great partners in the process.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this hearing, and to represent the North San Diego Business Chamber and the Southern California community of veterans' employment supporters.