



KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
MILITARY
AFFAIRS

STATEMENT OF

DR. ARTHUR DEGROAT, Ed.D, LIEUTENANT COLONEL (RETIRED), U.S. ARMY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF MILITARY & VETERANS' AFFAIRS
KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
&
MEMBER
KANSAS GOVERNOR'S MILITARY COUNCIL

BEFORE THE

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
AND
UNITED STATE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

WITH RESPECT TO

“Military to Civilian Transition: Ensuring Success After Service”

Washington, D.C.

October 18, 2023

Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, and members of these committees, I, as a third generation Army Officer, am both honored and thankful for this opportunity to address you with my insights on the challenges of Post 9-11 era veteran 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 veteran's transition and am honored to serve you at this joint hearing.

Today, I wish to share a few broad comments from my perspective. First, I offer my thoughts and findings on the enduring and contemporary challenges of this vital process. Secondly, I wish to comment upon efforts made to date to improve our transition system relative to performance outcomes. Finally and most importantly, I share where and why I believe we still face daunting programmatic performance shortfalls. I am sure everyone in this room today are well aware of the costs we face of continuing to not get this right—to include the promises not yet fulfilled to our Post 9-11 era veterans and families; and the domino effects we are seeing in the next generation of young citizens witnessing the post-military struggles of their elders and losing interest in serving our great Nation. I make my comments today not as criticism but of commitment to help us all make the adjustments needed to succeed.

My Strategic Perspective on Transition Challenges

The military separation system employed since the inception of the All-Volunteer Force in the 1970's was adequate for many generations of military members in transition. Societal, workforce and generational dynamics of these decades proved to offer a more permissive climate and environment facilitating effective transition for the Cold War and Gulf War I veterans. With minimal adaption to this system, our Nation entered the Post 9-11 Era where social, economic, generational, martial and workforce conditions had changed in significant ways rendering our

modified “separation” system ill-suited to effectively assist our new generation of service members and their families to re-enter civil life, the workplace and supportive communities. Some key changes effecting transition of these Post 9-11 veterans include: the changed nature of the workforce and its composition, a change from human resource hiring to talent acquisition models, dramatic changes to the very nature of work and the workplace, the economic necessity for dual working spouse families, the increased acceptance of behavioral health and its consequences on life events—such as transition and a myriad of others. From my lived experience, research and practice, I believe that the sum totality of these societal and generational changes where not adequately accounted for as we adapted our legacy military separation system to meet current Post 9-11 Era transition demands.

In the early 1970’s, useful social science research was conducted that guided the Human Resource (HR) practices involved in designing, recruiting, developing, employing and retaining a new All-Volunteer Force that serves the veteran today. Most of the transition-related applied research work focused exclusively upon the entry transition to military life. However, far too little research work conducted on the practice of exit transitions of veterans into civil life and work. For four decades, this gap of research needed to guide veteran’s separation went largely unnoticed due to the presence of a large, allied-military defense sector that absorbed up to 80% of transitioning veterans into defense-related employment after their uniformed service. Realizing this dynamic myself, I addressed this shortfall in my 18-years of study and practice of Post 9-11 Era veteran transition and have found, adapted and applied relevant social science research principles that I believe we should be using nationally to improve our strategies and programs of exit transition (SEE EXHIBIT 1 & 4).

VETERANS TRANSX FACTORS—Staged - Life Event Map (DeGroat, 2019)

Linking Lived Experience Phenomena to Social Science Theory

Pre-Service Factors	During-Service Factors	Transition-Period Dynamics	Intervening Influences	Environmental Dynamics	Transition Performance
Education-level/quality	Actual/perceived value of military service/experience to post-military employment Opportunity (Human Capital, Merns, 2012)	Presence of realistic life stage goals and personal adult transition strategy (Adults in Transition, Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2002)	Level of deliberate effort to self-transition a civilian (Hardy, 1994) (Jolly, 1996)	Viable pathways exist for veterans to obtain new career	Successful entry in new career track/employment (optimal outcome)
Socio-economic factors (Social Reproduction Theory, Bourdieu, 1987)		Mindset about transition (Zwick, 2009)	Participatory level of engagement in transition assistance programs of present employer	Employer's resolve and skill at hiring veterans -sound business decision -CSR/PR image -meet DOD contracting requirements	Under-employment
Lifestyle/Life Skills		Presence/absence of workplace ready skills (Galup, State of the American Workplace, 2017)	Level of stress of concurrent life events of social readjustment (Holmes & Rahe, 1967)	Social/industrywide attitudes about veterans	Gainful employment (satisfying outcome)
Career Orientation (Briscoe & Hall, 2006)	Expectations of transferability of military skill/experience from Reserve's narrative (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011)	Ability to re-socialize into civil life (Psychological Capital, Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2007)	Geographic relocation facilitates support via of employment goals	Viability of legacy veteran service organizations to assist recent veterans	Special employment
	Transferable value of acquired military training and advanced civil education	Ability to effect/accommodate necessary entry points of independent private sector employment/compensation (Psychological Contract, Rousseau, 1985)	Presence of relevant social connections to the private sector workplace (Social Capital Theory, Putnam, 2001)		Unemployed (JUCI) (Data @ U.S. Dept of VA)
	Perceived levels of institutionalization of military socialization (Institutional Logic Theory, Thornton & Ocasio, 1994)	Ability to replace military benefits and entitlements not provided by private sector employment	Ability to replace military benefits and entitlements not provided by private sector employment		Discouraged worker (Data @ U.S. Dept of Labor, BLS)
	Military Marriage and Family development	Willingness/ability to develop new workplace skills through education and training (O'Rourke, 2008, 2011)	Disability, healthcare and well-being issues at time of transition		Social inclusion on military disability-related compensation
	Level of dependency upon military system's welfare benefits/entitlements network	Disability-benefits administration	Impact of military disability compensation on employment		Enrollment in new skills/education development enabled by VA benefits
		Family member transition expectations & needs	Recruitment incentives for transition into National Guard or Reserve		Despair, Homeless, Suicide (National Strategy for Prevention of Veteran Suicide, U.S. Dept of VA, 2018)

EXHIBIT 1

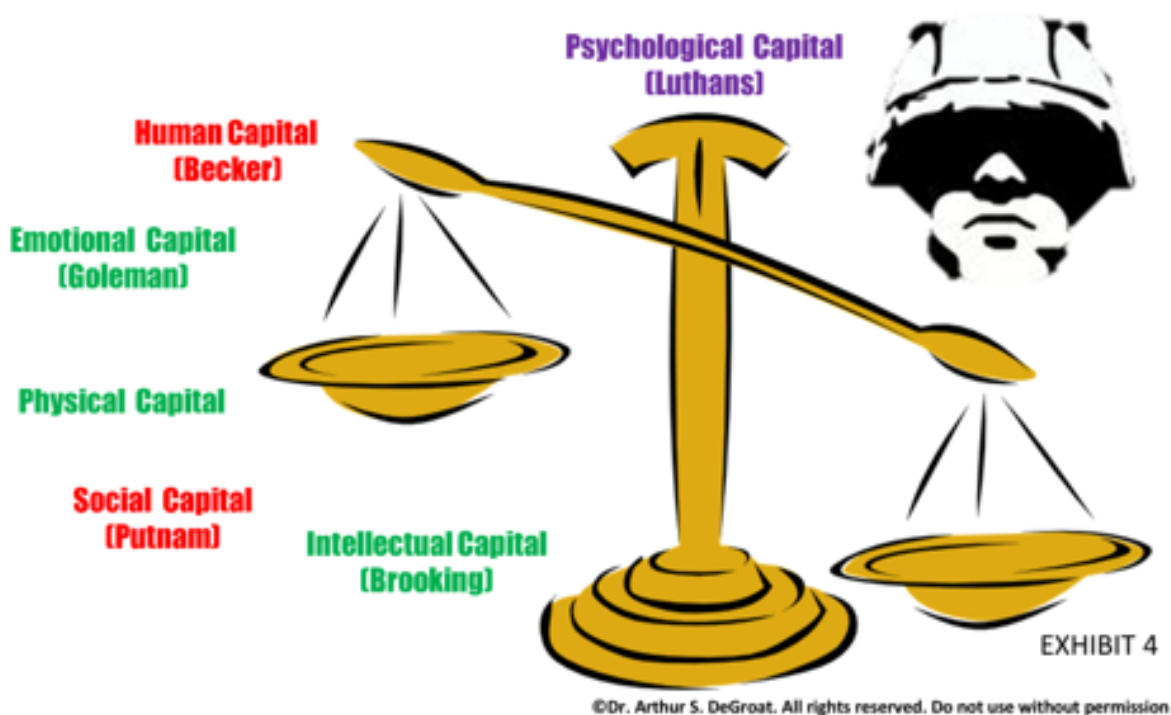
© 2019, Dr. Arthur S. DeGroat. All rights reserved. Do not use without permission.

I have had the opportunity to work with many transitioning veterans to test and prove the applicability of better foundational under-pinnings of this most difficult human life event.

While many of the process improvements made over recent years are fundamentally valid, I find their application ineffective when being applied to generationally outdated exit transition system.

I think we are seeing these efforts to improve applied with limited success to improvement — thus we continue to perform significantly below current needs and expectations. Additionally, It appears to me that the iterative changes made were incremental and reactionary efforts to mediate “symptomatic” –not systemic shortfalls —mostly by lacking an empirical basis needed to achieve optimal outcomes. Simply stated, I view our current Post 9-11 Era exit transition system as too heavily driven by historical practice and not predicated upon evidence-based or data-driven solutions that are generationally appropriate. Moreover, in doing so, we appear to be

THE VALUE OF A VETERAN...?

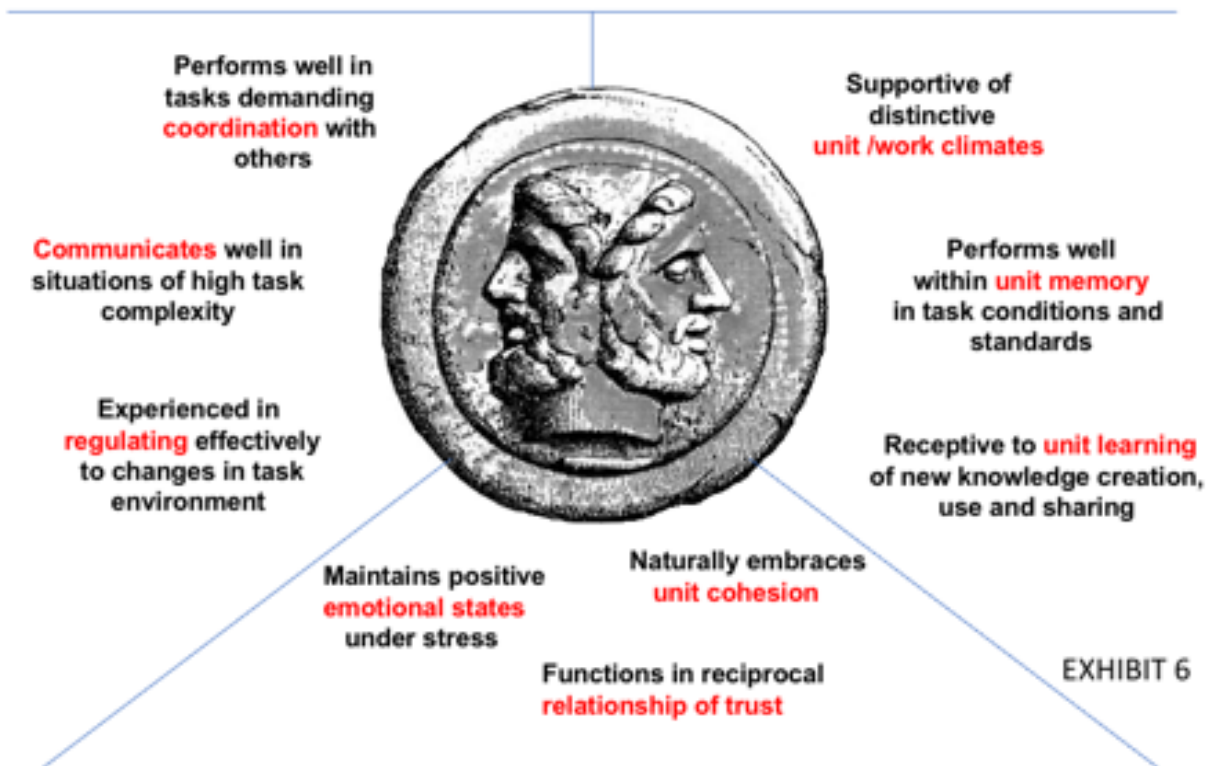


aggressively and progressively applying the right things —the wrong way- and at the wrong place in this process. As a believer in the validity of social reproduction theory, it appears that our exit transition shortfalls not only negatively impact this generation of veterans—but evidence is mounting that it is serving as another major disincentive for the next generation to serve our Nation in uniform. Current data points to the significant reduction of new recruits from families that recently served-where veterans and families that have not transitioned well are reluctant to influence or support their children from doing so.

Today, we find our Post 9-11 era veterans having limited opportunity to enter our contemporary workforce—a work force that has changed dramatically from the workforces previous generations of veterans entered. Additionally, a plethora of business management and organization behavior research details the changed nature of work and the work place in the Post 9-11 Era. All of this suggests to me that our current generation of Post 9-11 Era veterans are having to serve as “pioneers” as the first generation of veterans to face major, cross-boundary career transitions; and having to compete with an incumbent talent pool for employment in contemporary sectors where the veterans have little to no direct, relevant experience in. Adding complexity to this current reality, we are asking our young service members to know and envision their post-military futures in process started just 365 days before they exit. This is both daunting and unrealistic given what we know empirically about adults making these life transitions. While not a psychologist myself, my deepest belief is that our current TAP program, as applied, places too much life decision-making upon our exiting service members too close to their departure rendering a state of “learned helplessness” where their lack of readiness to transition questions their innate belief that they can do so.

Another major generationally different condition troubling our current effort is that most private sector employers consider military service as absenteeism from the workforce—rendering them valued in our current talent acquisition model as “entry-level talent” despite the veteran possessing years of exemplary professional military service experience. While many employers recognize the innate talent and general value of former service members attributes as desirable “soft skills” (SEE EXHIBIT 6), current employers do not see veterans having immediate workplace-ready skills, nor possessing the ready knowledge and experiences needed to perform for their companies within the industry standard 14 day of on-boarding.

“OTHER ATTRIBUTES” VALUE OF A VETERAN EMPLOYEE



©Dr. Arthur S. DeGroat. All rights reserved. Do not use without permission

By not adequately addressing these realities, our modern TAP approach appears to still rely on the legacy premise that the service member's military talent and experience is directly transferable to the workforce needs of today. As such, an unrealistic and over-reliance upon our current practice in exit transition assistance is predicated upon simply translating existing military skills, known as Military Occupational Specialties (MOS), into workplace equivalencies that simply do not exist. Evidence from human capital research (SEE EXHIBIT 5) informs us that human talent is sector specific—meaning military talent is not directly transferrable to the civilian market or workplace without additional knowledge, training and application in the private sector. Thus, most of our transitioning veterans are truly not ready to compete for entry into the workforce without additional training—and the TAP programmatic often fail to illuminate this reality to the service member, nor do it in a timely fashion to allow mediation. I believe the promising skill bridge program is a realization of this fact—however this program has not yet scaled to make a meaningful difference to this cohort.

A HUMAN CAPITAL PERSPECTIVE ON TALENT

What CAN They Do.....and.....What WILL They DO

- **General Cognitive Ability- intelligence**

- **Knowledge**** - understanding of principles, facts and processes (e.g. sales)
- **Skills**** - capacity to learn more info more quickly (e.g. problem solving)
- **Experience**** - transfer knowledge from generic to specific

- **Personality-** traits that direct behavior

- **Interests and Values** - preferences to certain type of work



**** These are context-specific and demand adaptability to new, non-military task environment**

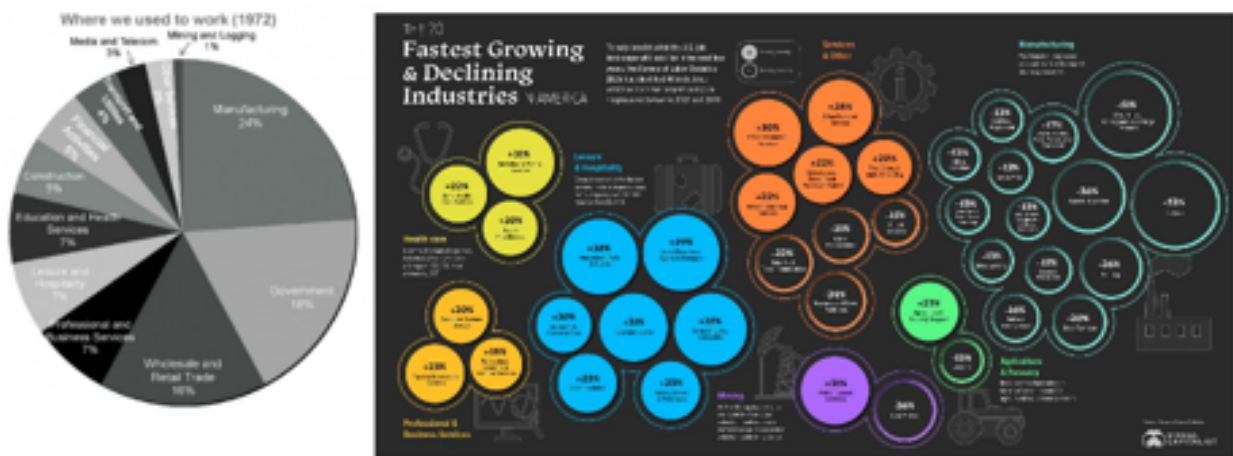
EXHIBIT 5

Ployhart & Moliterno (2011)

The second legacy practice of ineffective exit transition is that military unit leaders do not adequately support or perform the developmental coaching of their service members to plan for their futures after service- and place a premium on professional military development and retention. While this is a valid focus placed upon our leaders to train and retain their people—the reality is that they need to go beyond soldier development and perform more adult life development to prepare their service members for the eventual departure. This dynamic’s major shortfall negatively effecting transition is the practice of focusing primarily upon what the

veteran can do in the private workforce by falsely making these fore mentioned MOS linkages; while insufficient effort is offered to develop what the exiting service member wants to do after departure. Interestingly, anecdotal evidence tells us that most veterans do not want to work in career fields in post-military careers what they did in the military. In summary, these issues alone indicate that our efforts to “shoe-horn” military talent directly in a workforce that does not desire this talent directly (SEE EXHIBIT 12); and thrust it upon transitioning veterans to pursue carer fields that they do not desire. This fundamentally limits exit transition success.

We Need to Do Better in Steering our Transitioning Veteran's to Where our Workforce Opportunities Are



Too many of employers are seeking veteran workers in weaker industries

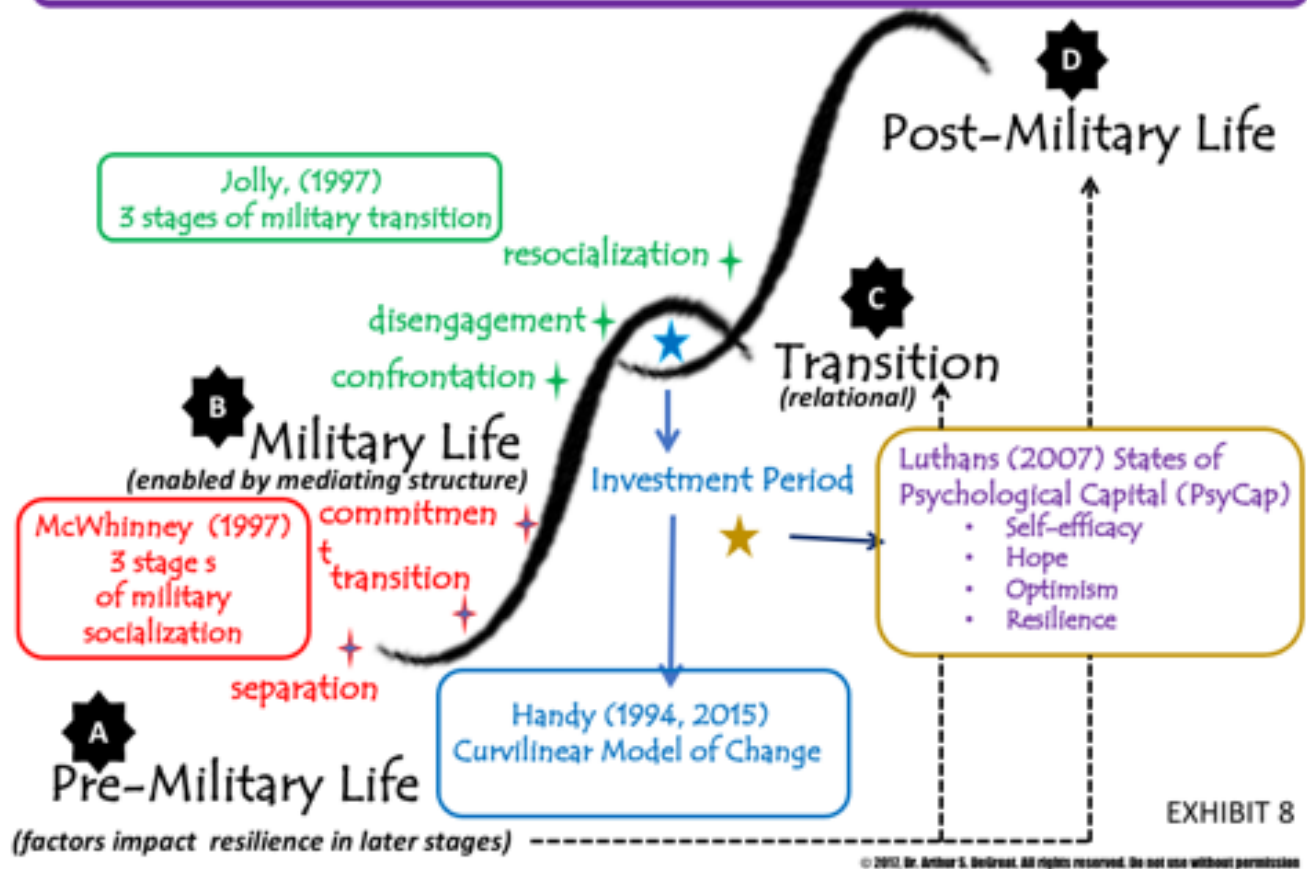
EXHIBIT 12

Prospective Exit Transition Practice Improvements Needed for Increased Effectiveness

1. Improve the Process

Contemporary military service culture justifiably places retention of their well-developed and experienced military talent at a premium. However, this has manifest into a professional culture that renders transition as fundamentally a retention failure. In my years of practice and study, I have witnessed military unit leaders viewing this relationship between service member retention and transition as competing demands. Within this competitive mindset or culture, it is then explainable that unit leaders place little effort to help our young service members confront eventual departure and envision future life plans-nor allowing sufficient time to make adequate preparations while gainfully serving in uniform. While reforms made to extend the exit timeline of our transition process have been made—they have not yet addressed the fact that transition is a subset and complementary function of retention and should be professionally be addressed in unit service member development. I offer that until the military culture changes from leading and caring for service members during their service career to focusing upon their life cycle needs an effective, evidence-based exit transition process will fail to operate effectively. I offer a relevant life cycle model to consider (SEE EXHIBIT 8).

DeGroat's (2016) Model of Veterans Transx



From a life cycle model approach, empirical research in adult and military transition posit that this unique life event unfolds in three distinct phases, with specific inputs and outputs needed to advance through the stages; and that many overlapping issues confound the process. Research also indicates that effective military exit transition as a holistic process typically lasts from 3.5 to 7 years- meaning much of this process occurs long before and after our current separation process is enacted. The sum result of my decades of work in this area suggest that successful transition must become an integral component of developing, leading and caring of our service members from day one—and not be viewed as a competitive venture to retention. I will elaborate further.

It is my firm belief that our Nation would be wise to recognize that this empirically valid staged process be incorporated (SEE EXHIBIT 9); and current exit transition tasks be re-programmed to be performed at each appropriate stage of the service members life cycle. This staged process of exit transition should start early in the service members career in the unit by (Stage 1) *confronting* reenlistment or an eventual departure. Then continues when it is time to progressively (Stage 2) *disengage* from unit activities to allow the performance of key transition preparations once a decision was made to depart. At this time, the service member starts to utilize TAP resources and begins making logical choices and commitment to educational, vocational and financial preparations to meet expected entry costs to civilian life and work.

HOW VETERANS FACE TRANSITION.. IN STAGES

(Jolly, 1997)



THE TALENT ACQUISITION PROCESS MUST ACCOMMODATE THIS REALITY

EXHIBIT 9

©Dr. Arthur S. DeGroat. All rights reserved. Do not use without permission

The process concludes upon departure by (Stage 3) *re-socializing* into society and work life as a veteran.

I believe that our exit transition program must be modified as a staged, life cycle program. This validates the current organizational approach of this being an interagency, effort starting with DOD, then VA and DOL, and concluding in community-based efforts (VSOs, state and local governmental and employer-based transition assistance programs).

2. Assess and Address the True Entry Costs of Effective Exit Transition

Without fully understanding, and where possibly mitigating, the effects of the true, high entry costs into independent civil life— we will continue to offer exit transition assistance information and support that does not match the realistic conditions being faced by our new veterans and their families. I find this in my practice to be the major factor that a majority of exiting service members continue to view TAP as an ineffective effort; and/or resulting in self-doubt and fear. However, I do witness that the current TAP curriculums have incorporated a significant understanding of these entry cost issues—but still lack offering the service members time and relevant assistance in developing solutions to overcome them. I will share a few of these entry costs.

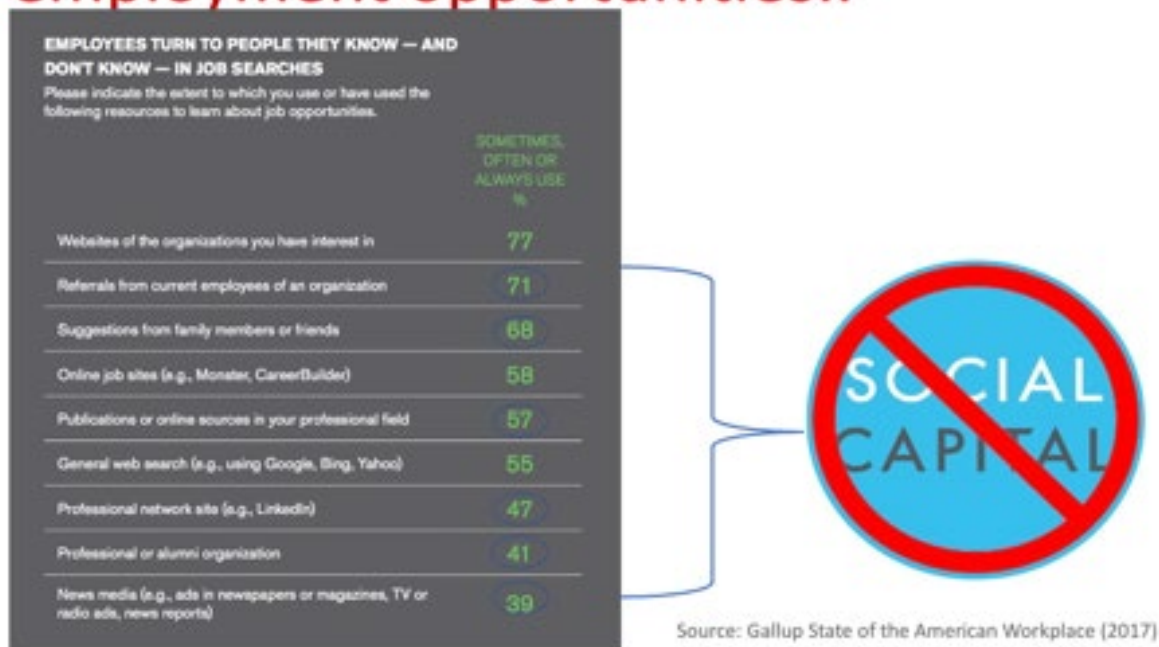
Economic Entry Cost. From my perspective, a leading factor in service member discouragement is the economic reality of a major compensation gap that exists between military pay and benefits and industry compensation rates based upon market rates, not military and recruiting and retention formulas. In 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 current TAP program asks the service member to identify financial gaps in their intended plans for many “out-of-pocket” expenses for housing, healthcare, childcare and taxation. To the degree that these are captured accurately relative to entry salaries in the civilian workplace greatly affect the mindset and readiness of the departing veteran to find and accept work. Generally, the departing veteran underestimates the financial entry costs and overly expects higher compensation than is offered. Confounding the ability to meet financial entry costs, evidence also indicates that spouses are less competitive for private employment than civilian candidates due to lack of skill development, work experience and social capital needed to establish oneself in private employment after living a military life as a service spouse. When these spouses are also serving in the growing population of in-home caregivers to their veteran—they face even greater limitations to meet entry costs.

Skill, Knowledge, Abilities and Other Attributes (SKAOA). In the absence of relevant private sector work experience, professional credentials and professional network connections, new veterans lack the human and social capital needed to overcome this cost of entry. Moreover, the under-utilization of the Post 9-11 GI Bill as a result of not believing it was needed; and/or submitting to the moral (family) and institutional (retention) pressures of transferring these vital resources to their family members renders the new veteran limited in meeting the skills entry cost in our new workforce and economy.

Building a Culture of Self-Sufficiency vs Entitlement. I witness exiting service members maintaining an overly reliant institutional dependency on the DOD and VA for their future financial success—thus limiting self-responsibility and acceptance of concierge-style assistance, coaching, mentoring from successful military “transitioners.” A key principle of adult transition is the presence of role models in the new lifeworld that they will be entering (civilian); and moving away from those who reinforce their former identities and roles (military). Currently, I find too few programs that identify and empower successful “transitioners” as *exemplars* to coach and assist our *re-socializing* veterans in private lives. My review of the TAP website prior to this hearing offers only two testimonials of successful transition. Perhaps we should modify our service’s alumni programs, such as “Soldier for Life” to develop a pool of successful “transitioners” to help those making this transition today. This would also help our exiting veterans build new social capital needed in civilian life—proven to be essential in civilian career development. Interestingly, HR and hiring managers cite that in addition to overly formulaic resumes, transitioning veterans lack credible, non-military references that validate their fitness for sought after positions (SEE EXHIBIT 13). Without such an effort to promote self-sufficiency and connecting our departing service members to successful civilian veterans, the reliance on institutional entitlements will continue to limit the energy and efforts of our new veterans to find ways to navigate this crucial exit transition stage, meet and overcome entry costs and find new life in society after their service.

Veterans lack social capital to find employment opportunities..



Strategic Consideration:
Traditional recruitment mechanisms may not reach veteran prospects

EXHIBIT 13

Re-Examine Institutional Approaches and Funding For Veteran Entrepreneurship.

Another reform of our current TAP program that I strongly support is the scaling-down or elimination of the Small Business Bureau's (SBA) Entrepreneurship Track as a viable pathway for departing service members. Without seeing compelling success outcome data, anecdotal evidence suggests that steering or perpetuating a departing veteran's interest in this challenging work form is highly unrealistic. Contemporary business management science clearly points out that entrepreneurialism is one of the most powerful ideologies of our time and has not produced careers as expected for many sound reasons. If business professionals with specialized

education, experience and private capital typically fail-on what rationale, would we base the great emphasis we give this pathway to our veterans? Research points out several points about entrepreneurialism that validate my suggestion. First, the rationale for most governmental encouragement of entrepreneurial activity is predicated upon either job creation as a social-economic enterprise (not an individual success enterprise); and secondly it is promoted as “emancipatory entrepreneurialism” as an ideology that those most hard to climb the traditional economic ladder can conceptually build their own. Quite simply, a rare few departing veterans possess the essential enabling conditions of skills, experience, hyper-individualism and private capital to start, scale and operate a successful business to sustain themselves and their families—and are best served in established organizations that provide higher compensation, better benefits, access to more training and stability. Lastly, a glimpse into career theory further highlights the lack of viable fit for recent veterans to find this pathway lucrative or possible.

Closing Remarks

In closing, I believe we can improve our outcome performance of veterans transition by making the adaptations suggested in my testimony that (a) better contend with current realities, (b) base our programmatic on evidence-based practices in adult transition social science, (c) build a true, life cycle model based on existing staged models, and (d) re-structure current successful features in a more practical and optimal timed sequence. By doing so, I believe that we can increase the logic, timing and flow of enduring steps of this challenging process- while increasing the transitioning service member’s confidence in the system.

Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and Wicker, and members of these committees, 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 veterans of the war in Vietnam; and a sage of wisdom on making veterans lives worth living after their service.)