

Testimony of James R. Lorraine

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Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs

"Is Transition Assistance On Track?"

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Introduction

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, distinguished members of the Committee, my name is Jim Lorraine and I am the President and CEO of the America's Warrior Partnership (AWP). Thank you for allowing me to testify on behalf of AWP and its affiliated communities today. My goal here is to outline critical areas essential to warrior transition success and to seek and urge favorable support for three things: creating community-focused solutions, greater access and collaboration among federal agencies serving warriors, and a streamlined authority to act within those agencies.

AWP is a national nonprofit supporting six regional communities, five states, seventeen municipalities, and more than 600,000 veterans. The regions supported are Augusta, Georgia; Greenville, South Carolina; Charleston, South Carolina; Panhandle of Florida; Buffalo New York; and Orange County California. These communities are the nation's leading coordinators of community services for military, veterans, their families, and their communities. They focus on all who serve and have served. We call them warriors. In just eighteen months of effort, our affiliated communities have developed a relationship with more than 17,000 unique warriors.

It is important to note that this success is the result of a focus by these communities on proactive outreach and engagement with the intent of developing a relationship with all warriors in their community, not just the wounded, the unemployed, or the homeless ones. This approach includes those Warriors who want to give back to their community and their brothers- and sisters-in-arms. It has been widely successful and sustained due in large part to coordinating existing programs toward a known issue. Through this approach, we have maximized the impact of partners such as Wounded Warrior Project, Goodwill Industries,

Veteran Treatment Courts, Team Red White and Blue, Team Rubicon, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and hundreds of other local and national community partners. I applaud the leadership of the Committee, as well as the Armed Services, and Labor Committee, for focusing on the existing transition assistance program in place for our military and veterans. I look forward to sharing with you our perspective on the current environment, including ways that such programs can be strengthened to improve transition and enhance effectiveness of government and non-government partners in this complex mission. With the collective leadership of this Committee as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs, Defense, and communities throughout the nation, I *know* that we can have a strong and vital national veteran network that can not only strengthen its communities, but can also improve our military for tomorrow.

Is Transition Assistance on Track?

In stark contrast to this success, is the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). Four years ago I testified before this committee regarding the integration effort of state of Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs. At that hearing, I testified that the question, “Is Transition on Track?” was incomplete because in order to achieve success, communities must be part of the calculus for long-term success. I said that understanding the veteran at the community level is the only way to be effective and to achieve success. Since then, not much has changed. The current transition program is not focused on the individual *veteran*; instead, its focus is on the *process* where impact is measured not by the long-term outcomes for veterans, but by the outputs of attendance and post-class evaluations at a time when the Service member’s life is nothing but unknowns.

We believe the time for transition assistance is not at the Service member’s separation from service, but occurs over time in the community when the Service member is confronted with the opportunities and barriers of transition. We have had success by providing proactive, holistic, and longitudinal engagement of veterans throughout transition in each of our six affiliated communities.

I cannot emphasize enough that in order to provide this high-level of support, the community must *know* the veteran who has joined their community. Our communities use different approaches to connect with veterans to include outreach media campaigns, the use of social media such as the RallyPoint® website, and of course, direct connection at the military installation prior to discharge. Following connection, our model is to educate the veteran about opportunities, then advocate on their behalf should they hit a road block toward their goal. This engagement creates both hope and purpose for the warrior. To reiterate, none of this would be possible if communities do not *know* the veteran.

Challenges of Public/Private Collaboration on Veterans' Transition

I cannot overstate the importance of seamless collaboration with federal agencies such as the Veterans Affairs, military bases, and other potential federal partners. Community agencies provide the boots on the ground, but such federal agencies must provide their designated benefits and services in an accessible manner for both warrior and community success.

Our communities are making the best of the government partnerships they've established with some having more access than others. Three (Augusta, Buffalo, and Panhandle) of our six communities have a Veterans Affairs partner focused on outreach and engagement with our Veteran Economic Community Initiative (VECI) through a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Veterans Benefit Administration. VECI's are responsible for helping connect communities to veterans seeking assistance with economic mobility. The VECIs are successful when they work in unison with our community groups. Such collaboration must be encouraged and expanded.

Additionally, many of our affiliated communities also have organic relationships with local Department of Defense installations. Augusta Warrior Project has the greatest access to their local installation, Fort Gordon, where their on-post presence enables their inclusion in transition services. This relationship with Fort Gordon is very unique and a credit to their Garrison Commander who initiated a relationship with Augusta Warrior Project through a formal memorandum to provide services to Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine service members stationed on his installation. Of those Warriors that are transitioning from Fort Gordon, it is estimated that 33% will stay in the Augusta, GA area while another 33% are unsure if they will stay or move.

Lastly, research indicates that the remaining 33% will leave the Augusta region to return home or to a job and are referred to other community programs regardless of their affiliation with America's Warrior Partnership. Augusta Warrior Project's goal is to support the 33% who choose to remain in Augusta and encourage the other 33% who are on the fence to remain in Augusta by connecting them to resources within the community that work to improve their lives and provide stability after they have transitioned from the military. In this case, the community has access to support those who are transitioning and recognizes the value veterans bring to the community. Recognizing veterans' societal contributions is ideal, but, unfortunately, inconsistent across the nation, thus community involvement varies drastically by site.

Ideally, our other five communities would like this level of relationship with their co-located military installations, but there is little consistency across the Department of

Defense. Two of our six communities have limited access to transitioning Service members as presenters at transition assistance programs where they provide information about their programs to veterans who choose to remain in the area. These organizations are not embedded within the installation as Augusta Warrior Project is, but hope to move toward that end-state as they continue to foster the relationship between their organization and the installation leadership. Our communities of Charleston, SC and Panhandle of FL have only episodic access to their local Air Force and Navy installations for transition briefings. Two of our affiliated communities (Buffalo, NY and Greenville, SC) do not have active duty installations and transition assistance programs for their local National Guard and Reserve component, which are not well established. Our sixth community, Orange County, CA borders Camp Pendleton. However, despite their continuous efforts, they have not had success of being included in the Camp Pendleton transition program.

Comparing these communities without embedded access to on-base transition activities to communities where such interaction is practiced shows the benefit of such collaboration. We see success as a warm hand-off from the military installation to the veteran's community of choice, where housing, employment, education, childcare, spousal support, and necessities of life can be secured before leaving military service. We know - from years of experience - that no single organization (government or non-government) can alone improve the quality of life for veterans in our community. It takes everyone working collaboratively around a single objective to succeed. We feel the community is the best connector with the greatest vested interest in their veterans' success. I do not believe we will ever get to a point, or even should get to the point, where the government is providing separating Service members' contact information to communities. However, I do believe that when communities are successfully assisting with transition, the word will get out and veterans will seek community assistance. To reach the level of success where veterans seek out community organizations for transition assistance, the communities must have a collaborative relationship with the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Defense, and Labor.

I retired from the military after twenty-three years. The only transition I made in my seven duty station moves where I did not have a sponsor at the other end was when I retired and became a veteran. We need the government - we need you - to partner with community organizations to help smooth the transition turbulence for all veterans - past, present, and future.

Major Issues Veterans Face in Transition.

For the last fourteen years as founder of the United States Special Operations Command Care Coalition, as Special Assistant to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff for Warrior and Family Support, and serving as CEO of America's Warrior Partnership, I've assisted

thousands of military members transition to civilian life. Regardless of the obstacle facing the veteran, the two greatest issues facing veterans today are the need to find hope and purpose in their lives. Hope is a powerful emotion. Without hope life seems unachievable, obstacles are unsolvable, and the future is dim. But with hope you have a way forward, solutions to achieve your objectives – you have a plan. What I've learned is that people are hopeful when someone is invested in them, can relate with their situation, and empowers them with education or advocacy. This is true for all veterans, young and old. With greater hope our oldest veterans may not have the highest rate of suicide than any generation of veterans. For a transition assistance program to be successful there must be a person who is knowledgeable and vested in the veteran's success in order to give hope. Communities are best positioned to provide hope to veterans as they are the most knowledgeable of the environment and are vested in the success of their fellow citizen.

Communities and non-profit organizations are also best positioned to provide purpose to a veteran after they've transitioned. Last week I met with a friend and Special Forces officer who had just returned from combat in Iraq. He felt that he had lost purpose in his life. While he had a wonderful job working for a private organization that improved the lives of others, he felt purposeless. In his words, "after advising and supporting 20,000 Kurds in the fight against ISIS, I don't think I'll ever be as important again." After a long pause, I reminded him that he could be even more purposeful in life by giving back to his community through volunteerism and servant leadership. This story is common, and is the reason Team Rubicon, Wounded Warrior Project, and Team Red White and Blue have been so successful – because they bring purpose to a veteran's life. Developing purposeful opportunities during transition without community involvement is difficult, if not impossible, because it is in communities where veterans find purpose in their lives based on opportunities that are presented to them by their communities.

While hope and purpose are not as concrete as housing, employment, and education they are the foundation by which we thrive and this cannot be discounted. A vast majority of veterans return home to little contact with others who understand military service; they have difficulty accessing programs presented to them in Transition Assistance Program. Plus, they return to an environment that is foreign from their military life. In these scenarios, veterans can quickly find themselves disconnected and hopeless and without satisfying purpose.

America's Warrior Partnership's Community Integration program addresses hope and purpose by knowing the veteran, understanding their situation and assessing them holistically on an eight-point spectrum of housing, education, employment, relationships, access to earned benefits, health/behavioral health access, spiritual, and recreational needs. Our objective is to empower the veteran and to find a balance in these holistic

components by leveraging local and national government and non-government services to provide opportunities. The other unique aspect of our model is that our outreach is also not just to those in need. Our program focuses on building a relationship with every veteran in the community. Those seeking assistance (hope) are supported by those seeking to give back (purpose). The veteran develops hope through trust in our competence and finds purpose by connecting with others in their community who are like them.

The Veterans Affairs Secretary has initiated his My VA Community program to encourage communities to come together and support all veterans including those who are transitioning. We see this as a great step to encouraging local Veterans Affairs leadership to become more involved in their community by becoming involved with regional groups seeking to have a positive impact on veterans. Our affiliated communities are leading this effort to set up My VA Community boards, but we feel these boards need to take a step further and measure their impact on the outcomes of the veterans in their communities. We would welcome a partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs to assist in establishing a truly impactful My VA Community program to provide hope and purpose to all veterans of a community.

Partnerships

When I served in Special Operations, the focus during operations was not who had the funds, the resources, or the vision, but who had the *authority* to act. As a community leader, the partner needed is the organization that has the authority to provide services. In the veteran space much of this authority resides in the government programs where lower-level employees can move mountains in a single action because they have the authority. As mentioned previously, America's Warrior Partnership is fortunate to have strategic partners that enable our affiliated communities to focus on the veteran engagement. Our Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Veterans Benefit Administration's VECI program has provided our community leaders with another partner who has the authority to act. Under this MOU the VECI has immediate authority to act in the community. They connect training and leading programs from national level to local. By leveraging TAP benefit advisors, the VECI could bring outreach efforts directly into the community where millions of veterans actually live. This would be an appropriate use of authority and would improve veterans' lives. We see partnerships such as My VA Community as a venue to bring those with authority to act together with those organizations identifying the needs to be met. We recommend consolidating community-facing efforts and improving access to information technology. Additionally, in order to ensure consistent participation at the Veteran Integrated Service Network (VISN), we support the sharing of nonprofit data.

Three months ago our Orange County affiliated community hosted a Veterans Affairs Policy Academy which enabled Veterans Affairs to highlight a community's efforts while bringing Service providers, leaders, and funders together. In the end, these partnership helped bridge the military-civilian divide.

The Department of Defense is an equal partner, but like Veterans Affairs, the approach is fragmented and inconsistent. We recommend an initiative that enables local Commanders to partner with community-coordinating organizations to improve community transition for all Service members. We have seen this work effectively in Augusta, GA, but because there is limited standardization and continuity of services, the relationship is highly dependent on leadership, which changes often. Additionally, we recommend Department of Defense partner with Veterans Affairs as co-presenters at regional policy academies where local and national public, private, and government organizations focused on veterans can meet to inform and share. The absence of the Department of Defense at these policy academies is a sign to communities of the disconnections within the Transition Assistance Program.

Lastly, we are fortunate to partner with national and local non-profit partners who seek to provide services to the military and veterans who live in our communities. By holistically addressing community outreach with our local and national partners, we have encouraged them to focus not only on the 20% of Warriors with critical needs, but also on the 80% of Warriors who either could use some advice or want to give back. Through these efforts, of the 11,488 post-9/11 Warriors our partner communities know they've empowered 176 of the 302 homeless Warriors to become permanently housed; assisted 1,350 of the 2,638 unemployed to find meaningful employment; encouraged 2,948 to use their GI Bill; and helped 99% of those warriors to stay on-track or complete their studies. Additionally, by focusing on improving access to veteran benefits, the communities have ensured 76% of their Warriors are enrolled in Veterans Affairs healthcare and 64% are enrolled in eBenefits. Using the community coordinating information system WarriorServe® our communities are able to coordinate services and volunteer opportunities with other partners throughout the community. We are confident that this tool will enable other communities and their partners not only to measure their impact, but also to quantify their outcomes within their regions so our nation can be stronger because of the continued service and value our veterans provide.

Conclusion

Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Blumenthal, thank you for affording me the opportunity to provide the Committee an overview of the importance of holistically approaching military and veteran transition back to our communities. We know that no

single government agency or program, no single company or no single non-profit organization can ensure a Warrior and their family are successful in their return to civilian life. It takes everyone working together, transparently and consistently in concert with each other for the individual veteran to successfully transition. However, the definition of success is as varied as the personalities of those who serve in the military. Defining success of transition cannot be set or measured within the Washington D.C. beltway; it must be measured at the community level where the veteran returns to live the next chapter of his or her life. The Special Forces officer I referred to above will not measure success by the things he has such as his job, education, or his housing. He'll measure success by the purpose he has found in life.

The government must assist communities through encouraging the creation of community-based programs, collaboration with effective community-based programs, by using their authority at the community level in order to provide hope and purpose to all veterans.

I appreciate the opportunity to outline these critical areas and look forward to working with you on these issues in the context of community solutions for veterans. We look forward to seeing our communities having a greater role in transition from military installations; we hope to continue to work closely with the Department of Veterans Affairs on their MyVA Community and Veteran Employment Community Initiative; and we look forward to participating in refinement of the Transition Assistance Program. Collectively, with the leadership of Congress, as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs, we have made significant strides, but there is much work ahead. Our veterans depend on your support.

Thank you. I would be glad to answer any questions that you may have.