

**THE TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
AND DISABLED TRANSITION ASSISTANCE
PROGRAM**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON
VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON
ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

ONE HUNDRED NINTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

JUNE 29, 2005

Printed for the use of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Serial No. 109-17



22-696.PDF

**U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON : 2005**

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office
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OVERSIGHT HEARING ON THE TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM AND DISABLED TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 29, 2005

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:10 p.m., in Room 334, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. John Boozman, [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Boozman, Brown-Waite, and Herseth.

MR. BOOZMAN. The meeting will come to order. I want to apologize. We are doing our appropriations bill, and probably 25 or 30 minutes ago, they called me and said we were going to have votes within five minutes. I thought, that's great. I'll run over and vote and get that done before we start.

The House has rules. The rule is such that basically anybody that shows up with an amendment can do it. They appear to keep showing up when they are not supposed to.

I think what we would like to do is go ahead. Ms. Herseth is on the way. I'm going to go ahead and do my opening statement, and then we will kind of go from there.

Again, we expect to vote at any second. As you all know, that's just something we have to deal with.

I wish I had the authority to call over and tell the leadership that we are busy over here, not to vote until we get done, but I'm not in that situation.

Today, we are here to receive testimony on the veterans' transition assistance and disabled transition assistant programs, usually referred to as TAP and DTAP.

TAP and DTAP are designed to smooth the transition of service-members back to civilian life. I believe this is an absolutely vital program, especially in light of the conflict in the Middle East.

It's probably fair to say that despite all the modern media that ser-

vicemembers are exposed to, military life is somewhat isolated from mainstream society.

That is not a criticism on my part. Rather, it is important to recognize that, whether a servicemember is leaving after initial enlistment or a career, they will face a society much different from the military. Working relationships are different, pay and benefit systems are different, there is no mutual bond of duty and sacrifice.

Therefore, it is not unreasonable that we ask commanding officers to make servicemembers available for three or four days out of an enlistment or a career to begin the transition process.

Along those lines, I want to state my strong opposition to the draft MOU being circulated that would limit TAP/DTAP to two days.

I've seen the TAP/DTAP curriculum, and I don't think there is any way a TAP staff can present that amount of information in two days and expect it to be retained by the participants. Even the four day version I observed at Navy Norfolk was rapid fire, and if you didn't pay attention, you would miss some valuable information.

By the way, I want to say Bravo Zulu to the TAP staff in Norfolk. They put about 10,000 departing servicemembers through TAP every year and of those 10,000, approximately one-third avail themselves of the benefits delivery at discharge or BDD program. If any base wants to see how it is done right, go to Norfolk.

I have a special concern about how we are de-mobilizing members of the Guard and Reserves. I know some units schedule a post-mobilization drill period to present TAP sessions. This sounds like a good approach, and I hope that best practice can be applied nationally.

Until now, we have only looked at transition as the process of leaving the military.

As far as the Guard and Reserves are concerned, transition should also be used to describe the process of being called up to active duty. That process is a transition potentially more stressful, given that a high percentage of the Guard and Reserves are small business owners who risk losing their businesses.

I strongly believe that some pre-deployment drill periods should include instruction from organizations like the Small Business Development Centers on how to plan for mobilization, and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on how such things can be put in place.

Finally, GAO notes plans to improve TAP for the Guard and Reserves and that additional resources may be needed. Fortunately, the agencies here today represent most or all of the members of the TAP Steering Committee which is chaired by the Department of Labor.

I would appreciate it if the Steering Committee would provide the Subcommittee with a report within 60 days regarding the types of services and training you intend to provide, new partnerships required, if any, the time line for implementation, and if additional resources are required, and how each department intends to meet that need.

I know our Ranking Member is very interested in this also, Ms. Herseith, so whatever remarks you would care to make.

MS. HERSEITH. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be brief.

Good afternoon to all of you and thank you for being at the hearing today. I want to thank the Chairman for holding today's hearing on such an important and timely subject. I thank the witnesses for being here today and look forward to your testimony.

The transition assistance and disabled transition assistance programs are very important tools in assisting our military servicemembers to adjust to civilian life and employment.

I am interested today in examining the witnesses' views on the overall effectiveness of TAP/DTAP and how we can work together to promote and improve these services.

Particularly, I'm concerned with members of the Guard and Reserve, many of whom come from rural areas, as to how they fit into the transition process.

Finally, with respect to the increasingly high number of wounded servicemembers from Iraq and Afghanistan -- the VA just yesterday admitted that the number of wounded is over 100,000 -- how is DTAP operating to assist in their rehabilitation, both physically and vocationally?

Mr. Chairman, once again thank you for your commitment to and bipartisan leadership on this important issue. I look forward to working with you, the agencies, and military service branches in implementing and improving transition services for our men and women in uniform.

Thank you.

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you. They have informed us that the votes perhaps are going to be a while. I say that, now they will ring the bell. That's probably jinxed us. Let's go ahead and get started.

Let's have our first panel, Major General Ronald Young, Director of the National Guard Bureau Joint Staff. Mr. Craig Duehring, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, Department of Defense. Ms. Judith Caden, Director, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service, Veterans' Benefits Administration, and Mr. John McWilliam, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Operations and Management, Veterans' Employment and Training Service, Department of Labor.

Let's begin with you, General.

STATEMENTS OF RONALD YOUNG, DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL GUARD BUREAU JOINT STAFF; ACCOMPANIED BY CRAIG DUEHRING, PRINCIPAL DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR RESERVE AFFAIRS, DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE; JUDITH CADEN, DIRECTOR, VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICE, VETERANS' BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION; AND JOHN McWILLIAM, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR OPERATIONS AND MANAGEMENT, VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

STATEMENT OF RONALD YOUNG

GENERAL YOUNG. Chairman Boozman, distinguished members of the committee, thank you very much for this opportunity to speak with you today about these very important programs.

The transition assistance program and disabled transition assistance program are critically important components of our efforts to take care of soldiers and their families.

The information received during these briefings has long lasting effects on our men and women in uniform, their families, and their communities.

The effectiveness of TAP and DTAP also holds significant implications for the long term health of our organizations as a whole, and specifically I'm talking about retention and recruiting.

As the recent GAO report noted, TAP and DTAP have not been completely effective. The recommendations included in this GAO report hold long lasting and important implications for Guard soldiers and their families across the nation.

The National Guard supports the initiatives planned or currently underway to improve the effectiveness of TAP and DTAP as outlined in the GAO report. Changes in the presentation of TAP materials, the level of emphasis placed on briefings and other initiatives noted in the report will put us on the road to success in this vital area.

As noted in the GAO report, several pilot programs are underway that offer greater flexibility and creativity in the administration of these programs.

The National Guard Bureau has taken the initiative to sign memorandums of understanding with several of the veterans' service organizations around the country. We signed two such MOU's back in March with the VFW, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and with AM-VETS.

Later in July, we are going to be signing a MOU with the Disabled American Veterans. On May 18th of this year, Lieutenant General Blum, the Chief of the National Guard Bureau, entered a partnership and signed a memorandum of agreement with the Department

of Veterans' Affairs.

That agreement between the two agencies established mutually agreed to requirements, expectations, and obligations in regard to the assistance and services that would be provided to our members.

As part of that memorandum of agreement, the National Guard Bureau has put and is in the process of establishing state benefit advisors in all of the 54 states, territories, and the District of Columbia.

Those state benefit advisors will be at the Joint Force headquarters in each state, and will be able to track and provide assistance to the servicemembers and their families, and to provide assistance to the Adjutant General and other local agencies as we track our soldiers and make sure they are getting the proper care and treatment.

In addition to these programs, I believe that the servicemembers should receive their transition assistance program briefings and other materials at home station, versus at the de-mobilization sites.

As you know and as the GAO report stipulated, the de-mobilization sites number about 27 across the country. The fact that they are located at sites away from the home station where the spouse and the family members are located, there is a disadvantage there to the servicemember as they go through these briefings and try to make decisions that quite honestly the family and the spouse and the soldier or the servicemember should be making together.

New Hampshire is a model state for us. They instituted a program that's called reunion and re-entry program. It was a program where they worked with the Department of the Army, and were allowed to keep their soldiers coming back from the theater, over 800, on five days of additional active duty when they came back from the de-mob site.

They conducted a program broken into three groups, three blocks. They put soldiers in one block that dealt with administrative details, financial details, all those types of things, to reintegrate them into the Reserve component, back in the National Guard, and back in the civilian community.

The second day a group spent at a VA hospital and actually went through a whole day of briefings with the family and the servicemember to explain all their benefits and entitlements of now being a veteran.

The third day they spent with the chaplains and received counseling such as suicide prevention, marriage enrichment, those types of programs to help them reintegrate.

Now more than ever taking care of our soldiers must be our highest priority. Making the benefits available to National Guard soldiers and their families through enhanced administration of TAP is a key part of our commitment to the welfare of returning soldiers and their families.

Working with the members of this Committee, I believe the National Guard along with DOD, Department of Labor, and Department of Veterans' Affairs as well as state and local agencies can dramatically enhance soldier quality of life improvements for these important programs.

Sir, transition assistance is a readiness issue. The way we take care of our soldiers and families today will be a direct reflection on how successful we are at recruiting the generations of soldiers and their families in the future.

Thank you for this opportunity. I look forward to your questions.
[The statement of Ronald Young appears on p. 31]

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you very much, sir.
Mr. Duehring?

STATEMENT OF CRAIG W. DUEHRING

MR. DUEHRING. Mr. Chairman, Madam Ranking Member, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the transition assistance program, TAP, and the disabled transition assistance program with you today.

Congress and in particular this Subcommittee deserves sincere thanks for its continued support of our efforts to ease the transition of our separating and retiring servicemembers, as well as those being released from active duty from the Guard and Reserves.

Let me begin by mentioning a couple of important points. First, TAP is one program consisting of four basic components. First, pre-separation counseling for which DOD has responsibility. Second, DOL TAP employment workshops, for which DOL has responsibility. Third, VA benefits briefings, for which VA has responsibility, and fourth, finally, disabled transition assistance program for which VA also has responsibility.

Each agency is responsible for its component of the program with DOD serving as the coordinating agency for conducting the program.

The second point, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs and I travel constantly throughout the country conducting town hall meetings with servicemembers, their families, and their employers.

In the four years, he and I have yet to field the first question regarding TAP and DTAP. Because the vast majority of the Guard and Reserve servicemembers return home to their former jobs, questions on the Uniformed Services Employment and Re-Employment Rights Act, USERRA, and the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, SCRA, things like TRICARE and pay issues, are at the forefront of most discussions.

However, this is not to say that we don't need to acknowledge the

areas of concern the GAO report raises.

In the body of the prepared statement for the record, I've enumerated the many accomplishments of TAP as well as the plans for the near term to increase the viability of the program.

The GAO report, serving as the basis for this hearing, listed many of the changes underway and also pointed out areas that still require attention.

From my review of the GAO report, I believe the real areas of concern for this Subcommittee center on employment assistance, VA benefits briefings, and DTAP for the Guard and Reserve.

In response to one of the GAO recommendations, the Department is taking the lead in collaborating with our partners in DOL and VA to form a de-mobilization working group, the focus of which will be to assess the needs of the Guard and Reserve members during de-mobilization.

The program will make recommendations to all departments concerned on how they can improve transition assistance during the de-mobilization process for members of the Guard and Reserve.

The group will work under the umbrella of our existing TAP Steering Committee, a standing committee with representatives from DOD, the military services, the Reserve components, DOL, VA, and the Department of Homeland Security.

The military services are already making every effort to provide pre-separation counseling to all returning units at the de-mobilization sites.

The Department will take the necessary steps to standardize the time allotted to TAP counselors so they can provide quality pre-separation counseling briefings our Guard and Reserve personnel deserve.

The Department remains steadfast in its commitment to offer separating servicemembers, retirees, Guard and Reserve personnel and their families a quality transition assistance program well into the future.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, on behalf of our servicemembers and their families, thank you and the members of the Subcommittee for your support during these demanding times.

Could I add one personal note? Yesterday, my wife and I were in the audience when you participated in the 2005 Congressional Flag and Independence Day celebration salute to veterans in the military. It was a marvelous program. We enjoyed your role. It occurred to us that none of those people were your constituents. You were there just because you really care about veterans, and it came through.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

[The statement of Craig Duehring appears on p. 39]

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you. That really was a very nice tribute and

a wonderful program. I appreciate that.
Ms. Caden?

STATEMENT OF JUDITH CADEN

MS. CADEN. Thank you. Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss the role of the Department of Veterans' Affairs in the transition assistance program and the disabled transition assistance program.

My testimony will cover both of those programs generally and focus in particular on the issues and challenges of assuring that comprehensive VA benefits briefings are available to all members of the National Guard and Reserve who are called to active duty.

I will also address the concerns and recommendations contained in the recent GAO report.

As the Subcommittee is well aware, TAP and DTAP are designed to prepare retiring or separating military personnel for their return to civilian life. DTAP is an integral component of the transition assistance for servicemembers who may be released because of disability.

In fiscal year 2004, in total, including TAP and DTAP, VA representatives gave close to 8,000 briefings to active duty personnel in the U.S. and abroad, with nearly 277,000 in attendance.

Four hours of the TAP workshops are devoted to discussing VA benefits. While some of these benefits and services are available for a lifetime, others are not, and we feel a profound sense of obligation to make certain that active duty service personnel are aware of any time limitations on applying for or using VA benefits.

Although TAP and DTAP are central to our efforts to inform the men and women on active duty about VA benefits and services available to them, they are not the only vehicles through which we disseminate this information.

In concert with the military services' outreach programs, VA continues its benefits delivery at discharge, the BDD program, through which servicemembers can apply for service connected compensation within 180 days of release from active duty.

Through that process, recently separated veterans can begin to accrue benefits toward their first disability check as soon as the month following their month of discharge.

Currently, BDD is provided at 141 state side locations and at two locations overseas, in Germany and Korea. In fiscal year 2004, we took over 40,000 BDD claims and we are keeping that pace and probably more for fiscal year 2005.

With the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, we have expanded our efforts further through the seamless transition program.

VA representatives at key military treatment facilities such as here

at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, provide benefit information and coordinate the submission of claims to regional offices so they can be processed more expeditiously.

With the activation and deployment of large numbers of Reserve and National Guard, VA outreach to these members has been greatly expanded. National and local contacts have been made with Reserve and Guard officials to schedule briefings for those members being mobilized and de-mobilized.

Last year, we conducted 1,400 pre and post-deployment briefings, which were attended by close to 90,000 Reserve and Guard members and we are expanding those numbers this fiscal year.

We recently signed a memorandum of agreement with the National Guard Bureau, and under this agreement, the National Guard will establish opportunities for VA to provide information to Guard servicemembers who are coming back.

VA also published a brochure, a summary of VA benefits for National Guard and Reserve personnel, which is widely distributed to Guard and Reserve units.

Despite these efforts, we know that much more needs to be done, particularly because of changes when they are on active duty longer, it can change what they are eligible for.

Let me now talk about the GAO report. I have indicated in our comments included as Appendix 11 of the final report, that we fully concur with the recommendations for executive action, particularly in working with DOD and DOL, to explore logistical options for ensuring that members of the National Guard and Reserve have the knowledge to make the decisions they need to make, in particular, one is about whether or not to opt for the Montgomery G.I. Bill.

Earlier this month, the TAP Steering Committee met to discuss ways to ensure members of the National Guard and Reserve are provided with such information in a more timely manner.

As you just heard, a work group is being formed from DOD, VA, DOL, and the National Guard and Reserve components to look at the best way of providing information in a timely manner.

The GAO report also recommended that in order to develop more accurate program statistics, we should keep track of servicemembers who attend TAP, DTAP, and other military briefings.

We are putting into place a Web based reporting system that will respond to that recommendation, and we expect the system to be fully operational by October 1.

Mr. Chairman, we are proud of our continuing role in TAP and DTAP, and seek to continually improve the quality and breath of our outreach efforts.

Thank you for allowing me to appear before you today, and I look forward to responding to any questions.

[The statement of Judith Caden appears on p. 59]

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you very much. Mr. McWilliam?

STATEMENT OF JOHN McWILLIAM

MR. McWILLIAM. Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Herseth, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee.

MR. BOOZMAN. Can you turn your mike on?

MR. McWILLIAM. Thank you.

It is my honor to appear before the Subcommittee today on behalf of Secretary Elaine Chao to update you on the efforts of the Department of Labor to provide transition assistance program services to servicemembers.

The mission of our service is to provide transitioning servicemembers and veterans with the resources and services to succeed in the 21st Century workforce. One of the ways that we do that is by providing employment workshops to transitioning active Guard and Reserve servicemembers.

DOL works closely with our partner agencies, the Departments of Defense and Veterans' Affairs, in providing TAP.

Our goal at the Department of Labor is to provide employment workshops at every location requested by the Armed Services.

The DOL facilitated employment workshops are comprehensive two and one-half day sessions, where participants learn about job searches, career decision making, current occupational and labor market conditions, resume and cover letter preparation, and interviewing techniques. Participants are also provided an evaluation of their employability relative to the job market.

To maintain a high quality of service delivery and ensure uniformity between locations, all workshops use a common work book and program of instruction. All facilitators are trained and certified by the National Veterans' Training Institute.

Mr. Chairman, we know that one of this Committee's key interests is whether our National Guard and Reserve units are receiving the best transition services. These longer mobilization periods have resulted in these servicemembers now being eligible for TAP.

Our state directors are working directly with National Guard and Reserve component commanders to make special arrangements following de-mobilization to present a modified TAP employment workshop to Guard and Reserve servicemembers.

We have also contacted each state Adjutant General to offer outreach and assistance to returning members of the Guard and Reserve.

Thus far, Labor has provided TAP employment workshops to over 1,200 National Guard and Reserve component servicemembers. We will provide any unit a workshop upon request.

Recognizing that there is data showing a risk of homelessness amongst veterans, in response to a congressional mandate to address the issue, Labor has developed a module on homelessness. This module will be added to the employment workshops after final coordination with DOD and VA.

To promote better ties between the employment workshop and one stop career centers, DOD and DOL are developing a supplemental guide to the employment workshop manual. This guide will provide detailed information about the one stop career center services and how to access them.

The Department of Labor fully supports the Government Accountability Office recommendation for a DOD led effort to determine what de-mobilizing Reserve and National Guard members need to make a smooth transition.

We are working through the TAP Steering Committee to fulfill this recommendation.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to mention another effort that supplements our employment workshops. Secretary Chao initiated REALifelines, the recovery and employment assistance life lines. This program provides a vital bridge in the transition of seriously wounded and injured servicemembers, including Guard and Reserve.

We currently have representatives stationed at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Bethesda National Naval Medical Center.

We will continue to expand this program and it will soon be in place at additional military treatment facilities across the nation.

We also have representatives at the recently established military severely injured joint operations support center, and we are working very closely with the Department of Defense on that effort.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I'm pleased to respond to any questions.

[The statement of John McWilliam appears on p. 68]

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you very much. I had the opportunity to go to Norfolk and visit the TAP center there. Again, I just want to publicly state that we found that to be a very, very good program. I think I can speak for myself and the staff on both sides, again, that was a very, very good trip.

The materials were good. The quality of the instruction was very, very good. I think we were very impressed.

Is that representative system-wide?

Again, I think they did a good job. Tell me our challenges. If that's a ten, is the rest of it a five, three?

The other thing is certainly the fact that compared to some bases, so many people are transitioning out of there compared to maybe another area, are we concentrating on the bases that we need to where there is large turn over?

MR. MCWILLIAM. Mr. Chairman, from our viewpoint, the employment workshops are standard between TAP sites. Whether it's a very large TAP program at Norfolk or very small TAP program at another location, they are very uniformly done.

I think by having the large number at Norfolk, they are able perhaps sometimes to segregate the servicemembers who come through and have a senior TAP or senior people and mid grade people to address their issues more specifically.

I think it is a pretty uniform program no matter where you go.

MR. BOOZMAN. I agree with the General. I think it is a readiness issue. One of the things that we found in visiting with some of the people that were going through the program and had gone through it, in fact, we sat through part of the program where they were comparing the benefits outside, what you needed to expect when you start paying for your own health insurance, when you consider the fact that maybe you are making \$40,000 there but you have \$9,000 worth of health insurance and housing benefits and this and that.

You could almost see a light going off in the room, that the folks were getting it there.

One of the things that many people seemed to feel might be a good idea was making the TAP program mandatory in the sense that there is somewhat of a stigma sometimes if you sign up for the TAP program, people feel like you are getting out, when sometimes you just want more information.

I think if you did it early in some cases, then the person might not get out, once they really understand what they are getting.

The problem is if you get it late, it's kind of like sending out the invitations to your wedding, you are married, it's very difficult to back out at that time.

What are your feelings about making it mandatory?

MR. DUEHRING. Mr. Chairman, I believe right now the active duty Marine Corps is the only organization that has a mandatory briefing. I think we have sufficient authority already to do that if we wish.

I think as part of our de-mobilization working group that we are forming, this is one of the issues we should look at, recognizing that there is a difference in requirements between the active duty and then the Guard and Reserve programs.

As the GAO report pointed out and some of the other discussion that I've heard here, I think the requirements for the National Guard and Reserve, if I could dwell on them for a minute, would be different.

On the one hand, they are going back to the communities they came from. In many cases, a vast number of cases, they are going back to the jobs they left, and of course, that's what USERRA is all about.

We recognize that there are a significant number of people who may have been unemployed when they came in.

Another factor we talked about yesterday was when you get back into the home environment, and of course, this isn't going to take place until after you de-mob, the effect of the family. The situation may have changed back there. You may have to move or change your goals in life or what have you. Your whole family life could change. That may necessitate some sort of re-entry back into the program.

What we have done to that end is -- it is really not a bad idea. I've got a couple of these cards here. This is the Army and this is the Marine Corps' card that every individual gets.

I'll read the Marine Corps' one. Transition assistance management program. We are here to support you even after you have separated. There is contact information on both sides.

If they see a need, they can get back into the system. Then, of course, because of the timing, you may cross out of DOD responsibility into the Department of Labor, which in many cases, is better equipped at that point to assist them.

I think this de-mobilization working group that we have already started forming and we have already been discussing at the worker level is going to take these suggestions, these questions that you have, the suggestions of the GAO report, and the other suggestions that I've heard from both ends of the table here, and tie these together to put together, as you have said, a much better program to meet the needs of basically two different groups of people.

MR. BOOZMAN. I think they are very different in that respect and need to be tailored differently.

Most of those people were mandatory regular service. They were in the regular service.

One of the things on the mandatory, the young enlisted guys getting in, if you had a program where halfway through their stay, where they had to go and listen to it, then at that point, there are things they could be doing at that point, education wise and everything else, to start preparing them to get out.

From a recruiting retention tool, I think some of them would realize that they had a pretty good deal.

The career guys, as they are transitioning out, even halfway through their career or whatever, as you talk about these kind of things, again, I think it's a retention tool in the sense of getting them to look forward to when they do get out, what do they need to do from an education standpoint when they are in the service.

Personally, I think it's something -- again, I don't get to make the rules. I do think it is something that needs to be looked at, and there would be a lot of positive -- if a guy could look at it, again, without the stigma of that he gets the reputation that this guy is on the way out, nobody wants that.

Can you respond to that?

MR. DUEHRING. Let me just jump on the active duty side for just a

moment. I recall when I separated, when I retired in 1996 and went through these briefings. We had some time to prepare. It was done before I left, whereas with the National Guard and Reserve, I think General Young will talk about that, there is a different motivation to get home. Everybody is going through it exactly the same time. There is X number of days available.

I was transitioning, but I knew what I was going to do on the outside. I needed a certain amount of information, but perhaps not the full blown course.

The services are probably in the best position to determine what their folks need. Again, it's been addressed in the GAO report, and we have said publicly that we are going to look at this.

I think at this point, we have sufficient authority to make whatever changes are necessary, if we feel that needs to be done.

General?

GENERAL YOUNG. Mr. Chairman, I believe there are two very different programs here that we need, quite honestly, for the Reserve and the Guard.

The Reserve program needs to be a program that is conducted at home station with the family and with the spouse in attendance. The program at that point would be better received by the soldiers and the servicemembers that are returning from the theater.

I just finished a tour as the Assistant Adjutant General for Army in Ohio for six years, since 1999. I've mobilized over 7,000 soldiers and been to many of these de-mobilization sites. I've met every soldier coming home and been with them as they received their initial briefings.

They are not focused on these types of things at that point. Their spouse, their family, is still back in Ohio. They want to get home. They want to get through the processing at the de-mob station as rapidly as possible. Even though they may be required to sit in a briefing, it's not one on one. It's not individual counseling. It's a group type session.

Their whole goal is to meet all the check marks in the blocks and leave the mob station to get home.

The program I talked about earlier is a great program. It's been conducted in New Hampshire. They are now in about their third phase. They came back in February and March. It's actually a continuum of care. They met them at the mob station, the leadership did. They brought them home. They talked to them again. They did follow up at the 30 day level, at 60 days back from mobilization.

They are continuing a program even out to six months, just to ascertain where those servicemembers are and what type of assistance they need.

I also think that there is an opportunity here while the servicemembers are deployed in theater and focused on their war time tasks

to assist the families and talk to the families back in the family support groups and with the family assistance centers that we have established across the country. We have 416 family assistance centers in the Guard across the country.

By educating those individuals more thoroughly in all the benefits and entitlements, and attending the family support group meetings and making presentations to them about these benefits and entitlements, when the soldier gets home, that spouse or that family member is going to ensure at that point that they listen, pay attention, and enroll in the programs that are going to benefit that family for the rest of their life.

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you very much. I agree. We had 3,500 plus troops from Arkansas in Iraq. I had the opportunity of seeing one of the groups return at Fort Hood.

Yes, you had individuals that literally had children that they had never seen. I think what you are saying is accurate. It's a very difficult time. Those families want to get reunited. They have other things on their mind.

Yet, on the other hand, as you said, from a readiness standpoint, if you can get this done at some point, then I think you prevent divorce, you prevent financial problems and many things that as a VA and a country come back and haunt us later.

Ms. Herseth?

MS. HERSETH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Maybe just to pick up a little bit on this line of questioning. I appreciate General Young sharing information about what's worked in New Hampshire with the reunion and re-entry program and the further description and response to some of the Chairman's questions about the phases and the importance of the continuum.

We have talked in earlier hearings about the importance of the follow up, particularly with National Guard and Reservists.

I would agree with the assessments that some of you have shared as well as the Chairman that these transition assistance programs, as we target them to two different sets of individuals that are serving in our force, the active duty, and of course now the heavier reliance on the National Guard and Reserve, as we have made this transformation, the stages of this transformation, certainly with recent deployments, that this goes to readiness and retention, but perhaps in different ways.

Perhaps with some of the enlisted members in active duty, as the Chairman's suggestion, if they receive some of this information earlier, they can better compare opportunities within the military versus what might or might not be available in the private sector or how they are going to make that transition at a different time, versus the importance of the retention for National Guard and Reserve, as you recommended, being connected with the family support groups

during the deployment, having that level of trust, the working relationships and the personal relationships with the spouses and other family members during the deployment and the follow up.

I know someone from our second panel may question some of the timing of offering the transition assistance programs to the National Guard and Reserve for precisely the reasons we are describing, in terms of the motivation to get home, the separation from the family, what the expectations are.

You said that the first stage up in New Hampshire is an additional five days at the de-mobilization site; is that correct? Of active duty at the de-mob site?

GENERAL YOUNG. No, ma'am. The five extra days that the Army allowed them to stay on duty was back in New Hampshire. They had already left the de-mob station. I think it was Fort Dix.

MS. HERSETH. With family?

GENERAL YOUNG. Yes, ma'am. They were welcomed home very informally by the leadership of the state, and the Commander had the option to give them a day off with their family the first day. He could actually give them a pass.

The second day, they were brought in and broken down into three distinct groups. They all went to a different location. One group went to the VA Hospital with their family, with their spouses, to hear the briefings again, and to take advantage.

You know that some of the programs, ma'am, they are entitled to require they still be on an active duty status when they exercise that right or say they want the programs.

This just gives another five days. They are still in active duty. There is plenty of time to do this. They can do it in a relaxed atmosphere with their family, with local agencies that are aware of the employment opportunities, more specifically targeted to their area where they live.

MS. HERSETH. I know General Michael Gorman, who is our state Adjutant General in South Dakota, has been very involved, working with his folks and our state agencies and with the Governor and his staff as our National Guard units have returned.

To the degree that you are aware, do the other Adjutant Generals across the country have information about this particular program or other model programs that may be working in different parts of the country?

GENERAL YOUNG. Yes, ma'am, they do. As a matter of fact, when we were in Omaha, Nebraska with all the Adjutant Generals, I spoke to the veterans' affairs partnership that we had just signed that day, and the chiefs of staff from each of the joint force headquarters was in Omaha with us.

I made a presentation to them with the details of both the partnership and the New Hampshire program, holding it up as a model of

something they might want to look at.

As you know, each Adjutant General can work his own programs. This is not the only program we have going on in the country, but it is a model program.

The State of Washington has a great program also. New Hampshire is the one we are holding up as one that has proven results, and the feedback that we are getting from the soldiers and the families is very positive.

MS. HERSETH. The focus on this program as the model program, on the follow up, the 30 days, 60 days, six months, I think with this group of individuals as part of our force, I think that's particularly significant that the follow up be incorporated into any program that's being utilized.

GENERAL YOUNG. Ma'am, I agree completely, especially the mental health aspects that the VA is working with us on in doing in this program.

MS. HERSETH. Thank you. A couple of other questions, and the Chairman has been kind enough to waive our five minutes here so we can probe a little bit further with you.

Mr. Duehring, thank you for bringing the memorandum of understanding to the attention of us and to staff today. I may be asking a couple of questions with the second panel, too. We appreciate it.

I know we asked you about this before, and we appreciate that the memorandum of understanding has been signed.

Just a couple of questions, and we can follow up with you after today's hearing, too.

In terms of the sharing of the information, of the health data sharing, the MOU appears to be a good step in the right direction. Certainly, with consideration of various privacy issues, I would like to know about the sharing of the individual health data, and whether or not the VA -- does this simply codify what currently exists and the VA has to wait for the discharge and the official transfer or whether or not the VA has access to the individuals that may have suffered severe injuries and disabilities prior to the official discharge and transfer of the information over to the VA?

MR. DUEHRING. What I'd like to do is take that question for the record, if I could, and we will get you a good answer on that.

[The information was provided and can be found on p. 146]

MS. HERSETH. Okay. Thank you. I appreciate it.

MS. HERSETH. Ms. Caden, given the number that's been provided to us here recently of those that have been injured seriously in Iraq and Afghanistan, exactly what services are provided within DTAP?

For example, does it cover Federal employment preference, Americans With Disabilities Act protections, vocational rehab and employment programs, et cetera?

MS. CADEN. DTAP is very complete and very over arching, and it will cover all of that. It will talk about the USERRA rights, re-employment rights.

If they are going to need to go back to the job they were in, if they had a job before that, what we can do to help them from there, and what other benefits are available.

We have the booklet that I brought up with me here last time. We have a script that's now used. We do show a video on the voc rehab program. They get a lot of information on that.

MS. HERSETH. I would just conclude by raising the same question or perhaps recommendation for further review by all of you as it relates to the mandatory status of the transition assistance programs, especially if indeed there has been some stigma attached over time for those who are participating or not.

Also, Mr. McWilliam, just from your agency's perspective, as we have perhaps explored a little bit more than with the active duty, any concerns or thoughts or complaints that you received as it relates to the assistance being provided for the transition assistance for the National Guard and Reserve, to focus particularly on this segment of our force?

MR. MCWILLIAM. Yes, ma'am. We have not received any complaints. We are prepared to provide employment workshops. I believe as we mentioned in the prepared testimony, we are conducting three pilots with three different states looking at models of how to present the employment workshops.

One in Oregon was done very traditionally. We trained facilitators from the returning Guard unit who assisted in getting the employment workshops.

The one in Minnesota was done more on an individual basis, where the returning servicemembers identify any issues they are having with employment, and then the workshop is geared towards the specific issues they have raised.

We are going to take all these ideas into the DOD led working group so we can come up with a best practice to present nationwide.

MS. HERSETH. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you. Following up on Ms. Herseth's question about the New Hampshire experience, they had the five day period.

Does the local General have the flexibility to determine that period of time?

GENERAL YOUNG. No, sir, he does not. What happened in that case was the Adjutant General went to the First Army Commander, Lieutenant General Honore, and asked for that authority to keep them on five extra days when they got home, instead of putting them on their transition leave to use the leave they had earned during their deployment.

He asked for a special privilege to do that. First Army saw the

benefits of the program and were agreeable to it.

I am not aware of other states that have asked for that or have been turned down. No one has told me they have had any problem with that.

MR. BOOZMAN. He got a waiver to do that.

GENERAL YOUNG. Yes, sir. It wasn't so much a waiver. The First Army Commander has the authority to keep them on duty for whatever time after they get back that he would like to. Five days was a suitable period to accomplish this.

MR. BOOZMAN. Very good. As we have talked among ourselves, again, you all are bringing out the difference in the Guard experience and the regular military, and in the Guard, you transition in as well as transition out.

Many of these people are business owners. There is just a real struggle that goes on in getting ready to go. Several of these people -- we have all heard stories of people losing their businesses. It's a tremendous financial strain.

The National Association of Small Business Development Centers have over 1,000 offices. That is your resource. Are we working with them? What kind of resources are we using, or are we using resources? Have we thought about the transitioning in?

Again, I was very impressed with the transitioning out for regular forces. Maybe we can go visit with the folks in New Hampshire about what they are doing in transitioning out with the Guard.

What are we doing about them transitioning in, if anything?

GENERAL YOUNG. Mr. Chairman, I can speak to just a little bit of that, that I'm fully aware of.

Each one of our soldiers as they prepare for deployment during the soldier readiness processing back at home station prior to leaving interface with our employer support in Guard and Reserve, a representative in each state. It is an initiative that General Blum put in place as soon as he was appointed to Chief, putting that person out there in each state to help with employment issues and to help employers with issues of a Guardsman.

One of the programs that works through ESGR is a program called SCORE, Service Corps of Retired Executives. They offer services to small business owners and some of our members to take advantage of, to assist them with financial issues or how to run a business, how to keep it running while they are gone, those types of things.

Both SCORE and the National Association of Small Business Development Centers are in tune with ESGR, and we have access to those programs through ESGR.

MR. BOOZMAN. If a servicemember is deployed, say an individual is deployed and negative things do occur, does the person here, the wife or husband of somebody in a small business, is there somebody they can access and get some counseling?

Could the dependent that is left get the same thing?

GENERAL YOUNG. Yes, sir. They certainly can. I know exactly what you're talking about, as far as some of our members that have lost some businesses. It's a great hardship. There's no doubt about it. It's a great hardship.

The soldiers and families that I've interfaced with understand the sacrifice and are willing to make the sacrifice, and many of them in some cases have actually volunteered for a second assignment and go and do it regardless of the impact on their business and on their family situation.

Yes, sir. The person left behind to try to keep the business running does have access to these same types of assistance.

MR. BOOZMAN. Very good. We have some other questions that we will submit.

Thank you all very much. We really appreciate you coming, appreciate your testimony. Again, TAP in Norfolk was excellent. If you can duplicate that every place, that is a huge success. That and the materials that you put together to give those individuals.

We would like to look a little bit more at the Reserve part of it and see what's going on there and see how it is differentiated. Maybe we can visit with the New Hampshire unit to see how that experience has worked and kind of go from there.

Thank you all very much.

Our second panel includes Ms. Cynthia Bascetta, Director of GAO's Veterans' Health and Benefits Issues. Colonel Bob Norton, Co-Chairman of the Military Coalition's Veterans' Committee, and finally, Mr. Brian Lawrence, Assistant National Legislative Director of Disabled American Veterans.

Ms. Bascetta, would you please get us started?

STATEMENTS OF CYNTHIA BASCETTA, DIRECTOR OF VETERANS' HEALTH AND BENEFITS ISSUES, U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE; ACCOMPANIED BY ROBERT F. NORTON, RETIRED, CO-CHAIRMAN, VETERANS' COMMITTEE, THE MILITARY COALITION; AND BRIAN E. LAWRENCE, ASSISTANT NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS

STATEMENT OF CYNTHIA BASCETTA

MS. BASCETTA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Herse.

We appreciate the opportunity to be here today to testify on our recently issued report on TAP, which was mandated in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2005.

Entitled Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance

for Reserves and National Guard, the report focuses on actions the Departments of Defense, Labor, and VA are taking, and challenges they face in improving TAP.

To do our work, we reviewed the legislative history of TAP, program materials, and participation statistics. We conducted extensive interviews with officials from DOD, DOL, and VA.

We also visited Fort Bragg, one of the heaviest volume de-mobilization locations, to observe TAP sessions firsthand and talk to participants, including Army Reserve and National Guard members.

As you requested, my comments today highlight our concerns related to their transition assistance.

Overall, we found variations in the delivery of TAP. The amount of personal attention, the length of components, and the instructional methods used all varied.

For example, we found pre-separation counseling in one on one sessions of about an hour, group sessions at bases where many individuals were separating, and computer assisted interactive programs at banks of computers so that servicemembers could work at their own pace in other locations.

At remote locations, TAP may be delivered by video or telephone, due to the lack of trained personnel on site.

Participation also varied. Not surprisingly, it was generally lower for the voluntary employment workshops, ranging from about 56 to 86 percent, and higher for mandatory pre-separation counseling.

Notably, from fiscal year 2002 through 2004, National Guard and Reserve members attending pre-separation briefings increased more than ten fold, from 9,000 to 93,000 members. During the same time, about 229,000 Army servicemembers attended pre-separation counseling.

Unfortunately, VA assumed that participation at workshops was a proxy for its benefit briefings and DTAP, so they didn't keep separate participation data.

We recommended that they do so to develop accurate program statistics as well as to ensure adequate follow up, particularly for disabled servicemembers.

Although several actions are underway or planned to improve TAP, we identified designing services that better meet the needs of Guard and Reserve members as a particularly important challenge.

For example, typically, as you have heard, the de-mobilization process is completed in five days or less. More importantly, as we have also discussed today, National Guard members want to get back to their families as quickly as possible.

As a result, unless TAP is redesigned, they risk not receiving timely information on benefits to which they are entitled, especially certain education benefits and medical coverage that require servicemembers to apply while they are still on active duty.

Their opportunity to participate in the two to two and a half day employment workshops is also severely curtailed by the rapid de-mobilization time frame.

To deal with these logistical challenges, the Departments told us that they are considering the option of offering some TAP components after de-mobilization. They could present their briefings during scheduled drill weekends, and DOL could conduct workshops as well after de-mobilization.

They told us they were unsure about how many Reserve and National Guard members might be interested in this option, and they believe that this would also require additional resources and a directive that commanders allow sufficient time for transition assistance.

One promising source of information on these issues is the three state pilot programs in which DOL is involved, to better understand how post-de-mobilization workshops might work.

To ensure this option is fully explored, we recommended that DOD in conjunction with its VA and DOL partners, determine what National Guard and Reserve members need to make a smooth transition, and that they explore the logistical options for providing that assistance.

Other positive steps they have taken include eliminating the one size fits all approach by updating counseling checklists, considering expansion of mandatory components of TAP to increase participation, and developing multiple outreach strategies to better disseminate information.

Mr. Chairman, our war time reliance on the National Guard and Reserves has focused our attention on ways to help all returning servicemembers. Surely, these men and women who put their lives on the line every day deserve the smoothest transition back to civilian life that we can offer.

We encourage DOD, DOL and VA to continue to vigilantly pursue ways to improve TAP.

That concludes my remarks, and I'd be happy to answer your questions.

[The statement of Cynthia Bascetta appears on p. 75]

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you very much. Colonel Norton?

STATEMENT OF ROBERT NORTON

COLONEL NORTON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Herseeth.

I am honored to present testimony today on behalf of the 35 members of The Military Coalition, which collectively represents approximately 5.5 million members of the uniformed services community, active duty, National Guard and Reserve, family members, retirees,

veterans, and survivors.

Mr. Chairman, you asked for the Coalition's views on TAP and DTAP and specifically issues addressed in the GAO report. I will focus my remarks on three issues and concerns from my prepared statement.

First, TAP and DTAP funding is inadequate to meet the needs of all servicemembers who are separating from active duty, including members of the Guard and Reserve.

The GAO report states that TAP funding requirements are based entirely on projected active duty separations. The services have separated an average of 200,000 active duty troops per year, and TAP budgets were built on those projections alone.

Since 9/11, almost 500,000 members of the Guard and Reserve have been called up. Last year alone, 117,000 Reserve troops were de-mobilized, but no additional funds have been earmarked by the VA, DOD, or the Department of Labor for TAP or DTAP activities.

Taking an average of about 100,000 Guard and Reserve separations per year, the TAP budget should be increased by about 50 percent over current spending levels.

Second, The Military Coalition agrees with the GAO that TAP/DTAP should be adapted to meet the needs of Guard and Reserve troops separating from active duty.

The last thing most citizen soldiers need is a mandatory week of TAP briefings after they have returned from deployment. For one thing, as has been pointed out already, their spouses and families are not available in most cases to participate in TAP activities. Active duty troops are assigned to installations. Reserve troops are not under the installation commander's control, and they pass through the de-mobilization sites normally without their family members.

Also, TAP information needs to be tailored to their specific needs. The Coalition supports initiatives like the state based pilot employment workshops.

We also believe that the veterans' benefits component of TAP needs to be expanded for Reserve troops and delivered back in the community wherever possible.

Many Guard and Reserve troops would benefit by information on enrollment in VA health care, filing claims for disability, re-employment rights, economic and financial rights and protections under the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, Small Business Administration disaster type loans, G.I. Bill education benefits, and other valuable VA program information.

Thirdly, we agree with the GAO that there appears to be some progress in developing TAP and DTAP checklists that address the unique needs of the Guard and Reserve servicemembers and their families.

My prepared statement offers specific observations for further im-

proving those checklists.

The Coalition wants to emphasize, however, that more needs to be done to advise and assist returning Guard and Reserve veterans and their families, especially those with physical disabilities and mental health disabilities.

We recommend that the Congress impose a reporting requirement on the Departments of DOD, VA and Labor, to report back to the Committee and the Subcommittee on measures taken to improve the coordinated delivery of TAP services.

It was mentioned earlier, Mr. Chairman, that a de-mobilization work group has been developed, and we applaud that, but we think there ought to be the greatest amount of transparency possible in terms of the work and the recommendations and the outcomes of the de-mobilization work group, so that all of us in the stakeholder community can see and assess what progress has been made in terms of improving TAP and DTAP services for the Guard and Reserve especially, but for all the separating troops as well.

A number of Coalition organizations, including my own, the Military Officers Association, are actively engaged in providing outreach and support assistance to disabled veterans in the community. The DAV, the VFW, many VSOs also have robust programs.

We are proud of that work but recognize its inherent limitations. Congress needs to provide additional funding for Government sponsored services provided by the VA and the Department of Labor in the community, not only for the physically disabled but for those wounded in mind and heart as a result of their service.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I would just also mention that from my prepared statement, The Military Coalition strongly supports accelerated development of what we call seamless transition initiatives.

We have testified on this before, not only before this Committee, but also before the Armed Services Committee.

We recommend the Manhattan like project to accelerate the development of an electronic DD-214 separation document, an one stop separation physical, as has been pointed out, BDD benefits delivery at discharge has been expanded, and we recommend further expansion of that program, and the development of electronic medical records, which was mentioned earlier, so that information can be quickly and seamlessly reported from the DOD over into VA.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I thank you again for the opportunity on behalf of The Military Coalition to testify before your Subcommittee today.

Thank you.

[The statement of Robert Norton appears on p. 90]

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you, Colonel. Mr. Lawrence?

STATEMENT OF BRIAN LAWRENCE

MR. LAWRENCE. Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Herseeth, on behalf of the Disabled American Veterans, thank you for the opportunity to present our views on the transition assistance program and the disabled transition assistance program.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to supplement my written statement, because in further discussions with some of our transition assistance officers, some simple suggestions were made that could increase the efficiency of the process.

The first is that DD-214, the discharge documents, should automatically be provided to the VA by DOD, as Colonel Norton said, preferably by electronic transfer.

Currently, an individual must wait to acquire his or her DD-214 from the Department of Defense after discharge and then deliver it to the VA.

Since almost every transition member is also relocating to another geographical area, it would be helpful if the transfer was automatic.

In addition to alleviating servicemembers' frustration, it would help the VA maximize its efficiency.

Secondly, the pre and post-military deployment health questionnaires should also be included in service medical records, which are the primary evidence considered when VA determines entitlement to service connection.

I was surprised to learn that in most cases, the deployment health questionnaires are maintained by DOD for its exclusive purposes. DOD understandably requires such information for health studies, but that requirement should not preclude VA's access to the questionnaires because they hold important information regarding benefits entitlement.

Copies of deployment health surveys should automatically be included in service medical records.

Lastly, in talking with our transition folks, the most emphasized suggestion I received was that the benefits delivery at discharge or BDD sites, should be expanded to include all discharge facilities.

BDD is a cooperative effort between DOD and VA to provide a physical examination that satisfies both agencies' purposes. Previous procedures required two separate examinations conducted several months apart. The first was a DOD exam, followed by a secondary VA exam for compensation claims.

BDD improves service for separating servicemembers by eliminating lengthy delays in claims decisions, avoids redundant and unnecessary exams, and improves the quality of the exams.

BDD takes the pressure off overly burdened VA regional offices that already face backlog problems, and veterans receive disability ratings sooner after discharge, and the accuracy and satisfaction with those

ratings is generally of higher quality or more readily agreed with.

The DAV strongly recommends that BDD be made available to every person retiring or separating from active duty.

That concludes my statement. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

[The statement of Brian Lawrence appears on p. 99]

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you, Mr. Lawrence.

You mentioned, Ms. Bascetta, about there being varied methods of delivery throughout the system. Was that just a comment or is that a criticism? There are different ways to get things done, depending on if you have a group where you have 10,000 separations versus a much smaller amount.

MS. BASCETTA. Right. That's correct. We believe that the flexibility that we saw is not a bad thing. They are dealing with different volumes of people on different days and a different mix of separating servicemembers.

It's not necessarily indicative of a problem that there's variation, as long as the content that's delivered is the same, and as long as there is adequate attention paid to the most important pieces of information that the servicemembers need, for example, those that are time sensitive, in that they need to apply for them, the education benefits and TRICARE, while they are still on active duty.

MR. BOOZMAN. One of the themes as we visited with individuals that were taking the course and others that had taken it, whether we visited individuals or groups, was that many of them said if they had just known they were entitled to all this stuff, that it would have made a difference while they were in the service, that the only time they had heard of it is when they were recruited. As a young recruit or whatever, you just didn't have the understanding of what went on.

MS. BASCETTA. If I might add, at Fort Bragg, we were there in February. I'm glad to hear that the Norfolk experience was a very positive one for you.

We were impressed also at Fort Bragg, but we noticed also that the amount of information was simply overwhelming. For that reason, there definitely needs to be follow up.

We understand the Departments are working very hard to try to get information in ways that's more accessible to the servicemembers, not paper like this, but laminated cards that they can put in their pockets and they won't lose, 800 numbers, things like that that can improve their ability to reach back out if they have forgotten something.

In some of the sessions that we were at, the talking was pretty rapid. Some of the critical information was on a table. If you came in one door, you might not necessarily pick it up.

Those are the kinds of issues that we are concerned about.

MR. BOOZMAN. I think that goes to the thought now that there might be some sort of a tendency to go to a two day program versus a four day. If we are having problems with the extended period, certainly a two day program would only heighten that greatly. I agree with you totally.

Again, not knowing the benefits, do you have any ideas about mandatory as part of as they go through their career, periodically having to take some sort of thing like this?

Again, so that halfway through their career, they could start positioning themselves, education and every other way, as they get out, or maybe they realize as they do these things, they are better off staying in for another tour?

MS. BASCETTA. We didn't ask that question for this report. We testified in 2002 on this issue, and that came up. In fact, the way it came up, if I recall, is some of the commanders who were reluctant to give the time to their servicemembers for the benefit became believers, if you will, when their servicemembers came back and said that they didn't want to leave the military because they actually felt their options in the military were better than outside.

The other comment I would make with regard to making TAP mandatory is we definitely think that the VA briefings should be mandatory. There is too much important information there that is now tacked onto the end of an employment workshop, which some servicemembers may not go to. This important information will be missed.

Of course, they should be getting the TRICARE notification at the pre-separation counseling, which is already mandatory.

With regard to the employment workshops, I don't think we would recommend they be mandated because there probably are a group of people -- I don't know how large that group is -- who don't need that workshop, but if a servicemember elects to attend the workshop, then DoD should definitely be considering mandatory release, so that servicemembers have time to attend.

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you. Colonel Norton and Mr. Lawrence, especially you, Colonel Norton, you alluded to the fact that the Guard units coming back didn't want to be held an extra five days or whatever.

You also alluded to the fact there is so much information that they need, including their health, understanding they need to be reporting their health care, their VA benefits. Again, four days worth of stuff goes on and on.

What is your recommendation? I understand that totally. Like I say, I was at a ceremony where people are looking for children they had never seen. This separation, boots on the ground for a year, it's a tough deal.

What is the answer? How do you get that information conveyed to them and their families without doing something along that line?

COLONEL NORTON. It's a great question, Mr. Chairman. I don't think it's so much a question of mandatory versus optional as what is the optimal moment, I'll call it the teachable moment, if you will, where deactivating members of the Reserve and Guard are ready to understand and receive that information.

As General Young and others have pointed out earlier, back in home station is a much more conducive learning environment to begin to assimilate this mountain of information.

In addition, because the family members are back home, often decisions about health care, decisions about how to restore and re-balance family finances, re-employment issues, Servicemembers Civil Relief Act protections, all those kinds of things automatically in a sense kick in when you are returned to the community.

The idea of having follow on information briefings by the VA, for example, in the community readiness center, the family readiness work groups, makes a lot of sense to us.

I would add as well that we applaud the idea of this MOU between the National Guard and the VA.

However, as with the joint services disabled support center, which was recently stood up by the Department of Defense to basically oversee policy and coordinate the transition of disabled service men and women, I think more needs to be done by the Defense Department as sort of the lead dog, the lead agent in this, to coordinate overall the delivery of this information and service to all of the Reserve components, not just the National Guard.

At the end of the day, there are large numbers of Army Reserve, Marine Corps Reserve, and other Federal Reserve troops that have been called up.

If the services that are being set up between the Guard and the VA are essentially for them alone, it's going to be dysfunctional for the entire team.

That's one of the reasons why we would like to see a little more transparency in the planning and the coordination process at the DOD level in terms of moving the whole team forward on this issue of delivering services in the local community.

MR. BOOZMAN. I agree. Sometimes I misstate in a sense. I have a tendency to lump the Guard, meaning the Reserve, components together in a sense that they do have special needs.

GAO, you all basically said, if I understand, this should be done during the drill period?

MS. BASCETTA. We thought that was definitely an option worth considering; yes.

MR. BOOZMAN. That's really what you are saying, Colonel Norton.

COLONEL NORTON. Yes. Some mechanism to deliver it in the home station. Family support groups, work groups, is probably as good a place as any. As General Young indicated, there are over 400 of these.

That probably could serve the entire Reserve and National Guard community, again, if the coordination was properly structured.

MS. BASCETTA. I think Colonel Norton is exactly right. I would just add that the same requirement about the commanders needing to allow time would be very important to ensure that anybody that opted for that workshop would be able to actually attend.

MR. BOOZMAN. Ms. Herseth?

MS. HERSETH. Thank you. You mentioned, Ms. Bascetta, that you saw down at Fort Bragg an increase from 9,000 to 90,000 participants?

MS. BASCETTA. That's total.

MS. HERSETH. Colonel Norton, you had mentioned a very important component here is the funding associated with providing these services at an adequate level. Of course, redesigning the program to meet the needs of National Guard, Reserve, active duty.

We take that to heart, given some of what we are facing on the health care front, that it's an important part that we are using not just active duty separation projections but what's happening with the National Guard and Reserve in the modeling to project what the needs are going to be as we look to changes to make these transition assistance programs as effective as possible.

A couple of thoughts, I won't pose any questions other than to ask Mr. Lawrence, you provided some information on the memorandum of understanding and some concerns, despite the fact that it has been signed between DOD and the VA, we have to address some of the ongoing concerns that perhaps GAO has as well.

If you could take the same question for the record that I posed to Mr. Duehring to address, whether it is some of the electronic transfer of information, individual or access by the VA, to individual health data prior to discharge, prior to transfer.

If you could submit that to us and our staff as well to share your assessment and evaluation and concerns you have about that MOU in addition to what you have already testified to, Mr. Lawrence.

The last thing I would offer, and I know Mr. McWilliam is still here, going on some of what the Chairman shared in his experience with some of the folks in Arkansas and what I have seen in South Dakota, especially with the National Guard, and what I would propose is just a factor to keep in mind when you are looking at redesigning the transition assistance programs and the importance of the follow up for the National Guard and Reserve, I think it is a very good idea to have the spouses and family members during the deployments involved in understanding what the benefits are.

We also are very well aware of the fact that that transition back within the family life poses some challenges as well. We know these units are very cohesive during these deployments.

Just as an idea based on some of the conversations I have had,

including with former students of mine from a couple of years ago that have served in these deployments, try to identify within the National Guard units a couple -- a handful of people that can become the in house experts, the members themselves that have returned, that are on the phone with their fellow service men and women from that Guard unit, that are meeting up with them on a more informal casual basis, that can share that information outside of a formal type official setting during the drills, 30 days after, 60 days after.

All of that is important. I do think we should try to identify some folks within the unit itself that become the in house experts for the units, not just the commanders, not just the leadership. Some folks that have identified an interest in or are already taking advantage of some of those benefits that can share that information with people they consider their second family after these deployments.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. BOOZMAN. Thank you, Ms. Herseth.

Again, I want to thank the panel. I guess I kind of equate this -- I'm an optometrist, an eye doctor. I equate a lot of things to health care.

I think if you scored it somehow dynamically, it is kind of like if you don't take your high blood pressure medicine or if you are a diabetic and you don't take your medicine for that, everything goes along, and then in the case of the high blood pressure, you have a stroke, and then that stroke cost a lot more money to deal with than taking a very inexpensive pill.

I think the problems that are encountered if this isn't done right, either in TAP or in the case of the individuals that all of a sudden are thrust into the military from civilian life without getting their things in order, truly, a lot of the problems that we deal with in the VA later on are as a result of failure caused from this.

I personally think it's money well spent. As Ms. Herseth alluded to and Colonel Norton brought it up, we need to look and make sure we are adequately funding the programs, certainly the demands and needs now are different than they were before 9/11, and again, go from there.

Once again, thank you very, very much for your testimony. Do you have anything else?

MS. HERSETH. No. Thank you.

MR. BOOZMAN. The meeting is adjourned. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 3:35 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

Executive Summary of the Prepared Statement, Major General Ronald G. Young, Director, National Guard Bureau Joint Staff - HVAC Hearing 6-29-2005

Transition Assistance and Disabled Transition Assistance (TAP/DTAP) are critically important components in our efforts to take care of our Guard members. The information received during these briefings has long lasting effects on our men and women in uniform, their families and their communities. The effectiveness of Transition Assistance and Disabled Transition Assistance also hold significant implications for the long term health of our organization as a whole.

As the recent GAO Report noted, TAP/DTAP efforts have not been completely effective due to quick demobilization time schedule, distance from home station and initial design of TAP/DTAP. The recommendations included in this report hold long lasting and important implications for Guard Soldiers and their families across the nation.

The National Guard supports the initiatives planned or currently underway to improve the effectiveness of the TAP as outlined in the GAO report. Changes in the presentation of transition assistance materials, the level of emphasis placed on these briefings, and other initiatives noted in the report will put us on the road to success in this vital area.

As noted in the GAO Report, several pilot programs are currently underway that offer greater flexibility and creativity in the administration of these programs. Building on these pilot programs, I believe that Service Members should receive Transition Assistance briefings and other materials while at home station whenever possible. Many of the decisions made during the Transition Assistance Program briefings and instruction are family based, as opposed to individual decisions, and this necessarily requires that the Service Member be united with his or her family during this process.

Home Station delivery of Transition Assistance information would necessarily present challenges to the organizations currently working to deliver these programs. Nonetheless, exporting these services to home station demobilization sites sends a subtle but important message to Soldiers and their families that should not be underrated.

Now more than ever, taking care of Soldiers must be our highest priority. Leveraging the benefits available to National Guard Soldiers and their families through enhance administration of the Transition Assistance Program is a key part of our commitment to the welfare of returning Soldiers and their families. Working with the members of this committee, I believe that the National Guard, along with DOD, DOL and the VA as well as state and local agencies, can dramatically enhance Soldier quality of life through improvements in these important programs.

UNCLASSIFIED

STATEMENT BY

**MAJOR GENERAL RONALD G. YOUNG
DIRECTOR, NATIONAL GUARD BUREAU JOINT STAFF**

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
UNITES STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

FIRST SESSION, 109TH CONGRESS

**ON TRANSITION ASSISTANCE AND DISABLED
TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS**

JUNE 29, 2005

**STATEMENT BY
MAJOR GENERAL RONALD G. YOUNG
DIRECTOR, NATIONAL GUARD BUREAU JOINT STAFF**

Chairman Boozman, distinguished members of the Committee. My name is Ronald Young, Director, Joint Staff, National Guard Bureau. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Today, we have 330,000 Army and 106,000 Air National Guard members of the National Guard serving our Country, States and Territories. The Transition Assistance and Disabled Transition Assistance Programs (TAP/DTAP) are critically important components in our efforts to take care of Service members.

As the recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) Report *"Military and Veteran's Benefits; Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard"* noted, TAP/DTAP's efforts have not been completely effective. Although, as the GAO report noted, Guard and Reserve personnel are entitled to participate in the TAP, these Service Members must have been in a mobilized status for more than 180 days, historically making the program unavailable to many mobilized National Guard personnel since many National Guard members are mobilized for periods less than 180 days. Because the TAP was primarily focused on the transition of Active Component Soldiers to civilian life, the program has not been entirely successful with regard to the transition of eligible Guard and Reserve Soldiers from a mobilized status. Many National Guard members remain unaware of many services available to them. Additionally, some benefits require that the member apply before he or she leaves mobilized active duty status, with the result that some members lose the opportunity to apply for these benefits entirely.

The reasons for the current challenges being experienced by the TAP for Guard members are manifold. As has already been noted, the TAP was originally

designed for the transition of Active Duty members to civilian life, and the structure and content of the program reflects that design. Secondly, there is an understandable interest both on the part of the Services and the members in demobilizing as quickly as possible in order that they may be returned to their families. Unfortunately, this means that the time available for administration of TAP components is extremely limited¹.

Additionally, the TAP is administered at mobilization stations normally at a distance from the members' home stations, which results in a lack of familiarity with local conditions and regional issues on the part of personnel administering the program. One reason why the TAP is effective with regard to Active Component Service Members is that these personnel undergo a comprehensive program while enjoying the ability to return home to their families at the end of each day. Additionally, Service family members are available to participate in many of the critical decisions associated with issues like medical coverage, educational benefits and retirement benefits. As a result, Active Component personnel are far more likely to avail themselves of the opportunities provided by this program than is a National Guard member who has been away from his family for an extended period.

TAP is administered to Active Component personnel at 82 Air Force sites and 53 Army locations, whereas National Guard personnel receive their TAP information and counseling at one of the 27 demobilization sites. In effect, Active Component Army personnel receive their TAP briefings while at their home stations, while Reserve Component Personnel receive their information removed from the communities in which they live and work. It has become increasingly clearer, that our Service Members should receive TAP/DTAP while at home station whenever possible.

¹ As noted in the GAO report, the Army standard for the demobilization process is five days.

Employment counseling, for example, is far more useful to Service Members who can consult with their families during this process than those separated from their loved ones. Additionally, employment briefings and seminars delivered at the regional or local level benefit from a greater understanding of local employment conditions, which can vary widely from region to region. Assistance provided by Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) would also be enhanced through the use of home station Transition Assistance. While ESGR information, including reemployment rights under Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA), are always useful, many of the capabilities provided by ESGR would benefit from being administered regionally and locally. Presently, though ESGR information is included as a part of the TAP at the various demobilization stations, these briefings cannot always address issues specific to members' communities.

In addition to the other benefits of home station administration of Transition Assistance, delivery and effectiveness of Veteran's benefit information would also be enhanced. At present, Veterans Affairs counselors visit demobilizing units at their demobilization sites, but these personnel cannot be aware of many local and regional issues that affect the members of these units. Delivery of the Veterans Affairs portion of the TAP by regionally based Veterans Affairs personnel would greatly enhance the effectiveness of this important component of the program.

The timely dissemination of Veterans Affairs benefit information is especially important with regard to those members who have incurred disabilities during the course of their active duty. As noted in the GAO report, some actions regarding application for benefits related to disabilities incurred on active duty must be taken while in an active duty status. Delivery of this benefit information at home station in a mobilized status would significantly enhance understanding and participation in Veterans Affairs programs for our disabled members. The National Guard Bureau and Department of Veterans Affairs have already taken

steps to facilitate our Guardmen's transition to life as a veteran by signing a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) on May 18, 2005. This MOA provides definition of agreed upon requirements, expectations and obligations between the National Guard Bureau and Department of Veterans Affairs in setting upon a nation-wide coalition that will extend out to 54 National Guard Joint Forces Headquarters with a Health and Benefits Support Specialist assigned to each HQ for the principal reason of assisting Guard members and their families in accessing benefits entitled through their service.

The challenges facing TAP managers to effectively transition National Guard members have implications beyond the detrimental effects on the member and their family. The DoD compensation system currently in place depends heavily on the use of benefits and incentives to leverage retention following periods of mobilized service. As a result, several important benefits available to reservists are contingent upon the service member remaining a part of the organization following demobilization. Failure to properly inform service members of the benefits available to them, and of the service requirements associated with these benefits, represents a lost opportunity to retain members at a time in which retention of these experienced veterans must be the services' highest priority.

Critical to successful retention of these service members requires a more effective follow-through support in the period immediately following demobilization. Many of the programs offered as a part of the TAP require member participation both while on active duty and following transition to a non-mobilized status. For example, participation in TRICARE Reserve Select, which provides one year of TRICARE coverage for every 90 days of mobilized service, is only available to members who choose to remain in a Selected Reserve status. Similarly, the Reserve Education Assistance Program, which provides up to 80% of the benefits enjoyed under the existing Active Duty Montgomery GI Bill, is only available to service members who choose to remain in the National Guard or Selected Reserve. Additionally, every effort must be made to facilitate the flow of

questions and concerns that inevitably arise regarding member benefits in the days and weeks following demobilization. To be truly effective, follow-on support would require close coordination by TAP representatives at the state and local levels. Support for National Guard member participation in these programs must necessarily include support across the continuum of the mobilization-post mobilization experience, not simply during the five day window currently allocated to the demobilization process itself.

As noted in the GAO report, several pilot programs are currently underway that involve administration of the TAP/DTAP at the state and local levels. Of particular note are Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense plans to deliver Veterans benefits briefings during weekend drill periods following demobilization, which would greatly enhance the effectiveness of this program. Employment assistance pilot programs through the Department of Labor in Minnesota, Oregon, and Michigan are exploring several means by which employment assistance can be provided to Guard members, though in at least one case, the program would require policy changes resulting in mandatory participation for Guard members in the 30 days following their demobilization.

Additionally, the New Hampshire National Guard began a pilot program for five weeks from February through March, for its 800 redeploying Guardsmen, called "Operation Welcome Home". The program involved detailed coordination between numerous state agencies and private providers and was executed through the Joint Force Headquarters in conjunction with the states' Family Support and Recruiting and Retention Programs. NH is among the first to reach out to such a large number of returning service members early on at the initial demobilization stage. Indeed, all of the initiatives would enhance National Guard participation in the TAP.

Now more than ever, taking care of National Guard members must be our highest priority. Leveraging the benefits available to National Guard members

and their families through enhanced administration of the TAP represents a key component in our commitment to the welfare of returning veterans and their families. A tremendous step would be, allowing the National Guard member's spouse or family to be present during much of the Transition Assistance briefings and counsel would greatly assist the National Guard member make informed decisions. Our ultimate goal is to provide a continuum of services and support before, during and after mobilization ensuring we give the best possible service to those who sacrifice so much for America's security.

I look forward to working with the members of this Committee, DoD, DoL and VA on these issues. I believe that the National Guard, working hand in hand with the leadership in these federal agencies as well as state and local agencies, can dramatically enhance National Guard members' quality of life and our personnel retention.

Thank you.

Executive Summary of the Prepared Statement, Mr. Craig Duehring, PDASD/Reserve Affairs - HVAC Hearing 6-29-2005

As the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, it is my privilege to discuss the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP). We have an outstanding commitment to our departing Service members, and it is more important today than ever that we take care of our military personnel and families as they enter and leave active duty. The Department and the Military Services, in partnership with the Departments of Labor and Veterans Affairs, provide transition services. The TAP program consists of four basic components.

1. Pre-separation Counseling – DoD has responsibility
2. DOL TAP Employment Workshops – DOL has responsibility
3. VA Benefits Briefings – VA has responsibility
4. Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) – VA has responsibility

Each agency is responsible for their component of the program, with DoD serving as the coordinating agency for the entire program.

In the body of the statement I've enumerated the many accomplishments of TAP, as well as the plans for the near term to increase the viability of the programs. The GAO report, serving as the basis for this hearing, listed many of the changes underway; and also pointed out areas that need attention. From my review of the GAO Report, I believe the real areas of concern for this Subcommittee center on employment assistance, VA Benefits Briefings, and DTAP for the Guard and Reserve.

Secretary Hall and I both travel throughout the country conducting town-hall meetings with Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen, and their families; and he and I have yet to field our first question regarding TAP or DTAP. Questions on USERRA, SCRA, TRICARE, and pay issues are at the forefront of most discussions with them. This is not to say that we don't need to acknowledge the areas of concern the report raises.

To that end, the Department has taken the lead in collaboration with our partners from DOL and VA to form a "Demobilizing Working Group" whose focus will be to assess the needs of Guard and Reserve members during demobilization. The group will make recommendations to all Departments concerned, on how we can improve transition assistance and the demobilization process for the Guard and Reserve. The "Group" will work under the umbrella of our existing TAP Steering Committee, a standing committee with representatives from DoD, the Military Services, DOL, VA, and Department of Homeland Security that meets on a quarterly basis and is chaired by the Department of Labor. The "Group" will also have representatives from the Guard, Reserve, and the demobilization and personnel communities.

The Department has undertaken several other initiatives that I've detailed in the statement, and we remain steadfast in our commitment to offer separating Active Service members, retirees, Guard and Reserve personnel, and their families a quality Transition Assistance Program well into the future. WHY? One might ask; "because it's right; because it's smart."

Prepared Statement Of

**Mr. Craig W. Duehring
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense
for
Reserve Affairs**

**Before the
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity**

**Oversight Hearing On
Transition Assistance Program
and
Disabled Transition Assistance Program**

**June 29, 2005
2:00 P.M.**

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SUBCOMMITTEE**

Craig W. Duehring

Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs

Mr. Duehring is the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs. He also performs the duties of acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs in the absence of the ASD/RA. He was selected effective July 23, 2001.

As the Principal Deputy, Mr. Duehring serves as the senior deputy to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs in policy development and overall supervision of the National Guard and Reserve forces of the armed forces of the United States. He is the chief staff advisor to the assistant secretary for all functional areas and responsibilities assigned to the office.



Previously, Duehring served on the Bush-Cheney Transition Team and the Department of Defense Transition Team. He was the executive director of the Patrick Henry Center for Individual Liberty, a non-profit 501 (c)(3) educational and charitable foundation located in Fairfax, Virginia. Duehring was the endorsed Republican candidate for the Minnesota 2nd Congressional District in 1998. He is a 28-year military veteran, retiring as a colonel in the U.S. Air Force in February 1996. His final military assignment was as the U.S. Air Attaché to the Republic of Indonesia.

He is a decorated combat pilot, completing over 800 missions during the Vietnam War as a Forward Air Controller. Duehring has flown more than a dozen types of aircraft, amassing over 1,200 hours in the A-10 Thunderbolt II. His military awards and decorations include the Silver Star, the Defense Superior Service Medal, two Distinguished Flying Crosses, three Meritorious Service Medals, 27 Air Medals, two Air Force Commendation Medals, the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry (individual award), and the Vietnamese Staff Service Honor Medal (1st Class). Duehring is also a recipient of the Air Force's highest individual award for leadership in the senior officer category, the Lance P. Sijan (SIGH-john) Award.

Duehring holds a bachelor of science in History and Sociology from Minnesota State University at Mankato, and a master of science in Counseling and Guidance from Troy State University.

He is a native of Mankato, Minnesota.

Introduction

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. It is my privilege to discuss the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP).

Congress, and in particular this subcommittee, deserves sincere thanks for its continued support of our efforts to ease the transition of our separating and retiring Service members, as well as those being released from active duty from the Guard and Reserves. Your interest and assistance on this matter, both individually and as an institution, are very much appreciated.

First let me restate our commitment to our separating Service members. It is more important today than ever that we take care of our military personnel and their families as they enter and leave active duty. The Department and the Military Services, in partnership with the Departments of Labor and Veterans Affairs, provide transition services; "Because it's right; because it's smart."

I know that you share our pride in the professionalism and dedication of today's Armed Forces. Whenever this Nation has gone to war, we demanded the best from those who serve. Today is no different. The Global War on Terrorism has forced us into a war, not of our own making or choosing. To meet this challenge, and to defeat the enemy, we are calling upon the total military forces of this Nation -- Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, members of the Coast Guard, the Guard and Reserves, and their families. And, as in the past, we ask for commitment and a great deal of sacrifice from our Service members and their families.

We recognize that we must reciprocate by providing benefits and services to our military personnel who have earned them by virtue of their valiant and heroic service. One major way to honor their service is by caring for them and their families as they leave active duty.

Transition Assistance Program

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee let me begin by laying a foundation of the Transition Assistance Program with two important points. First, TAP was developed primarily for Active Component Service members and their spouses. Second, I think it is important, at least for the duration of this hearing, that we all operate with the same understanding of what is included in TAP from a DoD perspective. Within DoD, and I believe my distinguished colleagues from DOL and VA will back me up on this – TAP is one program consisting of four basic components. The four components are:

1. Preseparation Counseling – DoD has responsibility
2. DOL TAP Employment Workshops – DOL has responsibility
3. VA Benefits Briefings – VA has responsibility
4. Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) – VA has responsibility

Each agency is responsible for their component of the program, with DoD serving as the coordinating agency for the entire program.

The reason this second point is germane is, as all too often, visitors to our military installations reviewing the transition program conclude that the Military Services have different transition programs and none are the same. The confusion comes from

differences in how each Service delivers TAP. The Military Departments use diverse methods of program delivery, but they all provide the same program – preseparation counseling, DOL TAP Employment Workshops, VA Benefits Briefings and DTAP. How a Military Service packages and delivers the four components of the program can vary by Service, installation, and in the overseas areas of operation.

Let me also note that the Military Services provide more than preseparation counseling. Each of the Services has established permanent employment assistance centers (part of TAP) as required by public law. These centers provide follow-on employment assistance once the Service member has attended a DOL TAP Employment Workshop. Some of the follow-on assistance provided includes the actual preparation of a resume and cover letter, use of the internet to search various Job Data Banks, and most important, one-on-one counseling and review of resumes by highly qualified counselors.

With this basic understanding in mind, let me turn my attention to why we are here today.

One of the greatest successes in the Department of Defense is the Transition Assistance Program, commonly referred to as TAP. Simply stated, TAP's mission is to prepare Service members and their families for a successful transition to civilian life. Through this program, the Department provides an extensive array of services and benefits designed to equip separating Service members with basic skills, tools, and the self-confidence necessary to prepare them to join the civilian workforce of the 21st Century. As you are well aware, not all separating Service members leave the military and go directly into the workforce. Some decide to continue their education. Others may

enter business for themselves, or obtain professional credentials that enable them to meet the various licensing and certification requirements of their chosen profession. And some realize, while going through the transition process, they are not really prepared to leave the military and choose to reenlist. Whatever their decision may be, our goal is to provide them with as many options as possible, so they can make an informed decision about their future.

Some TAP Accomplishments

Let me highlight a few of our TAP accomplishments in recent years.

- Assisted the Department of Labor in developing the Military Resume Writer, which is an automated tool for use by separating military personnel. It allows them to put their resume on-line through a DOL associate web site to America's Job Bank called DoD Job Search. This associate Web site directs separating Service members and veterans to the same Web site as employers who are interested in hiring separating Service members and veterans.
- Assisted the Department of Labor in the first phase of their assumption of responsibility for conducting TAP Employment Workshops overseas. The Department will continue to assist DOL in any way possible as they move forward, in the near future, to provide TAP Employment Workshops at all overseas locations.

- DoD, DOL, and VA provided TAP services and briefings on board the USS Constellation, the USS Enterprise, and the USS George Washington as they returned to their homeports after deployments.
- The Army is going to open an Army Career and Alumni Program (ACAP) Center at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in the near future.
- The Navy plans to open a fully operational Transition Assistance Management Program (TAMP) Office at the National Naval Medical Center – Bethesda.

Guard and Reserve

As you know, the Department and the Military Services provide outstanding transition assistance to the Active Component. The Guard and Reserve present special challenges for transition assistance based upon the almost immediate deactivation and return to their family and local communities. Upon demobilization, Guard and Reserve members, like their counterparts in the Active Component, receive the mandatory preseparation counseling. The preseparation counseling briefing explains the transition benefits and services to which they are entitled as a result of their service. Topics covered include employment, relocation, education and training, health and insurance, finances, and disabled veterans benefits.

With the support of our partners from the Departments of Labor and Veterans Affairs, every effort is made to ensure Reserve Component Service members receive a Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) Briefing as well as a VA Benefits Briefing prior to their release from active duty and during the

demobilization process. These are in addition to the mandated preseparation counseling briefing.

However, the Department, as noted in the GAO Report, recognizes there are inconsistencies in the delivery of USERRA and VA Benefits Briefings for the Guard and Reserves, and these inconsistencies vary from installation to installation. In some instances units are being deactivated at locations other than an Active Component installation such as from a National Guard Armory. When this occurs, providing transition service becomes problematic. In other cases, individuals may be “falling through the cracks.” We believe such occurrences are rare and isolated, but even one, is one too many.

DoD Partnership with DOL and VA

The full scope of TAP goes beyond what we in the Department offer our separating Service members. As I just mentioned, TAP also includes services and benefits available from the Departments of Labor and Veterans Affairs. For that reason, the Department has enjoyed a long-standing partnership with these agencies since the beginning of TAP. Another challenge before us as it relates to the Guard and Reserve is how and when do we provide timely transition services. Although Preseparation Counseling does not appear to be a major issue during demobilization, the Department is concerned that the time allotted for Preseparation Counseling at many locations is insufficient; thus, the TAP counselor is not able to provide a quality Preseparation Counseling Briefing. The Department will continue to work with the Military Departments down through the chain of command at demobilization sites to standardize

the time allotted for the delivery of the mandatory Preseparation Counseling for the Guard and Reserve.

Mr. Chairman, from my review of the GAO Report, I believe the real areas of concern for this Subcommittee center on employment assistance, VA Benefits Briefings, and DTAP for the Guard and Reserve.

The Department of Labor's 2 ½ day DOL TAP Employment Workshop is appropriate for the Active Components. Given the assumption that the overwhelming majority of our Guard and Reserve members have jobs when activated and mobilized, the Department supports DOL's USERRA briefings as the most appropriate type of information that should be provided upon demobilization. For those who were unemployed at the time of their activation, the Department will work with DOL to consider other options, such as a DOL employment workshop following demobilization. Potentially, this could occur during one of the unit's drill weekends. On the surface this may seem to be a great solution; however, there are many issues that have to be resolved before we go down that path. I will address some of those issues later in my testimony. For both individuals who are unemployed and those who want to consider career changes even though they have a job to return to, I am confident DOL would refer them to a One-Stop Career Center nearest to their hometown.

The final two components of TAP, the VA Benefits Briefing and DTAP, fall under the same scenario as the DOL Employment Workshop. Since these components are the responsibility of VA, I will defer to my distinguished colleague from VA to discuss in more detail the information and services they provide and ask them to share with the

Committee some of the challenges they will face if called upon to provide these briefings after demobilization.

Focus of Hearing -- Guard and Reserve

Mr. Chairman, I am keenly aware that there is great concern by this Committee as well as the entire Congress about the breadth and quality of services and benefits being provided to our Guard and Reserve personnel as they return home. DoD, the Military Services, DOL, and VA are working diligently to ensure these brave men and women are not left behind or left out.

The Military Services are making every effort to provide Preseparation Counseling to all returning units at the demobilization sites. And, as already noted, the Department will take the necessary steps to standardize the time allotted to TAP counselors so they can provide the quality Preseparation Counseling Briefings our Guard and Reserve personnel deserve.

However, the reality is that our returning Guard and Reserve personnel are only at their Demobilization station for a period of three to five days. Given their high anxiety to return home to their families and loved ones, the Department must carefully balance that desire with the need to provide them with the kind of information they need and deserve. The Department realizes that the demand for more time to get things done at demobilization sites, although well intended, has probably exceeded the capabilities of the demobilization process to meet those demands.

That is why the Department concurs with the recommendation for Executive Action contained in GAO Report, GAO-05-544, entitled: "*Military and Veterans*'

Benefits: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard. The recommendation states:

“To ensure that members of the Reserve and National Guard have the opportunity to benefit from transition assistance, we recommend that DoD in collaboration with DOL and VA, determine what demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members need to make a smooth transition and explore the logistical options for providing that assistance, such as opportunities for employment workshops before or after their demobilization and providing timely information about the need to apply for certain benefits while still on active duty.”

To that end, the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, Mr. John Molino, is taking the lead in collaboration with our partners from DOL and VA to form a “Demobilizing Working Group” whose focus will be assessing the needs of Guard and Reserve Service members during demobilization. They will make recommendations to the senior leadership of all Departments concerned, on how we can collectively improve transition assistance in the demobilization process for Reserves and the National Guard. The “Demobilization Working Group” will work under the umbrella of our existing Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Steering Committee, a standing committee with representatives from DoD, the Military Services, DOL, VA, and Department of Homeland Security that meets on a quarterly basis and is chaired by the Department of Labor.

The “Demobilization Working Group” will also have representatives from the Guard and Reserve, and the demobilization and personnel communities.

I mentioned earlier that I would address some of the issues that must be dealt with before we proceed. You will also hear some of these same themes repeated later in my remarks. Some of the issues and challenges the “Demobilization Working Group” will tackle are:

- Assessing the needs of demobilizing Guard and Reserve Service members.
- Evaluating various logistical options for providing assistance.
- Assessing whether timely information about the need to apply for certain benefits while still on active duty is being provided at all demobilization/deactivation locations.
- Identifying gaps in the current system.
- Determining the right time to provide information.
- Determining how much it will cost and who will fund the program, if information is provided after demobilization and during a drilling weekend.
- Determining what the deactivation time line for scheduling briefings will be -- 30 days, 60 days after demobilization – we just don’t know right now.
- Deciding if spouses should be included in post deactivation briefings.
- Identifying the resources, needed to support the Guard and Reserve transition requirements, whether before or after deactivation.

- Developing other options to address the needs and concerns of our Guard and Reserve members.

As you can see, this is a complex and difficult issue before us, but not one that is insurmountable.

In the interim, DOL and VA have assured DoD that, upon request by a deactivated unit, they will fulfill such requests and provide TAP Employment Workshops and VA briefings at unit locations. The Department will continue to improve the process and the delivery of these services to all our Service members and their families. That is the challenge for TAP before the Department, the Military Services, DOL, and VA today.

DoD Initiatives

DoD has several initiatives under consideration that are designed to address some of these issues. The focus of these initiatives is improving transition assistance for both Active and Reserve Component Service members. Let me cite just a few and enumerate on some of the challenges associated with some of them.

First – The Department has a revised Directive on Transition Assistance for Military Personnel out for coordination and comment. The key changes in the Directive will:

- Incorporate the change in law that make Reserve Component Service members serving 180 continuous days on active duty and their families eligible for TAP. DoD is in compliance with the law but the language is now being included in DoD policy.

- Mandate the availability for Active Component Service members separating and retiring, who indicate they want to attend a DOL Employment Workshop (and where there is no DOL presence, a Military Service Employment Workshop) to attend these workshops in their entirety. However, this mandate has two very important issues that must be resolved:
 - First – If this mandate is applied to the Guard and Reserves before being released from active duty, during the demobilization process, then, the Department has to be prepared to lengthen the current demobilization timeline and expand the mandate to include the Reserve Components. Or, the Department has to decide to apply the mandate to the Guard and Reserve but authorize its compliance after demobilization, during a drilling weekend. That leads to the second issue --
 - Second, can DOL fully support this mandate for the Active and Reserve Components?
- Mandate all Active Component separating and retiring Service members attend a VA Benefits Briefing and those with a service-connected disability, or those who think they have a service-connected disability, attend DTAP. The same issues mentioned above relating to the DOL Workshop, apply to this mandate and impact our partners at VA.
- Now, let me throw the final ingredient into the mix. These mandates that the Department wants to implement, present even greater challenges to

DOL and VA for our Service members stationed overseas. They will have the greatest impact on Active Component Service members stationed overseas. Let me point out to the Subcommittee that we do conduct demobilization for some, but not very many, Reserve Component members at overseas locations. Let me briefly cite a couple of the challenges confronting DOL and VA in providing DOL Employment Workshops, VA Benefits Briefings and DTAP to separating and retiring Service members overseas.

- First – There are Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) issues that must be resolved before DOL and VA can be authorized to operate in foreign countries on a permanent basis at military installations where DoD and the Military Services have a transition presence. This problem exists today. DOL is working to resolve these issues country by country – but it is a slow and difficult process.
- VA’s challenges are: 1) providing 12-month coverage overseas; 2) getting SOFA authorization from each country where they need to operate on a permanent basis; and 3) expanding their coverage to cover all installations where DoD has a transition presence.

Second – The recent General Accounting Office Report *“Military and Veterans’ Benefits: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard”* noted several actions directed at improving program content. Developing a separate “Preseparation Counseling Checklist” for members of the

Reserve Components was one initiative. The new form was approved effective June 15, 2005. The Military Services will move as quickly as possible to implement the new form.

Third – The GAO report also noted that for full-time active duty Service members, the Department had drafted an updated counseling checklist. The updated “*Preseparation Counseling Checklist*” for active duty Service members was also approved effective June 15, 2005. The updated form will enhance program content and provide an improved Preseparation Counseling Briefing. The Military Services will move as quickly as possible to implement the updated form.

Fourth – The Department is staffing two Memorandums:

a. The subject of the first one is: Command Support – Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for Active Component Service Members

b. The second memorandum’s subject is: Command Support – Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for Demobilizing Reserve Component Service Members. The intent of both memorandums is to reiterate the Department’s commitment to TAP for both the Active and Reserve Component service member.

The challenges that I lay before you by no means discourage us or deter our commitment to move these policy mandates forward. We owe it to our Service members to prepare them, to the extent possible, for their return to civilian life.

Good News – VA and DOL

That being said, I would now like to turn your attention to and share with you some of the good news on things taking place among DoD, DOL, and VA.

DoD is working with VA through a number of collaborative efforts such as the Benefits Executive Council, the Health Executive Council, the Joint Executive Council, and Seamless Transition.

VA is working closely with the Military Services at the major demobilization sites to ensure that VA representatives are part of the briefings provided to returning Service members. VA continues to place a major focus on Service members being separated or discharged for medical reasons. They have placed Veterans Service Representatives and Social Workers at key military installation medical treatment facilities where severely wounded Service members from Iraq and Afghanistan are frequently sent. They include Walter Reed Army Medical Center, National Naval Medical Center-Bethesda, Eisenhower Army Medical Center, Brook Army Medical Center and Madigan Army Medical Center.

Our work with the Department of Labor includes the DoD-DOL Policy Steering Group – a collaborative effort that deals with Recruitment, Retention, and Re-Entry issues for Military Personnel and their spouses; and, as I have already mentioned, the TAP Steering Committee. In addition, under Secretary Chao's Recovery and Employment Assistance Lifelines Initiative, commonly referred to as REALifelines, DOL has placed personnel at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and the National Naval Medical Center-Bethesda. Because of the success of this initiative they are expanding REALifelines to Madigan Army Medical Center and Brooke Army Medical Center. REALifelines is a new approach to ensure that wounded and injured Service members

and their families get the support they need to be successful and competitive as they return to the homes and lives they left in service to our country and the cause of freedom.

DOL is also working with several States conducting pilot programs to provide employment assistance services to our returning Guard and Reserve personnel.

And just before his departure from DOL, the former Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans Employment and Training Service, the Honorable Frederico Juarbe, Jr. sent a letter to the Department's Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy in anticipation of the report by the GAO, which is the basis for this Hearing today. In his letter, former Secretary Juarbe told Mr. Molino that one of his last acts before leaving DOL was to initiate contact with The Adjutant General of each state in an effort to determine their needs. He asked for the Department's assistance to help notify the Chiefs of the various components of the Armed Forces Reserves about the employment assistance programs offered by DOL VETS.

Mr. Chairman, I don't want to take all of the thunder from my distinguished colleagues from VA and DOL, so let me stop here. I am sure they are anxious to tell you first hand about their initiatives for providing TAP and DTAP services to our Guard and Reserve members.

Our Service members have, and continue to perform, magnificently while enduring many hardships since 9-11, in support of Homeland Security, Iraqi Freedom, and Enduring Freedom. For their unselfish and loyal service to this great Nation, and on the behalf of the President and the Secretary of Defense, I want to thank them for their devotion, loyalty and esprit de corps while facing the enemy at home and abroad.

The Department remains steadfast in its commitment to offer separating Service members, retirees, Guard and Reserve personnel, and their families a quality Transition Assistance Program well into the future. WHY? One might ask; “because it’s right; because it’s smart.”

In conclusion Mr. Chairman, on behalf of our Service members and their families, thank you and the members of this Subcommittee for your support during these demanding times. I stand ready to answer your questions.

**Statement of
Judith Caden
Director, Vocational Rehabilitation
and Employment Service
Department of Veterans Affairs
before the
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States House of Representatives**

June 29, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the role of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP). While my testimony will cover both of these programs generally, it will also focus in particular on the issues and challenges of assuring that comprehensive VA benefits briefings are available to all members of the National Guard and Reserves who are called to active-duty. I will address the concerns and recommendations contained in the recent GAO Report, *MILITARY AND VETERANS' BENEFITS: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard* (GAO 05-544).

VA has a long history of providing benefits information and special assistance to military personnel and their families, including assignment of VA representatives in Vietnam under Operation Early Word and counselors at military treatment facilities in both Europe and the United States from 1967 to 1972. The extent and nature of this assistance changed significantly when Public Law 101-510, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year

1991, expanded a pilot TAP/DTAP to military installations throughout the United States. TAP and DTAP are authorized under title 10, United States Code, chapter 58.

As the Subcommittee is well aware, TAP and DTAP are designed to prepare retiring or separating military personnel for their return to civilian life. While the two and a half day TAP Workshops primarily emphasize employment preparation, one half day is devoted to discussing VA benefits. VA health care, compensation for service-connected disabilities, the Montgomery GI Bill, VA home loans, life insurance, and vocational rehabilitation and employment services can play a key role in a veteran's successful readjustment to civilian life following active-duty service. While some of these benefits and services are available for a lifetime, others are not. We feel a profound sense of obligation to make certain that our active-duty service personnel are aware of any time limitations on applying for or using VA benefits.

DTAP is an integral component of transition assistance for service members who may be released because of disability or who believe they have a disability qualifying them for vocational rehabilitation and employment related benefits and services under chapter 31 of title 38, United States Code. The goal of DTAP is to encourage and assist potentially eligible service members in making an informed decision about VA's vocational rehabilitation assistance program. It is also intended to facilitate the expeditious delivery of vocational

rehabilitation services to eligible persons by assisting them in filing an application for vocational rehabilitation benefits. To ensure that the widest possible military audience receives DTAP briefings, responsibility for providing DTAP presentations is the shared responsibility of members of the Public Contact Team of the Veterans Service Center and members of the Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment Division at each VA Regional Office.

Although TAP and DTAP are central to VA's efforts to inform our men and woman on active-duty about VA benefits and services available to them upon retirement or separation, they are not the only vehicles through which we disseminate this information.

VA also provides briefings to active-duty military personnel in other venues, including military separation and retirement services programs, military medical facilities and Physical Evaluation Boards, special outreach to Reserve and Guard Units, Casualty Assistance Services, and various other military liaison activities.

In all - including TAP and DTAP - VA representatives conducted 7,210 briefings in FY 2004, which were attended by 261,391 active-duty personnel and their families residing in the United States. VA personnel also conducted 115,576 personal interviews with attendees. Through April 2005, VA

representatives conducted 4,637 briefings for 192,599 attendees and conducted 70,108 personal interviews.

Overseas, VA representatives, on tour, provide VA benefits briefings at bases in Germany, Italy, Japan, Okinawa, Korea, England, Spain, Iceland, Belgium, and Guantanamo Bay for 9 months each year under a memorandum of agreement (MOA) between VA and DoD. Just last month, we added Bahrain to our overseas sites. During FY 2004, 629 briefings were conducted in foreign countries, attended by 15,354 active-duty personnel. Through April 2005, 299 briefings were conducted in foreign countries. These were attended by 8,499 active-duty personnel.

VA has provided TAP briefings aboard Naval vessels, including the USS Constellation, the USS Enterprise, and the USS George Washington, on their return from the Persian Gulf to the United States. VBA will continue to support requests from the Department of the Navy for TAP workshops aboard ships.

In concert with the military services outreach program, VA continued its Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program through which service members can apply for service-connected compensation within 180 days of release from active duty. The required physical examination is conducted, service medical records are reviewed, and a rating decision is made prior to separation. Upon receipt of the claimant's DD Form 214, Report of Release from Active Military

Service, benefits are immediately authorized and the recently-separated veteran can begin to accrue benefits toward his or her first disability check as soon as the month following the month of discharge. Currently, BDD is provided at 141 stateside locations and at two locations overseas – Landstuhl, Germany and Yongsan, Korea. In FY 2004, 41,413 BDD claims were taken, with 28,822 finalized. Through April 2005, 22,612 BDD claims were taken, with 16,282 finalized.

Since the Vietnam War, we have distributed VA benefits and services information through our Veterans Assistance at Discharge System (VADS). Through VADS, new veterans receive informational brochures, along with an explanatory letter from the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. This mailing is based upon address information provided on a veteran's DD-214 upon separation from service.

With the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), VA expanded its efforts even further through the Seamless Transition Program. In 2003, VBA began to assign permanent, full time representatives at key military treatment facilities such as the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Bethesda Naval Medical Center, and the Eisenhower, Brooke and Madigan Army Medical Centers, where seriously injured OEF/OIF returnees are hospitalized. VA representatives provide those patients benefits information and assist them in filing claims. They monitor patient progress and movement,

and coordinate the submission and smooth transfer of claims to VA regional offices. Each of these cases is case-managed at the regional offices to expedite processing. From October 3, 2003, through May 11, 2005, VBA representatives assisted 5,945 patients at the five aforementioned medical centers.

Let me turn now to the subject of the Reserve and the National Guard, and the GAO Report.

Outreach to Reserve/Guard members is part of the overall VA outreach program. During peacetime, this outreach is generally accomplished on an "on call" or "as requested" basis. However, with the activation and deployment of large numbers of Reserve and Guard members following the September 11, 2001, attack on America, and the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, VA outreach to these members has been greatly expanded.

National and local contacts have been made with Reserve and Guard officials to schedule briefings for Reserve/Guard members being mobilized and demobilized. In FY 2004, VA representatives conducted 1,399 pre- and post-deployment briefings, which were attended by 88,366 Reserve and Guard members. Through March 2005, VBA representatives conducted 974 pre- and post-deployment briefings attended by 68,351 Reserve and Guard members.

Returning service members can elect to attend the formal 3-day TAP workshops. VA has also published a brochure, *A Summary of VA Benefits for National Guard and Reserve Personnel*, which is widely distributed to Guard and Reserve units. A special page on VA's main web site is dedicated for use by Guard and Reserve members.

VA recently signed an MOA with the National Guard Bureau (NGB). Under this agreement, the NGB will establish opportunities for VA to provide information to Guard service members returning from OIF. The Guard will provide timely, appropriate data regarding demobilization of Guard members to keep VA apprised of where and when groups of demobilizing service members will return to their local communities.

VA has worked closely with military officials at the major demobilization sites to ensure that VA representatives are part of the briefings provided to returning service members. VBA representatives also work closely with their VHA and Vet Center colleagues, as well as service organization representatives, at these sites. Recently, VHA hired 50 Global War on Terrorism outreach counselors at Vet Centers across the country and is in the process of hiring an additional 50 counselors. These counselors provide information and assistance to returning service members at military bases regarding the Vet Center program with specific emphasis on post traumatic stress disorder issues. In addition, VA is producing an informational video for retiring, separating, or demobilizing active-

duty service members. Despite these efforts, however, we know that more needs to be done, particularly because of the changes in VA benefits entitlement brought about by extended active-duty service.

As indicated in VA's comments included as Appendix XI of the GAO final report, VA fully concurs with GAO's recommendations for executive action, particularly in working with the Departments of Defense and Labor (DoD and DOL) to explore logistical options for ensuring that members of the Guard and Reserve have the knowledge to make informed decisions about enrollment in the Montgomery GI Bill prior to release from active duty, as required by law. It does not seem reasonable to expect such a decision to be made during the short period of demobilization – often no more than 48 hours. Earlier this month, the TAP Steering Committee met to discuss actions that need to be taken to smooth out the logistics involved so that members of the Guard and Reserve are provided with such information in a more timely manner. As a result of that meeting, DoD has agreed to form a workgroup that would include representatives from DoD, VA, DOL, and the Guard and Reserve components to work out means for dissemination of information regarding eligibility for enrollment in the Montgomery GI Bill, as well as the new educational assistance benefits set forth in title 10, United States Code, chapter 1607.

The GAO report also recommended that, in order to develop more accurate program statistics, VA keep track of service members who attend DTAP

in order to facilitate adequate follow-up. During the August 2004 DTAP re-engineering meeting, the participants recognized that measurement of the number of DTAP briefings, as well as DTAP attendance, was vital to the success of any program redesign. This summer, VA will put into place a web-based reporting system that will respond to GAO's recommendation. VA will also include general TAP briefings in this system, enabling us to measure our overall TAP efforts in much greater detail and accuracy. We expect to test this new system during July and August of this year, and have it fully operational by October 1, 2005.

Mr. Chairman, we at VA are proud of our continuing role in TAP and DTAP, and seek to continually improve the quality and breadth of our outreach efforts to active-duty, Reserve and National Guard members.

Thank you for allowing me to appear before you today. I would be pleased to respond to any questions from members of the Subcommittee.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The mission of the Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) is to provide veterans and transitioning servicemembers with the resources and services to succeed in the 21st century workforce. One of the ways that we meet that mission is by providing employment workshops to separating active, Guard, and Reserve servicemembers.

Since 1991, when the Department of Labor (DOL) began providing employment workshops pursuant to Public Law 101-510, over one million separating and retiring military members and their spouses have been given employment and job training assistance and other transitional services. Our goal is to provide workshops at every location requested by the Armed Services.

DOL is authorized by Chapter 58 of title 10, U.S. Code, to assist the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs in providing transition assistance services to separating servicemembers and their spouses. VETS conducts employment workshops based on projections made by each of the Armed Services and the Department of Homeland Security for the U.S. Coast Guard. In the United States, Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVER) lead most employment workshops. In overseas locations, contract staff lead most workshops.

To maintain a quality of service delivery and ensure uniformity between locations, all workshops use a common workbook and program of instruction. In addition, all facilitators, whether DVOP/LVER, Federal staff, or contract, are trained and certified by the National Veterans Training Institute.

In Fiscal Year 2004, over 133,000 separating military personnel attended 3,397 employment workshops. In Fiscal Year 2005, VETS will complete approximately 4,000 employment workshops.

Our State Directors are working directly with the Reserve and National Guard commanders to make special arrangements following demobilization in order to present a modified TAP employment workshop to Guard and Reserve servicemembers. To address the Government Accountability Office's recommendation, we will also be participating on a DoD-led effort to determine the requirements for TAP for the Reserve and National Guard.

VETS is also developing a homeless prevention and small business module, and training on how to access the workforce investment system's One-Stop Career Centers.

TESTIMONY OF

JOHN M. MCWILLIAM

DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR
VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

June 29, 2005

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Herseth, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee.

It is my honor to appear before this committee today on behalf of Secretary Elaine Chao to update you on the efforts of the Department of Labor (DOL) to provide Transition Assistance Program services to servicemembers.

The mission of the Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) is to provide veterans and transitioning servicemembers with the resources and services to succeed in the 21st century workforce. One of the ways that we meet that mission is by providing employment workshops to separating active, Guard, and Reserve servicemembers as part of their transition to civilian life.

Since 1991, when DOL began providing employment workshops pursuant to Public Law 101-510, over one million separating and retiring military members and their spouses have been given employment and job training assistance and other transitional services. VETS was further directed to provide these services at overseas locations by Public Law 108-183, (December 16, 2003). Before this law took effect, VETS began facilitating TAP workshops at overseas military installations where, by previous interagency agreement, the Department of Defense had provided TAP workshops since the program's inception. VETS continues to expand additional overseas sites in FY 2005 and we are extending efforts to provide workshops whenever requested to those Guard and Reserve units returning from the Global War on Terror. Our goal is to provide TAP at every location requested by the Armed Services.

Employment Workshop Overview

DOL is authorized by Chapter 58 of title 10, U.S. Code, to assist the Departments of Defense (DOD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) in providing transition assistance services to

separating servicemembers and their spouses. The role of VETS in this effort is to conduct employment workshops based on projections made by each of the Armed Services and the Department of Homeland Security for the U.S. Coast Guard. In the United States, Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVER) lead most employment workshops. In some cases, due to the distances from some State Employment Offices to the military installations, and to assist with the rapid growth of the program, contract facilitators were added in early Fiscal Year 1992 and Federal staff in Fiscal Year 1996. In overseas locations, contract staff leads most workshops.

To maintain a quality of service delivery and ensure uniformity between locations, all workshops use a common workbook and program of instruction. In addition, all facilitators, whether DVOP/LVER, Federal staff, or contract, are trained and certified by the National Veterans Training Institute (NVTI).

In Fiscal Year 2004, over 133,000 separating military personnel were trained in 3,397 employment workshops at military installations across the Nation and worldwide. In Fiscal Year 2005, VETS will complete approximately 4,000 workshops at military installations in the United States and overseas.

The VETS employment workshop is a comprehensive two and one-half day session where participants learn about job searches, career decision-making, current occupational and labor market conditions, resume and cover letter preparation, and interviewing techniques. Participants are also provided an evaluation of their employability relative to the job market and receive information on the most current veterans' benefits. Components of an employment workshop include: career self-assessment; résumé development; job search and interview techniques; U.S. labor market information; civilian workplace requirements; and documentation of military skills.

Overseas Employment Workshops

Beginning in 2003, VETS began facilitating employment workshops at overseas military installations where, by previous interagency agreement, DOD had provided employment workshops since the program's inception. VETS currently offers employment workshops at 49 sites in Germany, the United Kingdom, Guam, Japan, Okinawa, Korea, and Italy. In FY 2004, 5,939 separating service personnel overseas were trained in 286 separate classes. VETS will continue to expand to additional overseas sites in FY 2005 and beyond, reaching Bahrain, Turkey, Spain, Portugal, Belgium and the Netherlands.

Reserve and National Guard (RC) Employment Workshop

Our global military commitments have necessitated a mobilization of Guard and Reserve members that is unprecedented in modern times. The longer mobilization periods result in these servicemembers now being for veterans' benefits, including the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). The employment workshop is available for most servicemembers at one of the 215 transition offices located on military installations in the

United States. However, Reserve and Guard members usually transition at fewer locations, referred to as demobilization sites. Typically the demobilization process is rapid, taking a matter of days once the servicemembers arrive back in the United States from overseas. For example, the Army standard is to demobilize units in 5 days, and it is not uncommon for military installations to get two or fewer days advance notice before returning troops arrive. During demobilization, servicemembers may be expected to participate in as many as 18 separate briefings or activities such as physical examinations at various locations. This leaves little or no time for a full 2 ½ day employment workshop. Nevertheless, we have found that many Guard and Reserve servicemembers would benefit from such transition assistance. Our State Directors are working directly with the reserve and guard commanders to make special arrangements following demobilization in order to present a modified TAP employment workshop to Guard and Reserve servicemembers.

Based on requests from Reserve Component Commanders and through coordination with our VETS' state directors, TAP employment workshops in some form have been conducted in six states. Classes ranged in length from one-half day sessions in Maryland to three-day sessions in Arkansas. We began collecting data in 2003 and from that date through May of 2005, 1,101 members of the reserve components have attended 24 employment workshops.

Specifically, our State Directors have undertaken two projects. The first is that they have contacted each state Adjutant General to offer outreach and assistance to returning members of the Guard and Reserves during the demobilization process. Secondly, we are working with the Guard and Reserve on three pilots to provide TAP employment workshops. In Oregon, 650 Army Guard members recently demobilized en masse. In preparation for this demobilization, NVTI provided facilitation training on employment workshops for 10 VETS/ State Workforce Agencies (SWA) employees and 10 Guard facilitators.

In Michigan, we are planning four-day workshops to include after-hours employment assistance information. This will integrate separating active servicemembers, Guard/Reservist and case management clients in an employment workshop-like program.

Minnesota is continuing to develop its program for Guard and reserve members in concert with VA. In the last two weeks, they have participated in two Reintegration briefings for Guard members. Unlike a standard TAP program, which provides a very good overview of the employment picture, this program is modified based on the specific needs of each unit. As an example, a returning combat unit may need additional information on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and available medical benefits and they will concentrate more in this area (using our partners in the VA as well). Another unit that is mainly transportation may need more emphasis in another area, so they will concentrate on their needs. This program remains fluid in order to provide each unit with what they, and their commanders, feel they need most. This also includes input and participation from the spouses so they are certain to cover their issues/needs. All of these

presentations still include available services of VETS, DVOP/LVER, VR&E, USERRA briefings and job-search workshops.

Transition Assistance Program Steering Committee

TAP is coordinated among the various departments of Federal Government through a Steering Committee. Members of the Steering Committee represent the national leadership for military transition from the Departments of Labor, Defense, Veterans Affairs and Homeland Security. DOL convenes and chairs the meetings.

Meeting quarterly, the committee's purpose is to bring together the program leadership to discuss mutual concerns, accomplishments and future program issues. The results of these meetings are then shared with field program personnel from all agencies to ensure awareness of current issues and coordinated direction to address them.

Changes Directed by Congress

Mr. Chairman, Congress has directed DOL to add two items to its TAP employment workshop:

- a homelessness prevention module; and
- training on how to access the workforce investment system's One-Stop Career Centers.

Homelessness

Recognizing that there are data showing a risk of homelessness among veterans, and in response to a Congressional mandate to address the issue, VETS developed a module on homelessness. This module will be added to the TAP employment workshop facilitators' website at the NVTI when interagency coordination with DOD and VA has been completed.

Accessing the Workforce Investment System's One-Stop Career Centers

To promote better ties between the employment workshop program and One-Stop Career Centers, DOD and DOL are developing a supplemental guide to the employment workshop manual. This guide will provide detailed information about One-Stop Career Center services and how to access them.

In addition, the Departments are working on a compilation of successful partnering strategies now employed by employment workshop staff and One-Stop Career Centers in the field. This guide to best practices will be distributed to employment workshop offices and the workforce investment system nationwide.

The goal of these efforts is to educate program staff about the benefits and commitments involved in local partnerships and encourage them to leverage each other's resources. Direct business connections to employment workshops are constrained by the mandated

curriculum and limited time. However, we believe promoting ties between the employment workshop offices and One-Stop Career Centers in general will help separating service personnel connect with businesses, and we are working within DOL to make this connection more meaningful.

To further enhance awareness of these resources and initiatives, the Departments will work with “Hire Vets First,” (www.HireVetsFirst.gov), a Federal campaign to maximize the benefits of business partnerships on behalf of transitioning military personnel.

The impact of these changes to the existing employment workshop program as well as the education and encouragement of local partnerships between employment workshops and the workforce investment system will ensure that transitioning military personnel are aware of and utilize all of the resources available to them as they search for employment and training opportunities. Spouses will also be informed of the services available through the One-Stop Career Centers.

Small Business

Additionally, Executive Order 13360 requires that TAP and the Disability Transition Assistance Program educate separating servicemembers about the potential entrepreneurial opportunities available to service-disabled veteran businesses. Accordingly, a module on small business opportunities is under development. This information will also be provided to TAP facilitators by means of the NVTI facilitator’s website in the very near future.

GAO Review

The Government Accountability Office’s review of employment workshop (*Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard* GAO-05-544) contained a recommendation that DOL participate in a DOD-led effort to determine what demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members need for a smooth transition back into the workforce. We fully support that recommendation, and are working through the TAP Steering Committee with DOD to fulfill this recommendation. This recommendation formalizes the work that DOL had initiated with each state Adjutant General.

Additional Programs

Mr. Chairman, I would like to mention two additional programs that supplement our employment workshop in providing assistance to transitioning servicemembers: 1) “REALlifelines” and 2) a DOD/DOL partnership created by a Memorandum of Understanding between DOD and DOL to focus on recruitment and retention of military personnel and re-entry of transitioning military personnel into the 21st century workforce.

REALlifelines

The Recovery and Employment Assistance Lifelines (REALlifelines) is a new program initiated by Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao last October at Walter Reed Army

Medical Center. This program complements the employment workshop by playing an important role in the transition of wounded and injured servicemembers, including Guard and Reserve members, who are preparing for civilian life.

The REALifelines initiative provides a seamless, personalized network to ensure that seriously wounded and injured servicemembers are provided opportunities for rewarding careers in the public and private sector.

Currently VETS representatives are stationed at the recently-established DOD Military Severely Injured Joint Operations Support Center, Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and Bethesda National Naval Medical Center, and will soon be placed at additional Military Treatment Facilities.

Partnership with DOD

The second program to complement the employment workshop is an effort with DOD to study and undertake activities of mutual interest that may expand recruitment, retention and re-entry. These activities include: job search services, training, placement, licensing and certification, and other services for military personnel, veterans, and their families. An MOU was signed on July 11, 2003 by the Secretary of Labor and the Secretary of Defense. A DOD/DOL MOU Policy Steering Committee and associated working group have been established to focus on collaborative efforts that can be undertaken to fulfill the goals of the MOU.

One of the major areas being addressed by DOD and DOL is the re-entry of members of the military into the 21st century workforce after their service. A primary focus has been reviewing the registered apprenticeship programs and licensing and certification requirements of the private sector. The accessibility of certification opportunities to servicemembers while in the military may assist those servicemembers with rapid and successful entry into civilian occupations following military service. Section 599 of the Defense Reauthorization Act for FY 2005 required DOD and DOL to study how military training relates to civilian credentialing requirements. The study is in its final draft and is currently under review by senior officials of both Departments.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I am pleased to respond to any questions.

United States Government Accountability Office

GAO

Testimony before the Subcommittee on
Economic Opportunity,
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
House of Representatives

For Release on Delivery
Expected at 2:00 p.m. EDT
Wednesday, June 29, 2005

MILITARY AND VETERANS' BENEFITS

Improvements Needed in Transition Assistance Services for Reserves and National Guard

Statement of Cynthia Bascetta, Director
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues



GAO-05-844T

June 29, 2005



Highlights of GAO-05-844T, a testimony to the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives

MILITARY AND VETERANS' BENEFITS

Improvements Needed in Transition Assistance Services for Reserves and National Guard

Why GAO Did This Study

The increased role of the armed forces in military operations around the world, and the greater reliance on the Reserves and National Guard, has focused national attention on what is done to help service members transition to civilian life. GAO was asked to testify on its May 2005 report *Military and Veterans' Benefits: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard* (GAO-05-544) and to highlight its concerns about TAP for the Reserves and National Guard. That report (1) assessed TAP administration, including program participation, and (2) identified actions agencies are taking and challenges they face in improving TAP.

What GAO Recommends

To ensure that members of the Reserves and National Guard have the opportunity to benefit from transition assistance, we recommended in our report that DOD, in conjunction with the DOL and VA, determine what demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members need to make a smooth transition and explore options for providing that assistance. We also recommended that VA keep track of service members who attend the Disabled TAP component to ensure that adequate follow-up is possible with this population, which may be in particular need of the services. All three agencies concurred with our findings and recommendations.

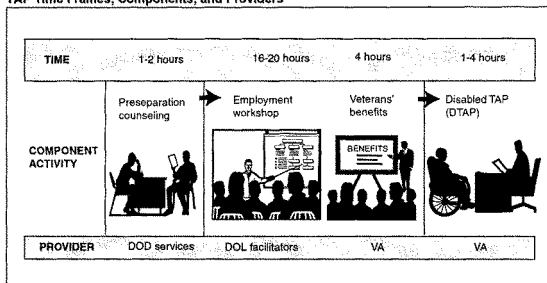
www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-844T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cynthia A. Bascetta at (202) 512-7101 or bascetta@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Jointly administered by the Departments of Defense (DOD), Labor (DOL), and Veterans Affairs (VA), the transition assistance program (TAP) is intended to help service men and women successfully adjust to civilian life after serving in the military. Originally created in 1980, TAP is composed of four components that are coordinated through meetings of TAP managers and interagency agreements. In fiscal year 2004, about 309,000 service members were released from active duty after serving at least 180 days and were eligible for TAP, including about 38 percent who were members of the Reserves and National Guard.

TAP Time Frames, Components, and Providers



Source: GAO analysis.

Both the method of delivery and level of participation in the program components vary. Notably, few members of the Reserves and National Guard have time to attend most of TAP. Because they demobilize within days after returning from overseas, members of the Reserves and National Guard participate in an abbreviated version of some components and generally do not have time for any employment preparation. Participation of service members in the Disabled TAP component is unknown because VA does not track this information.

DOD, DOL, and VA have taken actions to improve TAP's content and increase participation among full-time active duty service members. However, they continue to face challenges serving Reserve and National Guard members because of their rapid demobilization. To improve program content, the agencies have updated, or plan to update, their manuals, forms, and briefing materials. To increase participation, DOL and VA provide some employment workshops and veterans' benefits briefings overseas, and DOD is considering a policy change that would mandate participation in all components. While the agencies have not assessed when and where to offer TAP for members of the Reserves and National Guard, DOL has pilot programs in three states that will offer employment workshops after members return home.

United States Government Accountability Office

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our review of transition assistance for members of the armed forces, including members of the Reserves and National Guard. The increased role of the armed forces in military operations around the world, and the greater reliance on the Reserves and National Guard, has focused national attention on what is done to help service members successfully transition from the military back to civilian life. Originally created in 1990, the transition assistance program (TAP) has four components: (1) preseparation counseling, (2) employment workshops, (3) briefings on veteran's benefits, and (4) information for veterans with disabilities. Overall these components provide a range of information on specific services and benefits, including employment and relocation assistance, education opportunities, health and life insurance, and financial planning. Jointly administered under agreements among the Departments of Defense (DOD), Labor (DOL), and Veterans Affairs (VA), TAP is intended to serve military personnel who separate and members of the Reserves and National Guard who are released after at least 180 days of active duty. About 309,000 service members who left active military service met these criteria in fiscal year 2004, including about 38 percent who were Reserve and National Guard members.

As you requested, today I will discuss our recent report¹ on transition assistance, which (1) assesses TAP's administration, including program participation and (2) identifies actions agencies are taking and challenges they face in improving TAP. My comments highlight concerns we identified regarding how transition assistance is being provided to members of the Reserves and National Guard.

To develop the information for our report, we reviewed the legislative history of TAP, its program materials, and participation statistics. We also interviewed responsible officials from each of the three administering agencies, the armed forces, Reserve Affairs, and the National Guard Bureau.² In addition, we visited Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where many

¹GAO, *Military and Veterans' Benefits: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard*, GAO-05-544 (Washington, D.C. May 20, 2005).

²As agreed, our report did not include the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees the Coast Guard, although both are part of TAP.

Army service members are sent after serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. Our purpose was to observe TAP firsthand and talk with those who participated, including members of the Army Reserve and National Guard who were briefed during their demobilization. We also used for reference the body of prior GAO work on related issues shown at the end of this testimony. We conducted our work from December 2004 through April 2005 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

In summary, we found variations in the delivery and participation in the program components. Notably, few members of the Reserves and National Guard had time to attend most of TAP. The delivery of TAP varied in the amount of personal attention participants receive, the length of the components, and the instructional methods used. Participation also varied. For example, participation was higher for the mandated pre-separation counseling and generally lower for the employment workshops, where attendance is voluntary. In addition, while full-time active duty service members may participate in the full range of TAP services, members of the Reserves and National Guard participate in an abbreviated version of some components and generally receive no employment preparation because they are often released from active duty within days after they return from overseas. The agencies administering TAP have taken actions to improve its content and increase participation, but they continue to face challenges serving Reserve and National Guard members because of their rapid demobilization. To improve program content, the agencies have updated, or plan to update, their manuals, forms, and other briefing materials, and DOL is assessing its employment workshop curriculum using focus groups and survey data. To increase participation, DOL and VA provide some employment workshops and veterans' benefits briefings overseas, and DOD is considering a policy change that would mandate participation in all components. While the agencies have not assessed when and where to offer TAP for members of the Reserves and National Guard, DOL has pilot programs in three states that will offer employment workshops after the members return home.

Background

The role of the armed forces in the global war on terrorism and in military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq has heightened concerns about the assistance that these and other service members receive when they transition back into civilian life. All service members who have been on

active duty for at least 180 days are eligible for TAP, and those separating because of disability are eligible regardless of the length of their active duty service.³

About 309,000 servicemen and women separated from the military in fiscal year 2004 with sufficient time on active duty to meet the TAP eligibility criteria.⁴ Of these, about 192,000 were members of the full-time active duty armed forces—the Air Force, Army, Navy, or Marine Corps. The remaining 117,000 were members of the Reserves and National Guard, many of whom had been employed in civilian occupations before they were called to active duty. In recent years, more members of the Reserves and National Guard have been called to active duty and sent overseas than at any time since the Korean War. Further, the number of days they spend on average in active duty status has doubled since 1990, when TAP was established. DOD expects this trend to continue through at least fiscal year 2007, with Reserves and National Guard members serving on active duty for a year or more on average.

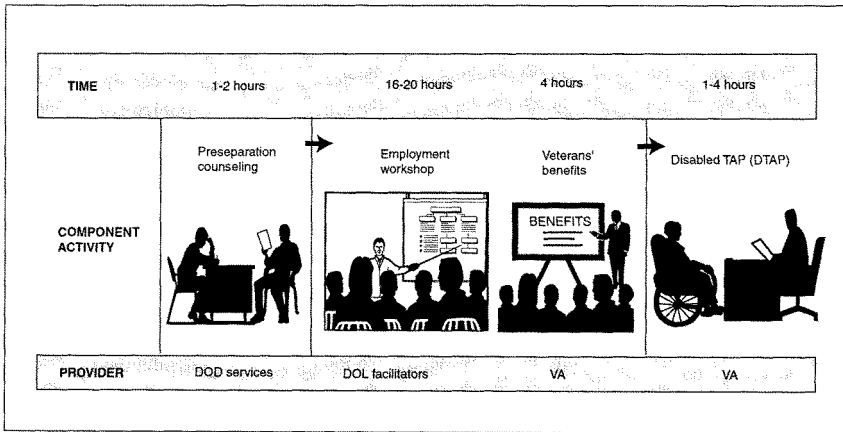
Each agency administering TAP is responsible for the content and delivery of one of the program's four core components, as shown in figure 1. In the first component, DOD provides pre-separation counseling, which includes a brief overview of available services and benefits. Separating service members complete a checklist during this component, certifying that they have been informed of the services available to them and identifying any subsequent services they wish to receive. The second component is an employment workshop conducted over 2 or 2 ½ days by certified facilitators following a DOL guide. The third component covers veterans' benefits, including disability compensation, and is often provided on the last day of the employment workshop by VA. VA also conducts the fourth component—the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP)—which offers information and counseling, primarily on vocational rehabilitation

³Eligible service members must be provided TAP while they are on active duty and receiving military pay, either as soon as possible within the 2 years prior to their anticipated retirement date or in the 1 year prior to their anticipated separation date; in either case, no later than 90 days prior to their discharge or release. The exception to this rule occurs when separations are not anticipated and less than 90 days of active duty remain. In such cases, TAP must be provided as soon as possible.

⁴We use the term *separation* to refer to the discharge or retirement of full-time active duty service members and also to the release of members of the Reserves and National Guard from active duty. Authority to call Reserve and National Guard service members to involuntary active duty is currently limited to 24 months, but members can volunteer for extended duty.

and employment options. Service members are required to attend prepreparation counseling by law; participation in the other components is voluntary, unless DOD or the armed forces decide otherwise. For example, participation in the employment workshop has been mandatory for those separating from the Marine Corps since the policy went into effect in December 2001.

Figure 1: TAP Time Frames, Components, and Providers



Source: GAO analysis.

Considerable time is set aside for the employment workshops. From 22 to 30 hours are scheduled for the delivery of all TAP components, with 16 to 20 hours devoted to the employment workshop. This emphasis on preparation for civilian employment is consistent with the purpose of TAP, which was designed to serve full-time active duty service members who generally had little prior civilian employment experience and might have difficulty transferring skills acquired in the military to the civilian economy.

To facilitate interagency coordination and oversight, the administering agencies established the TAP Steering Committee. Chaired by DOL, the

committee consists of TAP managers from each agency and each of the armed forces. These TAP managers meet quarterly to discuss issues, propose initiatives, and act as a sounding board. In addition, as required by law, an interagency agreement called a memorandum of understanding clarifies the roles and responsibilities of the agencies involved in all components of transition assistance except preseparation counseling, where DOD has sole responsibility. However, separate DOD and armed forces guidelines establish the procedures governing demobilization of Reserve and National Guard members. Further, local installation commanders rather than TAP managers control demobilization schedules.

Most benefits available to separating service members become available once they have separated and are veterans. However, service members must take specific actions while they are still on active duty to be eligible for certain benefits. Changes enacted in 2004, for example, permit Reserve and National Guard members called to active duty after September 11, 2001, to obtain a year's worth of health insurance coverage once they are released from active duty.⁵ However, they must select coverage while on active duty and enroll within 180 days of release from active duty or forfeit their right to this benefit. Similarly, to obtain certain education benefits under the Montgomery GI Bill, members of the Reserves and National Guard must apply for these benefits while still on active duty.

Delivery of the TAP components for most participants occurs at one of the 215 transition offices located on military installations. However, Reserve and National Guard members usually transition at fewer locations, referred to as demobilization sites. Typically the demobilization process is rapid, often occurring within a matter of a few days once the service members arrive back in the United States from overseas. During demobilization, service members may be expected to participate in as many as 18 separate briefings on various topics, such as legal and medical issues, and scheduled activities, such as physical examinations.

TAP's Delivery and Participation Vary

The delivery of TAP varies in the amount of personal attention participants receive, the length of the components, and the instructional methods used. Preseparation counseling, for example, may take the form of individualized, one-on-one counseling sessions of an hour or more, or it

⁵Service members and their families can obtain a year's worth of health insurance coverage for themselves and their families for each 90 days of active duty, as long as they contribute a share of the cost and continue to serve in a reserve capacity once they are released from active duty.

may take the form of group briefings, depending in part on the time available and the numbers being counseled. Group sessions are more common at large bases like those of the Army and Marine Corps, where many individuals are separating. Also, the Army has made use of technology and offers preseparation counseling at banks of computers that use interactive programs and include headphones so that participants can work independently and at their own pace. In the Navy, TAP may take place on board ships rather than at military installations. At some remote locations on land, TAP may be delivered by video or telephone due to the lack of trained personnel on-site.

Participation in TAP also varies. For example, from fiscal year 2002 through 2004, the Army had about 229,000 service members attending preseparation counseling—twice as many as any one of the other services. During the same period, the number of Army Reserve and Army National Guard members attending preseparation briefings at demobilization increased more than ten-fold, from about 9,000 to about 93,000. While participation was higher for the mandated preseparation counseling, it was generally lower for the employment workshops, where attendance is voluntary. No data, however, are available regarding participation in the VA components of TAP. Because the veterans' benefits briefings are usually held on the last day of the employment workshops, VA officials indicated that the participation rates for their briefings should be about the same as the rates for the employment workshops. Regarding DTAP, no data are available to determine the number of eligible individuals, and VA's records do not distinguish the number who participate in this component from the total of all recipients of VA outreach briefings.⁹ To develop more accurate program statistics, we recommended that VA keep track of service members who attend DTAP to ensure that adequate follow-up is possible with this population, which may be in particular need of the services. VA responded that it is developing a system to track attendance.

Because of their circumstances, particularly their rapid demobilization timetables, many Reserve and National Guard members cannot take advantage of TAP components offered to full-time active duty military personnel and instead receive much shorter presentations as part of large groups at demobilization briefings. For example, members of the Reserves

⁹In March 2004, VA released its VR&E Task Force report, *The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program for the 21st Century Veteran*, with several recommendations, including one calling for goals and measures of success to improve VA's administration of TAP and DTAP.

and National Guard may be offered a 45-minute veterans' briefing by VA, while 3 to 4 hours of veterans' benefits briefing are provided to other military personnel. Very few members of the Reserve and National Guard are able to attend the 2 to 2 ½ days of employment workshops, although they receive preseparation counseling. The TAP managers with DOD and the military services explained that the chief problem is the lack of time during demobilization, which is often completed in 5 days. In addition, many of the service members are anxious to return home and are not interested in prolonging their stay to attend workshops. Further, many may have jobs at home that are being held for them, so they may not need to attend the employment workshop. However, employment information may be useful and relevant for those Reserve and National Guard members whose businesses may have suffered or gone into bankruptcy in their absence. Other service members may have worked for companies that have gone out of business since their active duty began, while others might prefer to find better jobs than the ones they had before they went on active duty.

Many Actions Are Under Way to Improve TAP, but Challenges Remain in Meeting the Needs of Reserves and National Guard

Although several actions are under way or planned to improve TAP, challenges remain, particularly in designing transition services that better meet the needs of demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members. DOD acknowledges that this presents several unique challenges, that the service members have not been surveyed to determine how to meet their needs, and that further study might suggest ways to address the challenges, primarily in the logistics of when and where to offer TAP.

Several Actions Directed at Improving Program Content

To improve program content, the three agencies administering TAP have plans to take, or have taken, actions to update their TAP manuals, forms, and other briefing materials, including Internet sites. For example, DOD is updating information and reconsidering the topics to be covered during preseparation counseling, based on its assessment of the differing needs of participants. As a result, DOD plans to eliminate the "one size fits all" approach currently in place. For full-time active duty service members, it has drafted an updated counseling checklist, and to meet the needs of demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members, it has drafted a separate counseling checklist tailored to their circumstances.⁷ This new

⁷These new forms were approved for use on June 15, 2005.

checklist provides benefit information applicable to demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members, such as reemployment rights, employer support, and loan relief. DOD is taking the same approach to the revision of the guidebook and other materials used in preseparation counseling in an attempt to make the materials more relevant for Reserve and National Guard members.

DOL and VA are also taking actions to improve the information they provide on benefits and services available to separating service members. DOL plans to use focus groups and survey data to assess the strengths and weaknesses of its employment workshop curriculum in serving the needs of all service members. VA has improved its marketing activities by issuing pamphlets, brochures, a videotape, and a wallet-size card with information on how to obtain further information about VA health care and benefits. In addition, VA has developed a new curriculum with video, slides, and a script for DTAP presenters to follow. This standardized DTAP curriculum is intended to provide extensive information on VA's vocational rehabilitation and employment services. VA also issued a quick reference guide to present information about vocational counseling, rehabilitation, and employment services available to active duty service members as well as veterans with service-connected disabilities. Along with this new effort, VA continues its outreach campaign to contact all service members in need of these services.

Actions Are Planned or Under Way to Increase Participation in TAP

Several actions are also planned or under way to increase participation in TAP. For instance, a draft DOD directive under consideration would require all service members to attend the VA briefings and allow all who indicate an interest to attend the employment workshops. This policy change would be expected to improve program consistency, increase overall program access, and encourage commanders to release service members to attend TAP programs. In our review of TAP in 2002,⁸ we found that some service members faced difficulties being released from military duties to attend TAP because of the priority accorded their military mission or the lack of supervisory support for TAP. In addition, DOL and VA are expanding the availability of their employment workshops and veterans' benefit briefings by offering them at some overseas bases where service members that are likely to separate may access them. Further, the

⁸See GAO, *Military and Veterans' Benefits: Observations on the Transition Assistance Program*, GAO-02-914T (Washington, D.C.: July 18, 2002).

TAP managers with DOD and the military services are discussing the development of a centralized database that would automate and manage information on service member participation in TAP. The new system would also provide a means to analyze information specifically relevant to active duty or to Reserve and National Guard service members.

Challenges Remain in Meeting the Needs of Reserve and National Guard Service Members

Despite the actions under way or planned to improve TAP, challenges remain, particularly in designing transition services that better accommodate the schedules of demobilizing Reserve and National Guard service members. For example, staff who provide transition assistance may not know when Reserve and National Guard units are returning for demobilization, because national security concerns prevent the release of information on the movement of large numbers of service members. Moreover, the time schedules for demobilization vary by service and demobilization site. Commanders are challenged with trying to balance demobilizing some units while at the same time mobilizing others. They also must balance getting Reserve and National Guard members back to their families as quickly as possible with the extra time needed for transition assistance. Table 1 describes some of the key differences in circumstances between Reserve and National Guard members and others separating that need to be considered.

Table 1: Circumstances of Reserve and National Guard Members Compared with Those of Others Separating

Demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members	Full-time active duty members
During the demobilization process, little or no time is available to address transition assistance issues thoroughly.	Most can begin accessing TAP services 12 months prior to separation or 24 months prior to retirement.
Most are demobilized at a location in which they do not work and live.	Most attend TAP at the same location where they work and live with their families
Some are likely to have serious financial issues.	Most do not have serious financial issues.
Most are anxious to reunite with their families and reintegrate into the community.	Reunion and reintegration are not issues for most.

Source: TAP managers with DOD and the military services.

We found that during their rapid demobilization, Reserve and National Guard members may not receive all the information on possible benefits to which they are entitled. Notably, certain education benefits and medical coverage require service members to apply while they are still on active duty. However, even after being briefed, some Reserve and National Guard members we spoke to did not know that they needed to apply for certain benefits while still on active duty.

To deal with the logistical challenges, the TAP managers for DOD and the military services told us that they are considering the option of providing some TAP components to Reserves and National Guard members after they have been demobilized. For instance, VA could present its benefits briefing and DTAP, where applicable, during a scheduled drill weekend, after the service members have been home for 45 to 60 days. However, the TAP managers told us they did not know how many Reserves and National Guard members might be interested and able to attend such activities. They also believed such an option would require additional resources and a directive that Reserve and National Guard commanders allow sufficient time for staff to provide the transition assistance. Meanwhile, DOL officials told us that the agency was involved in three state pilot programs that will offer a version of the employment workshops to the Reserve and National Guard after they have been released from active duty and have returned home. The pilot programs should provide DOL with a better understanding of what is needed to ensure that the employment workshops meet the needs of Reserve and National Guard members.

The men and women who serve in our armed forces, particularly now that the U.S. military has increased its presence in contingency operations around the world, put their lives on the line every day. For this reason, it is important that the government do all it can to help servicemen and women successfully transition to civilian life after service ends. To ensure that members of the Reserves and National Guard have the opportunity to benefit from transition assistance, we recommended that DOD, in conjunction with DOL and VA, determine what demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members need to make a smooth transition and explore the logistical options for providing that assistance, such as opportunities for employment workshops before or after their demobilization and providing timely information about the need to apply for certain benefits while still on active duty. DOD concurred with our recommendation.

Mr. Chairman, this completes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have at this time.

Contact and Acknowledgments

For further information, please contact Cynthia A. Bascetta at (202) 512-7101. Also contributing to this statement were Irene Chu, Patricia L. Elston, and William E. Hutchinson.

Related GAO Products

Military and Veterans' Benefits: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard. GAO-05-544. Washington, D.C.: May 20, 2005.

DOD and VA: Systematic Data Sharing Would Help Expedite Servicemembers' Transition to VA Services. GAO-05-722T. Washington, D.C.: May 19, 2005.

Vocational Rehabilitation: VA Has Opportunities to Improve Services, but Faces Significant Challenges. GAO-05-572T. Washington, D.C.: April 20, 2005.

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Military Personnel: DOD Actions Needed to Improve the Efficiency of Mobilizations for Reserve Forces. GAO-03-921. Washington, D.C.: Aug. 21, 2003.

Military and Veterans' Benefits: Observations on the Transition Assistance Program. GAO-02-914T. Washington, D.C.: July 18, 2002.

Military Downsizing: Persons Returning to Civilian Life Need More Help from DOD. GAO/HEHS-94-39. Washington, D.C.: Jan. 21, 1994.

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

June 29, 2005

Presented by

Colonel Robert F. Norton, USA (Ret.)
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.

*STATEMENT OF
BRIAN E. LAWRENCE
ASSISTANT NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR
OF THE
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
JUNE 29, 2005*

Executive Summary

TAP/DTAP programs are especially important during the War on Terror. Thousands of active duty members, along with members of the Reserves and National Guard, will require transition services upon release from active duty.

The DAV strives to support the men and women making the transition from the Armed Forces to civilian life. DAV representatives conduct or participate in transition assistance briefings, review service medical records, and confer with VA officials on behalf of clientele, assist in the development of evidence and completion of necessary forms. DAV representatives are available to provide assistance to patients at the National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, Maryland and Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C.

For active duty members, access to TAP/DTAP remains the biggest issue. Mandatory attendance should become a department wide policy to ensure members have access to TAP/DTAP.

Demobilizing Reserve and National Guard face time constraints that do not allow for a comprehensive TAP/DTAP format. It would be unfair to extend demobilization periods merely to deliver TAP/DTAP. Units should arrange later meetings during drill weekends or issue troops a comprehensive package of information regarding benefits. Emphasis should be placed on the time sensitivity of certain benefits.

The DAV will happily provide services to National Guard and Reserve units on a nationwide basis.

**STATEMENT OF
BRIAN E. LAWRENCE
ASSISTANT NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR
OF THE
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
JUNE 29, 2005**

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.



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A M V E T S

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STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

of

Richard Jones
AMVETS National Legislative Director

before the

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
U.S. House of Representatives

on

The Transition Assistance Program and Disabled
Transition Assistance Program

Wednesday, June 29, 2005, 2:00 pm
334 Cannon House Office Building
United States House of Representatives

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pleased with overall program. AMVETS has been pleased with the effectiveness of TAP/DTAP. Veterans who have completed the workshops tell us that the program was a positive experience, and that the services truly helped them in their civilian job search.

Increase TAP/DTAP Funding. In FY2004 alone, over 130,000, veterans have benefited from TAP/DTAP assistance in identifying and obtaining educational and employment opportunities. However, funding for the program since 1995 has remained consistently flat. AMVETS recommends that the budget requests and allocations for TAP/DTAP be increased to accommodate the growing number servicemembers eligible for the programs.

Lack of records. AMVETS concerned that there is no data or records available for the VA components of TAP. While DTAP is provided to all members who are receiving medical care, there is no data available to determine the number of individuals eligible for DTAP. AMVETS agrees with GAO's recommendation to track DTAP attendees and develop statistics concerning DTAP participation.

Entrepreneurial opportunities for veterans. AMVETS recognizes the importance of expanding information and development of private enterprise opportunities for returning troops. Many veterans have technical, administrative, and design skills that lend themselves to the operation of a business. In addition, AMVETS remains concerned about the implementation of the *Veterans Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Act*, P.L. 106-50. We would like to see the federal government do a better job in accomplishing the 3 percent procurement goal for veteran owned businesses.

Improving outreach. We applaud the agencies administering TAP/DTAP for improving the program and outreach, but there are still some challenges in tailoring the program to the Reserves and National Guard, as indicated in the GAO report. With the upswing in deployment, many more members of Guard and Reserve qualify for TAP/DTAP assistance.

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Herseth, and members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of AMVETS National Commander William A. Boettcher and the nationwide membership of AMVETS, I am pleased to offer our views to the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity regarding the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Disabled Transition Program (DTAP) of the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs and Labor. For the record, AMVETS has not received any federal grants or contracts during the current fiscal year or during the previous two years in relation to any of the subjects discussed today.

Mr. Chairman, AMVETS applauds this Subcommittee and its effort to address TAP/DTAP. AMVETS is a staunch advocate of providing veterans with appropriate benefits and transition services *earned* through honorable military service. As a leader since 1944 in helping to preserve the freedoms secured by America's Armed Forces, our organization continues its proud tradition providing not only support for veterans and the active military in procuring their earned entitlements but also an array of community services that enhance the quality of life for this nation's citizens.

Mr. Chairman, there are well over 225,000 servicemembers who separate from the Armed Forces each year. It is the priority, duty, and responsibility of the federal government to provide these servicemembers who have honorably served our country in a time of war with our very best efforts to win their successful and seamless transition to suitable employment. For many veterans, the transition from military service to civilian life is uncertain. That is why TAP/DTAP programs are so critical. Veterans have the technical, administrative, and design skills that can be used in the operation of a business. The reliability, initiative, and leadership qualities our servicemembers possess are some of the best in the world.

In FY2004 alone, over 130,000 veterans have benefited from TAP/DTAP assistance in identifying and obtaining educational and employment opportunities. The TAP/DTAP program is designed to provide recently separated servicemembers with employment and relocation assistance, education opportunities, health and life insurance advice, and financial planning. TAP/DTAP provides the

initial, and perhaps the most important, employment and transition services for military personnel who separate and members of the Reserves and National Guard who demobilize after at least 180 days of active duty. TAP/DTAP holds a multi-day workshop where servicemembers are instructed on how to write a resume, conduct a job search, job interviewing and training exercises, as well as other skill development necessities.

AMVETS is pleased with the overall effectiveness of TAP/DTAP. Veterans tell us that the program is a positive experience and that the services truly help in transition to a civilian job. We are also pleased to learn that TAP/DTAP acknowledges the special people that make-up our military community and encourages full spousal participation in TAP services.

AMVETS is concerned, however, that TAP/DTAP funding sources have been essentially flat since 1995. It is estimated that about 200,000 servicemembers (not including eligible Reservists and National Guard members) have been eligible for TAP/DTAP each fiscal year since FY2001, yet the funding for the program has remain constant, about \$45 million per year in budget authority. We recommend that the budget requests and allocations for TAP/DTAP be increased to accommodate the growing number of servicemembers eligible for these programs.

We also recommend that DOD take into account the Reserves and National Guard in planning and budgeting TAP/DTAP. As cited by the GAO Report, "... 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."

Clearly over the years since the initiation of TAP in 1990 there is a growing reliance on members of the Guard and Reserve for our nations defense. Since the start of TAP there has been a dramatic increase in the number of servicemembers eligible for these programs. Funding, however, has stagnated and has not kept pace.

AMVETS is also concerned that there is no data or records available for the VA components of

TAP. This is disturbing because in many cases, especially for the disabled, VA briefing can be the most important. Veterans with service-connected disabilities face greater employment and economic challenges. While DTAP is provided to all members who are receiving medical care, there is no data available to determine the number of individuals eligible for DTAP. VA officials indicate that the participation rates for their briefings are equivalent to the participation rates for the employment workshops, but there is no hard data to back up this claim. AMVETS agrees with GAO's recommendation to track DTAP attendees and develop statistics concerning DTAP participation.

We as a nation must keep the promises we have made to those who have been injured fighting for their country. Despite federal laws and regulations, many employers are still unable, or unwilling, to accommodate disabled veterans. Because of this, many disabled veterans choose to operate their own business. AMVETS is still concerned about the implementation of the *Veterans Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Act*, P.L. 106-50. We strongly supported this bill because we believe it can help remedy many of the inequities veterans, especially disabled veterans, face when looking for small business assistance. Among the provisions of the law is the establishment of a modest 3 percent goal for service disabled veteran involvement in federal procurement contracts. Unfortunately, efforts to meet this goal have been sporadic so far. We are encouraged to learn that there is a section on small business opportunities in the TAP employment workshop participant manual. This will go a long way in getting small business assistance information in the hands of future entrepreneurs. Veterans have earned and deserve this consideration, which has been extended to other targeted groups for years.

In addition, AMVETS recognizes the importance of expanding information and development of private enterprise opportunities for returning troops. Through their military service, many veterans develop technical, administrative, design and related business skills that lend themselves to the operation and success of private enterprise, the backbone of America's economy. We would like to see strongly enhanced information about capital formation and business development that might lead to successful veteran owned businesses.

We applaud the agencies administering TAP/DTAP for improving the program and outreach, but

there are still challenges in tailoring it to the Reserves and National Guard, as indicated in GAO report GAO-05-544. A new TAP approach or guide for demobilizing Reserve and Guard members may be necessary so they have all the information on the benefits available in a timely manner. In most cases, demobilized Guard and Reserve troops are anxious to return to their civilian communities and are not focused on the services available to them. Clearly, there is room for improvement. We need to make every effort to ensure that Guardsmen and reservists are given every chance to take advantage of TAP assistance.

Finally, at our 2004 National Convention in Spokane, Washington, our members adopted a resolution that supports efforts to reduce red tape and streamline access to healthcare services and VA benefits programs for returning military personnel. We believe that the DOD, VA, and DOL should continue and intensify efforts to assure world class services are provided to our military and veterans returning from combat theaters. The VA Taskforce for the Seamless Transition of Returning Service Members has developed a number of training materials for staff to ensure that they can identify veterans who have served in a theater of combat and take the steps necessary to ensure they receive appropriate care. We applaud this effort, and recommend that DOD, VA, and DOL work together to improve and enhance outreach to returning members of the Reserves and Guard as well.

Mr. Chairman, AMVETS appreciates the leadership of the members of this Subcommittee to address needed improvements to the Transition Assistance Program and Disabled Transition Assistance Program for the men and women of the Armed Forces and their families. We look forward in working with the Subcommittee in pursuit of the goals outlined in our testimony. Thank you very much for the opportunity to present AMVETS views on these important topics.

**STATEMENT OF
JOSEPH C. SHARPE, JR.
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
NATIONAL ECONOMICS COMMISSION
THE AMERICAN LEGION
TO THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
HOW ENHANCED SERVICES COULD IMPROVE TRANSITION ASSISTANCE FOR
RESERVES AND NATIONAL GUARD**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

The American Legion appreciates this opportunity to share its views on the recent U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, "Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard," and the overall TAP/DTAP program.

With the ending of the Cold War the Department of Defense (DoD) dramatically downsized its personnel strength. In an attempt to assist separating service members in making a successful transition back into the civilian workforce, Congress enacted Public Law (P.L.) 101-510 which authorized the creation of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) in 1990. This law was intended to assist service members who possessed certain critical military specialties that could not be easily transferred to a civilian work environment and to assist others with educational and career choices.

DoD's TAP and DTAP programs are designed (in conjunction with The Departments of Labor and Veterans Affairs) to help prepare not only separating service members but also their families for a seamless transition to civilian life. Last year in FY 2004 more than 493,026 service members were discharged from active duty status, and 346,519 were part of the National Guard and Reserves. PL 101-510 (Chapter 58, Section 1142) mandates pre-separation counseling for transitioning service members. These programs consist of specific components: pre-separation counseling; employment assistance; relocation assistance; education, training, health and life insurance counseling; finance counseling; reserve affiliation; and disabled transition assistance seminars. DTAP is designed to educate and facilitate disabled veterans to overcome potential barriers to meaningful employment. Currently, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Labor (DoL), and DoD operate 207 transition offices

- 80 Air Force Transition Assistance Program Offices;
- 65 Navy Transition Assistance Program Offices (TAMP)
- 44 Army Career Alumni Program Offices (ACAP); and
- 18 Marine Personnel Service Centers.

While the TAP program assists transitioning service members leaving the military under their own accord, the DTAP program focuses on the specialized needs of the service members who are separating for medical reasons. The DTAP workshop is a half-day seminar sponsored jointly by DoL, DoD and VA. The workshop provides specialized information on VA's many disability benefits:

- Medical Care
- CHAMPVA
- Disability Compensation
- Vocational Rehabilitation
- Disabled Veterans Insurance

In this current era of a significantly smaller all-volunteer military, the reliance on the National Guard and Reserves to fight the present Global War on Terror is unprecedented. The reserve forces have become an essential part of all current DoD operations. Reservists in Iraq and Afghanistan make up close to 40 percent of the total force in any given month, and DoD reports that continued reliance on the 1.8 million reserves and National Guard will continue well into the foreseeable future. Attracting and retaining well qualified individuals to execute the fundamental functions of a strong and viable national defense is paramount. Without providing proper incentives for service members to enlist and reenlist, the military will continue to be hard pressed to effectively accomplish their Global War on Terror mission. Just recently, the Department of the Army announced that numbers of new recruits would fall short by 80,000 for FY 2005, dimming the hopes of increasing the size of the active army from 480,000 to 510,000.

Reservists Return to Find No Jobs

Countless numbers of National Guard and Reserve troops have returned from the war in Iraq and Afghanistan only to encounter difficulties with their federal and civilian employers at home. In numerous cases brought to the attention of The American Legion by veterans and other sources, many of these returning service members have lost jobs, or lost promotions or benefits, and in a few rare cases they have encountered job demotions. According to the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, employers must by law protect the old jobs of deployed service members, or provide them with equivalent positions. Benefits and raises must be protected, as if the service member had never left. For whatever reasons, in many cases this law has not been able to protect many returning service members across the country. From all accounts most reservists and those in the National Guard appear to be well informed about their active duty legal rights due to the Department of Labor's efforts. However, in the loss of a job, The American Legion strongly endorses the belief that service members would greatly benefit by having access to the resources and knowledge that the Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) can provide, but the program should have a strong employment and small business component.

The Effects of Reserve Call-ups on Civilian Employers and Veteran Owned Businesses

The impact of deployment on self-employed reservists is tragic with a reported 40% of all veteran owned businesses suffering financial losses and in some cases bankruptcies. Many small businesses have discovered they are unable to operate and suffer some form of financial loss when key employees are activated. The Congressional Budget Office in a report "*The Effects of Reserve Call-Ups on Civilian Employers*" stated that it "expects that as many as 30,000 small businesses and 55,000 self-employed individuals may be more severely affected if their reservist employee or owner is activated". The American Legion is a strong supporter of the "Hope at Home Act of 2005", which is a bipartisan bill that would not only require the federal government to close the pay gap between the reserves and national guard service member's civilian and military pay, but it would additionally provide tax credits up to \$30,000 for small businesses with service members who are activated. Currently, the Small Business Administration (SBA) offers a program billed as the Military Reservist Economic Impact Disaster Loans. This program offers businesses that meet certain eligibility criteria loans that help them to offset the economic consequences of the loss of their reservist personnel. To qualify, a company must be able to show that the activated reservist is critical to the success of the company. The American Legion recommends that the SBA should be part of any Reservist and National Guard TAP, and act in an advisory capacity to veteran business owners, to assist them with resources and information to help lessen the impact of activation on their bottom line.

Education and the GI Bill

Historically, The American Legion has encouraged the development of essential benefits to help attract and retain service members into the Armed Services, as well as to assist them in making the best possible transition back to the civilian community. On June 22, 1944, then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, which later became known as the GI Bill of Rights. This historic piece of legislation, authored by the leadership of The American Legion, enabled veterans to purchase their first homes, attend college, and start private businesses. The emergence of the American middle class, the suburbs, civil rights, and finally a worldwide economic boom can be attributed to this important legislation. The majority of individuals who join the National Guard or Reserves enter the Armed Forces straight out of high school, and many are full and part time students. With the number of activations since 9/11, these same reservists are discovering that their graduation will take longer than once anticipated. Currently the GI Bill pays the average reservist \$288.00 a month compared to his active duty counterpart who is paid \$1,004.00 a month. With the rising cost of tuition many reservists feel forced to apply for commercial loans and other sources of loans or grants to supplement the GI Bill. Unit activations generally take place during the middle or end of a school semester. When a service member withdraws from school the commercial loan must still be paid regardless of whether the student finishes the course or courses, adding to the accumulated debt of that service member. Most service members are not aware of other programs or ways of paying for school; for example, currently, if a service member serves 24 months on active duty their GI benefits become comparable to active duty. The American Legion recommends that TAP have an education representative to provide National Guard and Reservist members this kind of information so they can have the option to make informed decisions on how to best incorporate their military service with their civilian employment and education options.

According to a 2004 survey conducted by *GFK Custom Research*, the leading reason why people enlist, despite the Global War on Terror, is the desire for an affordable education. The American Legion is currently consulting with the VA's Advisory Committee on Education to discuss pursuing one education program for both Active Duty and Reserves. If it is true that young people enlist or reenlist primarily for an education, instead of giving them bonuses (\$20,000 bonus and up to get people to enlist and reenlist) promise them an education.

The Service Members Civil Relief Act

On December 19, 2003, the President signed into law a complete update of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Civil Relief Act of 1940. This helps ease the economic and legal burdens on military personnel called to active duty status in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. SCRA provides certain legal protections for individuals called to active duty. Relief extends to actions terminating leases, evictions, foreclosures and repossessions, default judgments, lower interest rates on credit cards and loans and protects against lapses or termination of insurance policies. In recent months there have been a number of news articles reporting that some creditors make illegal demands on active-duty soldiers (e.g., article by Diana B. Henriques, *The New York Times*, March 28, 2005). With the military's increased reliance on National Guard and Reserve units, debtors residing in remote areas of the country outside of the traditional military towns are not aware of this act, including members of the reserve component. Therefore, service members are experiencing serious financial difficulties while on active duty – their cars are repossessed, homes foreclosed and credit histories ruined because this piece of legislation is unknown. The American Legion has produced a brochure on active duty legal rights, copies of which will be distributed across the country. If TAP was mandatory, service members and local community businesses would also know of this program, and a lot of frustration, time and misunderstandings could be avoided. A few services such as the Navy discuss personal financial planning during workshops and seminars; however, the reserve components need to have this issue addressed during TAP.

Make TAP/DTAP a Mandatory Program

DoL estimates that 70 percent of all separating active duty service members attend the employment TAP seminars and 30 percent of all separating National Guard and Reservists attend a portion of TAP. The American Legion believes this low attendance number is a disservice to all transitioning service members. Many service members and most National Guard and Reservists are unaware of the assistance and resources offered by TAP. Without this program service members who have served their country bravely return to the civilian workforce less equipped than their counterparts who took advantage of the information provided by TAP. According to written testimony from John M. McWilliam, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Veterans' Employment and Training, Department of Labor, May 12, 2005, "we have been working with the National Guard and Reserve on providing TAP services to these returning service members in many states on an informal and as needed basis. In this regard, three Reserve Component TAP demonstration programs are underway in Oregon, Michigan and Minnesota". The American Legion has been informed by representatives of DoD and DoL that in Oregon 40% of those part time service members who attended the TAP session were looking

for employment. The American Legion recognizes the value of this program and recommends that it become a mandatory requirement for all transitioning service members.

Access to TAP

The GAO report, *Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard*, May 2005, reports TAP is not made available to the National Guard and Reserves. "TAP managers with DOD and the military services explained that the chief problem is lack of time during demobilization, which is often completed in 5 days." The American Legion recommends that TAP be instituted in the following ways:

- Incorporate TAP into the unit's training schedule months before activation
- Have a TAP briefing during a unit's organization day that includes spouses
- Activate a unit for a weekend either before or after a deployment
- Most units spend three to eight weeks at an installation site preparing to move into theater; include TAP
- Spend extra day or two at a demobilization site to include TAP

The GAO report also states that many service members are not interested in the employment segment because they believe they have jobs waiting for them once they return home. That might have been true with the first rotations into theater; however, that is not the case now for many veterans, especially with back-to-back deployments. A number of complaints have surfaced from service members around the country that some businesses are reluctant to hire veterans still in the military and businesses have allegedly started putting pressure on veterans who have deployed once not to deploy a second time.

Transitional Assistance Program for National Guard and Reserves:

Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Maryland

The TAP program located at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, has been called a unique program for all the Army. It is currently the only program that offers transition assistance to guard and reserves with an 8-hour presentation, that consist of full range of services and benefits briefing. A list of the benefits briefing are in the fields of Finance, Education, USERRA, VA compensation and disability claims, Employment assistance, Mental Health Counseling Services, and Tri-CARE. The program also has a number of unique partnerships with many Federal, State and local agencies. Some of those partnerships include: the Maryland Division of Workforce Development, The Perry Point VA hospital, Department of Labor, Walter Reed Army Medical Center and the Ft. Monmouth, N.J., Transition Office. The program has a pro-active philosophy. Some examples include:

- Service members needing employment are given immediate assistance. In some cases this has led to immediate hires, and those service members returned home with a job while avoiding unemployment. If the veteran lives outside the state a point of contact is given for that individual to ensure there is a Veteran Representative waiting with job service resources.

- The Perry Point VA hospital offers service members who may be homeless immediate shelter, which lessens the numbers of homeless veterans on our nation's streets. VA reports that more than 250,000 veterans are currently homeless and another 500,000 are homeless over a period of time. VA has also reported that the number of homeless veterans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan is increasing, especially among women with children. The American Legion believes the first line in defense in preventing additional homeless cases is to have a strong and pro-active transitional assistance program.
- Service members who need assistance with filling out compensation and disability claims are offered immediate assistance by visiting VA representatives. The program has received positive feedback by service members and commanders.

Assessing Services Rendered

The American Legion recommends that Congress require federal agencies that deliver TAP/DTAP services to develop a management-monitoring program to better assess how well services are being delivered to transitioning service members. Currently, the effectiveness of services provided by TAP agencies is unknown because adequate performance goals and benchmarking measures have never been instituted. Consequently, there is a lack of any verifiable outcome data. Performance measures should be instituted to hold all federal agencies involved in TAP/DTAP accountable for services rendered.

Summary

America asks her young people to serve in her armed forces to guard and defend this great nation and its way of life. Their selfless service provides millions of their fellow Americans with the opportunity to pursue their vocational endeavors. The successful transition of that service member back into the civilian workforce must be a shared responsibility, especially if that service member has suffered service-connected disabilities. There is much talk about "seamless transition" between DOD and VA, but it goes beyond that. It should be a "seamless transition" between all Federal agencies involved in a transition assistance program. That means:

- Ensuring service members know their active duty legal rights and that those federal agencies involved should monitor and assist in the compliance with those rights
- Prompt adjudication of disability claims
- Prompt adjudication of educational claims
- Timely access to Tri-Care and VA quality health care
- Housing of the homeless
- Employment assistance
- Small business assistance
- Any other federal assistance as needed

The American Legion reaffirms its strong support of the Transition Assistance Program but also encourages the Department of Defense to require that all separating, active-duty service members, including those from the Reserves and the National Guard, be given an opportunity to participate in Transition Assistance Program training not more than 180 days prior to their

separation or retirement from the armed forces, and follow-up counseling not later than 180 days after separation from active duty. The American Legion will also support any legislative initiatives to mandate that all service members be given the opportunity to participate in TAP/DTAP.

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD OF
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
CONCERNING
THE TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
AND
THE DISABLED TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM**

JUNE 29, 2005

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

- TAP program has been successful, but there is more to be done.
- PVA's primary concern is the fact that TAP is not mandatory for all servicemembers.
 - Currently, pre-separation counseling is the only portion of TAP mandated by law.
- Continued emphasis on conducting these programs at overseas installations is must to meet the shifting locations of our military men and women.
- We also recommend that National Guardsmen and Reservists returning from extended deployments be required to attend a TAP session.

Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP)

- DTAP program has not been as successful.
 - Severely disabled veterans often fall through the cracks.
 - Because these individuals are no longer located on or near a military installation, they are often forgotten in the transition assistance process.
- VETS and VA must ensure that necessary staff go to medical treatment facilities—VA, DOD, or private—to provide DTAP services.

Recommendations from the VR&E Task Force

- PVA supports recommendation that VA assign planning and administration responsibilities for the DTAP program to the VR&E service and that the Veterans Benefits Administration designate a DTAP manager.
 - VA must request and be provided dedicated funding to support the administration of DTAP.
- PVA also supports the Task Force recommendation for DOD, DOL, and VA to develop standardized information briefings and materials to ensure servicemembers are provided comprehensive counseling that is consistently delivered.
 - Materials should include information about veteran small business ownership and entrepreneurship programs of the Small Business Administration and the National Veterans Business Development Corporation.
 - PVA also recommends that information concerning homelessness, including risk factors, awareness assessment, and contact information for preventive assistance, be added to the curriculum.

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Herseth, members of the Subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit a statement for the record on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) managed by the Department of Labor's Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS).

PVA is an organization of veterans who are catastrophically disabled by spinal cord injury or disease. Our members and other individuals who suffer from similar injuries or diseases do not receive proper consideration for employment when applying for a job. This is often due to barriers in the workplace, false perceptions of the potential costs to employers of hiring people with disabilities, and the perceptions many people still have about veterans.

TAP and DTAP are perhaps the most important services available to servicemembers who are exiting the military. DTAP is especially important to disabled servicemembers who will face unique challenges upon leaving the military. It is incumbent upon Congress, the federal agencies, and the veterans' service organizations (VSO) to ensure that all veterans receive the transition assistance that they have earned and deserve so that they are prepared to enter the civilian workforce. This is particularly true now as many veterans are returning from the front lines of the war on terror and leaving military service

The Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Labor (DOL), and Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) all play a role in TAP and DTAP. These programs generally offer the first service that a separating service member will receive. These programs offer job-search assistance and related services. TAP consists of comprehensive three-day workshops at selected military installations both in the United States and overseas. DTAP was established for service members leaving the military with a service-connected disability. This program is meant to include the normal three-day TAP workshop plus additional hours of individual instruction to help determine job readiness and address the special needs of disabled veterans.

Although PVA believes that the TAP program has been successful, more remains to be done. One of PVA's primary concerns is the fact that TAP is not mandatory for all servicemembers. Currently, pre-separation counseling is the only portion of TAP mandated by law to be provided by all of the services. However, we believe that all program portions of TAP should be made mandatory for all separating servicemembers. Furthermore, continued emphasis on conducting these programs at overseas installations is must to meet the shifting locations of our military men and women.

We also recommend that National Guardsmen and Reservists returning from extended deployments be required to attend a TAP session. PVA understands the difficulty with keeping Guardsmen and Reservists on duty any longer than necessary; however, we believe that the importance of TAP outweighs that difficulty.

PVA also believes that the DTAP program has not achieved the same level of success that the TAP program has. PVA members are most likely to get transition services from the DTAP because they are exiting the military through the medical retirement process. However, many times severely disabled veterans needing DTAP services fall through the cracks, especially spinal cord injured veterans who may already be getting health care and rehabilitation from a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) spinal cord injury center despite still being on active duty. Because these individuals are no longer located on or near a military installation, they are often forgotten in the transition assistance process. Although they may be eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation and Education through the VA, this does not mean they should not receive the DTAP services to which they are entitled.

While the servicemember may be at a VA medical facility, they are still assigned to the nearest military installation as a medical holdover. It is incumbent upon VETS and the VA to ensure that the necessary staff go to the medical facility—either VA, military, or a private rehab facility--where the severely injured servicemembers are being treated to provide DTAP services. This could be done once a month or even once a quarter so long as it is actually being done.

PVA also supports a couple of the recommendations for DTAP made by the VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Task Force in its report released in March 2004. The Task Force report explained “that the TAP and DTAP mission has not enjoyed a high priority within the ROs (Regional Offices) and the VR&E organization.

This is completely unacceptable in light of the fact that transition assistance is more important than ever with servicemen and women returning from the conflicts overseas everyday. The Task Force recommended that VA assign planning and administration responsibilities for the DTAP program to the VR&E service and that the Veterans Benefits Administration designate a DTAP manager. Furthermore, the VA must request and be provided dedicated funding to support the administration of DTAP.

PVA also supports the Task Force recommendation for DOD, DOL, and VA to “develop standardized information briefings and materials to ensure servicemembers are provided comprehensive counseling that is consistently delivered.” This seems to be a common sense recommendation that can only benefit the servicemen and women exiting the military. The materials should not only include information about obtaining employment, but also about veteran small business ownership and entrepreneurship programs of the Small Business Administration and the National Veterans Business Development Corporation. PVA also recommends, as a participating member of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, that information concerning homelessness, including risk factors, awareness assessment, and contact information for preventive assistance, be added to the curriculum.

PVA appreciates this Committee’s continued interest in transition assistance for separating servicemembers. This is perhaps the most important issue facing the men and women who are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and preparing to get out of the military. We also have to be sure that servicemembers who are separating at their home

stations are not being forgotten in the effort to improve transition assistance for those men and women who have recently served in the war in Iraq or Afghanistan.

PVA looks forward to working with the Committee to ensure that every separating servicemember has a seamless transition into the civilian world. We would be happy to answer any questions for the record that you might have.

Information Required by Rule XI 2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI 2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the following information is provided regarding federal grants and contracts.

Fiscal Year 2005

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation—National Veterans Legal Services Program—\$228,000 (estimated).

Paralyzed Veterans of America Outdoor Recreation Heritage Fund—Department of Defense--\$1,000,000.

Fiscal Year 2004

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation—National Veterans Legal Services Program—\$228,000 (estimated).

Fiscal Year 2003

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation—National Veterans Legal Services Program—\$228,803.

STATEMENT OF

DENNIS M. CULLINAN, DIRECTOR
NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

TO THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

WITH RESPECT TO

TRANSITION ASSISTANCE and DISABLED TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

WASHINGTON, D.C.

JUNE 29, 2005

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

We appreciate the opportunity to present our views with respect to GAO Report 05-544, *Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard*.

The transition from military service to civilian life is, for most veterans, a period of stress, excitement, and uncertainty. Years of structured routine and job security end abruptly on the day of discharge from the military and replaced by an enormous array of decisions regarding career options. The TAP and the DTAP programs were created to help guide veterans through the labyrinth of job market information and secure meaningful civilian careers.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) is pleased with the overall effectiveness of TAP/DTAP. Since 1990, hundreds of thousands of veterans have benefited from TAP/DTAP counseling and assistance by identifying and obtaining various educational and employment opportunities. TAP and DTAP programs provide an obvious service to veterans and their families, but they also provide a less tangible benefit to the entire national economy. Additionally, through Memoranda of Understanding between the Department of Defense, VA regional offices, and

Post/Base commanders service organizations such as the VFW have conducted outreach to some of the bases in a sort of one stop shop setting to answer questions on the various benefit programs to separating military personnel and their families. A very effective service, which would not otherwise be provided by the military due to costs, manpower, and equipment. These outreach sessions have proven very beneficial in ensuring a smooth transition from military service to civilian life.

Additionally, Washington State has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with federal and local partners pledging assistance to National Guard and Reserve soldiers. This agreement will enhance transition services already available to returning soldiers by offering family support, employment, and mental health services to members of the Washington National Guard returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

Another important program that is helping veterans transition is The Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) Program; a joint VA-DoD venture to ensure a smooth transition for separating service members, and to share valuable medical resources. This initiative originated in 1998 and is known in other areas as the Pre-Discharge Program or the Pre-Separation Program. This program allows separating service members to begin the process of applying for VA compensation for service connected disabilities prior to separation. Applying before discharge can cut months off the process. The VFW currently has eight pre-discharge claims consultants at various installations across the country.

Despite the benefits associated with TAP/DTAP, far too many members of the Reserve and National Guard leave military service without attending pre-separation counseling. Prior to 2001, not all military units were provided adequate opportunities to attend TAP/DTAP programs. However, section 302 of Public Law 107-103, the "*Veterans Education and Benefits Expansion Act of 2001*," (the Act) enacted in December 2001, ensures all active duty servicemembers shall have the opportunity to attend TAP/DTAP within a reasonable period preceding their anticipated date of retirement or

discharge from active duty. This law must be expanded to include members of the Reserve and National Guard. We are pleased DoD has stated their intentions to make the program mandatory. However, until they actually do, the program will continue to be flawed.

The VFW was further encouraged that this legislation mandated that TAP/DTAP programs be established at overseas military installations. However, the Act neglected to provide additional resources that would allow the Veterans Employment and Training Service to fully and expeditiously make the implementation. We recommend that such funding be provided to ensure that servicemembers transitioning from overseas military facilities have the full benefit of this important program.

Accountability is a major concern. We have conducted many onsite visits to military basis only to find the members of the Reserve and National Guard are treated differently when it comes to transition. Some are being instructed to wait until they get back to their units to receive transition counseling while in other instances transition counseling is being provided prior to deployment to save time when the unit returns from combat. While the TAP/DTAP objective is to prepare the servicemember's return to the civilian community, follow-up on the program's effectiveness is virtually non-existent. One example of follow-up from the veteran would be reevaluation upon arrival at their final destination. Here DoD would be able to find detailed answers to build a database that could lead to local solutions instead of questions with vague national responses. Such a database would allow for self-assessment and productive changes to improve the overall quality of service to veterans.

Another positive action would be to perform an overall review of what is being taught, and consolidate the information to develop the best and most consistent program available. The feedback that could be provided from group sessions as well as individual counseling must be captured to ensure the information being provided proves useful and helpful to the servicemembers career transition.

DTAP, however, has been largely relegated to a “stand alone” session. Typically, a DTAP participant does not benefit from other transition services, nor does he/she automatically see a Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Service Representative. The number of military members being separated annually remains high: more than 200,000 as projected by DoD. We believe TAP/DTAP must continue to provide critical services as recommended in the report. However, we are concerned too little is being done for transitioning disabled veterans. With this in mind, we would recommend VA assign primary responsibility for the DTAP program within the Veterans Benefits Administration to the VR&E service, and designate a specific DTAP manager. DoD should also ensure that separating servicemembers, including the Reserve and National Guard, receive all of the services provided under TAP as well as the separate DTAP session by the VR&E.

Question for the Record
Honorable John Boozman, Chairman
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Committee on Veteran's Affairs
June 29, 2005

Q. The Government Accountability Office suggests doing TAP during normal drill periods after the soldiers return from post-deployment leave. Do you concur with GAO?

A. The Military Coalition (TMC) believes that scheduling Transition Assistance Program (TAP) briefings during normal drill periods after soldiers return from post-deployment leave may make sense. Such a decision would in effect "mandate" TAP briefings. At present, only the Pre-Separation Counseling component of TAP is mandated; the Dept. of Labor employment workshops and Dept. of Veterans' Affairs benefits briefings are optional.

Before a decision is made to mandate TAP briefings during military drill periods, TMC recommends that the Defense Department's "Demobilization Workgroup" first assess what is needed to tailor TAP information to the needs of deactivating Guard and Reserve servicemembers. TMC pointed out in our Statement for the Record that most reservists would not need extensive employment workshops, which are now 2 to 2.5 days in length. Spouses would normally not be available or permitted to attend scheduled inactive duty training, but they often are the action agent on TAP information related to benefits, counseling, and financial matters. Any solution for local delivery of TAP information must include key family members.

In our prepared Statement, TMC recommended that online or other delivery means for TAP information be explored. In addition, as discussed at the 29 June hearing, using National Guard family readiness support groups could be an excellent venue to organize TAP briefings for deactivated Guard and Reserve troops and their families – a joint solution to the need.

Questions for the Record
Honorable John Boozman, Chairman
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
June 29, 2005

Oversight Hearing on the Transition Assistance Program and Disabled Transition Assistance Program

1. The Government Accountability Office suggests doing TAP during normal drill periods after the soldiers return from past-deployment leave. Do you concur with GAO?

The Military Coalition (TMC) believes that scheduling Transition Assistance Program (TAP) briefings during normal drill periods after soldiers return from post-deployment leave may make sense. Such a decision would in effect "mandate" TAP briefings. At present, only the Pre-Separation Counseling component of TAP is mandated; the Dept. of Labor employment workshops and Dept. of Veterans' Affairs benefits briefings are optional.

Before a decision is made to mandate TAP briefings during military drill periods, TMC recommends that the Defense Department's "Demobilization Workgroup" first assess what is needed to tailor TAP information to the needs of deactivating Guard and Reserve servicemembers. TMC pointed out in our Statement for the Record that most reservists would not need extensive employment workshops, which are now 2 to 2.5 days in length. Spouses would normally not be available or permitted to attend scheduled inactive duty training, but they often are the action agent on TAP information related to benefits, counseling, and financial matters. Any solution for local delivery of TAP information must include key family members.

In our prepared Statement, TMC recommended that online or other delivery means for TAP information be explored. In addition, as discussed at the 29 June hearing, using National Guard family readiness support groups could be an excellent venue to organize TAP briefings for deactivated Guard and Reserve troops and their families – a joint solution to the need.

**Questions for the Record
Honorable John Boozman, Chairman
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
June 29, 2005**

Oversight Hearing on Transition Assistance Program and Disabled Transition Assistance Program

Question 1: Does Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) cover:

- **Disabled veterans 10 point preference**

Response: The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Transition Assistance Program (TAP) benefits briefing provides information on 5 and 10-point veterans' preference. Veterans' preference is also extensively covered in the Department of Labor (DOL) TAP workshop.

- **Job accommodations as required by ADA**
- **Non discrimination provisions in employment under ADA**

Response: Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) information is not provided during the Disability Transitional Assistance Program (DTAP) briefing. Veterans are provided the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Quick Series Guidebook at the DTAP briefing (enclosed). The guidebook includes information about the job accommodation network (JAN) Web site which provides information about ADA job accommodations and non-discrimination.

- **Affirmative Action requirements for federal contractors and federal agencies**

Response: A brief overview of affirmative action requirements for Federal contractors and Federal agencies is provided during DTAP as well as during the DOL TAP workshop.

- **Special appointing authorities for certain disabled vets 3112, 5 USC and 4214 38 USC**

Response: Information on special hiring authorities is provided during DTAP and DOL TAP workshops.

- **Please provide the DTAP curriculum**

Response: The DTAP standard presentation is included in separate attachments.

- **Are DTAP participants also getting the DOL TAP employment workshops or just the short VA TAP?**

Response: Since DOL TAP & DTAP are voluntary programs, some servicemembers may elect not to attend any one or more of the TAP components. In general, DTAP follows the DOL TAP and the VA TAP benefits briefings and servicemembers get all three briefings.

- **In your 5-track pilot, you have a component on small business. Do you work closely with the VA's Center for Veterans Enterprise?**

Response: VR&E Service staff members regularly consult with the VA's Center for Veterans Enterprise about small business opportunities for veterans. Referral to the VA's Center for Veterans Enterprise is highly recommended to any veteran who pursues the self-employment option. VR&E works as seamlessly and as efficiently as possible with the VA Center for Veterans Enterprise, the Department of Labor, and other partners to deliver state-of-the-art employment services. VA counselors, employment specialists, and employment coordinators are located in 57 regional offices and over 100 outbased centers to assist veterans in obtaining information on local labor markets, reemployment rights, interviewing skills, job search strategies, and job leads or referrals.

Question 2: What is the status of the TAP/DTAP Memorandum of Understanding being circulated among agencies and what is the position of each agency on the appropriate length of TAP/DTAP?

Response: The TAP/DTAP memorandum of understanding is still in the concurrence process. There is general agreement that the DOL TAP workshop should be two and a half days, the VA TAP benefits briefing should be a half-day, and the DTAP briefing should be two hours.

Question 3: The Paralyzed Veterans of America is concerned that too many disabled vets fall through the crack and do not receive DTAP. They recommend assigning responsibility for DTAP to the Voc Rehab Service and designating a DTAP manager.

Response: Responsibility for conducting DTAP is shared between the Compensation & Pension (C&P) Service and the VR&E Service. VR&E Service has appointed a DTAP manager who has responsibility for developing standardized DTAP materials and conducting reviews of field stations' implementation progress. The C&P Service is responsible for the coordination of VA TAP benefits briefings and DTAP. The fact that VA DTAP and the TAP benefits briefings are not mandatory plays a significant role in veterans falling through the cracks. Military commanders control whether or not a service member attends the briefings. Getting a service member to attend DTAP is outside the control of VA.

Enclosure

*QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD
HONORABLE JOHN BOOZMAN, CHAIRMAN
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
JUNE 29, 2005*

Mr. Chairman:

On behalf of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), thank you for the opportunity to respond for the record to the following question that arose from the oversight hearing on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP):

1. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) suggests doing TAP during normal drill periods after soldiers return from post-deployment leave. Do you concur with GAO?

The DAV does concur with the suggestion made by GAO. As presented in our written statement,

“The DAV believes it would be unfair to extend demobilization periods merely to deliver TAP/DTAP programs. 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.” (Emphasis added.)

Mr. Chairman, the DAV is grateful to be involved in the Subcommittee's efforts to make the transition period from active duty to civilian life as seamless as possible for our nation's military men and women. As indicated in my written and stated remarks, the DAV has an extensive network of officers dedicated to this purpose. Collectively, these gentlemen and ladies possess a wealth of knowledge and expertise regarding TAP/DTAP. Please contact me any time we can be of service on this or other important issues.

House Veterans' Affairs Committee

Equal Opportunity Subcommittee

Hearing Date: 29 June 2005

Subject: Transition Assistance Program and Disabled Transition Assistance Program

Member: Representative John Boozman

Witness: LTG Blum

Question #: 1

Transition Assistance Programs for Demobilizing Troops

Question. What plans does the National Guard have to increase the delivery of TAP services to demobilizing troops?

Answer. The first step is to have liaisons at the National Guard Bureau and Veterans Administration who interface on a daily basis. The National Guard has staffed a National Guard Liaison within the Joint Staff of the National Guard Bureau. The Veterans Administration has also appointed a senior staff member to the Secretary of the Veterans Affairs as a liaison and these two senior staff members coordinate closely on a daily basis. The second step will be to assign a state benefits advisor to each of our 54 Joint Forces Headquarters – this should happen by early fall 2005. The state benefits advisor will assist Guard personnel with access to TRICARE and VA health care and other VA related benefits as well as provide follow on education to the demobilization process. Some of our states like Washington are well on their way to achieving this, while others are not as far along in the process. The goal is to build a safety net at the local level to provide assistance and support to our Guard members.

House Veterans' Affairs Committee
Equal Opportunity Subcommittee
Hearing Date: 29 June 2005

Subject: Transition Assistance Program and Disabled Transition Assistance
Program

Member: Representative John Boozman

Witness: MG Young

Question #: 2a

National Guard Members Who Are Business Owners

Question. Many National Guard members are business owners. What plans does the Guard Bureau have to prepare them for mobilizations?

Answer. As part of our pre-mobilization and mobilization processing, all of our service members interface with Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) Committees within our respective States. During the mobilization processing activities, information from, specifically the Small Business Administration, is made available to those service members who are business owners. The SBA provides a range of counseling, training and financial assistance programs. Two of the programs used by our mobilized business owners are the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) and the Small Business Loan programs.

The SCORE Association is a resource partner of the SBA dedicated to entrepreneur education and the formation, growth and success of small businesses nationwide. There are more than 10,500 SCORE volunteers in 389 chapter locations who provide business counseling and training. SCORE Volunteers have provided assistance to our mobilized business owners which allowed the business to continue to operate during the owner's absence.

The SBA administers low interest rate loans to small business owners, while SBA's partners (lenders, Community Development Organizations and other loan institutions) make the loans to small businesses. SBA backs these loans with guaranty which eliminates some of the risk to the lending partners.

House Veterans' Affairs Committee

Equal Opportunity Subcommittee

Hearing Date: 29 June 2005

Subject: Transition Assistance Program and Disabled Transition Assistance
Program

Member: Representative John Boozman

Witness: MG Young

Question #: 2b

National Guard Members Who Are Business Owners

Question. Many National Guard members are business owners. Has the Guard Bureau contacted the National Association of Small Business Development Centers to Determine what services their over 1,000 offices could provide?

Answer. The National Association of Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) is a training resource and a cooperative effort of the private sector, the educational community and state and local governments. It is SBA's largest resource partner and an initiative that enhances economic development by providing small business with management and technical assistance. We will make sure it is offered as part of the information made available to our mobilized business owners.

House Veterans' Affairs Committee

Equal Opportunity Subcommittee

Hearing Date: 29 June 2005

Subject: Transition Assistance Program and Disabled Transition Assistance Program

Member: Representative John Boozman

Witness: LTG Blum

Question #: 3

Memorandum of Agreement with Disabled American Veterans

Question. The Disabled American Veterans state in there written testimony that they signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Guard Bureau to provide assistance with TAP instruction. Since then Bureau has not moved forward to implement the MOU.

What is the Bureau's plans regarding the DAV's offer of assistance?

Answer: The National Guard Bureau has coordinated and is awaiting the formal signature of the agreement by the Chief of the National Guard Bureau. The signing is tentatively set for July 2005. Once the Memorandum of Understanding has been signed it is the National Guard Bureau's intent to fully implement all aspects of the MOU.

U.S. Department of Labor

Office of the Assistant Secretary for
Veteran's Employment and Training
Washington, D.C. 20210

September 22, 2005

The Honorable John Boozman
Chairman
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U. S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I appreciated the opportunity to testify before your subcommittee on June 29, 2005. The following are responses to the follow-up questions submitted for the record of the oversight hearing on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for servicemembers. As requested, the questions have been restated in their entirety followed by our response.

Questions for the Record from the Honorable John Boozman

Q. Would you please describe the three-state pilot program for the Guard and Reserves and when do you intend to go national?

R. The program has taken on a different focus in each state. In Oregon, members of the National Guard units were trained by National Veterans Training Institute staff as TAP facilitators to work with the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVERs) to co-facilitate the TAP employment workshops. In Minnesota, unit members were interviewed to determine their employment concerns, and the employment workshop sessions were tailored to these concerns. The third program slated for Michigan is still in the planning phase. These pilots will be analyzed and the issues identified will be incorporated into the program for Guard and Reserve members being developed by the Department of Defense (DoD)-led Demobilization Working Group.

Q. Please describe some of the highlights we might anticipate from the DOL/DoD study on credentialing.

R. This is the comprehensive study of the licensing/credentialing issue and we expect it to serve as a baseline assessment of the program. The study reveals that great progress has been made over the past several years, particularly in light of the complexity of the issues involved. The study identifies a clear process for achieving credentialing and licensing that can be used by the servicemember/veteran, service counselors, DVOPs and LVERs, and Department of Veterans' Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment and Education Service staffs. The study also identifies those websites that provide assistance for credentialing and licensing. We will provide a copy of the report when it is finalized.

Q. DOL VETS staff recently sent over unemployment data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Despite spending over \$160 million on the DVOP/LVER program, the unemployment rate for veterans in the 20-24 year old group still exceeds their non-veterans counterparts by two to five percent in the period from 2002 to 2004.

- **Do you collect data on why these vets are not working?**
- **Why does their unemployment rate exceed non-vets?**

We are very aware of this issue, but we have no data on why these veterans are not working. While we are using the 20-24 year old group as a proxy for recently separated veterans, we don't know if the higher unemployment rates in this group reflect the difficulty of finding civilian employment following separation from the military or whether they reflect the difficulty experienced by all first time entrants to the civilian workforce. Some period of unemployment is to be expected among the newly separated veterans, who may be seeking jobs that best fit their skills and relying on unemployment benefits for temporary income support.

A November 2003 study observed that the status of the 20-24 year old veteran group more closely parallels the experience of 18-19 year olds who enter the labor force after high school. Although the 20-24 year old group is a relatively small segment of the total veteran population in the civilian labor force, we consider their unemployment rate to be a priority issue. In the coming year, we plan to initiate a study to determine the causes of this unemployment and the potential solutions.

Q. What is being done to educate your transitioning servicemembers about small business opportunities with the federal government?

R. The TAP employment workshops currently provide the transitioning servicemember with information about services provided by the Small Business Administration (SBA), and provide information on websites that contain valuable information to assist them. A new segment on business and entrepreneurship for the employment workshop is being developed in conjunction with the SBA and will be incorporated into TAP as required by Executive Order 13360, "Providing Opportunities for Service-Disabled Veteran Businesses to increase their Federal Contracting and Subcontracting," signed October 20, 2004.

Q. What is the status of the TAP/DTAP Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) being circulated among the agencies and what is the position of each agency on the appropriate length of TAP/DTAP?

R. The MOU is currently in the departmental clearance process at VA and Homeland Security. The next steps are for formal clearance at DoD and then DOL. DOL believes that the employment workshop should be 2 ½ days in duration. This duration was agreed upon by the TAP Steering Committee, which consists of DOL, VA, DoD, DHS and the military services representatives. This duration is included in the draft MOU.

Would you please list the topics covered under DOL's portion of TAP and the time needed to cover each subject properly?

R. The topics covered and time allocated to each follows:

Topic	Time allocated
Personal appraisal	2.5 hours
Strategies for an Effective Job Search	6.5 hours
Interviews	7.5 hours
Support and Assistance available from federal agencies	3.0 hours
The remainder of the 22-hour program consists of workshop introduction and how to use the workshop manual.	2.5 hours
Total	22 hours

Q. The Government Accountability Office notes that at some remote land sites, TAP is delivered by video or telephone. Could you tell us where these locations are and are there any plans to improve delivery?

R. All of DOL's TAP employment workshops are conducted in person by a trained and certified facilitator. However, it is our understanding that some military services conduct portions of the TAP pre-separation counseling by video or telephone.

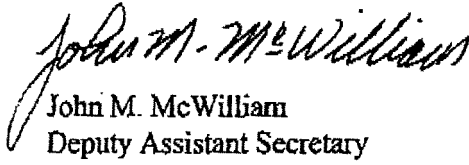
Q. Do the several methods of TAP instruction mean that DOL's standardized TAP curriculum is not being followed?

R. No. The DOL standard curriculum is followed in all employment workshops. Local conditions may allow slight modifications in how the class is formulated (i.e., separate classes for servicemembers who are retirement eligible) or how many facilitators are present (i.e., using a team teaching approach where several facilitators each present different portions of the workshop). In all cases, all facilitators are NVTI trained and certified, the same workshop manual is used, and the facilitator uses the common briefing slides and facilitator manual.

The Office of Management and Budget has advised us that, from the perspective of the Administration's program, there is no objection to the submission of this letter.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John M. McWilliam". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J".

John M. McWilliam
Deputy Assistant Secretary



G A O

Accountability • Integrity • Reliability

United States Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

July 20, 2005

The Honorable John Boozman
Chairman
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
House of Representatives

The enclosed information responds to the post-hearing question in your letter of June 30, 2005, concerning our testimony before the Subcommittee on June 29, 2005, on the Transition Assistance Program. If you have any questions or would like to discuss this information, please contact me at (202) 512-7215.

Sincerely yours,

Cynthia A. Bascetta
Director, Education, Workforce and Income Security

Enclosure

ENCLOSURE

ENCLOSURE

This enclosure details your question and our response, which supplements information in our testimony before your Subcommittee, *Military and Veterans' Benefits: Improvements Needed in Transition Assistance Services for Reserves and National Guard* (GAO-844T, Washington, D.C.: June 29, 2005.)

Question for the Record
Honorable John Boozman, Chairman
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Do the several methods of TAP instruction mean that DOL's standardized TAP curriculum is not being followed?

No. While there may be several methods of TAP instruction, primarily for the prepreparation counseling, the 2 to 2 1/2 day DOL employment workshop is conducted using a standardized curriculum and program of instruction, according to DOL officials. All of the employment workshop instructors are trained and certified by the National Veterans Training Institute. The curriculum and program of instruction are standardized to maintain quality of service delivery and ensure uniformity. For some separating Army personnel (fewer than one percent of all who received transition services), the Army in April 2004 began piloting the use of videos to provide employment assistance modeled on the DOL curriculum at remote sites, such as recruiting stations at the Universities of Idaho, Montana, and Wisconsin, according to Army officials. This flexibility in delivery methods is an important way to assure that all service members can participate in this benefit. Also, many separating Reserves and National Guard members are anxious to return home and are not interested in prolonging their stay to attend workshops, but may be interested in DOL developing an alternative or more flexible approach in providing the employment workshops. While prepreparation counseling and VA briefings, including DTAP, also have standard content, delivery methods vary and may impede the effectiveness of conveying information to service members. For example, the length of some sessions and the number of participants vary considerably. While this flexibility is important, the DOD and VA have not assessed the effectiveness of these different approaches.

Hearing Date: June 29, 2005
Committee: House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Member: Chairman Boozman
Witness: Secretary Rumsfeld
Questions #1

Question: What is being done to educate transitioning Service members about small business opportunities with the federal government?

Answer: Separating and retiring Service members, and those being released from active duty, complete one of the appropriate forms below:

- DD Form 2648, Preseparation Counseling Checklist for Active Component Service Members
- DD Form 2648-1, Preseparation Counseling Checklist for Reserve Component Service Members Released From Active Duty

By completing the appropriate form, Service members are given general information about small business opportunities. During the preseparation counseling process, if the Service member indicates he/she wants more information about small business opportunities, he/she is referred to the Small Business Administration (SBA) web site at www.sba.gov. Through the SBA's web site, separating Service members can access information about small business opportunities with the federal government and the private sector. They can also contact the local SBA office directly and ask questions or set up an appointment with an SBA representative.

Another source of information used to inform separating Service members about small business opportunities is the DoD Preseparation Guide (Chapter 3, Section Q). The guide can be accessed at www.dodtransportal.org.

Additional information is also available through The Veterans Corporation, an entity created by Congress under P.L. 106-50. The Veterans Corporation provides veterans, including service-disabled veterans, with the tools they need to be successful in business. They serve transitioning military personnel, National Guard and Reserve, as well as all other veterans. They seek to link them with partners and purchasing agents in both the public and private sectors. Separating Service members can access The Veterans Corporation through the DoD Transportal Web site or directly at www.veteranscorp.org.

Hearing Date: June 29, 2005
Committee: House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Member: Chairman Boozman
Witness: Secretary Rumsfeld
Question #2

Question: What is the status of the TAP/DTAP Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) being circulated among the agencies and what is the position of each agency on the appropriate length of TAP/DTAP?

Answer: On May 9, 2005, DoD completed its internal review and clearance process on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) Memorandum of Understanding. DoD is collaborating with the Department of Labor and the final product will be forthcoming from that agency.

In its June 29, 2005 testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, the Department indicated it was establishing an Interagency Demobilization Working Group to look at how to improve transition assistance for the Guard and Reserve. DoD defers comment on the appropriate length of TAP/DTAP until the working group has a chance to consider alternatives.

Hearing Date: June 29, 2005
Committee: House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Member: Chairman Boozman
Witness: Secretary Rumsfeld
Question #3

Question: The Government Accountability Office notes that Guard and Reserve members have unique TAP needs. What is the Department doing to determine those needs?

Answer: The Department has established an Interagency Demobilization Working Group to address this issue. The GAO's views will be considered by the working group as it makes recommendations for improvement.

Information for the Record
House Committee on Veterans Affairs
Hearing, June 29, 2005
Response to Representative Hereth

DoD/VA Information Technology Sharing

Background:

The Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) share health information today. The Departments continue to pursue enhancements to information management and technology initiatives to significantly improve the secure sharing of appropriate health information. These initiatives enhance health care delivery to beneficiaries and improve the continuity of care for those who have served our country.

Key Points:

- **Federal Health Information Exchange (FHIE):** Enables the transfer of protected electronic health information from DoD to VA at the time of a service member's separation. DoD transmits to VA on a monthly basis: laboratory results, radiology results, outpatient pharmacy data, allergy information, discharge summaries, consult reports, admission, disposition and transfer information, elements of the standard ambulatory data records and demographic data on separated service members. VA providers and benefits specialists access this data daily for use in the delivery of health care and claims adjudication. Since 2001, DoD has transmitted messages to the FHIE data repository, at the VA Austin Automation Center, on more than 3 million unique retired or discharged Service members. This number grows as health information on recently separated Service members is extracted and transferred to VA.
- **Bidirectional Health Information Exchange (BHIE):** Enables real-time sharing of allergy, outpatient prescription and demographic data, and laboratory and radiology results between DoD and VA for patients treated in both DoD and VA. BHIE is operational in the Seattle, WA area and El Paso, TX. Deployment to additional sites in FY05 is being coordinated with the Services, and local DoD/VA sites. Site selection was based on support to returning members of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, number of visits for VA beneficiaries treated in DoD facilities, current Federal Health Information Exchange usage, number and types of DoD medical treatment facilities, local sharing agreements, retiree population, and local site interest. We anticipate BHIE will be implemented at the following sites in 2005: Bassett Army Community Hospital, Fairbanks, AK; Brooke Army Medical Center, San Antonio, TX; Eisenhower Army Medical Center, Augusta, GA; National Capital Area to include Walter Reed, Bethesda, Dewitt and others; Naval Hospital Great Lakes, Chicago, IL; Naval Medical Center, San Diego, CA; Landstuhl Regional Medical Center; David Grant Medical Center, CA; Elmendorf AFB Medical Facility, Anchorage, AK; Mike O'Callaghan Federal Hospital (Nellis AFB) NV; and Wilford Hall Medical Center, San Antonio, TX.
- **Pre and Post Deployment Health Assessments** - Building on the success of FHIE, DoD has successfully tested the capability to add electronic pre- and post-deployment health assessment information from the Defense Medical Surveillance System (DMSS) to the information being sent with the FHIE data feed. The historical data extraction was initiated in July 2005.

Transmitting of electronic pre and post deployment health assessment data monthly to the FHIE data repository is scheduled to begin in August 2005. VA plans allow access to the data starting in November 2005. DoD plans to initiate activity to add post-deployment health reassessment information later this year.

- Clinical Data Repository/Health Data Repository (CHDR): Establishes interoperability between DoD's Clinical Data Repository and VA's Health Data Repository. The Departments successfully tested the exchange of computable outpatient pharmacy and allergy data in a laboratory environment in September 2004. This test demonstrated the ability to do drug-drug and drug-allergy checking using outpatient pharmacy and allergy information from both Departments. DoD and VA are on target to exchange outpatient pharmacy and medication allergy data on shared patients in the DoD Clinical Data Repository (CDR) and the VA Health Data Repository (HDR) by October 2005. This data will be computable allowing the DoD and VA systems to perform drug interaction checking and drug allergy checking. Immediately following implementation of pharmacy and allergy domains and the CHDR infrastructure, the work necessary to exchange standardized laboratory data between the repositories will be completed. The outpatient pharmacy data being exchanged utilizes DoD's Pharmacy Data Transaction Service (PDTS) so that DoD pharmacy data includes military treatment facility, retail network, and mail order pharmacy information.
- Laboratory Data Sharing Initiative (LDSI): Facilitates the electronic sharing of laboratory order entry and results retrieval between DoD, VA and commercial reference laboratories. LDSI is available for use throughout DoD. It is actively being used daily between DoD and VA at several sites where one Department uses the other as a reference lab. Either Department may function as the reference lab for the other with electronic orders and results retrieval.
- Sharing Inpatient Documentation: One element of the Madigan Army Medical Center/VA Puget Sound Health Care System NDAA demonstration project is to develop a mechanism to share selected inpatient documentation, such as the discharge summary, from DoD's Clinical Information System (CIS) with VA. This is being done using CHI adopted standards and leveraging parts of the work already completed on the Bidirectional Health Information Exchange to transfer the information. Once the demonstration is completed at Madigan/Puget Sound, it will be evaluated for replication at other sites that are also using CIS.