

**STATEMENT OF  
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BEFORE THE  
SENATE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

**April 21, 2022**

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, Senator Hassan and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today at this hearing about “Support for Service Members During Their Transition to Civilian Life” at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). I am accompanied today by Kevin Forrest, Director of the VA Manchester Medical Center, and Ryan Lilly, Director of the Veterans Integrated Service Network 1.

I want to express my appreciation for your continued support of our Nation’s Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. Secretary McDonough has defined his four guiding principles as Advocacy, Access, Outcomes and Excellence to be the foundation of serving Veterans and their families. This sacred mission is both personal and professional for me, and it remains the honor of my lifetime to serve Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

**Transition Assistance Program**

It is critical that today’s Service members are appropriately and adequately prepared to transition to civilian life and seek a meaningful post-military career. Established in 1991 and refined by the “Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) to Hire Heroes Act of 2011” (P.L. 112-56), the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is an interagency effort designed to help more than 200,000 Service members who separate annually successfully transition to civilian life.

Since 2014, under the auspices of a memorandum of understanding (MOU), VA, the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Education (ED), the Small Business Administration (SBA), the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and other partners coordinate the execution of TAP to provide information, counseling, resources, and tools for Service members and their families to support a smooth and successful transition from military to civilian life. The MOU also provides a robust governance structure, including multiple working groups, to address the various aspects of the transition process. The governance structure is comprised of representatives from each branch of the military Services and interagency partners. These working groups serve as subject matter experts in areas of executive leadership or content knowledge that, when taken together, support TAP maturation efforts. The working groups meet regularly, ranging from monthly to quarterly cadences, to identify opportunities to

improve TAP and the transition experience for transitioning Service members (TSM) and their families.

As part of the TAP curriculum, the VA Benefits and Services course helps Service members understand how to navigate VA and the benefits and services they have earned through their military careers. VA TAP provides the skills, resources and tools Service members need to achieve emotional health, physical health, career readiness and economic stability in civilian life.

In addition to the VA Benefits and Services course, which gives a broad overview of available resources, Service members and their families may access Military Life Cycle (MLC) modules to plan for the future. MLC modules are 45 to 60-minute information sessions that can be taken at any time throughout a Service member's career. They are especially valuable after major events like permanent changes of station, marriage or the birth of a child. They offer connections to a lifelong support system from the first duty station to separation and beyond. Each MLC module addresses a specific in-depth topic such as benefits, education, home loans or life insurance; social and emotional health resources; integration into a civilian community; or survivor and casualty assistance.

VA is committed to addressing military to civilian transition holistically. Military spouses and caregivers are eligible to attend VA Benefits and Services briefings, as well as access MLC modules. Family members can access the courses online through TAPevents.org. A Common Access Card-enabled device is not required to access the courses. VA Benefits Advisors (BA) are also available through one-on-one assistance sessions to answer questions, explain benefits and connect spouses to helpful resources, including education and employment benefits.

### **Women's Health Transition Training (WHTT)**

In accordance with the "*Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020*" (P.L. 116-315), the WHTT program was set to continue only through January 2022. However, since WHTT continues to positively impact Service women by providing gender-specific explanations of benefits and services provided by the VA health care system; the VA/DoD Joint Executive Committee (JEC) voted to make WHTT a permanent voluntary component of TAP in Fiscal Year (FY) 2019. These self-paced, online training sessions help Service women understand VA's gender-specific health care services and how to enroll in VA health care as quickly as possible after separation. VA encourages all Service women who are currently serving or have previously served in the military to take WHTT.

WHTT is a five-phase course which can be taken anytime, anywhere and is open to all Service women and women Veterans. Topics include transitioning to civilian life, health benefits (with an emphasis on women-specific needs), mental well-being, VA care models, VA culture, managing health care, eligibility, enrolling in VA and transition assistance resources. The participants' responses demonstrate that WHTT is providing

a return on investment with nearly 200 Active-Duty Service women participants who completed WHTT between February and July 2021. As a result, 54% of WHTT participants enrolled in VA health care after separation from service. Out of those who enrolled, nearly three out of four WHTT participants said the training influenced their decision to enroll.

## **Military to Civilian Readiness**

In alignment with, and in support of the President's goals to improve the customer experience across all Federal agencies, VA and DoD continue to prioritize improving the customer experience for both Service members and Veterans. We work closely with DOL, other Federal organizations, state agencies, and non-governmental organizations to provide transition assistance planning, services, and programs at multiple stages throughout this journey. As part of that effort and to provide a more holistic approach to transition, VA, and DoD, through the VA-DoD Joint Executive Committee (JEC), approved the Military to Civilian Readiness framework in September 2019, which defines transition as 365- days pre- and 365- days post-separation.

Military to Civilian Readiness meets and builds upon several components of Executive Order 13822, *Supporting our Veterans During Their Transition from Uniformed Service to Civilian Life*, as well as the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2019, Sections 522 and 552. Military to Civilian Readiness aligns the myriad of transition activities under one overarching framework and is complementary to current military to civilian support programs, thus providing a more defined exit pathway. The framework ensures that transitioning Service members, recently separated Service members, and Veterans: (1) receive comprehensive, standardized, and individualized assessments across both Departments, (2) are informed and educated about all post-separation VA, DOL, and DoD benefits and services they are eligible for, (3) are equipped with the tools they need to succeed and reintegrate into their communities, and (4) achieve sustainable economic well-being.

## **Mental Health Care Support**

The first year of transition out of military service is crucial for Service members and Veterans. VA research shows that the first year following discharge from active-duty service may pose significant challenges, including homelessness, family reintegration, unemployment or under-employment, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance use, all of which can increase the risk for suicide. All former Service members, including those with an Other than Honorable (OTH) discharge, have access to emergency mental health care at VA medical care facilities. Additional on-going mental health care may be provided to former Service members, including reservists, who were discharged under a condition that is not honorable, but also not dishonorable or by court martial, who meet the eligibility criteria in 38 U.S.C 1720I, and are not enrolled in the VA health care system. This important information, along with other mental health resources and care, is shared with TSM and Veterans in multiple touchpoints throughout their transition journey.

Through the VHA Health Eligibility Center's Concierge for Care (C4C) Program, Service members are called within 30 days of separation to answer enrollment and benefit questions, process the VA health care enrollment application over the phone and assist Veterans with setting up their first VA medical appointment. Over the first 3 years of operations (FY 2018, FY 2019, and FY 2020) over 160,000 contacts were attempted resulting in contact with over 30% resulting in telephonic enrollments with 3%. Of the 3% enrolled, all were then offered the ability to schedule their first medical appointment with 75% accepting the offer.

## **VA Solid Start**

The VA Solid Start program attempts to connect with recently separated Service members at three (3) key points (e.g., 90-, 180-, and 365-days) during the critical first year of military-to-civilian transition to provide assistance and support connecting transitioning Service members with earned benefits and services. VA Solid Start focuses on the specific needs of each recently separated Service member and open-ended questions help the VA Solid Start agents identify benefits and services that may help and support successful transition to civilian life. VA Solid Start is committed to helping all recently separated Service members establish a relationship with VA, increase their awareness of available VA benefits and services, lower their barrier to entry into VA mental health care, and support their successful transition into civilian life. In FY 2021, VA Solid Start successfully connected with more than 149,000 recently separated Service members and has achieved a 58% successful connection rate. VA Solid Start also provides priority contact to recently separated Service members who have had a mental health care appointment during their last year of active-duty service. In FY21, VA Solid Start successfully connected with more than 24,000 of these recently separated priority Service members, for a successful connection rate of 75%.

## **Personalized Career Planning and Guidance**

On January 4, 2021, to support Service members, Veterans and all eligible beneficiaries with their academic and career endeavors, VA launched the rebranded Chapter 36-Educational and Career Counseling program, now known as Personalized Career Planning and Guidance (PCPG). PCPG provides beneficiaries with enhanced career counseling, assessment, education planning and guidance resources to achieve personal, career and education goals. In FY 2021, we received over 8,000 PCPG applications requesting educational and career contract counseling services. VA has enhanced PCPG outreach to highlight Veteran and family member eligibility and to encourage PCPG benefits usage multiple times across their military to civilian and/or career lifespan for as long as they remain eligible.

Through this enhanced benefit, eligible participants are empowered to reach their educational and career goals through personalized education and career guidance. Due to COVID-19, PCPG approved the use of tele-counseling by contractors. This change allows for the continuation of services and expansion to beneficiaries who reside overseas, ensuring overall program success. Beneficiaries have reported satisfaction

with receiving PCPG benefits via tele-counseling; therefore, VA is currently updating program policy to include the option of tele-counseling in the future.

## **VA SkillBridge**

To support Service members entering VA careers, VA SkillBridge successfully launched in February 2020. VA SkillBridge is the organizing umbrella for programs across VA designed to provide Active Duty TSMs with employment training, internship and apprenticeship opportunities during their last 180 days of service. The program provides TSMs with valuable civilian work experience to better prepare them for post-separation employment. VA SkillBridge is executed in partnership with the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) via the December 2019 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) formalizing VA's role as a Federal employment partner organization supporting the DoD SkillBridge program. VA, in collaboration with the DoD SkillBridge team, provides consultative support to VA organizations developing and implementing VA SkillBridge programs. Since the program launch in February 2020, VA has engaged with 18 organizations that have either established or are interested in establishing a VA SkillBridge program for TSMs under the MOU.

## **VA and DoD Commitment to transitioning Service members**

VA and DoD leadership, through the VA-DoD JEC, have moved past the historically bifurcated view that DoD's role ends, and VA's role begins, when the Service member separates from military service. VA is committed to ensuring that the partnership between VA and DoD is aligned, enduring and strong, with a common focus on putting the needs of Service members and Veterans ahead of process. We seek continuous improvement by establishing a clear direction for our efforts, overseeing joint work, and assessing outcomes through our joint strategic planning cycle.

While the Joint Strategic Plan co-approved by DoD and VA focuses on the big picture, and long-term strategy, the JEC issues Annual Priority Guidance to members of the JEC and VA-DoD partners to identify current priorities and direct subcommittee leadership to develop action plans in our Joint Operating Plan. The detailed plans in the Joint Operating Plan establish agreed-upon milestones and performance measures for our joint work. Critical milestones are derived from this document which inform our Quarterly Priority Milestone Review where the JEC co-chairs review progress, issue guidance, and maintain oversight at each quarterly JEC meeting. Each year, we assess outcomes and report accomplishments to Congress in our Annual Joint Report. This systematic strategic planning cycle allows us to jointly manage efforts to achieve our shared goals of (1) Health Care Collaboration; (2) Integrate Benefits and Services Delivery; (3) Improve the Transition and Post-Separation Experience; (4) Modernize Shared Business Operations; and (5) Strengthen Interoperability and Partnership.

## **Conclusion**

VA shares Congress' goal of ensuring Service members and their families are supported as they transition from military to civilian life. VA continues to work to achieve this goal and will remain dedicated to strengthening our transition initiatives. Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and Senator Hassan, this concludes my testimony. I am happy to respond to any questions you or the Committee may have.