

**STATEMENT OF
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OF THE
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), thank you for the opportunity to present our views on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP), and the recent U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report entitled, "Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard." We commend the Subcommittee for holding today's hearing and its continued efforts to improve the TAP/DTAP programs, which are especially important during the global War on Terror when thousands of active duty members, along with members of the Reserves and National Guard, will require transition services upon release from active duty.

Before I address the TAP/DTAP programs and GAO report, I would like to summarize what the DAV is doing to support the men and women who are making the stressful and uncertain transition from the Armed Forces to civilian life. Since the inception of TAP/DTAP, many of the DAV's 260 National Service Officers (NSO) have participated in transition assistance briefings at various military installations across the country. In 2001, the DAV bolstered its services when it created the Transition Service Officer (TSO) program to provide service and counseling to members separating from the newly established Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) sites. The TSO program allows DAV representatives to conduct or participate in transition assistance briefings, review service medical records, and confer with Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) rating specialists, physicians, and other participants in the discharge process at BDD facilities. It also allows DAV to assist service members in the development of evidence, completion of required applications, and representation of claims for VA benefits. In 2003, DAV TSOs conducted 1,467 formal briefing presentations for 62,755 men and women transitioning from the military to civilian life. Nearly half of those in attendance chose to schedule personal interviews with our TSOs for claims file reviews. TSOs filed VA benefits claims for 22,796 of the 31,148 persons they interviewed. Additionally, the DAV has an established representative at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland and Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. where severely injured troops from Iraq and Afghanistan are being returned for continued medical treatment and rehabilitative therapy. A DAV NSO is available to patients at both facilities on a daily basis to provide assistance and information regarding VA benefits and services.

In preparing this testimony, I consulted a number of our TSOs and NSOs to gain a front-line perspective of the TAP/DTAP programs and how improvements might be made. Each

representative I spoke with had the utmost praise for the overall effectiveness and value of the programs. But, they also recognized areas requiring minor improvements. Not surprisingly, the TSOs and NSOs suggestions mirror most of those found in the above mentioned GAO report.

For active duty members, access to TAP/DTAP remains the biggest issue. When the DAV presented testimony before the Subcommittee in July 2002, it was noted that approximately forty percent of veterans left military service without attending pre-separation counseling. As expected, that percentage improved greatly with the enactment of Public Law 107-103, the Veterans Education and Benefits Expansion Act of 2001, which provided that all active duty service members would have the opportunity to attend TAP/DTAP. Still, a significant number of active duty personnel are unable to attend all components of TAP/DTAP because only the pre-separation counseling portion of the program is mandatory (with the exception of the Marine Corps, which has made attendance of TAP/DTAP mandatory for all components). Where attendance is not mandatory, many separating members miss valuable employment workshops due to difficulties in being excused from command responsibilities. If mandatory attendance was a department wide policy, members would not face tacit pressure from their superiors to return to work prior to completion of the entire TAP/DTAP program.

Another concern in 2002, which has since been addressed, was the lack of consistency regarding the level of service provided at various discharge facilities. Some facilities hosted weeklong TAP/DTAP programs with employment workshops and extensive counseling, while other programs consisted of one-day general information seminars. As noted in the recent GAO report, the curricula have mostly been standardized. The DAV is pleased that separating members can now expect to receive the same adequate level of service at any of the many discharge facilities.

As indicated by the title of the GAO report, most contemporary problems with the TAP/DTAP programs involve Reserve and National Guard units. The largest activation of reserve troops since the Korean War has given rise to situations not encountered since the programs existed. All of which can be attributed to the lack of time units have to demobilize upon their return from deployment. According to GAO, most units demobilize in five days or less. Such a short period obviously does not allow for a comprehensive TAP/DTAP format. Even if the programs were significantly abbreviated, they would still interfere with high priority activities units must accomplish during demobilization. The time shortage issue is further complicated by the fact that agencies delivering TAP/DTAP presentations may not know when units are returning and are unable to adequately prepare. As GAO indicated, national security concerns prevent the release of information regarding unit deployment agendas.

It would be unfair to extend demobilization periods merely to deliver TAP/DTAP. Members of National Guard and Reserve units have already sacrificed by being away from their homes and loved ones and are understandably eager to return to them as soon as possible. A couple of possible solutions would be to arrange a later meeting during a drill weekend or to issue troops a package of information that could include items such as a compact video disc of an entire TAP/DTAP presentation, printed information, point-of-contact information, or an internet address to a comprehensive TAP/DTAP website. Regardless of the method of information

delivery, it should be emphasized clearly to separating members that certain benefits, such as educational benefits, expire within a set time period.

DAV National Service Offices understand the importance of working with local National Guard and Reserve units that have been activated in support of the War on Terror. In some states, such as Florida and Ohio, DAV NSOs have established strong working relationships with local units and provide outreach on a regular basis to ensure troops understand the benefits to which they are entitled. Last summer, the DAV was contacted by the National Guard Bureau requesting our assistance on a nationwide basis. We readily offered our help, agreed to a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), and informed the Bureau that DAV NSOs would be promptly available upon notification of a unit's return and demobilization. Disappointingly, no further exchange has occurred since the MOU was signed, despite the DAV's repeated efforts to encourage such a relationship. The DAV remains willing to provide its services to National Guard and Reserve units on a nationwide basis.

The DAV sincerely appreciates the Subcommittee's continued interest in improving the TAP/DTAP programs. On behalf of our 1.2 million members, I thank you for the opportunity to present our views on this important topic.