

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Department of Alabama, thank you for the opportunity to provide our remarks on this important topic.

The VFW believes a proper and well-rounded transition from the military is one of the most important things our service members need in order to ease back into our society with minimal hardships. To that extent, the VFW places great emphasis on ensuring transitioning service members (TSMs) receive the best counseling and mentorship before they leave military service. Veterans who make smooth transitions by properly utilizing the tools and programs available will face less uncertainty regarding their moves from military to civilian life.

The military is a self-sustained society. Within this society there are diverse people with their own cultures, however the military society is its own culture. One must conform or they will not be allowed to stay. Service members spend six weeks learning how to dress, talk, walk, eat, sleep, think, etc. so that they may successfully conform. Forever how long they stay within the military society, they live this way. This fact is the reason why the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is necessary. Exiting one society and entering another is stressful, confusing, and at times impossible without help.

Transitioning service members face many hardships including unemployment, financial difficulty, lack of purpose, separation anxiety, and many unknowns. There have been programs set in place to ease the hardship of this change. The VFW believes these programs are paramount in easing service members out of military life and into the civilian world. The VFW views transition programs such as TAP and Soldier For Life (SFL) as key stepping stones. The information provided to service members on Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits, financial management, higher education, and entrepreneurship is invaluable.

In 2019, within the NDAA, it was made mandatory that a service member was to start TAP no later than 365 days prior to separation from the military. Speaking with several veterans, I have found that there are situations where this timeframe is impossible. Some veterans were denied re-enlistment and were separated within 60 days. There are some veterans that are medically retired with the same problem. In these instances, the veterans have found themselves dealing with the loss of their job, income, medical, and housing. When you have a family to provide for, this realization can be downright overwhelming.

Our VFW National Headquarters identified some of the same issues regarding timeliness of TAP attendance. The VFW's accredited service officers have been a resource for transitioning service members since 2001 and continue to provide assistance to these men and women during this difficult time of change. We provide pre-discharge claims representation at 24 bases around the country, and are available for transitioning service members at the same time they receive their training in TAP. While the primary role for the VFW staff in the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program is to help service members navigate their VA disability claims, they are also able

to assist with many other benefits and available opportunities. Last year, between individual meetings, and classroom briefings the VFW met with over 14,000 service members.

Each person our BDD representatives work with is asked to complete a survey detailing their experiences throughout the transition process. From March 2020-February 2021, the VFW collected 1,100 surveys from the service members, families, and veterans we served at our BDD sites. Some of the data were expected considering the unprecedented changes due to COVID-19, but other numbers suggested there is still a lot of improvement needed within TAP regardless of the pandemic situation.

While there was a slight improvement regarding the timely attendance of TAP, forty percent of service members are still not attending TAP classes at least six months prior to separation. Additionally, we were surprised to see almost sixty percent reported not participating in any of the three specific tracks that were made mandatory as part of the formal curriculum last year. Changes over the past years have been signed into law in order to improve the transition of service members. The VFW is greatly concerned some of these new mandates are not being adhered to.

### **COVID Specific TAP Issues**

In March 2020, the United States was unprepared for the new and fast-spreading COVID-19 virus. In response, we witnessed TAP offices hurriedly shutting down and furloughing VA benefits advisors who were contract employees. This left transitioning service members scrambling to adapt to a national crisis and changing environment in the midst of their exit from the military. While our great military services did a fantastic job adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic by maintaining national defense and the well-being of the service members, the garrison support's response was sorely inadequate. They chose to just shut down.

From what we witnessed here in Alabama and across the country, there was no well-vetted plan in place for this situation. The TAP program responded by initially directing service members to the Joint Knowledge Online (JKO) portal for completion of TAP. JKO requires a Common Access Card, which family members do not have. Later it was moved to the computer-based training classes on a public site, <https://tapevents.org/courses>. This change to the .org site allowed family members to access the computer-based training courses as the pandemic shutdown continued. The VFW believes that moving forward, any online TAP resources should always be hosted on a public-facing website so service members, families, and veterans can access this vital information at all times.

Initially, two of our offices engaged with the bases they support to offer assistance for TSMs. Joint Base Andrews, Maryland, Military and Family Support Center was one of the first to come online with live virtual TAP classes. Naval Support Activity Annapolis Fleet and Family Support Center followed shortly after Joint Base Andrews. They quickly integrated the VFW into their virtual TAP classes to discuss the VA claims process because the VA benefits advisors were noticeably absent.

Over the past year we have officially been integrated into the TAP curriculum at other locations to provide VA benefits briefings because the instructors were no longer there. Our BDD representatives provided full time instruction of VA benefits at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada;

Joint Base Myer, Virginia; Joint Base Andrews, Maryland; Naval Support Activity Washington, D.C. (Navy Yard); Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, D.C.; Naval Support Activity Annapolis, Maryland; Camp Lejeune, North Carolina; General Officer TAP classes (Pentagon) Washington, D.C.

Here in Alabama our BDD representative from Ft. Myer helped almost 30 transitioning soldiers from Ft. Rucker via zoom when our services were advertised via SFL TAP. We were also asked to provide supplemental instruction at other bases around the country. At Camp Pendleton, California, VFW representatives briefed during the new Spouse Transition and Readiness Seminar. In San Diego, representatives briefed at the Veterans Transition Service. At Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, representatives briefed the Navy Reserve quarterly. And at Norfolk, Virginia, VFW representatives provided benefits briefings along with the USO Pathfinders Program.

Now as we emerge from COVID TSMs hope to experience a robust transition assistance program. We believe it is extremely important for TAP offices to integrate accredited veteran service officers (VSOs) into their operations, not as a third-party entity but as an integral part of the team. TAP offices need to welcome and embrace the partnership and knowledge the accredited VSOs bring to their teams. We are an additional and very important resource and partner. The best option is to have an accredited VSO in the TAP office on location at the installation.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to answer any questions you or the subcommittee members may have.