

Chairman Patty Murray

Opening Statement of Chairman Murray
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Hearing on Veterans' Employment:
Improving the Transition from the Battlefield to the Workforce
April 13, 2011

Welcome to today's hearing.

Today we examine an issue that is very troubling to me and frankly should be more troubling to our nation as a whole.

The high rate of unemployment for recently separated veterans is an issue that at first glance defies common sense.

Our nation's veterans are disciplined, team players who have proven they can perform under pressure.

They have acquired skills on the battlefield as mechanics, medics, and leaders that should translate into successful careers in the working world.

They are eager to achieve and to give back once again.

But despite all that, according to Department of Labor statistics from just last month, over 27 percent of veterans age 20-24 were unemployed.

That is over one in five of our nation's heroes who cannot find a job to support their family, do not have an income that provides stability, and do not have work that provides them with the self-esteem and pride that is so critical to their transition home.

How could this be?

How could these young men and women who have performed so admirably, who know how to lead, and know how to execute be struggling so mightily?

One thing we have to recognize is that for many of our young veterans the civilian working world in a new experience.

For many young veterans the first job they apply for when they return home is often the first civilian job they have ever applied for.

These veterans need help translating the skills they have developed in the military into skills that civilian employers can understand.

They need direction on what employers are looking for, and they need to know what job resources are available to them as veterans.

I believe we can and should do more to not only prepare these veterans for meaningful civilian employment but to also make the critical connection to land a job.

For me, much of this effort begins with Labor's transition assistance program, commonly known as TAP, which should be the cornerstone to meaningful employment for young veterans.

Yet, the TAP program is only mandatory for the Marine Corps, and as it stands right now, is not as good as it can be.

This program needs to be customized, it needs to be updated, and it needs to be delivered in a way that is relevant and most importantly, accepted by servicemembers.

We can no longer afford for TAP to be seen as the last step in a service member's enlistment, it has to be seen as the first step in their successful career.

We also need to improve efforts to translate skills from the battlefield, onto a resume, and into an interview with a prospective employer.

Too often what a servicemember has done in the military does not really seem to count in the civilian workforce, and even more often, it is just not recognized.

We need to ensure that veterans are talking about their skills in a language employers understand.

And we also need to recognize that many states are not accepting the skills veterans honed in service, often times sending them into a certification process riddled with red tape.

I also believe the Federal government could be doing more to hire veterans and to ensure they are getting the hiring preference already in law.

A young disabled Iraq veteran on my own staff had an issue with a government hiring official who did not understand veterans' preference. The government needs to be getting this right.

For some time now I have traveled throughout my home state and talked to veterans about these and other employment challenges.

What these veterans have told me has been eye opening, and should be a call to action for all of us on this Committee.

I have had veterans tell me that they no longer write the fact that they are a veteran on their resume because they fear the stigma they believe employers attach to the invisible wounds of war.

I have heard from medics who return home from treating battlefield wounds who cannot get certifications to be an EMT or to drive an ambulance.

I have talked to veteran after veteran who has said they did not have to go through the TAP program or that it just wasn't taken seriously when they did.

I have heard from employers who say veterans do not use the vernacular of the business world to describe the benefits of their experience.

These stories are as heartbreaking as they are frustrating.

But more than anything they are a reminder that we have to act now.

Our economy is beginning to turn around.

We have seen very encouraging signs that employers are hiring and that the unemployment among the general population is beginning to subside.

We cannot leave our nation's veterans behind.

We cannot continue to pat them on their back for their service and then push them out into the job market alone.

It is time to take real, comprehensive, steps to put our veterans to work.

That is why I plan to aggressively pursue legislation to help our veterans make a successful transition from military service to the working world.

This hearing is a critical step to continue to inform that legislation and I hope that all of you today are open and honest about the challenges we face and what you believe needs to be done.

I also look forward to working with all of my colleagues on this Committee on this legislation and on every effort to improve results for our nation's transitioning servicemembers and veterans.

I thank our witnesses for being here today and I look forward to your testimony.