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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, Section 502) and codified in 10 U.S.C. §1142. The original purpose of the program was to help ease the transition into 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 remained high, particularly in regard to troops in transition following combat service in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In 2011, Congress passed the VOW to Hire Heroes Act (Title II of P.L. 112-56) which made a pre-separation counseling program mandatory for all servicemembers who have served at least 180 continuous days of active duty. Current law requires servicemembers to commence participation 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.

Program Administration

TAP is administered by the DOD in cooperation with the Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA), Labor (DOL), Education (DOE), Homeland Security (DHS), and the United States Small Business Administration (SBA), and Office of Personnel Management (OPM). 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.

TAP Counseling Requirements

Over time, Congress has increased the number and scope of topics included in TAP (See **Table 1**). In September 2011, then-President Obama established the DOD-VA Veterans' Employment Initiative Task Force, charged with revising TAP to better meet the needs of transitioning servicemembers. The centerpiece of the redesigned TAP is called Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success). Implementation of the classroom component of the new program was complete in January 2013.

Table 1. Statutory TAP Counseling Requirements

Topics to be covered by counseling
Educational assistance benefits
VA compensation and vocational rehabilitation benefits if member is being medically separated or is receiving a disability retirement
Procedure for affiliating with Selected Reserve
Civilian occupations and related assistance programs
Job placement counseling for member's spouse, and information on survivor benefits
Availability of relocation assistance services and other benefits and services available to persons leaving military service
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)
Financial planning assistance, including information on budgeting, saving, credit, loans, and taxes
Creation of a transition plan for educational, training, employment, and financial objectives of the member and spouse
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
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
Employment and reemployment rights and obligations
Veterans preference in Federal employment and Federal procurement opportunities
VA home loan services and housing assistance benefits and counseling on responsible borrowing practices
A description of VA health care and other benefits, and information on how to receive additional counseling on actual entitlement to such benefits and to apply for such benefits

Source: 10 U.S.C. §1142

Note: *Required elements of the DOL program are specified in 10 U.S.C. §1144.

Transition GPS Components

The redesigned TAP includes the development of Career Readiness Standards (CRSs), four hours of pre-separation counseling, and five days of classroom-based instruction. Classroom components include: core curricula, at least one of three Transition GPS topic tracks, and a Capstone event (See **Table 2**).

The redesigned TAP also includes a Military Life Cycle component that starts preparing the servicemember for civilian transition at the beginning of his or her military career and at certain milestones or “touchpoints” (e.g. promotion, deployment) throughout that career. At each of these touchpoints, servicemembers are made aware of CRSs and are given opportunities to review and adjust previously completed personal financial planning objectives and individual development plans.

Table 2. Transition GPS Components

Components	Description
Core Curricula	DOD administered workshops: <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
	DOL Employment Workshop
Transition GPS Tracks	Accessing Higher Education (DOD)
	Career Technical Training (VA)
	Entrepreneurship (SBA)
Capstone	Verifies that servicemembers have met Career Readiness Standards. (DOD)

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans’ Employment and Training Service, Transition Assistance Program Operations Manual

Population Served

In 2016, approximately 1.3 million members served in the Active Component (AC) and 819,000 in the Reserve Component (RC). DOD estimates approximately 200,000 servicemembers transition annually. DOD reported a 95% compliance rate with workshop attendance for FY2015.

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 servicemembers are authorized to attend certain portions of the classroom-based TAP course. The Transition GPS curriculum is also available virtually on Joint Knowledge Online. DOD reports that over 100,000 users have accessed the virtual curriculum since it was launched in October of 2013.

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. Within the DOD budget, the TVPO is included as a line item in the Operation and Maintenance budget for the Defense Human

Resource Activity. For FY2017, the amount requested for TVPO was \$3,047,000. The military departments subsume TAP funding into broader budget categories for reporting purposes. 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.

In FY2016 the SBA portion of TAP was funded at \$8.4 million and the DOL portion was funded at \$14 million. The VA spent approximately \$58.9 million on its portion of TAP in FY2016.

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 passed the Dignified Burial and Other Veterans’ Benefits Improvement Act of 2012 (P.L. 112-260, Section 301). Provisions in this act authorized an Off-Base Transition Training (OBTT) pilot program that would extend the TAP programs to veterans and their spouses in a community-based setting. The law required the pilot program to be established by the DOL in a minimum of three states, with selection favoring states with “high rates of unemployment among veterans.” The Department of Labor 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 and the VA submitted a report to Congress on April 14, 2015.

Issues for Congress

Many in Congress are concerned about military veterans as they transition from active service and question whether TAP is helping to improve outcomes as they relate to employment, education, financial health, and general well-being. Questions that have been raised in recent years include:

- Does TAP enable an adequate handoff to the VA and other agencies/community organizations? Can more be done to improve coordination (e.g., improved data-sharing)?
 - Do current outcome metrics reflect actual program impact and is there transparency in reporting?
 - Does the program provide adequate information and resources for certain groups of individuals (e.g., female veterans, veterans with disabilities and/or mental health needs)?
 - Is the timing and venue for TAP appropriate? Should it be offered in an off-installation setting and/or expanded to those veterans who have already left the service?
- Congress may consider these and other questions in its oversight role.

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