

The Transition Assistance Program: Steps to Ensure Success for Servicemembers as they Enter Civilian Life

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Statement of

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With Respect To

“The Transition Assistance Program: Steps to Ensure Success for Servicemembers
as they Enter Civilian Life”

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Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide our remarks on this vital topic.

The critical nature of military transition cannot be understated. For many transitioning service members (TSMs), the change from military to civilian life represents a complete personal and professional shift not previously experienced during adulthood. Additionally, leaving service often is complicated by injuries or illnesses incurred while serving, unique family needs, loss of identity and support networks, and the need for education or training

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to enter a new career field. Sadly, the initial year following transition also comes with heightened suicide risk among new veterans, bolstering the need to ensure all stakeholders focus appropriate attention to this time period. Access to well-rounded, quality, consistent, and timely transition support is vital for the post-service well-being and success of transitioning service members and often their families.

The needs and circumstances of separating and retiring personnel vary greatly as well as the levels of preparation necessary to be successful after service. For instance, those being unexpectedly separated or retired for medical reasons experience added hurdles like compressed discharge timelines, little or no opportunities to plan, potential employment barriers, and even grief or anger. This is in deep contrast to the majority who separate after finishing their contract or retire after completing a full career. The latter groups have more predictability and expanded opportunities to plan, set, and complete goals before leaving the military, thereby easing some of the challenges inherent with returning to civilian life.

Fortunately, personnel undergoing medical and physical evaluation are heavily supported throughout the process, known as the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES). As warranted, service members in the IDES receive a preliminary disability rating from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and often are directly connected to resources and programs like VA's Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E). This comprehensive program helps IDES personnel chart a post-military career path that accommodates service-connected injuries and illnesses. Importantly, these service members are entered into the VA system before discharge, enabling them to begin using the VA benefits and services for which they qualify once they are separated from the military.

Being medically separated or retired from service is the closest one can get to receiving a personalized transition experience, and for good reasons. Individuals deemed medically unfit for continued military service have earned and often require that level of support. While IDES participants must complete the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) like anyone else, the tools and resources necessary for them to be successful are brought to them where they are versus having to seek them out on their own. Notably, IDES service members are removed from their operational units and are thus able to navigate transition activities without operational demands. This puts them in a noteworthy minority. No other service members are afforded the level of care and attention during transition as those receiving medical separations and retirements. Non-IDES service members are informed about post-service benefits and resources during TAP, but must proactively engage them on their own. Unfortunately, the onus put on regularly separating and retiring personnel is frequently at odds with operational requirements and other pressing transition needs like finding a new home and career.

While the VFW knows it is not currently feasible to give every service member a customized transition experience like the one inherent with IDES, we know the Department of Defense

(DOD) and VA can do better to ensure more service members receive the support they need and deserve within the current TAP framework. Providing comprehensive knowledge of programs and resources and subsequent connections to them is no less important for regularly separating and retiring personnel than it is for individuals separating or retiring via IDES.

Transition Assistance Program Background

Attending TAP is mandatory for all personnel approaching separation or retirement, including those transitioning for medical reasons. Down from five mandatory days of instruction, the recently overhauled TAP is comprised of three mandatory days and two additional days, known as career tracks, that are optional for TSMs whose assigned tier allows them to forgo attending. The tier system is new, and came about as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 TAP law reforms. This structure is intended to align TAP more closely to TSMs' individual goals and needs by assigning them to one of three tiers. Tier assignment is based on assessed level of transition preparedness during service members' individualized initial counseling sessions, which occur before attending the TAP course itself. Service members assigned to Tier 1 are considered the most prepared to achieve their transition plan, exempting them from completing a track, while those assigned to Tier 3 are considered the least prepared, making track completion mandatory. Tracks are largely optional for Tier 2 TSMs.

Through continuous oversight and improvement, holistic transition support and services that meet TSMs where they are should be the goal of Congress, DOD, and VA. The VFW thanks each entity for taking this responsibility seriously through constant iteration and oversight such as this hearing. Under the new TAP curriculum, however, program managers have just three guaranteed days and at most five days with the estimated 200,000 service members who leave the military every year. This reduced window can by no means accommodate every service members' individual transition needs. Accordingly, less time with TSMs necessitates an approach that leverages external stakeholders who can provide the capacity and capabilities that the current curriculum cannot accommodate. Also vital, Congress must ensure DOD and each of the services abides by the TAP law and works to mitigate gaps and areas of ambiguity. Understanding that not all service members can receive robust transition support commensurate with what IDES TSMs receive, we have identified specific areas for Congress to focus its oversight and subsequent reforms. Such emphasis can bring the transition experiences of the majority of TSMs into closer alignment with those going through IDES, albeit via slightly different means.

VA Office of Outreach, Transition and Economic Development

The VFW is very concerned about VA's Office of Outreach, Transition and Economic Development (OTED) and how it discharges its supposed mission. We know that OTED

recently revised the TAP curriculum but has never sought input from organizations like the VFW, which is present in some capacity in TAP on nearly two dozen military installations.

When we have offered support, OTED has ignored our input. This is a stark departure from how VA operated before OTED's creation. The VFW had a seat at the table during the VOW Act implementation and again consistently provided feedback on TAP curriculum up until OTED's creation. The VFW was eager to work with OTED when the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) decided to stand up the office, but we have been outright disappointed with how the business line has operated ever since. To be blunt, OTED has appeared before this subcommittee before and poorly represented VA's position on transition. At this point the VFW has to ask this subcommittee, what exactly does OTED do?

A prime example of OTED's deficiency is its lackluster implementation of Congress's mandate under the COMPACT Act for VA to institute a pilot program through which veterans could elect to receive information from networks of support after transition. OTED took it upon itself to develop a mobile application called Getting Results in Transition (GRIT) to accomplish this objective. In the VFW's opinion, this resource was hastily developed without constructive feedback from community organizations like the VFW. Instead, OTED developed the product in a vacuum, presenting a product that is highly ineffective and underutilized.

VBA has repeatedly asked our organization to promote GRIT, but we cannot in good conscience. After reviewing a demonstration of the product, it seems to be a mobile application nobody asked for to build a social network that nobody wants.

Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program Access

One of the best resources at service members' disposal during transition is the VA Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program through which individuals can file expedited VA disability claims before leaving active duty. Using the BDD program (pre-discharge claims) service members can submit their compensation claims and complete associated medical evaluations before leaving service, thereby enabling VA to provide disability ratings upon or shortly after discharge. Individuals who participate in the BDD program are subsequently better positioned to engage VA benefits and services, like IDES personnel, after leaving the military. This means TSMs can minimize gaps in essential care like mental health counseling and medication management upon discharge.

The VFW believes there is incalculable value in incorporating VA-accredited representatives into the TAP curriculum. Specifically, we would like to see these representatives facilitate complementary course materials that cover VA benefits and services where practical, with a particular emphasis on those that can be applied for prior to separation or retirement. This

approach would mitigate instances of service members missing critical benefits-related details while enabling more to act on information without needing to find a representative in their free time outside of TAP. For instance, military personnel have a very slim window (180-90 days before separation) in which they are eligible to use the BDD program. Accredited representatives would not only be able to highlight the program but also help TSMs file claims once eligible, which is a task that VA contract employees who largely teach this material are prohibited from doing. Additionally, the VFW believes the window for eligible claims should be expanded beyond the window of 180-90 days to ensure service members have adequate time to file prior to separation.

Service members generally do not learn about the BDD program until they attend TAP. Yet, individuals across service branches and installations currently have unreliable access to accredited representatives during classes, creating barriers to filing pre-discharge VA disability claims via the BDD program. Accredited representatives experience wide variability in how, if at all, they can engage TSMs during TAP. This is because no statute or policy exists that requires installation commanders and site managers to permit representatives' entry into and participation in any element of the curriculum. As a result, site managers vary in their willingness to allow representatives in TAP and, if entry is permitted, managers also differ in what capacities they will allow representatives to engage TSMs. Commonly, they do not see the value in having accredited representatives present or assert that there simply is not enough time to allow them to speak to service members. Also common is the belief that all veteran- and military-serving organizations are created equal, and if TAP managers allow in one organization, they have to let in all external organizations. This could not be further from the truth, as not all organizations are recognized by VA for the purposes of preparation, presentation, and prosecution of claims before the agency.

Unequal access leads to less TSMs being connected to their benefits upon separation, thereby endangering connections to VA benefits and services like mental health care. The VFW asks Congress to either direct VA to develop a tailored pre-separation benefits course in which accredited representatives actively participate, or incorporate representatives into its current TAP presentation to explain benefits that can be applied for prior to separation. We believe that VA must utilize accredited representatives as tools in their TAP toolkit to the maximum practical extent. Details about accredited representatives as well as a list of groups and individuals who have received accreditation can be found by visiting benefits.va.gov/vso.

Knowing that the initial twelve months after discharge present heightened vulnerability for veterans to die by suicide, filing a pre-discharge claim can quite literally facilitate a lifeline for recently transitioned veterans. The VA's most recent suicide report suggested a decreased veteran suicide rate per day (1.0 vs. 6.7) for individuals having any contact with VBA as compared to those having no interaction with VBA or the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). This is the first time VA has provided benefits-related suicide data in

its reporting and, while high level, this suicide rate difference illustrates a vital link. For example, the Veterans Experience Office recently briefed the VFW on its customer experience work on TAP, validating that veterans who connect with VA benefit programs either before or within one year after separation are more likely to successfully reintegrate into civilian life. Accordingly, increasing BDD program participation may potentially reduce suicide deaths among new veterans.

The VFW knows VA health care and benefits improve veterans' lives, but we need more information regarding the relationship between these VA services and suicide prevention. We urge this subcommittee to introduce and pass a House companion to S. 928, Not Just a Number Act, which would evaluate the role benefits related to economic opportunity have on suicide prevention.

Connections to Community Resources

The VFW also believes it is essential that Congress clarifies how it defines resources located in communities as outlined in 10 U.S.C. §1142 (2021). As part of the FY 2019 TAP law reforms, Congress mandated that all TSMs be connected to resources in the communities in which they plan to live after service. These connections are supposed to be warm handoffs that are reflective of TSMs' individual needs and enable smooth transitions to new communities, including to resources that would provide the social support and camaraderie that is often lost when exiting the military. However, DOD is not doing this consistently or effectively. As written, the requirement is too ambiguous since the statute does not articulate how resources should be identified or what it means to connect service members. As part of the VFW's Pre-Discharge Claims program survey, respondents are asked whether they received community connections. Between September 2022 and May 2023, one third of more than one thousand respondents indicated they either were not or did not know if they received connections during their individualized initial counseling. This is problematic. The transition program's generalist nature is not a flaw of the system but rather a feature of the system. TAP is neither designed for nor able to address everyone's unique needs, so community resources fill the void that its curriculum cannot. In other words, community organizations are the transition program's force multiplier.

We question if DOD believes it is currently, at least in part, satisfying this TAP law requirement via box 10b of the DD Form 2648, which provides TSMs the ability to opt in to having their information sent to state agencies. While this would perhaps be a fair start, the opt-in nature of this approach means less service members will participate. Also, due to self-selection bias at the outset, requiring individuals to opt in potentially skews future efforts to evaluate the effect that facilitating connections has on TAP outcomes. For those who opt in, simply sending TSM discharge details to state agencies is not only passive and impersonal, but also not what Congress intended as being connected to community resources.

One example scenario where DOD's method is wholly inadequate is for service members with dependents enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP). The EFMP provides myriad support services to military families with special needs, but that support ceases once they leave the military. In this example, not only would the service members and their families have to navigate common transition challenges, but they also would have to identify and arrange equivalent supports in their new communities without the assistance they had via EFMP. Relying solely on box 10b would be a complete disservice to these TSMs and their families, especially since the state agencies on the receiving end are currently not allowed to engage service members until after they have been discharged. Regardless of circumstances, service members and families deserve, and the VFW demands, better.

As the law requires, we would like Congress to ensure connections are being consistently made between TSMs and resources in the communities to which they are transitioning, with an emphasis on specialized transition service organizations that receive federal grant funding. One existing tool Congress can designate for connections is the National Resource Directory (NRD), which is housed within the Defense Health Agency (DHA). A partnership between DOD, VA, and the Department of Labor, NRD contains a large repository of strictly vetted organizations that span the transition spectrum from career assistance to caregiver support.

The VFW insists connections to community resources be specifically defined and we recommend that the definition include NRD. While it is not the role of this subcommittee to authorize and appropriate funding for a DHA program, we believe Congress should evaluate and make sure the NRD team and website is properly funded and staffed to accommodate any increased workloads, capabilities, or necessary upgrades.

There are no national transition services in every city and state that support TSMs who are seeking services across all industries. However, there are a multitude of organizations that specialize in certain fields in certain areas of the country. If TSMs are seeking education opportunities, they should be connected to local Student Veterans of America chapters. If they are seeking employment in the technology industry in Texas, they should be connected to organizations like VetsinTech. If they are seeking to enter the finance world in New York City, they should be connected to FourBlock. And if they are service members separating from the Special Operations Forces, they should be connected to organizations like The Honor Foundation. Organizations with tailored transition plans for service members and veterans will not be able to offer the most value if they are underutilized and TSMs do not know they exist. TAP cannot be everything for everybody, but there are countless organizations that could offer specialized services as long as DOD makes the connections to community resources as required by law.

DOD Adherence to the Law

While our concerns about connections to community resources are largely grounded in VFW survey responses and anecdotal feedback, additional VFW survey data are consistent with recent U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) findings. A December 2022 GAO report confirmed a suspicion we already had that TSMs have overwhelmingly—at seventy percent—not been attending TAP at least twelve months prior to separation or discharge as required by law. Our survey data closely aligns. Between September 2022 and May 2023, the VFW’s survey of TSMs indicated that sixty-two percent began TAP less than one year prior to separation or retirement. Of that respondent subgroup, forty-five percent reported beginning six months or less prior to discharge. These figures are highly concerning. The intent of the FY 2019 change to the TAP attendance deadline was to ensure that service members could attend TAP early and often. This is largely not being done.

Poor course attendance timeliness hinders members’ ability to learn about, use, and/or apply for post-service benefits and programs with set deadlines, like the BDD program. Not participating in TAP on time also robs some service members of the ability to make course corrections to their transition plans as they hone goals and learn more about their post-service needs. As such, lack of timeliness in attending TAP negatively impacts service members’ ability to access needed benefits after service such as VA health care, while delaying elements of the members’ transition plans such as career training via the Post-9/11 GI Bill or the VR&E program. We urge Congress to hold DOD accountable to ensure TSMs complete TAP on time, while making sure each service department expeditiously implements GAO’s December 2022 timeliness recommendations.

The same GAO report also bolstered our concerns regarding the tier system. Almost twenty-five percent of TSMs assigned to Tier 3 did not complete a mandatory two-day track. Meanwhile, nearly thirty-three percent of VFW survey participants did not even know to which tier they had been assigned. Under the new system, understanding one’s tier is central to determining transition readiness and related goal setting. These findings suggest the tier system may not be meeting the intent of Congress. The VFW recommends evaluating the execution and effectiveness of the tier system or eliminating it entirely. In the interim, we urge Congress to make sure DOD urgently complies with GAO’s recommendations regarding track attendance.

Spouse Inclusion in TAP

Our survey data also reveal that of those TSMs with spouses, more than fifteen percent of respondents either did not know their spouse could attend TAP or their spouse wanted to attend but could not. Of those who provided clarifying remarks, the spouse’s job, child care challenges, being geographically separated, and being a dual-military couple (i.e., spouse has already taken or will take) were cited as reasons for spouses not attending. Military transition is an endeavor for families as much as it is for individual service members. Transition planning as a family is imperative to understand post-separation benefits,

services, and needs like disability compensation, education and survivor benefits, health care, financial planning, and even career changes.

While online TAP coursework is now available to spouses and caregivers, the value of attending the course in person cannot be understated. Some ways to increase attendance include offering TAP in the evenings or over weekends when spouses are not working and more child care options are available. Additionally, TAP stakeholders can work to accommodate child care needs during regularly scheduled sessions. We call on Congress to study the factors contributing to spouses not attending TAP in person and enact legislation that mitigates or removes the identified barriers. Moreover, we would like to see Congress create a spouse TAP pilot program that not only incorporates the findings of the study but also aligns with the unique needs and challenges experienced during transition.

Incongruent Incentives and Outcomes

Within DOD, military commanders' focus understandably centers around mission readiness priorities like training, staffing, and equipment upkeep. Operational requirements generally take precedence over peripheral efforts that are not considered mission essential. This all makes sense, of course, as DOD is charged with deterring war and ensuring our nation's security. Friction arises, however, when DOD policies and practices that prioritize and incentivize operational readiness and effectiveness are incongruent with service members who are leaving the military. Transition policies and programs are inherently incompatible with operations. Unit leaders are tasked with ensuring the mission is accomplished with the people they have, including TSMs, as service members are expected to simultaneously fulfill their regular duties and transition requirements. However, this conflict generally does not exist for personnel being medically separated or retired via IDES because they are removed from their units which allows commanders to backfill their positions.

Moreover, the prevailing military culture is not necessarily accommodating of or sympathetic to separating personnel and related policies. Evidence can be seen in the Navy's management of the DOD SkillBridge program. Although it is a lauded transition resource, the Navy recently restricted SkillBridge access by rank and time until discharge because service members' participation in the program impacts unit operations. Not only are commanders authorized full latitude to approve or deny SkillBridge use, but the tone of this Navy-specific administrative message, or NAVADMIN, is seemingly adversarial in nature. The Navy's policy on TSM participation in SkillBridge results in disparate outcomes among naval service men and women. The value of programs meant to facilitate smooth transitions cannot be fully realized if DOD is permitted to restrict them.

The VFW is concerned that disparate experiences are also occurring within TAP itself. For example, during the September 2022 Military-Civilian Transition Summit, the Army's TAP manager started his presentation by noting that each of the services administers TAP "a

little bit” differently. Any differences in TAP implementation should be only in the margins and never interfere with the timely and equitable access to information, programs, and services. DOD must ensure any latitude the services have in implementation does not interfere with the mandates and intentions of Congress.

Transition within the Coast Guard and Reserve Components

Historically, the Coast Guard has been overlooked in discussions about TAP oversight. It does not always fall under the jurisdiction of the Armed Services Committees, and it also does not receive the same level of recognition regarding VA issues. The men and women of the Coast Guard are often overlooked, but they also serve our nation and have needs similar to other members of the armed forces. However, the VFW has learned the Coast Guard is lacking the proper resources to administer TAP as effectively as other services. For example, the website that hosts the Coast Guard transition information has not been updated since before the FY 2019 TAP changes. We understand it is not the jurisdiction of this subcommittee to authorize or appropriate funds for the administration of Coast Guard programs, but we urge Congress to make sure this service is resourced properly so Coast Guard members are afforded equitable opportunities.

A large cohort of the armed services that is also often overlooked in the transition discussion is the reserve component. Members of the National Guard and Reserve forces do not receive the same out-processing and instruction as active duty members. Units completing major deployments are given truncated TAP-style briefings, but standard personnel who are out-processing in the rest of the reserve component do not typically receive this instruction. The VFW recommends members of the National Guard and Reserves be assigned the online version of TAP to complete before final separation, and annual VA benefits briefings be administered to units throughout the year during administrative drill days.

Chairman Van Orden and Ranking Member Levin, this concludes my testimony. Again, the VFW thanks you for the opportunity to testify on this important issue. I am prepared to take any questions you or the subcommittee members 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, the VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2023, 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.