



STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE
DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AFFAIRS AND VETERANS SERVICES

DIVISION OF COMMUNITY BASED MILITARY PROGRAMS
4 PEMBROKE
CONCORD, NH 03301



STATEMENT OF
AMY COOK, ADMINISTRATOR
DIVISION OF COMMUNITY BASED MILITARY PROGRAMS
NEW HAMPSHIRE DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AFFAIRS AND VETERANS SERVICES

BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

WITH RESPECT TO

“Supporting Service Members During Their Transition To Civilian Life”

April 21, 2022

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, Senator Hassan and honorable Members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, my name is Amy Cook, and I was honored to be asked to participate in today's hearing to provide thoughts on how our state and nation can support Service members during their transition to civilian life. As the great-grand-daughter of a US Navy Medal of Honor Recipient and the granddaughter of a US Navy Pearl Harbor Survivor and a US Army Veteran, I am incredibly honored to be here today. I know that my loved ones would be very proud that the country they loved dearly is striving to honor all those who have served even after their uniforms have been hung up. Their service may have been a generation or more ago and many things since then have changed, but one has not—the difficulty some can experience when transitioning into civilian life after military service.

Role of the New Hampshire Division of Community Based Military Programs

Before sharing my testimony, it's important to recognize New Hampshire's military & Veteran landscape. As you know, we are a small, but proud state. We have a population of about 1.36 million. Out of those, New Hampshire is home to 1,219 active-duty service members, 6,072 National Guard and Reserve members, and 99,249 Veterans.¹ We do not have a large, active-duty military installation in New Hampshire and more than 50% of New Hampshire's Veterans are over the age of 65.²

The Division of Community Based Military Programs acts as a bridge between the military, military groups, the Veteran community and civilian groups and businesses. In the Division of Community Based Military Programs, we focus our efforts to help civilian providers and employers be “veteran-ready”. We encourage community service providers such as community mental health centers and hospitals to identify Service members and Veterans at intake and to record a military health history that could potentially inform treatment decisions. We support community providers to be knowledgeable about evidence-based treatments for



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conditions commonly related to military service such as PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury. We want community providers to be on the lookout for symptoms of conditions that may require specialized referrals such as those resulting from burn pit or PFAS exposures.

In the private sector, we encourage employers to recognize and value the unique skills and talents those who have served can bring to the workforce. We teach hiring managers to translate military skills into civilian jobs. We share best practices for the workplace that lead to higher retention of Veterans in their first year of a civilian job such as Veteran Affinity Groups.

The military branches, Department of Defense and VA all have a role in educating, supporting and preparing Service members for a successful transition to civilian life. Our role at the Division of Community Based Military Programs is to prepare communities and providers to welcome Service members when they arrive and provide quality supports to them for the remainder of their lives. My testimony today will share some of the practices we have established, others that are in development and some opportunities for the VA to formally participate and collaborate in those efforts to increase the likelihood that those who have served will have smooth and successful transitions into civilian lives.

Partnering with and Engaging Employers to Support Service Members During Their Transition to Civilian Life

In 2018, New Hampshire was one of the first seven states invited to participate in *The Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide among Service members, Veterans and their Families* which is an initiative lead by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the US Department of Veterans Affairs.³ In the years since then, we have had an active team in New Hampshire working to develop statewide suicide prevention efforts that consider a whole-person approach for the Service member or Veteran—housing, employment, relationships, spirituality, education, access to earned benefits, health and recreation. All these components are important when considering how to make transition to civilian life a successful one. One of the realizations we had early on was that Veterans in NH have a very low unemployment rate, so using employers to reach and support Veterans made sense.

Research shows that 43% of Veterans leave their first civilian job within their first year, and 80% leave before the end of their second year, citing a lack of opportunity for career advancement and personal development.⁴ The rate of Veteran employment has improved nationally and in New Hampshire, but the issue of underemployment has become a strong barrier to a meaningful post-service career. A national study done by the Call of Duty Endowment and ZipRecruiter showed that 33% of Veterans are underemployed and Veterans are 15.6% more likely to be underemployed than nonveterans.⁵



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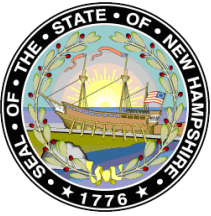
Finding purpose and meaning in civilian life and financial stability can lead to better long-term outcomes and both can be accomplished through addressing underemployment, retainment and opportunities for career growth.

In 2020, the Department of Military Affairs and Veterans Services and NH Employment Security worked together with private sector contributors to launch the NH Veteran-Friendly Business Network and recognize eligible NH businesses of all types and sizes as NH Veteran-Friendly.⁶ Businesses awarded the recognition meet various criteria in four different categories designed to encourage practices that honor, fortify, empower, and impact the lives of Veterans and their families in New Hampshire. This network has grown to be about 60 strong and continues to grow each quarter. Representatives from the recognized businesses and partners like the US Department of Labor and NH Department of Business and Economic Affairs meet quarterly. As the State Department that facilitates the network, we strive to inform, educate, and support businesses to be not only veteran-friendly, but also veteran-ready. Within this network, there are opportunities for the VA to collaborate and enhance the education and support provided to employers of Veterans. A model we'd love to replicate is how the VA Medical Center in Battle Creek, Michigan uses its Compensated Work Therapy Program to offer educational workshops to employers seeking to hire Veterans. A significant aspect of the partnership between this VA Medical Center and local employers is dedicated to lending the expertise of VA clinicians to help inform local business employees on Veteran and mental health topics. They've, reportedly, had some great success with this program that has led to better outcomes in Veteran employee retainment. In New Hampshire, we are hoping to develop a similar series of educational seminars for employers in the NH Veteran-Friendly Business Network and there is an opportunity to formalize the VA's involvement in that model.

A New Hampshire Pipeline for Supporting Service Members During Their Transition to Civilian Life

Recently, the NH Veteran-Friendly Business Network also began discussing how to create a pipeline through which transitioning Service members can pass after choosing our state as their next place to live, work, serve and play. There is ample opportunity for the VA to collaborate in formalized ways to make such a pipeline of supports and services a success. National research has shown that the suicide rate is lower among Veterans who are connected to the VA.⁷ If Service members were required to check in at the VA when they arrive at their civilian home state, that would be a valuable intercept point where a newly transitioned Service member could be encouraged to meet with a Veterans Services Officer to determine eligibility for benefits, enroll with the VA for services, and access state-specific information about a variety of resources available.

I spoke with a variety of my colleagues prior to preparing my testimony for today's hearing and one colleague offered the suggestion that Service members should be required to obtain their DD214 at their local VA which would force a connection, ensure the VA is the first point of contact, and provide an opportunity for a "warm handoff" from active service to civilian life.



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A Statewide Approach to Referrals and Follow Up

New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services is in the process of developing a closed-loop referral system.⁸ The system is currently up & running and will be more firmly established in the coming months. This statewide system will be where providers of all types (federally-qualified health centers, hospitals, community mental health centers and any other type of social service agency) can make and accept referrals and then also check to ensure that the referral was closed and successful. The Department of Military Affairs and Veteran Services is partnering with DHHS to fund and implement this system because we recognize the value that such a system will provide to New Hampshire Veterans and their families. Use of the system will result in more appropriate and better-quality referrals and more timely access to services. The system will identify current or prior military service and, if applicable, will provide information about service providers who can meet the unique needs related to military service. It will also provide the Department of Military Affairs and Veterans Services with valuable information about trends related to the service needs of the state's Veteran community which is something we do not currently have. The VA can play a valuable role within this system in multiple ways including enrolling as a provider in the system to make and accept referrals and requiring providers in the VA Community Care Network to enroll in the system. Making a commitment to this piece of state infrastructure will serve to enhance the services and supports available to those who will be choosing New Hampshire as their civilian home.

After TAP

The final practice I'll share with you today is currently under development at the NH Department of Military Affairs and Veterans Services. We are in the beginning stages of developing an educational series for those who have served that we will call "After TAP". On numerous occasions, it has been shared with me that the topics taught in Transition Assistance Programs are often overwhelming, like drinking water from a fire hose. The men and women sitting in those workshops are just thinking about getting home to their families and, even though the information is important, nothing seems particularly relevant at that moment. It might be months or years later when they need the information and have since forgotten or lost it. The series of workshops we will be creating and providing at the Department of Military Affairs and Veterans Services will walk alongside Veterans as they experience transitions throughout their lives—settling into their new civilian life, seeking new employment or career growth, starting a family, seeking a new home, becoming an empty-nester, managing a chronic illness, caregiving for an aging parent or spouse, seeking long-term supports, aging with dignity in their home, or preparing for end-of-life decisions. Again, there is opportunity within this model for the VA to lend the expertise of its staff to help educate and connect Veterans of all ages regardless of how long since transitioning to civilian life.



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Conclusion

We look forward to continuing our partnerships with the US Department of Veterans Affairs and our local VA Medical Centers to best meet the needs of Service members transitioning to civilian life in New Hampshire. Thank you for your invitation to share my thoughts with you today.

This concludes my testimony on behalf of the New Hampshire Department of Military Affairs and Veterans Services, Division of Community Based Military Programs.

¹ Defense Manpower Data Center, December 31, 2020

² Snapshot of New Hampshire's Veterans https://www.dnavs.nh.gov/sites/g/files/ehbemt401/files/inline-documents/sonh/nh-military_veteran-snapshot-aug21.pdf

³ Governor's and Mayor's Challenges to Prevent Suicide among Service Members, Veterans and their Families <https://www.samhsa.gov/smvf-ta-center/mayors-governors-challenges>

⁴ Korn Ferry Institute <https://www.kornferry.com/insights/this-week-in-leadership/veterans-hiring-retention-memorial-day#:~:text=Research%20shows%20that%2043%25%20of,career%20advancement%20and%20personal%20development.>

⁵ https://www.callofdutyendowment.org/content/dam/atvi/callofduty/code/pdf/ZipCODE_Vet_Report_FINAL.pdf

⁶ <https://www.dnavs.nh.gov/veteran-friendly-businesses-0>

⁷ Ramchand, R. (2021). Suicide Among Veterans. Rand Corporation. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1363-1.html>

⁸ <https://newhampshire.uniteus.com/>