

**STATEMENT OF J. MARGARITA DEVLIN, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY
VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Introduction

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the current state of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) across the armed services and the steps that should be made to continue modernizing and reforming the program. It is always a pleasure to testify before this Subcommittee. This month marks my 28th anniversary as a career federal employee, and I am honored to have served veterans for my entire tenure in government.

After almost two years serving in my current role at the Department of Labor (DOL) Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS), I have seen firsthand the passion, talent, dedication, and innovative spirit of our employees, many of whom are veterans themselves. Our partners across the interagency space are also incredibly dedicated. We have worked hard, together, to continue to improve programs in support of military to civilian transition. And, we will never stop innovating and improving because our service members and veterans deserve nothing less.

VETS' mission is to prepare America's veterans, service members, and military spouses for meaningful careers, provide them with employment resources and expertise, protect their employment rights, and promote their employment opportunities. VETS administers programs designed to address the employment, training, and job security needs of over 196,000 military service members who transition to civilian life each year,¹ 8.8 million military veterans in the U.S. civilian labor force,² over 770,000 National Guard and Reserve members,³ and nearly 950,000 military spouses (594,110 active duty and 354,255 Guard and Reserve spouses).⁴ Along with our partners, we are committed to ensuring the best transition for our service members and their families.

¹ Department of Defense (DoD), Improvements to the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Congressional Report, August 2022.

² Civilian noninstitutional population aged 18 years and over. Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) – 2022: <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat48.htm>

³ Department of Defense (DoD), Defense Manpower Data Center, Military Personnel Report, Selected Reserve Personnel by Reserve Component and Rank/Grade (Updated Monthly), September 2022: <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>

⁴ Military OneSource – Demographics Profile, 2021: <https://demographics.militaryonesource.mil/>

TAP Overview

TAP provides training, resources, and assistance to separating and retiring service members on active duty, Guard, Reserve, and their spouses, as defined in 10 U.S.C. 1144. TAP is a cooperative effort by DOL VETS, the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Education (ED), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Small Business Administration (SBA), and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

Congress originally established TAP in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year (FY) 1991 (P.L. 101-510). This enactment authorized the development of a voluntary program consisting of transition assistance counseling and employment assistance for separating service members and their spouses. In 2011, the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) Act (P.L. 112-56) mandated TAP participation for all transitioning service members—including pre-separation counseling and completion of courses provided by the newly established interagency partnerships—to start no later than 90 days prior to an anticipated date of transition. DOL, DoD, VA, and SBA collaborated to prepare new curricula and expand training, education, and transition activities to include Career Readiness Standards, a set of common and specified activities for service members to achieve.

The most recent legislative change to TAP occurred with the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2019 (P.L. 115-232), which requires TAP classes to occur no later than 365 days prior to an anticipated date of separation or release from active duty, or 24 months prior to retirement. These requirements allowed TAP to evolve from a one-size-fits-all program where service members had to transition to civilian life in a condensed timeframe to an individualized program tailored specifically to the needs of each service member under a more suitable timeline.

Service Members Attend TAP Employment Workshops in Record-Breaking Numbers

In FY 2022, service members and military spouses attended VETS' TAP employment workshops in record-breaking numbers. TAP employment workshops provided instruction to 266,127 total participants,⁵ which is an over 40% increase from the previous workshop record of 188,924 total participants in FY 2021. There are three core VETS TAP employment workshops. VETS is responsible for the delivery of the Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition (EFCT) Workshop, which is a mandatory, one-day course for employment preparation.

- **One-Day EFCT Workshop**: The EFCT lays the foundation for transitioning from military to civilian life, introducing the essential tools and resources needed to evaluate career options, gain information for civilian employment, and understand the fundamentals of the employment process. In FY 2022, VETS provided EFCT workshops to 149,229 participants, which is a 35.8% increase compared to 109,888 EFCT participants in FY 2021.

⁵ Note that an individual service member may attend more than one workshop. References to the total number of TAP workshop participants do not track individual unique participants.

Based on service members' individual needs, VETS offers two elective tracks to acquire additional skills via a two-day workshop: (1) the DOL Employment Workshop (DOLEW), and (2) the Career and Credential Exploration (C2E) Workshop. Service members must elect one two-day track during their individual counseling; however, they are encouraged to attend any additional track(s) and attendance to the courses more than once (as their unit missions allows) to prepare them for their transition.

- Two-Day DOLEW: The DOLEW is intended for those pursuing the employment track and covers emerging best practices in career employment, including in-depth training to learn interview skills, build effective resumes, and use emerging technology to network and search for employment. In FY 2022, VETS provided DOLEW workshops to 82,253 participants, which is a 21.3% increase compared to the 67,762 participants in FY 2021.
- Two-Day C2E Workshop: For those on the vocational track, the C2E workshop offers an opportunity for participants to complete a personalized career development assessment of their occupational interests and abilities. Participants are guided through a variety of career considerations, including labor market projections, educational opportunities, Registered Apprenticeships, certifications, and licensure requirements. In FY 2022, VETS provided C2E workshops to 15,341 participants, which is a 35.9% increase compared to the 11,284 participants in FY 2021.

In January 2023, VETS launched its revised EFCT and DOLEW curricula based on participants' feedback. Throughout FY 2022, the VETS TAP curriculum development team compiled and categorized input from stakeholders:

- TAP service members (through survey results and written comments);
- DOL TAP facilitators;
- VETS federal field staff;
- TAP interagency curriculum subject matter experts;
- National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA); and
- Veteran Service Organizations (VSO).

The VETS TAP curriculum development team used the stakeholder input to reorganize workshop content, remove redundancies, and improve sections on resume writing, federal hiring, interviewing, and salary negotiation. VETS piloted the revised curricula at several military installations, and made further refinements based on pilot participant feedback. VETS is currently following the same process with the C2E curriculum. VETS will launch the revised C2E workshop in January 2024.

VETS workshops are highly rated by attendees. The FY 2023 first quarter Transition Assistance Participant Assessment results indicated that 97% would use what they learned in their own transition planning, and 95% reported that the EFCT enhanced their confidence in transition planning.

VETS Designs and Implements Two Innovative Employment Workshops

In addition to the three core VETS employment workshops, VETS designed and implemented two other innovative employment workshops to address the unique needs of military spouses, caregivers, and our wounded, ill, and/or injured service members:

Military Spouse Employment Curriculum: Of course, our veterans have not served their country alone. In recognition of this, VETS developed a course curriculum specific to military spouses who are transitioning with their service member out of the service or to another installation. In February 2021, VETS announced the launch of a monthly series of career workshops to provide employment assistance to transitioning military spouses, also known as the Transition Employment Assistance for Military Spouses' (TEAMS) curriculum. The TEAMS workshops are designed to help military spouses plan and prepare for their job search in pursuit of their employment goals. Currently, VETS offers ten TEAMS courses. The courses use a combination of current curriculum components for service members, such as resume development and interviewing techniques, and components more specifically tailored to the needs of military spouses, who often face frequent moves and the complexities associated with state licensing and credentialing requirements. In FY 2022, VETS provided 270 workshops to more than 1,200 military spouses and caregivers. And, we continue to work with our partners at DoD to schedule and promote TEAMS events.

Wounded Warrior and Caregiver Employment Workshop (WWCEW): Each year, there are approximately 15,000 transitioning service members who are considered wounded, ill, and/or injured, transitioning either through their service branch's warrior care or military recovery units or through the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES).⁶ In April 2022, VETS launched the WWCEW for those being evaluated for a disability rating through IDES as an alternative to the required one-day EFCT. Disabled service members face barriers to completing the traditional EFCT, such as coordinating class schedules with medical appointments, long class duration, working with medical and health restrictions, and requiring caregiver attendance. The curriculum includes six self-paced online modules that participants can complete at their own pace, and the course interface enables users to meet online with a VETS facilitator to ask questions and to discuss activities and course content to accommodate the individual's needs. In FY 2022, the WWCEW provided instruction to 17,000 participants.

Two Employment Programs Are Transforming the Interagency Employment TAP Space

In FY 2022, almost 28,000 separating service members participated in two interagency employment programs that are rapidly transforming the TAP employment space, expanding TAP's information-sharing program to include hands-on training and assistance for service members and their spouses. 5,369 separating service members and 340 military spouses participated in the VETS Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot (ENPP), and 22,548 separating service members participated in the DoD SkillBridge Program.

⁶ 2021 DoD Demographics Profile of the Military Community:
<https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2021-demographics-report.pdf>

Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot: The ENPP began at 13 military installations worldwide on April 1, 2021. The ENPP leverages the Secretary’s authority under 10 U.S.C. 1144 to assist transitioning service members and their spouses with identifying and connecting to employment and training opportunities. The pilot was designed in response to feedback from veterans who stated that, while their TAP classroom experience was educational, they desired a more personalized approach. ENPP provides one-on-one, tailored services for transitioning service members and their spouses.

Through our full-time contract Employment Navigator staff and our employment partners, ENPP clients receive assistance with their resumes, career direction, as well as referrals to vetted partner organizations and American Job Centers (AJC) that provide additional personalized support. ENPP Partners are required to select a primary service provided across nine possible categories of services, which include: digital employment opportunity matching, training services, employment mentorship, hiring events, employment networking, Registered Apprenticeship opportunities, referrals to employment opportunities, placement services, and wrap-around services. A list of our current partners can be found on the VETS ENPP Partner Page,⁷ and organizations that are interested in partnership with us can submit an application form.⁸ As of March 31, 2023, ENPP served over 9,279 transitioning service members and 633 military spouses since its launch.

A key component of ENPP is that no later than 90 days prior to separating, transitioning service members will go through Capstone, a process by which the military service branch evaluates whether service members have met the Career Readiness Standards (CRS). To meet the employment track CRS, a service member must have either a completed resume or confirmation of employment. If a service member fails to meet the CRS, they are provided a “warm handover,” a person-to-person connection between the transitioning service member and an AJC, which connects them to designated services and follow-up resources as needed.

During a warm handover, Employment Navigators (ENs) connect transitioning service members to an appropriate AJC point-of-contact, who verifies with DOL that a client has connected with the AJC. In addition to being connected with the state AJCs where they reside, many service members receiving a warm handover also receive services from our ENs and partners. VETS believes that providing transitioning service members with additional support from ENs will enable more service members to meet the CRS and lead to a reduction in the number of transitioning service members who are required to receive a warm handover for employment.

According to participant surveys, the ENPP has been a great success. As of March 31, 2023, 96% of ENPP survey respondents reported positive feelings after meeting with their Employment Navigator and would recommend ENPP to a friend or colleague. Additionally, 98% felt ENPP partners met or exceeded their employment related expectations. As one ENPP survey respondent stated, “The value of the Employment Navigator is having a one-on-one conversation to go back over the plethora of information you received in TAP classes and give guidance and

⁷ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap/employment-navigator-partnership/enpp-partnerships>

⁸ <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/VETS/files/tap/DOLVETSENPPPotentialPartnerApplicationForm.pdf>

recommendations specific to your situation.” We are very proud of the progress that has been made through ENPP and look forward to continuing and expanding this initiative as time and budget allow.

A particularly noteworthy veteran served by ENPP is Petty Officer First Class Michael Santiago, who recently separated from the U.S. Navy in Yokosuka, Japan. Michael was hoping to stay in Japan after separating from service, but the entire transition process left him feeling overwhelmed. Michael knew he would need support to navigate the challenges of staying overseas, so he connected with an Employment Navigator. The Employment Navigator helped Michael translate his military experience into civilian terms, tailor his resume to his desired field, use job search tools, and identify additional services, as well as connected Michael to ENPP partner, American Corporate Partners (ACP). ACP matched Michael with a professional mentor, who shared career advice and guidance to help Michael in his career search. “Without the constant words of encouragement and support from my [Employment Navigator], I would have had an incredibly stressful, and miserable time trying to transition into a new career,” Michael shared. “I thought I was just going to receive basic professional services, but I received so much more and really owe a lot to my Employment Navigator for being there for me when I was alone in a foreign country trying to make it on my own.” With the help of his Employment Navigator, Michael accepted a management role with a Fortune 500 company in Tokyo. “Knowing I could reach out to my Employment Navigator at any time when I was feeling lost or not confident helped me feel empowered in my transition,” said Michael.

DoD SkillBridge Program: SkillBridge connects service members with industry partners in real-world job experiences, helping bridge the gap between the end of service and the beginning of their civilian careers. Employers participate in the SkillBridge program to provide opportunities for service members through specific industry training, Registered Apprenticeships, and internships during their last 180 days of service.

According to DoD, SkillBridge participation increased from 14,336 service members in FY 2021 to 22,548 in FY 2022, which represents the largest single year of program growth since its inception in FY 2016. Our Employment Navigators are improving their capability to provide timely and relevant career exploration support to pair service members with the most appropriate SkillBridge opportunity. Timely access to the SkillBridge program and other TAP programs and services is crucial to the transition process, especially for those who face more challenges in the civilian sector, such as junior enlisted, service members with exceptional family members, and those who have unplanned transitions. DOL is proud to work with our partners at DoD and employers across the United States to promote the SkillBridge program.

DOL is excited to continue collaboration with Congress, ENPP stakeholders, the military services, and employers across the United States to annually increase employment-related TAP outcomes created by these two emerging interagency TAP employment programs.

Expanding the Off-Base Transition Training Pilot

On January 11, 2022, VETS announced the launch of a five-year Off-Base Transition Training (OBTT) pilot program, in accordance with section 4303 of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-315), enacted on January 5, 2021. Section 4303 directed DOL to provide TAP to veterans and the spouses of veterans at locations other than active military installations for a period of five years to improve employment-related outcomes in areas with high veteran unemployment. The OBTT pilot launched in eight metropolitan areas across five states (California, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas). VETS is currently planning for expansion of OBTT to additional states by the end of FY 2023. VETS will select states with high rates of veteran unemployment, with preference given to states with a high rate of Unemployment Compensation for ex-servicemembers (UCX) usage by recently separated veterans.

OBTT features ten two-hour, instructor-led employment skills and workforce development workshops. The workshops cover the following topics:

- Marketing Yourself
- My Next Move
- Resume Essentials
- Resume Writing
- Employment Rights
- Federal Hiring
- Interview Skills
- LinkedIn Job Search
- LinkedIn Profiles
- Salary Negotiations

The OBTT workshops are offered in-person at various times and locations in the pilot states, as well as virtually nationwide. In 2022, 2,116 veterans or spouses of veterans were provided support through 1,947 virtual and in-person workshops through OBTT. To increase the number of annual OBTT customers and better meet their employment needs, Congress may wish to consider expanding OBTT eligibility to current serving members of the Guard and Reserve, regardless of veteran status, and their spouses.

Overall, VETS believes that OBTT has been a beneficial resource for our veterans, especially for those who have been separated from the military for over 10 years, as TAP was not mandatory for most separating service members until 2011. As one OBTT participant indicated in a survey: “Over the course of years, I have attended a myriad of workshops and acquired much valuable information during the presentations. Many of the workshops offered applicable information and materials. However, I must say that the workshop presented by OBTT, *Marketing Yourself and Other Job Search Tactics*, was the most organized, user friendly, and engaging that I have ever attended. The format of the workbooks is excellent. They are now my resource books for future questions. I feel prepared to go out and find employment that can utilize my skills and interests. Many, many kudos to you and your team! My wish and desire is that this workshop continues so others can have the opportunity I was afforded.”

Leveraging Data to Improve TAP Outcomes

Data analytics and research are the key tools we use to understand the effectiveness of our TAP services and improve employment outcomes for transitioning service members. Through changes in TAP since the passage of the FY 19 NDAA, VETS is transforming its data collection and analysis capabilities around the transition space. Traditionally, VETS has only had access to data about TAP workshops and those workshops' participants. However, new initiatives, such as ENPP, have enabled VETS to access employment outcome information on our transitioning service members through the National Directory of New Hires at the Department of Health and Human Services. Overall, the past year has been a transformative time for DOL's TAP program.

In FY 2022, TAP employment workshop participation was the highest on record since the inception of modern-day TAP in 2011. FY 2022 participation in DOL TAP workshops were as follows:

- 149,229 service members participated in the one-day Employment Fundamentals of a Career Transition Workshop (EFCT).
- 82,253 service members participated in the two-day Employment Workshop (DOLEW).
- 15,341 service members participated in the two-day Vocational Workshop (C2E).
- 17,000 service members participated in the WWCEW Workshops.
- 1,200 military spouses participated in the TEAMS workshops and 1,104 military spouses participated in the three DOL TAP mandatory workshops.

Last year (FY 2022), VETS updated its data-sharing agreement with DoD (specifically, the Defense Manpower Data Center) to expand data transferred to DOL. Through the Veterans' Data Exchange Initiative (VDEI), which started in FY2016 with DoD, the Department receives a daily refresh of information on transitioning service members collected on the DD2648 form (Pre-Separation Counseling Checklist) and TAP course attendance information. This data allows VETS to monitor DOL Benefit briefing attendance, DOL-provided TAP services, and receipt of warm handovers, and ultimately helps VETS measure program effectiveness. Additionally, in December 2021, VETS launched its case management system, the TAP Employment Navigator System (TENS), which is used by Employment Navigators (who are contracted staff), ENPP partners, and TAP Team members to capture data, develop reports, and manage ENPP processes. TENS includes an integrated client request meeting scheduler, program reporting, policy/guidance storage, and client record management.

In addition, VETS completed the required data-sharing agreements with the HHS needed to compare VDEI and ENPP data with wage and employment information from the National Directory of New Hires (NDNH) to understand employment-based outcomes for TAP and ENPP participants. Once the data comparison is completed, VETS can conduct analyses on: the correlation between employment status and timing and number of TAP courses taken; overall percentage of TAP participants becoming employed, and wages earned; the correlation between military occupation and employment status; and employment outcomes disaggregated by gender, age, race, ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics. NDNH data will provide VETS with new and powerful insights about TAP. DOL will leverage the information collected through

VDEI, TENS and NDNH to improve program delivery and policies that can enhance employment outcomes for transitioning service members. These data are also being used for multiple research studies evaluating TAP and ENPP.

Successful Interdepartmental Collaboration

VETS believes that, at its core, TAP is a collaborative program that requires close coordination between our interagency partners and with our public-private partnerships to be successful in its mission. To accomplish this mission, VETS will continue to collaborate with Congress, its interagency partners, ENPP partners, DoD SkillBridge stakeholders, and employers to annually increase employment-related TAP outcomes.

VETS works with its interagency partners to provide program oversight. In conjunction with DoD and VA, VETS co-chairs the TAP Interagency Executive Council, the TAP Senior Steering Group, and six functional working groups. Interagency members meet and coordinate on a regular basis to ensure the partners are supporting and advancing TAP, as well as to reduce redundancy, better serve unique populations, and improve coordination of services across program areas.

VETS, along with all the TAP interagency partners, is participating in the President's Management Agenda Life Experience Human Centered Design (HCD) project named Navigating the Transition from Military to Civilian Life. The project lead is the VA's Veteran Experience Office. Beginning in September 2022, representatives from VETS and all the TAP interagency partners worked as a co-design team for the project. Guided by the HCD model, the first co-design sprint produced a concept for a digital solution, which will be used to deliver information and resources based on service members' own transition plans. The cross-agency collaborative will continue work through the rest of this year in packaging recommendations for potential solutions that can be developed and implemented in the coming fiscal year and beyond.

Through the ENPP, VETS has served over 10,000 transitioning service members and their spouses. Originally launched at 13 locations, the pilot has since expanded to 26 locations at the request of the military services and has grown to over 44 partners. Employment Navigators and installation personnel meet regularly to assist with operational or policy related needs. Additionally, ENPP partners and VETS' staff meet monthly to share updates and to address best-practices and challenges. ENPP would not have succeeded without the great work that our partners are doing for our service members and their spouses, and for that we are grateful.

Through OBTT, our full-time contracted Employment Resource Coordinators (ERCs) are actively engaging with local stakeholders, including veteran and military spouse organizations. Stakeholder engagement through OBTT is essential for reaching our target audience. Each of our sites meets regularly with representatives throughout their community to leverage information, resources, and to share best practices.

Each of these emerging interagency employment programs provide positive employment outcomes that are rapidly transforming the employment TAP space. Over the next few years, VETS is excited to continue collaboration with Congress, stakeholders, the military services, and

employers across the United States to annually increase employment related TAP outcomes created by these two emerging interagency TAP employment programs and initiatives.

VETS' Federal Administration and USERRA Appropriation

VETS appreciates the funding increases appropriated by Congress for the TAP program over the past several years. However, Congress did not proportionally increase funding for VETS' Federal Administration and Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) appropriation, which funds our staff, enforcement activities, performance accountability systems, outreach, engagement, and research activities for all of VETS' programs, including the TAP program. In FY 2022, the President's Budget request for the VETS Federal Administration and USERRA was \$52.5 million, but Congress only appropriated \$46 million. In FY 2023, the President's Budget request was just over \$53.7 million, but Congress only appropriated \$47 million.

The VETS Federal Administration and USERRA funds directly impact TAP activities because they pay for approximately 37 VETS employees at the national, regional, and state levels that support TAP activities. Accordingly, VETS requests that Congress appropriate the FY 2024 President's Budget request⁹ of \$347.6 million for VETS, which includes \$34.379 million for TAP and \$59.3 million for Federal Administration and USERRA.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our long-term strategic goal for TAP is for the nation as a whole to recognize military service as a path to high quality civilian careers. The future of the country's All Volunteer Force across the armed services depends upon this recognition. As the lead Federal agency on veteran employment, VETS looks forward to working with this Committee and our many partners and stakeholders to create opportunities that ensure all veterans can have a good job and opportunity for advancement.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my statement. Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this hearing, and I welcome your questions.

⁹ <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/general/budget/2024/CBJ-2024-V1-10.pdf>