"Strengthening the Transition Assistance Program: Exploring Outcomes to Improve the Transition to Civilian Life"

Statement before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Rebecca L. Burgess, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow, The Yorktown Institute | Visiting Fellow, Independent Women's Forum

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Chaiman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of the Committee:

Thank you for your leadership in convening this hearing on rethinking the transition process from military service to civilian life. Too often, veterans' issues are treated as merely human-interest stories—tales to invigorate or innervate the heart; to lighten the pocketbook; to castigate government—rather than as serious policy issues of national importance. As a nation, we too often take symbolic action rather than substantive actions when it comes to taking care of those who have worn the nation's uniform, their families, survivors, and caregivers.[1] That symbolism is now exorbitantly expensive; the evidence now also suggests that it has been largely ineffective.[2] And this continues to have adverse impacts on our national security: A nation that struggles to staff adequately each of the separate branches of its military, because of false or mythologized impressions of any lasting effects of military service at the individual level, is a nation that cannot remain secure and strong for long.[3]

Understanding the DoD-VA Landscape

For 250 years, beginning with the Continental Army, every branch of the U.S. Armed Forces has had one consistent output, the military veteran, and yet for 250 years, our nation has

[1] Symbolic, even when immensely expensive and to the tune of $400 billion (the 2025 budget of the Department of Veterans Affairs alone). For a detailed expose of this dynamic, see Rebecca Burgess, "Triaging the VA," *National Review Magazine*, July 2024, https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2024/07/triaging-the-va/.

[2] Meredith Kleykamp et al., *Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions: Limited Scrutiny and Substantial Investment in Education Programs*, RAND Corporation, June 11, 2024, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1363-12.html.

[3] Bradley Bowman, Marcus Ruzek, and Dan Goldenberg, "Veterans and American National Security," *Foreign Podicy*, February 21, 2025, https://www.fdd.org/podcasts/2025/02/21/veterans-and-american-national-security/.

never articulated a national veterans' strategy. Not even when we professionalized military service and returned to our voluntary service roots with the creation of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973, did we officially recognize the importance—to the nation, and especially to the military itself—of the well-transitioned military veteran.[4] Every recruitment cycle since that has been overshadowed in concerns about meeting even lowered required enlistment numbers is proof of this embarrassing inattention.

An all-volunteer force is not a self-sustaining institution. Because we never asked ourself as a nation what it might take societally to sustain a volunteer, professional military, we seem to have failed to understand that there is a lifecycle to military recruitment that both begins and ends with the military veteran. As I have repeatedly argued, the veteran is the unacknowledged but permanent ambassador of national service: How we publicly portray veterans—by how we treat them, legislate about them, talk about them—directly relates to how society conceptualizes military service, including what happens to an individual during that service.[5]

As a nation, we have consistently failed to recognize that there is a societal "continuum" or lifecycle between the veteran and the potential military recruit. Perhaps we come by this failure honestly and despite the best of intentions, as a byproduct of our government structure. Unlike in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Singapore, and several other countries, in the United States we have created a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that is an executive agency that is independent in every meaningful way from the Department of Defense (DOD), from physical buildings to budgets, to personnel, to programs.[6] This physical, structural breaking apart seems to have resulted in a mental breaking apart, among those especially employed in the Defense Department, of treating soldiers as proper national security concerns but dismissing veterans as domestic policy concerns, and as almost entirely healthcare policy concerns.[7]

There is a long-running attitude—however informally articulated—within DOD that essentially treats anyone handed a DD214 form as a failure of retention and thus as deadweight. That perception must be reshaped. Such a mindset is not only outdated, but it directly negatively impacts the health of each service branch. It is a mindset in drastic need

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[4] Rebecca Burgess, "Saluting Those Who Freely Serve," *Law and Liberty*, August 22, 2023, https://lawliberty.org/features/saluting-those-who-freely-serve/.

[5] See, for instance, Rebecca Burgess, "From a Social Deficit to a Social Asset Model: How Congress and the VA Can Empower Veterans and Reverse the 'Broken Veteran' Narrative", Statement before the House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Hearing on Pending Legislation, April 9, 2019, https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20190409/109258/HHRG-116-VR10-Wstate-BurgessR-20190409.pdf.

[6] Institute for Defense and Government Advancement, "Five Countries: Five Approaches to Veteran Programs," *VA Healthcare 2018*, https://eco-cdn.iqpc.com/gfiles/_SXIJAfive_countries-_five_approaches_to_veterans_programs_whitepaper.pdf.

[7] I use "soldiers" here collectively for all those serving in the armed forces.

of re-education, in order to recognize the reality that every veteran who succeeds or fails to reintegrate healthily into civilian society represents investment funds or withdrawals (as it were) from the future military, in the form of potential recruits. Every failed reintegration of a veteran into civilian life is a disincentive and discouragement from joining the Army, Navy, Marine Corp, Air Force, Space Force, or Coast Guard; every successful reintegration is equally if not more an incentive to join one of those same service branches.[8] Veterans are just as much alumni of their alma mater service branch as any college graduate is of their college or university. And if there is one thing that alumni represent for their alma mater, it is a walking advertisement for enrollment. Or, as Brent Orwell and Matt Amidon recently put it, "veterans are recruitment influencers."[9]

The military, and thus DOD, must be brought to recognize these societal dynamics. The Defense Department must understand that it has a vested interest in the successful transition or reintegration into civilian living and society of each veteran after their active or reserve duty is completed. And thus, the several service branches and their secretaries must also understand that they have a vested interest in the nation having a coherent, modernized, effective, and efficient suite of programs and services to make up that transition process for all veterans, but especially the most vulnerable veterans, including young veterans and junior enlisted veterans.

Mapping the Transition to Civilian Life

Some 200,000 service members exit the military and re-begin their civilian journey every year, having access to some 45,000 registered nonprofit veterans service organizations, numerous VA benefits such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, DoD SkillBridge apprenticeship and immersive career programs, and corporate hiring initiatives. Many if not most of these services and programs have come about haphazardly. The result is that the "current institutional framework governing the scope of challenges affecting veterans remains far to disparate, reactive, and administratively marginalized."[10] What we need for an improved transition from soldier to civilian and a strengthened transition assistance program for

[8] See Brent Orrell and Matthew Amidon, "Sustaining a National Treasure: Veteran Transitions and the Life Cycle of the All-Volunteer Force," American Enterprise Institute, April 24, 2025, https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/sustaining-a-national-treasure-veteran-transitions-and-the-life-cycle-of-the-all-volunteer-force/#scrollSection0.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Nicholas J. Armstrong and Michael Haynie, "A National Veterans Strategy: The Economic, Social and Security Imperative," Institute for Veterans and Military Families and Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism, Syracuse University, February 19, 2013, https://securitypolicylaw.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/National-Strategy-PublicationFINAL.pdf.

veterans is not more programs or more money, but better coordination, data sharing, and outcome measurement of existing programs and initiatives.

More than twenty years ago, the 1996 Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance conducted the most comprehensive review of veterans' benefits since the Bradley Commission in 1956. Since many of the benefits and services were established in the waning days of World War II, Congress tasked the commission to examine everything meant to help service members transition to civilian life. The commission was then to propose modernizing measures and improvements, including consolidating and eliminating the administering organizations.[11]

The commission acknowledged the success of the original GI Bill's education and employment provisions. These included traditional education assistance and vocational training for nondisabled veterans; rehabilitation training; home, business, and farm loans; job counseling and employment placement services; and an unemployment benefit. But the commission bridged the post–Industrial Revolution time span between 1944 and 1996 with a declaration: "If employment is the door to a successful transition to civilian life, education will be the key to employment in the information age."[12] Still in a pre-9/11, pre–War on Terror atmosphere, the commission was concerned that the 20th-century structural system of benefits the VA oversaw was outmatched by the actual needs of veterans in the 21st century.

The commission found "in some cases, benefits and services have become so outdated, and program management so ineffective that they break faith with those who served, and currently serve, their Nation in uniform."[13] The commission therefore distinguished between benefits and services that directly help service members readjust to civilian life and those that offered mitigated or delayed compensation "for the hardships of military duty," opportunities lost or deferred by performing military service, or treatment or rehabilitation for injuries incurred while on active duty.

The nation and its veterans historically have shifted emphasis between these types of programs according to the concerns of the moment. After World War I, the 1918 Smith-Sears Veterans Rehabilitation Act, also known as the Soldiers Rehabilitation Act, recognized the demands that a rapidly growing manufacturing economy placed on individuals' commercial abilities. It emphasized vocational rehabilitation courses for injured soldiers, so that they could return to their old jobs or enter new occupations and "carry on a gainful

[11] Veterans' Benefits Improvements Act of 1996, Pub. L. 104-275 (1996), https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/PLAW-104publ275.
[12] Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance, "Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance Final Report," January 14, 1999, 3, https://ntrl.ntis.gov/NTRL/dashboard/searchResults/titleDetail/PB2006113212.xhtml.
[13] *Ibid.*

occupation."[14] This was bookended by compensation legislation specifically addressing financial and personal opportunities perceived to be lost by performing military service. The post–World War II GI Bill further shifted post-service benefits toward education in general. In fact, the Congressional Research Service dates the VA's education assistance benefits as beginning with the 1944 bill. The Congressional Research Service notes that a consistent theme of all GI Bill–type programs since 1944 is to "promote development of work-related skills to facilitate entry or re-entry into the civilian workforce."[15] It is this theme that the 1996 Transition Commission stresses.

"Returning to private life after serving in the military is a very complex undertaking," former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Military Community and Family Policy) Leslye Arsht observed in response to the Transition Commission recommendations. "To assist them in doing so, we must empower servicemembers with the tools and information they need to fashion individual solutions to the challenges they will face in civilian life."[16] Anthony Principi, the former chairman of the Transition Commission and former VA secretary, added: "The ultimate measure of successful transition from military to civilian life is long-term, sustained employment."[17]

Ten years after the Transition Commission was formed, both Arsht and Principi were concerned that the VA's suite of resources was still tailored to "the needs of a century gone by." Rather than helping veterans reenter an economy based on manufacturing and agriculture, the VA needed to orient its programs toward a services- and information-dominated economy. Furthermore, the VA needed to be taking into account the fault line that seemed to have developed between those who volunteered to serve and decision makers in government, business, labor, academia, and the media, as the Gulf War and post-9/11 conflicts reinforced America's reliance on a professional all-volunteer force and avoidance of conscription. Echoing the Transition Commission, Arsht and Principi emphasized that, with this in mind, Congress, the DOD, and the VA needed to especially rethink education assistance as a benefit of service to potential recruits.

Beyond anecdotal evidence that this remains true in 2025, a wealth of scholarship and

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[14] Smith-Sears Veterans Rehabilitation Act, Pub. L. 65-178 (1918).
[15] Congressional Research Service, "GI Bills Enacted Prior to 2008 and Related Veterans' Educational Assistance Programs."
[16] Leslye A. Arsht, testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Oversight, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, US House of Representatives, December 7, 2006, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-109hhrg31325/html/CHRG-109hhrg31325.htm.
[17] Anthony J. Principi, testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Oversight, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, US House of Representatives, December 7, 2006, 6, chrome-extension://bdfcnmeidppjeaggnmidamkiddifkdib/viewer.html?file=https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-109hhrg31325/pdf/CHRG-109hhrg31325.pdf.

empirical data gathered from diverse surveys reinforces how pivotal the framing of the VA's education benefits is for the VA's message of 21st-century economic opportunity for veterans. It is equally pivotal for civilian employers and the taxpayer community at large to see veterans as a unique national resource in order for the nation to capitalize on its investment in its soldiers' training and development. It is illuminating in this regard to examine veteran employment through the lens of the military-civilian divide. This reveals how education is the crossroads for both veterans and employers.

Two decades of veteran employment research show that both individual- and group-level factors, involving psychological elements for the person and cultural elements tied to group functioning, work to "ease or impede" veterans' successful transition from the military to civilian workforce.[18] This is bidirectional, reflecting both the veteran employee's and the civilian employer's perspectives. The veteran perceives his or her transition as having to negotiate military-civilian identities while navigating a civilian society and integrating into a civilian workforce. The employer may or may not know how to translate the veterans' military skills and experience to the workplace (generally the employer does not feel adequate to do this), but he or she does believe that the veteran lacks communication skills.[19] A majority of potential employers express openness to hiring veterans yet also some concern about veterans as employees, often linked to their perceived lack of translatable skills but sometimes linked to the "broken veteran" narrative.

In summary, the majority of potential employers believe veterans need more training or additional education, particularly in "soft skills" such as communication, before they are ready for careers in the civilian sector. Veterans tend to agree with this assessment, while 50 percent of current service members believe their military experience and skills are easily transferable to the private sector. Regardless, both veterans and employers nearly unanimously agree on the benefit of internship or apprenticeship programs for veterans as they seek to reenter the civilian workforce—both traditional employment learning paths. Post-9/11 veterans especially see education as crucial to their continued success.

Truly, as the Transition Commission noted, education is the key to employment in the 21st century, and employment is the door to a successful transition to civilian life. Given this reality, it behooves the nation to "provide transitioning service members with the means and opportunity to succeed in their civilian lives and to invest their talent and ability in the American economy."[20] Existing VA programs already have the infrastructure to do this. All

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[18] Hazel R. Atuel et al., "Veteran Employment in the 21st Century," in *The Civilian Lives of U.S. Veterans: Issues and Identities*, vol. 1, eds. Louis Hicks, Eugenia L. Weiss, and Jose E. Coll (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2017), 161–79.

[19] Martin Berman-Gorvine, "'Skills Translation' Crucial for Hiring Veterans," Berkshire Associates, October 2, 2017, https://www.berkshireassociates.com/.

[20] Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance, "Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance Final Report, 2.

that is lacking is a structural reorientation of these programs in alignment with 21st-century realities.

Recommendations for a 21st-Century Strengthened Transition Process

In the 21st-century information age, education is key to employment, and employment is the door to a successful transition to civilian life. Education and employment combined give veterans the crucial tools to reforge civilian identities stronger even than their military ones. The psychic rewards of work, productivity, and a career cannot be underestimated, which is corroborated by the true veteran narrative: Veterans, it turns out, are immensely successful. Empirical data shore that up by showing how veterans with increased levels of education are wealthier, healthier, and more civically engaged than even their civilian peers over the life course. Additional research has established the links between these outcomes and reduced rates of dependence, disability, and criminality.

But in 2025, outside of these more 10,000 foot observations and bits of knowledge, we also know a few additional, essential things when it comes to veterans transitioning into civilian life, in terms of where the gaps in our knowledge are and where the challenges exist. Here, I echo some of the findings and observations that are helpfully condensed in the recently published report by the American Enterprise Institute, "Sustaining a National Treasure: Veteran Transitions and the Life Cycle of the All-Volunteer Force," for which I provided some thoughts, observations, and advice.

We know that transition is both an event and a process, taking up to ten years for some individuals. Generally speaking, the bulk of the reintegrating "work" occurs in the initial two-year period after receiving one's DD214, though significant numbers of at least Post-9/11 veterans have felt that they were not entirely "fully" transitioned at even 6.5 years after service. Mental health, employment, and making and keeping friends are profound concerns for the typical veteran during this process. The Veterans Metrics Initiative has identified seven domains that are "critical" to success in transition: employment, education, finances, legal security, social connections, and physical and mental health.

We also know that that initial two-year period post-transition is the most impactful for intervention, and that those programs are the most impactful that allow for customized and timely support geared toward improving employment and well-being outcomes. Furthermore, we know that currently, our junior enlisted, women, and minority veterans are facing the steepest post-service challenges, which are exacerbated by low utilization of existing employment services. Explanations for why there is the low utilization by those who most stand to profit from accessing them include the fact that the veteran support system as it currently exists is fragmented. But further insight continues to elude us,

because of this pervasive problem when it comes to veteran-serving programs: a lack of data transparency, and a lack of data about veterans, simply.

High-quality information on veteran demographics and locations is scare, hindering efficient resource allocation. Enhanced data sharing among the DOD, VA, and other entities is essential. Connecting the VA/DOD Identity Repository Database and information available from the Social Security Administration specific to payroll information at the zip code level, for instance, would go a far way toward enabling a better delivery of resources targeted to regions of the country with enduring economic challenges.

When it comes to the lack of data transparency, our nation's veterans are ill-served by programs that are never meaningfully held to account via a true measurement of their outcomes. The majority of VA programs, for instance, appear only to measure outputs, rather than outcomes. This leaves us in the dark about whether the billions of dollars that are annually allocated for these programs are accomplishing anything other than smoke from how quickly the monies are consumed. Any funding should therefore be directed to programs that effectively improve veteran outcomes and have concrete evidence of the same, including partnerships with successful nonprofit and private initiatives.

Currently, neither VA nor Congress (for the VA) have articulated any key performance indicators to measure key transition goals. The result is that there is no standardized set of outcomes and impact measures for veterans-serving programs. Mandating evidence-based funding and third-party oversight to ensure alignment with measurable goals via implementing a "Veteran Impact Dashboard" would be one step toward answering this conundrum. Such a dashboard would allow for the tracking of the effectiveness of the aforementioned investments in support programs for government-delivered and nonprofit and private organizations that receive federal dollars.

What might boost such efforts to improve veterans' transition assistance programs would be better, and serious, attention paid to them coming from the Department of Defense. Reestablishing the Chairman's Office of Reintegration would enable the return of DoD leadership to the transition process. Rather than distributing the responsibility and authority for transition success across multiple government entities, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff needs to fund and lead high-quality reintegrations. Reestablishing the Chairman's Office of Reintegration would highlight to all stakeholders that transition outcomes are crucial to the sustainment of the AVF. And perhaps this step is what is needed to get both the Senate and the House Armed Services Committees to hold joint hearings with the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees.

Since the birth of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973, our nation has never thought to seriously examine the dynamics that do exist—and that must exist—between our society, our government, and our military branches in order to sustain an entirely volunteer military. A

national veterans strategy that reestablishes in the minds of our national security sector, our public officials in the Executive Branch as well as in Congress, and in the American public at large, the reality that the veteran is the beginning point as much as the end point of military service, is crucial for the continued health of these United States.