

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

APRIL 30, 2019

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you for this oversight hearing on “Fiscal Year 2020 President’s Budget: Requests Related to Veterans’ Readjustment Benefits.”

My statement will focus on the implementation of changes made to the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) as a result of the Fiscal Year 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (FY19 NDAA), and how Service members will continue to flow from DoD through transition into the Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Labor (DOL). Each have a primary responsibility for a portion of transition and we will continue to work together to prepare transitioning Service members for their next steps post-transition.

The TAP is a collaborative effort among seven federal partners. The federal agencies participating in the TAP are committed to supporting and facilitating transition success for departing Service members. Through robust interagency coordination, the program is overseen and monitored via the TAP interagency governance structure. The TAP interagency governance structure consists of:

- Executive Council (EC): The EC is composed of senior leaders from DoD (including the Military Components), VA, DOL, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Department of Education (ED), Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and Small Business Administration (SBA) who collaborate and coordinate the delivery of transition services to eligible Active and Reserve Component (RC) Service members. The EC provides oversight and strategic guidance for the TAP Interagency Governance Structure.
- Senior Steering Group (SSG): The SSG consists of members from DoD (including the Military Components), VA, DOL, DHS, ED, OPM, and SBA. The SSG resolves

issues, concerns and friction points among agencies providing transition assistance; promotes their alignment of effort; measures their progress; applies synergies and improvements; ensures legal review of proposed actions; and coordinates with internal agency leaders as appropriate. The SSG reports to the EC.

- Transition Assistance Interagency Work Group (TAIWG): The TAIWG meets monthly and consists of representatives from all agencies participating in the TAP. This work group develops procedures and guidance for the operation of the EC, SSG, and other work groups as well as makes recommendations to the SSG on matters pertaining to the TAP, which cross the TAP governance domain. There are five subordinate work groups that report to the TAIWG: the Curriculum, Data Sharing/Information Technology, Performance Management, Strategic Communications, and the Reserve Component Work Groups.

I will focus the remainder of my statement on the Department's implementation of the requirements set in the FY19 NDAA, as it applies to the TAP, and provide a few updates since the Department last testified about the TAP before this Committee in November 2017. The Department places heavy emphasis on the TAP being an adaptive, evidence-based program. Accordingly, we continuously seek to improve the program to ensure it meets the needs of our transitioning Service members and aligns with a changing military environment and population.

I will highlight some of the improvements, which build upon the original core objectives of the TAP, and the efforts currently underway to make changes to the TAP in compliance with requirements laid out in the FY19 NDAA. The Department and our interagency partners continue to strengthen the TAP to be a more robust outcome-based program that bolsters

opportunities, services, and training for transitioning Service members and their eligible family members in their preparation to meet their post-transition goals.

The mandatory components of the TAP are applicable for all Service members who have served 180 continuous days or more on active duty under Title 10 status. This includes members of the National Guard and Reserve transitioning or being released from active duty.

This raises the obvious question, ” ***What will TAP look like in the future in accordance with the FY19 NDAA?***” ***The changes mandated in the FY19 NDAA will be implemented starting October 2019.***

First, the transition from military to civilian life will begin no later than 365 days prior to transition for those who are separating or retiring. It is recommended retirees begin the transition process at least two years prior to retirement.

Second, the TAP will include an individualized initial counseling between the Service member and a TAP counselor. This will be done one-on-one, face-to-face or, in very limited situations that preclude a face-to-face meeting, via video conference. During the initial counseling session, Service members will complete their personal self-assessment /Individual Transition Plan (ITP) to identify and discuss their unique needs of the transition process and their post-transition goals. The self-assessment/ ITP is criterion based and includes the following: Health Care, Current Housing Expenses and Relocation Costs, Exceptional Family Member Program, assessment for a Post-Transition Housing Plan, Post-Transition Transportation, Post-Transition Peer Support, Availability of confidential mental health services through DoD *inTransition* Program, Military OneSource, VA Vet Centers, and VA Medical Treatment Facilities. In addition, the counselor takes the following factors into account when performing initial counseling:

- rank,
- term of Service,
- gender,
- whether the member was affiliated with an active or reserve component of an Armed Force,
- disability,
- character of discharge (including expedited discharge and discharge under conditions other than honorable),
- health (including mental health),
- military occupational code (specialty code),
- whether the member intends, after separation, retirement, or discharge, to:
 - (1) seek employment;
 - (2) enroll in a program, of higher education;
 - (3) enroll in a program of vocational training; or
 - (4) become an entrepreneur,
- the educational history of the member,
- the employment history of the member and
- whether the member has secured
 - (1) employment,
 - (2) enrollment in a program of education; or
 - (3) enrolled in a program of vocational training.

Also during the initial counseling session, the counselor will assist the Service member in determining their transition goal(s) and the best pathway to achieve his/her desired goal(s).

Based on the initial counseling session's identified goals, plans, challenges and barriers, etc., the Secretaries concerned have identified three pathways Service members will be placed in as they move forward through the transition process: Tier 1, Tier II, and Tier III. Tier I is for those who need little assistance, such as someone who already has employment confirmed or plans to completely retire and not work. Tier II would provide more assistance than Tier 1 such as those who may have employment but are not satisfied with that option, or have an idea of the industry but are unsure of the next steps. Tier III would be for those who have no post-transition plans or goals and thus need the most transition assistance.

Once the individual counseling is completed, Service members are required to complete pre-separation counseling, which must also commence no later than 365 days prior to transition. Pre-separation counseling is an overview of benefits, entitlements, services, training and resources for eligible transitioning Service members. Caregivers of Service members with disabilities are especially encouraged to attend this pre-separation counseling session.

Next, Service members will attend the mandatory one day pre-separation training specific to the Military Component concerned. This portion of the TAP includes curriculum modules on managing your own transition, provides an in-depth overview of the TAP and building resiliency as you transition, a Military Occupational Code (MOC) Crosswalk to help define and translate military skills, and a module on financially planning for transition, which fulfills the financial literacy requirements in statute. On day two, DOL will provide one day of instruction regarding preparation for employment. Then on day three, the VA will conduct one day of instruction regarding the various benefits available under the laws administered by the Secretary of VA.

Other changes in the TAP include Service members choosing one of the following two-day courses of instruction on: Employment, Education, Vocational Training, and

Entrepreneurship. The Service member may elect one or more of these tracks during initial counseling to support their ITP and post-transition goals.

The Capstone event is the culminating activity where commanders verify achievement of career readiness standards and a viable ITP. This must occur no later than 90 days prior to separation, retirement or discharge.

DoD's Transition to Veterans Program Office is pursuing an enterprise system capability to support and document the FY19 NDAA requirements and long term outcomes. It will be a single-source data collection tool to support and streamline the TAP enrollment, participation, and compliance. The tool includes, but is not limited to, an Enterprise Client Tracking System (CTS), which will provide the Military Components an IT platform to execute statutory requirements. The secure CTS will capture reported data as defined in the new statute (Self-assessment/ITP information, etc), enable seamless management of Service member transition across all Military Components and installations, and provide Installation and Unit Commanders performance reports to all Military Components and other Federal Agencies. Currently, for those Service members who do not meet career readiness standards (e.g., do not have employment, acceptance to an institution of higher learning, have not secured housing, or transportation) a "warm-handover" is provided to an appropriate agency such as VA or DOL. The current system documents that a "warm-handover" was provided as well as the agency or organization receiving the warm handover for action. The enhanced system will "close the loop", with information documenting the "warm-handover" and information on services provided. For example, what services were provided to the Service member by VA? Was housing secured? Was a referral made for mental health care?

CURRICULUM AND OTHER ENHANCEMENTS ACROSS THE MILITARY LIFE CYCLE (MLC)

Two core objectives of the original TAP redesign were to implement a revamped TAP curriculum and implement a MLC transition model. While both original objectives were achieved, the Department has continued to make advancements in these two areas.

The Department and our partners are committed to continuously updating and improving the TAP curriculum across the MLC. The TAP interagency governance has established a regular 2-year battle rhythm for reviewing, assessing and updating the curriculum, alternating between an in-depth and technical review. The annual process uses feedback provided by Service members through the Transition Participant Assessment, facilitators, subject matter experts, and other key stakeholders. This systematic review process is critical if we are to stay ahead of the changing needs of our transitioning Service members. In turn, we are providing a “pipeline” of skilled talent to industry and the public sector.

The TAP interagency governance is currently conducting an in-depth curriculum review, with revised curriculum to be implemented in FY20. The Department identified improvements to be made in all four DoD modules for Preseparation Training Day: Resilient Transitions (renamed Managing Your Transition), Financial Planning for Transition, MOC Crosswalk, and the Preparing for Education track. Based on Service member feedback, recent legislative changes, and recent research on challenges transitioning Service members face in their first 12 months post-separation, more substantial revisions are planned for the MOC Crosswalk and Preparing for Education modules this year. Note that the Managing Your Transition (Resilient Transition) and Financial Planning for Transition curriculum were substantially revised during the last annual review.

In terms of this year's review, the improved MOC Crosswalk module, will focus on determining the hard and soft skills a Service member attained while in the service and utilizing those skills in the civilian sector. In terms of the Preparation for Education track, this module will incorporate information the Service member needs to be successful in gaining admittance and as a student in an institute of higher education.

These proposed DoD revisions, which includes the FY19 NDAA changes are scheduled to be piloted this summer with planned deployment for October 2019. This planned deployment is for the whole of the Transition Assistance curriculum to include modules in revision by VA, DOL, and SBA.

We recognize Service members may not always know at 365 days prior to separation where they will live post-separation. Therefore, the TAP teaches transitioning Service members where to find geographic location specific information about benefits and services at a number of points throughout the curriculum. Beginning with pre-separation counseling, and again during VA's benefits briefing, Service members navigate to VA's website, in class, with links to the VA facilities in each state, a link to every state level veteran's affairs page for state specific programs and benefits, and access a page with information on Veterans Service Organizations. This same information is replicated across multiple platforms, i.e., Military OneSource and the National Resource Directory. DOL advises attendees on how to access American Job Centers, embedded in nearly 5,000 neighborhoods across the country. DOL also provides facilitated classroom instruction for TAP attendees to research career and education options by location, online. Service members research the potential growth of specific career fields in a given geographic area, pay differences for that career field in different locations, education availability to support that career field, and certification and licensing requirements for that career per state. Service

members also research the impact of taxes on civilian pay versus military pay and how individual states treat retirement pay with respect to taxes. Currently, Service members may elect to have DD-214 information provided to their state upon issuance of the DD-214 at the time of separation. Beginning in October 2019, Service members will be able to elect to have their contact information forwarded to their State Department of Veteran Affairs much earlier, as they complete initial counseling.

While the TAP interagency governance continues to improve the curriculum at the final touchpoint – Transition – within a service member’s MLC, we are also making advances across other areas of the MLC. Through implementation of the MLC transition model, service members are engaging in the career preparation and transition assistance planning much earlier in their careers – starting at their first permanent duty station or home station for the National Guard and Reserves. This represents a significant, yet critical, cultural shift for the Department. For example, at the first permanent duty station, Service members create an Individual Development Plan (IDP), which documents professional and personal goals, as well as the training, certifications, and higher education needed to achieve those goals. Service members are also provided information on apprenticeships, instruction on resumes and financial preparedness, and they register for eBenefits. As their career progresses, their IDP is continuously updated with current certifications, technical training, and documentation of higher education. At significant life events, such as promotion, military occupational change and/or marriage, Service members are provided updated information on impacts to financial readiness and career opportunities, among other key touchpoint activities. The intent is to ensure thoughtful career planning and preparation across one’s military career.

The Air Force (AF) and VA Health Administration (VHA) have been piloting a Women's Health Initiative which targets female transitioning Service members. The four hour brief provides information on women's healthcare services currently available at the VHA. Following the brief, if available, an in-person tour is provided for the workshop attendees to a local VA Women's Health Care Center. Funding for the pilot has been provided by a grant via the VA, and AF has supported the initiative by providing marketing, enrollment for the Workshop, manpower and facilities. To support all female transitioning Service members across the enterprise, the Transition to Veterans Program Office has recommended to the Initiative Team to develop a virtual capability of the project information, to include a video tour of a VA Women's Health Center. This will ensure those female Veterans no matter their location, those separating OCONUS and those at remote and isolated locations, will have the awareness of the services provided by VA to female Veterans.

CAPSTONE EVENT AND ASSISTING AT RISK SERVICE MEMBERS

The third core objective of the original TAP redesign was to implement a Capstone event to ensure: Service members complete the VOW Act requirements; meet the CRS, and have a viable ITP, to include employment or school acceptance/enrollment or a post-transition housing and transportation plan.

The DoD and VA continue to collaborate in the examining of other 'at risk' populations that may be better served during their military-to-civilian transition. This has had implications for changes to the TAP curriculum and/or "warm handover" processes. For example, one effort has been in support of the Executive Order 13822, a joint effort between DoD, VA, and DHS, geared toward suicide prevention of Service members and veterans. The focus has been on

identifying the population at risk for suicide following a military-to-civilian transition and determining ways in which to better support this high risk population prior to separation.

Finally, the Department continues to take an important look at whether we are providing the National Guard (Air and Army National Guard) and the Reserves (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard Reserve) the time, resources, and support to plan for transitions unique to those populations. Specifically, the Department is leveraging the Status of Forces Survey (SOFS) to pulse RC members' perceptions of the TAP and how perceptions may be changing over time. The Department recently commissioned the RAND Corporation to conduct a research study, entitled "Needs Assessment of Reserve Component Member Transitions," in order to more comprehensively investigate the current needs of transitioning RC members and to provide recommendations regarding any updates needed to the TAP. Study findings are expected in FY20. In short, the Department continues to conduct research, gather feedback from RC members, and consider potential changes to policy within current law to address any identified unique needs of RC members.

The Department remains fully committed to collaborating with Federal, state, industry, education, and community stakeholders to ensure continuous coordination and information sharing, while protecting the privacy and personal information of all our Service members. This ensures Service members receive access to education, training, and opportunities that best prepare them for their military-to-civilian transition. Private and public engagements with employers and agencies directly support and enhance stakeholder commitments that support successful transition of our service members.

Over the past nine months DoD, with the TAP interagency partners, hosted two Military Service Organizations (MSOs)/Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) events. The forums were

an opportunity for the TAP interagency partners to share with the MSO/VSO representatives what has changed in the TAP and what is coming in FY20. Both events were well attended, and the TAP governance received great feedback with very useful information in shaping the way ahead.

GAO REPORT

Additionally, I would like to share some of the improvements already in place as a result of the released 2017 GAO Report which was discussed with this Committee on November 8, 2017. The GAO Report 18-23, “Transitioning Veterans - DoD Needs to Improve Performance Reporting and Monitoring for the Transition Assistance Program,” released November 2017, provided the TAP governance an opportunity to receive external feedback on ways in which to further advance TAP.

Congress asked GAO to examine various aspects of the program’s implementation. GAO surveyed 181 DoD Military installations; analyzed DoD participation data for Fiscal Year 2016; reviewed and analyzed TAP data reports and performance measures; and interviewed officials at DoD, the Military Components, Service members, and our interagency partners. GAO also visited seven installations (two from Army, Navy, Air Force and one Marine Corps). The audit was conducted from February 2016 to September 2017. As a result, GAO made six recommendations, including that DoD improve transparency in reporting the TAP participation and career readiness rates and monitor certain key areas of the TAP implementation, including timeliness of participation and access to supplemental 2-day classes. I would like to provide you a progress update on the recommendations from the Report.

The Transition to Veterans Program Office in partnership with the Military Components has successfully had GAO approve two recommendations as “implemented and closed” of the six recommendations noted.

RECOMMENDATION 1: *DOD provides performance and career readiness attainment for ALL TAP-eligible service members and members of the National Guard and Reserve. A report is provided quarterly on the publically available DoDTAP.MIL website, on VOW compliance and information on missing or incomplete forms is included.*

RECOMMENDATION 3: *GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense monitor and report on the extent to which service members who elect to receive supplementary 2-day classes are able to receive training. DoD produces a quarterly report on self-reported barriers to attending the two-day classes. The report can be accessed specific to a Military Department, a Component, an installation, or a Unit. The Military Components have been provided training on how to access the information as well as provided the tools to accomplish the report.*

GAO approved both recommendations as “implemented and closed” in October 2018. The remaining four recommendations will be presented to GAO for closure in the Spring/Summer 2019.

CONCLUSION

The FY19 NDAA has driven significant changes to the TAP. These changes will require substantial adjustments in resource requirements for the Military Departments. The Secretaries of the Military Departments are developing implementation plans for the legislative change and will include in the plan any requirements for additional funding and manpower.

Career readiness and transition assistance preparation is an absolute must if Service members are going to have a successful transition to civilian life. We recognize that preparing

Service members throughout their MLC to be career-ready upon transition is essential to sustaining the All-Volunteer Force. In order for DoD to continue to attract the high quality and dedicated volunteers to serve in our Armed Forces, we must return this generation of Service members to the Nation with the ability to positively contribute to the national workforce and thrive within their civilian communities.

The Department cannot do this alone. It must have the continued strong collaboration with our interagency partners, the support and hard work of our Military Components, especially at the installation level, and collaborations with other external stakeholders and you, the members of Congress. The TAP interagency governance is vibrant, effective, responsive, and committed, as evidenced by the 2016 signing of our national Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) regarding the “Transition Assistance Program for Service Members Transitioning from Active Duty.” As stated in the MOU, “The parties will support and advance the ongoing implementation, assessment, and enhancement of TAP. This collaboration will serve to support Service members in pursuing employment, higher education, skills and career training, credentialing, and entrepreneurship.”

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I thank you, the Ranking Member, and the members of this Subcommittee for your outstanding and continuing support of the men and women who proudly wear the uniform in defense of our great Nation.