

A Review of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

Jan 27, 2015

STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE

VETERANS' AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE
ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

WITH RESPECT TO

A Review of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano and members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and our Auxiliaries, I want to thank you for the opportunity to present the VFW's thoughts on the current state of the military's Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

Over the past few years, this subcommittee has driven a significant evolution in the way the military prepares transitioning service members for civilian life. The VFW long recognized the need to provide transitioning service members with a quality baseline of information with which to make informed decisions about their post-military lives. This was one of the driving factors behind the TAP mandate that was included in the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011.

The VFW also readily recognized that while transitioning service members are still in

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uniform, there is no reasonable way for them to anticipate the unique challenges they may face once the uniform comes off and military quality of life benefit programs disappear. This is why the VFW pushed for the Off-Base Transition Training (OBTT) pilot program in 2012.

Over the past three years, the departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, Labor, and partners like the Department of Education and Small Business Administration have rebuilt the TAP curriculum from the ground up, and changed the standard delivery method to foster consistency across all branches of the military. Some of the most significant changes include adding three specific tracked courses designed for veterans seeking technical careers, access to higher education, and entrepreneurship; shifting to contact facilitators to teach each module; and offering TAP resources to veterans after they leave the military.

For our testimony, the VFW will focus on three specific issues: Striking the proper balance in contract facilitation; ensuring access to relevant tracked curricula; and post-service availability of TAP resources.

Striking the Proper Balance on Contract Facilitation

Each agency responsible for delivering a component of TAP has hired a cadre of contractors whose sole responsibility is to teach the curriculum. In the past, this was not the case. For example, past iterations of the Department of Labor employment workshop were facilitated by Disabled Veteran Outreach Specialists (DVOPs) or Local Employment Representatives (LVERs) from nearby state workforce agencies.

When the Department of Labor sought to replace DVOPs and LVERs with contract TAP instructors, the goal was to ensure that DVOPs and LVERs would no longer have to dedicate an inordinate amount of time to teaching, and could instead focus on developing employment opportunities for veterans in the community.

The VFW generally agrees with this shift to contract employees whose primary function is to provide information to service members, freeing up local resources to focus on local veteran employment. However, this shift has had some negative unintended consequences for both transitioning service members and local partners who can offer assistance in the difficult transition from military to civilian life.

The VFW recently visited with the Marine Corps civilians responsible for connecting wounded Marines to post-service employment opportunities. While they acknowledged that the TAP employment workshop was an improvement, they explained that missing the direct connection to DVOPs and LVERs, who work every day in veteran employment, proved problematic in helping transitioning service members understand the scope of services and benefits available to them in the community.

Another primary concern for the VFW is the lack of involvement of accredited Veterans

Service Organizations in the new TAP process. A critical element in the transition process is ensuring that when service members leave the military they have timely access to their benefits. This includes VA service-connected disability compensation, which not only helps veterans make up for lost earning potential as a result of injuries and illnesses incurred on active duty, but also serves as a gateway to other benefits and services like VA health care, Vocational Rehabilitation, adaptive housing, or intensive job placement services.

To assist in this process, the VFW has professional Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) staff stationed permanently on more than a dozen major military installations, and we plan to extend to additional installations in the near future. Today, the VFW has staff available to transitioning service members on Andrews Air Force Base, Bolling Air Force Base, Camp LeJeune, Camp Pendleton, Fort Belvoir, Fort Bragg, Fort Campbell, Fort Drum, Fort Hood, Fort Lewis, Fort Myer, Fort Stewart, Marine Corps Base Quantico and Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. Each VFW staff member's primary mission is to provide separating service members free assistance in reviewing their military health records and filing claims for VA disability benefits prior to separation. At each of these installations, we rely on our military hosts for significant logistical and administrative support, to include integration into TAP to ensure that service members know the scope of services VSOs can provide to them.

The VFW recognizes that operational requirements and space considerations mean that not two of our BDD sites will have the same opportunities, but we have concerns over how TAP has changed and the level of support that the VFW will have from those now responsible for implementing the program.

To the VFW, the problem is two-fold. First, the military has made a significant investment in TAP. The VFW recognizes that this is in anticipation of the major military drawdown following the conclusion of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, installations have been given the authority to hire a significant number of additional staff to train thousands of expected transitioning service members.

More transitioning service members require more staff. More transitioning service members also require more classroom space to facilitate training. So as DOD increases its staff to meet demand, an effort must also be made to ensure there is adequate space for VSOs to deliver their respective services as well.

Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel, recognized these concerns in his memo to installation commanders, which outlines the law requiring commanders to provide access and space for VSOs and MSOs so they can hold face-to-face meetings with transitioning service members seeking VA- accredited representation.

Adherence to this memo is critical to the VFW as we see a correlation between consistent exposure and access, and the number of service members seeking representation. On

installations where our access is limited we are not seeing an increase in service members seeking to file a disability claim, while the number of service members transitioning out of the military continues to grow.

Next, the contract to deliver the VA Benefits I and II briefings is rigid. VA Undesecretary of Benefits Allison Hickey issued guidance to the contract staff, allotting up to five minutes of briefing time during which VSO representatives can introduce themselves to service members and share their contact information.

In our travels visiting military transition points, the VFW has had an opportunity to meet with many of the contractors responsible for facilitating the VA Benefits briefings. Many of these contractors are recently-transitioned veterans who readily understand the process and take their work very seriously. However, they acknowledge that their job has very specific requirements to ensure consistency in information for all transitioning service members. The VFW applauds their continued hard work. However, we question why the contract would leave such little flexibility for contractors to adapt to the transition needs of their service members. We encourage VA and this committee to review the contract and recommend offering flexibility for facilitators to not only reintegrate local resources, like VFW BDD staff, but also adapt the curriculum to suit the needs of their audience.

The VFW knows that consistency is important, but we must be able to strike a reasonable balance between consistent access to information and access to geographically-relevant information.

Access to Relevant Tracked Curricula

Another persistent issue with the delivery of TAP to transitioning service members is ensuring consistent access to the newly-established track curricula, as well as consistent delivery of timely and relevant training.

The VFW acknowledges that it was a bold task to create each curriculum track, and that the partners who developed each track invested significant time and resources to develop a reasonable program for the minimal time allotted.

However, after reviewing the curriculum for the Career Technical Training track and the Accessing Higher Education track, the VFW believes that these two modules would better serve as compliments to one another.

The VFW believes that the Accessing Higher Education track is a quality preparation course to help college-bound veterans learn about their options. It offers transitioning service members the tools necessary to compare academic programs and make an informed educational decision. However, the Career Technical Training track, which was developed independent of the Accessing Higher Education track, also contains some critical

information about career readiness, accreditation and academic structure that the VFW believes would be beneficial to a college-bound veteran.

Considering this, the VFW worries that veterans who choose to only participate in the Accessing Higher Education track will miss out on critical information that would help to better inform their decision as to where they should use their earned education benefits.

The VFW would support ensuring that transitioning service members have access to the full suite of transitional training, should they choose to do so. However, the VFW also recognizes the operational limitations in mandating such participation across the military.

In our recent visits to military transition centers, I have had the opportunity to see first-hand how this training is delivered and to speak with the Department of Defense civilians responsible for implementing TAP. They echo the sentiment that the training is a marked improvement from past TAP iterations. They are grateful for the significant investment that Congress has made in improving the transition process for separating service members. However, they also worry that line unit commanders still struggle to see the value in allowing their service members to fully participate.

Sadly, this is an issue that is not isolated to one or two installations that we have visited, but instead is a consistent concern that commanders still do not take the transition process seriously.

I remember one specific quote from a Transition Manager. He told me in our meeting that as a young officer in the Army, his leaders made sure he latched on to the mantra of “Mission first, people always.” He said that to him this meant that if you took care of your people, they would be there for you when you needed to accomplish the mission.

Make no mistake, the VFW understands that the military needs its personnel to focus on the mission first. Commanders are often stuck with making the difficult call as to whether they can spare to let their people go while work still needs to be done. However, the VFW believes that leaders who fail to recognize the importance of the new military transition process are ultimately doing a disservice to the men and women they command. Though TAP is now distinguished as a commander’s program, the VFW worries that DOD lacks mechanisms to hold commanders accountable.

Thankfully, we have recognized that this will require a significant cultural shift – one that is unlikely to take place anytime during the anticipated military downsizing now that major combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are over. In an effort to mitigate the concern that TAP will not be a command imperative, the VFW encouraged DOD and its partners to make the curriculum modules readily available to service members online.

DOD took the first step by allowing transitioning service members to audit the modules

through the secure Joint Knowledge Online (JKO) portal. Through JKO, service members could participate in all TAP briefings and tracks, as well as receive transition credit for completing the required practical exercises.

However, one challenge remains nearly insurmountable for commanders, TAP managers, and contract briefers - Transitioning service members have no reasonable way to anticipate the specific challenges they will face after leaving the military. This means that some will miss critical information or not fully understand the scope of benefits and services available or how to access them.

The VFW believes that one of the most simple solutions would be for DOD to finally formalize its information-sharing agreement with DOL to ensure that state workforce development agencies would have consistent access to the names of veterans leaving the military and relocating to their areas. When armed with this information, employment counselors could reach out directly to recently-transitioned veterans and speak to them face-to-face to ensure that they fully understand what is available to them locally.

Unfortunately, the proposed information sharing agreement is once again delayed. DOL first informed the VFW that it was working to codify the agreement in 2012. It's 2015. At this point, the VFW believes it is unacceptable that DOD and DOL have yet to finalize this agreement, and we encourage Congress to act on it.

Post-Service Availability of TAP

Another simple solution to ensure veterans have access to the information in TAP at the time and place that they need it is to continue to bolster the post-service availability of TAP.

In 2012, the VFW had the opportunity to testify before this subcommittee in support of the *TAP Modernization Act*, which would commission a pilot program to offer post-service TAP to veterans in states with high veteran unemployment. The pilot was eventually signed into law as part of the *Dignified Burial and Other Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2012*.

Over the past two years, Department of Labor worked with its contract TAP facilitators in West Virginia, Georgia, and Washington to facilitate 23 workshops as part of the Off-Base Transition Training (OBTT) program.

In speaking to DOL about the OBTT pilot, they acknowledged that some workshops were more successful than others, and that West Virginia experienced the most success due to extensive support from the West Virginia National Guard.

DOL also reported that OBTT was very cost-effective, costing only \$52,052 to administer the entire pilot. By facilitating large-scale, community-based TAP classes, OBTT serves veterans who otherwise would not have had access to the material, or who could only have

received comparable information by meeting one-on-one with employment counselors at an American Jobs Center.

Unfortunately, the OBTT pilot expired this month, and DOL will not have information on employment outcomes for participants for another year.

To the VFW, the value proposition is simple: It is more cost-effective to leverage the current TAP contract to facilitate large group training sessions for veterans before they meet one-on-one with employment counselors at American Jobs Centers. We equate this to the relationships that our BDD representatives on military installations have with the contract facilitators of the VA Benefits I & II briefings.

On military installations, it is critical for contractors to provide transitioning service members with the basic information they would need to file a claim and to tell them about the assistance resources nearby, like the VFW BDD staff. This way, when service members come to meet one-on-one with VFW BDD staff, they are prepared to have a constructive meeting in which we can review health records and complete benefit applications.

The VFW believes that OBTT should be a permanent program, but until we have final data on the OBTT pilot, the VFW believes that Congress must work quickly to pass an extension of the pilot, offering training to more veterans who need it.

Thankfully, there is one more way for veterans to access TAP resources after separating from military service. DOL and DOD worked together to post every TAP module to a front-facing web site where veterans can click through the modules as a refresher.

The VFW believes this is a game-changer for separated service members, but we have some minor recommendations to improve the front-facing resources. Currently, a veteran who visits the site cannot easily skip from one section to another in a curriculum module. For example, if a veteran needs help crafting a resume, they can click onto the Employment Workshop, but they cannot click directly to the resume section. Instead, they must skip through each section until they reach the section on resumes. Veterans also do not have access to the participant guides that serve as a supplement for transitioning service members who receive the modules in a classroom setting.

The VFW recommends that DOD and DOL should direct the contractor to allow veterans navigating to the front-facing TAP site to easily navigate directly to the modules they seek, and offer links to download participant guide materials. With these minor improvements, veterans could use the public-facing TAP site as an easy reference.

The VFW also recommends that DOL should track and report on traffic to the public-facing site to better understand how many veterans or family members navigate to the site and which resources generate the most traffic. The VFW believes that this information would be

useful in identifying trends in the veterans' community or potential shortcomings in the TAP curriculum.

TAP is undergoing an amazing evolution, and the VFW wants to thank everyone who has been involved in the development of the new TAP for their continued hard work on this project. However, we also acknowledge persistent shortcomings that we can all work together to improve.

With the impending drawdown of our military, this is a critical mission to ensure the future success of the men and women who have volunteered to defend us for the past 14 years. We look forward to working with this subcommittee on ways to make sure we succeed in that mission.

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, this concludes my testimony and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2014, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

The VFW has not received payments or contracts from any foreign governments in the current year or preceding two calendar years.