

STATEMENT of
THE MILITARY COALITION (TMC)
before the
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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Presented by

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Co-Chairman, Veterans' Committee
The Military Coalition

MISTER CHAIRMAN AND DISTINGUISHED MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE. On behalf of The Military Coalition, a consortium of nationally prominent uniformed services and veterans' organizations, we are grateful to the Subcommittee for this opportunity to express our views concerning the transition assistance and disabled transition assistance programs of the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs and Labor. This testimony provides the collective views of the following military and veterans' organizations, which represent approximately 5.5 million current and former members of the seven uniformed services, plus their families and survivors.

- Air Force Association
- Air Force Sergeants Association
- Air Force Women Officers Associated
- American Logistics Association
- AMVETS (American Veterans)
- Army Aviation Association of America
- Association of Military Surgeons of the United States
- Association of the United States Army
- Chief Warrant Officer and Warrant Officer Association, U.S. Coast Guard
- Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service, Inc.
- Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States
- Fleet Reserve Association
- Gold Star Wives of America, Inc.
- Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America
- Marine Corps League
- Marine Corps Reserve Association
- Military Chaplains Association of the United States of America
- Military Officers Association of America
- Military Order of the Purple Heart
- National Association for Uniformed Services
- National Guard Association of the United States
- National Military Family Association
- National Order of Battlefield Commissions
- Naval Enlisted Reserve Association
- Naval Reserve Association
- Navy League of the United States
- Non Commissioned Officers Association
- Reserve Enlisted Association of the United States
- Reserve Officers Association
- Society of Medical Consultants to the Armed Forces
- The Retired Enlisted Association
- United Armed Forces Association
- United States Army Warrant Officers Association
- United States Coast Guard Chief Petty Officers Association
- Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States
- Veterans' Widows International Network

The Military Coalition, Inc., does not receive any grants or contracts from the federal government.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Increase Transition Assistance Program and Disabled Transition Assistance Program (TAP / DTAP) Resources. Federal agency budgets for TAP / DTAP have been flat for 10 years and do not take into account the mobilization of nearly 500,000 members of the Guard and Reserve since 9/11. *The Military Coalition strongly recommends that the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Labor increase their TAP / DTAP budgets to accommodate the growing number of National Guard and Reserve service members eligible for these programs.*

Tailor TAP / DTAP Programs to the Needs of Active and Reserve Troops. TAP / DTAP programs were developed in the early 1990's to support the post-Cold War draw down of active duty troops. The unique needs of demobilizing Guard and Reserve troops and their families have not been fully assessed. *TMC endorses the GAO's recommendation that the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Labor must determine what Guard and Reserve servicemembers need to make a smooth transition back to civilian life.*

Mandatory vs. Optional Components of TAP / DTAP. By statute, only the Pre-Separation Counseling component of TAP is mandatory for separating servicemembers. Service TAP representatives recently recommended that the other three elements of TAP / DTAP be required at separation. This may make sense for active duty troops, but not necessarily reserve component troops. *The Military Coalition urges further study of mandating all TAP components for de-mobilizing Reserve troops. TMC strongly supports expansion of post-separation TAP activities such as veterans' benefits briefings, employment workshops and family counseling for de-mobilized Guard and Reserve troops.*

TAP / DTAP Checklists. Efforts are underway to refine and improve checklists to support TAP activities for active duty and reserve component troops. Appendix VII of the GAO Report illustrates changes that are to be implemented this year. *TMC recommends that DoD / DVA / DoJ be required to report on measures taken to improve TAP processes and procedures (including TAP checklists) for the active and reserve forces. TMC also recommends expanding DTAP checklists to include mental health counseling to ensure spouse / caregiver and community support resources are identified and a process is in place to ensure follow through in the community.*

Balancing Employment Workshop and Veterans Benefits TAP Components. Presently, the Employment Workshop component of TAP consumes 2 to 2.5 days of the total TAP process, but only a few hours is devoted to the Veterans Benefits Component of TAP. *The Military Coalition recommends expansion of the veterans benefits component of the TAP / DTAP program, and use of post-separation VA benefits briefings in communities and reserve centers.*

Integrate "Seamless Transition" Initiatives into the TAP / DTAP Programs. Accelerated development of an electronic DD-214, bi-directional medical records, expanded Benefits Delivery at Discharge activities, a one-stop separation physical, family support services, and related initiatives can markedly improve the outcomes intended for the TAP / DTAP programs. *TMC recommends a "Manhattan Project" to speed the development and implementation of "seamless transition" initiatives to support more effective delivery of TAP services.*

OVERVIEW

Mr. Chairman, The Military Coalition (TMC) thanks you and the entire Subcommittee for your interest in ensuring adequate support and transition services for members of the armed forces, including activated members of the National Guard and Reserve, who complete their military obligations and return to civilian life. Family members are also in need of transition assistance information and support, since a majority of military members -- active duty and reserve component -- are married when they separate from the service.

TMC was asked to provide its views on the overall Transition Assistance and Disabled Transition Assistance Programs (TAP / DTAP) and specifically to address issues and recommendations raised by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in its report, *Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard* (GAO-05-544).

In testimony today, The Military Coalition offers its collective recommendations on what needs to be done to address the concerns raised by the GAO regarding TAP / DTAP services for National Guard and Reserve servicemembers and their families.

Transition Program in Transition.

Since September 11, 2001, nearly 480,000 members of the National Guard and Reserve forces have been mobilized. That represents about 55% of the Selected Reserve force structure – units and individuals of the Guard and Reserve who train regularly and are subject to recall to active duty by the Commander-in-Chief. At the pace of current activations, it's reasonable to project that within just a few years the entire Selected Reserve will have served at least one tour of active duty that would qualify for TAP / DTAP services.

About two years into the War on Terrorism, the Defense Department announced a major shift in its policy towards the use of Guard and Reserve forces. The new policy calls for the routine call-up of those forces every five or six years for the foreseeable future. The Total Force Policy in the 21st century contemplates the use of these forces for every operational commitment. Many Guard and Reserve units already have served multiple tours of active duty since 9/11 with only a very brief turnaround time between call-ups.

In this context, TMC is concerned with the GAO's observation that the TAP / DTAP remains focused only on the needs of separating active duty service men and women. The GAO Report states that "[A]lthough the Reserves and National Guard were specifically identified in the law that established TAP [1990], the program was designed to meet the needs of full-time active duty service members because most Reserve and National Guard members had not served in an active duty capacity long enough to be eligible for TAP." (p. 10)

Under the new policy of routine reserve call-ups, DoD should have taken the lead in consultation with the VA and Department of Labor (DoL) to tailor the TAP / DTAP program to accommodate its reserve activation policy.

The GAO Report also notes that TAP resources have been “flat since fiscal year 1995” and that DoD’s budget assumes only a steady-state of 200,000 full-time active duty personnel have been eligible for TAP since 2001. [Appendix III, p. 31] In other words, DoD has not identified any additional resources for the nearly 500,000 National Guard and Reserve service men and women called up since 9/11. In 2004 alone, 117,000 members of the Guard and Reserve were released from active duty [p.5], yet no additional resources were sought to expand and refine TAP services unique to their needs.

The Military Coalition strongly recommends that the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Labor increase their TAP / DTAP budgets to accommodate the growing number of National Guard and Reserve service members eligible for these programs. TMC also strongly endorses the GAO’s recommendation that the Departments must determine what Guard and Reserve servicemembers need to make a smooth transition back to civilian life.

SPECIFIC TAP / DTAP ISSUES for the NATIONAL GUARD and RESERVE

Mandatory vs. Optional TAP Components for Reserve Troops

Only the Pre-Separation Counseling phase of TAP is required by law. The Employment Workshop, Veterans’ Benefits, and Disabled TAP (DTAP) components are optional for separating service men and women, including de-mobilizing Guard and Reserve servicemembers.

The GAO Report notes that, recently, TAP service representatives at DOD proposed to the Secretary of Defense that participation in TAP be mandatory (p. 20). This may make sense for active duty servicemembers, but it may be counter-productive for Guard and Reserve troops. A number of factors militate against a mandatory TAP program during the de-mobilization process:

- Demobilizing Guard and Reserve troops are anxious to return to their civilian communities (whereas active duty troops usually take TAP at their installation of assignment);
- Reserve component spouses are unable to participate in TAP at de-mobilization sites;
- Guard and Reserve troops are “outside the control of TAP managers” (p.14);
- Currently configured TAP services may not meet the needs of Guard and Reserve troops

It may make sense to require participation in some TAP components besides Pre-separation counseling. TMC, however, agrees with the GAO that the needs of de-mobilizing Guard and Reserve troops ought to be defined more precisely first. In addition, innovative delivery of TAP services in local communities, through the internet, or through state-level offices may make more sense than a one-size fits all approach.

The Military Coalition urges further study of mandating all TAP components for de-mobilizing Reserve troops. TMC strongly supports expansion of post-separation TAP activities such as veterans’ benefits briefings, employment workshops and family counseling for de-mobilized Guard and Reserve troops.

Additional Support for Disabled Transition Assistance Program Participants

Disabled servicemembers and their families need and deserve additional support as they depart the military environment back to the civilian community. TMC commends the DoD and VA for inviting military and veterans' service organizations to increase their sponsorship of disabled service men and women when they return to the community. A number of Military Coalition members are actively engaged in this worthy activity and are helping disabled service men and women re-build their lives. At the same time, TMC recognizes the limitations on voluntary assistance efforts. ***TMC supports additional resources for the DoD, VA, and DoJ to meet the unique needs of disabled servicemembers after their separation from military service including but not limited to employment services, mental health counseling, spouse or other caregiver training and employment support, and identification of community resources to help families.***

TAP / DTAP Checklists

TMC is pleased to note some progress in refining the checklists used by the Armed Forces in pre-separation counseling for the Guard and Reserve as well as active duty troops. Appendix VII of the GAO Report lists a number of changes that are to be implemented this year.

Revised checklists need to be structured in such a way as to emphasize new or changed benefits so that Guard and Reserve troops will be aware of the need for follow-up at home station. Some observations on proposed checklist changes in Appendix VII follow:

- *Health and Life Insurance Section.* The new TRICARE Reserve Select (TRS) Benefit is not identified in this section. Instead, three qualifying descriptions are provided with no reference to a specific military health care benefit available after separation
- *Finance Section.* Omitted for the Guard and Reserve as not applicable. Guard and Reserve servicemembers and spouses must be provided the information and tools to overcome any indebtedness incurred on active duty, apply for Reserve Component Survivor Benefit Plan (RCSBP), if eligible, and protect their reemployment rights under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA), among a number of financial planning needs.
- *Education / Training.* Noted as "same as active duty." However, there are unique situations that should be earmarked in the checklist. For example, reservists who serve 90 or more days up to two years active duty are eligible for enhanced Montgomery GI Bill Benefits (MGIB) under Chapter 1607 of Title 10. Those who serve 24-months continuous active duty have the choice of electing to participate in the active duty MGIB or the new Chapter 1607 program (which has not yet been implemented).
- *Small Business Loans for Reservists.* Mobilized small business owners are eligible for "disaster-type" small business loans from the Small Business Administration to restore businesses hurt by a call-up.
- *Servicemembers' Civil Relief Act.* The SCRA is cited as the Soldiers and Sailors Relief Act, the old title of the recently amended law. The SCRA should be identified in the Finance section of the Checklist as a source of information and financial protection for both active and reserve servicemembers.

TMC recommends that DoD / DVA / DoJ be required to report on measures taken to improve TAP processes and procedures (including TAP checklists) for the active and reserve forces.

TMC also recommends expanding DTAP checklists to include mental health counseling to ensure spouse / caregiver and community support resources are identified and a process is in place to ensure follow through in the community.

Balancing Employment Workshop and Veterans Benefits Components of TAP / DTAP

A key difference between active duty and reserve servicemembers is that reservists are returning from a limited duration call-up to a known civilian setting and, most often, reemployment in an existing job. Active duty TAP participants on the other hand usually re-enter the civilian world after years of full-time military service and little or no civilian workplace experience. Consequently, TAP programs should be structured to accommodate these differences.

Employment Workshop Component. The GAO Report notes that the Employment Workshop component of TAP is conducted over 2 or 2.5 days by certified DoL facilitators (p. 8). The GAO further notes that attendance in the employment workshops is greatest among servicemembers who are retiring with 20 or more years' active duty service. This phase makes sense for those who have been away from the civilian marketplace for a long time. The majority of de-mobilizing reservists, however, are returning to their former civilian jobs and may not need a two-day employment workshop dedicated to converting military skills / experience to the civilian world. ***TMC supports the ongoing employment workshop pilot projects in three states for Guard and Reserve TAP participants. We agree that these initiatives should be evaluated for use at home station during the post-service transition period.***

Veterans Benefits Component.

More than 50% of the Selected Reserve is comprised of veterans who have prior service in an active component of the Armed Forces. These citizen-soldiers potentially are eligible for all veterans' benefits administered by the VA. The remainder of the Guard and Reserve, however, may be eligible for some but not all veterans' benefits unless and until they complete qualifying active duty service.

Military Coalition partners hear from members that de-mobilizing troops often have incomplete or inaccurate information regarding eligibility or entitlement to veterans benefits, including VA health care, following their release from active duty.

TMC has strongly advocated for improving "seamless transition" processes to ensure the smooth and effective transition of servicemembers from active duty. We are acutely aware of the need to strengthen "outbound" DoD transition services as well as "inbound" veterans' services and believe that the TAP / DTAP programs can and should support seamless transition objectives.

In 2003, the President's Task Force to Improve Health Care Delivery for Our Nation's Veterans (PTF) final report on DoD - VA collaboration focused on the need to improve services and support for separating servicemembers to ensure the receipt of timely, quality health care and other benefits. At this time when hundreds of thousands of servicemembers are deployed in combat operations, the stakes are even higher – putting them at greater risk for long-term, service-connected health and disability problems.

In a more recent report *Vocational Rehabilitation; More VA and DoD Collaboration Needed to Expedite Services for Seriously Injured Servicemembers (January 2005)*, GAO recommends that

VA and the DoD share information to promote recovery and return to work for seriously injured servicemembers; and to develop policy and procedures for regional offices to maintain contact with the seriously injured servicemembers.

Without systematic data from DoD, the VA cannot reliably identify all seriously injured servicemembers or know with certainty when they are medically stabilized, when they are undergoing medical evaluation, or when they are medically discharged from the military.

The fiscal year 2005 National Defense Authorization Act directed DoD to do a better job of collecting base-line health status data through a formal medical readiness tracking and health surveillance system. Fielding a “one-stop” discharge physical, providing outreach and referrals for VA Compensation and Pension examinations, and following up on claims adjudication and ratings is not just more cost effective in terms of capital and human resources; it is the right thing to do -- to ensure that servicemembers receive the benefits they have earned and deserve.

DoD and VA are to be commended for the development of the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program for active and reserve component members. BDD activities need to be coordinated with the TAP / DTAP programs to the greatest extent possible.

The Military Coalition recommends expansion of the veterans benefits component of the TAP / DTAP program, and use of post-separation VA benefits briefings in communities and reserve centers. TMC supports a “Manhattan Project” to accelerate development of a bi-directional electronic medical record (EMR), enhanced post-deployment health assessments, implementation of an electronic DD214, family services, and a one-stop separation physical. These initiatives can support more effective delivery of TAP services.

CONCLUSION

The Military Coalition appreciates the leadership of the members of this Subcommittee to address needed improvements to Transition Assistance and Disabled Transition Assistance Programs for the men and women of the Armed Forces and their families. The Coalition is eager to work with the Subcommittee in pursuit of the goals outlined in our testimony. Thank you very much for the opportunity to present the Coalition's views on these important topics.

Biography of Robert F. Norton, COL, USA (Ret.)
Deputy Director, Government Relations, MOAA
Co-Chair, Veterans' Committee, The Military Coalition

A native New Yorker, Bob Norton was born in Brooklyn and raised on Long Island. Following graduation from college in 1966, he enlisted in the U.S. Army as a private, completed officer candidate school, and was commissioned a second lieutenant of infantry in August 1967. He served a tour in South Vietnam (1968-1969) as a civil affairs platoon leader supporting the 196th Infantry Brigade in I Corps. He transferred to the U.S. Army Reserve in 1969 and pursued a teaching career at the secondary school level. He joined the 356th Civil Affairs Brigade (USAR), Bronx, NY and served in various staff positions from 1972-1978.

Colonel Norton volunteered for active duty in 1978 and was among the first group of USAR officers to affiliate with the "active Guard and Reserve" (AGR) program on full-time active duty. Assignments included the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Army Staff; advisor to the Asst. Secretary of the Army (Manpower & Reserve Affairs); and personnel policy and plans officer for the Chief, Army Reserve.

Colonel Norton served two tours in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). He was responsible for implementing the Reserve Montgomery GI Bill as a staff officer in Reserve Affairs, OSD. From 1989 –1994, he was the senior military assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, where he was responsible for advising the Asst. Secretary and coordinating a staff of over 90 military and civilian personnel. During this tour, Reserve Affairs oversaw the call-up of more than 250,000 National Guard and Reserve component troops for the Persian Gulf War. Colonel Norton completed his career as special assistant to the Principal Deputy Asst. Secretary of Defense, Special Operations / Low Intensity Conflict and retired in 1995.

In 1995, Colonel Norton joined Analytic Services, Inc. (ANSER), Arlington, VA as a senior operational planner supporting various clients including UN humanitarian organizations and the U.S. Air Force's counterproliferation office. He joined MOAA's national headquarters as Deputy Director of Government Relations in March 1997.

Colonel Norton holds a B.A. in philosophy from Niagara University (1966) and a Master of Science (Education) from Canisius College, Buffalo (1971). He is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, the U.S. Army War College, and Harvard University's Senior Officials in National Security course at the Kennedy School of Government.

Colonel Norton's military awards include the Legion of Merit, Defense Superior Service Medal, Bronze Star, Vietnam Service Medal, Armed Forces Reserve Medal, Army Staff Identification Badge and Office of the Secretary of Defense Identification Badge.

Colonel Norton is married to the former Colleen Krebs. The Nortons have two grown children and reside in Derwood, Maryland.