

Military Transition During the COVID-19 Pandemic

May 12, 2021

Statement of

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National Legislative Service
Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States

Before The

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

With Respect To

Military Transition During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Washington, D.C.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, 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

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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.

Today's military has faced almost two decades of continuous war, and this extended time of conflict has shaped the experiences of all men and women who have worn the uniform defending our country. This experience of heightened conflict makes transitioning to the civilian world that much more important. Only a small percentage of Americans serve their country in the armed forces, so transitioning back to the civilian world after military service can bring its own set of trials and tribulations.

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 the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Soldier For Life 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.

We are glad to see the five-day TAP classes were restructured within the past few years, and we are eager to see what benefits the more efficient method of information delivery will bring. However, there were many other important provisions to reform overall transition that were left unfinished at the end of the 116th Congress, such as providing grants to organizations specializing in transition services, connecting transitioning service members with resources in their communities, and including accredited service officers in the formal TAP curriculum. Such provisions would ensure veterans can succeed after leaving military service. The VFW urges Congress to introduce legislation that would ensure accredited service officers are included in the formal TAP curriculum.

The VFW's accredited service officers have been a resource for transitioning service members since 2001, and continue to provide assistance to 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 transitioning service members at the same time

they receive their training in TAP. 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.

Each person our BDD representatives work with is asked to complete a survey detailing their experiences throughout the transition process. From March 2020-February 2021, the VFW collected 1,100 surveys from the service members, families, and veterans we served at our BDD sites. Some of the data were expected considering the unprecedented changes due to COVID-19, but other numbers suggested there is still a lot of improvement needed within TAP regardless of the pandemic situation.

While there was a slight improvement regarding the timely attendance of TAP, forty percent of service members are still not attending TAP classes at least six months prior to separation. Additionally, we were surprised to see almost sixty percent reported not participating in any of the three specific tracks that were made mandatory as part of the formal curriculum last year. Changes over the past years have been signed into law in order to improve the transition of service members. The VFW is greatly concerned some of these new mandates are not being adhered to.

Our BDD representatives offer guidance and information for many different transition opportunities that may not be covered in the TAP classes. Our representatives are trained in education, employment, and financial management opportunities, and can be additional resources to the ones offered during TAP classes. Service members who utilize additional resources such as BDD representatives are likely to face fewer unknown hurdles during transition.

Though the BDD program is critical to post-military success for many veterans, the VFW remains concerned that VA's decision to compress the time in which a transitioning service member may file a BDD claim remains problematic. Prior to 2017, transitioning service members could file BDD claims between 180-60 days before they leave the military. Service members with fewer than 60 days could file claims through the Quick Start program.

In 2017, VA arbitrarily moved the goalposts back for BDD, allowing service members to file only between 180-90 days and eliminating the Quick Start program altogether. In the years since this policy was changed, the VFW has seen problems in delivering benefits for transitioning service members. First, some service members, particularly those who work in high-intensity military occupations, have trouble meeting this timeline due to the constraints of their jobs. A 90-day window also creates compliance issues with military treatment facilities in furnishing service members with their full health records in a timely manner to satisfy the requirements of the BDD program.

These hurdles have only been exacerbated by the sunset of the Quick Start program. While it remains true that service members can still technically file regular claims before separation, many times VA intake sites on military installations turn these BDD-excluded claims away, or VA fails to act on them in a timely manner due to a future effective date showing in VA's Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS). For many BDD-excluded claimants, the VFW's cadre of service officers must deliberately hunt down their claims in VBMS, then work with the VA regional office of jurisdiction to jump-start the claim. Though the veteran loses no benefits because of this bureaucratic hurdle, it can significantly delay the delivery of benefits until long after a veteran has transitioned.

These changes were an unnecessary step backward for VA all in the name of efficiency on paper. However, these reported efficiencies come at the expense of transitioning service members' needs. The VFW urges Congress to direct VA to revert to the old parameters of its BDD program and to reinstitute Quick Start so that VA can once again ensure transitioning service members have a smooth experience accessing their earned VA benefits.

The VFW is also interested in improving private sector and civilian credentialing for certain military occupational specialties. Many service members leave active duty to pursue employment in the same vocations for which they were trained during military service. Unfortunately, this is not usually possible because military training does not align with state-issued professional licenses or trade association credentials. Therefore, it is necessary to explore solutions to ensure that service members receive relevant credentials while on active duty and seamlessly apply for a professional license after they transition from military service.

Research has shown that veterans who hold certificates and certifications generally

receive higher wages than veterans without certificates or certifications, but they often face challenges in translating their military experience to civilian recognition. The Department of Defense (DOD) establishes, measures, and evaluates performance standards for every occupation within the armed forces, providing some of the best vocational training in the nation to its military personnel. Unfortunately, that training is generally not recognized as fulfilling state and private sector certification and licensure requirements for civilian equivalent occupations. This means many former military personnel who are certified as proficient in their military occupational specialties are not recognized as certified or licensed to perform comparable jobs in the civilian workforce.

The VFW recommends that DOD in collaboration with states, unions, and certifying/licensing entities expand its training curriculum to meet the various certification and licensure requirements of applicable civilian equivalent occupations. Congress must facilitate a national dialogue, working closely with DOD, VA, and the Department of Labor, as well as state governments, employers, trade unions, and licensure and credentialing entities, to establish clear processes so that military training meets civilian certification and licensure requirements for the states in which veterans choose to live once they leave military service.

The VFW is also concerned about military spouse unemployment. The Bureau of Labor Statistics does not track statistics on military spouse employment, but other organizations estimate this rate is as high as twenty-six percent, which is more than seven times the national average. Underemployment estimates among military spouses are as high as fifty-one percent. Many of these men and women move from state to state with their service member spouse, so having interstate agreements for licensing portability would help support employment for military spouses. The Spouse Transition and Readiness Seminar (STARS) is a great step in improving the lives of military spouses, but programs like STARS need to be stood up and expanded everywhere possible.

The John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 revised the structure of the TAP program to make sure TSMs could attend the career track program they want, instead of providing it as an additional option. The start date for beginning TAP class was also revised so TSMs could take the class earlier and, if possible, more than once before separation.

Connecting TSMs to resources in the communities where they are relocating is an important step that should happen during TAP classes. Providing connections to organizations that offer employment training, education information, and financial or legal assistance is beneficial in a seamless transition and must be part of the TAP class so TSMs can begin to make these connections before they separate. TAP class cannot be the solution for every individual service member's employment or education goals after service. However, TAP can be the facilitator of information for these TSMs to make connections to resources within the communities into which they hope to transition.

Covid Specific TAP Issues

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 transitioning service members scrambling to adapt to a national crisis and changing environment in the midst of 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.

From what we witnessed, there was no well-vetted plan in place for this situation. The TAP program responded by initially directing service members to the Joint Knowledge Online (JKO) portal for completion of TAP. JKO requires a Common Access Card, which family members do not have. Later it was moved to the computer-based training classes on a public site, <https://tapevents.org/courses>. This change to the .org site allowed family members to access the computer-based training courses as the pandemic shutdown continued. The VFW believes that moving forward, any online TAP resources should always be hosted on a public-facing website so service members, families, and veterans can access this vital information at all times.

The information we received from service members during this critical time of transition was that once they were finally directed to the computer-based training, they found it was training just to check the box. The value was greatly diminished through computer-based training, which is not the same as a virtual live presentation. There is no interaction in computer-based training as it is all automated, whereas a virtual live presentation allows for

interaction and questions. The VFW believes any online TAP training moving forward should always be a virtual live format.

Computer-based training courses are non-interactive and do not facilitate an enriched learning environment. This is extremely important during the critical transition time and can impact the success or failure of service members integrating into civilian society. Imagine your transition place of duty is in front of a computer screen for 330 minutes of non-interactive computer training for “Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition,” 240 minutes of eye-glazing screen activity in “VA Benefits and Services” or 630 minutes of mind-numbing “Employment Track: Employment Workshop.”

By contrast, the VFW pre-discharge claims representatives transitioned into the COVID-19 pandemic without missing a beat. Even though our representatives were forced into a telework environment, they continued to assist transitioning service members with their VA pre-discharge claims. Our representatives had the necessary equipment prior to the pandemic and were already well-versed in the electronic submissions of claims. The DoD Secure Access File Exchange portal was operational for secure transfer of documents between service members and VFW claims representatives. During the first full month of the pandemic, April 2020, our pre-discharge claims representatives submitted nearly 800 claims. The next month was about the same. Even though our physical locations were closed, we never shut down our service to our warriors.

It was a significant issue for us that our host and hub of interaction with service members was not operational. TAP offices were closed and many service members believed our services were closed as well, which was far from reality. Where we were allowed, we posted signs with our contact information on the doors of TAP offices and buildings that were shutting down. Many service members who called or emailed us expressed frustration and anxiety that TAP was closed, VA benefits advisors were gone, and they did not know who could assist with their VA claims. They were relieved to find out we were fully functional with no issues assisting and submitting claims to VA.

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 past year we have officially been integrated into the TAP curriculum at other locations to provide VA benefits briefings because the instructors were no longer there. Our BDD representatives provided full time instruction of VA benefits at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada; Joint Base Myer, Virginia; Joint Base Andrews, Maryland; Naval Support Activity Washington, D.C. (Navy Yard); Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, D.C.; Naval Support Activity Annapolis, Maryland; Camp Lejeune, North Carolina; 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.

Eventually we had other TAP offices bring back some workforce to provide virtual TAP assistance and several contacted our representatives to brief in their classes and take questions. The General Officer TAP programs also reached out to us to brief. We heard several comments about how service members were directed to the non-interactive, computer-based training for VA benefits, but there was too much information and no way to follow up with questions. We provided live interaction that was, and is, necessary.

We also have had service members from across the country and around the world reach out to us to request assistance with their VA claims and help understanding the process because their local offices were either shut down or did not have the resources to assist. We have assisted service members in Germany, Belgium, Italy, Korea, and around the country during the COVID-19 pandemic. We may have been forced to temporarily close our physical doors at TAP sites, but we have never shut down our operation.

Now we are at a crossroads for the TAP program with several of the offices still closed. As we emerge from this pandemic, TSMs hope to experience a robust assistance program. We believe it is extremely 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. TAP offices need to welcome and embrace the partnership and knowledge the accredited VSOs bring to their teams. We are an additional and very important resource and partner. The best option is to have an accredited VSO in the TAP office on location at the installation.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to answer any questions you or the subcommittee members may have.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2021, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

The VFW has not received payments or contracts from any foreign governments in the current year or preceding two calendar years.

