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Military Transition Assistance Program (TAP): An Overview

Background

The military Transition Assistance Program (TAP) was established by Congress in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 1991 (P.L. 101-510). The original purpose of the program was to help ease the transition to civilian life for military servicemembers who were involuntarily separated as part of the force structure drawdowns of the late 1980s. From 1991 to 2011, Congressional interest in the program remained high, particularly in regard to troops who served in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In 2011, Congress passed the VOW (Veterans Opportunity to Work) to Hire Heroes Act (Title II of P.L. 112-56), which made a pre-separation counseling program mandatory for all servicemembers with at least 180 continuous days of active duty. Current law requires servicemembers to begin participating in TAP as soon as possible during the 24-month period preceding an anticipated retirement date or 12-month period preceding the anticipated separation date. It also specifies that pre-separation counseling should commence no later than 90 days before the date of discharge or release unless precluded by unanticipated circumstances or operational requirements.

In 2011 the Obama Administration established the Veterans' Employment Initiative Task Force with the Departments of Defense (DOD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) and charged the task force with redesigning TAP. The redesigned Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success) program includes a Military Life Cycle component that starts preparing the service member for civilian transition at the beginning of his or her military career and at certain milestones (e.g., promotion, deployment) throughout that career. At each of these milestones, servicemembers are made aware of Career Readiness Standards (CRSs) and are given opportunities to review and adjust personal financial planning objectives and individual development plans. Over time, Congress has also increased the number and scope of required TAP counseling topics (see **Table 1**).

Program Administration

DOD administers TAP in cooperation with the Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA), Labor (DOL), Education, Homeland Security (DHS), Small Business Administration (SBA), and Office of Personnel Management (OPM). Officials from these agencies participate in TAP Executive Council and Senior Steering Group meetings on a regular basis. DOD's Transition to Veterans Program Office (TVPO) within the Office of the Secretary of Defense is the principal oversight body for the military departments and components in the development, management oversight, and strategic planning of TAP.

Table 1. Statutory TAP Counseling Requirements

Creation of a transition plan for educational, training, employment, and financial objectives of the member and spouse.

Educational assistance benefits.

Availability of relocation assistance services and other benefits and services available to persons leaving military service.

VA compensation and vocational rehabilitation benefits if member is being medically separated or is receiving a disability retirement.

Health-related topics:

- Availability of medical and dental coverage following separation from active duty, including the opportunity to elect into the conversion health policy.
- Effect of career change on individuals and their families and availability of suicide prevention resources (member and dependents).
- Availability of mental health services and treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, depression, suicidal ideations, or other mental health conditions associated with service in the armed forces.
- A description of VA health care and other benefits.

Financial planning topics:

- Financial planning assistance, including information on budgeting, saving, credit, loans, and taxes.
- VA home loan services and housing assistance benefits and counseling on responsible borrowing practices.

Career and employment topics*:

- Civilian occupations and related assistance programs.
- Procedure for affiliating with Selected Reserve.
- Priority of service for veterans in the receipt of employment, training, and placement services provided under qualified job training programs of the DOL.
- Veterans small business ownership and entrepreneurship programs of the SBA.
- Veterans preference in Federal employment and Federal procurement opportunities.
- Employment and reemployment rights and obligations.

Spouse and caregiver topics:

- Job placement counseling for member's spouse, and information on survivor benefits.
- Assistance and support services for family caregivers.

Source: 10 U.S.C. §1142

Note: *Additional employment-related topics under the DOL portion of the program are specified in 10 U.S.C. §1144.

Transition GPS Components

The current TAP includes the development of Career Readiness Standards (CRSs), four hours of pre-separation counseling, and five days of classroom-based instruction which includes core curricula and a Capstone event. Members may also select to participate in additional 2-day Transition GPS tracks (see **Table 2**). Topics for these optional tracks are specified in 10 U.S.C. §1144(f), and the Secretary of Defense has the authority to offer other additional training options.

Table 2. Transition GPS Components

Components	Description
Core Curricula	DOD administered workshops (8-10 hrs): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transition Overview Resilient Transitions Military Occupational Code Crosswalk Personal Financial Planning Individual Transition Plan Review
	VA Benefits Briefings I & II (6 hours)
	DOL Employment Workshop (3 days)
	Optional Transition GPS Tracks (2 days each)
Optional Transition GPS Tracks (2 days each)	Accessing Higher Education (DOD) Career Technical Training (VA) Entrepreneurship (SBA)
Capstone	Verifies that service members have met Career Readiness Standards. (DOD)

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans' Employment and Training Service, Transition Assistance Program Operations Manual; U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Transitioning Veterans: DOD Needs to Improve Performance Reporting and Monitoring for the Transition Assistance Program*, GAO-18-23, November 2017.

Population Served

There are approximately 1.3 million servicemembers in the Active Component (AC) and 800,000 in the Reserve Component (RC). Approximately 200,000 transition annually. Separating members depart with varying skills, education, and experience levels. There are also individual factors that affect the ease of transition, including, level of disability (if any), family status (e.g., spouse employment, dependent children), and preferences.

U.S. Coast Guard personnel are permitted to participate in portions of DOD's TAP as availability of resources and classroom space permits. Spouses of military service members are authorized to attend certain portions of the classroom-based TAP. The Transition GPS curriculum is also available virtually on Joint Knowledge Online.

Compliance with TAP Requirements

DOD has publicly reported 92%-97% compliance rates with mandated TAP elements. However, a 2017 GAO report found that actual TAP participation rates based on DOD internal monitoring reports for eligible servicemembers are lower, particularly for Reserve Component members (approximately 47% compliance).

14.1% of transitioning service members participated in one or more of the optional 2-day transition tracks.

In the 2017 GAO study (GAO-18-23), top reasons affecting TAP participation included instances where members were separated on short notice, and mission- or duty-related requirements that interfered with ability to attend the course. DOD reports that efforts are underway to improve data collection for monitoring purposes.

Program Costs

Program costs are split between the partner agencies. Aggregate program cost for all agencies is not reported, and TAP is not a single budget line item.

DOD has estimated that its total annual cost for the program is approximately \$100 million, including service-level programs and operation of the TVPO office. Within the DOD budget, the TVPO is included as a line item in the Operation and Maintenance budget for the Defense Human Resource Activity. The military departments subsume TAP funding into broader budget categories for reporting purposes. The SBA portion of TAP is typically funded at about \$8 million and the DOL portion at \$14 million. The VA spends approximately \$60 million on its portion of TAP.

Off-Base Transition Training (OBTT)

In 2012, some veterans groups pushed for expansion of TAP to those who had already separated from service. In response, Congress authorized an Off-Base Transition Training (OBTT) pilot program (P.L. 112-260, Section 301) that extended the TAP programs to veterans and their spouses in a community-based setting. DOL ultimately conducted 21, three-day workshops in Georgia, Washington, and West Virginia. Average attendance was 12 participants per workshop, and overall course ratings were high. The OBTT pilot program expired in January of 2015.

Issues for Congress

Many in Congress are concerned about whether TAP is helping to improve veteran outcomes as they relate to employment, education, financial health, and general well-being. Issues that have been raised include:

- Participation compliance and monitoring;
- Interagency coordinating (e.g., data-sharing, "warm handover");
- Potential involvement by other federal, state, and/or local agencies;
- Potential involvement by private organizations and employers;
- Tailored information for population subgroups (e.g., female veterans, veterans with disabilities);
- Timing and venue for program delivery; and
- Long-term outcomes for participants.

Congress may consider these and other questions in its oversight role.

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