

Mission Incomplete: Strengthening the TAP Program to Ensure a Smoother Transition to Civilian Life for Tomorrow's Veterans

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Statement of

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With Respect To

“Mission Incomplete: Strengthening the TAP Program to Ensure a Smoother Transition to Civilian Life for Tomorrow's Veterans”

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Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, 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 important topic.

Background

The all-volunteer force is continually evolving as service members complete their terms of service and transition to civilian life. Pentagon data shows that approximately 80 percent of enlisted personnel separate from the military before reaching retirement eligibility. This reflects the military's structured approach to force management, which depends on a steady pipeline of new recruits to sustain operational readiness and force structure. This ongoing cycle, coupled with the fact that nearly 200,000 service members exit the force each year, underscores the importance of ensuring the Department of Defense (DOD) delivers robust and effective military-to-civilian transition programs.

Recognizing the importance of a strong transition, DOD has taken steps to support service members as they reintegrate into civilian life. Just as military training instills discipline, skills, and resilience, an effective transition process empowers veterans to apply those strengths in new careers, communities, and personal endeavors. A well-prepared service member leaving the military can become a thriving, productive member of society who brings leadership, adaptability, and experience into the civilian workforce.

The critical nature of military-to-civilian transition cannot be understated. It is a major life event that, if navigated well, can lead to the reintegration of productive members of society. But new veterans who are not fully prepared for the challenges ahead can just as easily falter and struggle to become stable. However, transitioning out of service presents unique challenges. Leaving the military is often complicated by injuries or illnesses, shifts in identity and support networks, and the need for education or training to embark on a new career. For those unprepared for these changes, the transition can be disorienting, leading to struggles with employment, well-being, and overall security. Tragically, veterans face an

increased risk of suicide during their first year after leaving service, underscoring the urgent need for focused support during this time.

To ensure the long-term success of veterans, comprehensive and well-structured transition programs must be a top priority. While the military invests months and sometimes years indoctrinating civilians into military service, transitioning service members (TSMs) often receive only a few days of formal preparation for reintegration. Strengthening transition resources, ensuring early access to support, and fostering a culture that prioritizes a successful post-service life are all essential to maintaining the health and stability of those who have served.

While DOD's primary mission is national security, supporting successful transitions is an extension of that mission. The military builds warriors, but it must also ensure that those warriors are prepared to succeed beyond their time in uniform. By fully embracing transition as a critical component of military service, DOD can solidify its commitment to those who have served by helping them not only to leave the military, but to thrive in the next chapter of their lives.

DOD's Legal Obligations

Title 10 of the United States Code (U.S.C.) §1142 requires DOD to provide individual pre-separation counseling to all service members preparing to leave active duty. Additionally, the *National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2019* (Sec. 552) places the responsibility for delivering the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) squarely with DOD. The law mandates that all eligible service members begin transition support services on time, which should be no later than 365 days before their expected separation.

Although TAP is a core part of the transition process, Title 10 U.S.C. §1142 also mandates that DOD connect TSMs with external support systems in the communities where they will reside. This includes not only employment assistance but also local health care options, housing resources, peer support networks, and mental health services. The fiscal year 2020 NDAA requires collaboration between DOD and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure the most at-risk service members receive a "warm handoff"—a process in which

TSMs are directly referred to VA services and connected to veteran-specific community programs upon discharge.

Despite these mandates, there is a persistent belief within DOD that any gaps in transition services will be addressed by VA after a service member has left the military. This assumption that “VA will take care of them on the other side” can lead to critical gaps in support at a time when service members need it most.

Additionally, junior enlisted service members face significant challenges post service. Research from The Veterans Metrics Initiative (TVMI) at The Pennsylvania State University shows that this group experiences disproportionately high rates of underemployment, financial instability, substance abuse, housing and food insecurity, and even suicide.

Alarming, only 65 percent of veterans feel fully transitioned three years after separation, and 61 percent remain underemployed even six-and-a-half years later. TVMI researchers also found that within the first three months after leaving the military, veterans struggled most with employment and financial stability. However, the challenges do not end there. Up to 78 months after separation, veterans continue to experience difficulties with social connections, and mental and physical health.

The Current State of TAP

The benefits of attending TAP courses, both tangible and intangible, are difficult to measure, but ensuring service members attend TAP fully and on time is critical to their post-service success. On January 17, 2025, DOD submitted a report to Congress detailing TAP participation in 2023. While the report showed progress in attendance rates from previous years, still just more than half attended on time.

According to DOD’s report, nearly 177,000 service members attended TAP in 2023. Of these, 65 percent began pre-separation counseling at least 365 days before separation or retirement, as required by law. However, 35 percent still failed to meet this requirement,

leaving them with less time to prepare for civilian life.

Among those service members with planned separations, only 52 percent met the requirement to begin counseling at least one year before leaving the service. In contrast, 100 percent of service members with unplanned separations began counseling as soon as possible after receiving their separation orders. This contrast underscores an important opportunity for improvement. When required by operational needs, DOD effectively ensures that service members attend TAP, as seen with those undergoing unplanned separations. For those with planned separations—who make up the majority of TSMs—attendance has improved but remains inconsistent. While the increase in compliance is encouraging, further progress is needed to ensure all service members receive the full benefits of early transition preparation.

Under current law—Title 10 U.S.C. § 1144(c)(2)(A)-(B)—service secretaries have the authority to waive the mandatory TAP instruction of Two-Day Tracks if a service member is deemed unlikely to face significant challenges in readjustment, health care, or employment. Additionally, waivers may be granted for those with specialized skills who are essential to supporting a unit's imminent deployment due to unavoidable circumstances. However, in practice, waivers are often issued for reasons beyond these intended exceptions, frequently tied to mission requirements or administrative convenience rather than a service member's actual transition needs.

In October 2023, DOD testified before Congress that commanding officers frequently waive TAP attendance due to mission requirements, involuntary separations, or even personal choice. At the same hearing, the Government Accountability Office testified that 53 percent of all TAP waiver requests were approved, with 22 percent of Tier-III service members (those identified as being at the highest risk for transition challenges) not attending the mandatory two-day course at all.

DOD's own January 2025 report further highlights the widespread use of waivers by commanders, showing that 55 percent (74,000 TSMs) who were eligible for exemptions in 2023 did not attend the two-day course. Of the Tier III TSMs who were required to attend the full TAP curriculum, 17 percent (33,000 service members) did not attend an employment, education, or entrepreneurship track. Tier III personnel who miss out on TAP lack the individualized support necessary for a smooth transition and leave the military

without being properly connected to VA resources. If commanders can prioritize getting every service member to weapons qualification or other mandatory training, they must also recognize that preparing them for civilian life and educating them about their earned benefits is just as mission critical.

VFW Survey Data

The VFW conducts a post-transition survey with service members who participated in VA's Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program, gathering firsthand insights into their experiences with TAP. The feedback reveals common challenges faced by TSMs and highlights areas where DOD can improve TAP to better prepare future veterans.

For many, transitioning from military to civilian life is an overwhelming process. A separating Air Force E-5 described it as "dealing with a bunch of important life decisions" without enough guidance. An Army E-6 from Fort Riley, Kansas, said the unit did not give enough time to complete a smooth transition. Many reported feeling rushed through TAP, with one participant describing it as a "firehose of information" with no time to act on what was being taught. Because most service members must still perform their regular duties while attending TAP, they often struggle to focus fully on their transition. Several suggested that TAP should incorporate dedicated time to begin working on transition tasks rather than just presenting information.

When facing transition out of the military, TSMs share that their primary concerns are finding employment and living with the impacts of their service-connected disabilities. They worry about the loss of their sense of purpose and mission, as well as the camaraderie and dependable network they have come to know. They are concerned about paying their living expenses, finding and affording health care, and housing and food security. It is unwise to assume every service member has a job waiting or a ready support network.

For National Guard and Reserve members, TAP presents additional frustrations. An Air Force O-5 noted that "we need more support for guardsmen. We're the most complicated group of all, and I don't think there's enough support for our unique circumstances." Additionally, several TSMs emphasized that the core three-day TAP course is too short,

recommending either an extension or a second round of participation. A Navy O-5 in Washington, D.C., remarked, “One should attend TAP twice or at least have access to review materials more than once. It’s too much information to absorb in one week, and some of it becomes more relevant later in the transition process.” Others suggested the need for “pre-TAP” at the 18-year service mark to allow for earlier preparation.

Many TSMs also reported significant barriers caused by their parent commands. A retiring Army E-7 admitted that the workload made it difficult to focus on transition, saying, “the 82nd keeps on trucking along, regardless of folks moving on.” A sailor from Quantico, Virginia, noted being constantly pulled from TAP classes to assist with unit operations, making it difficult to focus. Another service member’s TAP experience was rushed due to not being released from deployment in time to complete the program properly. The common theme was clear—units prioritize operational readiness over transition, leaving many service members scrambling.

The lack of personalization within TAP was another frequent concern. Multiple respondents suggested that TAP should be tailored to separation type, such as retirement, medical discharge, or end of service contract, so that service members receive information relevant only to their situation. A soldier from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, explained, “TAP could be improved if each cohort was broken up by separation type so that only relevant info is provided.” A Navy E-7 echoed this, saying the program “lacks the bandwidth to individualize for non-standard retirees.” Others expressed frustration over limited TAP availability, with a sailor from Naval Support Activity Annapolis, Maryland, struggling to register because the first open session was not available for three months.

Many also highlighted the need for greater spouse and family involvement. An Army O-5 retiring from Fort Belvoir, Virginia, said, “They need to encourage family attendance. It wasn’t clear when and where to include them.” A Navy E-6 agreed, saying, “Spouses should be encouraged to attend. It’s a wealth of information, and as a team, more can be retained.” These insights suggest that better outreach and flexibility are needed to integrate families into the transition process. Despite these challenges, some found elements of TAP effective. A soldier retiring from Fort Cavazos, Texas, praised the executive TAP course for being “time-effective and relevant to the audience.” However, others found TAP “surprisingly stressful” with one participant stating, “We reviewed each section of the book, which I can do on my own. TAP lacked details that would actually benefit my transition.”

These survey responses underscore the need for DOD to improve TAP by allowing more time for participation, ensuring units prioritize transition, tailoring courses to different separation types, expanding access for Guard and Reserve members, and integrating spouses into the process. By addressing these gaps, TAP can become a more effective bridge to civilian life, helping future veterans to be better prepared for success beyond military service.

Gaps in TAP

While DOD has made significant strides in supporting service members' transitions, there are still areas for improvement, particularly for junior enlisted personnel and those at high risk. As stated earlier, despite legal requirements many service members do not attend TAP classes on time and commanders can waive attendance for mission requirements or operational needs. As a result, junior enlisted personnel, who often benefit the most from early transition preparation, may not receive the same level of access as their senior counterparts.

VFW staff have observed disparities in TAP participation. According to VFW's accredited BDD representatives, senior enlisted personnel and officers attend TAP at significantly higher rates than junior enlisted service members. For example, during one particular week at Fort Bragg, out of 28 disability and compensation claims submitted by VFW's BDD representative, only six came from junior enlisted service members, even though they constitute a much larger share of those leaving the military. This suggests that many junior enlisted personnel are not receiving the same level of guidance and time to file for their benefits as their senior counterparts. Addressing this gap would help ensure that all service members, regardless of rank, receive the full range of support needed for a smooth and successful transition.

TAP has proven to be effective for senior enlisted personnel and officers, who often have greater stability, education, and resources. However, junior enlisted service members—who are statistically more vulnerable to challenges such as underemployment, homelessness, and mental health struggles—may require additional outreach and command encouragement to fully engage in the program. By strengthening engagement efforts for this population, DOD can enhance TAP's impact and better equip all service members for life after service.

Additionally, while TAP offers specialized tracks tailored to different career paths, not all service members receive sufficient counseling to help them select the most suitable option. Those uncertain about a post-military path may benefit from more in-depth guidance to explore available opportunities effectively and make informed decisions about the future.

Another opportunity for improvement lies in structured post-separation follow up. While TAP focuses heavily on pre-separation preparation, many veterans struggle in the critical first six to twelve months after leaving the military. Expanding follow-up support during this critical period could further enhance the success of TSMs long term.

Finally, continued efforts to foster a culture that fully supports transition preparation will be key. While TAP is a valuable program, some service members, particularly those leaving involuntarily, may feel disengaged due to lingering cultural stigma or varying levels of command emphasis on transition planning. By reinforcing the importance of TAP across all ranks and ensuring that every service member is encouraged to participate fully, DOD can further strengthen its commitment to set up TSMs for long-term success.

Successes of VA's TAP 6.0

With the establishment of TAP 6.0 in January 2024, VA has taken a proactive approach by ensuring TSMs receive direct, in-person counsel on navigating the VA benefits system. TAP 6.0 includes accredited representatives who provide crucial guidance on the complex process of filing a VA disability and compensation claim through the BDD process. These accredited representatives assist TSMs in filing claims, expediting disability ratings, and ensuring continuity of essential care including mental health services. This access has significantly increased the number of TSMs receiving benefits upon discharge. Codifying it into law would secure its long-term impact at no additional cost.

Since the implementation of TAP 6.0, the VFW has had no difficulty accessing military installations to support its portion of the VA TAP day. Although VFW representatives are typically allocated only fifteen minutes during the Veterans Service Organization (VSO) briefing, they prefer to be scheduled at the end of the day to maximize their opportunity to engage with TSMs. After the briefing, they often remain available to answer questions, schedule appointments, and discuss various aspects of VA disability and compensation claims, including time requirements, necessary documentation, and evidentiary criteria. Representatives distribute their business cards and encourage TSMs to contact them for

follow-up appointments. When accredited representatives write their contact information on the classroom whiteboard, nearly every TSM takes a photo for future reference. It is important to note that VFW representatives do not file claims or request TSMs to sign any forms during TAP courses.

During the first year since TAP 6.0 became effective, the VFW briefed 13,000 more TSM's than the year prior, a 54 percent increase in contact. This effort resulted in a 25 percent increase in establishing service connection for VA benefits for service members seeking claims assistance. The VFW's accredited representatives alone briefed nearly 24,000 TSMs in 2023, and in 2024 they briefed 37,000 TSMs, achieving a 26 percent increase in awards.

The VFW urges Congress to pass the *TAP Promotion Act* to codify this practice and ensure that all TSMs have access to this essential benefits assistance before leaving the military.

Community Connections

As TSMs step away from the structured environment of the military, they are faced with a multitude of new and often complex challenges. Connections to local resources are essential for service members' successful transitions, as they can significantly impact outcomes including those related to military sexual trauma. However, VFW survey data indicates that one third of respondents were either unaware of these resources or reported not being connected to them. While DOD prioritizes warm handoffs for those identified as most in need of transition assistance, expanding these connections to all TSMs, as outlined in the law, would help ensure that every TSM has access to the support they need to thrive in civilian life.

To address this, the VFW urges Congress to ensure that all service members are consistently connected to reliable community resources, especially those specialized transition organizations receiving federal grants. The National Resource Directory is a resource for vetted organizations that could be designated to support these connections. Additionally, VA's partnership with Onward Ops provides trained volunteer sponsors to guide approximately 25,000 service members each year during their first year of civilian reintegration.

While no national transition services exist in every city, many organizations specialize in

specific industries or locations. For example, TSMs seeking education can be connected with Student Veterans of America chapters. Those interested in technology jobs in Texas can connect with VetsinTech, and those pursuing finance in New York City with can connect with FourBlock. Specialized organizations like The Honor Foundation serve members from U.S Special Operations Forces. These resources cannot be fully effective if they are underutilized or not well-known to those who need them.

Successful Suicide Prevention Efforts – VA’s Veteran Sponsorship Initiative

Building on DOD’s responsibility to connect TSMs with community resources, VA’s Veteran Sponsorship Initiative (VSI) takes a targeted approach to supporting those at the highest risk for suicide, ensuring they receive personalized, life-saving assistance during transition. VSI plays a critical role in linking TSMs at risk to essential services, including VA medical care, mental health and wellness support, housing assistance, financial aid, vocational training, and peer mentorship. A key feature of the program is the DOD STARRS Practical Risk Calculator for Suicidal Behavior, a predictive analytics tool designed to identify service members at the highest risk for suicide. This questionnaire, which has been administered to 18,000 active duty TSMs, has demonstrated remarkable accuracy by identifying 93 percent of potential suicide attempts among the top 30 percent of at-risk individuals. Those flagged as high risk receive rapid access to VA health care and peer-certified sponsors through Onward Ops, an organization that provides structured, veteran-led sponsorship to ensure a smoother and more supported transition. Results from VSI show a reduction in suicide attempts after military discharge. By integrating data-driven risk assessment with personalized support, VSI and Onward Ops are ensuring that vulnerable TSMs receive the critical assistance they need. To enhance suicide prevention, the VFW urges DOD to expand VSI and mandate universal participation by all TSMs in the STARRS Practical Risk Calculator for Suicidal Behavior risk assessment.

Impact on DOD’s Force Readiness

Proper transition support for TSMs is vital to sustaining the long-term strength and readiness of the force. Ensuring that service members successfully transition to civilian life not only helps maintain their well-being but also fosters a culture of support and commitment in the military. When transitions are well managed, service members are more likely to remain advocates for military service, whether by rejoining in the future, supporting the military in civilian roles, or encouraging their families and communities to consider service.

Data from the Pew Research Center shows that perceptions of military service are evolving, with younger generations expressing more concerns about challenges post service. These concerns influence recruitment efforts, especially among families who have traditionally been strong supporters of military careers. If potential recruits perceive gaps in the military's transition support, they may hesitate to enlist because of uncertainty about long-term benefits, career options, or challenges after leaving service.

VFW's Recommendations for Improving DOD's Transition Services

To enhance DOD accountability and support TSMs, the VFW recommends that Congress pass legislation to create an Under Secretary of Defense for Transition (USD-T) within DOD. This office would oversee and coordinate all transition programs, ensuring comprehensive and standardized support for service members as they prepare for life after military service. The USD-T would enforce compliance with TAP requirements, hold commanders accountable for participation, and address cultural stigmas around transition assistance, reinforcing that it is a key part of career development. The office would also implement targeted interventions for service members at high risk for post-transition challenges such as suicide, substance use disorders, and mental health issues.

The VFW urges Congress to pass the *TAP Promotion Act* that would strengthen transition support across all branches of service. To ensure service members receive the support to which they are entitled, we recommend that Congress mandate TAP compliance and timeliness by requiring DOD to create an accountability system. Commanders should be incentivized to prioritize transition services by establishing performance metrics and reporting requirements that evaluate their support for transition preparation. Waivers for TAP attendance should be granted only in exceptional circumstances, under strict criteria, rather than for administrative convenience. A cultural shift within the military is needed to ensure that transition preparation is viewed as equally mission critical as other mandatory training.

To expand and strengthen transition programs, the VFW recommends enhancing collaboration with transition service organizations, especially those receiving federal grants, and increasing integration with programs like Veteran Sponsorship Initiative and Onward Ops. Additionally, the VFW calls for DOD to expand the use of the STARRS Practical Risk Calculator for Suicidal Behavior throughout the Department, ensuring all TSMs are

screened.

Finally, the VFW recommends integrating transition support early and at all levels of a service member's career. Transition education should be expanded beyond TAP and introduced at multiple points, including a "Pre-TAP" program around the 18-year service mark for those approaching retirement. TAP itself should also be tailored to different transition paths, ensuring more relevant guidance for each service member's unique situation. Moreover, increasing family and spouse involvement in TAP sessions and improving scheduling flexibility will ensure a smoother transition for the entire family.

The VFW urges Congress and DOD to take decisive action in establishing the USD-T and implementing these critical reforms. By embedding transition preparation into military culture, enforcing accountability for TAP participation, and expanding access to specialized transition resources, DOD can better equip service members for life after service. Recognizing transition as a core mission within DOD will not only improve veterans' well-being but also enhance recruitment, retention, and the overall quality of life for all who have served. This approach will ultimately make it easier for every service member to transition successfully.

Chairman Van Orden and Ranking Member Pappas, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to answer 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 2025, 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.