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Military Transition Assistance Program (TAP): Background and Issues for Congress

June 27, 2024

Congressional Research Service

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R48114



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The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) estimates that over 200,000 servicemembers (active and reserve component) transition from active duty to civilian life every year, joining a population of about 19 million military veterans. This period of transition, from servicemember to civilian, can pose unique challenges for veterans. Some of these include navigating veteran health and benefits systems, translating military skills into civilian employment, and adjustment to civilian culture.

Congress has sought to ease servicemembers' transitions by authorizing federal agencies to provide various support programs and benefits. The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is one such program. TAP is an interagency effort, led by DOD, that consists of pre-separation counseling, self-assessment, and workshops for servicemembers separating or retiring from active duty and for demobilizing members of the Reserves and National Guard. Military spouses are also eligible to participate in certain TAP events and program materials are available virtually. Participation in certain elements of TAP is mandatory for most servicemembers. TAP is funded through appropriations to the relevant agencies.

The TAP courses generally consist of individualized pre-separation counseling, DOD transition topics, Department of Veterans affairs benefits briefing, and an employment readiness component led by the Department of Labor. Over the past few decades, Congress has expanded counseling and curricula requirements, required tailored programs for different demographics, and increased program oversight. Future Congresses might consider issues including TAP resourcing decisions, program design and execution, and assessing veterans' outcomes.

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Overview

More than 80% of those who enter active military service will separate from service before becoming eligible for retirement.¹ This is by design, as the military requires a “young and vigorous” force to engage in physically demanding occupations, often in austere environments.² Nearly all servicemembers eventually reenter civilian communities and most will embark on a second career in the civilian workforce.

The Department of Defense (DOD) estimates that over 200,000 servicemembers (active and reserve component) transition from active duty to civilian life every year, joining a projected population of about 18 million military veterans in 2024.³ This period of transition from servicemember to civilian can pose unique challenges for veterans. Some of these include navigating veteran health and benefits systems, translating military skills into civilian employment, and adjustment to civilian culture. For those transitioning to employment, it may be the first time they have engaged in a full-time job search, as many enter the military directly from high school or college. Even military retirees who separate with 20 or more years of service may have little experience with conducting a job search, preparing a resume, or interviewing for positions.

Congress has sought to ease this transition by authorizing federal agencies to provide various support programs and benefits, including the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). TAP is an interagency effort led by DOD that consists of pre-separation counseling, self-assessment, and workshops for servicemembers separating or retiring from active duty and for demobilizing members of the Reserves and National Guard. The program is primarily administered through a memorandum of understanding by DOD, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the Department of Labor (DOL). Other federal agencies play supporting roles, including the Department of Education (ED), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS, the United States Coast Guard), the Small Business Administration (SBA), and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).⁴

Congress may evaluate the TAP’s current structure and statutory requirements, organization and oversight mechanisms, and funding. In determining whether and how it may modify the program, Members of Congress may consider its legislative history and significant changes to the program made by previous congresses, as well as additional policy issues that Congress may consider in its oversight role.

¹ Generally, military servicemembers become eligible after 20 qualifying years of service. Report of the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission, Final Report, January 2015, pp. 303 and 573 of 1003. For more on military retirement, see CRS Report RL34751, *Military Retirement: Background and Recent Developments*, by Kristy N. Kamarck.

² Department of Defense, *Military Compensation Background Papers: Compensation Elements and Related Manpower Cost Items, Their Purposes and Legislative Backgrounds*, Eighth Edition, July 2018, p. 55.

³ DOD, Defense Human Resource Agency, Operation and Maintenance, Defense-Wide, Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Estimates, p. 22 at https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/budget_justification/pdfs/01_Operation_and_Maintenance/O_M_VOL_1_PART_1/DHRA_OP-5.pdf#page=22. Veteran population estimates at https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp.

⁴ DOD, *Memorandum of Understanding Among the Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Labor, Department of Education, Department of Homeland Security (United States Coast Guard), United States Small Business Administration, United States Office of Personnel Management regarding the Transition Assistance Program for Separating Servicemembers*, at https://prhome.defense.gov/Portals/52/Documents/RFM/TVPO/files/TAP_MOU.pdf.

TAP Structure

Elements of TAP primarily fall under three sections of *U.S. Code*:⁵

- 10 U.S.C. §1142: Pre-separation counseling; transmittal of certain records to Department of Veterans Affairs;
- 10 U.S.C. §1143: Employment assistance; and,
- 10 U.S.C. §1144: Employment assistance, job training assistance, and other transitional services: Department of Labor.

These statutes require federal agencies to provide eligible servicemembers with certain information regarding veteran benefits, programs, services, tools, and other entitlements.⁶

TAP Participation

Participation in TAP is mandatory for most servicemembers. Eligibility for TAP is contingent on serving at least 180 continuous days on active duty. Military spouses are eligible to participate in certain TAP events and program materials are available virtually.⁷ Coast Guard servicemembers are able to participate in TAP either through the Coast Guard or at a DOD installation on a space-available basis.⁸

TAP Curricula

The TAP course generally consists of individualized pre-separation counseling, DOD transition topics, VA benefits briefing, and an employment readiness component led by DOL (see shaded text box). According to DOD, the TAP elements may be completed separately over the course of 365 days prior to separation, or in a consecutive five-day period.⁹

TAP Components

- Individualized Initial Counseling (IC) between the servicemember and a TAP counselor (no later than 365 days prior to separation).
- Pre-separation counseling that covers mandated topics to include benefits, entitlements, and resources.
- One-day DOD curriculum including modules on building resiliency by managing your own transition (MyTransition), a Military Occupational Code Crosswalk, and the financial plan for transition module.
- One-day VA Benefits and Services brief including disability benefits and compensation; memorial and burial benefits; education and economic support; housing benefits; and health care options, including both physical and emotional health needs.
- One-day DOL brief on preparation for employment.

⁵ Chapter 58 of Title 10, *U.S. Code*, more broadly authorizes benefits and services for servicemembers being separated or recently separated.

⁶ 10 U.S.C. §§1142, 1143 & 1144.

⁷ TAP, TAP Online Courses, at <https://www.tapevents.mil/courses>.

⁸ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Transitioning Veterans: Coast Guard Needs to Improve Data Quality and Monitoring of Its Transition Assistance Program*, GAO-18-135, April 2018, p. 10, at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/691415.pdf#page=10>.

⁹ DoDTAP, Transition Components, at <https://www.dodtap.mil/dodtap/app/transition/gps>; and DoDTAP, TAP Curriculum, at https://www.dodtap.mil/dodtap/app/transition/core_curriculum.

- Two-day elective based on servicemember's post-transition goals (DOL Employment Track, DOL Vocational Track, DOD Education Track, or the SBA Entrepreneurship Track).
- A "Capstone" process if a commander or a commander's designee verifies that the transitioning servicemember has met the TAP Career Readiness Standards, has a viable Individual Transition Plan (ITP), and is prepared to transition to civilian life

TAP Oversight and Agency Coordination

The *Military-Civilian Transition Office* (MCTO) within the office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness oversees TAP, as well as other servicemember transition programs (i.e., Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program and Skillbridge).¹⁰ This office provides "program management including research, strategy, policy development, program design, budget and contract management, grant management, curriculum development, program evaluation, program assessment, program compliance, information technology (IT), public affairs, strategic communications, and outreach."¹¹ MCTO is also responsible for coordinating with interagency partners and other stakeholders to implement, assess, and enhance TAP. In the Coast Guard, the *Health, Safety, and Work-Life Directorate* oversees TAP policy; one or two TAP managers are assigned to each of the Coast Guard's nine districts.¹²

VA-DOD Joint Executive Committee

In 2003, as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004 (FY2004 NDAA, P.L. 108-136, §583), Congress mandated the creation of the Department of Veterans Affairs-Department of Defense Joint Executive Committee (JEC). Under 38 U.S.C. §§320 and 8111, DOD and VA are jointly responsible for funding the JEC, and are required to publish a joint strategic plan for coordination between the two departments (see shaded text box below) and an annual joint report to the two Secretaries and to Congress, making recommendations as appropriate (see shaded text box below). Besides representatives from DOD and VA, 38 U.S.C. §320 requires participation from the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training. In addition, the law specified the JEC should have three sub-committees: the Health Executive Committee, Benefits Executive Committee, and Transition Executive Committee. The Transition Executive Committee has statutory responsibility for

- review[ing] existing policies, procedures, and practices of the Departments (including the military departments) with respect to job training and post-service placement programs; and

¹⁰ The FY2023 President's Budget consolidated funding for YRRP and oversight for Skillbridge was transferred to this office in calendar year 2023. DOD, Defense Human Resources Activity, Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Estimates, April 2022, p. 21, at

https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2023/budget_justification/pdfs/01_Operation_and_Maintenance/O_M_VOL_1_PART_1/DHRA_OP-5.pdf.

¹¹ DOD, Defense Human Resource Agency, Operation and Maintenance, Defense-Wide, Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Estimates, at

https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/budget_justification/pdfs/01_Operation_and_Maintenance/O_M_VOL_1_PART_1/DHRA_OP-5.pdf#page=22https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/budget_justification/pdfs/01_Operation_and_Maintenance/O_M_VOL_1_PART_1/DHRA_OP-5.pdf#page=22.

¹² U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Transitioning Veterans: Coast Guard Needs to Improve Data Quality and Monitoring of Its Transition Assistance*, GAO-18-135, April 2018, p. 8, at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/691415.pdf#page=8>.

- identify[ing] changes to such policies, procedures, and practices to improve job training, transition from life in the Armed Forces to civilian life, and post-service placement.¹³

The responsible agencies implement this requirement through the Transition Assistance Program Executive Council (TAP EC) and Senior Steering Group (SSG). Per DOD policy, the TAP-EC is chaired by a Senior Executive Service (SES)-level DOD representative and the SSG includes senior enlisted representation.¹⁴

TAP in the JEC Joint Strategic Plan, Fiscal Years 2022-2027

The JEC's Joint Strategic Plan for FY2022-2027 includes a goal to "enhance the transition and post-separation experience." The plan focuses on the period of 365 days pre-separation to 365 days post-separation and emphasizes individualized assessments and services.

According to this Joint Strategic Plan, the JEC intends to prepare an annual Joint Operating Plan with "current priority objectives for each year in the FY2022-2027 joint strategic planning cycle, detailed action plans supporting these objectives, and critical milestones and performance measures."¹⁵

TAP Funding

TAP is funded through appropriations to the responsible agencies.¹⁶

- **DOD.** Operation and Maintenance (O&M) funding supports TAP contracts for counseling, instruction, IT support services, as well as research and program evaluation. DOD-wide funding supports the MCTO, while military departments also request funding for transition programming.¹⁷
- **DOL.** TAP funding is typically administered by DOL's *Veterans Employment and Training Administration* (VETS). DOL TAP funding primarily supports the employment workshop component of the TAP program for separating members.¹⁸
- **VA.** TAP is funded through the VA's *Outreach, Transition & Economic Development* program.¹⁹ This funding line supports the VA benefits and services part of the TAP curriculum.

¹³ 38 U.S.C. §320(e).

¹⁴ DOD, *Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for Military Personnel*, DODI 1332.35, September 26, 2019, p. 6, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/133235p.pdf>.

¹⁵ JEC Joint Strategic Plan, Fiscal Years 2022-2027, p. 15, https://www.va.gov/opa/docs/remediation-required/oei/JEC_Joint_Strategic_Plan_2022_2027_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁶ The USCG does not include line-item funding for TAP in its budget request documents.

¹⁷ See for example, DOD, Defense Human Resources Activity (DHRA), Operation and Maintenance, DOD-Wide, FY2025 Budget Request, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/budget_justification/pdfs/01_Operation_and_Maintenance/O_M_VOL_1_PART_1/DHRA_OP-5.pdf#page=28. The military departments do not consistently provide a budget line item request for TAP or other transition funding in their budget justification books.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Labor, *FY 2023 Annual Performance Report*, p. 26 of 128. See also DOL, *FY 2025 Congressional Budget Justification Veterans' Employment and Training Service*, p. 3.

¹⁹ VA, *FY2005 Budget Submission*, Burial and Benefits Programs and Department Administration, March 2024, p. 163, <https://www.va.gov/opa/docs/remediation-required/management/fy2025-va-budget-volume-iii.pdf#page=163>.

- **SBA.** The *Boots to Business* program, a TAP component, is funded as part of *Veterans Business Outreach*, in the *Entrepreneurial Development Program* account.²⁰

CRS is unable to estimate the total costs of the program since the military services do not consistently include TAP funding as a line item in their budget requests. In addition, among all agencies, TAP funding and programming may be integrated into broader veteran support programs.

A large portion of TAP activity is executed through contracts: congressional mandates and other changes that affect TAP structure and curricula can have cost implications. In 2023, DOD noted that “periodic subsequent changes to legislation drive increases in development costs for IT/enterprise solution enhancements, new curriculum and additional manpower requirements.”²¹

Legislative History

Throughout the history of TAP, Congress and DOD have structured the program primarily to assist servicemembers in their transition to civilian sector employment. Congress has amended the scope, structure, and eligibility requirements for the transition program several times over the past three decades to include support for military spouses and to connect veterans and their families with other transition resources (e.g., mental health/resilience, caregiver support, and programs of state and local agencies). The discussion below focuses on significant legislative changes to TAP; see **Appendix A** for a more inclusive timeline of transition-related legislation.

TAP Origins in the Post-Cold War Drawdown

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, DOD sought to reduce the size of the active-duty force. These drawdowns were mainly achieved through reducing the number of new recruits, tightening re-enlistment requirements, providing early retirement and voluntary separation incentives²², and increasing involuntary separations.²³ It was in this context that Congress first authorized a transition program in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991 (FY1991 NDAA, P.L. 101-510 §502). In hearings leading up to the bill’s enactment, the Ranking Member of the House Military Personnel and Compensation Subcommittee, Representative Herbert H. Bateman, expressed his concern about servicemembers who may be caught off guard by a sudden forced career change,

²⁰ U.S. Small Business Administration, *FY 2025 Congressional Budget Justification and FY 2023 Annual Performance Report*, <https://www.sba.gov/sites/default/files/2024-03/FY%202025%20SBA%20CBJ%20Final%20Updated-508.pdf>, pp. 24, 33, 92, 149. This account also funds the Veterans Business Outreach Centers (VBOC), Service-Disabled Veteran Entrepreneurship Training Program (SDVETP), Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities (EBV), Veteran Federal Procurement Entrepreneurship Training Program (VFPETP), and Women Veteran Entrepreneurship Training Program (WVETP).

²¹ DOD, Defense Human Resources Activity (DHRA), Operation and Maintenance, DOD-Wide, FY2024 Budget Request, p. 20, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2024/budget_justification/pdfs/01_Operation_and_Maintenance/O_M_VOL_1_PART_1/DHRA_OP-5.pdf#page=20.

²² Congress funded the Voluntary Separation Incentive (VSI) and Special Separation Benefit (SSB) in FY1992, and the Temporary Early Retirement Authority (TERA) in 1993 as force-shaping programs. See, CRS In Focus IF12042, *Defense Primer: Military Separation and Severance Pay*.

²³ Maria C. Lytell, et al., *Force Drawdowns and Demographic Diversity: Investigating the Impact of Force Reductions on the Demographic Diversity of the U.S. Military*, RAND Corporation, 2015, p. 13.

The other thing that strikes me [...] is that these figures go up to [a] 560,000 reduction in military personnel. I do not know how many of these would represent people who joined voluntarily, and who did not want to get out as opposed to attrition and [expiration] of enlistment terms of people who were willing and happy to leave, but it seems to me you have a very, very large number of people whose lives, whose careers, whose jobs and economic security is [sic] going to be, at the very least, disrupted. [...]

[B]efore we embrace legislative changes that will mean real pain for people, we need to make sure that other actions we take will mitigate that pain to the maximum extent possible.²⁴

To help ease the transition for those who were involuntarily separated due to planned personnel reductions, the Senate Armed Services Committee recommended a number of provisions that were ultimately enacted, including one that mandated the establishment of a transition program that would,

...require the Department of Defense to implement a uniform, aggressive program to assist separating military personnel find jobs and settle in the civilian community.²⁵

As initially authorized, this transition program was required to provide pre-separation counseling on eligibility for veteran benefits and services, other government-sponsored employment programs, and job training assistance.

Iraq and Afghanistan Conflicts and TAP Enhancements

In 2004, in response to concerns about the ability of troops returning from contingency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan to successfully transition back to civilian life, Congress directed the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to report on whether TAP was meeting the needs of servicemembers.²⁶ The GAO's study, released in 2005, found that program implementation and participation were inconsistent across the active and reserve components. The GAO study noted particular challenges in tailoring program content and delivery for the reserve component (RC) due, in part, to rapid reserve component (RC) demobilization.²⁷ GAO recommended that DOD take action to increase participation in TAP and enhance the program with a greater emphasis on veteran benefits, particularly for demobilizing National Guard and Reserves.²⁸

Following the 2005 GAO study, Congress added several pre-separation counseling requirements to the TAP program in the FY2006 NDAA (P.L. 109-163 §594). These included information on job training, entrepreneurship, employment/reemployment rights, and federal preferences in hiring and contracting. There were also requirements for TAP counseling to include additional information on VA health care and mental health resources. The FY2006 NDAA also required DOD to provide information on civilian occupations that correspond to military occupational specialties. This requirement, along with mandates in the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (see below), has since been implemented as the *Military Occupational Code Crosswalk*.²⁹

²⁴ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Military Personnel and Compensation, *Hearing on National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991 - H.R. 4739*, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., February 27, 1990, HASC No. 101-50, p. 41.

²⁵ S. Rept. 101-384, p. 173.

²⁶ P.L. 108-375 §598.

²⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Military and Veterans' Benefits; Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard*, GAO-05-544, May 2005, p. 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁹ DOD, *2023 TAP Curriculum; Military Occupational Codes Crosswalk*, https://www.tapevents.mil/Assets/ResourceContent/TAP/MOC_Crosswalk.pdf.

VOW Act and TAP Redesign (2011)

In 2011, Congress ushered in a significant overhaul of programs for transitioning servicemembers. This came following the 2007-2009 recession and high unemployment rates among veterans, particularly those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan—some of whom were disabled in those conflicts.³⁰ DOD spending on unemployment benefits for servicemembers rose rapidly during this time, peaking at \$1 billion in 2011.³¹

In this environment, policymakers began to question the adequacy of existing transition services in preparing servicemembers for success in the civilian job market.³² The VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (VOW Act, P.L. 112-56) was an effort to provide a jobs package that would help reduce veterans' unemployment rates. The VOW Act enhanced several programs and authorities under the purview of VA, DOL, and OPM. With regard to TAP, Subtitle B of the VOW Act created some notable changes including requirements for:

- mandatory participation in the DOL employment workshop by nearly all separating servicemembers,
- individualized assessments of civilian opportunities based on military qualifications, and
- authorized participation in apprenticeship programs for those being separated or retired.

The VOW Act also required another GAO review of the program (discussed below).

The FY2012 NDAA (P.L. 112-81), enacted shortly after the VOW Act, again expanded some of the pre-separation counseling requirements to include topics related to financial management, survivor benefits, and suicide prevention resources. It also included a provision (Section 551) authorizing a job training or apprenticeship program for servicemembers expected to be discharged within 180 days. DOD subsequently implemented an internship and apprenticeship program now known as “Skillbridge” (see shaded text box below).

In 2011, the Obama Administration convened the DOD-VA Veterans' Employment Initiative (VEI) Task Force, which was charged with revising and improving TAP to better meet the needs of transitioning servicemembers.³³ This redesign—the first since the program's inception—incorporated congressional mandates and sought to implement a “Military Life Cycle” approach through “career readiness standards” counseling at various touchpoints throughout a servicemember's career and a “capstone” assessment preceding separation.³⁴ DOD's target for full implementation of these components was October 2014.³⁵ The GAO's congressionally

³⁰ Daniel Schwam and James V. Marrone, *Veterans' Employment During Recessions*, RAND Corporation, Veterans' Issues in Focus, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1363-7.html>.

³¹ Congressional Budget Office, *Transitioning from the Military to the Civilian Workforce: The Role of Unemployment Compensation for Ex-Servicemembers*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/52503>.

³² U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, *Veterans Employment: Improving the Transition from the Battlefield to the Workplace*, 112th Cong., April 13, 2011, S.Hrg. 112-19. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Employment Situation of Veterans – 2011”, issued March 20, 2012, https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2012/ted_20120323.htm#:~:text=The%20unemployment%20rate%20for%20veterans,all%20veterans%20was%208.3%20percent.

³³ U.S. GAO, *Transitioning Veterans; Improved Oversight Needed to Enhance Implementation of Transition Assistance Program*, GAO-14-144, March 2014, p. 2, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-14-144.pdf>.

³⁴ U.S. GAO, *Transitioning Veterans; Improved Oversight Needed to Enhance Implementation of Transition Assistance Program*, GAO-14-144, March 2014, p. 8, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-14-144.pdf>.

³⁵ Ibid.

mandated report, published in March 2014 before the full implementation of the redesigned TAP, found that while federal agencies had processes in place to track program outputs (e.g., servicemember participation), they lacked mechanisms to evaluate longer-term impacts of the program.³⁶ In addition, GAO noted concerns about “unfavorable timing and location of program delivery” for members of the National Guard and Reserve.³⁷

Skillbridge Program³⁸

The Skillbridge program is authorized by 10 U.S.C. § 1143(e) to “help prepare [...] members for employment in the civilian sector.” Skillbridge essentially allows servicemembers to do an unpaid internship or apprenticeship with an outside organization (private sector or government) during the last 180 days of their service. Servicemembers continue to receive military pay and benefits during this time and they do not receive any pay or benefits from the sponsoring organization. The program is managed at the installation/unit commander level and authorization to participate is at the discretion of the commander. According to a DOD spokesperson, Skillbridge is considered “a critical part of the investment the department makes in the future success of those who serve our nation in uniform,” with a dual benefit in some instances of providing critical industries with “a trained and capable workforce.”³⁹ On the other hand, the program could also result in unfilled positions within the military force structure during the internship/apprenticeship and have readiness implications. DOD temporarily stopped accepting new civilian employers into Skillbridge in July 2023 and to realign the program due to “overwhelming popularity.”⁴⁰

Congress, in the FY2023 and FY2024 NDAA, has required DOD to place more emphasis on Skillbridge by directing DOD to staff the program with at least two full-time equivalent personnel, develop a program funding plan, and conduct outreach to potential employers and participants (See **Appendix A**). The FY2024 NDAA requires a GAO report on aspects of the program by July 1, 2024.

Off-Base Transition Training Pilot (2013)

Some observers have suggested that pre-separation servicemembers may not be able to anticipate the challenges they may face as a civilian, and therefore post-separation TAP workshops might be more meaningful.⁴¹ In 2013, in Section 301 of the Dignified Burial and Other Veterans’ Benefits Improvement Act of 2012 (P.L. 112-260§301), Congress required a two-year pilot to assess the feasibility of providing portions of TAP to veterans outside of military installations. The law required the program to be implemented in three to five states, to be selected partially on the basis of veteran unemployment rates. The Department of Labor’s Veterans’ Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS) invited Georgia, Washington, and West Virginia to participate in what was called Off-Base Transition Training (OBTT).⁴²

³⁶ Ibid, pp. 22-25.

³⁷ Ibid, pp. 1 and 26-28.

³⁸ For more information on Skillbridge, see DOD, *Job Training, Employment Skills Training, Apprenticeships, and Internships (JTEST-AI) for Eligible Service Members*, DODI 1322.29, January 24, 2014, Incorporating Change 1, Effective May 5, 2020, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132229p.pdf>.

³⁹ C. Todd Lopez, *Service Members Find Civilian Career Opportunities Through SkillBridge*, June 3, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/story/Article/3052396/service-members-find-civilian-career-opportunities-through-skillbridge/>.

⁴⁰ Amanda Miller, “Growth of SkillBridge Transition Program Paused After Overwhelming Popularity,” *Military.com*, July 7, 2023.

⁴¹ U.S. GAO, *Veterans’ Employment: Need for Further Workshops Should Be Considered before Making Decisions on Their Future*, GAO-15-518, July 16, 2015, p. 13, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-15-518>.

⁴² Ibid., cover page.

In general, DOL and GAO analysis of OBTT noted a high level of satisfaction from participants in the program.⁴³ Their reports also noted low attendance and challenges in engaging participants with varied needs. GAO also noted that DOL and the VA have several existing programs to support veteran employment and questioned whether OBTT could fill a niche that was not already being met by other programs.⁴⁴ The OBTT pilot program was completed in 2015; DOL continues to offer OBTT workshops in both virtual and in-person formats as part of its Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) program.⁴⁵

Congressionally Mandated TAP Counseling Pathways (2018)

Between 2013 and 2018, Congress enhanced several of the pre-separation counseling and training requirements for TAP (see **Appendix A**). In 2018, as part of the FY2019 John S. McCain NDAA (P.L. 115-232), Congress mandated several changes to TAP that again led to a restructuring of the program. In particular, this legislation required the Service Secretaries to develop tailored pathways based on the separating servicemember's characteristics or situational factors (e.g., gender, disability status). It also required initiation of TAP no later than 365 days prior to separation, individualized self-assessments (in-person or virtually), and servicemember election of least one of the tailored workshop tracks offered as part of TAP.⁴⁶ These workshop tracks are employment (DOL), education (DOD), vocational (DOL), or entrepreneurship (SBA).⁴⁷

In 2022, GAO reported that DOD had fully implemented these pathways and that participation in two-day workshops had increased.⁴⁸ GAO also found that the services waived many servicemembers' attendance at workshops, sometimes in violation of the services' own policies. In addition, GAO found that 70% of servicemembers failed to meet the statutory requirement to initiate TAP counseling at least one year in advance of separation.⁴⁹

Issues for Congress

Since 2019, Congress, primarily through the defense authorization process, has made amendments to TAP counseling requirements, and engaged in further efforts to expand outreach and information sharing to transitioning servicemembers (see **Appendix A**). Stakeholder interest in programs that support transition remains high.⁵⁰

Oversight concerns continue to be focused on program implementation and effectiveness, and, in particular, compliance with the requirement to initiate TAP at least one year prior to separation. Given GAO's findings of up to 70% of servicemembers out of compliance, Congress may

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 13 and 22. U.S. Department of Labor Veterans' Employment and Training Service, *Second Annual Report to Congress; Off-Base Transition Training Pilot*, April 14, 2015.

⁴⁴ GAO-15-518, pp. 22-23.

⁴⁵ See <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/programs/tap/off-base-transition-training>.

⁴⁶ The existing TAP at the time included optional 2-day workshops.

⁴⁷ U.S. GAO, *Service Members Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Can Better Leverage Performance Information to Improve Participation in Counseling Pathways*, GAO-23-104538, December 12, 2022, p. 6, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-104538.pdf>.

⁴⁸ According to GAO, the Coast Guard had only partially implemented the pathways and reported a target of 2023 for full implementation. Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁹ GAO-23-104538, pp. 13 and 22.

⁵⁰ See for example, Veterans of Foreign Wars, *The Transition Assistance Program: Steps to Ensure Success for Servicemembers as they Enter Civilian Life*, Statement of Brittany Dymond Before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, May 17, 2023.

consider further investigations into the root causes of noncompliance and may also consider the feasibility of these timelines. Another consideration might be whether all the current TAP requirements should apply to those in both the active and reserve components.

Congress might also consider whether TAP and associated transition programs are meeting areas of transitioning servicemember needs, such as

- navigating VA programs, benefits, and services,
- finding a job,
- adjusting to civilian culture,
- addressing financial challenges, and
- applying military-learned skills to civilian life.

TAP counseling and workshop components provide resources intended to ease these challenges for servicemembers and their families. TAP arguably lacks components that support adjustment to civilian culture; aspects of what some researchers have called the “psychosocial transition” may be more challenging to address through federally mandated programs.⁵¹

When determining the level of resources dedicated to veteran transition programs, Congress might consider labor market conditions. In terms of employment, DOL data from 2024 indicate that veterans have lower unemployment rates than their nonveteran counterparts and that disabled veterans also fare better than nonveterans with a disability. Between June 2023 and May 2024 the nondisabled veteran unemployment rate averaged 2.7% relative to the nonveteran unemployment rate of 3.5%.⁵² Veterans with disabilities have consistently lower unemployment rates than nonveterans with disabilities, averaging 5.9% unemployment relative to 7.2% over the same time period.⁵³

In addition to TAP, there are several other federally sponsored programs that support veteran transition or provide support after transition. A 2019 GAO inventory of available education and employment benefits to help servicemembers, veterans, and their families achieve civilian jobs found 45 such programs and benefits across 11 agencies.⁵⁴ In some cases, military veterans may have real or perceived barriers to accessing these programs. A 2020 study of post-9/11 veterans noted that they “report having difficulty discerning which, if any, of these programs are relevant to them or whether they qualify to use these programs.”⁵⁵

Congress might also consider whether the amount of investment in transition programs is appropriate relative to other DOD priority areas. Historically, Congress and DOD have expanded transition programs when down-sizing the force or in the context of poor economic conditions to help ease the transition of servicemembers to civilian employment. Congress might consider the

⁵¹ For more, see Mal Flack and Leah Kite, “Transition from military to civilian: Identity, social connectedness, and veteran wellbeing,” *PLoS One*, vol. 16, no. 12 (December 2021). See also Rich Morin, *The Difficult Transition from Military to Civilian Life*, Pew Research Center, December 8, 2011, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2011/12/08/the-difficult-transition-from-military-to-civilian-life/>.

⁵² DOL VETS, *Veteran Unemployment Rates*, June 7, 2024, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/latest-numbers#:~:text=Veteran%20Unemployment%20Rate%20was%203.0,from%203.4%25%20the%20prior%20year.>

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ U.S. GAO, *Military and Veteran Support: Detailed Inventory of Federal Programs to Help Servicemembers Achieve Civilian Employment*, GAO-19-97R, January 2019, p. 3, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-97r>.

⁵⁵ Nicole R. Morgan et al., “Reducing barriers to post-9/11 veterans’ use of programs and services as they transition to civilian life,” *BMC Health Service Research*, vol. 20, no. 525 (June 10, 2020).

current environment—relatively low civilian unemployment and other challenges in meeting recruiting goals—when considering the desired effects of TAP-related legislation.

Congress may consider these issues and others in deliberations around veteran transition services.

Appendix A. Legislation Related to Servicemember Transition

Table A-I. Selected Legislation Related to Servicemember Transition

Year	Citation	Description of Provisions
1990	National Defense Authorization Act Year for Fiscal Year 1991, P.L. 101-510	Section 502 codified certain requirements for transition and employment-related services for servicemembers.
1992	National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1993, P.L. 102-484	Sections 4401(a), §4462(b), and §4441(b) required TAP course initiation no later than 90 days before discharge, and included pre-separation counseling requirements for certain jobs programs (e.g., Troops to Teachers).
2003	National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004, P.L. 108-136	Section 538 mandated the creation of the Department of Veterans Affairs-Department of Defense Joint Executive Committee
2004	Ronald W. Reagan National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005, P.L. 108-375	Section 598 required a GAO report on TAP. Section
2006	National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006, P.L. 109-163	Section 594 required information on civilian occupations that correspond to military occupational specialties (i.e., Military Occupational Code Crosswalk) and several other pre-separation counseling requirements related to veteran benefits provided by VA, DOL, and SBA. Section 595 required a report to Congress on actions taken in response to the 2005 GAO report, with particular attention on TAP for those deployed to overseas contingency operations and in federal hurricane response efforts.
2011	VOW Act, P.L. 112-56	Title II, Subtitle B made changes to TAP including, mandatory participation in the DOL workshop by nearly all separating servicemembers, individualized assessments of civilian opportunities based on military qualifications, and authorization for participation in apprenticeship programs for those being separated or retired.
2011	National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012, P.L. 112-81	Section 529 expanded counseling requirements for financial management, housing assistance, and responsible borrowing practices. Section 551 authorized apprenticeship programs for servicemembers in the last 180 days of service (i.e., Skillbridge).
2013	Dignified Burial and Other Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2012 (Dignified Burial Act), P.L. 112-260	Section 301 required DOL to conduct a two-year pilot program to assess the feasibility and advisability of providing TAP to veterans and their spouses at locations other than military facilities (off-base transition training).

Year	Citation	Description of Provisions
2016	National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, P.L. 114-328	Section 562 required inclusion of alcohol, prescription drug, opioid, and other substance abuse counseling as part of TAP pre-separation counseling. Section 563 required inclusion of information regarding effect of receipt of both veteran disability compensation and voluntary separation pay as part of TAP pre-separation counseling. Section 564 required TAP training on career and employment opportunities associated with transportation security cards.
2017	National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018, P.L. 115-91	Section 541 required pre-separation counseling on caregiver support. Section 542 required DOD to improve information provided in TAP on State-submitted and approved lists of military training and skills that satisfy occupational certifications and licenses.
2018	John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, P.L. 115-232	Section 552 required tailored TAP pathways, initiation of TAP prior to 365 days of separation, and GAO reporting on implementation.
2019	National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, P.L. 116-92	Section 561 required pre-separation counseling on how to file VA benefits claims. Section 562 authorized federal agency participation in the SkillBridge program. Section 568 required that commanders assigned to a new military installation receive training on the TAP resources available at the installation. Section 570C required the inclusion of question regarding immigration status on pre-separation counseling checklist (DD Form 2648). Section 570F required DOD and VA to coordinate with veteran agencies at the state level to allow for voluntary transmittal of pre-separation counseling checklists to such agencies. Section 570G required a pilot program for an online/mobile TAP resource.
2021	William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, P.L. 116-283	Section 572 expanded the Skillbridge program to the Coast Guard.
2022	James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, P.L. 117-263	Section 561 codified the name “Skillbridge” for the program authorized under 10 U.S.C. § 1143(e) and required DOD to develop a funding plan for the program.
2023	National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024, P.L. 118-31	Section 571 amended the description of counseling pathways for TAP. Section 572 amended requirements for Skillbridge staffing, funding, and outreach.

Source: CRS analysis of legislation in the 101st-118th Congresses.

Appendix B. Acronyms

Table B-1. Acronyms and Description

Acronym	Description
ED	Department of Education
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOD	Department of Defense
DOL	Department of Labor
GAO	Government Accountability Office
JEC	Joint Executive Committee
OBTT	Off-Base Transition Training
MCTO	Military-Civilian Transition Office
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
SBA	Small Business Administration
TAP	Transition Assistance Program
VETS	Veterans Employment and Training Administration
VA	Department of Veteran Affairs

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