Informational Hearing:

Challenges Facing California Veterans

During the Transition Back to Civilian Life

1:30 p.m., Tuesday, March 14, 2017

Room 2040 (Rose Ann Vuich Hearing Room)

State Capitol

**Introduction: California Veterans**

California is home to more than 1.8 million military veterans, approximately 11% of the national total. During the recent downsizing of the active force, approximately 30,000 separating troops have been returning to California annually. These recent “discharges” may be grouped within four categories of consideration:

1. Commissioned officers and senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) who:
   1. Already have earned a college degree, either before or during military service.
   2. Have earned a post-service retirement pension from the military.
   3. Have developed expertise in a military occupational skill that translates readily into a well-paying civilian technical job.
   4. Some combination of the above.

Members of this category have significant financial security and/or career options and generally do not need federal and state benefits as urgently as younger, less educated and less experienced veterans. Overall, these veterans tend to outperform nonveterans in the age group. This is the smallest group in terms of numbers.

1. Individuals whose military or post-military experiences have left them with physical or mental disabilities or other conditions, including substance abuse, that have challenged their ability to provide adequately for themselves and/or family members.

Many members of this modestly but significantly sized category do not seek help from family or from governmental, social or religious institutions that could assist them. Before they can be assisted, they must be located, identified, encouraged to receive help, and assessed. Some have received discharges under “other than honorable” conditions, which can complicate eligibility for some of the most valuable veterans benefits. Some end up negatively involved with the criminal justice system.

1. Veterans, usually in their twenties or early thirties, who served one or two enlistment periods, then opted not to reenlist, but to “get out” and reenter civilian live, first earning a college degree and then entering into a civilian career.

This large cohort of younger veterans contains many self-starters. In addition to quickly using the GI Bill, many connect easily to other earned federal and state veterans benefits. Although starting their college educations three to eight years later than most nonveterans of the same age, they tend to catch up economically to their nonveteran age peers within several years after receiving their college degrees.

1. The final category includes a variety veterans representing some combination of the following factors:
   1. Does not have a college degree and is not driven to pursue one in the near future.
   2. Has no mental or physical disabilities or has only mild-to-moderate conditions.
   3. Does not acquire an immediately transferrable technical skill and expertise during military service.
   4. Most are discharged “under honorable conditions,” but some have problematical discharge statuses.
   5. Some actively seek their veteran benefits; others do not.
   6. Some identify strongly as veterans; others do not and do not join veterans groups.

A significant percentage of this large population of veterans can become delayed in reintegrating as they struggle to find identity, meaning, purpose and well-paying employment in a civilian world that is very different from the military experience that shaped them. Members of this category usually are very “helpable,” but many can be hard to locate and identify.

While the above categorizations generally hold true around the nation, California’s veterans deviate from national trends by being more racially and ethnically diverse.

For example, 17 percent of California veterans identify as Hispanic or Latino, compared to only seven percent nationally. California also is home to roughly one-third of the nation’s Asian-American veterans, who make up six percent of California’s veteran population – compared to one percent of the veteran population nationwide.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The LAO also notes that the median household income for California’s veterans in 2014 was estimated to be about $74,000, about $12,000 higher than the estimated median household income for Californians overall. According to data from 2015, 7.5 percent of California’s veteran population was below the poverty level, compared to 14.3 percent of Californians overall.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Transition-Related Challenges**

Historically, veterans have always faced transitional challenges after returning from service and continue to be disproportionately represented among the homeless and unemployed. In addition to the complex set of factors influencing homelessness; extreme shortage of affordable housing, livable income and access to health care; a large number of displaced and at-risk veterans live with the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and substance abuse. Compounding these issues is often times a lack of family and social support networks. Additionally, transferring military experience, education, and training to the civilian workforce can be difficult, placing some veterans at a disadvantage when competing for employment. With the growing diversity among service members, additional challenges arise in the effective delivery of service and support to this changing demographic, including services to minorities, female and LGBT veterans.

Numerous studies indicate that for a significant percentage of veterans, the transition from military service to civilian life – even during peacetime – has always presented challenges. In one Pew Research Center survey[[3]](#footnote-3) of 1,853 veterans, nearly 30 percent said that the transition was difficult for them – a proportion that swells to 44 percent among veterans who have served since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

According to the Pew study, various factors – such as education, marital status, religiosity and trauma – influenced the transition process. For example, veterans who were commissioned officers and those with college degrees experienced easier readjustment to post-military life than enlisted personnel and those with only high school diplomas. Veterans who reported emotionally traumatic experiences while serving, such as combat or military sexual trauma, or had suffered a serious service-related injury were significantly more likely to report problems with re-entry, when other factors were held as analytical constants.

In addition, those who have been transitioning to civilian life since the onset of the so-called Great Recession (late 2008 – present) have faced further complications, such as high unemployment, associated with the global economic crisis.

Various governmental and nonprofit entities have determined that veterans, especially those recently separated, face adjustment challenges in four major areas of post-military life: education, employment, health, and housing. The degrees to which a separated veteran successfully advances in each of those areas serve as key analytical markers for the veteran’s overall success in reintegrating into civilian life. Two other helpful metrics include measuring how well the veteran mutually engages with his or her surrounding community and the strength and positivity of the veteran’s connectedness to his or her family, along with the well-being of the veteran’s family members.

The federal government has developed a transition assistance program for individuals approaching separation from active military service. In addition, many states, including California, have programs to assist separating or recently separated persons.

**Federal Transition Assistance**

The U.S. Department of Defense’s (DoD) Transition Assistance Program (TAP) was developed in 1990 to assist separating and retiring military members in preparing for their transition back to civilian life. The program consisted of a one-week curriculum that primarily focused on employment. The TAP was coordinated by the Department of Labor (DOL) and provided three days of employment training focusing on identifying transferable skills, resume writing, and effective interviewing techniques. The remaining scheduled curriculum was filled by representatives of the USDVA and DoD family support networks.

One of the biggest criticisms of the TAP program was that it was not available to all separating service members with often times no program in place for National Guard or Reserve members. Additionally, the USDVA role was so minimal that it could neither properly disseminate nor retain the volumes of information delivered in such a short period of time. The USDVA benefits education portion of the program was often referred to as “drinking from a fire-hose.” The DoD representatives that presented at TAP were also criticized for lacking the understanding of the civilian world and the myriad of challenges service members might face once they took the uniform off.

Through its enactment of the Vow to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (VOW Act), Congress mandated a new transition program for exiting service members. In response, three large federal agencies, DoD, USDVA, and DOL, along with partners such as the Small Business Administration (SBA) and Department of Education, restructured the TAP program into the new Transition: Goals, Plans, Success (TGPS) program.

The new program’s first priority was to develop a curriculum that could be standardized and delivered consistently across all branches of the military. Additionally, the TGPS program was made mandatory for all exiting service members and is available also to spouses up to 12 months before separation. TGPS is an outcome-based modular curriculum which offers a core curriculum with standardized learning objectives. The program’s goal is to prepare service members for the transition to civilian life by aligning the experience and knowledge obtained in the military with civilian career goals. The program is designed to achieve this alignment by offering service members three distinct tracts; Education, Technical Training, and Entrepreneurship. The training modules are delivered by the military services and partnering agencies at installations across the country.

The VOW Act requires separating service members to attend the transition assistance program. The Act required that the DOL redesign its employment workshop, the largest component of the TAP curriculum, to be more applicable to the realities of today's job market. The DOL developed the Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) to fulfill this requirement and manage implementation of the employment workshop at hundreds of military installations worldwide for thousands of separating service members.

In 2013, the DOD launched a TAP virtual curriculum through their Joint Knowledge Online (JKO) learning management system. This TAP virtual curriculum is designed to provide service-members who are unable to attend the TAP in-person due to military exigencies with the ability to fulfill their TAP obligations.

Transition GPS training modules:

* Transition Overview – Introduction to the eight stages of transition, reviewing summaries of upcoming TGPS modules and tracks, examine ways to address family concerns associated with transition, recognizing signs of stress and ways to mitigate it, and learning how to build an Individual Transition Plan.
* Military Occupational Classification (MOC) Crosswalk - Identifying skills, experience, credentials, and education they obtained in the military and correlating them to opportunities in the civilian workplace.
* Personal Financial Planning – How to analyze credit, salaries and compensation packages, housing, cost-of-living, retirement options, tax changes, and personal budgets.
* DOL Employment Workshop - Job searching, career decision-making, Veterans benefits, resume writing, and job interviewing.
* Federal Employment – Job opportunities and veteran preferences in federal government.
* VA Benefits I – Basic federal veterans benefits, including identifying the forms and documentation necessary to apply for benefits and matching benefits to service member needs and eligibility.
* VA Benefits II – Advanced understanding and navigation of VA health care and disability compensation resources.
* Career Technical Training Track – Identifying a potential technical career, determining credentialing requirements, researching training programs, exploring funding options, completing an Individual Transition Plan, and creating a Plan for Success.
* Accessing Higher Education Track –Guides a separating member through the decisions involved in choosing a degree completion program, college institution, and funding, as well as completing the admissions process.
* Entrepreneur Track – Reviews the fundamentals of small business ownership, explains how to do an initial feasibility analysis of a business concept, and familiarizes with entrepreneurial tools and resources.

While the TGPS program represents an improvement based on “lessons learned” from the original TAP program, certain shortcomings appear built into the system. For example, the service members often have difficulty getting state-specific information. California state agencies, county veterans service officers (CVSO), and California nonprofit organizations have worked to participate directly in TAP/TGPS sessions on military bases located in California – but participation varies from base to base, largely due to varying levels of commitment by individual base commanders, and the material presented is not uniform in substance or approach. Furthermore, only a portion of personnel at such bases intend to stay in California after separation. Most are moving back to their states of origin or other areas.

A greater problem resides on the flip side of that paradigm: The majority of separating service members who intend to live in California comes from military bases located outside of California – in other states and countries. The California state agencies and nonprofits are unable to directly engage those persons in state-specific discussions during the military’s mandated transition process.

**State Transition Assistance**

The State of California long has supplemented the federal government in delivering veterans benefits, but has lacked a dedicated, comprehensive, uniform program focused on transition.

In 2014, the Legislature enacted Assembly Bill 1509 (Fox, Ch. 647, Stats. 2014), which required the California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet) to develop a state-level transition assistance program plan to help veterans recently discharged from the military, including the National Guard of any state. AB 1509 required the program plan to include certain California-specific transition assistance information. In May 2016 CalVet submitted an Budget Change Proposal requesting $813,000 from the General Fund in Budget Year 2016-17 and $774,000 General Fund annually thereafter to support intended to support a new California Transition Assistance Program (Cal-TAP) within the department’s Veteran Services Division.[[4]](#footnote-4) The proposal became part of the 2016-17 Budget Act.

Cal-TAP is designed to educate veterans and their families about benefits available to them. Unlike CVSOs, who perform some outreach but primarily assist self-motivated veterans in applying for benefits, the main mission of Cal-TAP is outreach and education to veterans not yet seeking or aware of benefits. Cal-TAP currently is in its implementation phase. The program will offer online and in–person presentations from state, federal, and community-based partner organizations to inform and connect veterans to available benefits. Outreach through Cal-TAP will focus on younger veterans as they leave military service, but presentations will also be available for veterans at all stages of life.

**Veterans Benefits**

Veterans of the United States armed forces may be eligible for a broad range of programs and services provided by federal, state and even local governments. Many of these benefits can play crucial supportive roles during a veteran’s transition period. The USDVA is the primary manager of federal benefits, which are legislated in Title 38 of the United States Code and generally fall within the following categories:

* Education & Training
* Vocational Rehab & Employment
* Disability Compensation & Pension
* Health Care
* Home Loan Guaranty
* Life Insurance
* Burial

Approximately 15 percent of California veterans receive federal compensation and pension benefits, averaging $1,929 per month per veteran. While the percentage of California veterans receiving these benefits has improved in recent years, the state still lags behind other states with large veteran populations like Texas and Florida. The national average is approximately $2,104 per veteran.

State and local government also provide a mix of benefits to veterans, which generally are less extensive and lucrative than the federal benefits and, in California, include:

State benefits:

* Business license, tax and fee waiver
* California college tuition fee waiver
* Disabled veteran license plates
* Disabled Veterans Business Enterprise (DVBE) opportunities
* Employment assistance
* California farm and home loans
* Fishing and hunting licenses
* Motor vehicle registration fees waiver
* Property tax exemptions
* State park and recreation passes
* State veterans homes
* Veterans preference in California civil service exams
* Property tax exemptions

Local benefits (varies by jurisdiction):

* Claims assistance
* Case management
* Fiduciary services
* Homeless assistance
* Indigent burials
* Information and referral
* Jail and hospital outreach
* Job referrals
* Veterans preference points for employment exams
* Peddler’s license
* Transportation services
* Veteran’s advocacy

1. Legislative Analysts’ Office, State of California, “Understanding the Veterans Services Landscape in California,” January 17, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The LAO’s income data reflect the median income of households containing veterans, and therefore do not necessarily reflect the median income of veterans themselves. In addition, the income data are estimated from the American Community Survey, in which veterans must choose to identify themselves as veterans—this may lead to underreporting of veterans. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pew Research Center, “The Difficult Transition from Military to Civilian Life,” December 8, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. California Department of Veterans Affairs, Budget Change Proposal 8955-401-BCP-DP-2016-MR, FY 2016-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)