

STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SENATE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
December 15, 2015

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and other members of the Committee, we appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the current status of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Veterans Economic Communities Initiative (VECI). Accompanying me today is Ms. Rosye Cloud, Senior Advisor for Veteran Employment.

Background

It is critical that today's Servicemembers are appropriately and adequately prepared to transition to civilian life and seek a meaningful and productive post-military career. In November 2011, Congress passed and the President signed the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (VOW Act), which included steps to improve TAP for Servicemembers. Among other things, the VOW Act made participation in TAP mandatory for all Servicemembers (except in certain limited circumstances). Mandatory components of TAP now include pre-separation counseling, two VA benefits briefings,

and a Department of Labor (DOL) employment workshop. Under the auspices of a memorandum of understanding executed in 2014, VA, DOL, Department of Defense (DoD), Department of Homeland Security, Department of Education (ED), Small Business Administration (SBA), U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and other stakeholders coordinated on the implementation of the redesigned TAP to strengthen and expand information, counseling, and support to transitioning Servicemembers. Inter-agency cooperation is at all levels of the Performance Reporting and Management strategy. VA currently co-chairs the Executive Council (EC) and the Senior Steering Group (SSG). The EC meets on a quarterly basis to provide strategic guidance and discuss recommendations or concerns raised by the SSG. The SSG meets monthly, and the working groups meet as necessary.

Inter-agency working groups study issues pertaining to transition, employment, curriculum, education, training, strategic communications, technology, and overall performance. Environmental scans are often conducted to ensure employment trends and educational standards are current and relevant.

Implementation of VA Transition Assistance Program

In order to provide resources and expertise to develop and implement VA's portion of TAP worldwide, a contract vehicle was put in place where more than 300 VA benefits advisors were deployed to provide transition support at more than 300 military installations. As a testament to VA's commitment to Veteran employment, our current network of contract VA benefits advisors is comprised of over 86 percent Veterans and 11 percent military spouses. Notably, there is a large representation of Women Veterans in our cadre of benefits advisors (approximately 30 percent), which is almost

double their representation in the Veteran population. The strong acumen Veterans and family members bring to the table is expected to be crucial as we work to increase warm handovers across agencies.

VA benefits advisors are responsible for delivering the mandatory VA Benefits Briefings; facilitating the Career Technical Training Track (CTTT); supporting Capstone and Military Life Cycle events and briefings; and providing individual assistance to transitioning Servicemembers upon request. They also conduct outreach activities to ensure Servicemembers are aware of VA benefits and services available to them, and provide support for local events such as transition summits, career/hiring fairs, policy academies and other community events that benefit Servicemembers and their families.

To meet the needs of National Guard and Reserve members, VA deployed benefits advisors to all formal demobilization locations (Fort Bliss, Fort Hood, and Joint-Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst). In our last round of curriculum enhancements, we tailored our Benefits I and Benefits II briefings to meet the needs of our Guard and Reserve populations. In addition, VA rapidly responds to Service requests for briefings at Yellow Ribbon and community-based events, as well as to short-notice (same-day notification) demobilization events on installations worldwide.

VA Briefings

The original VA curriculum structure consisted of a four-hour VA Benefits I Briefing and a two-hour VA Benefits II Briefing, which provided an overview of all VA benefits, including eligibility requirements and the application process.

In March 2014, with input from our partner agencies (DOL, DoD, DHS, ED, SBA, and OPM), VA fully deployed the Career Technical Training Track (CTTT), an optional

course designed for those seeking job-ready skills and industry-recognized credentials through short-term training programs rather than four-year degree programs. The initial CTTT curriculum guided Servicemembers through the decisions involved in identifying a technical career, determining credentialing requirements, researching and applying to training programs, exploring funding options (including VA benefits), and creating a plan for success.

As a result of a full review of VA's transition curriculum in 2015, enhancements were made to the VA Benefits I and II Briefings to include modules on education, training and upskilling, economic opportunities, estate planning, housing, and health care, as well as demonstrations of eBenefits and the Veterans Employment Center™. The 2015 revisions better align the information presented into logical categories, versus the previous alignment to VA business lines.

Additionally, VA enhanced the CTTT, in collaboration with our interagency partners, in 2015 to provide Servicemembers an opportunity to utilize assessment tools to determine possible employment/career direction; conduct labor-market research; learn about upskilling opportunities; and make a plan for a career.

Last fiscal year, 194,910 people attended over 7,500 VA Benefits I and II Briefings; and 7,745 people attended 858 CTTT briefings. VA attendance numbers are based on voluntary, non-personally identifiable information collection at the event site. The attendance database of record is maintained by DoD.

VA and its partner agencies also developed a virtual TAP curriculum, hosted on the DoD Joint Knowledge Online Web site that enables Servicemembers, Veterans and their families to access the curriculum from remote locations. Participants can access the courses and review the training at their preferred pace. VA also worked with the

Army to deliver virtual briefings via live-meeting sessions to Servicemembers deployed to remote locations without access to VA benefits advisors.

VA Capstone Support

Capstone is intended to serve as a standardized and comprehensive end-of-career experience to validate, verify, and bolster the transition training and other services that prepare Servicemembers for civilian careers. As part of Capstone, VA assigns a benefits advisor to each military installation to receive warm handovers from DoD for those Servicemembers who do not meet career readiness standards or are at risk for homelessness so that VA can connect them to assistance, such as additional information on compensation, educational benefits, or career counseling. Career readiness standards are verified by the Military Services, and attendance is tracked by DoD and reported to partnering agencies on a quarterly basis. During the warm handover, the Services verify that Servicemembers previously completed the VA benefits briefings. Benefits advisors welcome Servicemembers to the VA community and provide local points of contact for future assistance and issues. Through the Capstone process, VA is working with its interagency partners to create appropriate synergies to ensure that Servicemembers who are at-risk for larger issues, such as homelessness, are connected to the right resources prior to separation.

VA Military Life Cycle (MLC) Overview

Currently, individual assistance is provided by VA in one-on-one MLC sessions. These sessions involve answering any specific questions that may arise after completing VA benefits briefings and assisting with online benefits applications. VA

benefits advisors also connect Servicemembers who need additional support in filing their disability claims or accessing other VA services with a Veterans Service Organization or VA representative at one of our VA regional offices, VA medical centers, Vet Centers, or the National Call Center. Individual transition support also includes services to Servicemembers who are wounded, ill, or injured, or who may not be physically capable of sitting through the entire six-hour VA benefits briefings.

The MLC transition model capitalizes on military training and development opportunities and leverages TAP offerings to ensure Servicemembers are successful throughout their military and post-military careers. MLCs will be expanded across a series of subject matter areas in the near future to best support the needs of military members and their families.

Measuring the Quality of Briefings

The interagency TAP evaluation strategy is a year-round process that involves collaboration among all stakeholders, culminating in annual reviews of the TAP curriculum, evaluation methods, and processes. Interagency performance measures are reported monthly on a staggered schedule to the SSG, and interagency staff assistance visits are conducted throughout the year and briefed to the EC quarterly.

In addition to the interagency TAP evaluation strategy, VA is aggressively implementing a comprehensive quality assurance (QA) program to ensure the TAP curriculum and the performance of VA benefits advisors meet the highest standards. The QA program sets a framework for continuous monitoring that includes oversight visits conducted by VA to ensure evaluation of all activities carried out in support of TAP. In FY 15, VA and its contractors conducted 145 QA visits at 89 sites. Of these

145 QA visits, contractors performed 91 evaluations and VA conducted the other 54. In order to improve the quality assurance program for VA delivery of TAP, VA is working multiple acquisitions in FY 16. The work will be completed through two contracts to separate vendors: one for transition, employment, and economic impact, and the other to provide independent verification and validation, as well as performance management.

VA benefits advisors complete a rigorous training program before being placed on the briefing rotation. Through a “Train the Trainer” system, master trainers provide expertise, training, oversight, and assistance to new VA benefits advisors. VA Benefits I and II training consists of pre-requisite study of content knowledge and 80 hours of classroom-based instruction. VA benefits advisors are required to demonstrate their proficiency of the materials and delivery of briefings. To assess VA benefits advisors’ performance, VA developed an evaluation rubric that measures proficiency, knowledge of content, facilitation and platform skills, professionalism, and classroom preparation. Additionally, the CTTT training is highly interactive and consists of 120 hours of content study and practice.

DoD currently collects feedback from Servicemembers through the interagency Transition GPS participant assessment. This assessment collects demographic data and includes questions assessing the quality of the course curriculum, course materials, facilitators, and facilities. Participants also answer questions for VA to gauge their intent to use the information learned, confidence derived from the modules/tracks, and self-assessed knowledge gain. In the Transition GPS participant assessments for the first and second quarters of FY 15, several VA benefits advisors were personally praised for their efforts.

VA is listening to Servicemembers' needs and responding to feedback. Through Transition GPS participant assessment feedback, quality assurance visits, and direct feedback from our trainers, VA has an agile curriculum improvement process that allows us to make immediate and on-going enhancements to the Benefits I, Benefits II, and CTTT curricula and delivery.

The Veterans Employment Center™ (VEC)

VA, DOL, DoD, ED, SBA, and OPM collaborated to design, develop, and incorporate features of existing online employment tools into the VEC™. The VEC™ consolidates several job assistance tool sites, bringing together real job opportunities with technology to translate military skills into plain language and allow users to build an online profile that can be shared in real time with employers who have made a public commitment to hire Veterans. The VEC™ platform is not tied to any vendor, commercial entity, or service, but endeavors to integrate tools, resources, and programs from across Federal agencies and vetted public-private partnerships, at no cost to Federal agencies, employers, Veterans, military, or their families.

The site now averages over 1.2 million page views each month. Employers have made publicly displayed commitments to hire more than 740,000 individuals from the military community. These numbers reflect the national commitment by small, medium, and large employers across America. VA is continuing to work with its partner agencies and Veterans to identify ways to best use these tools and technologies.

Veterans Economic Communities Initiative (VECI)

To complement the goals of TAP and as part of Secretary McDonald's MyVA initiative, VA launched the Veterans Economic Communities Initiative or VECI in May 2015. VECI's goal is to promote local collaboration, dialogue, and partnerships among organizations that serve transitioning Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families.

Economic liaisons in each VECI community collaborate and partner with government leaders, businesses, policy experts, educational institutions, and nonprofit organizations to build an integrated network of support and resources and maximize impact to improve outcomes for Veterans and their families.

Although VECI is for Veterans of all eras, the program places emphasis on Post-9/11 transitioning Servicemembers. It is designed to connect economic liaisons into the benefits advisor network across the country. Additionally, economic liaisons work closely with their counterparts across agencies, including DOL, SBA, and DoD, to coordinate services with a unified approach to supporting Veterans and their families.

On September 30, 2015, VA announced expansion to 25 new VECI communities in early 2016, bringing the total to 50 U.S. metropolitan statistical areas. VECI communities were selected based on transitioning Servicemember and Post-9/11 Veteran populations, unemployment rates, employment opportunities and job growth, and education spending. The response to our VECI campaign from our nation's businesses has been encouraging, and in many cases enthusiastic.

The VECI campaign launched two new innovative education initiatives for transitioning Servicemembers and Veterans: Learning Hubs and Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) pilots.

VA launched five Learning Hub pilots across the country in partnership with Coursera, the American Red Cross, and The Mission Continues, to offer no-cost learning opportunities to transitioning Servicemembers and Veterans. VA Learning Hubs offer the opportunity to learn online and in the classroom, listen to presentations from local subject matter experts, and network with leaders in the community. Upon successful completion of the program, participants may elect to receive one free verified certificate issued by Coursera. VA Learning Hubs will expand to 28 communities total this calendar year.

VA also launched an ALP pilot this summer, with seven courses focusing on building skills and certifications needed to begin or advance in careers in information technology (IT), as part of the President's TechHire initiative. ALPs are typically completed in fewer than six months; provide opportunities to learn online, in the classroom, or in a blended format; and lead to industry-recognized certifications. Under an innovative pay for success concept, the ALP pilots incentivize and compensate training providers based on graduation and career-placement rates. We are testing this model to determine if it could be used more broadly to train Veterans in other industries and sectors. Launched in August 2015, VA received more than 1,000 applications on the first day and approximately 3,500 applications in the first week.

As an important component of the VECI campaign, VA held its inaugural Policy Academy from September 29-30 in Orange County, California. The event had more than 450 registrants. Policy Academies serve as a forum for local, regional, and national partners to engage in dialogue about Veteran economic issues; receive interactive training on national philanthropic and fact-based best practices; and hear from leaders in the field about emerging data, trends, and opportunities.

To measure the success of VECI, VA will leverage key strategies for improving economic outcomes. These include Veteran-focused community engagement activities, employment interest via the VEC™, and review of education outcomes such as VA Learning Hubs and programs that leverage the GI Bill®.

Each of these strategies helps VA to measure its progress toward achieving national goals for Veteran employment and education attainment, and as each VECI matures, will evolve into more granular core performance metrics.

Since its national launch in May, the VECI campaign has already placed economic liaisons in 25 communities across the country. Liaisons are deeply rooted in their local networks and based out of locations in the community. VA is aggressively pursuing additional innovative opportunities to increase public and private partnerships in communities via no-cost partnerships. VECI has also enabled VA to work with Veteran-focused foundations to identify and increase opportunities to ease reintegration for Veterans and their families nationally.

Conclusion

VA continues to work with partner agencies to assist with the transition of Servicemembers from military to civilian life. TAP is designed to give Servicemembers and their families an opportunity to learn more about the benefits they have earned, identify benefits that fit their individual needs, and equip them with a plan for success outside of the military.

VA fully supports the efforts of the Administration and Congress to ensure transitioning Servicemembers are ready for civilian life upon separation from the military

and achieve strong economic outcomes, and we will continue to implement initiatives to achieve this goal.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the Committee may have.