

STATEMENT OF  
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BEFORE THE  
UNITED STATES SENATE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
WITH RESPECT TO  
**“Supporting Service Members During Their Transition to Civilian Life”**

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Senator Hassan, Congressman Pappas and members of the committee on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Department of New Hampshire, thank you for the opportunity to provide our remarks on this important topic.

The VFW believes a proper and well-rounded transition from the military is one of the most important things our service members need in order to ease back into our society with minimal hardships. To that extent, the VFW places great emphasis on ensuring transitioning service members (TSMs) receive the best counseling and mentorship before they leave military service. Veterans who make smooth transitions by properly utilizing the tools and programs available will face less uncertainty regarding their moves from military to civilian life.

The military is a self-contained society. Within this society there are diverse people with their own cultures, however the military society is its own culture. One must conform or they will not be allowed to stay. Service members spend weeks learning how to dress, talk, walk, eat, sleep, and even think so that they may successfully conform. However long they stay within the military society, they live this way. This fact is the reason why the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is necessary. Exiting one society and entering another is stressful, confusing, and at times impossible without help.

Transitioning service members face many hardships including unemployment, financial difficulty, lack of purpose, separation anxiety, and many unknowns. There have been programs set in place to ease the hardship of this change. The VFW believes these programs are paramount in easing service members out of military life and into the civilian world. The VFW views transition

programs such as TAP as key stepping stones. The information provided to service members on Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits, financial management, higher education, and entrepreneurship is invaluable.

The VFW is happy to see changes that have been made in TAP in the past few years to bring a more tailored, personalized experience to TSMs and increase access to family members. We believe TAP is a critical program that should be accessed as early and as often as needed by service members and by their family members. We are excited to learn this year of outcomes from DOL's newly launched Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot (ENPP) and discover the impact of providing individualized counseling to help TSMs find their paths. We look forward to data on these results, and recommendations for improvement of this program and expansion beyond its current eighteen locations.

The VFW is also encouraged by significant changes that have been made by DOL to revamp transition programming available for veterans and those without installation access. We are excited by the newly launched Off-Base Transition Training Program (OBTT), which will allow both in-person and virtual opportunities in key geographic transition hubs. We are also pleased to learn that the VFW's recommendations have been heard, and these resources will be interactive and provided under a facilitator. The VFW believes that access to transition resources and support is integral throughout a veteran's journey and should not and cannot be limited to just their time in service. Like ENPP, we look forward to learning from DOL and veterans about the successes and challenges of the pilot, and how it can best be expanded and improved.

The VFW's accredited service officers have been a resource for TSMs since 2001 and continue to aid these men and women during this difficult time of change. We provide pre-discharge claims representation at 24 bases around the country and are available for TSMs at the same time they receive their training in TAP. This service offers the opportunity to bridge the gap of healthcare and benefits coverage when leaving active duty. While the primary role for the VFW staff in the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program is to help service members navigate their VA disability claims, they are also able to assist with many other benefits and available opportunities. Last year, between individual meetings and classroom briefings, the VFW met with over 20,000 TSMs, including those transitioning to New Hampshire. Moreover, each person our BDD representatives work with is asked to complete a survey detailing their experiences throughout the transition process, with over 2,000 TSMs participating in 2021.

As part of the *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year (FY) 2019*, DOD established a three-tiered evaluation system to allow for a one-on-one analysis of an individual's readiness for transition. As a byproduct of these evaluations, if a service member is deemed ready for transition and has a transition plan for success, the individual can choose to forgo an otherwise required two-day track focused on accessing higher education, vocational training, entrepreneurship, or employment. Throughout 2021, over sixty percent of survey participants reported not having completed a two-day focused career track. While the VFW is pleased that TAP is providing a more individualized approach and increasing overall access, we are concerned that service members may be waived of track requirements to their detriment. We ask Congress to require in-depth reporting on the use of this tier system, its impact on track participation, and its overall effect on outcomes following transition. Additionally, we ask for reporting on military spouse and

dependent participation and overall outcomes to assess any needed improvements to programming tailored to family members.

Furthermore, within the FY 2019 NDAA, it was made mandatory that a service member was to start TAP no later than 365 days prior to separation from the military. While there was a slight improvement regarding the timely attendance of TAP, forty percent of service members reported not attending TAP classes at least six months prior to separation. Additionally, speaking with several veterans, we have found that there are situations where this timeframe is impossible. Some veterans were denied re-enlistment and were separated within 60 days. Some other veterans who were medically retired experienced the same problem. In these instances, the veterans have found themselves dealing with the loss of their job, income, medical care, and housing. When you have a family to provide for, this realization can be downright overwhelming. The changes that have been signed into law were meant to improve the transition of service members. Yet, the VFW is greatly concerned some of these new mandates are not being adhered to.

We were pleased the FY 2019 NDAA also restructured and enhanced the five-day TAP classes, and we are eager to see what improvements the more efficient and holistic approach has generated. However, the VFW sees additional areas for improvement, such as including accredited service officers in the formal TAP curriculum. We also want, as the law requires, a connection made between TSMs and resources in the community to which they are transitioning. With the recent implementation of the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox grant program, these connections with organizations in the community is increasingly important. We would also like the timely return of TAP classes to an in-person format across DOD, while ensuring adherence to COVID-19 precautions. Such provisions would help ensure veterans are equipped to succeed after leaving military service.

### **The Path Forward Following COVID-19**

In March 2020, the United States was unprepared for the new and fast-spreading COVID-19 virus. In response, we witnessed TAP offices hurriedly shutting down and furloughing VA benefits advisors who were contract employees. This left TSMs scrambling to adapt to a national crisis and changing environment amid their exit from the military. While our great military services did a fantastic job adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic by maintaining national defense and the well-being of the service members, the garrison support's response was sorely inadequate. They chose to just shut down.

Initially, two of our offices engaged with the bases they support to offer assistance for TSMs. Joint Base Andrews, Maryland, Military and Family Support Center was one of the first to come online with live virtual TAP classes. Naval Support Activity Annapolis Fleet and Family Support Center followed shortly after Joint Base Andrews. They quickly integrated the VFW into their virtual TAP classes to discuss the VA claims process because the VA benefits advisors were noticeably absent.

Over the following year, we were officially integrated into the TAP curriculum at other locations to provide VA benefits briefings because the instructors were no longer there. Our BDD representatives now provide full-time instruction of VA benefits at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada;

Joint Base Myer, Virginia; Joint Base Andrews, Maryland; Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, D.C.; Naval Support Activity Annapolis, Maryland; Camp Lejeune, North Carolina; and General Officer TAP classes (Pentagon), Washington, D.C.

We were also asked to provide supplemental instruction at other bases around the country. At Camp Pendleton, California, VFW representatives briefed during the new Spouse Transition and Readiness Seminar. In San Diego, representatives briefed at the Veterans Transition Service. At Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, representatives briefed the Navy Reserve quarterly. And at Norfolk, Virginia, VFW representatives provided benefits briefings along with the USO Pathfinders Program.

As we emerge from COVID-19, TSMs hope to experience a robust transition assistance program. In addition to resuming fully in-person TAP courses, we believe it is vitally important for TAP offices to integrate accredited veteran service officers (VSOs) into their operations, not as a third-party entity but as an integral part of the team. The expansion of BDD site duties during COVID-19 illustrated the value that including accredited VSOs in TAP brings to TSMs. TAP offices need to embrace the partnership and knowledge accredited VSOs bring to their teams. We are an additional and very important resource and partner, and we firmly believe it is in service members' best interest to have an accredited VSO in the TAP office on location at each installation.

Speaking with recently separated TSM's trying to get a look at the program that I went through 24 years ago there are some similarities between what I went through and the program today. There is a lot of beneficial information jammed into the program and we believe that a refresher type program made available after discharge would be advantageous to the TSM and their Family members.

Senator Hassan and Congressman Pappas, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to answer any questions you or the committee members may have.