

To: Senator Kirsten E. Gillibrand

From: Tiana Sloan

Cc: Lois Warner, PhD

Date: April 22, 2024

Re: Reforming TAP for a Successful Military-to-Civilian Transition

To address challenges faced by approximately 200,000 service members who separate from the military and return to civilian life each year, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2019 included provisions requiring the service branches to establish counseling pathways, a self-assessment, individualized initial counseling, identification that reflects servicemembers' transition preparedness, and a revised core curriculum. These provisions are offered through the Department of Defense's Transition Assistance Program (TAP), an outcome-based legislative program that reinforces opportunities, services, and training for transitioning service members in their preparation for post-military life.

TAP aims to support military service members during their transition to civilian life. With NDAA 2019 marking the first significant update to the TAP process since 2011, adjustments were made to extend the training period and enhance counseling opportunities for servicemembers. Despite these much-needed changes, they have not proven to be effective in adequately supporting veterans through the transition process.

Before beginning the transition process, servicemembers complete a personal self-assessment to identify their needs 12–15 months before their discharge date. The assessment includes demographic information and primarily focuses on financial and employment readiness, with only two questions focused on personal wellness. One question asks about the

servicemember's support system and the other question asks, "Does the thought of leaving the military create stress on you or your family?" This approach is too narrow of a focus and will not offer a holistic understanding of the variety of factors that could contribute to their overall wellness and readiness for post-military life. It also will not lead to referrals to the appropriate services and resources that the servicemember may need during and after their transition. The National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report of 2022 shares that an estimated 17 veterans die by suicide each day, and shockingly, around 60% of those who died by suicide in 2020 had no prior contact with the Department of Veterans Affairs. This staggering number demonstrates the lack of attention given to mental health and personal wellness during the transition process.

Under NDAA 2019, TAP begins no later than 365 days before a servicemember's separation from the military, with retirees encouraged to begin two years prior. While this certainly allows for an extensive curriculum to be covered, it comes at an overwhelming and inopportune time for the servicemember and their family. Upon separation from the military, many servicemembers need to move, find new schools for their children, and navigate education and career pathways among other challenges. Additionally, servicemembers who entered the military early in their adult life, do not have a frame of reference for how the information presented during TAP will relate to their civilian life. It should be noted that TAP does not extend beyond the date of separation from the military. For veterans who struggle in their transition, there is no safety net or support network to reinforce the TAP curriculum when it is most needed and could potentially avoid a crisis in civilian life.

Another component of NDAA 2019 is that individualized pre-separation counseling was established to develop an Individual Transition Plan and provide information on benefits, entitlements, and resources. The curriculum covered during TAP was developed as a cooperative

interagency effort among the Departments of Labor, Defense, Education, Homeland Security, and Veterans Affairs, as well as the Small Business Administration and the Office of Personnel Management. This has resulted in a comprehensive curriculum with tracks focused on employment, vocation, education, and entrepreneurship. During this counseling, servicemembers can take more than one of the tracks based on their identified interest. While this curriculum is developed by the Department of Labor, it is delivered by a commanding officer who is responsible for verifying the servicemember's readiness for the civilian workforce. This is an active duty member of the military who has not transitioned themselves and does not have relevant experience for the context of what they are teaching. It is no surprise that underemployment affects veterans at a disproportionately higher rate with nearly one-third of veteran job seekers being underemployed, which is 15.6% higher than non-veteran job seekers.

TAP's standardized curriculum taught by active duty servicemembers does not adequately address the diverse and profound needs and circumstances that transitioning service members face. Additionally, TAP does not extend beyond a service member's military career, potentially limiting its effectiveness in providing timely support. Accessibility to TAP resources and counseling services in post-military can also vary, leading to inconsistent support. Finally, the cultural and psychological challenges associated with transitioning from military to civilian life are not adequately addressed by TAP, potentially leaving transitioning service members at a disadvantage when navigating the many challenges of transition and putting them at risk for suicide. Overall, TAP serves as a valuable resource, but its current model is ineffective in facilitating successful transitions.

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