

Stenographic Transcript
Before the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

UNITED STATES SENATE

JOINT HEARING:
MILITARY TO CIVILIAN TRANSITION: ENSURING SUCCESS
AFTER SERVICE

Wednesday, October 18, 2023

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1 JOINT HEARING:

2 MILITARY TO CIVILIAN TRANSITION: ENSURING SUCCESS AFTER
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5 Wednesday, October 18, 2023

6
7 U.S. Senate

8 Committee on Veterans' Affairs

9 Committee on Armed Services

10 Washington, D.C.

11
12 The committees met, pursuant to notice, at 9:59 a.m.,
13 in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Jon
14 Tester, and Hon. Jack Reed, Joint Chairs of the Committees,
15 presiding.

16 Present: Senators Tester [presiding], Murray, Brown,
17 Blumenthal, Hirono, Sinema, Hassan, King, Moran, Boozman,
18 Tillis, Sullivan, Blackburn, Cramer, and Tuberville.

19 Present: Senators Reed [presiding], Shaheen,
20 Gillibrand, Blumenthal, Hirono, Kaine, King, Peters, Rosen,
21 Kelly, Wicker, Fischer, Cotton, Ernst, Sullivan, Cramer,
22 Scott, Tuberville, Budd, and Schmitt.

1 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN TESTER

2 Chairman Tester. I want to call this hearing to order.

3 Good morning. This is a rare occurrence where we have
4 a Joint Hearing with Senate Committees on Veteran Affairs
5 and the Senate Armed Services Committee.

6 I want to give special thanks to Chairman Reed, Ranking
7 Members Moran and Wicker, for making this hearing happen.
8 This is a critically important topic. It is a topic that we
9 have been talking about since I came to this body, and that
10 has been a number of years back. And it is about the yearly
11 transition of 200,000 service members from being a warrior
12 to a civilian, and the tools that we provide these men and
13 women during that process that will impact everything from
14 financial, to medical, to emotional well-being.

15 Today, I want to hear how the DoD, the VA, and the DOL
16 are working together to ensure that this impact is a
17 positive one. In partnership through agencies, we have made
18 some strides to improve the transition process, but we are
19 far from where we need to be. In partnership, they are
20 important, I want to make sure during this hearing that you
21 guys are talking to one another, and that we understand what
22 is going on with the folks who are retiring out of the
23 Military.

24 Look, we have got enhanced GI Bill benefits, programs
25 like SkillBridge. We have got DoD and state governments

1 that are working to streamline requirements to get service
2 members everything, from commercial drivers' licenses, to a
3 number of other opportunities that are in the private sector
4 that they have learned those skills in the Military. There
5 is still too much red tape out there, and we need to work to
6 undo that.

7 We have enacted the PACT Act, which has been a huge
8 success, a large expansion of VA health care, and benefits
9 in a decade, and I might add, necessarily so. We have
10 improved veterans' access to mental health through the
11 Hannon Act and the STRONG Act, but recent data shows that we
12 are not where we need to be when it comes to veterans'
13 mental health. We need to get more of these veterans into
14 the system so they don't fall through the cracks, and that
15 transition process is an opportunity to happen.

16 And in fact, we have got some people on this roster
17 today that have some ideas on how to make that transition
18 from DoD to the VA system, smoother. I am looking for our
19 first panel to provide a government perspective on what is
20 working and what is not. I am looking for our second panel,
21 composed of veterans and advocates, to provide their
22 personal perspectives on what is working, and what is not.
23 They will also advocate for various policies to make sure we
24 are doing right by our service members.

25 I want to read you some statistics before I turn it

1 over to my fellow Chairman, Jack Reed. These are DoD data
2 on enlisted deaths: 89 percent of active-duty deaths by
3 suicide were among enlisted service members, enlisted
4 service members; across the Active and Reserve component,
5 those who died by suicide were primarily enlisted male under
6 the age of 30. These are data points we need to take into
7 consideration.

8 If this population is struggling with their mental
9 health while in the service, those struggles are likely to
10 continue and get worse as they make the transition to
11 civilian life. And that is why this hearing today is so
12 important.

13 With that, I turn it over to Senator Reed.

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1 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN REED

2 Chairman Reed. Thank you very much, Chairman Tester.
3 It is a privilege to share the dais with you this morning.
4 I am glad we have brought our committees together to discuss
5 such a very important issue. I would like to welcome and
6 thank our witnesses for joining us today.

7 Our Military's greatest asset is the people, the men
8 and women who serve. Our men and women in uniform have long
9 provided America with the strongest national defense in the
10 world, and the leaders in this room have a fundamental duty
11 to ensure that they are set up for success, both in and out
12 of the service. The Military is a challenging profession,
13 and we know that our service members have sacrificed much
14 for the Nation. We also know that the overwhelming majority
15 of veterans report positive experiences in the Military.

16 Through surveys and data, we know that American
17 veterans are more civically engaged, earn more money, and
18 have more education than those who have not served. Veteran
19 unemployment is lower than non-veteran unemployment across
20 the country, and across nearly every demographic. Their
21 economic outlook and quality of life is, on average, higher
22 than non-veterans Americans.

23 In short, the Military Service is a social good. It
24 benefits the nation, and it benefits those who serve.
25 Transitioning from military service to civilian life can be

1 challenging, however, the Department of Defense, and in
2 conjunction with the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the
3 Department of Labor, prepare service members and their
4 families for this transition, primarily through a structured
5 training program known as the Transition Assistance Program,
6 or TAP.

7 TAP provides information, resources, and tools to
8 service members and their families to help prepare for the
9 move from military life to civilian life. Service members
10 are required to begin TAP a year before separating from
11 military service; and those who are retiring can begin TAP
12 up to two years in advance of their anticipated retirement
13 date. I have been encouraged by the overall success of TAP,
14 but there are opportunities for improvement that we will
15 discuss today.

16 In particular, recent Government Accountability Office
17 reports have highlighted the challenge in getting full
18 participation in the program among service members.
19 Although 90 percent of transitioning service members do,
20 eventually participate in TAP, up to 70 percent did not
21 enroll in TAP a year in advance of their separation as
22 required by law. I understand the Department of Defense is
23 working to implement the GAO's recommendations and would ask
24 our witnesses for an update on those efforts.

25 A number of professional transition programs have shown

1 great promise. For example, the SkillBridge Internship
2 Program allows service members in the final months of their
3 military career to work full-time in a private employer to
4 gain experience and knowledge about the civilian workforce.

5 Similarly, the United States Military Apprenticeship
6 Program provides Active-Duty Military members with
7 professional skills training and the opportunity to earn
8 nationally recognized certificates while finishing their
9 Military careers. I would like to know what lessons can be
10 drawn from these programs and applied to other efforts.

11 Finally, the transition from the Military Medical
12 System, TRICARE, to the VA Health Care System can be
13 daunting and confusing. Although VA eligibility and
14 implementation should be smooth, many service members
15 experience delays in determining their disability ratings,
16 which can cause uncertainty and financial stress. Swift
17 implementation of health care programs will be key to
18 improving the transition of members from active service to
19 civilian life. And I would ask our witnesses to share their
20 views on how the transition can be streamlined.

21 Thank you again to our witnesses, and I look forward to
22 your testimonies.

23 Now, on behalf of Chairman Tester, I would like to
24 recognize Ranking Member Moran.

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1 STATEMENT OF SENATOR MORAN

2 Senator Moran. Senator Reed, or Chairman Reed, thank
3 you very much. Thank you to you, and our Chairman, and
4 Veterans, and Senator Wicker for joining us. And thank you
5 for our witnesses for being here.

6 Our committee in the Department of Defense, Veterans
7 Affairs, and Labor should prioritize a seamless transition
8 and provide resources to reduce unemployment, homelessness,
9 and suicide, all issues our committee deals with on an
10 ongoing basis, and it seems like they all come together at
11 this moment when we talk about transition. But we can
12 address unemployment, homelessness, and suicide, as well as
13 bolster Military recruitment and support success after the
14 Military, if we can improve the transition from active duty
15 to prior service.

16 Success after service will look different for every
17 service member. That is why we must make certain that
18 veterans are equipped with the knowledge and resources they
19 need to thrive, that knowledge and resource needs to come
20 earlier than the day in which they leave active service.

21 I also want to address the friction, and I would like
22 to see you all address the friction that exists in the
23 transition process between Military retention and readiness,
24 something hugely important to our Military, but to our
25 Nation and its national security. We need to allow service

1 members to attend pre-separation counseling, TAP classes,
2 apprenticeships, and internships before separation.

3 FY 2019 NDAA Congress Reformed TAP put additional
4 requirements on the Departments to individualize the
5 transition process for those who are at higher risk for
6 unemployment or post-transition issues. Additionally,
7 Congress required that each service member go through TAP at
8 least once, more than 365 days prior to separation. A
9 mandate that we know is not being followed for at least 70
10 percent of transitioning service members, according to the
11 Government Accountability Office.

12 Since those reforms were made in 2018, GAO has issued
13 12 reports on transition. Those reports include nearly 40
14 recommendations to VA and DoD. It is my understanding that
15 very few of those recommendations have been agreed to or
16 implemented, and DoD has not implemented a single one.

17 Given these facts, I worry that there is a lack of
18 understanding from commanders about the importance of
19 prioritizing a positive transition and allowing service
20 members time to prepare for the next phases, and their
21 families' phase in their lives. I understand the importance
22 of operational readiness; however, if a service member has a
23 positive transition experience and receives support from
24 their command and peers as they leave the Military, they are
25 more likely to have a positive view of their Military

1 experience, a successful transition, and assist with the
2 recruitment by encouraging others to join the Military.

3 I am grateful to each one of our witnesses for being
4 here today. In the second panel, we will be joined by a
5 Kansan, who I want to express my gratitude for his presence
6 here; Dr. Arthur DeGroat, Lieutenant Colonel, Retired, he is
7 from the Kansas State University Military Affairs and
8 Innovation Center, and he has become a significant component
9 of witness -- of our witness panels as we deal with
10 transition.

11 So Dr. DeGroat, thank you for joining us. And I assume
12 I should -- I have to return this to Senator Reed.

13 Chairman Reed. Thank you, Senator Moran.

14 On behalf of Chairman Tester, let me recognize the
15 Ranking Member of the Armed Services Committee, Senator
16 Wicker.

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1 STATEMENT OF SENATOR WICKER

2 Senator Wicker. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I am
3 glad to be here today, joining with three of my
4 distinguished colleagues. I am particularly proud that I
5 share the leadership role on the Armed Services Committee
6 with a fellow veteran, Senator Jack Reed. His career in the
7 Military is far more distinguished than mine, but I am proud
8 to be a veteran, proud to have served, and proud to be here
9 with three very distinguished supporters of our Military and
10 our Veteran community.

11 There are improvements that need to be made in our
12 veteran experience, and in our transition experience, but
13 the truth is that the vast majority of our veterans are
14 highly successful in their post-Military careers and
15 personal lives. And I do appreciate Chairman Reed making
16 that point, and making the very positive point about
17 Military Service during the active duty time and as a
18 veteran.

19 As our economy struggles with inflation and rising
20 interest rates, the report in from the U.S. Census Bureau
21 shows that veterans and their families have consistently
22 achieved higher standards of living than non-veterans. This
23 is over the past 40 years. The veteran unemployment rate is
24 lower than the non-veteran employment rate. Both can be
25 improved, but that is a significant statistic. This has

1 been true nearly every month since January 2003 when the
2 Bureau of Labor Statistics began tracking this information;
3 this impressive fact is no surprise to those of us who
4 understand how valuable veterans are to civilian employers.

5 Between 2005 and 2015, a recent study from the
6 University of Akron found that Military veterans earned
7 higher average wages than non-veterans. These facts
8 demonstrate what those of us in the Military community have
9 known for years. Most veterans are doing well. The skills
10 and character we developed during our time in service lead
11 to desirable outcomes. Our witnesses should be
12 congratulated for the superb work that they and their
13 Departments have been doing in this area over the past
14 decades.

15 The success of our veterans shows that joining the
16 Military is a great way to improve career and life
17 prospects. This is true regardless of sex, race, or
18 national origin. As I have said and echoing others, the
19 United States Military is the greatest civil rights program
20 in the history of the world. The success of veterans from
21 minority communities proves this. Researchers studied
22 households headed by racial or ethnic minorities with low
23 education experience. In that study, researchers found that
24 households headed by veterans had significantly higher
25 standards of living than those headed by non-veterans.

1 And in 2017, the median annual incomes of Black and
2 Hispanic veteran households were more than \$20,000 higher
3 than those of minority non-veteran households. So as you
4 can see, I am not only proud to be a veteran, I value
5 Military service and encourage many young Americans to
6 follow this type of service.

7 We have also learned that effective pre-separation
8 transition programs are helping to prepare service members
9 for life after their Military careers. The programs set
10 these veterans up for civilian life, and their communities
11 notice their success. In particular, young Americans see
12 that Military Service can have very positive effects. This
13 helps recruiting efforts. In this way, these transition
14 programs act as a force multiplier.

15 The Transition Assistance Program has been operating
16 for just over 30 years, but it has a lot to show from that
17 relatively brief tenure. Today, it supports around 200,000
18 service members every year. Congress has capitalized on
19 that momentum. We have identified the success of these
20 transition programs and expanded these opportunities. The
21 FY 2019 National Defense Authorization Act required broad
22 reforms to make the Transition Assistance Program even
23 stronger.

24 Today, we will find out if we can improve on that.
25 Congress must keep faith with our veterans through these

1 initiatives, which I will continue to support. I look
2 forward to hearing from our witnesses today about their
3 efforts to execute these transition programs.

4 Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

5 Chairman Reed. Thank you, Senator Wicker, for your
6 statement and for your service. Thank you very much.

7 Now, let me welcome the first panel. From the
8 Department of Defense, we have the Honorable Ashish
9 Vazirani, Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel
10 and Readiness.

11 From the Department of Veterans Affairs we have the
12 Honorable Joshua D. Jacobs, Under Secretary for Benefits;
13 accompanied by Mr. John W. Boerstler, Chief Veterans
14 Experience Officer.

15 From the Department of Labor, we have the Honorable
16 James D. Rodriguez, Assistant Secretary of Labor for
17 Veterans' Employment and Training.

18 And from the Government Accountability Office, we have
19 Mr. John Sawyer, Director of Education, Workforce, and
20 Income Security.

21 Mr. Vazirani, please begin with your opening statement.
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1 value proposition is to provide them with the support,
2 services, and resources they need to thrive beyond the
3 battlefield.

4 President Biden said, "The only truly sacred obligation
5 we have is to prepare and equip those women and men we send
6 into harm's way and care for them and their families when
7 they return home."

8 Service members are better prepared for their
9 transition to civilian life today than at any other point.
10 This reflects Secretary Austin's steadfast commitment to
11 take care of our people. This commitment extends beyond
12 their separation from duty in either the Active or Reserve
13 component. DoD is one of the seven agencies that each plays
14 a crucial role in the governance of military to civilian
15 transition.

16 Our investments in our service members' training and
17 education, financial readiness, and health and well-being,
18 coupled with the whole-of-government efforts to support
19 their transition, are proving effective. Veterans using the
20 Post-9/11 GI Bill are more likely to graduate and have a
21 higher GPA. Veterans are 20 percent more likely to be
22 homeowners. Veterans earn more than their civilian
23 counterparts on average, and veterans enrolled with the VA
24 have better health outcomes than their civilian
25 counterparts.

1 The Joint Executive Committee stands as the bedrock of
2 our collaborative efforts, and I have the privilege of
3 serving as the DoD Co-Chair. The JEC provides the framework
4 through which our agencies jointly oversee this transition
5 process. The Transition Assistance Program Executive
6 Council, a subordinate committee of the JEC, co-chaired by
7 VA, Labor, and DoD, is responsible for ensuring that we have
8 met statutory requirements, and continuously improve the
9 transition process for future service members and their
10 families.

11 DOD, with the collaboration and coordination of our
12 interagency partners, is supporting service members in their
13 transition to civilian life with a human-centered design
14 approach. Our lines of effort are too numerous to name them
15 all here, but we have made great strides in mental health
16 support services, career advancement, and educational
17 resources, transitioning spouse employment assistance, and
18 homelessness prevention, just to name a few.

19 Our interagency team knows our work is ongoing. We are
20 wholeheartedly committed to continuous improvement of the
21 transition process and our Transition Assistance Program.
22 We appreciate the legislative authorities that Congress
23 provides to support transitioning service members and
24 improve transition processes and programs. We continue to
25 use those authorities with our interagency partners.

1 In closing, I am proud of the holistic transition
2 framework that delivers individualized support for service
3 members and their families through our interagency
4 partnership. With your continued support, we will uphold
5 our promise to take care of our people, securing their
6 future, and ensuring the continued success of the All-
7 Volunteer Force.

8 Thank you. And I look forward to your questions.

9 [The prepared statement of Mr. Vazirani follows:]

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1 Chairman Reed. Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary.

2 And I am now going to recognize the next person; if I
3 can find my notes.

4 Senator Moran. I think to recognize Mr. Jacobs.

5 Chairman Reed. I think, we will recognize Mr. Jacobs
6 now. Thank you, Senator Moran.

7 Mr. Jacobs.

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1 STATEMENT OF THE HON. JOSHUA D. JACOBS, UNDER SECRETARY
2 FOR BENEFITS, DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

3 Mr. Jacobs. Thank you very much. And good morning,
4 Chairman Tester, Chairman Reed, Ranking Members Moran and
5 Wicker, as well as Members of this distinguished committee.

6 I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you to
7 discuss VA's efforts to support service members as they
8 transition from military to civilian life.

9 I am accompanied by VA's Chief Veteran Experience
10 Officer, John Boerstler. And I am pleased to join our
11 partners from DoD, DOL, GAO, as well as our VSO partners on
12 the second panel.

13 Each year, approximately 200,000 service members
14 transition from Military to civilian life. For many,
15 transition is an opportunity to take on new challenges and
16 build the next chapter in their lives. For others, this
17 time can be daunting and filled with a mix of emotions and
18 uncertainties. It is our duty to care for all types of
19 veterans, regardless of where they are in this journey.

20 We need to connect them with their earned benefits in
21 health care, because veterans who utilize their earned
22 benefits are healthier, they earn more, and they are better
23 set up for success as they enter into civilian life; not
24 only that, we know that our success or failure in connecting
25 veterans with their benefits has lasting impacts on the

1 Military's ability to recruit future generations of service
2 members.

3 To empower transitioning service members in their
4 journey towards a fulfilling civilian life, service members
5 are allowed to begin their Transition Assistance Program one
6 year prior to separation, or two years prior to retiring.
7 Attending TAP as early as possible in the transition process
8 is critical for transitioning service members, given the
9 vast amount of information they need to digest in a
10 compressed time frame. It also gives them the opportunity
11 to access their earned VA benefits more quickly through the
12 Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program, or to get their foot
13 in the door to a potential employer through the SkillBridge
14 Program.

15 As part of the broader interagency TAP program, VA
16 delivers a one-day TAP Course, which was attended by 88
17 percent of all VOW Act-eligible transitioning service
18 members in fiscal year '22. VA's TAP course is a valuable
19 resource that provides guidance on how to access earned VA
20 benefits and enroll in VA health care, and participation in
21 TAP is correlated with a higher application rate for VA
22 benefits.

23 Additionally, VA also contacts all eligible veterans at
24 three key stages during their first year after separation
25 from active duty through a program called Solid Start, which

1 was established in 2019. As of September 30th, Solid Start
2 has assisted nearly 400,000 veterans with accessing their
3 earned benefits. Despite these successes, too many recently
4 separated veterans aren't accessing VA's most high-impact
5 services within the first year after they separate from
6 active duty, including health care and compensation
7 benefits. Part of the reason for this may be that veterans
8 under 40, and especially those under 30, don't consider VA
9 an immediate need, but they should.

10 To tackle that challenge, VA, in partnership with all
11 Military Service branches, as well as our federal partners,
12 including DoD and DOL, are using the voice of veterans and
13 their families to identify pain points and co-design
14 solutions through extensive human-centered design research
15 conducted over the last two years. Some of those pain
16 points were echoed recently when Sergeant First Class Rima
17 Rusnack [ph.] began her transition journey and started
18 visualizing her life in different capacity. A life geared
19 more towards academics.

20 For Rima, it was only two years ago that transition
21 came on the radar. She has many goals for life after
22 service, but for the first time in her career, she didn't
23 know what actions to take. While still in uniform, she
24 began studying to get her master's degree with the ultimate
25 goal of obtaining her doctorate. She needed to know whether

1 she would be financially secure during school, but she
2 wasn't sure what the GI Bill would cover or when she could
3 even utilize it.

4 Rima is also a paratrooper. Every jump takes a toll no
5 matter how well you execute the parachute landing fall.
6 While knee and back pain from jumping out of airplanes is
7 tolerable at this point, she expects it to become more of a
8 challenge later in life. She was fortunate enough to attend
9 TAP in February, and she applied for her benefits through
10 BDD. She left active duty in August and received her first
11 disability compensation payment in September. And as she
12 begins this next chapter in her life, she is going to
13 continue her service to this country through the Army
14 Reserves.

15 Stories like Rima's are why we are actively co-
16 designing solutions that address pain points and demonstrate
17 tangible value to Veterans. It is why we began hosting
18 Annual Veteran Transition symposiums to coordinate and
19 improve the way that we support transitioning service
20 members and their families. It is why we are updating the
21 TAP curriculum so accredited VSOs and State Departments of
22 Veterans Affairs will now have the opportunity to directly
23 engage with transitioning service members and their families
24 for nearly an hour, at the end of every one-day VA TAP
25 class.

1 And it is why the cross-agency team co-designed and is
2 prototyping with service members, veterans, and their
3 families a personalized digital solution that enables them
4 to set goals, take action, and get help when they get stuck.
5 We are also working to engage more with service members
6 during their Military career by collaborating with DoD to
7 educate commanders on the importance of connecting service
8 members and spouses with VA benefits and health care prior
9 to separation; and as I stated earlier, improving the
10 experience during that process.

11 The military-to-civilian transition process brings
12 opportunities for us to improve trust in VA, and support the
13 personal growth of veterans as they navigate this
14 challenging, but ultimately rewarding phase of their lives.

15 Thank you for your continued support of transitioning
16 service members, veterans, caregivers, and their survivors.

17 I would be happy to answer any questions you or the
18 committee members may have.

19 [The prepared statement of Mr. Jacobs follows:]

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1 Chairman Tester. Thank you, Josh. Thank you for your
2 testimony.

3 Next up, we have, from the Department of Labor. The
4 Honorable James Rodriguez, Assistant Secretary of Labor for
5 Veterans' Employment and Training. You have the floor,
6 James.

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1 STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES D. RODRIGUEZ, ASSISTANT
2 SECRETARY OF LABOR FOR VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING,
3 DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

4 Mr. Rodriguez. Chairman Tester, Chairman Reed, Ranking
5 Member Moran, and Ranking Member Wicker, and Distinguished
6 Members of the Veterans Affairs and Armed Services
7 Committees; thank you for the opportunity to testify before
8 you today on the current state of the Transition Assistance
9 Program and the steps that should be made to continue
10 modernizing and reforming the program.

11 I have spent my entire federal career serving veterans.
12 This is my passion and that of my team who carry out our
13 mission every day across the entire country. DOL is the
14 federal lead for employment and training programs, within
15 DOL, VETS's mission is to prepare America's veterans,
16 service members, and military spouses for meaningful
17 careers, provide them with employment resources and
18 expertise, protect their employment rights, and promote
19 their employment opportunities.

20 VETS administers employment programs for transitioning
21 service members as part of TAP. Successful employment is a
22 key to economic success and can strongly impact physical and
23 mental health, life expectancy, and the quality of life.
24 Our American Job Centers are one-stop locations that offer a
25 broad range of career and supportive services to the public,

1 and veterans receive priority service for all DOL-funded
2 training programs. That is why it is so critical that DOL
3 VETS is at the table today, and that we continue to have a
4 seat at the table with our federal partners and to ensure
5 the success of transitioning service members and veterans in
6 the future.

7 Today, I would like to highlight four topics that will
8 interest this committee. First, service members are
9 attending DOL TAP employment workshops in record-breaking
10 numbers. VETS administers three core TAP employment
11 workshops: the one-day Employment Fundamentals of Career
12 Transition Workshop, the two-day DOL Employment Workshop,
13 and the two-day Career and Credentialing Exploration
14 Workshop.

15 In FY 2022, we provided instructions to over 266,000
16 participants, which is over a 40 percent increase from the
17 previous workshop record in FY 2021. And our participant
18 survey results are very encouraging. In FY 2023, 97 percent
19 of participants indicated they would use what they learned
20 in their own transition planning, and 95 percent reported
21 that their confidence in transition planning was enhanced.

22 Second, VETS is leading the way to transform the TAP
23 employment space. Via the VETS Employer Outreach Program
24 VETS is also asking U.S. employers to participate in the DoD
25 SkillBridge Program. Last year, employers provided 22,548

1 employment-related DoD SkillBridge opportunities to service
2 members across all services.

3 And in response to consistent feedback that service
4 members want more personalized support beyond the classroom
5 environment, VETS created the Employment Navigator and
6 Partnership Pilot, or ENPP. Since its launch in 2021, at 13
7 Military installations, ENPP has served about 13,000
8 participants, and preliminary data shows that ENPP
9 participants earn higher wages than those who did not
10 participate in the ENPP.

11 Third, VETS's pilot programs are a huge success. For
12 example, as of March 31, 2023, 96 percent of ENPP survey
13 respondents reported positive feelings after meeting with
14 their employment navigator and would recommend ENPP to a
15 friend or colleague. Additionally, 98 percent felt ENPP
16 partners met or exceeded their employment-related
17 expectations.

18 And our off-based transition training pilot provides
19 veterans and their spouses workshops modeled after our TAP
20 curriculum at locations across the active duty Military
21 installations in areas with high veteran unemployment in ten
22 pilot states so that they can get additional post-separation
23 assistance when they need it.

24 Fourth, VETS will leverage data to improve TAP
25 outcomes. Traditionally, VETS has only had access to data

1 about TAP workshops and those workshop participants.
2 However, new initiatives such as ENPP have enabled VETS to
3 access employment outcome information on our transitioning
4 service members through a National Directory of New Hires at
5 the Department of Health and Human Services. DOL will
6 leverage this information to improve program delivery and
7 employment outcomes, and we look forward to sharing the
8 outcomes of our research with our partners and stakeholders
9 in the future.

10 In conclusion, our long-term strategic goal for TAP is
11 for the nation to recognize military service as a path to
12 high-quality, civilian careers. The future of the country's
13 All-Volunteer Force across the Armed Services depends on
14 this recognition, and we look forward to working with the
15 committees to ensure all veterans can secure a good job that
16 will provide them with career advancement opportunities.

17 Thank you again for the invitation to participate in
18 this hearing with my colleagues from VA, DoD, and the GAO.
19 And I welcome your questions.

20 [The prepared statement of Mr. Rodriguez follows:]

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1 Chairman Tester. Yeah. Thank you for your testimony,
2 Mr. Rodriguez.

3 Next up from Government Accounting -- Government
4 Accountability Office, we have got John Sawyer, Director of
5 Education, Workforce, and Income Security.

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1 recommendations on these programs. I am pleased to report
2 that VA implemented our Solid Start recommendation to
3 further collaborate with veteran service organizations to
4 identify and address outreach gaps for hard-to-reach
5 veterans. As a result, VA increased its rate of successful
6 outreach to younger veterans and continues to regularly
7 coordinate with VSOs to enhance its overall outreach.

8 The remaining recommendations were directed at DoD and
9 its service branches. For example, we found that DoD's
10 credentialing programs lacked adequate evidence to show that
11 the programs were working. As a result, we recommended that
12 DoD more fully assess the effectiveness of its credentialing
13 programs. DoD agreed and expects to implement this
14 recommendation in fiscal year 2025.

15 The remaining recommendations were issued in our
16 December 2022 report on DoD's Transition Assistance Program.
17 In that report, we found that attendance in the tailored
18 two-day classes increased significantly since 2016.
19 However, the service branches waived over half of its
20 transitioning service members from attending them. Per
21 Service Branch policies, service members who need maximum
22 transition support must attend a two-day class, but we found
23 that nearly a quarter of them did not.

24 And finally, we found that most transitioning service
25 members, 70 percent did not start TAP at least one year in

1 advance, as generally required. While the service branches
2 and the TAP Policy Office collect and review performance
3 information on two-day class attendance and timeliness, they
4 do not fully leverage this information to understand and
5 improve results. We believe that better understanding root
6 causes for attendance and timeliness results would help DoD
7 improve service members' ability to benefit from the full
8 range of transition resources available to them.

9 Effectively addressing the outstanding recommendations
10 would help DoD reasonably assure that every service member
11 who leaves the Military receives the best possible chance to
12 succeed as they transition back to civilian life.

13 This concludes my oral statement. I would be happy to
14 respond to any questions.

15 [The prepared statement of Mr. Sawyer follows:]
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1 Chairman Tester. Thank you for your statement. Thank
2 the whole panel for their statements. There are two panels
3 today. I would ask the members on the rostrum, and we get
4 four minutes to ask questions. So get your good questions
5 up so we don't run over, because otherwise, this would be an
6 incredibly long hearing, not that it shouldn't be because it
7 is important.

8 I am going to start my questions with you, Mr. Sawyer,
9 since you are warmed up. In your review of the transition
10 process, did you identify -- you talked about they didn't
11 start to -- many of them didn't start transition one year in
12 advance; did you identify the reasons why?

13 Mr. Sawyer. Thank you for that question, Chairman
14 Tester. In our report, we did not specifically identify
15 reasons why individuals were not starting the Transition
16 Assistance Program one year -- at least one year in advance
17 of their anticipated separation or transition date. But
18 what we did find is that there is information available to
19 DoD to allow them to assess the results, and that is why we
20 recommended that they identify the root causes to try to
21 understand.

22 Chairman Tester. So we will go to you, Mr. Vazirani.
23 How does the DoD hold commanders, or does it hold commanders
24 accountable for providing service members the need for
25 transition, the time they need for transition?

1 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, thank you. The DoD is holding,
2 or observing and watching what the commanders are doing.
3 And so we do that through collecting data on the Transition
4 Assistance Program. We have compliance measures and
5 timeliness measures, we measure compliance across eight
6 domains, and we measure timeliness whether the service
7 member starts 365 days in advance.

8 Chairman Tester. And what are you seeing with those
9 measurements?

10 Mr. Vazirani. What we are seeing is, as has been
11 reported, about 30 percent are starting on time. We know
12 that we have to make improvements there. We are providing
13 that data to the services. And one of the things that we
14 are also doing is, at the assessment at the end of TAP,
15 understanding if there are barriers to that timeliness. And
16 what we are finding is that those barriers tend to be in the
17 area of three categories: involuntary separations which are
18 happening within that 365-day time period, mission
19 requirements, and then also personal decisions.

20 Chairman Tester. So you are in a tough position
21 because everybody on this roster knows the Military needs
22 every person they can get and keep every person that they
23 have available to them. So I think the last thing you want
24 to talk about is transitioning folks out of the Military.
25 But I think it is important that this is a group effort. It

1 is why everybody is here today. We have got you
2 representing the DoD, we have got Jacobs representing the
3 VA, we have got the folks on this panel that give us the
4 full gamut. We have got a massive problem that has been
5 around for a long time in mental health with the folks that
6 are coming out. And the statistics that I read in my
7 opening statement show that this is really most prevalent in
8 enlisted members.

9 So do you have; do you have, before I move on -- just
10 real quickly, Mr. Vazirani, do you have any ideas on how we
11 can make it better while keeping our numbers up in the
12 Military?

13 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, as the Secretary said, mental
14 health is health, and we are very focused on assessing the
15 mental health of service members and ensuring their mental
16 health throughout their time of service, through the
17 congressionally mandated suicide prevention response.

18 Chairman Tester. Yes.

19 Mr. Vazirani. We have implemented, we are implementing
20 a program looking across and implementing a public health
21 approach, ensuring that we are fostering a supportive
22 environment, that we are addressing stigma, that we are
23 improving the delivery of behavioral health care, and that
24 we are revising suicide prevention training so that
25 commanders and our first-line leaders understand the signs

1 of where a service member may have concerns about their
2 mental health or behavioral health.

3 Chairman Tester. Thank you. I will go to Chairman
4 Reed, and then Ranking Member Moran.

5 Chairman Reed. Thank you very much, Chairman Tester.

6 Quickly, Mr. Vazirani, what steps are you taking to get
7 compliance with the statutory 365-day sign-up? There are
8 some circumstances in which you can't, i.e. someone who is
9 terminated from duty prior to that time period? But what
10 are you doing specifically?

11 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, one of the things that we are
12 doing is we are in the process of integrating a single data
13 repository that will allow for that measurement and
14 providing that information back to the Military Services and
15 to commanders. And when we think about the accountability
16 portion of this, we try to think about this non-
17 accountability necessarily from a punitive standpoint, but
18 from what can we learn? Are we understanding the best
19 practices? And are we sharing those best practices across
20 the services?

21 Chairman Reed. Well, thank you. One of my experiences
22 is that the transition from uniform to civilian, DoD to VA,
23 the most challenging aspect is medical health care. I
24 recall going up to Walter Reed in 2000, visiting and finding
25 people who were there for six or seven months trying to get

1 their VA eligibility or disability status to a level that
2 meets the Military level. And the other issue, just the
3 first step. Have we successfully combined electronic
4 medical records between the VA and the Department of Defense
5 yet?

6 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, the Department of Defense has
7 completed the deployment of the electronic health record
8 within Kronos, with the exception of the Lovell Center in
9 Chicago, and we are working with our partners at the VA to
10 implement that. We are taking all of the lessons we have
11 learned through the Kronos implementation and applying that
12 to ensure that we have a successful implementation at
13 Lovell.

14 Chairman Reed. But we are not operational yet; are we?

15 Mr. Vazirani. We are not operational between the two
16 systems; however, we do have visibility, so there is a
17 sharing of information between DoD and VA. So while the
18 electronic health record is not operational, there is a
19 sharing of information to coordinate that care, and ensure
20 continuity of care.

21 Chairman Reed. Well, I would encourage you. I mean,
22 this is slightly off-topic, but not entirely. I would
23 expedite that. It is something going on now for a decade or
24 more, and that would, I think, help smooth out the
25 transition dramatically.

1 And what are the primary chokepoints, Mr. Jacobs,
2 Secretary, between VA in terms of healthcare? I understand
3 that VA does a separate independent disability assessment;
4 is that true, that differs from the Department of Defense?

5 Mr. Jacobs. We have a joint program called IDES, when
6 a service member is -- when they have a condition that
7 impedes their service, where we can do a joint disability
8 process. But for anyone applying for VA disability
9 compensation, that is a separate and distinct approach. And
10 the benefits that we provide, in terms of disability
11 compensation, are not only a recognition of the impact of
12 the individual service, but they are also a gateway to other
13 benefits. They impact healthcare eligibility, and the
14 criteria, the priority group within healthcare. It also can
15 inform eligibility for other benefits and make connections.

16 Chairman Reed. But the reality is that a DoD physician
17 could give someone an 80 percent disability rating, that the
18 VA would independently rate?

19 Mr. Jacobs. We are providing independent assessments
20 based on our rating schedule for disability compensation
21 purposes.

22 Chairman Reed. I think that is something that deserves
23 further coordination, and maybe even legislative support. I
24 think that would be helpful. Thank you. I know this is a
25 very challenging situation. But the other point, too, I

1 presume, and I have exceeded my time. Just very quickly.
2 There is a mandate for an information session on medical
3 health care opportunities that are specifically designed for
4 the retiring veteran?

5 Mr. Jacobs. Yes. And the one-day VA TAP Course that
6 we provide, we include information about health care, in
7 addition to the full suite of other benefits.

8 Chairman Reed. Thank you.

9 Chairman Tester. Ranking Member Moran.

10 Senator Moran. Chairman, thank you.

11 Secretary Vazirani, both of my colleagues who preceded
12 me in asking questions have highlighted the need for, and I
13 think our view that the Department of Defense further
14 emphasize and act more expeditiously. Would you confirm to
15 me that you understand and support the value of this
16 transition program for the benefit of the servicemen and
17 women who serve today and the veterans they will be
18 tomorrow? And tell me what the impediment in the Department
19 of Defense and the branches is toward moving more
20 expeditiously to meet the requirements of the statute?

21 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, I do confirm our commitment to
22 taking care of people and ensuring that service members make
23 a successful transition so that they are successful; as a
24 veteran as well. We are working with the Military
25 Departments and Services to make sure that they have the

1 information available about the starting of TAP and the
2 completion of TAP, providing that information, creating
3 dashboards that the commanders have available to them, and
4 their leaders have available to them, so that we have a
5 clear understanding of if there are any barriers to TAP and
6 addressing those barriers.

7 Senator Moran. What, if any, is the pushback or the
8 lack of enthusiasm for complying with the law by those you
9 are informing?

10 Mr. Vazirani. Sir, we have not heard any pushback
11 regarding compliance with the law. I think the one thing
12 that we do is we trust our commanders to ensure that they
13 are balancing the readiness of their unit with the needs of
14 the individual. The one thing that we do understand, and we
15 have been taking advantage of, is this full year to plan for
16 transition so that the service member has time to customize
17 that approach for their expectations and for their needs.

18 Senator Moran. Mr. Sawyer, you highlighted, in your
19 testimony, and in response to Senator Tester about the data,
20 including the lack of two-day attendance as being waived.
21 What the plan at GAO to try to push the services to take
22 statutory mandate seriously, and decrease the utilization of
23 their waiver authority?

24 Mr. Sawyer. Thank you for that question, sir. Now, in
25 our report we did not direct any recommendations towards the

1 waivers, we did notice that for some 53 percent of those
2 that were transitioning that waivers were granted. We are
3 not sure why that occurred. Our scope did not allow us to
4 investigate that. However, we did see that in tier three,
5 those that are designated as having the greatest risk of a
6 successful transition that some 22 percent of those did not
7 take the class at all. And that is why we recommended that,
8 spend some time, DoD should spend some time evaluating the
9 root causes. Is it commander support? Is it the culture
10 change? Is it mission requirements? But what other reasons
11 that are driving this?

12 Senator Moran. Is the timing of your recommendations
13 and the response to your recommendations such that we should
14 see further progress at the DoD, or the VA, or the
15 Department of Labor in response to your recommendations? Or
16 is this the course of business at the moment?

17 Mr. Sawyer. To answer that question, based on our
18 follow-up and discussions that we have had with DoD and VA,
19 they are moving towards addressing these recommendations and
20 issues that we have --

21 Senator Moran. So GAO feels comfortable with the
22 progress that those two Departments are making?

23 Mr. Sawyer. We --

24 Senator Moran. All right. Let me ask you this
25 question: Should I feel comfortable with the progress that

1 these two Departments are making?

2 Mr. Sawyer. I think you should feel comfortable with
3 the progress. However, we have recommendations, and we are
4 going to monitor the corrective actions, because this
5 recommendation that is dealing with identifying root causes
6 is a tough recommendation, that you really have to go below
7 the surface and really try to identify reasons why these
8 timeliness and attendance results are such that they are.

9 Senator Moran. Mr. Sawyer, if I don't reach out to
10 you, would you reach out to me with any concerns that you
11 have in the recommendations being followed?

12 Mr. Sawyer. Absolutely, sir.

13 Senator Moran. Thank you, sir.

14 Chairman Tester. In lieu of Ranking Member Wicker,
15 Senator Fischer.

16 Senator Fischer. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

17 Mr. Vazirani, within the TAP, how much leeway is given
18 to individual TAP offices to teach the curriculum so they
19 can tailor it to their needs? For example, if you have a
20 service member who is going to sign up again, but that
21 doesn't show on their records yet, they still have to attend
22 the week-long class; is that correct?

23 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, if I can clarify your question.
24 If a service member has gone through TAP, transitioned and
25 then come back into service, is that the question, sorry?

1 Senator Fischer. No. No. If they are still in the
2 service, but with the requirements and the timeline that is
3 there, they have to start the process, but yet their records
4 haven't kept up with their intentions, that they plan to
5 reenlist, for example. Are the programs given any kind of
6 flexibility to be able to tailor it to certain instances?

7 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, the program is designed to
8 tailor to each individual. Each individual goes through an
9 individual assessment, and they are tiered. They then have
10 a separation counseling to help them understand which
11 elements of the TAP program will be beneficial for them. At
12 the end of the program, there is also a capstone, which the
13 commander will sign off on completion. If during that time
14 period, the service member decides they want to stay in
15 service, then there would not be a need to complete the
16 program.

17 Senator Fischer. Okay. Do you think you have the
18 program appropriately staffed to handle the current number
19 of Military personnel?

20 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, we do believe we have the
21 current level of staffing correct. I think as we continue
22 to learn more about the program, we will continue to evolve
23 that and determine whether or not additional authorizations
24 are required to fulfill the program. But at this point, we
25 do believe that we have the right staffing.

1 Senator Fischer. We have seen a GAO Study from
2 December 2022, and it found that nearly 25 percent of
3 service members who needed that maximum support didn't
4 attend the mandatory two-day class. So what steps do you
5 see the Department needs to take or are you taking now that
6 would address that?

7 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, we are taking steps to get a
8 better understanding of why service members are electing not
9 to participate. There are service members who want -- as I
10 indicated earlier, the personal decisions why they wouldn't.
11 So we are trying to get a better understanding of that. We
12 are also ensuring that --

13 Senator Fischer. What specifically are you doing?

14 Mr. Vazirani. So through the TAP assessment, we are
15 digging into that and understanding those barriers. And
16 then the other thing, through the commander's capstone,
17 getting a better understanding of why that service member
18 would not want to participate in that program.

19 Mr. Jacobs. And Senator Fischer, if I might add; one
20 of the things that we are doing is we are recognizing that
21 TAP is a commander's program. We are creating a visual
22 management tool so that commanders have greater visibility
23 of their transitioning service members. It is work that Mr.
24 Boerstler is leading through a human design element. We are
25 prototyping that tool, and if it is appropriate, I would

1 love for him to share a little bit about that.

2 Senator Fischer. That would be great. When you say
3 you are prototyping it, do you have a pilot program in
4 place? Are you using it?

5 Mr. Boerstler. Yes, Senator. We are currently
6 actually testing it this week with command teams. So this
7 can not only include the commanders themselves, but the
8 senior enlisted personnel that are supporting the
9 commanders' decisions. It will give them much greater
10 visibility, as Mr. Jacobs mentioned, to actually see which
11 units that they oversee are in compliance with the 12-month
12 or 24-month requirements.

13 This is a decision that has been co-designed from all
14 of our agencies, plus a few more, including all six service
15 branches, and has been taken through our governance process.
16 So it is underway and it should be available next year.

17 Senator Fischer. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
18 Chairman Tester. Senator Hassan.

19 [Technical issue.]

20 Senator Hassan. -- really help build that sense of
21 community that is so important. Now, I will start with a
22 question to you, Mr. Vazirani. Senator Cramer and I, as you
23 know, worked together last year to pass into law of the
24 Solid Start Act, which requires the VA to call each veteran
25 three times within their first year of separating from the

1 Military to make sure that they know about and understand
2 the VA benefits that are available to them.

3 In your written testimony, you referred to the year
4 before separation and the year after separation as the
5 critical transition period. The Solid Start Program helps
6 with the second half of that critical transition period.
7 How can we provide a similarly tailored approach to service
8 members in the first half of that transition period as they
9 prepare to separate from the Military, to help them plan for
10 and work towards their long-term goals post-Military
11 service, including for future careers? And I hope you were
12 able to hear that. Apparently, there was some difficulty
13 with this speaker, this microphone.

14 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, thank you for that question, I
15 was able to hear the question. I appreciate it. As I
16 indicated, and as I said earlier, we certainly believe that
17 mental health is health, and throughout the service members'
18 cycle of service, we do have checks on their mental health,
19 during that 365 days in the transition time period. We have
20 worked with our interagency partners in developing an
21 enterprise individual assessment, and that covers nine
22 different domains. As we look at those, that is how we
23 understand how to tailor the program, the Transition
24 Assistance Program, for that service member.

25 Senator Hassan. Well, thank you. And I hope that

1 includes some real outreach similar to what we are trying to
2 accomplish in Solid Start, so that everything doesn't rest
3 with the service member to initiate the transition services.

4 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, it does. And in that, in that
5 if a service member has had, through that mental health
6 assessment, or interaction with behavioral health, and
7 mental health, they are referred to the In-Transition
8 Program which helps them to understand what services would
9 be available, and help them transition.

10 Senator Hassan. I understand that, and my time is
11 short, so I will follow up with you. But it is not just
12 about mental health, right? I mean there are other things
13 that veterans need, and they need that reach forward. So
14 let us move to one other question, because I continually
15 hear how service members feel unprepared to transition into
16 their new careers, or move to new places, because they done
17 have connections with local community, something New
18 Hampshire is proactively trying to deal with.

19 So for example, James Roberg of Antrim, New Hampshire,
20 shared with my office his experience working for the New
21 Hampshire Department of Military Affairs, and Veteran
22 Services, this State Office has developed a variety of
23 resources to help transitioning service members and veterans
24 including a research book full of available state and local
25 resources. Like many other transitioning service members,

1 James had no idea that there was a State Office like this in
2 New Hampshire, and yet he eventually ended up working there,
3 and to this day continues to help educate other service
4 members on employment opportunities in the state. In New
5 Hampshire we have worked to help address this gap in
6 knowledge, because we value veterans in our community, and
7 recognize their contributions to our workforce.

8 So I would ask that you guys respond to this in
9 writing, because I am running out of time. But I am very
10 interested in how we can ensure that more service members
11 get directly connected to state and local resources that can
12 provide meaningful connections with the communities that the
13 veteran plans to reside in, before the veteran makes that
14 transition. Thank you all so much for your work.

15 Chairman Tester. There will be a number of questions
16 for the record. And I would hope that you all answer them
17 in a timely manner.

18 Senator Scott?

19 Senator Scott. Thank you, Chairman. First off, I want
20 to thank each of you for being here; thank you for caring
21 about our service men and women, and their families, and
22 thank you for what you try to do every day.

23 I am just going to give you a couple experiences I had.
24 I was in the Navy and got out. Do you think anybody before
25 talked to me about what I was going to do afterwards? Do

1 you think anybody ever called me afterwards? Nobody, ever,
2 nobody ever. In 2011 I became Governor of Florida, and
3 right after I won the election I welcomed some National
4 Guard members back from overseas, and 30 percent
5 unemployment. Now, unemployment was bad at the time, but 30
6 percent unemployment, and their experiences, you know,
7 nobody was talking to them about how to get a job.

8 So we put a lot of effort into -- in our state into,
9 one, making sure people could get a job, and then a variety
10 of other issues. We also had a state agency that just did
11 Veteran Affairs, and the thing that surprised me the most,
12 it was there was no coordination with the federal
13 government, I mean, like none. They wouldn't give us any
14 information on who was getting out, and so, I mean there is
15 a big opportunity to help our families.

16 And so my goal as Governor was to make Florida the
17 place where you want to serve; and number two is, make it
18 the place where you want to retire. And so we did a variety
19 of things. And I have been up here five years, and I am
20 really proud of the things that the Armed Services Committee
21 has done. The 2019 NDAA established programs for counseling
22 Pathways, for self-assessments, for individualized initial
23 counseling, tier assignments that reflect the service
24 members' transition preparedness, revised curriculum, and
25 improvement to the Transition Assistance Program,

1 There is just a lot of -- I think this Armed Services
2 Committee has done a lot of good things, but we are here,
3 you know, in my state there is a lot of news from our
4 Veterans Services organizations, and also from the GAO
5 Report in 2022 that indicates it is not working the way it
6 should. And then we had a meeting yesterday, and you are
7 absolutely committed to getting this done.

8 But the GAO said that 90 percent of the transition
9 troops participated, but one-quarter did not even attend the
10 mandatory two-day class. So there has to be a lot of things
11 to make that happen. Florida is home to -- we have 21
12 military bases, three in the flight commands. I always
13 think it is the best place to serve, but I think there is a
14 lot of opportunities that we have to make it better.

15 So here, let me get to my questions, and I think we did
16 everything we could. I mean, we have waived every fee for
17 spouses. Probably one the biggest things we did was parents
18 that had a child in the Medicaid, and needed them to have a
19 Medicaid waiver, they would go to the bottom of the list,
20 mostly. And we changed it, they went to the top of the
21 list. That changed people's lives a lot.

22 So can any of you talk to me about how you work with
23 your state counterparts? Because I assume most states have
24 what I had; there is a state agency, and how do you work
25 with them now?

1 Mr. Jacobs. Yeah. Thank you, Senator, for that
2 question. And I have to say you have an excellent veteran
3 leader and advocate in "Hammer", Hammer Hartsell, who is the
4 Lead of the State Department of Veterans Affairs in Florida.

5 Senator Scott. Yeah.

6 Mr. Jacobs. It seems like every time we have an
7 engagement, he is there. We actively work with all of the
8 State Departments of Veterans Affairs through the NASDVA
9 Program. And one of the things that we are doing through
10 the upgrade to our VA TAP curriculum, is we are including at
11 the end of our day, for the last 45 to 60 minutes, a portion
12 of the day where accredited VSOs in State Departments of
13 Veterans Affairs can directly engage with transitioning
14 service members, because we know that personal relationship
15 is important. That when veterans go home they are provided
16 with 200 pages of material on VA benefits and healthcare
17 alone.

18 There are a lot of questions, and they have incredible
19 advocates in both accredited VSOs and state and local
20 government who are there, and whose sole purpose is to help
21 connect them to those earned benefits. So we actively work
22 with them, we actively seek input and feedback on our
23 programs. I get feedback from Hammer personally, when
24 something is not going well, or he wants to say: Hey, you
25 know, your staff did a great job, you should recognize them.

1 And so it is a really important part of our operating model,
2 and they are really valued partners.

3 Senator Scott. Thanks. Thanks for what you guys are
4 doing.

5 Chairman Tester. Senator Shaheen.

6 Senator Shaheen. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank
7 you all for being here. I want to make sure I understand
8 some of the testimony earlier with respect to the TAP
9 program. Mr. Rodriguez, I understand you to say that vets
10 are attending TAP in record numbers; was that correct?

11 Mr. Rodriguez. Yes, it is. I am talking about the DOL
12 version of TAP, that one-day TAP course.

13 Senator Shaheen. Okay. So that is a different TAP
14 course than --

15 Mr. Rodriguez. Well, it is a single day that is
16 separate from the DoD and the Veterans Affairs days.

17 Senator Shaheen. And how do you coordinate with what
18 DoD is doing?

19 Mr. Rodriguez. So we work seamlessly together as part
20 of the TAP Executive Committee, the Joint Executive
21 Committee, we work together to ensure that TAP is a seamless
22 transfer of information and share of resources to better
23 prepare that service member when they are preparing to
24 transition out of the Military.

25 Senator Shaheen. So if I am a service member, can I go

1 to the DOL TAP rather than DoD TAP?

2 Mr. Rodriguez. It is the same TAP, so there are three
3 mandatory days: one day DoD, one day Department of Veterans
4 Affairs, one day DOL, and then there are two additional
5 optional days that a service member can take.

6 Senator Shaheen. So what percentage are actually
7 attending DOL's TAP?

8 Mr. Rodriguez. I don't have the percentage, Senator,
9 but I can tell you the numbers. Roughly 148,560 service
10 members are going through the one-day DOL TAP.

11 Senator Shaheen. But I understood you to say, Mr.
12 Sawyer, that 70 percent of members of the Military who are
13 getting out didn't attend. Are you talking about a
14 different program?

15 Mr. Sawyer. Thank you. The 70 percent relates to
16 those starting the program at least one year in advance of
17 their transition date.

18 Senator Shaheen. I can understand why veterans might
19 be confused because the coordination is challenging. And as
20 we heard from virtually both -- all the Chair and Ranking
21 Members talked about the mental health challenges and the
22 number of veterans who are at risk of suicide.

23 And Mr. -- is it Boerstler? I understand that you have
24 worked with our European allies about how they administer
25 their transition assistant programs. Do veterans -- non-

1 U.S. veterans face the same risk of suicide in their first
2 year as U.S. veterans?

3 Mr. Boerstler. Senator, I would have to take that
4 question for the record because we don't -- understand their
5 methodologies and how they measure that rate, but I do know
6 that there are some great programs that our allies use as
7 well as our own. But I think we still have the best system.

8 Senator Shaheen. So when you talk about those great
9 programs, are there things that we should be adopting from
10 what our allies are doing?

11 Mr. Boerstler. I do think that we -- as I mentioned,
12 Senator, we do have the best system when we compare to a lot
13 of our allies and the way that they execute these programs.
14 There are some interesting use cases, particularly in the
15 United Kingdom and their Career Transition Partnership, but
16 in the intervening years, as Assistant Secretary Rodriguez
17 mentioned, the ENPP program for the Department of Labor
18 almost mirrors what the United Kingdom has been doing. It
19 has been very successful. So I think there is a lot we can
20 learn from each other.

21 Senator Shaheen. I appreciate that.

22 Mr. Jacobs, one of the things that we are hearing in
23 New Hampshire is that too many veterans are not taking
24 advantage of the VA benefits, particularly for mental
25 health. It is the theme that everybody has referenced in

1 all of the questions. So what can we do better?

2 Mr. Jacobs. Thank you very much for that question. We
3 know that when veterans connect and access their earned
4 benefits, whether it is disability compensation, home loans,
5 education, or their VA health care, they have better health
6 outcomes, they have better economic opportunities, and it
7 decreases the risk for suicide.

8 Senator Shaheen. Right. Okay. How do we do that?

9 Mr. Jacobs. Correct. So we are aggressively
10 continuing to do more outreach. So during the transition
11 period, we are identifying where there are veterans
12 transitioning service members at risk and providing a warm
13 handover. We have benefits counselors, we have Military
14 service coordinators, and there are VHA liaisons on Military
15 treatment facilities.

16 Part of the way that we are doing that is through the
17 Solid Start Program, where we are calling transitioning
18 service members three times in the first year after they
19 leave the Military, at the 90-, 180-, and 365-day marks.
20 And the goal of this program when it was created, was to
21 address the very real mental health concerns that we are all
22 focused on. And the program is structured in a way where it
23 is open-ended, so it is really tailored around responding to
24 the veterans' needs.

25 Do they need a connection with a mental health

1 counselor? And then we can connect them to a Vet Center, a
2 CBOC, a medical center. Do they need a status update on
3 their claim? Do they need assistance with their claim? Do
4 they need help pursuing housing? And so we have
5 opportunities like that. But it is also, to the point that
6 was made earlier, it is Buddy Check Week. It is promoting
7 opportunities for us, not only as a government, but as a
8 broader society, to support one another, to know the signs,
9 to look out for, so that when we see a fellow veteran, a
10 friend in crisis, you know that there is a place to help
11 them, even if you don't have the resources to do it
12 yourself.

13 Senator Shaheen. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

14 Chairman Tester. Senator Schmitt.

15 Senator Schmitt. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you
16 all for being here, and the work that you do every day,
17 helping the folks that served us in Missouri. We are really
18 proud. We have got three bases. We have got Whiteman Air
19 Force Base, we have got Fort Leonard Wood, and we have got
20 Rosecrans, which is the Air National Guard Base in Northwest
21 Missouri. And so those folks that have committed themselves
22 to this country, they deserve all the support and the best
23 support, which is why we are all here. So thank you for
24 that.

25 I wanted to ask just two questions, and I will just

1 throw it out whoever wants to answer. The first is Senator
2 Ossoff and I co-sponsored a bill that would support military
3 spouses as they are being reassigned to ease some of the
4 regulatory burdens that exist as they are moving from place
5 to place. What are just one or two things that we can do
6 better to ease that sort of burden? As they want to
7 continue their careers or business ventures as they are
8 moving from place to place?

9 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, if I may, I will start. First
10 of all, thank you very much for the work that you have done
11 to support military spouse employment. The one thing that
12 we are finding is really effective for military spouses is
13 the compacts and encouraging the states to sign on to
14 compacts. That portability, not only benefits an active-
15 duty -- the spouse of an active-duty service member, it
16 supports spouses of veterans, it supports all Americans.
17 And so the more that we can get states to sign on to those
18 compacts, I think we will find that we will have greater
19 portability.

20 Senator Schmitt. Thank you. I don't know if anybody
21 else had anything to add to that.

22 Mr. Rodriguez. Senator, I will add a few things there.

23 Senator Schmitt. Okay.

24 Mr. Rodriguez. One of the biggest challenges is our
25 military spouses are at a 31 percent unemployment rate, so

1 they have the highest unemployment rate of any category
2 affiliated with the military community. So we need to
3 figure out a way to protect military spouses' employment
4 when they are transferring from duty station to duty
5 station, or if their spouse is Guard or Reserve, and they
6 are called to active duty, and that spouse has to take time
7 away to take care of their families, or whatever things that
8 come as part of life when someone is active duty, or called
9 to active duty.

10 So I think there are ways to protect military spouses,
11 to give them the courage to identify as military spouses,
12 and finally -- and encourage employers to actually employ
13 these military spouses and help retain that spousal
14 employment when someone is called to active duty.

15 Mr. Jacobs. And I will add, at the risk of being a bit
16 parochial, we are actively looking to hire military spouses
17 at VA. We know they are incredible mission-oriented
18 teammates that need sometimes additional flexibility to
19 enable them to continue to support our mission while moving
20 and in partnership with their spouse. So we are actively
21 working to do that from a VA perspective as well.

22 Senator Schmitt. I am sure this is probably true for
23 other senators, but I know that as I get around Missouri and
24 talk to employers, they are -- I mean, they are looking for
25 skilled people. The labor shortage obviously is a broad

1 issue. But as it relates to Military folks, and this
2 question has been asked in a few different ways but you
3 know, it is the United States Senate. Just because a
4 question has been asked, it doesn't mean it has been asked
5 by everybody.

6 Your sort of take on: What are a couple of things that
7 we can do better to make sure that, you know, our Military
8 servicemen and women, while they are in active duty, can
9 avail themselves to as much of that training as possible as
10 they transition? Because there is a great need out there,
11 and I know that a lot of employers are really looking for
12 people who served the country as well. What are just a
13 couple of takeaways that we can take back home and work on?

14 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, I will start on that. As we
15 think about the opportunities for military -- the service
16 member and the military spouse to gain employment, or to be
17 successful as they go beyond, I think encouraging employers
18 to get involved in the programs that we have, whether it is
19 SkillBridge, or our Military Spouse Employment Program,
20 those would be helpful. I think the other thing, sir, that
21 would be really helpful is if we can encourage more
22 Americans to talk about the value of service, and the
23 benefits, and how successful veterans are. That will help
24 us on the frontend as well as we encourage people to come
25 into service.

1 Mr. Jacobs. And I would just briefly add. You know,
2 one of the things I heard when I joined Hiring Our Heroes in
3 a community event with the health and life sciences industry
4 is that oftentimes companies will have incredible veteran
5 candidates. They may not have a position that they can
6 offer them, but they think it is a valuable resource. And
7 so it is making, kind of, that connective tissue a little
8 bit stronger so that they have got colleagues in industry
9 who they can refer those incredible candidates to, even if
10 they can't offer a position at that time.

11 Senator Schmitt. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
12 Chairman Tester. Senator Murray.

13 Senator Murray. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for
14 having this hearing. Thank you all for being here.

15 There is no question that our service members deserve a
16 seamless transition out of the Military to VA services. In
17 my home state of Washington, DoD went live with its own
18 electronic health records program back in 2017. It has its
19 own challenges, and I am sure you all know that when the VA
20 rolled out its EHR program, it was not working the way it
21 should have, and patient safety has been a very big concern.

22 So I want to make sure that DoD is working hand-in-hand
23 with VA so that we can truly have a seamless electronic
24 health record system that is available across both agencies
25 to serve service members and veterans alike.

1 Mr. Vazirani, I want to ask you, can you share some of
2 the lessons DoD has learned while you rolled out your EHR
3 system? And how did you earn back the trust with providers
4 and service members after you had significant periods of
5 system downtime?

6 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, thank you for that. As we have
7 rolled out our EHR, the things that we learned, particularly
8 through that first time period, the things that we -- the
9 barriers that we had in utilization, we have learned about
10 what we need to do from a usability standpoint to make the
11 EHR more usable for the healthcare provider. We have
12 learned about the training that we need to conduct to ensure
13 that there is a quick ramp-up on utilization. And those are
14 some of the things and some of the lessons that we have
15 learned and that we shared with our VA partners.

16 Senator Murray. Okay. I appreciate that. I wanted to
17 ask you about women's service members, because transitioning
18 out of the Military is a challenging experience for all
19 service members, but it is particularly difficult for women
20 who face additional barriers in the civilian world.
21 Everything from gender pay caps, to sexual harassment, lack
22 of access to childcare. And there was a study by Syracuse
23 University that 54 percent of women veterans who left the
24 service didn't feel prepared to navigate the resources
25 available to them in their local communities. That is

1 compared to 35 percent of male veterans.

2 Mr. Vazirani, has DoD tailored the Transition
3 Assistance Program at all for women service members?

4 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, we have. One of the things
5 that we do through that transition process, and particularly
6 in that -- understanding of what benefits are available, and
7 the care, we have tailored, particularly the education
8 around health benefits and how to access health benefits for
9 women. The other thing that we continue to do is focusing
10 on all veterans, but particularly for women, is to
11 understand, for those who may have come across or
12 encountered something along the spectrum of harm, the
13 resource is available to them there.

14 Senator Murray. Thank you.

15 Mr. Vazirani: So I will turn to maybe Mr. Jacobs.

16 Senator Murray. Very good.

17 Mr. Vazirani. And he could talk about what VA would?

18 Senator Murray. Yeah.

19 Mr. Jacobs. Senator, we have what is called The
20 Women's Health Transition Training Program, which provides
21 tailored support and information for transitioning service
22 members, includes gender-specific health care information as
23 well as information about how to access benefits in a timely
24 way. What I would say is, it is underutilized. So we are
25 working to try to get the word out and promote and encourage

1 more transitioning service members to take it, because we do
2 think it is a valuable resource.

3 Senator Murray. Okay. Thank you. And one last
4 question. In last year's Military Family Support
5 Programming Survey, 80 percent of the respondents said their
6 finances were a major source of stress, and more than half
7 of military and veteran families reported experiencing
8 barriers to savings over the previous two years. Twenty-two
9 percent of currently serving Military families, and 38
10 percent of Veteran's families have less than \$500 or no
11 emergency savings at all. I think financial literacy is
12 critically important.

13 And Mr. Vazirani, in my few seconds that I have left,
14 what is DoD doing, right now, to promote financial literacy
15 and making sure that it is an integral part of the
16 Transition Assistance Program?

17 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, one of the things we do is,
18 from the very outset, from the time a service member starts
19 in boot camp, we make sure they understand what financial
20 readiness resources are available to them. We provide
21 education, and training, and coaching, and access to
22 personal financial counselors throughout their time in
23 service.

24 Senator Murray. Okay. And if I can get a more
25 detailed response from you, I would really appreciate that.

1 Mr. Vazirani. Sure.

2 Senator Murray. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

3 Chairman Tester. Yeah. Senator Cotton.

4 Senator Cotton. Mr. Vazirani, I have heard reports
5 that former U.S. service members have been approached by
6 communist China and offered jobs that draw on their Military
7 expertise to aid the PLA. This is already happening with
8 some of our European partners, veterans, oftentimes through
9 professional military companies in third-world countries,
10 like South Africa. What steps, if any, has the Department
11 of Defense taken today, during the transition process, to
12 ensure that our troops are aware of this kind of activity,
13 and adequately prepared to resist these offers, especially
14 when done through intermediaries?

15 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, we continue to be concerned
16 about the pacing threat of China, and the approach that they
17 take to try and undermine what we are doing. We have
18 provided guidance through the Military Departments on when
19 our service members are -- there is outreach from mal
20 actors. And Senator, I will be happy to get back to you
21 with the specific steps we have taken and the guidance we
22 provide.

23 Senator Cotton. Yeah, could you please get back to me,
24 in writing, on those steps, and also what mechanisms, if
25 any, you have in place to track these kinds of offers?

1 Because I do think it is a growing concern, like I said with
2 our European partners, but I worry about reports that it is
3 now occurring in the United States as well.

4 I believe that our Reserves play a crucial role in the
5 nation's defense by allowing the U.S. to retain critical
6 skills and talents in our services while also allowing
7 Active-Duty service members to transition into the Reserves;
8 unfortunately, like the rest of the Active-Duty Military,
9 the Reserves are facing historic shortfalls as well. Has
10 the DoD studied barriers to transitioning into the Reserves
11 from the Active Duty?

12 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, that is, as far as addressing
13 barriers to transitioning to the Reserves, we are looking at
14 that. We want to ensure that we -- particularly as we
15 continue to rely on the Reserve component, one of the things
16 we have been doing, we brought on our first Chief Talent
17 Management Officer. An area that we are looking at is
18 permeability between the Active and the Reserve component
19 and providing that opportunity for service members to move
20 from one to the other, Active to Reserve, but also the
21 opportunity to come back into the Active component.

22 Senator Cotton. Okay. In the studies, has the DoD
23 identified any specific issues that create challenges for
24 transitioning troops who may have gone into the Reserves,
25 but decided not to?

1 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, if I can take that for the
2 record, and I will get back to you with the specific
3 findings?

4 Senator Cotton. You may. One final and related
5 question; obviously, we want to make sure that every man and
6 woman who wears the country's uniform, and wants to leave
7 the service is set up for success in civilian life, or in
8 the Reserves if they choose to go there. But I am also
9 curious about barriers to remaining -- I shouldn't say
10 barriers -- drivers to transition when troops may have
11 stayed on active duty. So as you are studying the
12 challenges that they have in the transition process, have
13 you also studied the main issues that are driving their
14 desire to separate in the first place?

15 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, one of the things that we are
16 seeing now is we are seeing actually record levels of
17 retention.

18 Senator Cotton. Yeah.

19 Mr. Vazirani. And so we are benefiting from that, and
20 that is certainly helping us in end strength. One of the
21 areas that we have talked about during this panel that is a
22 driver for service members to get out, is military spouse
23 employment, and the opportunity for a service member's
24 military spouse to also have a successful career, and also
25 contribute to the family's financial readiness.

1 So that is an area that we are very -- we are working
2 very hard on to ensure that military spouses have career
3 opportunities to support their service member, particularly
4 as we look at our model, which typically requires the
5 service member to move every two to three years.

6 Senator Cotton. Okay. Thank you.

7 Chairman Tester. Senator Peters.

8 Senator Peters. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank
9 you to our witnesses here today. Thank you for your work in
10 this area. I think we can all agree that it is critical
11 that our veterans have the support they need as they
12 transition into civilian life.

13 Which is why it has been a priority of mine, to
14 introduce legislation that was signed into law to help
15 veterans who may have been wrongly given a less than
16 honorable discharge from the Military as a result of PTSD
17 and TBI that was simply not diagnosed; they exhibited
18 behaviors that led to a less than honorable discharge, and
19 yet those behaviors were a result of PTSD and traumatic
20 brain injury.

21 That is why my bill, which was signed into law in 2016,
22 allows for service members, who have been diagnosed with
23 PTSD, or TBI, or other related conditions in connection with
24 their service in the Military, they can more easily petition
25 to upgrade their status.

1 We know whether a veteran is entitled to VA benefits
2 depends largely on the discharge status that is assigned to
3 them. And VA benefits play an absolutely critical role in
4 the successful transition to civilian life. It remains a
5 key priority of mine that the Discharge Review Boards
6 continue to take these types of mental traumas into account
7 when they are reviewing these petitions. And to that end,
8 this year's NDAA included a provision that I authored,
9 calling on the GAO to complete a review of the Discharge
10 Review Board's implementation of the legislation.

11 But in order for veterans to access their newly earned
12 benefits through an upgrade, they first need to be made
13 aware of the opportunity to petition. That as they are
14 suffering from the trauma of PTSD and other mental traumas,
15 they don't need to do that in silence; they can seek out
16 help, but they need to be aware that it exists.

17 So Under Secretary Vazirani, and Under Secretary
18 Jacobs, could you each describe what your agencies are doing
19 to ensure those leaving or have already left Military
20 Service are aware of the opportunities to petition a
21 Discharge Review Board for an upgrade? And my second
22 question to each of you is, are there opportunities or
23 additional ways to communicate this option, perhaps through
24 the Transition Assistance Program? Whoever would like to go
25 first?

1 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, first of all, I appreciate the
2 efforts that you have made to ensure that service members
3 and veterans receive the benefits that they are entitled to.

4 We have been working with the Military Departments to
5 ensure that service members who have been discharged and
6 want to seek a change or correction to their record, or a
7 characterization of discharge are aware of those vehicles.
8 Each Military Department maintains their own website that
9 provides information about the discharge review process and
10 the Boards of Correction. We, in P&R, also maintain a site,
11 and then we work jointly with DoD -- excuse me -- with VA,
12 to maintain a website that outlines, and has an online tool
13 that will take an individual through the different steps
14 based on questions of what they are trying to change and how
15 to get to the right resource. And so we are working with
16 the VA on that.

17 At this point, I will turn to Mr. Jacobs.

18 Senator Peters. Thank you.

19 Mr. Jacobs. Yeah, Senator, thanks for your leadership
20 on this issue. We know that veterans with an OTH discharge
21 may be at higher risk for adverse outcomes, so we are
22 actively working to increase our engagement and outreach,
23 thanks in large part to Mr. Boerstler, who has worked to
24 create a journey map leveraging human-centered design to
25 understand where the pain points and the opportunities are

1 for us. And so we are using those insights.

2 We have had a couple of symposiums within the
3 interagency where we can look at the full lifecycle, but
4 also with veterans who have OTH discharges to understand
5 where there are challenges and where we can make
6 improvements. And finally, what I would say is, we are
7 working on a regulation. We have issued draft regulations,
8 and we are hoping to finalize that that might address some
9 of these issues.

10 Senator Peters. Well, I look forward to continuing to
11 work with you.

12 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, if I may?

13 Senator Peters. Yeah, please.

14 Mr. Vazirani. One of the things you asked, your second
15 question was what are we doing -- what else will we do?

16 Senator Peters. Right, proactively.

17 Mr. Vazirani. Yes, proactively. So what we are doing
18 is we are creating resources through our Military OneSource
19 Program to tape webinars that will outline the steps that a
20 service member would take. We are also developing a
21 learning tool online that service members -- and those will
22 be resources that service members will be exposed to during
23 the TAP process.

24 Senator Peters. Good. Great. Thank you.

25 Mr. Boerstler. And Senator, I would just like to add

1 that VA's Solid Start, our outbound call program, contacts
2 every single veteran, regardless of discharge type, to
3 ensure that they are equipped with the resources they need.

4 Senator Peters. Okay. Great. Thank you.

5 Chairman Tester. Senator Ernst.

6 Senator Ernst. Yes, thank you, Mr. Chair. And thanks
7 to all of our witnesses who are here today for your
8 testimony. We all know, and as you will witness from a lot
9 of the comments today, that leaving the service is very
10 complex, and it can be complicated at times, and I do
11 believe we all need to do our best for our country's best.
12 And that means supporting all transitioning service members
13 to be successful.

14 Many years ago, when I was a young woman, I actually
15 was part of the Army Career and Alumni Program, the old ACAP
16 program, and worked at the Job Assistance Center. So one of
17 my roles was educating members that were leaving the service
18 on job employment, how to write resumes, fill out job
19 applications. So I truly appreciated and enjoyed the time
20 that I had at Fort Benning working with those service
21 members that were separating. But I know that there is a
22 lot more that we need to do. So part of this, beyond all
23 the employment assistance, part of it is mental health
24 education, resource education.

25 And so Mr. Vazirani, the first year after discharge is

1 always, I think, the most difficult for those transitioning
2 members. And it comes with that increased risk of suicide.
3 I know my colleague, Senator Hassan, had mentioned the Buddy
4 Check Program. I was glad to partner with her on that
5 effort. But getting transitioning service members connected
6 to the post-service benefits and resources they need as
7 quickly as possible really has the potential to lower the
8 risk of suicide.

9 So to what extent does the Transition Assistance
10 Program provide service members other resources? Again,
11 beyond the employment, and beyond education resources, we
12 want to focus on those resources specifically for mental
13 health; what does that provide?

14 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, so through the Transition
15 Assistance Program, we do also want to ensure that the
16 service member has a successful transition, and so through
17 that assessment process, as we look across those different
18 domains, we try and understand where a service member may be
19 at risk, whether it is at risk of homelessness, whether it
20 is at risk because of mental health issues, whether it is at
21 risk because of spouse employment. So we try and tailor the
22 program to that service member.

23 I think another area that we have worked very closely
24 through the Joint Executive Council and in our interagency
25 partnership is the Benefits at Discharge, and we have made

1 that process electronic, where we are sharing information
2 with the VA now. A service member now can make that
3 application for benefits between 180 days and 90 days in
4 advance of separation, so that when they separate they will
5 have that benefit statement, and they will get that payment
6 earlier on. So that is an area that we have been
7 collaborating with the VA on. And I will turn to Mr.
8 Jacobs again.

9 Senator Ernst. Certainly.

10 Mr. Jacobs. And Senator, I have the benefit, the
11 participant's guide that all transitioning service members
12 get when they attend the VA's one-day TAP class, that
13 includes an overview that transitioning service members
14 actually write and try to tailor to their particular needs.
15 It includes opportunities for follow-up.

16 Senator Ernst. That is good.

17 Mr. Jacobs. We also have benefits advisers where we
18 can make that warm handoff, and other staff who are there to
19 help with some of the more personal questions that they may
20 not feel comfortable asking in a broader group.

21 Senator Ernst. Okay. Well, I truly appreciate that,
22 because I know back when I was working in that area, there
23 was a lot of work to be done. But I appreciate you closing
24 up that gap. One of the other areas is, of course, on help
25 with filing disability claims. I could go on and on, but is

1 there a way that those VA contract employees who are
2 teaching that VA curriculum at TAP, are they allowed,
3 legally, to assist with VA claims? And what would be some
4 resources or ways that we could assist there?

5 Mr. Jacobs. Yeah, no, thanks. One of the ways that we
6 are working to provide more assistance to help with the
7 filing of claims is through the upgrades to our TAP 6.0
8 Curriculum, which is going to launch in January. And
9 through that change, we are going to add at the end of every
10 day, between 45 and 60 minutes, for accredited VSOs, as well
11 as State Departments of Veterans Affairs, to come in and
12 speak directly to transitioning service members and their
13 families.

14 And that is important for a couple of reasons. One is
15 to the point that you just said, there is a lot of
16 information. We are compressing 200 pages into a day. And
17 so there are going to be follow-up questions, and those VSOs
18 and State Departments of VA can help in the following days,
19 weeks, and months, either directly or through a warm handoff
20 to us.

21 Two is, there is a growing risk of predatory actors
22 trying to target veterans to get their earned benefits.
23 They are charging money for things that are incredible VSO
24 partners, the accredited VSO partners and their state
25 governments are doing for free and very well. And so by

1 creating that touch point at the end of every TAP class that
2 VA offers, we are creating that warm connection and helping
3 build relationships that, hopefully, can be helpful later
4 on.

5 Senator Ernst. Thank you. And to our Chairs, thank
6 you so much for the time today. And thank you to our
7 witnesses.

8 Chairman Tester. Senator Kelly has deferred to Senator
9 Sinema.

10 Senator Sinema. Thank you, Chairman. And thank you,
11 Senator Kelly. Thank you for holding this hearing today.
12 And thank you to our witnesses for being here today; this is
13 an exciting chance to unify our Active-Duty priorities and
14 VA priorities to address important concerns and to
15 strengthen the process all service members go through when
16 transitioning to civilian life.

17 Arizona has five Active-Duty Military Bases and over
18 20,000 service members that will someday, we hope, join the
19 almost half-a-million veterans already living in Arizona.
20 We are proud that so many veterans call our state home, and
21 want Arizona to continue to be an attractive place to settle
22 in civilian life. When transitioning out of Military
23 service, it is not enough just to have resources out there,
24 but our veterans need to be made aware of all the programs
25 that exist.

1 The Transition Assistance Program is often criticized
2 for being too brief and not giving veterans time to retain
3 the information provided. When losing the group safety net
4 of the Military, our veterans need to be set up to pursue a
5 fulfilling career after their service. Arizona veterans
6 tell me that, while the Military has given them an
7 invaluable skill set, it can be difficult to transfer those
8 skills into the civilian workforce without career guidance
9 from people that understand their unique circumstances.

10 So my first question is about the Sergeant Daniel
11 Somers Veterans Network of Support Legislation. We were
12 proud to pass that into law. In fact, Congress had to pass
13 it twice, once each for the DoD and for the VA. Together,
14 these bills established a program where transitioning
15 service members identify loved ones who will receive updates
16 from the DoD and VA, respectively, to help them be better
17 informed during the transition process.

18 Can you provide me with an update on our pilot from the
19 law I wrote, and any lessons that we have learned from the
20 process?

21 Mr. Vazirani. So Senator, thank you for that
22 legislation and giving us the opportunity to connect to
23 those family members. I will have to get back to you with
24 -- for the record on the results of the pilot at this stage.

25 Mr. Jacobs. And I would just add, you know, personally

1 I know my wife helps make sure that I get to my annual
2 physical, that I do all the things, and I know that is a big
3 source of support for many transitioning service members,
4 particularly given the breadth, the depth, the scope of the
5 information that is being provided. So continuing to
6 encourage spouses is really important to attend. But we are
7 also mindful that sometimes they just can't make it during
8 the day so -- or while they are actually still in uniform;
9 so some of the off-based training that DOL provides is also
10 a really great resource, and then continuing to follow up in
11 the first year after they transition to try to connect those
12 dots as well.

13 Senator Sinema. Thank you. I would like to follow up
14 with each of the Departments on more detailed information
15 about the success or challenges that the pilot is
16 experiencing. As mentioned in previous testimony transition
17 from the Military can take a lifetime, in last Congress we
18 passed my bill to Reduce Unemployment for Veterans of All
19 Ages Act. That lifted the arbitrary 12-year time limit on
20 VA's vocational rehab and employment, for VR&E Program for
21 veterans with service connected disabilities.

22 Can you provide an update on the VR&E Program,
23 specifically any details on how it is being used by older
24 generations of veterans?

25 Mr. Jacobs. Yeah, Senator, I would have to get back to

1 you for the record with more details, but what I would say
2 is we have seen an increased demand for VR&E services,
3 particularly in the aftermath of the PACT Act. It is one of
4 our most impactful programs that we provide tailored to the
5 individual needs, and it helps many more veterans as they
6 are figuring out how to transition in their career goals.
7 And so I would be happy to follow up with you or your staff
8 in addition to in writing.

9 Senator Sinema. Thank you. I appreciate that.
10 Another benefit for transitioning service members is the
11 SkillBridge Program which has a great deal of support from
12 industry partners at home in Arizona, but once service
13 members become aware of this program it is often too late
14 for them to participate. How can you better spread
15 awareness and encourage participation?

16 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, thank you. We also believe
17 that the SkillBridge Program is a very effective program.
18 One of the things that we are doing is, in the transition
19 counseling process is making sure that the service members
20 are aware of SkillBridge as a transition program, we are
21 also ensuring that commanders are aware of the benefits of
22 the program to ensuring the success of the transition of
23 that service member, so they get those experiences working
24 with companies, and/or nonprofits, or state agencies in
25 order to put their skills to use and understand how they may

1 be able to apply those when they do transition to becoming a
2 civilian.

3 Senator Sinema. Thank you, Chairman.

4 Chairman Tester. Back to back Arizona; Senator Kelly.

5 Senator Kelly. Thank you Mr. Chairman, and thank you
6 Chairman Reed as well, and Ranking Member Wicker, and
7 Ranking Member Moran, for holding this very critical joint
8 hearing on the Military to Civilian Transition.

9 As a Navy veteran myself I know how critical and how
10 crucial support of our nation's service members and their
11 families is to ensuring their continued success after their
12 service to our country. An Army survey of young adults aged
13 18 to 28 found that nearly 21 percent believe that joining
14 the Military -- and this surprised me -- joining the
15 Military puts their lives on hold. This perception could
16 not be further from the truth.

17 I am a veteran who took, you know, my time in service
18 in the U.S. Navy, you know, started with training to be a
19 pilot, and then I was a combat pilot. And then after that I
20 earned a Master's Degree in Engineering, and then went to
21 school to become a test pilot, did that job for a while, and
22 later had the opportunity to serve at NASA as an astronaut.
23 I wasn't putting my life on hold.

24 You know, we need to be sharing the message about the
25 incredible honor it is to serve, and just the -- but I would

1 also like -- that it is a great job because of the
2 challenges, because of the travel benefits, the teamwork,
3 the camaraderie, but also the focus on a mission, and how
4 great it is to have the opportunity to serve your country.
5 And we need to do that work by providing support for our
6 service members as they transition, as well as into their
7 transition from military to civilian life.

8 So thank you to all the witnesses for being here, and
9 for your work to support the success of our Nation's service
10 members, and veterans, and their families. And I know that
11 a successful transition often requires a lot of time, and it
12 requires planning, and it requires conversations with
13 family. Service members need support to think about
14 professional development from an early point in their
15 military careers, whether that development will occur in
16 their service to our country, or whether it will be later in
17 civilian life.

18 And by beginning these conversations early on we are
19 setting our service members and military families up for
20 success. So I commend DoD for significantly increasing
21 participation in DoD's Transition Assistance Program. And I
22 know that DoD can do better, and can do better early on.

23 So Secretary Vazirani, and Mr. Sawyer, how can each
24 service further improve their career and professional
25 development programming to support earlier integration in a

1 service member's career?

2 Mr. Vazirani. Senator thank you for your comments, and
3 I agree with you wholeheartedly that Military Service is a
4 powerful way for Americans to set themselves apart while in
5 service and beyond their service. As far as starting
6 earlier, a number of the programs that we have that are not
7 -- that are aligned with but not specifically associated
8 with transition, for example, the Tuition Assistance Program
9 help service members develop -- either earn degrees, or
10 develop credentials, certifications that will help them in
11 their Military service, or beyond their Military service.

12 The other things that we do are helping service members
13 to translate the work that they do into what could be a
14 civilian career when they decide to transition, and that is
15 through our credentialing program. We help service members
16 achieve credentials and we also help them translate the work
17 that they do through their MOS into career opportunities
18 understanding where they can apply those credentials.

19 Senator Kelly. And Mr. Sawyer, what else -- in the
20 remaining few seconds I have -- how can Congress help you
21 with this, and improving this process?

22 Mr. Sawyer. And thank you for that. The continued
23 oversight that you are giving and I believe holding DoD and
24 the agencies accountable for implementing the
25 recommendations that we have given to them on this area.

1 Awareness, ensuring that service members are becoming aware
2 is another area that could be helpful. And for the
3 Department we have issued recommendations asking them to
4 develop performance goals with these programs and evaluate
5 those programs to ensure that objectives are being achieved.

6 Senator Kelly. Well, thank you both. And I think it
7 is so important that we continue to get the message out that
8 serving in the U.S. Military is not putting your life on
9 hold. Thank you.

10 Chairman Tester. Senator Sullivan.

11 Senator Sullivan. Thank you Mr. Chairman. And
12 gentlemen, thank you for being here. I think this is a
13 really important hearing because we all know this is a win-
14 win proposition for everybody, employers, our country needs
15 hard workers, our members of the Military, their families to
16 be able to come off active duty and go into a good-paying
17 job, and then to have a workforce where the men and women
18 that you hire know what it is like to have discipline and
19 get up at 0500, or 0400, or whatever, and be on time, I mean
20 this is a win all over the place.

21 So I want to ask a specific question. I had a
22 provision that was in last year's NDAA that encouraged DoD
23 to partner with local employers, local unions, the building
24 trades in Alaska, in particular, hire a lot of members
25 coming out of the Military. And what I have seen is that a

1 lot of times it is really base-commander-specific. Meaning,
2 a base commander at JBER might be like: Yeah, let us bring
3 the unions and employers on base, our guys can start doing
4 transition stuff early before, you know -- one day before
5 they get out.

6 And then you have a new commander, and all that goes
7 away. So what my NDAA provision was to trying to get DoD to
8 focus on, kind of from a broad perspective, let us do that
9 across the board. And can I get an update from any of you
10 on where DoD has been with regard to working with these
11 groups that hire? Like I said, local unions, a lot of them
12 have a really good program, the IBEW, for example, has a
13 really good program in Alaska, in contractors, in the
14 construction trades. If you have an update on that I would
15 love to hear about it, but you might recall this provision.

16 And then I do want to -- maybe I will just ask the
17 second question next. It follows up on Senator Kelly's
18 question about credentialing, and the one area in particular
19 that I think is really important is the maritime industry.
20 You might remember President Trump signed an executive order
21 that would make it easier for transitioning Military members
22 in the maritime space to waive licenses, in allowing their
23 experience to count towards Merchant Mariner credentialing,
24 and other credentials. But again, these are super well
25 trained, ready to go, and some sometimes we make it hard, a

1 lot of times we make it hard.

2 So two questions I will throw it out to any and all the
3 witnesses, but if you can take that first one first, and
4 then the one on credentialing following up on Senator
5 Kelly's question. Thank you.

6 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, so we continue to work with
7 employers, and try and expand the engagement with employers,
8 to help transitioning veterans. So we continue to grow the
9 SkillBridge Program.

10 Senator Sullivan. Yeah. The SkillBridge program is
11 great by the way and I think it -- do you think it is going
12 well?

13 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, we do believe it is going well.
14 We have had over 22,000 participants in the SkillBridge
15 Program last year.

16 Senator Sullivan. Great.

17 Mr. Vazirani. A high percentage of those participants
18 convert to full-time employee with their SkillBridge
19 internship. We are replicating that program for military
20 spouses, with the Military Spouse Career Accelerator
21 Program, providing them with a 12-week fellowship, so that
22 they can gain that. And we are seeing an 80 percent
23 conversion there as well.

24 Senator Sullivan. Do you agree with me it is a little
25 bit base-commander dependent? And we could do a better job

1 of kind of making sure everybody is on board with this, or
2 is that just something I am seeing back home in Alaska?

3 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, I do believe that there are
4 areas of the country where, particularly for service members
5 who want to stay in the place they want to retire from the
6 locations they are in, that we can probably do a better job
7 engaging at the local level, and local employers.

8 Senator Sullivan. Yeah.

9 Mr. Vazirani. And so Senator, that is something that I
10 will take back. I would love to work with you and your team
11 --

12 Senator Sullivan. Great.

13 Mr. Vazirani. -- to figure out how do we drive more
14 local engagement at across the enterprise with consistency.

15 Senator Sullivan. Yeah. That is really important.
16 That is what my NDAA provision from last year was about.
17 And then real quick on credentialing, anyone who wants to
18 take that one on? I know it is a big topic, but it has got
19 so much promise.

20 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, there we continue to focus on
21 our credentialing program. We provide a tool that will
22 allow service members to gain their credential, and a tool
23 also as well to figure out how to --

24 Senator Sullivan. When they are still on active duty?

25 Mr. Vazirani. While they are still on active duty --

1 Senator Sullivan. Oh. Good.

2 Mr. Vazirani. -- to earn their credentials. And then
3 we engage with the Department of Labor through the U.S.
4 Military Apprenticeship Program, and service members can
5 gain a Department of Labor Journeyman Certificate, and we
6 have over 93,000 participants in that program. And Mr.
7 Rodriguez may want to comment.

8 Mr. Rodriguez. Thank you, Mr. Vazirani. Senator, I
9 just wanted to add that I spent a week in Alaska, and I
10 visited the Commanders at JBER. If you recall, during my
11 confirmation hearing, and you asked me to go to Alaska, so
12 we spent the week there.

13 Senator Sullivan. Thank you.

14 Mr. Rodriguez. I met with the commanders. They said
15 exactly what you did: They wanted connections to the local
16 community. We had our State Director come; we actually went
17 to the American Job Center there at the local level to
18 ensure that they were connected. And we spoke to the
19 Electric Workers Union out there, IBEW. I visited them as
20 well.

21 Senator Sullivan. Good.

22 Mr. Rodriguez. So there is a strong relationship at
23 the local community with the commanders, but as you
24 mentioned, that often changes when the commander does
25 change, they have a change of command, but the resources are

1 there at the local levels. We have to ensure that they
2 understand that those resources exist and make sure that we
3 are continually, connect with the incoming commanders as
4 well.

5 Senator Sullivan. Great. Thank you. Thank you, Mr.
6 Chairman.

7 Chairman Tester. Senator Blumenthal.

8 Senator Blumenthal. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. As I go
9 around the State of Connecticut, and I am sure my colleagues
10 have the same experience, what I find is, again and again,
11 small- and medium-sized businesses saying to me: We need
12 people with skills, particularly in manufacturing. Every
13 year, I guess the estimate is 200,000 service members
14 transition back to civilian life, that is a potential pool
15 of skilled labor that right now, I am guessing, is only
16 partially used for manufacturing, particularly by those
17 small- and medium-sized businesses.

18 A Government Accountability Office released a January
19 2023 Report that urged the VA to collaborate with veteran
20 service organizations in identifying outreach gaps. The
21 combination of VSOs and small businesses, I think, offer a
22 real opportunity for apprenticeship, on-the-job training,
23 perhaps even skills provided while on active duty in
24 anticipation of potential jobs outside.

25 The Military is one of the great educational forces, if

1 not the greatest in America today, in terms of its resources
2 and the numbers of people that it involves. So I would like
3 to ask this panel what your ideas are for enhancing the
4 skill training and job placement in manufacturing, or small-
5 and medium-sized businesses around the country?

6 Mr. Rodriguez. Senator, I will take this question
7 first. I just visited an advanced manufacturing company,
8 Rockwell Technologies, in Wisconsin, and their premise was
9 they cannot hire enough veterans. They want to get more
10 veterans into advanced manufacturing, so they are working
11 across the veteran community to make sure that they are
12 aware of these types of resources exist for training.
13 Apprenticeship programs we know are extremely valuable,
14 \$80,000 starting salary when someone completes an
15 apprenticeship program, and a 90-percent hire rate post-
16 apprenticeship.

17 So through our regional veteran employment coordinators
18 located across the entire country, we are connecting
19 corporations and veterans across the entire country to these
20 types of opportunities. And we do this in conjunction with
21 the SkillBridge Program. As they are working on
22 SkillBridge, when they do get the opportunity to participate
23 in DoD, for those who don't get to participate in it, we
24 have opportunities that we are working to solidify with
25 companies across the entire country.

1 Also, as part of Task Force Movement, which I sit on
2 that organization's structure there, we are looking at,
3 again, how do we align manufacturing organizations to locate
4 this talent and make sure that they are connected with these
5 opportunities that exist?

6 Mr. Boerstler. And Senator, I would add as well, in
7 partnership with the Department of Labor and Department of
8 Defense, we send a weekly email called "Vet Resources" to
9 about 14 million subscribers, veterans and their families
10 across the country. That includes links to jobs that are
11 routinely updated, sometimes daily, when we connect with the
12 corporate sector, the commercial sector, to fill these jobs.

13 And more importantly, I think the jointness that we,
14 you know, continue to share these resources with our
15 veterans and their families, through that channel, and many
16 others, is a great way to connect the dots between the
17 commercial sector and our veterans.

18 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, the other thing I will add, is
19 in the TAP program, in the tailored instruction in the two-
20 day courses, there is a two-day course delivered by the
21 Small Business Administration that can help service members
22 transitioning explore opportunities in small business,
23 either as an entrepreneur or working in a small business.

24 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you all. Thank you for your
25 service. And I hope, perhaps, the next panel will address

1 this question as well because I think the veteran service
2 organizations can play an important role in this challenge.

3 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

4 Chairman Tester. Senator Tillis.

5 Senator Tillis. Thank you, Chair Tester. And thank
6 you, gentlemen, for being here. A couple of questions; I
7 was in here earlier, and one thing that I am curious about
8 is, to what extent does the TAP program emphasize and ensure
9 that we get a connection with the VA upon separation?

10 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, so in the TAP program, one of
11 the specific core courses is a session that is led by the
12 VA, so that is --

13 Senator Tillis. Yes. But I mean, we are leading them
14 to water, but we know if you take a look at the number of
15 suicides that occur, on average, about two-thirds of the
16 people who commit suicide every day are not connected to the
17 VA. So I know that there is -- it is obviously a natural
18 transition because it is a discussion about benefits and
19 everything else, but to what extent does the TAP program
20 remain focused on, not only leading them to water, but
21 actually enrolling and becoming connected? And I would be
22 also curious, Mr. Sawyer, if you have any observations on
23 that.

24 Mr. Sawyer. Senator, I will comment just briefly on
25 the particular piece that you mentioned about suicide and

1 suicide prevention. So through that transition process, we
2 conduct a mental health assessment. There is also a single
3 -- we are working on this, a single health assessment with
4 the VA, so that if we identify that a service member may be
5 at risk, or has been treated for mental health, then they
6 are referred into the In-Transition Program, and then that
7 information is shared with the VA. So we start that process
8 early, and we are very focused on ensuring that there is
9 continuity of care so that in that transition period, the
10 365 days following --

11 Senator Tillis. Okay. Mr. Jacobs, do you have
12 anything to add? I am going to go fast, because I have got
13 one other point I want to make related to it.

14 Mr. Jacobs. We think there is a moral imperative to
15 connect veterans to their earned benefits and health care,
16 because it is exactly to your point. When veterans utilize
17 their earned benefits in health care, they do better, and it
18 is not only in terms of reduced suicide rates, but it is
19 better health outcomes, better economic opportunities.

20 So we have a one-day TAP course. One of the ways that
21 we are enhancing it is by including our VSO, accredited VSO,
22 and State Department of Veterans Affairs partners, and that
23 is important because, you know, this is 200 pages of
24 information about VA benefits and health care. It is a lot
25 to digest in one day.

1 Senator Tillis. And most people aren't going to.

2 Mr. Jacobs. They are going to come back with more
3 questions. And our VSO partners and State Partners can help
4 them as one more fact.

5 Senator Tillis. Okay. Mr. Sawyer, you have something
6 to add, briefly?

7 Mr. Sawyer. Thank you. I would just like to add that
8 GAO does have ongoing work that is looking at the mental
9 health and suicide prevention for transitioning members, as
10 well as the warm handover process, and we would love to meet
11 with you to --

12 Senator Tillis. I am going to make sure I stay within
13 time. But I did want to go back to something that Chair
14 Reed mentioned about the electronic health record, I have
15 been following. I was on Senate Armed Services until last
16 Congress following the electronic health record
17 implementation. DoD, good on you all for getting it done.
18 We have got to get it done in the VA. It is a long way from
19 being done.

20 Until those two platforms are completely implemented,
21 we probably need some duct tape and baling wire to get data
22 that we can use to better predict -- and better predict what
23 we should be trying -- I have said in this committee before:
24 It will be great when we have a TAP audience of one. We are
25 not there yet. But one of the ways that we can get there is

1 through predictive analytics. And one thing that came to my
2 mind is whether or not we should take a look at information
3 that we had in the electronic health record for the service
4 member and see if we could use predictive analytics to say
5 that this person could be in crisis, and sadly, correlate
6 that using historic records. Sadly, probably correlate that
7 to this veterans' population who has committed suicide.

8 And then if you start thinking: If there is a
9 statistical correlation there, then that should begin to be
10 something that is very, very much embedded in future TAP
11 programs. My time has expired. Thank you.

12 Chairman Reed. Thank you, Senator Tillis. And on
13 behalf of Senator Tester, let me recognize Senator Hirono.

14 Senator Hirono. I thank both Chairs for this hearing,
15 as I sit on both Committees. This is for Secretary Vazirani
16 and Secretary Jacobs, since I have both of you here. There
17 is a huge issue on Oahu in which veterans are having
18 difficulty accessing critical health care services at the
19 Matsunaga CBOC, which is located at Tripler Army Medical
20 Center.

21 Can you both look into what DoD and VA can do to make
22 it easier for veterans to get on base for care and report
23 back to the Committees and my staff? I think this should
24 be, I hope, a pretty easy fix, because what is happening is
25 when our veterans try to get on base, they have their VA

1 card, VA ID cards, and apparently that is not adequate to
2 get on base. And they are supposed to have a DoD-compliant
3 ID. So can both of you figure this out, and make it easier
4 for veterans to get the care that they need from the
5 Matsunaga CBOC?

6 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, we are certainly committed to
7 taking care of people, and beyond the transition point as
8 well. We are working through the Joint Executive Council on
9 access to bases for veterans. We are working through a
10 common ID, to develop a common ID that can be utilized. And
11 I certainly commit to getting back to you on a solution,

12 Senator Hirono. Why can't the VA, why can't they just
13 use their VA ID? Anyway, that is an idea. Rather than
14 requiring them to go get a whole another ID.

15 Next question for Mr. Jacobs; regarding the Solid Start
16 Program; does VA track -- during which stage of Solid Start
17 veterans stop responding to outreach? The idea is that, at
18 certain specific time frames, the 200,000 veterans a year
19 are supposed to be contacted within 90 days, 180 days, and
20 360 days. Do you keep data on when they stop responding?

21 And I would also like to know what are the questions
22 that they are asked? Because this program is supposed to be
23 a check-in to help address concerns, connect the VA with
24 resources. So do they get asked things like; whether they
25 have experienced sexual assault during their time in

1 service, whether they exhibit suicide ideation? What kinds
2 of questions are asked of the VAs as you make these
3 contacts?

4 Mr. Jacobs. Yeah. Thanks, Senator, for that question.
5 So through our Solid Start Program, we contact transitioning
6 -- recently transitioned veterans at three points in the one
7 year after they have left the Military. It is usually
8 around the 90, 180, and 365-day mark. In some cases, we can
9 connect with those veterans quite easily. We send an email
10 in advance, making sure that they know, because many
11 veterans don't answer -- many Americans don't answer phone
12 calls from numbers they don't know about. We call at each
13 increment seven times. So if we don't -- if we are not able
14 to successfully contact them, we move on. But then we
15 continue to try to contact.

16 And the goal here is really personalized, individual
17 attention. So it is really focused on, one, making sure
18 that if there is a mental health crisis, that we can help
19 them. But two, it is making sure that we are connecting
20 them to the benefits and the care that they need, whether it
21 is an update on their status -- the status of their --

22 Senator Hirono. So I know what the purpose is of Solid
23 Start.

24 Mr. Jacobs. Yeah. Yeah.

25 Senator Hirono. But is there a time frame in which the

1 veterans stop responding to contacts within this one-year
2 time frame?

3 Mr. Jacobs. We have been able to connect with about 75
4 to 80 percent of veterans through the Solid Start. But I
5 would have to get back to you with more specific data.

6 Senator Hirono. Isn't there a standard list of
7 questions that the contactor is asking so that they can
8 ascertain whether services need to be -- so they can be
9 connected with services? Can you send me those questions?

10 Mr. Jacobs. I would be happy to follow up. And we do
11 also try to make sure that it is open-ended so that we are
12 -- it is not overly prescriptive, but we can get back with
13 some more detailed information on that.

14 Senator Hirono. Thank you. My time is running out,
15 but I did have one question, Mr. Chairman; both Chairs, if I
16 can ask about SkillBridge.

17 Chairman Tester. For the record.

18 Senator Hirono. I think -- oh, shoot. You are not
19 going to let me ask the question.

20 Chairman Tester. I can't do it. We have got another
21 panel.

22 Senator Hirono. Okay. Sorry about that. I will
23 submit the question.

24 Chairman Tester. Senator Blackburn.

25 Senator Blackburn. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank

1 you all for being with us. I think we all have plenty of
2 questions. I want to stay with that Solid Start Program,
3 Mr. Jacobs, if we can do that. So I want to be sure that I
4 am following you on this. The veterans are contacted by
5 phone call 90, 180, and 365 days into the program; is that
6 accurate?

7 Mr. Jacobs. Yes, Senator.

8 Senator Blackburn. Okay. And then you confirm that
9 they have received a mental health evaluation in the last
10 year of their service?

11 Mr. Jacobs. No.

12 Senator Blackburn. Oh. Okay.

13 Mr. Jacobs. So the goal is to try to identify, I think
14 the reason that the program was stood up in 2019 was
15 recognizing the first year post-transition is a high risk
16 for some veterans.

17 Senator Blackburn. Okay. So then the -- I want to
18 confirm that I heard this right, too. So the VA, through
19 the VA Solid Start Program, the VA receives information that
20 is shared from DoD to VA?

21 Mr. Jacobs. Yes, Senator?

22 Senator Blackburn. Okay. And that is what you use to
23 ascertain veterans that are eligible for these mental health
24 services, right?

25 Mr. Jacobs. Yes. So the --

1 Senator Blackburn. Okay. All right. Let me move on
2 then. So the veterans are deemed a priority, correct?

3 Mr. Jacobs. We do receive information for high
4 priority.

5 Senator Blackburn. Okay. So they are automatically
6 enrolled in the VA system, and they have their profiles
7 flagged for licensed professional mental health counselors
8 so that they can start that dialogue; is that accurate?

9 Mr. Jacobs. No. They are not automatically enrolled.
10 They have to enroll at their own discretion.

11 Senator Blackburn. They have to enroll. So what is
12 the wait time to enroll?

13 Mr. Jacobs. I would have to get that for the record.

14 Senator Blackburn. Okay. So I will submit that in
15 writing. Now, one of the things of interest to me is, if
16 you have got all this data and you are transferring it from
17 DoD to VA, why would an individual have to wait weeks to get
18 their information? I have got several veterans that are a
19 part of our team back in Tennessee and here in D.C., and it
20 makes no sense that one of our team members had to wait 14
21 weeks to get their medical documents from the DoD, and then
22 had to wait for VA to schedule appointments. So if you are
23 doing it for one sector, it seems like you could kind of
24 clean up the system and do it across the board.

25 Mr. Jacobs. Senator, I would like to get the

1 information on the individual team member so that we can
2 personally address that, and also correct it --

3 Senator Blackburn. Well, I think, writ large, just the
4 fact that people have to wait so long to get their
5 information, then they have got to wait again --

6 Mr. Jacobs. Yeah.

7 Senator Blackburn. -- to get an appointment. Going to
8 the TAP program, we have had a lot of fun looking at this
9 with you all, into the TAP program. I had some comments
10 that I am going to take my time to read, these come from
11 different members of our team. I would like to note that
12 TAP -- let us see: He wished he went back to take advantage
13 of the program more and appreciated the classes offered, but
14 he had managed a \$180 million budget, and felt like this
15 program was one-size-fits-all, and he had to go back and
16 take the class on budget.

17 So these need to be personalized more. Here are some
18 more comments, "Some of the contractors that work there have
19 never successfully transitioned, themselves. The contractor
20 teaching my class how to get a D.C. and V-suite job in the
21 corporate world." He was a retired E6 that got his job
22 teaching our class right out of his retirement. So he had
23 no experience; "Wasting days teaching me, a 20-year veteran,
24 how to do a simple budget, handing me a VA book and telling
25 me all I need to know is in there." "Holding job fairs

1 every Wednesday that consist of a truck driver, L-E-O, or
2 assembly line position. Resumes produced that are not just
3 lukewarm; they are not helpful." So I think that if we are
4 going to put the money into this, then we need to see some
5 personalization.

6 My time has expired. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

7 Chairman Tester. Senator King.

8 Senator King. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Those of us
9 who are on both committees, get twice the time; is that
10 correct?

11 Chairman Tester. Divided by two.

12 Senator King. Yeah, I see. Thank you. I figured. I
13 did want to mention there was some talk earlier about spouse
14 employment, and Senator Sinema, Lankford, myself, and
15 Senator Fischer got a bill passed in the Senate about a
16 month ago requiring the federal government to allow remote
17 working for military spouses at any government agency. So
18 that is a step forward. We need to get it through the
19 further process, but it has been passed by the Senate.

20 How much of this is legislation, and how much is
21 implementation? One of my life mottos is, implementation is
22 as important as vision. And it sounds like what we are
23 really talking about today is implementation. And do you
24 need new authorities? Do you come to us with
25 recommendations for any changes to the law, additional

1 funding, or additional resources?

2 Mr. Vazirani, do you need anything further from us? Or
3 do you have the authorities you need, and it is just a
4 question of working the system?

5 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, thank you for that, and the
6 opportunity to express this; one of the things I think we
7 found is that the work through the Joint Executive Council
8 has really helped in this collaboration, and in taking the
9 authorities that you provided us and implementing them.

10 Senator King. I like the idea of the Joint Executive
11 Council. By the way do you -- does the Joint Executive
12 Council ever meet with veterans and veteran service
13 organizations, have focus groups, polling, and just input
14 from your customers?

15 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, the working committees do have
16 those kinds of engagements, and we do have them at the Joint
17 Executive Council as well. We do bring people in to talk
18 through ideas. So we continue to work that. I think
19 through that interagency process, we have worked through,
20 and we are understanding where we may have difficulties or
21 barriers; and Senator, as we do that, we would appreciate
22 the opportunity to come back to you and let you know if we
23 do need additional authorities.

24 Senator King. I hope you will. And I hope all of you
25 will take advantage of my invitation to suggest any changes

1 in authorities, any federal statutes that are obstacles to
2 the implementation. Here is a question that occurs to me:
3 we are talking about TAP, which I understand is a mandatory
4 program. What would the base commander do if a soldier
5 skipped a mandatory weapon safety class? My suspicion is he
6 or she would make sure they got to that class. Is this,
7 again, an implementation at the base commander level?

8 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, we continue to work through
9 that and ensuring that commanders who have the
10 responsibility to balance the mission readiness along with
11 care for the service member. And that is why we have the
12 commander engaged at that 90-day point for that capstone to
13 review how the service member is engaging. And, as Mr.
14 Boerstler has indicated, we are creating that dashboard so
15 that a commander can track how a service member will --

16 Senator King. There is something seriously wrong, if
17 70 percent don't meet the one-year guideline that is a
18 serious problem. And it seems to me that is an
19 accountability problem. So I hope that is a priority.

20 We talked about credentialing. Isn't one of the issues
21 with credentialing state laws, and to what extent are we
22 able to work with states and state compacts? So if you
23 learned to be a plumber or electrician in the Military, you
24 don't have to go out and spend a year going through a state
25 process to get a license to be a plumber or an electrician.

1 Mr. Labor, what is your view of that one?

2 Mr. Rodriguez. -- but I going to say, so I apologize
3 there. Senator, one of the things that was passed in 2021,
4 that there was the ability for states to have reciprocity
5 agreements with regards to accepting those licenses and
6 credentials --

7 Senator King. And is that happening; that is my
8 question?

9 Mr. Rodriguez. That is one of the things we are
10 working on with the states. We are trying to ensure that
11 they understand, one, that that agreements exist, but also
12 for the military spouses to be educated about that as well,
13 as well as the Department of Defense's Legal Departments to
14 ensure that they can provide support to those military
15 spouses to have conversations with the State Departments.

16 Mr. Rodriguez. I think that would be a place where
17 some emphasis should be placed to work with the states'
18 press, the states, because all the states talk about wanting
19 to help veterans. This is one clear way they can do it.

20 I am out of time, but one additional issue that has
21 come up in other hearings we have had is financial
22 counseling that is necessary for many veterans because they
23 are suddenly out into the Wild West of civilian life. And
24 so financial counseling is something that is important.
25 Thank you all. And a hearing like this always focuses on

1 the negative, on what is not being done. You all are doing
2 a lot. And I just want you to know that we appreciate it.
3 Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

4 Chairman Tester. So here is what is going to happen
5 because nature is calling some. And we are going to take
6 about a five-minute break for the panelists, be back -- I am
7 sorry to do that to you guys, but you know how it is. And
8 then get back. We will finish up, and then we will go to
9 the second panel so. And you can go vote right now if you
10 want. Okay?

11 So we are adjourned for five minutes. And it will be
12 five minutes.

13 [Whereupon, at 12:10 p.m. to 12:15 p.m. there was a
14 recess.]

15 Chairman Tester. If nobody else shows up, we have got
16 about another 12 minutes, and then we will get to the second
17 panel; if you are good with those, Senator Budd.

18 Senator Budd. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And again,
19 thank you all for the panel for being here today.

20 Mr. Boerstler, North Carolina has taken great efforts
21 to integrate veteran communities. It is something we hold
22 dear, and it is very important to us in North Carolina.
23 Here are some examples. NCServes, launched in 2015, it was
24 the nation's first statewide coordinated network for
25 veterans and military families, and North Carolina

1 communities were some of the first to adopt the Community
2 Veterans Engagement Board structure in 2016, with seven of
3 those CVEBs now locally led by nonprofit leaders and working
4 very closely with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

5 North Carolina leaders are also part of Mission 85, it
6 is a three-state effort in North Carolina, South Carolina,
7 and Georgia, to align local, state, and federal, and
8 nonprofit resources to improve the quality and continuity of
9 care for veterans along Interstate 85 in North Carolina.
10 You are familiar with those efforts?

11 Mr. Boerstler. Yes, Senator, very familiar. Thank
12 you.

13 Senator Budd. Great. It seems like we are leading the
14 country in efforts to improve veteran reintegration. So
15 that being the case, how would you like to see this model
16 -- it sounds like you are familiar with, how would you like
17 to see this utilized in other states?

18 Mr. Boerstler. Well, thank you very much, Senator. I
19 think, with the leadership of the Veterans Bridge Home, in
20 particular, that help steward, the NCServes Initiative, you
21 mentioned, they are a critical part of our Vet Resources
22 Community Network, which is a nationwide community of
23 practice that shares these lessons from North Carolina with
24 other states that want to align with a lot of the objectives
25 that they have set out.

1 And CVEBs, Community Veteran Engagement Boards, as you
2 mentioned, are still fantastic listening posts and
3 observation posts for us out in the field that can relay
4 customer and employee experiences directly to the facilities
5 that are in their backyards, but also VA's Central Office.
6 So they are incredibly essential. They are the conduit
7 between that installation and that return home to the
8 community. And we are glad to partner with not only these
9 partners, but also our State Departments of Veterans Affairs
10 who are in tandem.

11 Senator Budd. Thank you, sir.

12 Mr. Vazirani, in your written statement, you state,
13 often, and I quote this, "Often military spouses find the
14 transition of their service member an ideal time to begin,
15 restart, or re-energize their career." So unfortunately,
16 that is also a statement about a lack of employment
17 opportunities while their spouse is in service. So would
18 you agree that though the Department -- that through the
19 Department, they should work to improve spouse employment
20 opportunities, not just in transition, but also during
21 service?

22 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, we firmly believe that military
23 spouse employment is critical to the successful service of
24 the service member and to a successful transition. So we
25 are working very hard across the interagency, also with

1 states, to ensure that military spouses have employment
2 opportunities. We also work with our corporate nonprofit
3 partners to ensure that there are good career opportunities
4 for military spouses.

5 Senator Budd. Thank you. So what is the Department
6 doing to improve spousal employment opportunities,
7 particularly when a military family relocates during the
8 transition back to civilian life?

9 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, so through our Military Spouse
10 Employment Program, there is a specific aspect through the
11 transition period called MySTeP, which helps a military
12 spouse, through that transition process, finding new
13 opportunities. One of the new programs that we have is
14 called the Military Spouse Career Accelerator Program. So
15 it is a SkillBridge-like program. We engage with corporate
16 nonprofit partners, provide a 12-week fellowship for a
17 military spouse. They gain pointed experience, and we are
18 seeing that we are having a very high conversion rate of
19 those spouses into full-time employment with their
20 fellowship sponsor.

21 Senator Budd. Let me make sure I am not asking the
22 same question, can you talk specifically about DoD's
23 Military Spouse Employment Partnership? I don't think that
24 is the same one you were just referring to, unless it is.

25 Mr. Vazirani. So they are slightly different programs.

1 The Military Spouse Employment Partnership is where we
2 engage with employers to actually -- to bring on full-time
3 hires. And we continue to grow that program. In fact, we
4 are inducting today, 130 new partners into our Military
5 Spouse Employment Partnership Program.

6 Senator Budd. So this Military Spouse Employment
7 Partnership, the MSEP, what are current limitations to the
8 program, if any?

9 Mr. Vazirani. I think the current limitation is just
10 expanding our reach, and helping employers to understand the
11 benefits of employing military spouses. We know that
12 military spouses are, in many cases, significantly more
13 qualified than their civilian counterparts. They have
14 higher levels of education. We also know that through that
15 military experience, they develop a level of resilience and
16 a level of ingenuity that proves them to be very successful
17 employees.

18 Senator Budd. Thank you. My time has expired.

19 Chairman Tester. Senator Budd, I appreciate yours and
20 Senator Rosen's patience. Senator Rosen.

21 Senator Rosen. And thank you, Chairman Tester. It is
22 a really important hearing. You know, our servicemen, how
23 we care for them as they transition, it really makes a
24 difference. I want to agree with Senator King that
25 streamlining and implementation is always key to success,

1 reducing the, I guess, paperwork is always the most
2 stressful thing for people. So I want to talk about a
3 Reserve and Guard demobilization.

4 So Secretary Vazirani and Secretary Rodriguez, these
5 are for you. I am concerned with the demobilization process
6 for Guard and Reserve Service members transitioning from
7 active-duty orders back to Reserve status. The Reserve
8 component, they are required to complete the TAP program,
9 even though they are not separating from the Military. The
10 TAP curriculum is tailored to individuals separating from
11 Military Service entirely rather than returning to reserve
12 status in their civilian applications.

13 So instead of receiving help completing travel
14 vouchers, and reimbursements for costs incurred during their
15 mobilization and deployment, reservists are forced to take
16 classes tailored to those leaving the Military and starting
17 new lives as civilians. We have heard a lot about this from
18 our Reserve men and women in Nevada.

19 So as such, they must figure out the burdensome, let me
20 tell you, burdensome reimbursement process on their own.
21 And the reserve components just face their own direct set of
22 challenges, as they lack access to day-to-day services
23 available to either active-duty troops, because they are not
24 at their 28 unit days of the month to be able to sit down
25 with someone for help.

1 So I get to get language in the FY '24 NDAA that
2 encourages DoD to modify the demobilization process for the
3 Reserve component to better address their needs and
4 circumstances, and this requires the Committee be briefed on
5 actions taken to improve this process.

6 So for both of the Secretaries, Vazirani and Rodriguez,
7 how would you improve this Reserve component part so it
8 better focuses on what they actually need, particularly this
9 is a huge stressor, this financial stressor, that they can't
10 figure out how to get their reimbursements, their travel
11 vouchers? They are not getting out of the Military; we need
12 to help them so they can continue their service. Please?

13 Mr. Vazirani. Senator, I think the area that we can
14 help that Reserve component member make that transition, and
15 to your point, they are not transitioning from the Military;
16 they are transitioning from their active service to their
17 -- back to their Reserve Unit, and to their -- so one of the
18 things that we will continue to do, and we are doing this
19 through the interagency partnership, is how do we assess the
20 needs of an individual coming into the TAP program, and
21 continuing to evolve the TAP program.

22 And so an area here to support the Reserve component,
23 those members, is an area that we recognize we should
24 continue to evolve, and we appreciate the support that you
25 are providing on that.

1 Senator Rosen. Thank you. We would love to see some
2 reporting on how you are doing that. Please, Mr. Secretary.

3 Mr. Rodriguez. Senator, that is a great question with
4 regards to the Guard Reserves because they have unique
5 requirements in their process of transitioning as well. One
6 of the things we have done is we executed an off-based
7 transition training pilot that began last year, and that is
8 allowing us to be at the local communities working with the
9 Guard Reserves that allow us to work through their
10 individual needs when it comes to preparing for transition,
11 and/or when they are looking for a job to maintain while
12 they are actually performing Guard Reserve work.

13 One of the things that we have seen so far at the TAP
14 sites, is that there is currently at ten states, over 7,000
15 service members have been supported through the current
16 pilots, and we want to ensure that they also understand that
17 if we are able to in the future, utilize American job
18 centers to support Guard Reserve, that would be another
19 requirement -- or another resource, I am sorry, that would
20 allow those Guard Reserve Members to utilize at the state
21 and local levels.

22 Senator Rosen. All right, thank you. I am going to
23 let the second panel. We really appreciate you.

24 And there you go, Chairman; both Chairmen.

25 Chairman Tester. Finally came along. You should have

1 come to the panel earlier, and we could have finished this
2 up a lot quicker, Senator Rosen.

3 I want to thank the first panel. Needless to say,
4 thank you for the work you do. And also needless to say, we
5 have more work to do. So thank you all for that. And you
6 are dismissed, and we will start on the second panel.

7 [Panel Two.]

8 Chairman Tester. So I am going to welcome the
9 witnesses to the second panel, and I am going to apologize
10 up front; obviously, this is a big issue by the presence of
11 so many members, which is a good thing. The bad thing is
12 that I wish we could spend more time with you, the second
13 panel.

14 And on this second panel we have: Ryan Gallucci,
15 Executive Director of the VFW, Veterans of Foreign Wars.

16 We also have Tom Porter, Vice President of Government
17 Affairs for Blue Star Families.

18 We have Kevin O'Neil, who is the Employment and
19 Education Policy Associate for the American Legion.

20 And last but certainly not least, we have Dr. Arthur
21 DeGroat, somebody who has been in front of the VA Committee
22 before; he is Executive Director of the Office of Military
23 and Veterans Affairs at Kansas State University.

24 And as soon as you get seated and you are ready to go,
25 I am going to turn to Chairman Reed for a comment.

1 Chairman Reed. First of all, I welcome all of you, but
2 I want to particularly welcome Ryan Gallucci, who is a Rhode
3 Islander, and a graduate of the University of Rhode Island,
4 and thank you for your service in the Military, and now at
5 VFW. So go Rhodi. Thank you.

6 Chairman Tester. And Mr. Gallucci, you have the floor,
7 five minutes.

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1 STATEMENT OF MR. RYAN M. GALLUCCI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
2 VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

3 Mr. Gallucci. Thank you, Chairman Tester, Chairman
4 Reed, Ranking Members Moran, Wicker, and Members of the
5 Committees. Thank you for the opportunity to provide VFW's
6 remarks on this vital topic.

7 Nearly 200,000 service members exit the force each
8 year, which makes regular joint oversight hearings like this
9 imperative for today's Military. A solid transition can set
10 up veterans for success after service; conversely, a failed
11 transition could lead to devastating consequences like
12 unemployment, homelessness, even suicide. The perception of
13 veterans after service directly correlates to the next
14 generation's propensity to serve; failed transitions hurt
15 Military recruiting, making this a national security
16 priority.

17 The VFW is on the ground every day at more than 20
18 Military installations worldwide, working with nearly 20,000
19 transitioning service members, or approximately 10 percent
20 of the transitioning force every year. Accredited by VA,
21 our professional staff assists troops with Benefits Delivery
22 at Discharge or BDD claims, provide benefits' guidance, and
23 even provide VA benefits briefings when offered the
24 opportunity.

25 Last year, VFW filed more than 12,000 claims for

1 transitioning service members, ensuring timely connections
2 to benefits like VA compensation and care. We speak today
3 not only as veterans who have gone through TAP, but as
4 professionals who work in TAP every day.

5 The VFW testified on TAP before the House earlier this
6 summer. At the time we were frustrated by a lack of
7 engagement from VA. Thankfully, our collaboration with VA
8 has substantially evolved. The VFW is the only organization
9 that participated in multiple TAP 6.0 pilots. We provided
10 feedback on the 5.1 curriculum and are now collaborating on
11 ways to ensure TAP participants have access to competent,
12 accredited representation where practical.

13 This is why the VFW highly recommends the passage of
14 the TAP Promotion Act. We know the immense value for all
15 troops to access accredited representatives. VA has
16 committed to making this a reality. By codifying this
17 collaboration, we ensure that more service members have
18 access to critical information and resources prior to
19 separation.

20 Sadly, many are not offered the opportunity to even use
21 this program because they cannot attend TAP on time. Timely
22 attendance in TAP is critical. Recently, a member of
23 Chairman Tester's own staff contacted VFW to file a BDD
24 claim. When the VFW spoke to this staff member, we learned
25 they had just one day to spare before they were ineligible.

1 In a stroke of luck they had their records available, and
2 the VFW was able to file before the hours'-long window
3 closed. Had they waited even one day, they would have
4 missed an opportunity to apply for seamless care and
5 benefits.

6 This problem disproportionately affects junior-enlisted
7 and junior officers, who comprise most of the separating
8 force. Veterans Experience Office data indicate that this
9 is a real problem, with most claimants reporting they file
10 after the uniform comes off because they miss the BDD window
11 entirely. The VFW clients indicate that this may be a
12 command-level problem demanding command-level solutions,
13 such as evaluating leaders on compliance.

14 Connections to community resources are also a force
15 multiplier that often means the difference between a
16 successful -- excuse me -- successful or unsuccessful
17 transition. The law was written to ensure community
18 connections are made for all separating service members.
19 Unfortunately, DoD has decided to make warm handoffs only
20 for troops it determines require the most help. The law is
21 clear, though: these connections are for everyone.

22 We cannot feasibly contort the TAP curriculum to meet
23 the unique needs of everyone leaving the Military. This is
24 where countless organizations that offer community-based
25 services play a role. If troops are going to college,

1 connect them to Student Veterans of America chapters. If
2 they want tech careers in Texas, connect them to Vets in
3 Tech. If they want to work on Wall Street, there is
4 FourBlock. No one knows what challenges they will actually
5 face until the uniform finally comes off. This is why
6 reliable community connections are so important. If no one
7 knows these organizations exist, they will not be able to
8 help. We only prevent service members from slipping through
9 the cracks if DoD makes the connections as required by law.

10 Finally, the VFW knows that families often play a
11 critical role in facilitating successful transitions, while
12 the service member focuses on completing their service
13 obligation. Spouse attendance in TAP is notoriously low,
14 but these classrooms full of uniformed service members, on-
15 base during the duty day, may not be the most effective
16 vehicle. The VFW is a strong proponent of Labor's Off-Base
17 Transition Training Program, which is why we recommend
18 either integrating VA benefits into OBTT, or testing an
19 OBTT-like program around Military installations focused on
20 families.

21 Look, we have come a long way since the VOW Act.
22 Veterans' unemployment is down; knowledge of benefits is up,
23 innovations that we heard about earlier, like SkillBridge,
24 Solid Start, Employer Navigator, and Partnership Program are
25 available. But we still miss many of the transitioning

1 service members who need these services the most. The VFW
2 believes we have a key role to play in this, which is why we
3 are grateful for the dialogue with your Committees today.

4 Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Members Moran and
5 Wicker, this concludes my testimony. And I am eager to
6 answer any questions you or the committee members may have.

7 [The prepared statement of Mr. Gallucci follows:]

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1 Chairman Reed. There will be questions. Thank you,
2 Ryan.

3 Mr. Porter, you have the floor.

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1 STATEMENT OF MR. TOM PORTER, VICE PRESIDENT OF
2 GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS FOR BLUE STAR FAMILIES

3 Mr. Porter. Thank you, Chairman Tester, Chairman Reed,
4 for having the hearing. Blue Star Families is the Nation's
5 largest grassroots Military family support organization, and
6 we are really at the heart of the issue that we are talking
7 about here today, transitions, here today.

8 We are committed to connecting military and veteran
9 families with their neighbors and organizations to create
10 vibrant communities of mutual support. Our groundbreaking
11 research is raising the Nation's awareness of the unique
12 challenges of military family life, both during and after
13 service. Our innovative programs are solving specific
14 challenges for our families, such as fighting economic
15 insecurity with resources that foster spouse career
16 development, address food insecurity, building family
17 strength with family programming, and provide critical peer
18 support for caregivers.

19 With more than 275,000 members, including chapters and
20 communities all over the world, Blue Star Families touches
21 more than 1.5 million family members every year. By
22 cultivating innovative programs and partnerships, we seek to
23 ensure that our military and veteran families always feel
24 connected, supported, and empowered.

25 Blue Star Families has 13 chapters across the country,

1 which provide virtual and in-person support, and local
2 presence where various programs, events, and services are
3 provided to military and veteran families to help them feel
4 more welcome and engaged in the community.

5 This past year, Craig Newark, founder of Craigslist,
6 committed \$100 million to the support of veterans by
7 contributing to solutions for the most pressing challenges
8 facing veteran and military families, including mental
9 health, suicide prevention, housing and homelessness, and
10 food insecurity. As part of this generous contribution, he
11 also made a personal commitment to Blue Star Families to
12 start 12 new outposts to assist military and veteran
13 families.

14 Our outposts will build upon our existing chapter
15 structure, allowing us to partner with local organizations
16 to bring events, programs, and resources to even more
17 veteran and Military-connected communities worldwide.

18 Transitioning from uniform to civilian life is a
19 critical period for service members and their families,
20 which is why it is extremely important that TAP is a
21 comprehensive, family-centered, and outcome-based program
22 that is delivered well in advance to service members and
23 their family members before leaving service.

24 A 2022 GAO Report said that over 90 percent of
25 transitioning service members participated in TAP, but that

1 nearly 25 percent of service members who needed maximum
2 support didn't attend the mandatory two-day class. However,
3 our 2021 survey told us that over half, 58 percent of
4 veterans reported they did not attend TAP or any government-
5 sponsored transition assistance programming. Furthermore,
6 41 percent of these veterans reported they and their
7 families disagreed that they were well-prepared to
8 successfully navigate the transition from military to
9 civilian life.

10 There are evaluation gaps in services, and service
11 members, and dependents' accessibility of the services. It
12 is a positive step that spouse employment has been
13 incorporated into TAP; however, child-friendly courses also
14 are key to ensure dependents' accessibility. Our perception
15 is there are actually few literal barriers to participation
16 for military spouses.

17 Instead, it seems that there is a culture of
18 nonattendance among transitioning spouses that must be
19 overcome. One of the biggest challenges that spouses
20 indicate they face in our research, has to do with mental
21 health challenges, and the impact they have on integration
22 into civilian society, marital issues, and several others.
23 It is our understanding that TAP includes some classes about
24 identifying PTSD, and other mental health challenges, but
25 not necessarily classes about how to manage these challenges

1 and their consequences. Specifically, we believe that
2 robust marital support programs will help these military
3 spouses.

4 So in addition to what we normally look at in terms of
5 transitioning with the TAP program, a lot of discussion
6 here, also important that we haven't had a lot of discussion
7 about here today, are some of the major programs that
8 recently have been passed, like the Honoring Our PACT Act,
9 the VA has done an amazing job reaching out to the veteran
10 and Military and Veteran community to encourage them to
11 enroll in their new benefits.

12 So over 600,000 cases of benefits have been approved in
13 the last year, and it is an incredible amount. And those
14 that get the disability benefits at the time following their
15 separation that could be an enormous benefit and help during
16 that critical part of transition.

17 Also, the honoring -- the John Scott Hannon Act that
18 was passed a couple of years ago; Blue Star Families is a
19 recipient of one of the Fox Grants that were a part of that
20 bill that you passed, Senator Tester. We appreciate that.
21 We are in our second year that we have received that grant,
22 it is a significant grant. We have done a lot of good. We
23 have got some solid feedback. What we are doing with that
24 money is we are training family members and friends on how
25 to address veterans in this critical time of need.

1 So great work on that, thank you very much, and
2 appreciate you having me here today.

3 [The prepared statement of Mr. Porter follows:]

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1 Chairman Tester. Thank you, Tom.

2 Mr. O'Neil, you have the floor.

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1 MR. KEVIN O'NEIL, EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION POLICY
2 ASSOCIATE, THE AMERICAN LEGION

3 Mr. O'Neil. Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Member
4 Moran, on behalf of National Commander Daniel J. Seehafer,
5 and our 1.6 million dues-paying members, The American Legion
6 thanks you for the opportunity to testify in Military to
7 Civilian Transition.

8 My own transition journey began as I was driving down
9 an unpaved road in Djibouti, Africa, with two of my fellow
10 Airmen. We were on our way to start our overnight shift,
11 and I proposed the question: What do you plan to do when you
12 separate? Neither knew. The uncertainty in their responses
13 propelled me to start thinking about the path that I would
14 take following my military career. After many nights alone
15 on deployment and a great deal of time to think, I made the
16 decision to go back to school.

17 Upon separating from the Air Force, I enrolled at a
18 community college, and from there I transitioned to a four-
19 year university where I earned my degree. I had finally
20 achieved the goal that I set for myself four years prior. I
21 went on to earn my graduate degree, and all of that has led
22 me here today.

23 While I am incredibly proud of these accomplishments, I
24 recognized that I was fortunate enough to have found my path
25 well before my separation. This cannot be said for all

1 service members, and I believe that this is why we are here
2 today. TAP offers a plethora of information that service
3 members can utilize to achieve success post-Military
4 service, but there are improvements that can be made. One
5 improvement is seeing that service members begin TAP no
6 later than 365 days prior to their anticipated separation.

7 According to a GAO Report released in December of 2022,
8 70 percent of service members are not completing TAP within
9 the mandated time frame. With over 200,000 service members
10 separating annually, that equates to around 140,000
11 transitioning service members who may have less than a year
12 to plan for their future. This is far too many service
13 members who may find themselves unprepared for the
14 transition to civilian life.

15 In light of the information gathered in this study, The
16 American Legion would like to offer a couple of suggestions
17 to remedy this issue. First, we can look to the Veterans
18 Affairs Military Life Cycle modules, or MLC, as a best
19 practice for providing vital information regarding the
20 transition process. MLC modules comprise 14 comprehensive
21 informational sessions that allow transitioning service
22 members and their families to access the information
23 provided through TAP at any time throughout their Military
24 Service. It is a great tool that can be emulated by other
25 federal agencies.

1 For instance, DOL offers a program titled the
2 Employment Navigator & Partnership Pilot. This program
3 offers one-on-one career assistance to transitioning service
4 members and their spouses at installations worldwide. It is
5 an excellent opportunity for service members and their
6 spouses to better prepare for civilian life by finding the
7 right career.

8 If DOL were to create online modules similar to those
9 offered through the VA's MLC modules, service members and
10 their spouses would have greater access to information that
11 will prepare them for a successful career post-Military
12 service. In addition to allowing for greater access to the
13 many opportunities available to transitioning service
14 members and their families, we would like to see an
15 application created that can be accessed at any time
16 throughout one's Military career.

17 This app would comprise the modules offered through
18 TAP, as well as the programs offered by DOL, DoD, and other
19 Executive Branch agencies. Through interagency partnerships
20 and the creation of a comprehensive Military life cycle app,
21 we can ensure that service members and their families have
22 unfettered access to information that will assist in
23 transitioning to civilian life.

24 Not only do we want service members and their spouses
25 to be successful in their post-Military endeavors, but we

1 also want them to serve knowing that there are options for
2 them when it comes time to separate or retire. This will
3 allow service members to be successful both in their
4 Military career and post-Military career, as it contributes
5 to a sense of security that comes only from having a plan.

6 Chairmen Tester and Reed, Ranking Member Moran, The
7 American Legion thanks you once again for allowing us to be
8 here. And I welcome any questions you may have.

9 [The prepared statement of Mr. O'Neil follows:]

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1 Chairman Tester. Thank you, Kevin, for your testimony.

2 Next, we have Dr. Arthur DeGroat.

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1 DR. ARTHUR S. DEGROAT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF
2 MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS, KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

3 Dr. DeGroat. Chairmen, Tester and Reed, Ranking
4 Members Moran and Wicker, Members of these Committees; I, as
5 a third-generation Army Officer, am honored for this
6 opportunity to address you today with my insights on the
7 challenges of Post-9/11 era of veterans' transition. As a
8 combat veteran, a human science researcher, a professional
9 practitioner of transition assistance through higher
10 education at Kansas University, and working with nonprofit
11 veteran service organizations, professional consulting, and
12 my own personal coaching with over 120 veterans from the
13 ranks of Specialist to four-star General, I believe that I
14 have a unique and relevant perspective on contemporary
15 veterans' transition.

16 This year marks my 39th year in public service to our
17 Nation's Military, in and out of uniform, and for the last
18 18 years, I have worked extensively with our veterans'
19 transition effort. So I am deeply thankful to participate
20 with you at this joint hearing today on a subject of my
21 greatest personal interest.

22 For opening remarks, I wish to share a brief statement
23 of my strategic perspective on our transition challenge.
24 The Military separation system deployed at the inception of
25 the All-Volunteer Force in the 1970s was adequate for many

1 generations of Military members departing their service.
2 Societal workforce and generational dynamics of previous
3 decades proved to offer more favorable conditions for
4 effective transition for our Cold War and Gulf War I
5 veterans than we face today. However, we see today that far
6 too little research work was conducted then and now on the
7 practice of exit transition.

8 Thankfully, for four decades, this gap of an empirical
9 basis needed to guide veteran separation went largely
10 unnoticed due to the presence of a large allied Military
11 Defense sector that absorbed up to 80 percent of
12 transitioning veterans into employment after their service.

13 As we entered the Post-9/11 era, where social,
14 economic, generational, martial, and workforce conditions
15 had changed in significant ways, we found our Legacy
16 separation systems ill-suited to effectively assist our new
17 generation of service members and their families to re-enter
18 civil life in the workplace.

19 Responding to this reality, we performed a process
20 improvement approach to adapt our Legacy separation system
21 to a transition assistance model. Some key changes
22 impacting modern transition include the changed nature of
23 the workforce, a change from a human resource development
24 model to a talent acquisition model, dramatic change to the
25 very nature of work in the workplace, the economic necessity

1 for dual-working spouse families, and the increased
2 awareness of the impacts of behavioral health care and human
3 performance.

4 From my research and practice, I believe that the sum
5 totality of these societal and generational changes,
6 compounded by a lack of an evidence-based approach to modern
7 transition, were not adequately accounted for as we adapted
8 our Legacy Military separation system to meet Post-9/11 era
9 transition assistance needs. While many process
10 improvements were made reactively to our underperforming
11 systems of today, I find some of these changes have been
12 ineffective when being applied to our transition system,
13 some of these being addressed today in this hearing.

14 So today, we find our Post-9/11 era veterans having a
15 greater transition challenge than any previous generation
16 and having to serve as pioneers as the first generation of
17 veterans to face such a major cross-boundary career
18 transition and doing so while competing for entry with a
19 highly skilled incumbent civilian talent pool for careers in
20 new industry sectors where our veterans have little to no
21 direct relevant experience in. Adding complexity to this
22 current reality, we are also asking our young service
23 members to forge their post-Military futures within a
24 process started just 365 days before they exit.

25 This is both daunting and unrealistic, given what we

1 know empirically about adults making these types of life
2 changes. My deepest belief is that our current TAP program
3 places too much life decision-making upon our existing
4 service members too close to their departure, rendering a
5 state of learned helplessness where our service members
6 perceived an actual need, or lack preparation to transition
7 questions if their innate belief is they can do so
8 successfully.

9 In my written testimony, I offered several
10 recommendations aimed to overcome systematic challenges in
11 our current efforts, including adapting from a one-stage
12 simultaneous process to a more natural evidence-based
13 approach of a three-stage process of transition that
14 sequentially merges with our retention efforts, that can
15 prepare our service members and their families for staying
16 or leaving in a time frame where essential resources and
17 assets and planning can occur over time.

18 This would require an institutional culture where
19 transition is not viewed as a competitor to retention. Both
20 are simply a natural aspect of caring for service members
21 over their life course.

22 My written testimony also addresses the empirical
23 realities of service members' human capital and economic
24 entry cost to civilian life and work that needs to be
25 addressed more realistically than we are doing today. As

1 well as commenting on the phenomena that as a result of
2 learned helplessness, many transitioning service members
3 place an over-reliance on VA financial disability
4 entitlements, becoming a disincentive to do the hard work
5 for self-sufficiency and independence.

6 In conclusion, I appreciate this opportunity to help
7 our Military, VA, and others as we continue to work together
8 to improve this vital capability to care for our service
9 members and their families as they move successfully into
10 civil society as proud, independent, and successful
11 veterans. I am also ready to share some insights on health
12 and well-being impacts upon transition performance, as it
13 was highlighted during the first panel.

14 I look forward to your questions. Thank you very much.

15 [The prepared statement of Dr. DeGroat follows:]

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1 Chairman Tester. Dr. DeGroat, thank you for your
2 testimony. As I thank all of you for your testimony. I am
3 just going to say one comment about you, Dr. DeGroat,
4 because these other fellows are in front of the committee
5 much more often than you are, but I really appreciate you
6 thinking outside the box, and you do that very, very well.
7 And I appreciate that.

8 I want to ask to all of you, you guys heard the
9 previous panel; you heard the transition programs that are
10 there, there is a lot of things you could say, and you could
11 eat up the next hour each one of you, but if you were going
12 to pick one thing, one thing that the Department of Defense
13 could do better and that the VA could do better, what would
14 it be?

15 And I will start with you, Mr. Gallucci.

16 Mr. Gallucci. Thank you, Chairman Tester. So one
17 thing that we believe VA can do better is the collaboration
18 that we are already working on, and that is the integration
19 of accredited representatives in the Transition Assistance
20 Program, which is also supported by the TAP Promotion Act.
21 The reason this is so important is that we know that the
22 people who need this program the most are not linked to it.

23 We also know that TAP can't be everything to everyone;
24 it is supposed to provide a baseline of information to
25 separating service members. That is where high-touch,

1 vetted, accredited programs and resources like the VFW, or
2 VSO peers, or state agencies play such a critical role.

3 Some of the urgency of this: are the predatory actors
4 that Mr. Jacobs spoke to in the first hearing. We call them
5 "claim sharks". I want to share two stories. The first is
6 Joe Ziegler, our accredited representative on Fort
7 Wainwright in Alaska; the service members he meets with
8 regularly wonder why they are getting solicitation emails
9 and aggressive online ads from these companies looking to
10 sign predatory contracts.

11 The second is a gentleman who is sitting behind me from
12 the State of Tennessee, Preston Stewart, VFW member, who his
13 peers, within the Military Service, recommended one of these
14 predatory companies to help him with his benefits. So our
15 recommendation is to inject this into the Military Lifecycle
16 module so that leaders at all levels know what "right" looks
17 like. There are aggressive predatory actors out there, but
18 there is lots of free assistance, competent, highly trained
19 assistants ready to help.

20 Chairman Tester. Tom.

21 Mr. Porter. Thank you, Chairman. I think that we
22 would really like them to be able to look at the TAP program
23 through the lens of what the family members want. Maybe
24 they are looking at it from a top-down perspective. What
25 does not only the service member want and his or her

1 transition to civilian life, but what does the spouse want?
2 What does the child want? And then deliver on that in
3 person. A lot of new possibilities have developed
4 opportunities with a virtual TAP, but they really need to
5 have the in-person, high-touch availability for these
6 opportunities.

7 And they need to be able to have these events when it
8 is not just during working hours; they could be outside of
9 working hours, because if a spouse has a job, if the service
10 member is busy during the day, then there is less excuse for
11 them not to be able to attend if it is outside of working
12 hours. I can tell you that recently former service member
13 just trying to get a hold of anybody to do anything on the
14 Military side outside of working hours it is almost
15 impossible. So they can do better on that.

16 And then how better to acclimate to the civilian world
17 than working in public-private partnerships to tell people
18 what it is like on the outside and the skills that are
19 necessary to make that transition. And then, when you do
20 all these things, to be able to tell everybody about it.
21 Don't expect -- I would say that, look at the way that the
22 VA is doing with the PACT Act. If they can do a hundred
23 outreach events in a month's time and see the progress and
24 the results that they are getting in terms of people
25 enrolling in the VA at this point, then they can do this,

1 DoD and VA can both do this, in terms of talking to
2 veterans, and talking to the service members -- I am sorry
3 -- their spouses, their family members about the
4 possibilities of their training and their transitioning to
5 new opportunities in the civilian world.

6 Chairman Tester. Okay. And Kevin.

7 Mr. O'Neil. Thank you for the question. In reference
8 to the VA, I think that they can do a better job in
9 advertising their Military Life Cycle Modules. I think this
10 is a very important resource. Currently, only 30,000
11 participants have utilized this resource in the past year.
12 I think this could be greatly enhanced, and that comes with
13 better advertisement and communication.

14 Additionally, I don't think we need to see transition,
15 retention, and recruitment in conflict. The Marine Corps
16 has proven that these things can coincide and work
17 effectively together with their Marine for Life Program.
18 The Marine Corps currently has the best retention and
19 recruitment of all branches of the Military.

20 Chairman Tester. Thank you for that. Dr. DeGroat.

21 Dr. DeGroat. I believe the DoD has the opportunity to
22 make the greatest improvement to our TAP program, and
23 particularly, to see the conflict between transition and
24 retention. I think we saw when we had Wounded Warriors, we
25 recognized that we weren't caring for them well during Iraq

1 and Afghanistan. And so what we did is create Warrior
2 Transition Battalions and sort of Recovery Units, and
3 putting line units, and line leaders in charge of their
4 soldiers to help them get well.

5 And I think we need to expand the role of the activity
6 leadership, in units, to start the conversations earlier
7 with their service members, to make sure that they are
8 talking about the right things, and that their
9 responsibility -- they are responsible for their soldiers,
10 if they choose to stay and re-enlist, or if they opt to
11 transition back to civilian life.

12 Chairman Tester. Thank you, all. Senator Reed.

13 Chairman Reed. Well, in the spirit of our partnership,
14 I will yield to Senator Moran.

15 Chairman Tester. Okay. Senator Moran.

16 Senator Moran. Senator Reed, thank you.

17 First of all, let me compliment Mr. O'Neil. I
18 appreciated your story about how you have lived your life,
19 and how you thought about it, and the success that you have
20 had since service. And I thank you for your service, and I
21 wish you well in all the endeavors that now follow it. You
22 captured me with the kind of personal nature of what you
23 have experienced.

24 And Mr. Porter, you mentioned Fox Grants, that captured
25 my attention, too. I think it is one of the significant

1 components of the John Q. Hannon Act, and I rarely run into
2 anyone, or any community, or any organization that knows or
3 is utilizing them. And I am not absent to community
4 leaders, and I am not absent veterans. I am anxious to hear
5 your story about that grant in the two or three sentences
6 that you can tell me, and maybe we can follow up more.

7 Mr. Porter. Thank you, Senator. So we are in our
8 second year, Blue Star Family, with the Fox Grant, \$750,000
9 the first year, and was recently approved for the next year.
10 And so what we do, we focused it on equipping family and
11 friends on the training and the skill sets that they need to
12 be able to talk to that veteran service member during that
13 critical time, to get the help that they need, and which is,
14 as we all know, it is a very sensitive time.

15 So it is an eight-week training. And our program, it
16 is called Upstream Solutions to Crisis, and that is within
17 Blue Star Families, and we have so far completed seven
18 cohorts, a total of 50 participants. So it is very in-depth
19 training, and we are very proud of that. And we are going
20 to be looking forward to doing more.

21 Senator Moran. Is this occurring across the country,
22 with Blue Star Families in a particular community taking the
23 lead? Or this is something that you do nationally?

24 Mr. Porter. It is across the country, nationally. It
25 is. And we hope to expand it.

1 Senator Moran. And does that mean utilizing technology
2 to deliver that conversation, those services?

3 Mr. Porter. Sure, and in-person.

4 Senator Moran. Right; and in person. Okay. Thank
5 you.

6 Dr. DeGroat, welcome back. I was reminded by your
7 presence that the last time you were with us, Chairman
8 Tester called you: Hot, white, smart. And thanked you for
9 improving his image of Kansans by your presence today. In
10 your testimony, you say, and I quote, "Societal and
11 generational changes were not adequately accounted for as we
12 adopted our Legacy Military Separation System to meet
13 current Post-9/11 era transition demands."

14 You mentioned this in your response to Senator Tester's
15 question. I wanted to give you, at least for my benefit,
16 tell me more. You have done a lot of research into Military
17 life cycle, and touch points in military careers leading up
18 to separation. What should we know to take from that
19 sentence?

20 Dr. DeGroat. I think societally this is a different
21 -- let me go back. We tend to see veterans as this
22 monolithic archetype from generation to generation, but
23 there are significant generational differences between each
24 generation of veterans. Yet, we continue to just mildly
25 improve on some existing legacy systems as we manage them in

1 all different processes of talent management. But I think
2 we have to recognize that, generationally, these are
3 different people, the nature of their war experience.

4 I went to war one time in 23 years for seven months.
5 Young veterans in three years have gone back and forth to
6 wars in two different theaters or three different theaters
7 in four years. The iteration of how we utilize soldiers
8 today has incredibly increased psychological demands. This
9 is the first generation that went to war where they are
10 present on the battlefield and the home front because of the
11 presence of social media and communication technologies.

12 The cognitive, mental, and moral demands on the current
13 generation of our service members, they are still managing
14 their homes while they are managing their soldiers on the
15 battlefield, concurrently. So and then the nature of the
16 workforce, we had a -- we had an economy and industries
17 where small unit leadership, which is the majority of our
18 combat soldiers, they have great experience in leading
19 groups of diverse young people to do very complicated,
20 dualistic, hazardous things. And historically, they made
21 great lead supervisors in manufacturing and industry.

22 But now we have knowledge workers, and knowledge
23 economies. And so I also believe strongly that one of our
24 shortfalls, in this generation, is the reliance on and
25 looking at the MOS skill -- the Military Occupational Skill

1 -- most service members take the ASVAB test, and it kind of
2 boils down to all -- from the whole range of choices of what
3 they can do in the Military, from what they were talented
4 for and what they desire to do. It says: You can be a cook,
5 a truck driver, or a fuel handler.

6 So now as we start to transition, we are saying: Okay,
7 let us just credential you in that, and make you do one of
8 those three things in civilian life. So I think the reality
9 is, as our workforce today, where our service members may
10 have been snipers today, but they don't want to be snipers
11 in the civilian world, even if they could. They are looking
12 for a bold transition, a cross-boundary transition to a new
13 industry and a new life, where their soft skills, as
14 veterans, are very relevant, but their innate military
15 talent is not directly relevant.

16 So those are just a few examples where, generationally,
17 the workforce has changed, our soldiers and veterans have
18 changed, and we have to have a transition program that is
19 relevant and that places them within those realities. And
20 my written testimony cites about 13 other areas,
21 specifically, where we are missing the mark on being more
22 relevant.

23 Senator Moran. Dr. DeGroat, thank you. Chairman Reed,
24 thank you for your leadership on the Committee, thank you
25 for your leadership in the Army Caucus with me, and thank

1 you for bringing our two committees together for this
2 important topic.

3 Chairman Reed. Thank you very much, Senator Moran, and
4 gentlemen, thank you for your testimony.

5 Mr. Gallucci, you mentioned these shakedown artists
6 that are going after people as they retire. Have you been
7 in contact, or any organizations, with the Consumer
8 Financial Protection Bureau? That organization has a
9 dedicated section for the Military?

10 Mr. Gallucci. Yes, Senator. As a matter of fact, my
11 colleague who is with us today, Kristina Keenan, had
12 participated in a round table of CFPB on this last week. We
13 are in regular contact. We are also working -- Kristina had
14 worked with State Attorneys General to pen a letter in
15 support of reining in some of these companies.

16 Chairman Reed. Well, if you need any assistance,
17 please contact me in my office directly.

18 And Mr. Porter, I was talking about the transition with
19 respect to health care. You say, from a very interesting
20 perspective, the families. What is one or two things that
21 we could do better in terms of transitioning active-duty
22 personnel into a transition to civilian life, maintaining
23 the best health care they can?

24 Mr. Porter. I am sorry. Are you talking about VA
25 health care, or are you talking about transitioning?

1 Chairman Reed. I am just talking about transitioning.

2 Mr. Porter. Okay.

3 Chairman Reed. Because, you know, many families don't
4 get VA but they have some benefits, or they just need advice
5 as to how to sign up for the best program for their family,
6 both value and cost.

7 Mr. Porter. Right. As I was mentioning before, it is
8 really important to look at this through the lens of not
9 only the service member, but the spouse and the child. What
10 are their needs? What are their school needs? What are
11 their employment needs, their health care needs, their
12 community needs? And to be able to fold in other outside
13 partners, so public-private partnerships can be part of
14 that. That could be able to give job training,
15 transitioning advice into the civilian career world. So
16 those are important things.

17 But the main thing is to look at this from the
18 perspective of not just the top-down from what the commander
19 thinks on the base, but what does the service member,
20 spouse, and children need?

21 Chairman Reed. Well, thank you. And you, Mr. O'Neil,
22 do you have any ideas in terms of this issue of medical
23 transition; because I think it is important?

24 Mr. O'Neil. Thank you for the question, sir. I do
25 believe that, as I stated, regarding the Military life cycle

1 modules, that resources can be better advertised and better
2 communicated, and this should start day one in the service
3 from your first duty station when you first process. You
4 should be aware of these opportunities. But having access
5 to virtual online modules creates a sense of anonymity that
6 I think is important to service members because,
7 unfortunately, there is a stigma associated with mental
8 health issues.

9 Chairman Reed. Thank you. And Dr. DeGroat, I think
10 you have raised a fundamentally important topic, that is,
11 there is a real desire within the Military to retain
12 personnel. And when you set up a system that sets up exit
13 routes that are pretty clear now, that seems to have a
14 tension with retention. You have raised this issue. Any
15 advice in terms of how do we blend those two together?

16 Dr. DeGroat. I think it is a perceived tension because
17 soldiers, everyone, every soldier leaves either by the end
18 of their service tour, or the end of a career, or by
19 sacrifice in combat, or result, or just by separation. So
20 the fact that every soldier leaves, and it means that that
21 transition is just another part of -- it is the same thing
22 as retention. It is the other side of retention.

23 I think when you show the soldier early on all of the
24 challenges of leaving, and all of the assets and
25 opportunities of staying for a while longer, I think they

1 make a more informed choice. I don't think the truth of the
2 value of Military Service is a disincentive to stay. They
3 joined for the right reasons. And so I really don't think
4 in practice, it is really a competitive thing, one or the
5 other. I think actually it is the same thing. Given more
6 opportunity to think about it early on, you are actually
7 coaching the person. You have made a great choice, you can
8 stay here if you want, you and your family, or you can
9 transition. And if you transition, here is, to do what you
10 want to do, these are the things you need to do between now
11 and then.

12 If you are ready for that, if you have saved money to
13 start your own business, if you have got enough savings, and
14 a plan, and enough credentials to get the kind of
15 compensation in your career, your future career that you
16 need to support your family independently; health care,
17 child care, then you are ready to go. But if you are not
18 ready to go, then you continue to stay in the service, serve
19 honorably and usefully, and build those assets and resources
20 needed while you are in your uniform and prepare yourself
21 for that eventual transition.

22 Chairman Reed. So the premise is that an individual
23 has to be informed about the benefits of continued service,
24 the values, and all the external, as well as the cost of all
25 those things. And then, at the same time, they have to be

1 made aware of what is available outside so they can make a
2 better judgment. And do you feel we are -- very quickly, do
3 you feel we are doing that now?

4 Dr. DeGroat. We are not doing that, but I think we can
5 do that.

6 Chairman Reed. Okay.

7 Dr. DeGroat. I think it is just a culture change, and
8 we have to really look at that and make sure commanders
9 realize that is the right thing to do. It is not change
10 -- it is not going to drive -- it may improve retention or
11 delay transition until the service member is more prepared,
12 and their families are more prepared. But not having that
13 conversation until the last year, and currently models, it
14 looks like transition is when retention fails.

15 Chairman Reed. One other quick question, which is
16 basically a lot of personnel will make that decision, you
17 know, they are going to relist, I am going to relist, and
18 then two months before their -- expiration of their service,
19 they suddenly throw up their hands: No, I am getting out.
20 And those are counted in statistics as: Well, you didn't
21 have the full year. I think we have to do something about
22 that. I think they have to refine who falls into the
23 category.

24 Dr. DeGroat. Yes, sir. My written testimony shows
25 that transition in other industries is usually a three-stage

1 process. It starts with confronting the reality of
2 eventually leaving. Then there is a stage of disengagement,
3 which is pretty much what our TAP program is now. And then
4 there is a period of resocialization that science says could
5 be up to three-and-a-half to seven years. So what we are
6 doing is essentially compressing all three of those natural
7 adult transition stages into one, 365, and as many
8 testimony, was made, we are asking life-changing -- young
9 people to make life-changing decisions that will affect the
10 course of their life, too late, and not enough time to think
11 through and build the assets needed to go to the next stage.

12 Chairman Reed. Thank you.

13 Dr. DeGroat. So I think, simply, that the opportunity
14 is just to use the existing Military infrastructure that we
15 used in retention counseling with unit line leaders who know
16 those soldiers and families the best, use them to start
17 having the transition conversations with not being fearful
18 that that is going to encourage them out.

19 In fact, those conversations of showing the
20 alternatives and the options, which would suggest, you are
21 probably not ready after four years to take yourself and
22 your three children, as a junior enlisted person, with very
23 little direct transferable workplace skills. You ought to
24 stay in a little longer, become a non-commissioned officer,
25 get some leadership skills, get some more courses while you

1 are here. Maybe it is time for your spouse to get ready
2 before you get out, because then you will be a dual-working
3 family.

4 Chairman Reed. Thank you very much. I want to thank
5 all the witnesses. Do you have another comment?

6 Senator Moran. If I could ask a question if you would
7 let me?

8 Chairman Reed. I will let you ask a question, but it
9 has to be succinct, and the answer has to be even more
10 succinct.

11 Senator Moran. Dr. DeGroat, please don't get me in
12 trouble with -- if won't be my fault; it will be your fault
13 if I am in trouble with Chairman Reed.

14 You said something, and I was writing it as quickly as
15 I could, and it had something to do with VA benefits. You
16 said at the end of your testimony, and what I wrote was:
17 That it has a consequence in creating less motivation to
18 pursue other options. Would you tell me what you were
19 conveying?

20 Dr. DeGroat. I will make this very concise. I believe
21 the frustrations that young people have when they are
22 separating with the transition program is that they then
23 start over-relying on seeking higher levels of disability as
24 a financial cushion, that becomes a disincentive, where they
25 are spending all their efforts in transition on working the

1 disability claim and ratings, at the expense of working on
2 independence and reliance for transitioning.

3 Senator Moran. Is there any suggestion in that answer
4 that the VA needs to emphasize more educational benefits,
5 workforce, workforce training benefits? Or is this just
6 that people have this expectation of monetary benefits upon
7 their departure?

8 Dr. DeGroat. I think if the DoD transition program
9 -- in the DoD if the transition program is more effective,
10 as we talked about today with some of these changes, then
11 that problem will solve itself. But I think the lack of
12 -- the perceived lack of transitioning well through the DoD
13 TAP program is causing an over-reliance and an overburden on
14 the VA for disability to be the sole source of their plan
15 for transition.

16 Senator Moran. Thank you.

17 Chairman Reed. The last word has to be given by two
18 Rhode Islanders. So Mr. Gallucci, please go.

19 Mr. Gallucci. Well, thank you, Chairman Reed. I
20 wanted just to take a second to respond to Ranking Member
21 Moran's comments, and Dr. DeGroat's comments as well. I
22 fundamentally disagree that that is what is happening.
23 Unfortunately, this is the system that is set up. What we
24 see is that these benefits are often an enabler to economic
25 readjustment and the like. I sit before you as a product of

1 many VA programs. I am service-connected; I utilize VA
2 health care; I use the GI Bill; I use the VA home loan.

3 Now, I believe that these have allowed me and people
4 like me to thrive after Military Service against other
5 factors. What I will also say is that one of the things
6 that is missing in the TAP curriculum is that the primary
7 mechanism for eligibility for VA care, is that service-
8 connected disabilities. There is other policy nuance here
9 where insurance companies don't have to cover conditions
10 that result from Military Service, and that is supposed to
11 be covered by the VA.

12 If I were injured on my job with the VFW, I would be
13 eligible for workers' compensation. I am not eligible for
14 that in the Military. There is a reason that these benefits
15 exist. I invite the dialogue with Dr. DeGroat and with the
16 Committee, but I don't want to understate the significance
17 of separating service members applying for these earned
18 benefits.

19 Chairman Reed. Well, thank you, gentlemen. I want to
20 thank you for your testimony, and also for your service to
21 the Nation, your continued service to the Nation. I
22 appreciate it deeply.

23 We will keep the record open for a week. And the
24 hearing is adjourned.

25 [Whereupon, at 1:09 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]