



KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
MILITARY
AFFAIRS

STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WITH RESPECT TO

“Success After Service: Improving Veterans’ Employment, Education and Home Loan Opportunities”

Washington, D.C.

October 27, 2021

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and members of this committee, I, as a third generation Army Officer, am both honored and thankful for this opportunity to address you with my insights on the challenge of Post 9-11 era veterans transition to successful and fulfilling civilian lives after their service. As a combat veteran, as well as a human science researcher, and active practitioner of transition assistance through higher education administration, non-profit veteran service organizations, professional consulting and personal mentorship efforts -I believe

I have a unique and relevant perspective upon this human life event of contemporary veterans transition.

While I could share a simple list of best practices from my perspective at the frontlines of higher education—I firmly believe that you deserve a more compelling and strategic insight to the larger issue of veterans transition. Today, I wish to share a few broad comments on: (1) the inherent challenges of Post 9-11 era veterans' transition, (2) the true nature of this social phenomenon, and (3) some examples of evidence-based practices that increase success. I share these with you today in an effort to improve our collective work in this noble endeavor of caring for Americas' service men and women- as well as their families.

The Inherent Challenge of the Post 9-11 Ear Veteran Transition Experience

Today, there does not appear to be a coherent, evidence-based framework or national strategy driving the institutional practices of veterans' transition assistance. Adaptations of decades old military separation policy and practices have been expanded, with some useful innovations that are helpful to guiding veterans into this life-altering event of post-military transition. However, performance data and anecdotal trends suggest that much of contemporary transition assistance practices are lacking. Moreover, the noble and committed work of our military services, our VA, employers, non-profit veteran service organizations, workforce development professionals and the veterans themselves also appear to lack effectiveness, scale and outcomes needed to properly care for this generation of deserving veterans. Why, despite sincere commitment and effort is this so?

In the early 1970's, social science research was conducted that guided the human resource practices involved in designing, recruiting, developing, employing and retaining a new All Volunteer Force that serves the veteran today. However, little to no work was undertaken on the practice of transitioning veterans into civil life and work- other than common HR functions of separation. For four decades, this gap of research to guide veteran's transition went largely unnoticed due to the presence of a large, allied-military defense sector which absorbed up to 80% of transitioning veterans into defense-related employment after their uniformed service.

Today, we find our Post 9-11 era veterans having very limited opportunity to enter this dramatically reduced sector—and being the first generation that must compete with the existing workforce for employment in contemporary employment sectors when they have little or no relevant experience. In fact, most non-defense related employers accurately consider military service as absenteeism from the workforce. While recognizing the innate talent and general value of former service members- current employers do not see veterans having immediate workplace- ready skills, knowledge and experiences needed to perform for their companies within a minimal 14-day on-boarding process.

Moreover, foundational human capital research validates the fact that human talent is sector specific—meaning military talent is not directly transferrable to the civilian market or workplace without additional training and education. Much of our current practice in transition assistance erroneously is predicated upon translating existing military skills, known as Military Occupational Specialties (MOS), into workplace equivalencies that simply do not exist. Thus, most of our transitioning veterans are truly not ready to compete for entry into the workforce without additional training. While the need to re-skill our Post 9-11 era veterans served as the impetus for the enactment of the Post 9-11 GI Bill, considered the most lucrative GI Education Benefits Bill in our history—its limited use has not yielded the transition mechanism that this cohort needs. There are many factors why this is so and beyond our discussion today—however, the transferability of this benefit to depended family members has resulted in many veterans not using this needed benefit for themselves.

To fully appreciate the magnitude of our contemporary veteran transition problems into entering our workforce, I feel we must also face the reality that our veteran unemployment statistic appears to not full address the problem. The way we track employment rates in America is a bit confusing to the average citizen. While today the Department of Labor and the VA report a 6.5 % veteran unemployment rate for all generations of veterans—this number fails to capture the number of *discouraged workers* who are unemployment yet are removed from the unemployment statistic after a lengthy period of not joining the workforce. My research and practice finds the proximal cause for being discouraged is lack of successful transition and

resocialization. In 2020, the number of discouraged veterans was nearly 9.5 million veterans—with almost 1 million being recent veterans serving after 9-11. I believe the true scale of this challenge is best represented by combining the numbers of unemployed veterans and discouraged workers that are capable and wanting to work after their military service.

From my perspective, a leading factor in this discouragement is the economic reality of a major compensation gap that exists between military pay and benefits and industry compensation rates based upon market rates, not military and congressional retention formulas. In most cases, our veterans are not aware-- nor ready to accept major decreases in compensation and benefits as an “entry cost” into civilian employment. For many, military disability claims become a financial cushion to mitigate this reality—driving up VA costs and workload, and prolonging or preventing the active successful search for employment.

The Nature of Veteran Transition & Reintegration

My review of prior research on veterans transition resulted in the discovery that an empirical, operational definition of veterans transition does not exist to help us understand this contemporary life event. However by taking a multi-disciplinary search of other relevant works in other fields beyond military scholarship—I have managed to piece together a workable framework and grounded theory that explains this social phenomenon. I have enclosed a copy of this work in my written testimony to be shared in the public record. Most noteworthy is the discovery of British sociologist Ruth Jolly’s findings that veterans’ transition occurs in a three stage process of confronting departure, disengagement activities prior to departure and resocialization into society and the workplace. She also found that the holistic process of veteran transition typically lasts from 3.5 to 7 years- meaning much of this process occurs long after separation from the service. The sum result of my decades of work in this area suggest these principles are correct; and that incorporating them in contemporary practice would greatly enhance institutional, organizational and personal efforts to improve veterans’ transition.

I have found through my research and practice five major factors essential to veterans' transition. Veteran transition, to work effectively must cultivate a proper *mindset* within our veterans about the true nature of its challenges and rewards, as well as what it will demand to be successful. We do this well with our recruits being prepared for the proper mindsets to become soldiers, airman, sailors, marines and Coast Guard—but we lack any effort to effectively mentally prepare our “leavers” to guide personal transition ventures. Most veterans I have worked with or studied enter transition have major misconceptions about their employment readiness, compensation expectations and career fit. I have found that the root cause for many of these misconceptions can be traced to recruitment and retention narratives that do not accurately reflect the lack of directly transferable values of military service to the private sector. The misconceptions render the service member starting transition with an incorrect mindset.

Secondly, veterans in transition must be given tools to *socialize*, not “re-socialize” into a modern society and workplace that they have never been a part of or has changed during the years they served. Most contemporary service members lack the essential social capital—or strategic and personal connections needed to engage, enter and succeed in the civilian world and workplace. When I ask my veteran mentees to share their social media “Friends, Likes and Connections” nearly all have rich networks of fellow, active service members- but extremely few connections to the world they are about to enter.

Thirdly, veterans must also realize that their transition is not to be accomplished alone-and that *mediated assistance* of experts and experienced exemplars or mentors is needed for the duration of this transitional life event- especially after formal separation from the military. Today, my work finds that the people best positioned to assist our veterans have neither made this transition themselves or fully found their path to the civilian workforce themselves. Moreover, at the point of vital delivery—many assistance program lack any true personal connection—and use mass briefings as a primary assistance method to large groups of transitioning veterans that ultimately result in pointing to websites for the veteran to seek their own needed resources. Like other adult life transitions such as marriage, divorce, death, child-raising, career change—most human transitions involve personal or “concierge style” assistance from those that have done so successfully. Our veterans deserve the same support.

Fourthly, *Self-realization* becomes essential for each individual veteran to overcome the pervasive military identity that they know and cherish. The ability to re-form a new personal and social identity has been empirically found to be essential to successful transition. The impact of service members becoming “institutionalized” into the military culture is found similar to those serving in the clergy, penal, cultural and others institutions. The institutional mindset provides security, knowing one’s place, and provides established pathways to follow without much personal direction. This impact of institutionalization phenomenon is especially exasperated as the military obtains its members from the entry point of the adult life stage—enlisted from high schools and officers from undergraduate college degree programs- where the military institutional ways of life and work become the new “operating system” for most veterans. While the military operating system is extremely suited to professional military service—it is not directly relevant in the organizationally-based civilian world and workplace. Thus, the transitioning veteran needs to gain self-realization skills to conceptualize and follow major change behaviors needed to see their new world in a new way -not to simply impose the military ways upon their current circumstance. In going back to Ruth Jolly’s foundational study—she found up to 40% of veterans lack the ability to perform this change successfully.

Lastly, my work finds that effective transition assistance efforts must aim at building capacity for veterans to possess cross-boundary *mobility skills* that are essential for the veteran to direct their own transition experience well beyond their initial separation. Without this capacity of bridging institutional and individual forces - the veteran remains increasingly dependent upon an institution to guide them in this extended process. Veterans must be able to create new social connections that can serve as career capital in their new lives beyond the familiar military system. Activities such as volunteering in non-veteran community service organizations, engaging in athletic and cultural events and engaging in non-credit community education programs have been found to inculcate new individual competencies that are needed to take individual responsibility and direction in making life changes.

While not my scholarly expertise, I have also discovered that the life event of veteran transition is riddled with debilitating levels of stress for most who undergo it. Using the

sociological Holmes & Rahe Social Readjustment Scale tool that ranks the 43 most common life transition events and their associated and cumulative stress levels with my cohort of transitioning veterans under exploratory study—I found that nearly 90% of veterans in transition were experiencing stress scores associated with the highest risk category for physiological and emotional/behavioral illness. While not making a causal connection—I do believe this transitional stress significantly contributes to reduced entry into academic programs, skills training and direct employment pathways. Additionally, my work in veteran suicide abatement also offers indicators that transitional stress has an influential impact upon our veteran suicide rates among those veterans—even among those without specific combat trauma. This means to me that veterans’ transition, when not done properly, has devastating impacts well beyond educational enrollment and employment.

Recommendations Needed to Increase Veterans’ Transition Success

Having shared my major discoveries concerning of the nature and challenge of veteran’s transition- I must also report that many effective programs, practices and activities do exist today. Many of these incorporate the principles I delineated in this testimony. I wish to share a few as examples that should be considered as “best practices” to include in any strategy established to better guide veteran transition.

Using concierge-type transition assistance: Through my service as a board member of the USO’s Central Region, I’ve been impressed to see first-hand the work the USO is providing to transitioning service members and veterans through its USO Pathfinder Transition Program. The program extends the USO experience to active-duty, Reserve, National Guard and military spouses and educates them on professional services available to better prepare them as they transition from the military and settle into their new communities. Simply stated their methods of personal *mediation* are yielding exceptional results.

Building new workforce needed skills prior to departure from military service. My observation and interactions with the Army Transition assistance Program (TAP) Career Skills

Program and United States Military Apprenticeship Program (USMAP) at Fort Riley, Kansas find these two practices help to create economic *mobility* into the workforce by making the veteran workplace-ready earlier after their separation. Anecdotal evidence also suggests these program outcomes help shape a more appropriate *mindset* about transition through immersion with industry and workforce professionals that differ from military culture and institutional norms.

Encourage participation and membership in contemporary veteran service organizations.

Organizations such as Team Red, White and Blue (RWB) and Mission Continues offer veterans generationally-appropriate social connections that enhance the *socialization/resocialization* process through value-based activity. Post 9-11 era veterans find service to others a pervasive purpose in their lives. Some legacy veteran service organizations expertly met the needs and functions of their respective generations—but have struggled to find relevance in serving the current generation of veterans. More can be done to encourage transitioning veterans to find these organizations in their new communities following separation.

The role of community-based arts engagements in assisting transitioning veterans. I have worked extensively for over a decade in developing the practice of arts-based engagements to address development needs of our veterans in transition. This formerly obscure practice is now recognized as a national enterprise—in major part due to the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) partnership with the Departments of Defense (DOD) and Veterans Affairs (VA). The recent launch of The Creative Forces Community Engagement Grants will financially and programmatically support arts engagement activities for military, veterans, family members and caregivers that provide unique broadening opportunities for creative expression and strengthening resilience. My exploratory research with veterans undergoing these type voluntary programs show firm evidence of its *self-realization* developing potential. Interestingly, the work of Los Angeles-based DIAVOLO Veterans Project uses a pioneering blend of movement performance art with a developmental strategy of restoring the previously held strengths of veterans that have diminished because of their separation and transition experience. DIAVOLO had recently showcased their work at the Kennedy Center to a national cohort of leaders unfamiliar with the relevance of the arts to help veterans with transition.

Closing Remarks

In closing, I believe that we need a national strategy for veteran transition assistance based upon sound human and social science principle; that also incorporates the holistic nature of the military life-cycle from pre- to post-service. Without such change, I do not see how we can yield better outcomes for our veterans despite current efforts to do so. There is general consensus that our veterans are both a valuable and deserving population needed in our civilian workforce. There is also evidence that the result of unsuccessful veterans' transition is negatively effecting the recruitment of the next generation of veterans who witness the struggle of veterans' after their service. With nearly 80% of our current service members being from military families—this generational source of talent is eroding.

Despite my testimony focusing upon the critical aspects of veteran transition--I wish to end on a positive note I fully recognize the commitment, investment and true concern of leaders from all sectors of American life toward doing better for our veterans as they navigate their way to civil society and the workplace. I strongly recommend that a national strategy for the successful transition of military veterans to help us all better arrange the mosaic of services and programs that are needed to care for these special citizens and their families. A national strategy is required to tap this pool of talent for American prosperity. I stand ready and committed to work towards this end.

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, this concludes my testimony. I welcome any questions you may have. Thank You

(I dedicate this testimony to my mentor, friend and exemplar of the finest in veterans' character- Colonel Retired Mike McDermott, U.S. Army, Infantry. COL McDermott is one of the most highly decorated combat veteran of the war in Vietnam; and sage of wisdom on making veterans lives worth living after their service.)