

STATEMENT
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BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

HEARING

ON

VETERAN'S EMPLOYMENT: IMPROVING THE
TRANSITION FROM BATTLEFIELD TO WORKFORCE

APRIL 13, 2011

Madam Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the role the Department of Defense (DoD) plays in helping Service members successfully transition from active duty to civilian life. Education and training are keys to obtaining meaningful employment and a better quality of life after a Service member retires or separates from the military. Service members are encouraged to take full advantage of all educational opportunities and training programs afforded while they are on active duty, such as tuition assistance and the Post 9/11 GI Bill. The Department also focuses on providing separating Service members useful information and assistance in all aspects of the transition process, including preparation for post-military employment. It is crucial to the transition process that Service members take full advantage of their military experience in order to reach and achieve their full employment potential after they leave the military.

TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (TAP)

TAP is a collaborative partnership among DoD, the Departments of Labor (DOL), Veterans Affairs (VA), and Homeland Security (DHS) and remains the primary platform used to deliver an extensive array of services and benefits information to separating Service members. Service members are required by statute to commence pre-separation counseling no later than 90 days prior to active duty separation but are strongly advised and encouraged to start the process 12 months before separation, or 24 months before retirement. In addition to the mandatory pre-separation counseling, DoD counselors make every effort to encourage transitioning Service members to participate in the voluntary TAP components (which are VA's Benefits Briefing, Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) and DOL's TAP Employment Workshop). Each agency is responsible for providing its portion of TAP to Service members.

Taking full advantage of what TAP has to offer enables Service members to be strong competitors for career opportunities in the civilian workforce. During mandatory pre-separation counseling, Service members review and complete an extensive checklist with a counselor. After Service members complete the pre-separation counseling portion of TAP, they receive a copy of the checklist (DD Form 2648 for Active Duty and DD Form 2648-1 for the National Guard and Reserves) so they can refer back to it and look up web sites and other information to reinforce what they received during the pre-separation counseling session. The checklists have all

the topics required by statute that a counselor must address during the pre-separation counseling session. The forms are used by separating Service members and their spouses to record that pre-separation counseling was conducted.

If the Service member desires more information on any topic on the pre-separation counseling checklist, that exceeds the general knowledge of the counselor, then the member checks a “YES” block next to the item on the form, and the counselor refers the Service member to a subject matter expert who is able to assist the member with the desired information, or get the answers to questions which the transition counselor may not have been able to answer. The subject matter expert may be a family support transition or education counselor located at the installation, or it may be a DOL or VA representative who provides TAP support at the installation.

During pre-separation counseling, the counselor is required to explain and discuss “Licensing, Certification and Apprenticeship Information” with transitioning Service members. Additionally, Service members are always encouraged to do research on the internet and it is recommended they start with CareerOneStop, the DOL web site on exploring careers, salary and benefits, education and training, resume and interviews, and licensure and certification (<http://www.careeronestop.org>). The Workforce Credentials Information Center, within the America’s Career InfoNet part of this site, provides a wealth of licensure and certification information. The member can also access the Occupational Information Network called O*NET (www.onlineonetcenter.org) and the skills profiler which also falls under the purview of our partners at DOL. This site is considered the nation’s primary source of occupational and industry information. Using O*NET allows the Service member to do a crosswalk between his or her Military Occupational Code and the civilian equivalency of that code, linking the member to the Standard Occupational Classifications in the civilian workforce.

The information received during the pre-separation counseling portion of TAP is reinforced during the other three voluntary components of TAP: DOL’s TAP Employment Workshop, VA’s Benefits Briefing, and the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP). National Guard and Reserve personnel receive a Uniformed Services Employment and Re-Employment Rights Act (USERRA) briefing during demobilization processing. DOL has notified each state’s Adjutant General of the opportunity to receive TAP employment workshops whenever and whe-

ever desired. Transitioning Service members, including National Guard and Reserve personnel, are strongly encouraged to visit one of approximately 3,000 DOL One-Stop Career Centers, where they receive priority service consisting of help with translating their military skills to civilian occupations, receiving a skills assessment, and getting assistance in finding a job. In addition to receiving information on licensure and certification, Service members can also receive information on apprenticeship resources.

ENHANCED TAP FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Initially developed in the late 1980s and implemented in the early 1990s, the current program has been in place for nearly two decades without major enhancements. To strengthen and improve TAP, DoD, DOL and VA are collaborating to re-engineer, redesign, and transform the current program in a way that will better meet the needs of Service members and their families in the 21st Century. The “enhanced TAP” is a collaborative effort where each agency will improve its component of TAP through a number of initiatives, to include leveraging technology, improving curriculum, better staff (counselors/facilitators, etc.) training, and developing ways to access TAP so that the information is accessible 24/7.

DoD is moving TAP from an end of military career event to a military lifecycle process. We are developing a robust blended delivery of TAP information and services via online, brick and mortar, and multi-media. An example of this is Virtual TAP, an online delivery system that will allow Service members and their families to access and receive information on education, scholarships, employment, financial and career planning, and other transition-related areas any time. A major part of Virtual TAP is the Career Decision Toolkit, which can be accessed at www.turbotap.org. The toolkit, in both CD and online format, is a cornerstone of transitioning TAP into a blended career transition training model that takes advantage of online and digital resources, virtual classrooms, social media and other platforms that compliment the traditional “brick and mortar” TAP classes that most Service members now attend.

We are also improving staff training to better inform Service members of the benefits, resources and enhanced online tools available, as well as to improve the experience of Service members attending the traditional “brick and mortar” sessions which will still be available. In-

creased use of social media will also enhance DoD's ability to connect with the 21st Century Service member.

In addition to DoD's efforts, DOL is redesigning and transforming its TAP Employment Workshop to make it more relevant to Service members and spouses. VA's re-engineering initiative involves a three phase effort to develop a self-serve, online mechanism for Service members to have the option of completing the VA benefits briefing electronically within their own time frame prior to discharge. DOL will speak more to their redesign of TAP for the 21st Century in their testimony.

OTHER EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVES

Operation Warfighter (OWF)

OWF is a DoD-sponsored internship program that offers recuperating wounded, ill and injured Service members meaningful activity that positively impacts wellness and offers a process of transitioning back to duty or entering into the civilian workforce. The main objective of OWF is to place recuperating Service members in supportive work settings that positively benefit the recuperation process.

OWF represents a great opportunity for transitioning Service members to augment their employment readiness by building their resumes, exploring employment interests, developing job skills, benefiting from both formal and on-the-job training opportunities, and gaining valuable Federal government work experience that will help prepare them for the future. The program strives to demonstrate to participants that the skills they have obtained in the military are transferable into civilian employment. For Service members who will return to duty, the program enables these participants to maintain their skill sets and provides the opportunity for additional training and experience that can subsequently benefit the military. OWF simultaneously enables Federal employers to better familiarize themselves with the skill sets of wounded, ill and injured Service members as well as benefit from the considerable talent and dedication of these transitioning Service members.

To date, the program has placed approximately 1,800 Service members across more than 100 different Federal employers and sub-components. The program currently has 390 active internship placements.

The Veterans Employment Initiative (VEI)

The VEI, created by Executive Order 13518, aims to aggressively enhance recruitment strategies and promote employment opportunities which will lead to an increase in the number of veterans in the Federal government. DoD is a strategic partner on the Steering Committee for this initiative, along with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), VA, DOL, and DHS. The Order established an interagency Council on Veterans Employment that advises the President and the Director of OPM on the initiative. The Council serves as a national forum to promote veterans' employment opportunities in the Executive Branch and develops performance measures to assess the effectiveness of the VEI. DoD implemented an agency-specific DoD Veterans Strategic Plan, which includes performance measures and expected outcomes. Agencies covered by the VEI have established Veterans Employment Program Offices or designated a full-time staff person dedicated to providing employment services to veterans. The DoD Veterans Employment Program Office assists Veterans with navigating the application process in their search for employment. Veterans and the public may also access the VEI's helpful website at www.fedshirevets.gov.

Education and Employment Initiative (E2I)

Contributing factors to unemployment among wounded warriors include the lack of a focused employment, educational, and rehabilitation process that engages Service members as soon as they begin treatment at a Medical Treatment Facility (MTF), as well as a lack of qualified career counselors who can administer career assessments and match Service members to careers. DoD, in collaboration with VA, DOL, and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), is developing E2I to address these shortfalls. E2I will leverage best practices and the good work already being done from existing employment and training initiatives in both federal and private sectors. The first phase is a tiered pilot program scheduled to launch in May 2011.

The goal of the E2I pilot is to engage Service members early in their recovery to identify skills they have, the skills they need and the employment opportunities where those skills can be matched and put to good use. The E2I process will begin within 30-90 days of a Recovering Service Member (RSM) arriving at a MTF, taking advantage of a recovery time that averages 311 days but can be as long as five years. At the very beginning of the E2I process, all applicants will be administered a comprehensive skills assessment to include understanding their current disability, current Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) experience, career desires, education and training background, and special accommodations that may be required for a particular type of position. This assessment will be provided by a highly trained career and vocation counselor who has extensive knowledge of the issues facing wounded warriors.

The E2I counselor will work with the RSM from the initial stages of creating an individual development plan (IDP) goal setting, course selection or education requirements, through the completion of training/certification to return to duty or alternate job placement. A Mentor and Coach will be assigned to all E2I applicants at the beginning of the process to provide personalized assistance and guidance throughout the E2I process from recruitment at the MTF into the program, through placement in their new MOS or chosen career.

Our plan is to evaluate the E2I program over the next 12 months to 18 months and refine the E2I process with new ideas and best practices. Once this evaluation is complete, our plan is to continue our E2I roll-out, which will include partnering with OPM, VA and DOL to ensure we have standardized practices and comprehensive handoffs as the RSM leaves the responsibility of the DoD.

CONCLUSION

The Department understands there is a strong consensus within Congress and the Veterans' community that more needs to be done to help Service members successfully transition to civilian life. There are proponents who believe DoD should be responsible for finding jobs for transitioning Service members. However, we do not believe that is an appropriate role of DoD. Rather our responsibility, which we take very seriously, is to help prepare transitioning Service members to find a job by connecting them to the vast resources of the DOL and VA Vocational

Rehabilitation and Employment Services which have dedicated programs and training to help transitioning Service members find employment. As we empower Service members to take charge of their transition, we must recognize that their success rests largely on their implementation and utilization of the skills, tools, and resources made available to them, starting with pre-separation counseling and continuing throughout the transition process. The success is further reinforced by active engagement, reinforcement, and motivation by unit/command leadership.

The measure of a successful transition does not focus solely on TAP, but rather is shared with military leadership at every level within the command structure and the degree of personal involvement by the Service member and his or her family. We must continue to find new ways to not only reach our Service members and provide useful information to them, but also to strive to ensure they are armed and prepared to address all the various challenges and opportunities in their transition to civilian life. It is through their success that we measure ours and continually look for better ways to provide the help they need.

In summary, the end-state for the enhanced TAP for the 21st Century by DoD, DOL, and the VA will consist of a population of Service members who have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to empower themselves to make informed career decisions, be competitive in the global workforce and become positive contributors to their community as they transition from the military to civilian life. Madam Chairman, this concludes my statement. On behalf of the men and women in the military today and their families, I thank you and the members of this Committee for your steadfast support.