

## **Field Hearing July 25, 2022**

### **Veterans Affairs Economic Opportunity Subcommittee**

Chairman Mike Levin, Ranking Member Barry Moore, members of the Veteran Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and submit the following testimony regarding Veteran employment and transition. As a Veteran, I am very appreciative for the actions taken to ensure Veteran transition and employment are done effectively for America's heroes.

Transitioning is a daunting task to even the most well-prepared Veteran. Transitioning has improved exponentially since I separated from the Army back in 2010. Previously, the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) was very basic and focused on preparing the transitioning service member to apply for employment in the civilian workforce. TAP at this point also provided basic information on benefits that service member would be entitled to after leaving the Military. In all honesty, there is so much more TSMs need to successfully transition from military life.

Today, TAPS has improved and provides an abundant amount of information for the transitioning service members in the areas of employment, resources, and benefits. Despite this program's growth and much improved information provided to the transitioning service members, there are gaps in the transitioning process that can be assisted by community-based organizations or public / private entities through partnerships. I would like to discuss how these partnerships in Southern Alabama assist in filling the gaps in the transition process for transitioning service members.

## Public and Private Partners

### Alabama Department of Labor: American Job Centers (AJC)

At the Alabama Department of Labor (ADOL), we can assist transitioning service members in several ways. Initially upon meeting a Veteran, we first attempt to bridge the financial gap by providing qualified service members with unemployment compensation (UC program). The Employment Service Division of ADOL provides employment services to transitioning service members and Veterans either through the internet or in-person through the Alabama Career Center System. All transitioning service members and Veterans are eligible for these free Career Center services. ADOL provides these services through three grants: Wagner-Peyser (W/P), Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and the Jobs for Veterans State Grant (JVSG). Veterans that receive a Dishonorable Discharge are not eligible for JVSG Services. These services are provided regardless of residency status in Alabama.

Initially, services are provided by Wagner/Peyser staff. Upon entering the Career Center, an initial assessment is conducted to determine what services the service member may need. Service members also receive basic employment services such as labor market information for the service member's intended career path. This information is provided by ADOL's Labor Market Information Division. The W/P staff will assist the service member in producing an initial résumé. Once the service member determines a specific career field they are interested in, the W/P staff will work with the service member to develop a more focused résumé. If the service member is going to reside in Alabama, then W/P staff will assist them with job referrals or referrals to WIOA staff for potential eligibility to obtain skills and employment training. If it is determined by W/P staff that the service member may need more one-on-one assistance, they will provide case management until employment is obtained or the service member terminates the case management. If W/P staff and the service member determine that additional training in a WIOA eligible program is needed, the service member will be transferred to WIOA staff to determine eligibility and apply for that specific training. If approved, WIOA staff will case manage the service member until training is complete. There are On the Job training and Apprenticeships also available through the WIOA grant. Service members in need of intensive services are eligible for services with a Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialist.

The Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialist and Local Veteran Employment Representative positions are covered under the Jobs for Veterans State Grant (JVSG). The Federal statute that covers the JVSG program is Title 38 Chapter 41, section 4103A. The JVSG funds two types of positions to aid Veterans with their employment goals. The Local Veterans Employment Representative (LVER) represents Veterans seeking employment through the state workforce system to employers. LVERS are eligible to work with any Veteran that walks into each state's Career Centers. The other position is the Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialist, which provides intensive services and case management for Veterans with barriers to employment. These barriers are listed in US. Department of Labor veteran program letter 03-14 with changes 1 and 2 (see attached). Significant Barriers to Employment (SBEs) that entitle a veteran to DVOP services are:

- Special Disabled Veteran (VA rating)
- Homelessness
- Recently separated and in the past 12 months been unemployed for 27 weeks
- Justice involved
- Lacking a high school diploma
- Low income
- 18-24 years of age
- Vietnam-Era Veterans

The role of the DVOP is to resolve the Veteran's barriers to employment and provide intensive services. These services include a comprehensive assessment, individualized employment plan, and career counseling. The individualized employment plan is developed jointly by the DVOP and the Veteran and includes specific steps for the Veteran to follow to accomplish the desired career goal. Another major role of the DVOP is to provide career services to Veteran Administration's Veteran Readiness and Employment Chapter 31 veterans. Once their training is complete, an official referral is sent from the VA to the intensive service coordinator (ISC) to be assigned to a DVOP for individualized services. These Veterans are then case managed by the DVOP until satisfactory employment is secured, or the VA terminates the referral. Once satisfactory employment has been secured, the DVOP will contact the Veteran (and in some instances the employer) for 60 days to conduct a follow-up to ensure all is well in the Veteran's new position.

The LVER's responsibility is to advocate for the Veteran's employment with a local or national employer. They do this by building relationships with Human Resource professionals at all levels. It is the LVER's job to build relationships and encourage employers to hire veterans. It is vital that the LVER educates hiring managers of the undeniable skills, knowledge, abilities, and experience that our veterans bring to the workforce.

If a service member is not residing in Alabama, the Jobs for Veterans state coordinator provides POC information for the career center in the state and city the service member wishes to reside. In some cases, we must rely on partner services and resources to help DVOPs resolve a Veteran's employment barriers, such as the following:

#### **Alabama Department of Veteran Affairs**

The Alabama Department of Veteran Affairs has 61 county service offices that serves Alabama's 67 counties. The service officers are specially trained to assist Veterans and their dependents in filing for and receiving the benefits they have earned. They will also assist the Veteran in contacting community resources where government benefits are not available if the Veteran so desires.

The Office of Engagement was created to better inform and serve Veterans. Too often Veterans are unaware of the benefits and services provided, especially the existence of the county officers, and details regarding federal benefits. With the newly hired full-time Veterans Wellbeing Program Manager, there is now an organic resource with a social sciences background to tackle the larger issues, such as Veteran suicide and homelessness, but can also help connect individual Veterans with resources.

The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs works to foster and support community Veteran groups. Regardless of whether these are MyVA groups, CVEB groups, or just a bunch of folks trying to help, these are community-based entities and individuals who work collaboratively to provide support to Veterans in need. Fostering these groups is critical, in my opinion. Younger Veterans are not becoming members of our traditional Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs). Historically, these groups have served as the community support as well as the voice for Veterans at the state and local levels. As these groups dwindle, we will have to rely on other, less structured organizations such as these community-based Veteran groups.

## **Alabama Department of Rehabilitation**

Services from the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation can be utilized when the individual has a permanent physical or mental impairment which interferes with the ability to work and vocational rehabilitation services are necessary for the individual to prepare for, enter, engage in, or maintain gainful (paid) employment.

ADRS is also not limited in their provision of service due to service-connected disability or rating level of service connection. Service provision by ADRS is not limited by a 12-year restricted entitlement eligibility for VR&E Services. ADRS is not limited by types of military discharges. Services are provided for those discharged with: Honorable, General Discharge under honorable conditions, Other than honorable, Dishonorable discharge.

The State Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (ADRS) can provide services to active-duty service members, transitioning service members of the Alabama National Guard and Reserves (including those who have acquired their disability after service) and Veterans leading to employment outcome. Comparable benefits and financial eligibility are required for some services, accommodations, auxiliary aids, and training.

### *Post 9/11 Military 2 VA (M2VA) Case Management*

Overview: ADRS partners with the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System M2VA and the Birmingham VA Medical Center's M2VA team. Recently transitioning service members who are severely injured or not severely injured are typically waiting on a service connection. They are also beginning the process of entering the civilian world and need additional supports. These service members may have a variety of disabilities that are impacting them but are not service connected. Not all service members connect with VR&E as they are not yet service-connected and need support that ADRS can provide as it relates to disability. ADRS receives a robust number of referrals, all of whom have disabilities. With proper documentation, they can make them eligible for services the same day and support them during the critical transition period as they enter civilian life connecting to VA services and partner agencies.

Benefits for Transitioning Service members from M2VA:

- Disability- related counseling
- Referral and Collaboration (Connection to services they are entitled to)
- Referral for Benefits Counseling
- Résumé assistance, job readiness, job search assistance, job referral, job placement, job retention

The Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services is a public partner that fills the gaps either before or while waiting on a VA rating. They also provide services that are not offered by the VA for transitioning service members or qualifying Veterans.

## **Alabama Office of Apprenticeship**

According to their website, the Alabama Office of Apprenticeship (AOA) was created in September 2019 as a new tool in the workforce development toolbox of our state. The mission of the Alabama Office of Apprenticeship (AOA) is to expand the use of registered apprenticeships (RAs) and Alabama industry recognized apprenticeship programs (AIRAPs) in order to provide high-quality career training which will enable workers and employers to prosper in pursuit of the continued economic development of our state. Veterans seeking to obtain an apprenticeship can use GI Bill benefits to help pay for the program. The AOA is broken up into 7 different regions. Southeast Alabama is represented by regions 5 and 6. Tawanna Robinson is the Region 5 & 6 Project Manager. As the LVER for Southeast Alabama, I maintain a relationship with Mrs. Robinson in order to know what new apprenticeships are coming available so that we can communicate what is available to our veterans.

## **Southern Alabama Regional Council on Aging (SARCOA)**

Southern Alabama Regional Council on Aging is an area agency serving the seniors of Barbour, Coffee, Covington, Dale, Geneva, Henry, and Houston counties of southeast Alabama. SARCOA is a vibrant and dynamic organization continually seeking ways to better serve the rapidly growing senior population through planning, coordinating, and developing community levels of service. As the regional focal point for senior services, SARCOA's focus today, and every day is to provide services which improve the quality of life and enhance the independence of the seniors of our area.

SARCOA not only provides services for our aging veteran community they also hire our veterans. Through building a relationship with the hiring manager, we had a veteran obtain employment as a case manager.

## **Southeast Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission**

Part of our job as JVSG staff is to refer veterans to outside partners. The Southeast Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission partners with the Alabama Department of Senior Services to help seniors gain employment. The Senior Employment Program is a no-fee employment service and has trained, capable older workers available for both entry level and higher-level positions. We have partnered as a worksite with SEARPD in the past, employing Seniors (some Veterans) in our Career Center with temporary work placements.

## **U.S. Army TAP-SFL Fort Rucker, Alabama**

The Transition Assistance Program provides transition and employment assistance to Soldiers and their adult family members who are transitioning from active duty, veterans and retirees, and DOD civilian employees in a reduction-in-force status. Pre-separation planning includes benefits information, job search skills development, career guidance, job search assistance and other guidance relevant to a thorough transition.

The Fort Rucker TAP and Soldier for Life (SFL) is a vital partner to helping get TSMs and Veterans hired in our local area. Every month (depending on Covid-19) they host an employer day with about 10 employers. The event is open to TSMs, Veterans, and Military Spouses. The TAPs Service Manager invites both the Dothan and Enterprise Career Center JVSG Staff to set up a table and speak with clients about local labor market information and job opportunities. Whenever possible, the Career Center is

invited to attend voluntary workshops hosted by TAPs to inform TSMs of Career Center and Veteran services that are at their disposal to help aid in their transition and career search.

### **Local Municipalities**

The city government has become a vital partner in hiring our veterans and TSMs. The City of Dothan sends jobs every two weeks for me to post and refer veterans. They have internships available to qualified veterans. In addition, they also provide use of the civic center at no cost to host regional job fairs such as the Veteran Resource and Job Fair held in March. Many local municipalities in Southeast Alabama are ready and willing to help our veteran population.

### **Southeast Alabama Works**

Southeast AlabamaWorks, Region 6, is one of seven regional workforce councils in Alabama created to serve business and industry through the development of a skilled workforce and pipeline of future employees. Southeast Alabama Works strives to implement strategies developed by the Alabama Workforce Council – AlabamaWorks – on a local level to ensure every community, from urban areas to rural towns, has an industry-led council using available resources to help local businesses and workers prosper.

### **Other Community Partners:**

#### ***Wiregrass Rehabilitation Center***

Wiregrass Rehabilitation Center, Inc. (WRC) is a non-profit organization governed by 14-member Board of Directors. WRC currently serves a 10-county area in Southeast Alabama. WRC plays a vital role in the economic life within the communities served by paying individuals for work performed in an “earn while you learn” training approach. WRC assists individuals with disabilities in locating jobs within their communities. They help with vocational and employment services.

#### ***Alfred Saliba Center / Coffee County Family Services Center***

Dothan's Saliba Center for Families and the Family Services Center in Coffee County are public, non-profit agencies offering a wide array of social services at no cost. They specialize in prevention and intervention services to help strengthen families to help them help themselves. Not only do they offer our direct services, but they also have more than 30 social service agency partners.

#### ***Still Serving Veterans***

Still Serving Veterans is headquartered in Huntsville and has a regional office in Phenix City, Alabama. They provide services statewide via the internet. They provide one-on-one career counseling, job search skills workshops, and life and career transition workshops. Still Serving Veterans assists in filing VA claims and benefits. They have accredited Veteran Service Officers.

#### ***DAV Auxiliary Unit 87 Dothan, AL***

The Disabled American Veterans Auxiliary (DAVA) is a volunteer organization. They are dedicated to helping disabled veterans and their family members around our local area and the USA. They are located in the Alfred Saliba Family Services Center.

***Priority Veteran***

Priority Veteran, in partnership with United Way of Central Alabama (UWCA), is an assistance program created through a grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF). The program is focused on serving U.S. military veterans and their families who are homeless or at immediate risk of becoming homeless. They serve all counties in Alabama with the exception of Baldwin and Mobile. They also serve Muscogee and Troup counties in Georgia. Priority Veteran provides veterans with intensive one-on-one assistance to locate stable, permanent housing and links them to resources that help them gain the knowledge and skills necessary to remain financially stable.

***Alabama Community College System***

Alabama's community colleges offers 2-to-4-year transfer, dual enrollment, technical training, adult education, and community education services. Many Adult Education programs are housed within the Alabama Career Centers serving civilian and veterans. We also partner with ACCS with WIOA funding to help eligible individuals obtain needed training.

***The Arc Dothan***

This is a 12-month residential program for men and women seeking to overcome homelessness, addiction, or achieving a successful transition from prison.

***Love In Action***

Love in Action helps people through their food pantry, outreaches, and cooking hot meals. They have large warehouses and food banks at their locations. They also are able to help with referrals to other ministries in Dothan and the Wiregrass, and assist these ministries with food to reach people in their areas.

***Local Housing Authority***

The local housing authorities provide affordable multifamily housing, housing for the elderly and disabled in the surrounding counties. They provide and manage Public Housing, Housing Choice Voucher Program formerly known as the Section 8 Program, and market-rate rental apartments. Aside from helping with housing, the Dothan Housing Authority hires local veterans. Through a job development they hired a retiring Sergeants Major for a Community Security Coordinator position. They created the position around his experience and skill set.

***Local Chambers of Commerce***

Local chambers host meetings promoting military affairs happenings along with the Association of the United States Army. They routinely discuss community activities that could include Veterans and plan jobs fairs that are also marketed on Ft. Rucker and within the community. They have been instrumental of sponsoring our large area job fairs at the Civic Center to help promote veteran job seeker participation.

***Wiregrass Wounded Veteran Committee***

The Wiregrass Wounded Veteran Committee provides resources to wounded and disabled Veterans. They also work with Ft. Rucker's Directorate of Family, Morale, and Welfare to fund events for wounded and disabled Veterans.

This is just a short list of private partners there are many more we count on to fulfill our outreach efforts and requests for resources. There are also Veteran committees throughout the state that assist with resources and serve as a source for Veteran outreach.

\*This list for support and services for transitioning service members and Veterans is not a complete list.

**Recommendations:**

1. The Alabama Department of Veteran Affairs recommends that ADVA staff be present during the TAP briefings given at our active-duty bases and posts. Regardless of Alabama residency status, informing them that a county office should be nearby to provide one-on-one support whenever they need it is critical as their need may arise years after separation.
2. The Alabama Department of Labor, Veteran Services Section recommends that ADOL Veterans staff have more access to service members at all military facilities in our area to provide JVSG contact and local labor market information. The AJC veteran staff would also inform TSMs present at workshops of similar services in whatever state the veteran will eventually reside.
3. Additionally, the Veterans staff at ADOL has recently been trained in strategic networking via LinkedIn. We recommend that this training be expanded to all Veterans in their TAP briefings. While setting up a LinkedIn profile is already covered in TAP briefings, we believe that by implementing this training, Veterans will be provided with real-time mentoring and labor market information. Service members can search for Veterans (or Civilians) working in the career field at same location where they are eventually going to reside. They can make these connections which have proven be invaluable to the Veterans we work with after the have transitioned from the Military.
4. Civilian credentials that correlate with military training: For example, if the military member finish advanced individual training (AIT) or A-School in HVAC there should be a way to give that service member the correlating civilian credentials. This will give transitioning service members (TSMs) the certifications they need to go straight to work without having to attend school after military service.
5. More participation in the DOD SkillBridge Program. The program can be a tremendous tool ensuring a successful transition to employment after military service. It allows service members with 180 days left of military service to leave and enter an internship or training program while still being paid by the military. Unfortunately, the approval for the program rests solely with the first field grade Commander authorized to impose non-judicial punishment under Article 15 of the UCMJ in the Service member's chain of command, and this is not always granted. It would be beneficial to allow more service members to use the SkillBridge Program.

Thank you for allowing me to speak to this committee to provide information on services that the state can provide all transitioning service members throughout the state.