

**Statement of  
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and Employment Service  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
before the  
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
United States House of Representatives**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the role of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP). While my testimony will cover both of these programs generally, it will also focus in particular on the issues and challenges of assuring that comprehensive VA benefits briefings are available to all members of the National Guard and Reserves who are called to active-duty. I will address the concerns and recommendations contained in the recent GAO Report, *MILITARY AND VETERANS' BENEFITS: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard* (GAO 05-544).

VA has a long history of providing benefits information and special assistance to military personnel and their families, including assignment of VA representatives in Vietnam under Operation Early Word and counselors at military treatment facilities in both Europe and the United States from 1967 to 1972. The extent and nature of this assistance changed significantly when Public Law 101-510, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year

1991, expanded a pilot TAP/DTAP to military installations throughout the United States. TAP and DTAP are authorized under title 10, United States Code, chapter 58.

As the Subcommittee is well aware, TAP and DTAP are designed to prepare retiring or separating military personnel for their return to civilian life. While the two and a half day TAP Workshops primarily emphasize employment preparation, one half day is devoted to discussing VA benefits. VA health care, compensation for service-connected disabilities, the Montgomery GI Bill, VA home loans, life insurance, and vocational rehabilitation and employment services can play a key role in a veteran's successful readjustment to civilian life following active-duty service. While some of these benefits and services are available for a lifetime, others are not. We feel a profound sense of obligation to make certain that our active-duty service personnel are aware of any time limitations on applying for or using VA benefits.

DTAP is an integral component of transition assistance for service members who may be released because of disability or who believe they have a disability qualifying them for vocational rehabilitation and employment related benefits and services under chapter 31 of title 38, United States Code. The goal of DTAP is to encourage and assist potentially eligible service members in making an informed decision about VA's vocational rehabilitation assistance program. It is also intended to facilitate the expeditious delivery of vocational

rehabilitation services to eligible persons by assisting them in filing an application for vocational rehabilitation benefits. To ensure that the widest possible military audience receives DTAP briefings, responsibility for providing DTAP presentations is the shared responsibility of members of the Public Contact Team of the Veterans Service Center and members of the Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment Division at each VA Regional Office.

Although TAP and DTAP are central to VA's efforts to inform our men and woman on active-duty about VA benefits and services available to them upon retirement or separation, they are not the only vehicles through which we disseminate this information.

VA also provides briefings to active-duty military personnel in other venues, including military separation and retirement services programs, military medical facilities and Physical Evaluation Boards, special outreach to Reserve and Guard Units, Casualty Assistance Services, and various other military liaison activities.

In all - including TAP and DTAP - VA representatives conducted 7,210 briefings in FY 2004, which were attended by 261,391 active-duty personnel and their families residing in the United States. VA personnel also conducted 115,576 personal interviews with attendees. Through April 2005, VA

representatives conducted 4,637 briefings for 192,599 attendees and conducted 70,108 personal interviews.

Overseas, VA representatives, on tour, provide VA benefits briefings at bases in Germany, Italy, Japan, Okinawa, Korea, England, Spain, Iceland, Belgium, and Guantanamo Bay for 9 months each year under a memorandum of agreement (MOA) between VA and DoD. Just last month, we added Bahrain to our overseas sites. During FY 2004, 629 briefings were conducted in foreign countries, attended by 15,354 active-duty personnel. Through April 2005, 299 briefings were conducted in foreign countries. These were attended by 8,499 active-duty personnel.

VA has provided TAP briefings aboard Naval vessels, including the USS Constellation, the USS Enterprise, and the USS George Washington, on their return from the Persian Gulf to the United States. VBA will continue to support requests from the Department of the Navy for TAP workshops aboard ships.

In concert with the military services outreach program, VA continued its Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program through which service members can apply for service-connected compensation within 180 days of release from active duty. The required physical examination is conducted, service medical records are reviewed, and a rating decision is made prior to separation. Upon receipt of the claimant's DD Form 214, Report of Release from Active Military

Service, benefits are immediately authorized and the recently-separated veteran can begin to accrue benefits toward his or her first disability check as soon as the month following the month of discharge. Currently, BDD is provided at 141 stateside locations and at two locations overseas – Landstuhl, Germany and Yongsan, Korea. In FY 2004, 41,413 BDD claims were taken, with 28,822 finalized. Through April 2005, 22,612 BDD claims were taken, with 16,282 finalized.

Since the Vietnam War, we have distributed VA benefits and services information through our Veterans Assistance at Discharge System (VADS). Through VADS, new veterans receive informational brochures, along with an explanatory letter from the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. This mailing is based upon address information provided on a veteran's DD-214 upon separation from service.

With the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), VA expanded its efforts even further through the Seamless Transition Program. In 2003, VBA began to assign permanent, full time representatives at key military treatment facilities such as the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Bethesda Naval Medical Center, and the Eisenhower, Brooke and Madigan Army Medical Centers, where seriously injured OEF/OIF returnees are hospitalized. VA representatives provide those patients benefits information and assist them in filing claims. They monitor patient progress and movement,

and coordinate the submission and smooth transfer of claims to VA regional offices. Each of these cases is case-managed at the regional offices to expedite processing. From October 3, 2003, through May 11, 2005, VBA representatives assisted 5,945 patients at the five aforementioned medical centers.

Let me turn now to the subject of the Reserve and the National Guard, and the GAO Report.

Outreach to Reserve/Guard members is part of the overall VA outreach program. During peacetime, this outreach is generally accomplished on an “on call” or “as requested” basis. However, with the activation and deployment of large numbers of Reserve and Guard members following the September 11, 2001, attack on America, and the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, VA outreach to these members has been greatly expanded.

National and local contacts have been made with Reserve and Guard officials to schedule briefings for Reserve/Guard members being mobilized and demobilized. In FY 2004, VA representatives conducted 1,399 pre- and post-deployment briefings, which were attended by 88,366 Reserve and Guard members. Through March 2005, VBA representatives conducted 974 pre- and post-deployment briefings attended by 68,351 Reserve and Guard members.

Returning service members can elect to attend the formal 3-day TAP workshops. VA has also published a brochure, *A Summary of VA Benefits for National Guard and Reserve Personnel*, which is widely distributed to Guard and Reserve units. A special page on VA's main web site is dedicated for use by Guard and Reserve members.

VA recently signed an MOA with the National Guard Bureau (NGB). Under this agreement, the NGB will establish opportunities for VA to provide information to Guard service members returning from OIF. The Guard will provide timely, appropriate data regarding demobilization of Guard members to keep VA apprised of where and when groups of demobilizing service members will return to their local communities.

VA has worked closely with military officials at the major demobilization sites to ensure that VA representatives are part of the briefings provided to returning service members. VBA representatives also work closely with their VHA and Vet Center colleagues, as well as service organization representatives, at these sites. Recently, VHA hired 50 Global War on Terrorism outreach counselors at Vet Centers across the country and is in the process of hiring an additional 50 counselors. These counselors provide information and assistance to returning service members at military bases regarding the Vet Center program with specific emphasis on post traumatic stress disorder issues. In addition, VA is producing an informational video for retiring, separating, or demobilizing active-

duty service members. Despite these efforts, however, we know that more needs to be done, particularly because of the changes in VA benefits entitlement brought about by extended active-duty service.

As indicated in VA's comments included as Appendix XI of the GAO final report, VA fully concurs with GAO's recommendations for executive action, particularly in working with the Departments of Defense and Labor (DoD and DOL) to explore logistical options for ensuring that members of the Guard and Reserve have the knowledge to make informed decisions about enrollment in the Montgomery GI Bill prior to release from active duty, as required by law. It does not seem reasonable to expect such a decision to be made during the short period of demobilization – often no more than 48 hours. Earlier this month, the TAP Steering Committee met to discuss actions that need to be taken to smooth out the logistics involved so that members of the Guard and Reserve are provided with such information in a more timely manner. As a result of that meeting, DoD has agreed to form a workgroup that would include representatives from DoD, VA, DOL, and the Guard and Reserve components to work out means for dissemination of information regarding eligibility for enrollment in the Montgomery GI Bill, as well as the new educational assistance benefits set forth in title 10, United States Code, chapter 1607.

The GAO report also recommended that, in order to develop more accurate program statistics, VA keep track of service members who attend DTAP

in order to facilitate adequate follow-up. During the August 2004 DTAP re-engineering meeting, the participants recognized that measurement of the number of DTAP briefings, as well as DTAP attendance, was vital to the success of any program redesign. This summer, VA will put into place a web-based reporting system that will respond to GAO's recommendation. VA will also include general TAP briefings in this system, enabling us to measure our overall TAP efforts in much greater detail and accuracy. We expect to test this new system during July and August of this year, and have it fully operational by October 1, 2005.

Mr. Chairman, we at VA are proud of our continuing role in TAP and DTAP, and seek to continually improve the quality and breadth of our outreach efforts to active-duty, Reserve and National Guard members.

Thank you for allowing me to appear before you today. I would be pleased to respond to any questions from members of the Subcommittee.