AUTHENTICATED
U.S. GOVERNMENT
INFORMATION
GPO

TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

FIELD HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED TENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

JULY 28, 2008
FIELD HEARING HELD IN RAPID CITY, SD

Serial No. 110–99

Printed for the use of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs



U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE
44–001 WASHINGTON : 2009

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office
Internet: bookstore.gpo.gov Phone: toll free (866) 512–1800; DC area (202) 512–1800
Fax: (202) 512–2104 Mail: Stop IDCC, Washington, DC 20402–0001

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
BOB FILNER, California, *Chairman*

CORRINE BROWN, Florida
VIC SNYDER, Arkansas
MICHAEL H. MICHAUD, Maine
STEPHANIE HERSETH SANDLIN, South Dakota
HARRY E. MITCHELL, Arizona
JOHN J. HALL, New York
PHIL HARE, Illinois
SHELLEY BERKLEY, Nevada
JOHN T. SALAZAR, Colorado
CIRO D. RODRIGUEZ, Texas
JOE DONNELLY, Indiana
JERRY MCNERNEY, California
ZACHARY T. SPACE, Ohio
TIMOTHY J. WALZ, Minnesota
DONALD J. CAZAYOUX JR., Louisiana

STEVE BUYER, Indiana, *Ranking*
CLIFF STEARNS, Florida
JERRY MORAN, Kansas
HENRY E. BROWN, JR., South Carolina
JEFF MILLER, Florida
JOHN BOOZMAN, Arkansas
GINNY BROWN-WAITE, Florida
MICHAEL R. TURNER, Ohio
BRIAN P. BILBRAY, California
DOUG LAMBORN, Colorado
GUS M. BILIRAKIS, Florida
VERN BUCHANAN, Florida
STEVE SCALISE, Louisiana

MALCOM A. SHORTER, *Staff Director*

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
STEPHANIE HERSETH SANDLIN, South Dakota, *Chairwoman*

JOE DONNELLY, Indiana
JERRY MCNERNEY, California
JOHN J. HALL, New York

JOHN BOOZMAN, Arkansas, *Ranking*
JERRY MORAN, Kansas
STEVE SCALISE, Louisiana

Pursuant to clause 2(e)(4) of Rule XI of the Rules of the House, public hearing records of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs are also published in electronic form. **The printed hearing record remains the official version.** Because electronic submissions are used to prepare both printed and electronic versions of the hearing record, the process of converting between various electronic formats may introduce unintentional errors or omissions. Such occurrences are inherent in the current publication process and should diminish as the process is further refined.

CONTENTS

July 28, 2008

Page

Transition Assistance Program 1

OPENING STATEMENTS

Chairwoman Stephanie Herseth Sandlin 1
Prepared statement of Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin 56
Hon. John Boozman, Ranking Republican Member 3
Prepared statement of Congressman Boozman 57

WITNESSES

U.S. Department of Labor, John M. McWilliam, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Veterans' Employment and Training Service 45
Prepared statement of Mr. McWilliam 78
U.S. Department of Defense, Don Keplin, State Chairman, South Dakota Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve 46
Prepared statement of Mr. Keplin 80
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, William D. Fillman, Jr., Director, Central Area, Veterans Benefits Administration 48
Prepared statement of Mr. Fillman 81

American Legion, Department of South Dakota, Luverne L. Boes, District 13 Commander 35
Prepared statement of Mr. Boes 70
American Legion Auxiliary, Doris Ann Werlinger, Past Department President of South Dakota 37
Prepared statement of Ms. Werlinger 75
Ellsworth Air Force Base, SD, Transition Assistance Program, Susan Machetta, Community Readiness Consultant, Transition Assistance Program Coordinator 18
Prepared statement of Ms. Machetta 64
Geffre, Kimberly S., Servicemember, Ellsworth Air Force Base, SD 9
Prepared statement of Ms. Geffre 60
Krebs, Master Sergeant Roxanne, USAF, Ellsworth Air Force Base, SD 8
Prepared statement of Sergeant Krebs 59
Koopman, Mark, Servicemember, Ellsworth Air Force Base, SD 9
Prepared statement of Mr. Koopman 60
Lassegard, Sergeant Ole D., USANG, Member, 235th Military Police Company, South Dakota Army National Guard 6
Prepared statement of Sergeant Lassegard 58
Lassegard, Yvette S., Rapid City, SD 5
Prepared statement of Ms. Lassegard 58
South Dakota Department of Labor, Todd Kolden, Administrator 27
Prepared statement of Mr. Kolden 68
South Dakota National Guard, Major General Steven R. Doohen, Adjutant General, and Secretary, South Dakota Department of Military and Veterans Affairs 17
Prepared statement of General Doohen 61
South Dakota State Approving Agency, Shane A. Olivier, Veterans Education Program Specialist 25
Prepared statement of Mr. Olivier 65
Veterans of Foreign Wars Ladies Auxiliary, Department of South Dakota, Diane Hickenbotham, President 39
Prepared statement of Ms. Hickenbotham 76

Page

SUBMISSION FOR THE RECORD

U.S. Small Business Administration, William D. Elmore, Associate Administrator for Veterans Business Development, Office of Veterans Business Development, statement 84

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Post-Hearing Questions and Responses for the Record:
Hon. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, Chairwoman, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, letter to John McWilliam, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Veterans' Employment and Training Service, U.S. Department of Labor, letter dated August 1, 2008, and DoL response letter 86

TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

MONDAY, JULY 28, 2008

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY,
Washington, DC.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:00 a.m. MST, at Rapid City Central High School, 433 North Mount Rushmore Road, Rapid City, South Dakota, Hon. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin [Chairwoman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Herseth Sandlin and Boozman.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRWOMAN HERSETH SANDLIN

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. The Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity hearing on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) will come to order.

It is an honor and privilege for me to be here with you today. I would like to thank our servicemembers, veterans and their families, in particular, and everyone in attendance this morning. I would also like to thank the distinguished Ranking Member, Mr. John Boozman of Arkansas, for joining us here in Rapid City.

Like other States across the country, South Dakota has seen many of its servicemembers activated in support of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Over two-thirds of the South Dakota Air National Guard, 1,012 members, have actively supported the Global War on Terror (GWOT), since the September 11th attack on the United States, either at home or abroad, in 15 different countries.

In addition, since the terrorist attacks on America, the South Dakota Army National Guard has mobilized more than 3,200 soldiers. Also, the airmen and women from Ellsworth Air Force Base have been supporting missions in the Middle East since September 11th in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), including the 200 servicemembers that have been deployed, as well as many others deployed in Southwest Asia.

Many of our brave service men and women in South Dakota, and across the country, are returning in need of healthcare, employment, housing, educational, and other services. They deserve our best efforts in providing the resources to ensure a seamless transition from military service to civilian life.

On June 19th, 2006, the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, under the leadership of then-Chairman Boozman, held a field hearing nearby at Ellsworth Air Force Base to discuss the Transition Assistance Program and the Montgomery GI Bill. Dur-

ing that hearing, some of our panelists suggested expanding evening classes or on-line resources to accommodate servicemembers and their spouses' work schedules. Others suggested making the program mandatory for separating servicemembers and expanding existing Montgomery GI Bill benefits.

Today, we are gathered here to reexamine the Transition Assistance Program and the progress we've made from 2 years ago. We will also have the opportunity to learn how the program is assisting our veterans in the seamless transition into employment and community life.

As the Subcommittee was taking testimony in Washington, DC, and elsewhere across the country, we learned: when and where transition assistance is most effective; how invaluable family support readiness is to servicemembers and their families; how National Guard leaders have worked to establish programs to assist families during deployment; how to ease the transition home following deployment for their members; and how more recent remobilization patterns often using small Reserve or Guard tactics pose many unique challenges.

As many of you know, the Transition Assistance Program was established to meet the needs of separating servicemembers during their period of readjustment into civilian life. The program offers job-search assistance and related services, such as: workshops on resume writing; interview process; labor market overviews; personal appraisal; and VA benefits. The program seeks to provide veterans with the skills and services needed to transition into the workforce.

During my time in office, I've had the opportunity to meet with many local government officials and veterans here, in South Dakota. In addition, this Subcommittee has received many recommendations from government, military officials, veteran service organizations, and concerned citizens from across the country. I'm glad to note that we have succeeded in making progress for our servicemembers and veterans during this Congress.

For example, included in the final version of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2008, we were able to gain bipartisan support for language that would allow mobilized members of the Reserve Forces to use their Reserve Educational Assistance Program, also known as REAP, benefits for 10 years after they separate from the Guard or Reserves.

Furthermore, we made progress in passing the Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act, which was recently enacted into law. This act will enable most veterans to attend a public 4-year college or university, with benefits covering full tuition. It also provides a housing stipend, and helps pay the costs of books and other expenses associated with attending school. Many of their dependents may also be eligible to receive these benefits if the servicemember meets certain enlistment requirements.

While this progress is long overdue, we must remain committed to reviewing all benefits and provide the oversight necessary to ensure effective administration of those benefits, which help meet the needs of our servicemembers and veterans.

I'm glad to see some of our panelists here today who were with us 2 years ago. We hope to hear more, from all our panelists, with

regard to how the Transition Assistance Program can better serve our veterans.

I look forward to working with Ranking Member Boozman, and other Members of our Subcommittee, to ensure that our servicemembers and veterans are provided proper benefits to help them succeed in life after the military. The men and women who serve our Nation honorably deserve and should receive the best our country has to offer.

I now recognize Mr. Boozman for any opening statements he may have.

[The prepared statement of Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin appears on p. 56.]

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN BOOZMAN

Mr. BOOZMAN. Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

A couple years ago I had the opportunity to meet with you, and I certainly remember the warm hospitality that was afforded us and is being afforded now. We really do appreciate that. We appreciate the staff, the district staff of the Chairs, who again have worked so hard to put all of these things on, as has staff in Washington.

During that time I was the Chairman, and I'd like to announce that your Congresswoman did such a good job as my Ranking Member here in the 109th Congress that I thought she should get a chance to be Chairwoman for the 110th, and I need to start negotiating with her to get my old job back. She does a tremendous job. The Veterans' Affairs Committee is a committee that people choose to serve on. It's very bipartisan. We work hard, and she and her staff have done a tremendous job.

We're here to hear from South Dakotans about their experiences with the Transition Assistance Program. TAP is designed to provide servicemembers with the basic skills and knowledge to reenter the civilian work. As such, TAP appears to have mixed results. It's successful because of the information being put out touches a wide variety of topics of importance to those in the military service. Unfortunately, a significant portion of servicemembers either choose not to attend or are not allowed to attend TAP scheduled training.

According to the July 17, 2008, audit by the VA Inspector General (IG), entitled "Veterans Benefits Administration Transition Systems for Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom," servicemembers and veterans in 2006 and 2007, only 43 percent and 47 percent of OEF/OIF servicemembers participated in that, falling short of the VA's goal of 53 percent. Clearly the VBA needs to do a much better job in reaching out to your veterans.

I'm also concerned with the same Inspector General report that shows that the highly touted Benefits Delivery at Discharge, or BDD, program is not meeting its goal to process benefit claims for severely wounded OEF/OIF veterans within 30 days. Imagine, of the nearly 5,000 claims received by regional offices, only 24 percent were processed within 30 days. The other 76 percent averaged 114 days, with some taking as long as 504 days.

Madam Chair, while oversight of the basic claims processing system falls outside of our Subcommittee, its performance certainly delays a disabled veteran's ability to access programs within our

jurisdiction, such as vocational rehabilitation benefits and specially adaptive housing benefits. These two programs alone are essential to a smooth transition to civilian life.

With most locations providing TAP over a two and one-half-day period, members are literally deluged with information, and if they don't pay attention, they will likely miss something important.

Members of the National Guard and Reserves pose a special challenge because of the dispersed nature of their duty stations. In my mind, we need to do a better job preparing members of the Guard, especially those who own businesses, prior to deployment. We need to ensure that they have full access to all benefits and programs for which they are eligible.

Finally, many of those leaving military service will enter school or training programs under the GI Bill. I'm sure that most servicemembers are aware that the Congress passed, and the President signed into law, a new, much more generous GI education and training benefit.

I want to recognize your efforts, Madam Chair, to improve education benefits by introducing H.R. 5684 that greatly improved the education benefit. And again, I appreciate you and your staff really leading the way as we did get a new GI Bill that was signed into law.

You've brought together, Madam Chair, an excellent group of witnesses, and I look forward to the testimony. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Congressman Boozman appears on p. 57.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you, Mr. Boozman. It's nice to have you back here in South Dakota.

We will be in Arkansas later in the summer, having a field hearing for the Subcommittee. As Mr. Boozman mentioned in his opening statement, it's a bipartisan committee and one in which we are squarely focused on the needs of our servicemembers in a bipartisan way. It allows the districts of our colleagues to hear from servicemembers, local and State officials who have been working hard, in partnership with Federal agencies to ensure that our servicemembers and veterans have the full scope of benefits and programs to which they're entitled.

I want to welcome all of our panels testifying before the Subcommittee today. Before I invite our first panel up, I would like to take a moment to express my disappointment in the absence of the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) today. While I appreciate the participation of Mr. Don Kelpin, South Dakota Chairman, the continued absence of the DoD officials is disheartening.

Ranking Member Boozman might recall the absence of a DoD official in our legislative hearing in Washington, DC. The participation of DoD officials would add tremendous value to these hearings, as we look to provide our servicemembers and veterans the resources they need and deserve.

We strongly encourage the Department of Defense to take a more active role in participating in all hearings, especially these field hearings, where servicemembers, veterans and their families provide feedback regarding problems with military deployment. We're concerned that one of the largest Federal agencies in our country couldn't find a person from the Pentagon to attend this theater.

I would like to remind all our panelists that your statements will remain part of the record. Therefore, please limit your remarks to 5 minutes so that we may have sufficient time to follow up with questions once everyone has had the opportunity to provide their testimony. We've set aside ample time for testimony and questions, but remember that full written statement is already a part of the written record.

I'd like to invite the first panel up. Joining us on this first panel is Mrs. Yvette Lassegard, military spouse; Mr. Ole Lassegard, a member of the South Dakota National Guard; Ms. Roxanne Krebs, a servicemember from Ellsworth Air Force Base; Mr. Mark Koopman, a servicemember also from Ellsworth Air Force Base; and Ms. Kimberly Geffre, a servicemember from Ellsworth Air Force Base as well.

Thank you all for joining us. Please have a seat. We look forward to hearing your testimony.

Ms. Lassegard, I will begin with you.

STATEMENTS OF YVETTE S. LASSEGARD, RAPID CITY, SD (VETERAN'S SPOUSE); SERGEANT OLE D. LASSEGARD, USANG, MEMBER, 235TH MILITARY POLICE COMPANY, SOUTH DAKOTA ARMY NATIONAL GUARD; MASTER SERGEANT ROXANNE KREBS, USAF, ELLSWORTH AIR FORCE BASE, SD; MARK KOOPMAN, SERVICEMEMBER, ELLSWORTH AIR FORCE BASE, SD (RECENT TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM ATTENDEE); AND KIMBERLY S. GEFFRE, SERVICEMEMBER, ELLSWORTH AIR FORCE BASE, SD (RECENT TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM ATTENDEE)

STATEMENT OF YVETTE S. LASSEGARD

Ms. YVETTE LASSEGARD. My testimony today reflects my personal views and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Army, the Department of Defense or the administration.

Thank you, Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin and other Subcommittee Members, for the opportunity to speak with you about my experiences of transition.

My name is Yvette Lassegard. My husband Ole is a sergeant for the 235th Military Police Company in the South Dakota National Guard. We have one son Aric, who is 6 years old.

Ole is a war veteran, having served twice in Operation Iraqi Freedom. His first deployment was a stateside mission at Fort Carson, Colorado, from February 2003 to January 2004. And most recently he served in Afghanistan from October 2006 to January 2008. I served as the lead volunteer for the Family Readiness Group for our unit during both deployments. This job was not always very easy, but it will be an experience I will carry with me for a lifetime.

During the first deployment, our soldiers were stateside, which, even though they were on home ground and it was not as stressful in the sense of the constant danger, it was no easier than their deployment overseas. They still were not home.

The transition back into our family and civilian lives went pretty smoothly on a personal level; however, even though the soldiers were considered veterans, I don't think they were always treated

as veterans by society. Oh, you were only stateside. That's not so bad. It was no different in most ways. They were still away from their families, civilian jobs, homes, and they were treated as deployed soldiers by the military. These soldiers did have many of the same sacrifices, even though most people did not understand that.

When our unit was activated to go to Afghanistan 2 years later, it was very different. The stress level was higher. They were in a war zone again, away from their families, jobs, home, but there was more support from the public. People were more accepting of this real deployment.

When they came home this time, they were treated like veterans, even though most of them were already veterans before they were in foreign soil. The transition this time has been a little different. We both have become stronger, a little bit more independent in our time apart. Different things are more important to us, the most important being each other and our son. This time I worry about things like post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and what other things they may experience, but I do know I feel more prepared to help with what he may need.

I think our State does a wonderful job of helping the families of the soldiers both during deployment and transition back into civilian life. They work with me and the rest of the Family Readiness Group to help keep the families across our State informed about what's going on with their soldiers during deployment as well as help them prepare for the returning soldiers.

The program that—the programs that are offered are outstanding, *Military OneSource*, troop and family counseling, the TRICARE benefits, and the benefits that the VA offers. I think that continuing education for both the families as well as the soldiers about these programs is very important, especially after deployment. I also think that trying to continue educating the public is important. When a National Guard unit is deployed, it affects everyone in the community. Not only do loved ones leave, but employees, employers, community volunteers or friends. These deployments bring back changed soldiers, whether it is a stateside mission or an overseas mission. If more people are aware of the effects deployment has as a whole, I think transition will be easier for everyone, especially the soldiers.

Thank you for your time.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Lassegard appears on p. 58.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you, Mrs. Lassegard.

Sergeant Lassegard, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF SERGEANT OLE D. LASSEGARD

Sergeant OLE LASSEGARD. My testimony is from personal views. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the Army, the Department of Defense or the administration.

Thank you, Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin and other Subcommittee Members, for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Ole Lassegard. I'm a sergeant in the 235th Military Police in the South Dakota National Guard. My wife Yvette and I have one son Aric. He is six.

I joined the Army National Guard in September of 1993 in order to pay for college. I'll have completed 15 years of service this coming September, and I will have 19½ years of service when my current enlistment is finished. I do plan to serve a minimum of 20 or more years.

During my 14 years of service, I've been on State duty for one fire in the Black Hills, the Jasper fire. I have helped with snow and power pole removal in Watertown, South Dakota, after a major blizzard, and did security detail at Camp Rapid after 9/11.

I've also served active duty. My first deployment was a stateside mission in Fort Carson, Colorado, from February of 2003 to January of 2004. During this deployment we conducted law-and-order missions while active-duty military police from Fort Carson went overseas.

My second deployment was an overseas mission in Afghanistan from October of 2006 to February of 2008. During this deployment, my unit conducted several missions that consisted of detainee ops, which is enemy prisoners of war; convoy security; law and order on some—excuse me, law and order in some of the smaller forward observation bases (FOBs); customs missions on some of the smaller outlying FOBs; and also village assessments. Being away from our family was not easy either time. During my time at Fort Carson, it was very frustrating to be so close to home but yet not at home.

My integration back into my family life and my civilian job was fairly smooth. While being deployed in Afghanistan, things were a lot different. I was halfway around the world from my family and home. Being in a war zone was stressful. This time when I came home, integration into my family life has been a little different. Yvette and I both became stronger. My son Aric has finished preschool, and he is almost done with kindergarten and has grown up so much while I was away. The most important part of our life now is our time together as a family. My transition back to my civilian job has gone good.

Our demobilization was at Fort Carson, Colorado. The out-processing, including briefings and debriefings, were long and drawn out. A lot of us felt that some of it could be completed at our home station here in Camp Rapid so that we could have more time with our families, being gone for more than a year.

Once I was home, I was able to get into the VA at Fort Meade for a dental appointment within a week; however, my post-deployment medical checkup before going back to work was not easy. I was told at first I should get an appointment within 30 days. This did not happen. I was told several times that they were full and that I would have to wait. When checking back in with them, I was getting several different stories, depending on whom I would talk to. Things were finally straightened out, and I was able to get the appointments I needed. It was very frustrating for me to have to deal with this. But in all, the VA has been a nice benefit in which I will continue to use as needed.

Thank you for your time.

[The prepared statement of Sergeant Lassegard appears on p. 58.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you, Sergeant Lassegard, for your testimony and sharing your experiences.

Ms. Krebs, you're recognized. Thank you for being here.

STATEMENT OF MASTER SERGEANT ROXANNE KREBS

Sergeant KREBS. Madam Chairwoman and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity of presenting my experience. I've been in the Air Force for 21 years and will retire at the end of this year. Since the Air Force has been my only career since the age of 18, I've never had the opportunity to gain the experience my civilian counterparts have with conducting a job search, preparing a resume or going on a job interview. Although my military career has allowed me to grow and develop into a leader who will be successful in any job I hold, the TAP workshop provided me with the fine-tuning I needed to effectively market myself to an eventual employer.

Over the past few years, I had numerous friends who went to TAP workshops here at Ellsworth Air Force Base and overseas, and every one couldn't say enough about the program. Although I've heard wonderful things about TAP over the last few years, I kept putting it off because something else would come up. Finally, in May of this year, I needed to, so I finally signed up for the 3-day June workshop at the base Airmen and Family Readiness Center.

This was the best decision of my career. Now I can't stop talking about the workshop to everyone I know who is separated or even thinking about retiring. During the TAP workshop, we not only learned how to write a resume, conduct ourselves during a job interview and what veterans programs and vet benefits are available, but we were also provided an opportunity to speak with real civilian employers.

The employers provided us opportunities to discuss with them what they were looking for in potential employees, how they view resumes, and their tips on conducting an interview. Once they finished briefing the whole group, they provided one-on-one opportunities to meet with the employers for further individualized feedback.

One final aspect was the volume of reference materials we were provided, from Web sites to magazines to books, all covering different aspects of the job search. One of the most priceless reference sites showed me how to convert military terminology into the equivalent civilian terminology, which allows my resume to be competitive.

Some people would argue why offer a career workshop, which costs time and money that the Department of Defense doesn't have when an individual could just go to a local college and pay for a similar class? I would argue that a local college can't design a class to meet the needs of our military culture. Only a program created for and run by both veterans and the military can meet the unique needs of transitioning military personnel.

I truly believe this is one of the most comprehensive and informative workshops I have ever taken throughout my life. I believe it will continue to help make a big difference in the lives of all military personnel.

Thank you again for allowing me an opportunity to present my experience with the Transition Assistance Program.

[The prepared statement of Sergeant Krebs appears on p. 59.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you very much.
Mr. Koopman, you are recognized.

STATEMENT OF MARK KOOPMAN

Mr. KOOPMAN. Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin, Ranking Member Boozman, Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the Transition Assistance Program, I would like to thank you for allowing me to present my information and give you three reasons why I support it.

After being out of the civilian workforce for 20-plus years, day one of TAP gave me a wealth of knowledge on getting back in the game. I no longer felt like an outsider looking in. Granted, I experienced information overload, but now felt that I had been given the competitive edge that I needed for my job search, with access to tools such as Web sites, job search, personal appraisal information and financial guidance.

Day two of TAP was even more valuable. It consisted of teaching me how to fill out a job application, master application; understanding the five different types of resumes, chronological, functional, combination, Federal and targeted; the importance to know how to complete cover letters; and finally, writing my own resume.

Day three was equally important as it consisted of the interview process. They taught us basic elements such as preparation, knowing the company, and know the job description—as basic as it sounds, we needed to be reminded of this; getting my 30-second commercial done, having to sell myself; finding out that there are so many different types of interviews, phone, board, one-on-one, e-mail, and that I always had to be ready to interview.

We discussed tough questions and how to handle them in interviews. I understood that I must be able to show the interviewer how I can contribute to this company by increasing their profits and satisfying their needs. Without the last half of the day to learn about personal veteran benefits, I know that I now have—that I would not have been able to protect my family and best use the benefits that are available to me.

In summary, I've explained why the three-day TAP classes benefited me and why I believe it is invaluable for all veterans. Please continue to support it as I do.

Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin, Ranking Member Boozman, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for taking the time to hear about my experience with the Transition Assistance Program. This concludes my testimony. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Koopman appears on p. 60.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you for your testimony, Mr. Koopman.

Ms. Geffre, thank you for being here. You are recognized.

STATEMENT OF KIMBERLY S. GEFFRE

Ms. GEFFRE. Thank you. And, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present information concerning my experience with the Ellsworth Transition Assistance Program and the reasons I support it.

I'm honored to have served my country for over 19 years. In May of 2007, I deployed to Iraq; shortly after my departure, my husband relocated also for a 1-year assignment in Central America. I've had the opportunity to benefit from many of the services provided at the Ellsworth Air Force Base, including pre-deployment and post-deployment services, and most recently the Transition Assistance Program.

I've been out of the civilian workforce for almost 20 years. I was intimidated by the transition back into civilian life. This course provided me with the insight into areas I should consider prior to separating. I was given information to assist me in job search, to access the tools such as Web sites, personal appraisal information, financial guidance, et cetera. I only wish I had—would have attended earlier and had more time to get prepared.

The training I received was very informative and presented in a logical format. Lessons included how to fill out job applications, understand different types of resumes, the importance of cover letters, and the instructors even provided assistance to me in drafting my own resume.

I learned the keys to job search, such as preparation, knowing the job description and the different types of interviews. But lastly, I learned about the veterans benefits and specifically programs that I didn't know were available to me. Every military member should attend this class.

There is one area of concern that I have in applying for civil service following military service. Although benefits and preferences are available for veterans after separation, the hiring system for the civil service may not allow you to take advantage of the veterans preference until you receive the final DD–214 Form. In the past, a copy of this document was provided to the servicemember during their last appointment. A copy of this document at the outprocessing is now mailed to the servicemember and can take more than a month from the date of separation. Many members who are retired have spent up to 60 days on terminal leave attempting to secure employment, in some cases remaining unemployed for as long as 3 months before they can take advantage of the VA preferences because they have not received the DD–214 Form.

Compounding this problem is the complicated hiring system. In my current position, I have worked with this hiring process to hire a civilian employee. It took months. On USAJOBS.com, positions are listed that are not truly open. Two other civilian positions were listed within my own office that we were not hiring for, and there were positions open for months that remained unfilled because someone in the reviewing process determined the applicant was unqualified. This process was very difficult for the unit waiting for the position to be filled and frustrating for the applicants who needed employment and had applied, but had not received feedback on why they were found not to be qualified. This hiring system needs significant work.

Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin, Ranking Member Boozman and Members of the Subcommittee, I support your efforts to review and improve the Transition Assistance Programs offered throughout

our Nation, and hope that the information provided here today is helpful to you.

This concludes my testimony. I'll be glad to answer any questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Geffre appears on p. 60.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you, Ms. Geffre.

Thank you, to all of you, for your testimony.

If I could just start with a couple of questions. Let's start with you, Ms. Lassegard. While your husband was deployed, either stateside or to Afghanistan, did the Department of Defense or the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) ever contact you in any way?

Ms. YVETTE LASSEGARD. No.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Do you think it would have been helpful to have heard from one or both of those agencies with regard to benefits, or just soliciting from you information, or the needs of certain services to make things easier?

Ms. YVETTE LASSEGARD. I'm not sure. But like I said, our Families Assistance Center, they do what they can to train—you know, to train the family and soldiers coming home to provide as much information as they can, so that's what information we did get.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Looking back, at both of those deployments, what information that you didn't have at the time that you now have, would have been critical for you to know? Can you think of anything off the top of your head?

Ms. YVETTE LASSEGARD. No, I can't.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Is that something you could submit in writing? I know it's hard to think back to both of those deployments, and the information you may not have had at the time.

It goes a little bit to the question that I asked the three servicemembers from the Air Force Base. Each one of you said, in your testimony, that during that last day, your last half day, you learned of veterans benefits that you didn't realize you were entitled to in the past, or didn't have the full scope of information. The same would be true of our members of the Guard and Reserve, particularly those who—when they separate from service after deployment.

But in light of the testimony from the three of you, would you recommend that the Transition Assistance Program be made mandatory? Or do you think that there are trade-offs in making it mandatory, where perhaps people wouldn't get as much out of it if it were mandatory versus the word of mouth? Ms. Krebs, you described those who raved about how beneficial the program was.

Could each of you respond about whether or not you think it would be good to make it mandatory?

Sergeant KREBS. I think it would be good to make it mandatory. I think the problem comes in is that it is a three-day class, and then there's another half-day class with the disabled veteran part. And it's deployment rates. It's really hard, I think, and I don't know where you would target it.

Because there's a lot of—so much information given, it's really recommended that you take it almost a year, a year and a half before you separate, and then 4 or 6 months before you separate.

I think it's good. I just—ultimately, I think it should be mandatory. I just don't know how you work it into——

Mr. KOOPMAN. I also vote for making it mandatory. I think we could implement it even as not a 3½-day class, but lengthen it to 5-or-more-day class with all the information that we're bombarded with. Five is probably realistic, but we could make it like the Noncommissioned Officer Academy. Of course, it's not a 6-week program, but a 1- or 2-week program where maybe at the 6- or 9-month point, it's just part of the transitioning out program.

It's—I'm very much in favor of it.

Ms. GEFFRE. I also feel it should be mandatory. In fact, I think it should be longer, and they also have up to 90 days of terminal leave. And so it's very difficult for them to decide in a few months how they're going to proceed from this point.

Especially with the GI Bill changes, we don't know how those benefits are going to play out. So it is helpful, and I think we should work it in somewhere within the Academy or within our service time. It is difficult to find the time, but time should be made for those.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Yes, Sergeant Krebs.

Sergeant KREBS. Just one more thing. There was one other thing I'd like to see maybe added. When you leave the military, especially for retirees, there's a lot of things that are specific to the military, such as the TRICARE, survivor benefit plan and a lot of those, just the retirement pay. A lot of those would be nice to see added, or just a specific class held. Or make it mandatory for military people, instead of having to go to 20 different offices, go to one location.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Be more efficient perhaps.

Ms. Krebs, you had said something about the helpful information of converting military terminology to civilian terminology. I've heard this from other witnesses, either in DC or in my district.

Are you familiar with anyone who didn't take advantage of the TAP program that really struggled as it related to that terminology conversion? Now that this is on a Web site, is that more easily accessible for servicemembers as an assistance tool in preparing for finding employment in the civilian sector?

Sergeant KREBS. I don't know specifically of anybody who hasn't taken the program. Like I said, Ellsworth has a great one. I did a year over in Korea, and they had a great one there. Pretty much word gets around, and you get into the program. Pretty much you figure it out, and the light goes on.

Military—I talk about the military culture, and we do have terminology that if you don't know, it just doesn't translate easily. So the Web site is a great thing. But I don't know of anybody specifically, unless you guys do, that maybe struggles.

Mr. KOOPMAN. We had one member in our class last week who took out all the military acronyms and then had a civilian friend proof it. And that civilian friend found two acronyms that he had swore he had everything out of there, so it's another world.

Ms. GEFFRE. My husband, coming back from Central America, the TAPS program is not available at the base where he was at. And without this course, I know he would struggle, I would struggle trying to retire without having the knowledge gained in TAPS.

It's invaluable, at least to have the ideas out there and available. I believe it should be available, because most of these people who are struggling when they separate don't realize how difficult it is to find a job in the civilian sector.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. That is very helpful.

I have one more question for Mr. Lassegard. But one comment, too. Mr. Koopman, you said TAP should be longer because you're bombarded with all this information. I think that's how all the members of the National Guard feel when they're in their demobilization site, right?

We're going to have General Doohen testify about some steps that will be taken to try to follow up on some of this information at times where it's versus TAP, which you're sort of looking at retiring, perhaps, or looking at leaving, now we're looking at a compressed timeframe after a deployment.

I think, Ms. Geffre, you had mentioned pre-deployment and post-deployment in TAP. If you could comment. You had already specifically mentioned it would be nice if you could have more demobilization time at Camp Rapid than at Fort Carson.

Do you think if you had more demobilization time at Camp Rapid, that it would make it easier for processing some information that they're giving you about benefits and programs, and you had family there to help participate, versus being at Fort Carson and solely focused on getting home?

Sergeant OLE LASSEGARD. I personally believe that the big problem was, okay, once we were stateside, even if you were stateside, we were just about home. It was real hard to sit and concentrate on some of the briefings that they were giving us.

I feel that if we were at home being able to see our families, that it would have been easier to concentrate and maybe to integrate some of the briefings they were giving us with the family, because there's a lot of that at that point in time I can honestly tell you I wasn't concentrating on. And with the spouse there or other family member, they might have caught something that we wouldn't and said, hey, this is what they said. This is what you need to do.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you.

Mr. Boozman.

Mr. BOOZMAN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think that's one of the biggest problems of advice. Guys, members that are coming home, there are certain things that just have to be done to make sure that the proper information is gathered and given to you. And it's really difficult.

I've had the opportunity to go to the coming home ceremonies, and things were literally—people are there that maybe haven't seen a child that was born while they were overseas or someplace else. So it's very, very difficult. And that's something that I think we're doing a better job of it now than ever, but it's just hard.

So again, that's something that we're going to work on, and we appreciate your testimony.

First of all, I appreciate all of your armed service. My dad did 20 years in the Air Force and retired as a master sergeant. He was as good as he could be, and yet I learned very quickly that if he ever told me to do something, I needed to get it done. But nobody—

he didn't attend the TAP program. That was never taken out in his demobilization, whatever.

What good did you all—you went through the TAP program. What do you all do now? Where are you employed?

Sergeant KREBS. Actually, I'm still in the military. I am not due to get out for another 2 months.

Mr. BOOZMAN. What do you want to do?

Sergeant KREBS. Actually, I really like what you did with the GI Bill. I'm actually going back to college full time to get my teaching certification. So I'm really looking forward to what you did.

Mr. KOOPMAN. I'm seeking a management position in accounting and finance. So if there's anyone out there hiring.

Ms. GEFFRE. I have a year left. Right now I'm a paralegal, and I'm going back to being a mom for a while. My kids are still at school age, and I want to enjoy that while they still want me around, and hopefully get into a job that is more flexible as a parent.

Mr. BOOZMAN. I think your argument about why the DoD versus community college or some other, whatever, was very valid. These things, they're so much easier, you know, when you're listening. I know a lot of the stuff that you were hearing that you probably hadn't heard since you were recruited, you just don't hear that stuff anymore. And really, it's—some people don't really realize these are the benefits that you have and you're going to lose.

I'm also in agreement with Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin, and I think it needs to be mandatory. I think it needs to be in some way encouraged to take your extra career, because in a lot of ways, you know, you're transitioning to wanting to teach and the other professions, the accounting stuff or whatever. But it would be good if you were taking it 5 years before you got out so that you can start what you're doing, ancillary education, and pushing in that direction.

But it's hard. We're in situations that are difficult. We are doing a better job than we were doing before. But one of the concerns in the IG report that I talked about was again the fact that in some cases, and this probably is an example, and Reserve with the regular military as far as the number of people taking it, but this is something that I think we really need to continue to get those numbers up as best we can.

So thank you very much for your testimony. It's very helpful, and I'm glad that you had a good experience, it sounds like, going through the program. I think the important thing is that hopefully after you got done with it, that you had the ability to have sites to go to in the future and people to contact, you know, so that as you ran into a snag, you know, you'll be able to continue to get the information. So thanks again very much.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. I want one or two quick follow-up questions for the Lassegards. Yvette, you said you were lead volunteer for the Family Readiness Group, and you also said to stress the importance of continued education about the programs and benefits, especially after deployment.

Does the Family Readiness Group stay pretty cohesive after deployment? Are you aware of anyone who sought assistance from any of the agencies for that type of continued education and infor-

mation you utilized in the Family Readiness Group as a vehicle to deliver information?

Ms. YVETTE LASSEGARD. I'm not aware of any, no, at this point.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Is that something that you think would be helpful, or would it be too difficult to keep it active, the Family Readiness Group versus those who don't separate from service at the 40-day, 45-day, during some of the training for National Guard members?

Ms. YVETTE LASSEGARD. You know, we always have the information for them, or we can always direct them to where they need to go to get the information. So I don't know how it—I guess it will work.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Then on the healthcare issue, Sergeant Lassegard, you had mentioned there was sort of some frustration that you understand you felt, as it related to some initial medical appointments.

Sergeant OLE LASSEGARD. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Do you have any idea? It sounds like you were talking to a number of different people telling you a number of different things about why there was a delay. Were you ever given a justification or rationale that made sense to you as to why it was delayed? It sounds like you've worked through that now, but we need some information, we're charged as a full Committee, not just as a Subcommittee. But as a full Committee, we work closely with the VA to make sure we address issues that they need and resources to make sure that we don't have long waiting times, and especially when we focus on the OEF veterans receiving their care from the VA for a period of time.

Sergeant OLE LASSEGARD. When I first got in contact with the VA, it was in regards to the DD–214. I forget the name of the—the lady I talked to, but it would have been in the—anyways, basically what it boils down to is that she told me that within 30 days I should be getting an appointment for the post-deployment checkup.

And I called again to set up an appointment, and the individual that I talked to that made the appointments, scheduled the appointments, had told me the doctor that I see or I need to see is full, and he doesn't have any appointments open. And basically at that point in time it was 2, 2½ months.

And I told her, I'm an OEF veteran, and I was instructed that I should be able to get in and see you within 30 days, and she wouldn't work with me. After going back and talking to a couple other people, I was eventually helped to get it straightened out, and they got me in within—basically within the 30 days, and I was able to be seen.

But it just seemed that someone wasn't getting the proper information within the VA at Fort Meade, and it—it kind of grated on my nerves, I guess you would say. It was real disappointing in that regard.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. I appreciate you sharing that with us, because one of the things that we've focused on over the last couple years is the seamless transition, whether that's a seamless transition from being in the military as a career, retiring and

transitioning out. Or it's a seamless transition of being deployed and post-deployment and the readjustment period with families.

We appreciate you sharing that experience, and we appreciate all of your testimony today. Thank you. We're grateful for your service to the country.

Mr. Boozman may have other follow-up comment or questions as well.

I would just like to say I wish all of you the best of luck as you transition into the civilian sector, and we thank you for your additional commitment into the National Guard, and thank you very much.

Mr. Boozman?

Mr. BOOZMAN. Yes, Miss Geffre. You mentioned the problem with the disabled?

Ms. GEFFRE. Yes, sir.

Mr. BOOZMAN. And Mike was telling me that there's a special hiring authority. Were you aware of it?

Ms. GEFFRE. I am also aware of that, but you have to apply—if you don't go to a Transitioning Assistance Program like the one we went to, you won't know about those benefits to enable those servicemembers to take advantage of those, even if it's a service-connected disability. They should know about those things as it gets closer.

At the Academy, it could also be used as a recruitment tool. In some cases I understood that I would probably delay my retirement, because now I knew I could actually plan through these things. By waiting to attend, I had limited myself to that last year, so information about the disabled veterans preference is an informational tool that's not always known to all of us and TAP is time to learn about these things, informational tools.

Mr. BOOZMAN. And then even in the last year.

Ms. GEFFRE. Yes, sir.

Mr. BOOZMAN. How long—has that been going on for a long time?

Ms. GEFFRE. That's a fairly new process. The DD–214 forms were the last forms needed in order to apply and they are given to us in outprocessing at the base. That has been regionalized to Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC) back in Randolph Air Force Base (AFB), TX. It's just one of those functions that they've taken back.

My understanding is it will take 4 to 6 weeks. Unfortunately, we have no experience with this yet because the program hasn't been running that long. One of the Airmen that is in my office is waiting for her paperwork to actually start this process since she'll be starting leave next month. It could take some time to get that form in order to enable her to get veterans benefits.

Mr. BOOZMAN. We need to see what's going on, the GI Bill benefits, whatever benefits are out there.

So, again, thank you very much for your time. Thank you for being here. I appreciate your testimony.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you.

We'll invite our second panel up.

Joining us on the second panel is Major General Steve Doohen, Adjutant General of the South Dakota National Guard, who is accompanied by Captain Martin Yost, Program Manager of Family Support; and Miss Cynthia Porter, Advisor, of South Dakota Tran-

sition Assistance. Also joining us on this panel is Ms. Susan Machetta, Community Readiness Consultant at Ellsworth Air Force Base.

We were going to take this off. Now we're going to tack it up. So we apologize for the distraction. If the tacks don't work, we're just going to take it off.

[Reference to a Banner.]

We look forward to all of you being here.

Major Doohen, we'll go ahead and begin with you. You're recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENTS OF MAJOR GENERAL STEVEN R. DOOHEN, ADJUTANT GENERAL, SOUTH DAKOTA NATIONAL GUARD, AND SECRETARY, SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS; ACCOMPANIED BY CAPTAIN MARTIN YOST, PROGRAM MANAGER, FAMILY READINESS, SOUTH DAKOTA NATIONAL GUARD; AND CYNTHIA PORTER, TRANSITION ASSISTANCE ADVISOR, SOUTH DAKOTA NATIONAL GUARD, AND CONTRACTOR, ARROWPOINT CORPORATION; AND SUSAN MACHETTA, COMMUNITY READINESS CONSULTANT, TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM COORDINATOR, ELLSWORTH AIR FORCE BASE, SD, TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

STATEMENT OF MAJOR GENERAL STEVEN R. DOOHEN

General DOOHEN. Good morning, Madam Chairwoman, other Members. It is a real honor and pleasure to be here this morning with you. I just want to take this opportunity to thank each and every one of you for what you have done for the veterans in the State and in the Nation.

I'm fairly new to this position, but coming into this job and taking a look at the resources that you have given to our veterans, my hat's off to you. On behalf of the members of the South Dakota Army National Guard, I thank you for all the work that you have done.

I would just like to also mention this morning that my comments are my own, and I'm not representing the DoD or anything else. They're just my own comments.

From my perspective, my job is, as the Adjutant General for the National Guard of South Dakota, and also I'm the Secretary for the Military and Veterans Affairs, and I must say I'm very impressed with the reintegration program that the National Guard has in the State with Captain Martin Yost and Cynthia Porter and the Family Support Program.

I must say that Minnesota gets all the recognition for having a great program, but I seem to think that South Dakota is very lucky to have such a great program. And I said that when I was first starting out that Minnesota benchmarked part of the program from South Dakota, so maybe we can get some recognition. But it's an eight-day program, and I think that really it covers all the areas. They've fine-tuned it over the years.

I'm also a Secretary for the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, and I must say the active director and his staff, I feel, are really doing an outstanding job trying to reach out to different vet-

erans in the States. And they're going to be hosting another mental health summit in Pierre here coming up this fall, and I feel that they have been very beneficial.

One of the things that I've also been very impressed with is the cooperation between the different agencies in South Dakota, not only in the National Guard and on stateside, the VA and Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR), I really have found in the short time of my job is that there's really good cooperation when we call all these summits or conferences, that people are working well together.

Just one thing that I would like to mention. One of my concerns coming into this job, and it hit me a month or two after I got into this job, is the issue with PTSD. And it's an issue that if you look into it, it's really probably more serious than I really have thought. And it's a tough—I think the resources are there, from what I've seen—is that in a lot of these guys on leadership is trying to take the stigma away from soldiers and airmen asking for help. And so that's one area that I feel responsibility in and was trying to reach out, taking that stigma away.

Also, it's trying to educate the community employers and family members what PTSD is all about, and in a lot of instances where I've seen instances where family members and possibly employers see the symptoms in soldiers and airmen, and maybe encourage them to get help. So another emphasis on—I think we're going to need to do is educating people about PTSD and maybe some of the symptoms, and then also encouraging them to maybe encourage their military member to get help.

One of the things that I've run across is that they have a great program now in Hot Springs VA just specifically for PTSD, and they do an outstanding job down there in addressing this. It's kind of a small program, but it's known around the State that they have a good program.

And just in conclusion, I flew airplanes for 35 years in my life. I can tell you taking over this job, it has really made me very appreciative of what our military servicemembers, the sacrifices that they go through. Another thing that's really made an impression on me is that we are in the war, and the military men, women, all the sacrifices that they make and they're continued to be asked to make. And we're so fortunate to have the young people—and sometimes the Guard gets the old people like me—to have the people we do have in the military.

Thank you for your time.

[The prepared statement of General Doohen appears on p. 61.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you, General Doohen, for your leadership and testimony today.

Ms. Machetta, you are now recognized.

STATEMENT OF SUSAN MACHETTA

Ms. MACHETTA. Thank you, Chairman, and all of you here today. Thank you so much for giving us the opportunity to speak to you. As the transition coordinator, I've found that deciding to leave the service, whether through retirement or separation, is an incredibly personal decision, and people really need to look at that. And it's essential that they have 2 to 3 years to make those proper deci-

sions, whether it's financially, emotionally, in job preparation, what am I going to do next.

All of that is so critical for them to do what they need to do in that program. They can't wait for the last 2 or 3 weeks or a month. And so we've really made a strong encouragement that people come much in advance of the 3-year timeframe. It's actually a recruiting tool now in helping people stay and make better choices for themselves. If all you worried about is where you worked, it wouldn't be a problem, but there's so much more involved.

We also found that so many times you can't make that decision in a vacuum. If your spouse isn't there to assist you or to capture all that data in the three and one-half-day class that we have, they're not going to get the best out of it either. And so we're really pushing for spouses to come.

We've increased membership and attendance every single session since I started with this program over 2 years ago. We have many more spouses coming, and we've tried to increase the flexibility of the program so that now you can attend 3 years in advance. You can get assistance with resumes while you're deployed to Iraq. We do a lot of that on line or through e-mails.

We've built a Web site to pull together the most critical Web sites for job preparation, and we put them on a central Web site so they don't have to go to 1,000 different places. They can capture it all in one location. They can do that from no matter what service they're in while deployed.

We'll have folks from Army, Navy, calling back saying, hey, can we get involved? Can we do this? And then we'll edit with them, so that really helps them make a decision a lot faster.

A few years ago we had an individual from out in Oregon who was going to retire and had wanted to be a pilot out in Rapid City. So he heard of the program, so he came out and attended. On his way back to duty, he had a heart attack and luckily survived. But as a pilot, it totally changed what he might be wanting to do with his future.

The most wonderful thing was that he brought his wife with him, and so the wife was here in Rapid City. And they were able to easily get into all of the resources that they might need and make a decision whether to do a standard retirement or go to a disability retirement. And without her attending, that wouldn't have been possible.

To make it flexible, because, again, you can't have people going six times and getting that much out of a duty day forever and ever, we do encourage them to attend the full three and one-half-day program. And then we give them just-in-time training; whether it's personally needed, or if they just want to come for an hour, they can get that refresher feedback that they need, and that's been helpful.

So I really appreciate Congress' help. You've given us now four additional classes every year at Ellsworth that we wouldn't have had without that help. The VA, all of the agencies in the local area, the U.S. Department of Labor (DoL), are tremendously beneficial, and that's been a good team effort. And we couldn't do it without all of them, so I dearly thank you for that.

We did do some changes. We found some statistics were not being kept, or they were being taken, but not monitored. And the other positive benefit of doing this has been we've been able to get a great deal more help out to the folks in the area of finances. They start 3 years early now, and they really know what they need to have saved if they want to go into their own business. We have different resources to help them, if that's what they require, with finding those resources so that they can actually find their dream job and offer something to the community in the future. So that's been really helpful to have 3 months to help them get that—3 years to 3 months to help them get into that program.

Thank you very much for your time.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Machetta appears on p. 64.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you for your time.

Mr. Boozman, do you have any questions for them?

Mr. BOOZMAN. Ms. Machetta, what is the average time for people that attend class before they're discharged?

Ms. MACHETTA. It would be difficult to say. I know that we've had a huge increase. I still got some that are coming in 2 weeks before they get out. And it's helpful in some ways, but I have most folks coming in with a year and a half to 3 years left, and it's really helped us change the focus on the future of learning.

Mr. BOOZMAN. So is it, I guess—again, I'm a guy that would like to see people when they're trying to make a decision to stay or get out, to attend this type of program, because as you were talking, a lot of these people aren't aware of some event that has begun in the military. Eventually, seeing a seminar where you tell them about some of the things that they're getting in the military life that they're not going to be—that they're going to have to pay for on the outside.

So is there a stigma attached with going through the TAP program if you stay in?

Ms. MACHETTA. Not any longer. It's actually turning into a tool. At our decision-time debriefing where people are looking at getting out after their first term, they're encouraged to come and take a look at TAP. Many of the students attending the full transition program have found that there are benefits that affect the wives they didn't know about.

They've found that by taking—staying in, they can get their master's or doctorate paid for, and then use that educational benefit with the family member now with the changes, or to get them into that dream area. For one gentleman it added an additional $11,000 to his GI Bill by staying in one more term.

Mr. BOOZMAN. See, I think that's great. So that would be a reason to encourage them to get in earlier in the career.

Ms. MACHETTA. We did have a visit recently, probably 6 months ago, with our first entrance of commanders, explained what they were trying to do with transition. And they've been very, very helpful now in encouraging people to come earlier, and that helps to have leadership pushing.

Mr. BOOZMAN. So if you're exposed to that stuff while you're so far down the line, then it's not as difficult to back up. Perfect.

General, I appreciate your testimony, the really detailed description. I think you all are doing a great job.

Have you been able to put in place—you mentioned PTSD, your concern about that, your concern about suicide and stuff. And have you been able to collect data that basically shows effectiveness of some of the things that you're doing?

General DOOHEN. I'll turn this over to Martin, but the one thing that I will say that I heard the other day, that initially there was some information coming out that the military was having a higher rate of suicide and—but then I've just heard some figures the other day, and I can't confirm them.

But actually, if you look at the age groups and the number of suicides, the military actually has a lower percentage of suicides than the civilian population. That's the only different thing that I have.

On the PTSD, it's really hard—I've heard the word from 20 to 40 percent of the members coming back have some form of PTSD, and some different opinion levels on it.

But as far as our State, Martin, do you have any figures?

Captain YOST. Thank you, General.

Ms. Herseth Sandlin and General, we really don't have the figures on that, but what we see is recognizing of PTSD is coming later; rather than at 30, 60, 90 days, sometimes it takes up to a year to identify PTSD.

And General Doohen's leadership in that has been to somehow have a counselor embedded with the units upon their return so when they are back at their normal drills on weekends, there's someone there that if a commander or first sergeant or first line leader sees something, someone's there maybe that they could directly meet with that individual to prevent and treat conditions.

We currently don't have that program right now. The Yellow Ribbon Program that Congress has passed is working with that right now, but I don't see us having the trained individuals there so that we can give that servicemember the immediate response that may be needed at that point in time.

Mr. BOOZMAN. I think that's—I think it is helpful as you go forward, but it looks like you're doing a very, very good job. What we're trying to do, put best practices that work throughout the country, so having your views, sometimes that is helpful. I really like servicemembers opinions on things like that. Those things are very valuable. And if you just start beating that into their head from the very start—but again, we appreciate your testimony. Thank you very much.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. General Doohen, in fact, you or Captain Yost or Ms. Porter, who is accompanying you today, can answer the questions and explain to the Subcommittee how the reintegration programs recently revised and under eight phases. If you could explain how it was more recently revised, then also talk to us about how long it takes to complete all the phases of the program, and how many members have finished the program versus those who may start the reintegration program.

Captain YOST. Ms. Sandlin, with the program just starting, we just received funds from Congress starting in 2008, late 2008, so we're finally getting support funding right now. And so some of the units are backtracked a little bit and will be going forward with the new units coming back.

Right now we have a first drill back, which happens within 90 days after the return of deployment. And at that program—that's probably our seventh phase. And I just want to catch you up a little bit on what's happening.

Now, with the Yellow Ribbon Program funding, we will start out a year out from when the unit gets the alert. Then we will have programs up until the deployment. And then during deployment there will also be different levels of help that will go on. And then once the soldier returns back again, then there are several phases that we will address as far as reintegrating. There's a 30-, 60-, and 90-day program that will take effect. These programs will involve everything from job transition. We also do individual counseling. We have Department of Veterans Affairs there, everybody—all the providers are there to give the—the servicemembers and their families—and I think that's the biggest key, that the funding comes down to help pay, because of our geographical size of our State, to help get the families together with the servicemember.

As the other panel had stated, the wife needs to be there or the parent, because we sometimes forget our single soldiers. They have nobody to go to. They sometimes are the ones nudging the servicemember saying, hey, that's you, or you need to get this. And that's been very successful. So with the money that Congress has given us, this program will be a success.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. But you've had it in place. So, you're saying with the additional funding, you're going to start earlier than what you've been doing over the last few years as it relates to the Family Readiness Group. Then after deployment, the 30, 60, 90, this is just going to enhance enough time and services you're able to provide to members and their families, correct?

Captain YOST. That's correct. South Dakota was one of the first States to start a family weekend within 30 days prior to deployment; that we brought all the families in, and we gave them the TRICARE classes so that they would be able to understand that medical process. We also had counselors come in that did small groups with the youth and also with the adults in transitioning with that separation, some of the key points on communicating and working with the kids so they understand Dad's going or Mom's going, and this is how you work with the people who are at home.

We also had worked with all the different service organizations, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the Legions. They worked well with us, giving the support to the families while they were there.

The last thing we talked about, we talked about Red Cross messages and to prepare the families so that there aren't as many questions with the Transition System Advisor, Ms. Porter, so there aren't a lot of questions while a servicemember is deployed, so he or she can continue the mission without worrying about their families, that they are going to be taken care of.

Again, now that the money has come down we'll enhance that program with additional moneys and additional programs prior to deployment, the company and battery commanders, first sergeants, and the commands along with families together to make great plans for their services.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Ms. Porter, do you think that there's one common problem that stands out either for families during deployment or for servicemembers when they return? Is it PTSD? Is it a general readjustment period, employment issues? Is it some of the members who are small business owners that are causing problems during the deployment after? Any one thing that stands out, or a set of things that you think Congress can be of additional assistance, furthering the funding that we have allocated for the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program?

Ms. PORTER. Ma'am, I had experience being that spouse left in the rear with the small children; and also being at the side of a deployed spouse twice, as Mrs. Lassegard. So I have a very interesting perspective because of my new job post, my husband's deployment.

And I think that that deployment time period enhanced my emotional intelligence, if you will, and it—I wanted to be the lead strength in our marriage. And I think that as my husband came home and we transitioned as a family, it seems to be that we have a lot of resources, and we are an excellent team in South Dakota.

The State, the VA, the National Guard, Ellsworth, we've worked together as a team that I haven't seen in my short professional life in years. It's a wonderful experience to work and serve after having three deployments myself, and I don't know how to solve this problem.

I do know that I had the honor of being asked to participate in a public service announcement that was by General Doohen, and my husband and I also had the opportunity to lend our faces to create awareness faces of vet advance and the PTSD awareness.

Now, PTSD is left to be diagnosed by the professionals, and I think that we need to give people the opportunity to grow as individuals so that they know how to best use the resources. And all of the resources in the world, if they're not receptive to them, cannot be effectively used. So it's very hard to say there's this one thing that you can fund, because how can you fund opening someone's mind to making them available to use all the avenues of approach for personal advancement available to them?

So I guess unless you want to really pay for therapy, maybe, it would be hard to say that there's this one thing. But I do know that the Committee, through TRICARE, that is, to go to therapy as a family, turned us around and put us very fast on the right track. And I would encourage every family I see, if they're struggling, personally I encourage them to use that opportunity. And it's okay to go to therapy. And we say that all the time, because you just don't know what—you don't know what you don't know. How do you know?

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Did you have something you wanted to add?

Captain YOST. Yes. As a caveat to that, being in the work with General Doohen, we are both Air and Army. We also have the Army Reserves in the State of South Dakota. Our Family Assistance Center and our family program assists any servicemember, whether it's Navy or full-time or active duty, whatever it is. We will take the calls, and we will give them service.

But I see a point where the Army has really taken a forward step and done an outstanding job in obtaining the funding, and the Air Force is also on board now. But I think we're forgetting about our Army Reserves. They're small. They're a smaller unit. They don't have probably the budget, and we've been working greatly with those groups in eastern South Dakota and giving them some of the briefs that we have.

We also let them know that we will support them, that we bring them on board with us so that they will be part of our programs, too. But I think a funding issue would be to fund those other sides.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. I appreciate that, Captain Yost. This is one of the things that Mr. Boozman and I heard in Indiana. The Reserve component, especially when it's not the full component of it, the individuals from different units in a smaller detachment going and mobilizing with others. They are falling through the cracks, the individual reservists, upon deployment in terms of access of information, in terms of their employment rights and their other issues.

I appreciate what you are saying. I appreciate what the South Dakota National Guard and what your leadership has done to fill the gap that I think has existed for a number of years where the Department of Defense was really only communicating about these benefits of readjustment to their active-duty military and left it to all of you to make this up as we went along.

You've done an outstanding job being proactive. Your outreach has been tremendous, and we appreciate it here in South Dakota. You're also reaching out to the Reserve components. That's something that we're looking into further to see what else we can do to assist those efforts on a State level.

One last question, and then I'll turn it back to Mr. Boozman, for Ms. Machetta. You had talked about the individual who had come here and heard about how good the TAP program was at Ellsworth, and then he suffered the heart attack after the spouse had attended TAP.

I failed to ask the three individuals on the prior panel if their spouse attended TAP with them. Is that something that you encourage or recommend? Are you stretched for resources and the spouses can't attend on their own, they have to come with the servicemember? Also, is it a recent development where TAP has integrated the opportunities for servicemembers to meet with civilian employers that are coming in; is that something that has happened in the past, but not to the degree you're integrating it now?

Ms. MACHETTA. Okay. Thank you.

As spouses, by regulation, they've always been told they can come. If they don't know, they don't attend. So we actively sought them through commander calls and weed them out. And we talk to them about specific benefits such as the Workforce Investment Act and Dislocated Spouse Program so that as we get them there, they see that there's something for them, and they're also listening better for the member. So that's really been helpful.

In fact, Mark Koopman's wife was in attendance at the class, and Kim Geffre's husband will be attending in the near future. So as active-duty couples, they'll attend separately sometimes. That's been really helpful.

When I took the program over 2 years ago, we offered in the class a 1-hour block where professionals could come in and do interviewing and help the folks with practice interviews. But what I found was that most people were terrified of doing an interview because they didn't have the resume done, and they didn't know what kind of job they were looking for. It was really not a positive experience. And so now at the beginning of TAP, we make available to them hundreds of jobs that are open, actual positions, descriptions they can write the job for.

And then after TAP, during lunch hours and about 5 hours on Friday, we'll invite many, many different companies, some from as far away as Texas, to come up and actually do interviews, review resumes and give them help. Some of the local businesses; some are from all over the country. And so they have that opportunity to visit privately with hiring professionals and make sure they're ready. And that's—that's just so wonderful, the businesses that work with us and come up every 2 to 3 months. And they all take turns.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Mr. Boozman, any further questions for the panel?

Mr. BOOZMAN. No. Thanks, Madam Chair.

Again, I thank all of you for your service and your great job.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you for your work with the servicemembers, our Nation's veterans, your support on transition assistance, and the efforts that you've put up. Thank you very much.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Joining us on this third panel is Mr. Shane Olivier, Education Program Specialist. He's accompanied by Mr. George Summerside, Acting Director of the South Dakota Division of Veterans Affairs. Also joining us on the third panel is Mr. Todd Kolden, Veteran Services State Coordinator for the South Dakota Department of Labor.

We appreciate your attendance and testimony this morning.

Mr. Olivier, we'll begin with you. Again, just a reminder to this and the remaining panels, your written testimony will be included in the printed record. So we'll recognize Mr. Olivier for 5 minutes.

STATEMENTS OF SHANE A. OLIVIER, VETERANS EDUCATION PROGRAM SPECIALIST, SOUTH DAKOTA STATE APPROVING AGENCY; ACCOMPANIED BY GEORGE SUMMERSIDE, ACTING DIRECTOR, SOUTH DAKOTA DIVISION OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; AND TODD KOLDEN, ADMINISTRATOR, SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

STATEMENT OF SHANE A. OLIVIER

Mr. OLIVIER. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman, Ranking Member Boozman and Members of the Subcommittee. We're pleased to appear before you today and provide some comments on the post-9/11 GI Bill and kind of give you an idea of what the South Dakota State Approving Agency has been up to.

We're very pleased with the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, you know, it's a good deal for the Total Force GI Bill, for people—that it's really providing opportunities and benefits for people that are wanting to use it for college degrees.

The Chapter 33, the way it's written right now, veterans cannot use their benefits at a non-college degree educational institution. Some examples of these institutions are business and trade schools, voc tech's, cosmetology or barber schools. In addition, like flight training institutions and correspondence schools are also not included. The Chapter 33 veterans cannot use their benefits in crime or on-the-job training programs. In some of these examples are carpenters, electricians, automotive technician, truck drivers, et cetera.

Since the original GI Bill, it's an important component for all the educational benefits. We get a lot of the approval of job training programs. We do a lot of apprenticeship and job training. And some of the VA benefits that these kids use or people use, they learn better from on-the-job training or apprenticeship skills, and we do a lot of those approvals. We also recommend reconsideration of other GI Bill improvement measures that were introduced into the 110th Congress, but they haven't been fully acted upon. And another aspect of our agency's mission is customer service. We partner with all of the other agencies, kind of like the previous panel discussed. We work together.

Our job is really to be the front-line responder for the vet and to help them get—if they contact our office, and it's not regarding an educational issue, we will direct them to the right direction.

And customer service is something that George really preaches and we all believe in. And we're serving the people that have served our country, so we do our best to get them an answer or direct them to where they need to go to get their answer.

When the new GI Bill came out, we didn't have much information on them, but we got a lot of questions on it. So George got right on it, and we went to work immediately trying to find some information that we could get out to our vets we were getting all the questions from. We got a fact sheet from the VA that was electronically. We made sure we could get that out. It's kind of a short—just a short fact sheet on the new GI Bill. And we got that out to our veterans services workers and provided a mailing electronically as well and got that out very rapidly. About—I think it was 18 days after we got—the bill was signed, we got that fact sheet out.

We do a pretty extensive welcome home brochure, and I know, speaking as a veteran myself, that's very helpful. But kind of like the first panel said, Sergeant Lassegard, you get inundated with a lot of information. It's good to have these manuals as well as these brochures that George was instrumental in putting together. It has a ton of info, and you can take it home and read it. It's pretty important.

But to echo what the first panel member said, you want to get home and see your families. Benefits aren't really on your mind when you're coming back from a year and a half, wherever. But we do our best to get the information out to these people.

We also—we printed 1,000 fact sheets on the new GI Bill, and we provided electronic copy out to the Veterans Service Network, also to our school certifying officials, and to our county and Tribal Service officers.

As you guys know, the new Chapter 33 GI Bill is very comprehensive and complex, and what we're going to do is try to disseminate this information out to our vets as quickly as we can. Also, we try to respond, like I said, quickly to the demands of the veterans. The last fiscal year we had over 1,900 actions taken. We visited over 200 facilities. There was 1,100 approval actions that we completed just for our veterans educational benefits.

That's kind of just a quick run-down. As you said, this is all in the record, so I just kind of hit the high points.

In closing, Madam Chairwoman, I'd like to thank you guys for allowing us to testify and kind of give you a short run-down on what we're doing.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Olivier appears on p. 65.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you, Mr. Olivier. I appreciate your testimony.

Mr. Kolden, you're recognized.

STATEMENT OF TODD KOLDEN

Mr. KOLDEN. Thank you. My name is Todd Kolden, and I'm an Administrator of the South Dakota Department of Labor. And one of the programs that I administer for the Department is the Veterans Employment Services. I serve as an active member of the National Association of State Workforce Agencies, Veteran Affairs Committee, and I'm the State Employment Chairman for the Veterans of Foreign Wars and Disabled American Veterans (DAV).

It is my honor to appear before this Subcommittee today on behalf of the South Dakota Department of Labor Secretary to present to you the views regarding the Transition Assistance Program workshop and to discuss any questions you may have.

My testimony this morning will focus primarily on TAP. You heard earlier this morning that the partnerships are important for TAP to be successful, and I'm happy to say that the partnership we have with the Department of Defense, in this case Ellsworth Air Force Base, the VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, the South Dakota Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, the U.S. Department of Labor (U.S. DoL) and Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) and our Department are solidly in place.

I think these are very important for TAP to be instrumental in the success of TAP facilitated at Ellsworth Air Force Base. Without these solid partnerships, servicemembers attending TAP would not be receiving the full benefit of transition services that they deserve.

South Dakota's current TAP Memorandum of Understanding, 2008, which was signed by Ellsworth Air Force Base, the U.S. DoL, the South Dakota Department of Labor, is current. However, with these partnerships, even though they aren't in writing, we do ask for your assistance in—to ensure that these departments can continue to function successfully.

I want to note that the importance of our DVOPS, our Disabled Veterans Outreach Program Specialists, and our Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVERs) is not only serving veterans in the local office, but also conducting outreach. One of the best opportunities for outreach is during the facilitation of TAP workshops.

In South Dakota, our DVOP specialists and LVERs facilitate approximately 80 percent of the TAP workshop and 25 percent of the disabled TAP workshop, which is conducted approximately 16 times per year. On average, our workshops have about 30 personnel, 30 to 35 personnel, attending each workshop.

The majority of our Air Force and members of the other services, including the National Guard and Reserve, often attend. TAP is also available to spouses, and they are strongly encouraged to attend as you heard Machetta state earlier. TAP workshop transition services develop a one-on-one relationship with the DoD or LVER, which, in my opinion, enhances a very successful transition.

For those servicemembers who are leaving South Dakota, we do provide a contact, an EOT or LVER in the State that they are relocating to.

As the Subcommittee is aware, and I think I heard some questions earlier of making TAP mandatory for active-duty servicemembers and to facilitate TAP workshops regarding their component before transitioning or retiring from military service. The Department of Labor and South Dakota Department of Labor strongly feels it should be mandatory for active-duty personnel.

Many of these servicemembers have been in the military for more than 4 years, and most likely have been serving at a fairly young age. Many have probably never held a civilian job, and this transition will be a very abrupt change. This should be handled through the accounting or command level.

In other words, we feel that the Adjutant General of each State should inform their units about the TAP workshop, allow them the opportunity to attend the TAP workshop if they desire by sending them on no cost, Temporary Duty (TDY) assignment, or Temporary Additional Duty (TAD) orders.

As you know, many of these individuals already have jobs they are returning to and may not have a desire or need to attend TAP. But again, they should at least be given that opportunity.

In South Dakota, the South Dakota Department of Labor made this request that nearly 5 years ago to the Adjutant General and thanks to the partnership we have established there is an informal agreement in place and this was recently affirmed with the new Adjutant General. And thanks to the partnerships we have established, there was an informal agreement in place as recently affirmed by General Doohen.

Currently there are full-time Guard members attending TAP that are retired or separated. U.S. DoL reports that only 60 percent of our servicemembers are currently attending TAP with an ultimate goal of 85 percent. We support this initiative and feel that making TAP mandatory will reach this goal.

More important, it will have increased the successful transition of servicemembers. Of note for all servicemembers who are assigned Ellsworth Air Force Base and unable to attend TAP prior to separation, one of our DOT specialists will provide an abbreviated TAP presentation at the mandatory pre-separation briefing.

While this is not meant to replace TAP, it does provide valuable and needed information to separating personnel. We always encourage participation in the full TAP workshop. If this isn't pos-

sible, we will encourage them to attend TAP at the State where they're relocating to.

I would like to share my personal experience with TAP. When I retired from the military service, I was given the opportunity to attend TAP, and the information I learned and the resources I was provided helped me immensely, immediately. TAP assisted me into seamless transition from military civilian life as I had employment when I retired. It also assisted in ensuring that all of my benefits were in place prior to my transition, and what to do and where to go if further assistance was needed.

I feel that the TAP workshop is one of the best resources we currently have for servicemembers who are making the transition from military to civilian life and for Guard and Reserve individuals who want to make a career change.

Finally, I'd like to mention that oftentimes an important part of transition is training separated servicemembers so they can enter a particular employment field. Some of you might remember or are aware of the Service Member Occupational Training Act, 1992, often referred to as SMOCTA, which was an Act that provided funding for training servicemembers after separating from military service and was highly successful in South Dakota.

Recently, H. R. 6272, which would re-authorize SMOCTA by the Subcommittee and forwarded to the full Committee for consideration. And I would urge your support on this bill.

Again, I want to thank you for allowing me to testify. This does conclude my testimony. I would be happy to discuss or respond regarding TAP or services in South Dakota. And I would just like to add one more note that I feel these field hearings might be one of the best ideas that have happened in a long time to get out and really listen to the field and what's going on in our State, so thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Kolden appears on p. 68.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you, Mr. Kolden. We appreciate your testimony and your insight that you have offered today.

I will have some questions for you after Mr. Boozman has asked some questions regarding what you recommended in your testimony 2 years ago and again today. Let me start with Mr. Olivier. In terms of the post GI Bill, as Mr. Boozman mentioned during his opening remarks, the fact that this Subcommittee had taken the lead in working with various stakeholders, various State veterans organizations, and agencies to try to find ways to dramatically improve the benefit, at the same time making sure that VA was adequately resourced to effectively administer it.

While I'm very pleased that we passed a dramatically improved GI Bill benefit for our servicemembers, I should say that what we passed wasn't fully vetted in the Committees. There were provisions added late on transferability. It's going to be a complicated new program to administer.

Now, Mr. Summerside, I remember having conversations with you over the last few years about the people that are your contacts down in Saint Louis who you can count on, who you can rely on, who help you, help servicemembers and veterans get answers to questions they have about benefits, get things processed, making this as smooth as possible. But, I think that there are some con-

cerns that you have expressed that I share about whether or not Saint Louis is always fully resourced to meet all of the demands that have been placed on them in the past, all the new demands that are going to be placed on them working with folks like you and the State Approving Agencies.

Mr. Olivier, on the State level with you, and of course, the VA as a whole, and the education service being ready to administer this expansive, appropriately generous but expansive and very complicated benefit. I am going to be charged with Mr. Boozman, I'm sure, throughout the rest of this term, and we hope into future years, to make sure that we're exercising the oversight the VA is going to need to make sure that our servicemembers have an ease of accessing this new benefit without bumps in the road. Also, by demonstrating some of the frustrations that occur when there are delays in processing claims and information that may not always be accurate that they're getting from different sources.

I appreciate the steps you've already taken shortly after we passed that bill to try to share as much information as you can that was available from the VA to our servicemembers. But Mr. Olivier, Mr. Summerside, could you speak with me a little bit about your thoughts on administering this new benefit, and the support that you will need from Congress and the support that you believe the VA will need from Congress to make sure it's effectively administered?

Mr. OLIVIER. I think as far as when we start the work with the veteran, we always have to get in touch with our regionalized employment liaison representative to find out exactly about their abilities and stuff like that. And that takes away quite a bit of time where we don't have access to those records. And that's for security issues, I'm sure.

But we work—you know, it's tough for us, because we're kind of a liaison between the vets and the State and our veterans. And we try to get an answer back as quickly as we can, but they are very busy down in Saint Louis. And they do a really good job of getting back to us, you know, in a fairly short amount of time. Sometimes two, three days, but usually we tell the veterans a week. But they usually have a run-around, and then bounced to several different people or, you know, that it's tough when we get them on the phone.

We try to run it through as quick as we can. But I think George can speak better on that, because he's got a lot more experience in that.

Mr. SUMMERSIDE. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee.

Saint Louis, this process actually began, the regionalization, over a decade ago. And many of the things or the thoughts that I thought they would do through technology and the other initiatives really haven't been realized, I don't think, to the full benefit to the veterans or family members.

You know, we're very fortunate in South Dakota to have good relationships with some key people down in Saint Louis. But that was a hard-fought war here in South Dakota. We had to actually through a letter to our South Dakota veterans' Commission and others to the director of Saint Louis just about a decade ago, and

he came up and visited. And from that meeting, he made a commitment to us and what we—the commitment back to him was this.

We would do all the on-the-job-training (OJT) on the claims that would come right through our State improvement agency, which basically was unheard of. We would make sure that all the pieces are there to expedite any processing of the claim.

We've held true to our part. But on the other side, what we always said to the veteran or the trainee, within 4 weeks of application, if you don't hear anything, we want to know, and we want to put it in—you know, on any kind of new arrangement or agreement, usually right up front it's usually pretty good, they respond back very quickly within a few days. But I still have a good working relationship with many of the key individuals down there. I think the main thing they need is they need resources available to them.

And one other thing that they possibly could use is over in the comp and pension side, those individuals are paid at a higher rate. So when you open up the doors to comp and pension you get more claims examiners and those folks going over to comp and pen, you're losing them from the education end.

And the other thing I've seen in the last decade, the VA educational services have lost a lot of the experience they've had over the last decades. I believe in my heart the real experience as far as knowledge and experience about veterans' programs really rests a lot with State approving agencies.

My colleagues across the State, you know, Don Sweeney, he's been involved since the seventies. He's seen all these types of programs go through. Jim Bonaparte in New York, Jim Little, you know, most of the individuals I'm talking about have 10, 15, 20, 25 years of experience. Most of the staff at the VA central office at this point in time, I think many of them have under 5 years of experience. A lot of the ELR's that you're bringing into play to work with our agencies have little or no experience when they come out, and they are the final say in a lot of these approval issues.

My good friend down in Missouri, Chad Shotz, said to me the other day when we were talking about an OJT approval, we're fighting fights we won 15, 20 years ago, and we're fighting them today. A lot of these have to do with training programs.

So I think if the VA Central Office, you know, educational services really looks to the resources, and that would be through your State approving agencies, I think every one would gain a lot as far as the new GI Bill, the Chapter 33.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you both for your response to that question.

Mr. Boozman?

Mr. BOOZMAN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Kolden, do we need a program that focuses on retraining vets with few skills? Do you see that as a problem?

Mr. KOLDEN. I do see that. I don't think it's a full blown problem. I think it's an even larger problem. But, you know, if you look at the new GI Bill which came out, it's tremendous. I applaud that tremendously. That might even affect some of this legislation that's been thrown about.

But a small State like South Dakota, we haven't seen training there that a lot of the larger States and large metropolitan areas have. I'm talking specifically, I'm not trying to put down the VETS office, but the homeless veterans reintegration program and the veteran grant, the Veteran Workforce Improvement Program Grant, VWIP, have never received any training dollars.

That's probably another reason why that was successful in South Dakota, because we had a lot of servicemembers that did need the training. We currently have in South Dakota, approximately at this time today, 11,000 job openings. Our unemployment rate is about 2.5 percent.

A lot of people say that's good, but there's a lot of underemployment out there. And I think the dollars that will come through to train servicemembers or training servicemembers who don't have the necessary skills in the workforce, civilian workforce, would benefit very highly from SMOCTA or a similar bill.

I think our businesses in South Dakota would benefit from a bill similar to that. I just really can't see anything that would belong with a bill like that.

To answer your question, yes, again, there are a lot of servicemembers who do not have the skills that they have achieved in military service that would benefit them in civilian life.

Mr. BOOZMAN. Good. That's under Miss Herseth Sandlin's leadership and her staff, my staff. I guess most bills come down the bar, so we're in the process of redoing that and trying to address that concern. And it is good that you're—that's why we're out where the battle is being fought. You know, you guys are out on the front lines of these things, and we really are trying to give you some more tools to address those individuals. And so I think, hopefully we can get that passed at the arms level.

What can you tell us about the number of veterans placed by the South Dakota Department of Labor this year?

Mr. KOLDEN. What can I tell you about as far as numbers?

Mr. BOOZMAN. Are you getting referrals from the VA, from the voc rehab?

Mr. KOLDEN. Yes. Again, that's another great partnership in South Dakota. We have the voc rehab, and the VA voc rehab operates out of Sioux Falls and out of Rapid City. And it's set up—I'd almost say that the Rapid City voc—VA voc rehab and our State was a model for a lot of other States.

As I told you, I'm active with the National Association of State Workforce Agencies Veterans Affairs Committee. I think you hear a lot of the horror stories, if you will, of the relationships between other States and the Department of VA. And that just has not happened in South Dakota. We've had a few issues to work through.

Kevin Roseland is the VA Regional Director out of Fargo. John Smith, we'll hear from him later today, out of Sioux Falls. They were instrumental in approving some of the relationships, and a lot of them were personnel problems. And they've dealt with and we had to move on.

Like I say, there have been some bumps through them, but based, again on Kevin Roseland and John Smith, Earl Schultz from U.S. DoL/VETS in my office, we've worked through those bumps, and we have a good relationship to be successful in South Dakota.

Mr. BOOZMAN. That's the important thing. Thank you very much.

Madam Chair, I appreciate you guys very much for your service to our vets.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you, Mr. Boozman. Mr. Kolden, I'm glad to hear that you think TAP should be mandatory. The servicemembers and the Air Force Base, all of them, felt it should be mandatory.

Mr. Boozman and I have had discussions about getting what we've heard across the country, and how effective the program is for those who have participated, how we can best go about making sure that more people are able to participate.

Now, the Marines have made TAP mandatory, and you have mentioned that you think that the encouragement or the requirement could come from the command level, from the Adjutant General to encourage more people to take advantage of the TAP program on the National Guard/Reserve. Correct?

Mr. KOLDEN. Correct.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Separate from the National Guard Reserve to the other branches of the Armed Services, in your opinion, since the Marines have made it mandatory, but the other branches haven't yet, do you think that this is a leadership issue that can be resolved there, or do you think it needs a legislative fix?

Mr. KOLDEN. And you're all aware that a lot of the obstructions to making it mandatory was commands felt they would be losing people. But I think in the last 10 years, it's become very evident that TAP is a good recruitment tool. That's one way to look at it.

I personally, when I retired, my command, it was mandatory in my command to have TAP when you retired or separated. So I think in the Navy and a lot of other services, there are commands to make it mandatory before you separate.

I think hearing the testimony of servicemembers today, you know, they talk about getting the word out. And I'm not sure that we require legislature, but I think if the Services, the very service organizations heard the testimony like they heard today from the servicemembers who say it should be mandatory because they benefited from it, I'm glad I went through it, because I benefited from it.

Again, an example was I had employment waiting for me at a very good job in the Twin Cities. And quite frankly, when I decided to come back to South Dakota, because I was tired of life in the big city, I used my TAP resources again to complete my resume, et cetera. And I had a job, a very good job which I'm at now in no time.

But requiring legislation, I'm not sure if that would be the right way. I think then some of the Services or servicemembers would feel like they're being forced, and you know how people don't like to be forced. But again, I think if they start hearing how good of a recruitment tool it is and hearing the testimony today that servicemembers think it should be mandatory because it really benefited them, I think we'd see more of it.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. I know you have some TAP facilitators that have joined you here today.

Mr. KOLDEN. Yes.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Could you share with the Subcommittee, whether it's from your perspective or something you've heard from them, have you received any suggestions from servicemembers or from members of the Guard of ways to improve TAP? Maybe the issue of the spousal participation that we heard from the prior panel. Any other suggestions, other than the mandatory issue or the command encouragement, any other suggestions about how best to improve it?

Mr. KOLDEN. I would have to say that Ellsworth Air Force Base has done a great job in getting the word out so spouses do attend. We strongly encourage spouses to attend.

I'm thinking about Sue Machetta, who testified earlier and talked about a program, and she has a very good feedback system in place. After every TAP workshop, every servicemember who went to the TAP workshop fills out a feedback sheet form, et cetera. She reviews them. She sends them on to Earl Schultz, our DoL staff State director, and myself and to the TAP facilitators so we can all review the feedback that we receive. And we have made some tweaks based on servicemembers' feedback.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you very much.

One last question and then I'll see if Mr. Boozman has any further questions.

I had mentioned that we had made some changes in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2008 where the REAP benefits are now available for 10 years post-separation. Mr. Olivier, has your office taken any proactive steps working with either Guard leadership or other resources to identify and communicate with men and women who may have been deployed in OIF or OEF, but who separated from service, who may not yet be aware that they're entitled to utilize these REAP benefits?

Mr. OLIVIER. Yes. I'll let George answer that question as well. They started that process. I'll let him address that.

Mr. SUMMERSIDE. Madam Chairwoman, as we talked when we had our meeting in, I think it was late February with Tom Murphy and myself, when we received that information, we developed a fact sheet. We distributed it not only to—all through our veterans' service network, all the Army and private service officers and certifying officials, and also we provided it electronically through the National Guard network and they provided it to their members.

The one problem—and then we—we presented this very topic at some of the briefings or outreach briefings we had. The one issue we have is even the fact sheets that are available now are not very clear on who is actually eligible for what and how long. The response I received from Saint Louis is this: Tell them to apply to see if they will meet the requirements. And that isn't a very easy thing to do when you're trying to reach individuals on the simple facts of the program. And that was one of our National Guard group reports, and the administrator that we were working with, Cindy, she does an outstanding job. She's called for two briefings. Part of it was on education. Part of it was on post traumatic stress.

But that is the one thing that—similar to what happened when they had Chapter 1606 and they allowed that extension. Basically the VA was allowing that extension, but no one was willing to talk about it or tell anybody about it for 6 months after they made the

decision, so during that 6-month period there's a lot of individuals that are missed.

And so if we could get a comprehensive fact sheet and good direction from the VA that actually will pay the benefit, we have the resources to make that information known in a quicker——

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you very much. I appreciate your testimony.

Mr. Boozman, any further questions?

Thank you for your insights and your expertise that you bring to the table. We appreciate it. We look forward to following up with you on some of your suggestions. Again, thank you for your testimony and service to our State and the Nation's veterans.

We're going to take just a short 5- or 10-minute break before we start with our fourth panel. We'll have two panels remaining, but we'll just take a short 5- to 10-minute break.

[Recess.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. We now go to our fourth panel. Joining us is Mr. Luverne Boes, District 13 Commander of the American Legion here in South Dakota; Ms. Doris Ann Werlinger, Past Department President of the American Legion Auxiliary in South Dakota; and Ms. Diane Hickenbothan, President of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary in South Dakota.

Thank you all for being here, for the great work you do on behalf of South Dakota's veterans, and the members of the organizations, and their families.

Mr. Boes, we'll start with you. You are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENTS OF LUVERNE L. BOES, DISTRICT 13 COMMANDER, AMERICAN LEGION, DEPARTMENT OF SOUTH DAKOTA; DORIS ANN WERLINGER, PAST DEPARTMENT PRESIDENT OF SOUTH DAKOTA, AMERICAN LEGION AUXILIARY; AND DIANE HICKENBOTHAM, PRESIDENT, VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS LADIES AUXILIARY, DEPARTMENT OF SOUTH DAKOTA

STATEMENT OF LUVERNE L. BOES

Mr. BOES. Good afternoon, Madam Chair, Ranking Member Boozman, and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Luverne Boes, United States Navy Master Chief Petty Officer Retired and the American Legion Department of South Dakota District 13 Commander.

Since we have a much smaller all voluntary military, the need for National Guard and Reserves to fight the Global War on Terror is unprecedented. They have become the central part of our current DoD operations. We need to attract and retain these well-qualified individuals so our National defense stays strong and viable.

One major incentive is the servicemember knowing that when they return from the wars they still have a job waiting for them. This is not always the case. Numerous cases brought to the attention of the American Legion by veterans and other sources, many of these returning servicemembers have lost jobs, promotions or benefits, and even been demoted.

According to the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA), employers must, by law, protect the

old jobs of employee servicemembers or provide them with equivalent positions. From all accounts, most Reservists and those in the National Guard appear to be well-informed about their active-duty legal rights. However, in their loss of their job, the American Legion strongly endorses the belief that servicemembers would greatly benefit by having access to the resources and knowledge that TAP can provide, but the program should have a stronger employment, mental health, and small business component.

The American Legion strongly endorses H.R. 6272, the "Service Members Occupational Conversion and Training Act (SMOCTA) Reauthorization Act of 2008," along with the funding request. Veterans eligible for assistance are those with a primary or secondary military occupation specialty that the DoD determines is not readily transferrable to the civilian workforce, or those veterans with a service-connected disability rating of 30 percent or higher. The program successfully returns veterans to the civilian workforce.

The American Legion believes that the Small Business Administration should be part of any Reservist and National Guard TAP and act as an advisory capacity for businesses owned by veterans to assist them with the resources and information to help lessen the impact of activation on their bottom line.

Also, most individuals who join the National Guard and Reserves enter straight out of high school. Many are full- and part-time students with a number of activations since 9/11. They are discovering that graduation will take much longer than once anticipated.

The American Legion recommends that TAP have an education representative to provide the National Guard and Reservist members with up-to-date GI benefit information so they can have the option of making informed decisions on how they incorporate their military service with their civilian employment and education options.

With the President's signing into law a Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, the veterans education will change significantly after it becomes effective in August 2009. TAP and the Disabled TAP Program, DTAP, are excellent venues to brief recently separated servicemembers, especially those in the National Guard and Reserves, on new, enhanced educational benefits.

In the recent months, there have been a number of news articles reporting that some creditors make illegal demands on active-duty personnel. With the military's increased reliance on National Guard and Reserve units, creditors residing in remote areas of the country outside of traditional military towns are not aware of the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, which the President signed into law December of 2003. This Act helped ease the economic and legal burdens on military personnel called to active-duty status in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

Relief extends to actions terminating leases, evictions, foreclosures and repossessions, default judgments, and lower interest rates on credit cards and loans, and protects against lapses and termination of insurance policies. If TAP was mandatory, servicemembers and local community businesses would also know this program and a lot of frustration and time and misunderstandings could be avoided.

And finally, the American Legion recommends that Congress require Federal agencies that deliver TAP and DTAP services to develop a monitoring program to better assess how well services are being delivered to transitioning servicemembers and performance measures should be instituted to hold all Federal agencies accountable for their services rendered.

The American Legion reaffirms its strong support in the TAP program but also encourages the Department of Defense to require that all separating active-duty servicemembers, including those in the Reserves and National Guard, be given an opportunity to participate in TAP training not more than 180 days prior to their separation or retirement from the armed services and follow-up counseling not later than 180 days after separation from active duty.

The American Legion would also support any legislative initiatives to mandate that all servicemembers be given the opportunity to participate in TAP and DTAP.

This concludes my statement.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Boes appears on p. 70.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you, Commander. Ms. Werlinger, you are now recognized.

STATEMENT OF DORIS ANN WERLINGER

Ms. WERLINGER. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman and Mr. Boozman and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting the American Legion Auxiliary to appear before you today to discuss the Transition Assistance Program.

Today I represent the American Legion Auxiliary, the world's largest women's patriotic service organization with 900,000 members in 8,900 communities across the country. Here in South Dakota, we have 18,000–16,000 members in 221 communities. Our mission is to serve veterans, their families, and their communities.

The curriculum for TAP includes a narrowly defined yet broad-based agenda with the attempt to import as much information as possible to the active-duty component. Guard and Reserve members haven't had the benefit of a comprehensive TAP.

While there is little debate as to the value of the information being shared during TAP, we hear continually from servicemembers and their families that TAP is either too much or too little, given at the wrong time and in the wrong setting with the expectation that all servicemembers hear the same message at the same time and in the same way.

So what changes need to be made for TAP to be more effective? First, one size doesn't fit all. Even within the active component, not all servicemembers share the same career goals for civilian life. Guard and Reserve members face additional challenges as they return back to civilian lives that are now very different than when they left.

Second, timing matters. Hitting a servicemember and his or her family too early or too late can dilute the message.

Third, accuracy is not—no matter the delivery or message line is critical. We hear of miscommunication on important issues too many times.

Fourth, too much information during delivery at one time with a combination of any of the above issues means much of it gets lost or not absorbed.

Fifth, while technically the civilian job of a Guard or Reserve member is covered under USERRA, we all know that in practice these servicemembers have difficulty re-entering the workforce or picking up their careers because of subtle hiring practices that don't work in their favor.

Following the example of Turbo TAP, which was designed with the National Guard in mind, any face-to-face program must be appropriately timed, relevant, and to the point. To oversimplify, the Auxiliary feels strongly that TAP needs a more contemporary face. Instead of giving servicemembers and their families what we think they need, we need to give them the option of choosing what they know they need.

We recommend establishing a program that collectively is no more than 24 hours of content with an agenda flexible and varied enough so it appeals to participants at all stages of readiness for transition. The program should consist of a menu of presentations and/or workshops with minimum and mandatory requirements established for participation. The program should be established in such a way that one or two mandatory general sessions start TAP, followed by a diverse agenda of programs that would appeal to participants on a variety of levels and stages.

If planned right, this format change would not require additional staff resources, would include much of the same content and material currently being used but focus on what's important to the participant.

The most current Department of Labor statistics report that 60 to 65 percent of all separating active-duty servicemembers attend TAP seminars and 30 percent of all separating National Guard and Reservists attend a portion of TAP. DoD has set a goal of 85 percent of separating servicemembers. We recommend that each branch of the military make TAP a mandatory requirement for all transitioning servicemembers, bringing participation to 100 percent.

The Auxiliary is further recommending that accountability and measurable standards be established for each agency and delivery component in the process to ensure excellence. It is only right that at the conclusion of military or active-duty service we provide a transition program that meets them on their terms, ensuring a seamless transition back to civilian life.

The American Legion Auxiliary recommends reformatting TAP to fulfill the needs of specific servicemembers, including our Guard and Reserve; requiring TAP be mandatory for all separating servicemembers; creating measurable standards to gauge effectiveness and success.

TAP is an essential component of reintegration for all of our members of our military regardless of branch or rank. TAP done right becomes an invaluable step in successful reintegration.

Thank you again for allowing me to represent the opinions of the American Legion Auxiliary through this testimony. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Werlinger appears on p. 75.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you very much for your testimony. Ms. Hickenbotham, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF DIANE HICKENBOTHAM

Ms. HICKENBOTHAM. Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin, Mr. Boozman, and distinguished Members of this Subcommittee, I thank you for the opportunity to discuss what the Transition Assistance Program is doing to provide servicemembers and their families with the information and resources necessary to facilitate a successful transition from military to civilian life.

I am honored to be asked to be here as the Department President of the State of South Dakota of the Ladies Auxiliary to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. We are the wives, widows, mothers, grandmothers, daughters, granddaughters, and sisters of persons who were or are eligible for membership in the Veterans of Foreign Wars by having served our great country in a foreign war or a hostile region.

The Ladies Auxiliary to the Veterans of Foreign Wars serves veterans and their families and are a strong advocate for all veterans and their families. I am from the city of Aberdeen, South Dakota, where many of our National Guard and Army Reserve have been deployed. I speak as a wife and advocate for all veterans and their families and as the President of the Department of South Dakota Ladies Auxiliary to the VFW.

We express great appreciation and gratitude for what the VA and the Department of Labor has been doing to help their readjustment back into a civilian life. Having returning to civilian life is often not easy for a soldier and is not easy for their families.

I am especially grateful that you have included the Ladies Auxiliary to both the VFW and the American Legion. It does let us know that you are considering the effect and opinions of the families involved in the lives of our returning troops. I strongly believe that the family is the foundation for a healthy readjustment to civilian life.

In speaking with many of the returning National Guard and Reserve members, they have expressed that the Turbo TAP technology has been a valuable tool for those returning from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. This Web-based system seems to work very well for delivery of information and assistance.

Servicemembers have rapid accessibility to locate One Stop Career Centers for employment assistance as well as medical care by locating the closest VA Medical Center. This program is helping returning servicemembers increase their participation and awareness of military benefits, allowing for an easier transition to civilian life.

Now, what improvements and additions can be made that might make TAP more effective? This has come from talking to many troops and their families, and this is their opinion that they have expressed to me.

I also would like to thank General Doohen and Captain Yost for their comment of PTSD and their dedication to take away any stigma from it, not only for the soldier but for the family, the spouses, the parents and the children of returning troops.

We know there has been significant progress in the efforts to provide transition assistance to the soldier and to the families since this program was implemented. However, like I said, these are some of the following—or some of the concerns.

Families are asking for more assistance to emotionally support their family while their spouse is deployed. This includes readjustment to parenting jointly again for when the spouse returns. Many feel that the family readiness leader or group leader was all that they know about, and to these ladies like Mrs. Lassegard, the people that have stepped up and taken over the job as assistance and family readiness leaders, I don't think we can thank them enough. I tell you, they are the backbone and they sit here very quietly. And they have been there for, you know, little things, from teenagers' problems to, you know, what's happening now, at that day I might possibly be deployed again.

On some of the returning feedback with the TAP program, some spouses have felt that the returning soldiers are shuffled around too much for testing and receiving transitional assistance when they returned home. We had a soldier that was sent from Aberdeen to Fort Carson, Colorado, you know, for their testing and training, and the family felt like that was just another stress of another family separation.

Many feel the need for credit counseling. And I know that was probably in some of the counseling, but it probably goes back to the communication, that maybe the readiness leaders aren't—you know, up in northeastern North Dakota we're not as close to a military base, and they really—there definitely is a definite need to have some of the counseling availability information sent home to the spouses and the families about the mandatory participation in TAP with the family member, whether it be the parent or the spouse would definitely be, I think, a great help.

As far as the credit counseling, we often think that the spouse at home is in charge of the checkbook for the family and spending the money. One spouse related to me, though she got the bills all paid and her husband just worried about taking care of himself over there with what he had and when he returned home, the credit cards and the loans got really high from the person living at home.

Many need assistance and support in dealing with the idea that their soldier may be called up again. It seems to hang over the heads of the children very intently. They know they're on alert. Their parent has been gone once, and the fear of it happening again causes much anxiety to some within the family unit. This isn't openly addressed, and it needs to be dealt with through the proper channels.

There are things with PTSD that people—you know, transition is kind of almost not really a temporary word, but sometimes that transition into a well-adjusted foundation, signs and symptoms of PTSD may not show up for 15 years later, you know, and never have been addressed with it. Because, like I said, back here there are times where, you know, they just want to go back to their life.

And just last week I had a young child call me. She was 15. She says, "You know, Diane," she says, "my dad's, you know, probably going to go again." And she says, "I can't wait until he goes because

I'm so tired of the anger that he's expressing at us." So this is happening now.

We've got wonderful assistance for our program through the TAP for the counseling, but it is kind of underlying. It's not being—we definitely feel that the time line for this counseling for PTSD for the family, and we often know that the family becomes a battle buddy for the returning soldier. Families feel that the time to utilize the program is too short, doesn't start soon enough before the soldier returns. I don't know if it can be integrated or when you do actually start the readjustment with the families back home before their troops return.

Many of the listed concerns seem to deal with communication with the TAP program and with the family. We recommend that communication with the families become a priority in a timely manner. The timetable of the transition assistance must be communicated frequently and soon enough to accommodate the soldier and family for smoother transition into civilian life. Family readiness leaders are an important tool in this program and they're training needs to be comprehensive and supportive.

I thank you for allowing me to present this testimony on behalf of our organization, the Ladies Auxiliary to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Know that we deeply appreciate the implementation of this program. The men and women that have worn the uniform of this great Nation deserve all the help and transitional assistance that we can give them to deal with the stress of war and separation. Every soldier deserves all the support that we as Americans can give them. Each and every soldier and each family member deserves help and support for the great sacrifice that they have all given.

And I would be glad to respond to any of your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Hickenbotham appears on p. 76.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you all, for your testimony. We will start with Mr. Boozman's questions.

Mr. BOOZMAN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

I appreciate your testimony. Again, this is why we're here, is you all are on the front lines and are very, very involved with what's going on.

I think you really have given us a lot of good suggestions, and it's just difficult. We've got two things going on here. We've got people transitioning out of the military back into civilian life and then we've got people transitioning back as they come back from being gone in the theater and stuff and that's a difficult situation, also.

I don't think sometimes we think enough about the—and you all have mentioned the stress in the family, the financial problems that come with deployment. You know, particularly in the case of the National Guard when you have a business and you go off and—it's just a difficult situation. Sometimes the support mechanism, it's just not there like it is in the regular military.

Mike was mentioning earlier that possibly we could use the credit unions on base things like that, more to give advice and things. But I do think that's an area and that's something that we've looked at, that we're trying to be more supportive, but I think that when you look at the—something that we don't talk about, we talk

about PTSD, we talk about suicide rates, but we don't talk about divorce rates, which is—you know, it's been significant.

So those are things that we really do need to do a better job of and its something I'm committed to and the Chair and her leadership understands.

But—I really don't have a question. I do appreciate you being here, and I appreciate your Auxiliary.

I tell this story. I was at a ladies meeting several years ago, and I told them that my wife, Kathy, was with me. And I told them that I looked around and the auxiliary was doing all this work and that they were the backbone of the organization.

And on the way home, Kathy looked at me and she said—my wife, Kathy, looked at me and she said, "They're not only the backbone. They're the brains, also." So we do appreciate you very much.

So thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you, Mr. Boozman.

I have a couple of questions for the panel. Mr. Boes, if I could start with you.

In making TAP mandatory, I asked this question of Mr. Kolden in the previous panel, the Marines have made it mandatory. In your experience and in your opinion, do you think that this is going to require Congress to act, to make it mandatory, or do you think that the Department of Defense can make it mandatory in each branch following the suit of the Marines?

Mr. BOES. Madam Chairwoman, what I would say personally is it should be mandatory through DoD.

I was visiting the other day with a retiring E6 from the Air Force, and since given this task to come onto this panel, I decided to ask people that I saw in uniform about the program. And this gal was just outstanding. Her positiveness was just great. When she gets out of the service, she's going to do great things, and the TAP program is setting her up for that.

And I said, "Well, that's great for those of you that are retiring. How about that E3 or that E2 or even an E4 that's getting out after 3 or 4 years?" And she was telling me that they really don't care about it. They just want to get out and go home.

The problem is that in a few years they're going to say, "I wish I would have known about that." And so many of them don't even know to go check in with their local county offices to sign up for the veterans' benefits, because, if nothing else, the veterans' service officer there would be able to visit with them for a little while.

While all of this discussion was going on, I was sitting back there thinking about something. I'm the brains of the organization.

We talk about this being a great recruiting tool. Has there been any thought given to including a representative in a recruiting office so that people can see the veterans coming and going and what they are doing after service? Just a thought.

But as far as making it mandatory, I think it needs to come from above. Because at the service level, if it isn't mandatory, we're going to have commanding officers or someone in command saying the job takes precedence over what you—wanting to get in TAP right now.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. I appreciate your response.

Two years ago when we had this hearing, the field hearing focused on this topic in part, out at Ellsworth Air Force Base. They were going through a reduction in force, so you had some younger Airmen who may or may not take advantage of TAP. I think with Airmen in particular, that's an additional obligation of the Department of Defense, to ensure that this information is shared with these younger individuals.

But I do think—I appreciate your thoughts here even if one of the things we heard 2 years ago is if you make it mandatory, then it's just like every other mandatory program. You're not going to get much out of it.

Well, that may be true in the short term for some of them. They're still going to have certain information that they retain, or remember that it's available, or that they will likely follow up or know where to follow up to get that information if they don't go through the program.

So I appreciate your response.

One other thing, Mr. Boes. You recommended that TAP workshops should have a stronger employment, mental health, and small business component. Do you think that there should be workshops that address only one or two of those topics at a time so that there's a stronger focus? Would you agree with the servicemember who testified earlier that there should be a longer duration to cover some of these other topics? Do you recommend that?

Mr. BOES. Madam Chairwoman, I feel that the longer term of receiving that knowledge would be better. The idea that you get it in one fast blast, I heard Turbo TAP, a computer online system to get the information, that's all good, but the first time, too, you're going to pick up some information. The next time through you're going to pick up a little more.

So if we start out 6 months prior to somebody's return or getting out of the service, start giving him that data, it will slowly sink in to where when they get out they say, "Oh, wait, I remember, it was said at TAP, and I need to go check in at that veterans' service office."

One thing that the American Legion does also is we have a veterans' forum. Each district within the American Legion puts on a forum once a year and we bring in all of these people. I would like to find a TAP representative to include in my district's forum. It would just make sense to give out that extra information also.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you.

To Ms. Werlinger and Ms. Hickenbotham, the Auxiliaries have been working with the Family Readiness Groups. Both of you talked about the importance of communication with the families, this time line of when you get the information to the family is too late and it will dilute its effectiveness.

Could each of you elaborate in greater detail where you think TAP needs to be improved for Guardsmen and women and their families? In particular, having worked with the Family Readiness Groups to communicate to the National Guard leadership about the importance of encouraging not just full-time Guard but part-time Guard to participate in the Transition Assistance Program offered at Ellsworth, or looking to see if those types of programs could be offered in Sioux Falls or elsewhere in the State?

Ms. HICKENBOTHAM. In Aberdeen, it seems like there has been—I was just sharing with her earlier that we are not getting the communication out there like they seem to be getting out here. I don't know if they're sending a representative out here.

Just a week or so ago a wife called me and her husband had to go to Greece, which allowed her to receive CHAMPVA. And she was—you know, he'd returned like 6 years ago. He was one of the first ones back. And so—everybody knows TRICARE and they all go to the hospitals and the doctors or CHAMP, but they weren't aware of what CHAMPVA was and how she could get help with that.

And we're in the middle—Minot's up there. You know, we're there, but we need some help and support working up there with them. And being from Rapid City, I'm feeling like you're getting the help you need, and I really think we need more help up in that northeast corner there.

Ms. WERLINGER. The only other thing I can think of, Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee, is these service men and women, they need whatever they can get, and the sooner they can get it, the better off they are.

I know in my own personal life, when my husband retired from the Air Force, he had all the information available for him. I was not included as a spouse for that retirement separation. I could have been, but he did not want me there. Well, being the person I am, I got the information anyway, but that's because that came within, what's here.

But I feel that some of those things should be mandatory, and I have not heard of anybody that I can think of right off the top of my head that has had any problems. But, like I said, when they need it, they need it, and they should have it.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. One quick followup. Is the accuracy of information you identified in your testimony, and some of the concerns of the accuracy of the information that they're getting, not only do they need it and anything they can get, they need, we have to make sure it's accurate.

Does the American Legion Auxiliary have any specific recommendations? Is it an issue of training within the TAP program itself? Is it facilitating accurate information? The previous panel said that some of the fact sheets coming from the VA are not always as comprehensive as we need them to be and don't fully explain the benefits. Do you have any specific recommendations on how we can improve the accuracy of the information?

Ms. WERLINGER. Well, I have to go along with Mr. Boes. I think that if we can have a TAP representative at those meetings that we have for the veterans' forum for the benefits, then we'll get that information that we need.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Okay. Thank you.

Thank you very much for your testimony today, for your leadership in your respective organizations. As a member of one of the Auxiliaries, I appreciate, very much, the role that both organizations play in supporting the American Legion and VFW. We appreciate, again, your leadership, Commander, and we'll look forward to following up with you on your suggestions to better serve our Nation's and our State's men and women. Thank you.

We'll now move to our fifth and final panel.

Joining us is Mr. John McWilliam, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Veterans' Employment and Training Service, U.S. Department of Labor. He's accompanied by Mr. Earl Schultz, Director of Veterans' Employment and Training in South Dakota. Also, we have Mr. Don Kelpin, South Dakota Chairman, Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, U.S. Department of Defense, and Mr. William Fillman, Central Area Director for the Veterans Benefits Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, who is accompanied by Mr. John Smith, Director of the Dakota Regional Office, Fargo and Sioux Falls, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Thank you, gentlemen, for being with us today, traveling, most of you, to South Dakota or this part of the State, and we appreciate the written testimony you've submitted, which has been made part of this hearing record.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Mr. McWilliam, we will begin with you, and thanks for joining us in South Dakota. You are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF JOHN M. MCWILLIAM, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR; ACCOMPANIED BY EARL R. SCHULTZ, DIRECTOR, VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING, SOUTH DAKOTA, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR; DON KEPLIN, STATE CHAIRMAN, SOUTH DAKOTA EMPLOYER SUPPORT OF THE GUARD AND RESERVE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE; AND WILLIAM D. FILLMAN, JR., DIRECTOR, CENTRAL AREA, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; ACCOMPANIED BY JOHN SMITH, DIRECTOR, SIOUX FALLS, SD, REGIONAL OFFICE, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

STATEMENT OF JOHN M. MCWILLIAM

Mr. MCWILLIAM. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman, and Ranking Member Boozman. It's a pleasure for us to be present here in South Dakota for this very important hearing on the Transition Assistance Program.

The mission, as you know, of the Veterans' Employment and Training Service is to assist veterans in the transitioning into the 21st century workplace. One of the major ways that we do that is through the employment workshops provided through the Transition Assistance Program.

We're very proud of our role in helping people transition from military to civilian employment. As has been mentioned several times today, currently 65 percent of all active-duty transitioning servicemembers attend a TAP employment workshop. This has risen from 50 percent about 10 years ago. As a recommendation of the President's Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes, each of the military services has established a goal of 85 percent participation. The DoL commitment to this is to provide the TAP employment workshop wherever and whenever requested by the Department of Defense and by the Department of Homeland Security.

As you know, Madam Chairwoman, to maintain a quality of service delivery, all our workshops use a common workbook and standard program of instruction. All facilitators are trained at the National Veterans' Training Institute.

We are currently in the process of beginning a redesign of the curriculum. A core aspect of that redesign will be customer surveys and follow-up afterward to provide a feedback loop so we can improve the program.

Since 2001, VETS has provided transition services to over 146,000 National Guard and Reservists. These transition services range in size and content from mobilization and demobilization briefings to the full-scale TAP employment workshop. In many cases, Guardsmen and Reservists are put on orders and are sent to an active-duty TAP workshop, and that is the case often in South Dakota. We have provided these services to 43 States and the District of Columbia.

In particular for the Guardsmen and Reservists returning to South Dakota, we have long recognized the importance of providing them assistance. Since their mobilizations normally take place at Fort Sill or Fort Carson, when the presentations are made to the demobilizing servicemembers, they are given the contact information for our staff here in South Dakota.

In closing, I'd like to thank you for allowing us to address you today, and Mr. Schultz and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. McWilliam appears on p. 78.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you, Mr. McWilliam. Mr. Kelpin, thank you for being here. You are now recognized.

STATEMENT OF DON KELPIN

Mr. KELPIN. Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to offer my perspective on issues relating to the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, or ESGR, as it applies to the South Dakota National Guard and Reserve members.

I have volunteered with ESGR since 1996 and currently serve as the South Dakota State Chairman. South Dakota ESGR consists of 40-volunteer members located throughout the State and two paid staff here in Rapid City.

ESGR is a DoD agency that seeks to promote a culture in which all American employers support and value the military service of their employees. The ESGR volunteers recognize outstanding employer support, increased awareness of the law, and resolve conflicts through mediation.

The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, or USERRA, Title 38, United States Code, Chapter 43, was enacted by Congress and signed into law by President Clinton on October 13, 1994, to protect the rights of persons who voluntarily or involuntarily leave employment positions to undertake military service.

There are two types of transitions for servicemembers, one when they transition after deployment and the other when they transition after enlistment obligations.

I will reference three significant sections of the Federal Regulations for USERRA, 20 CFR, Part 1002, that pertains to today's hearing regarding the transition of servicemembers.

The first section 1002.198. What efforts must the employer make to help the employee become qualified for their re-employment position? The employee must be qualified for the re-employment position. The employer must make reasonable efforts to help the employee become qualified to perform the duties of this position. These efforts include providing refresher training and any training necessary to update a returning employee's skills in situations where the employee is no longer qualified due to technological advances.

The second section I will cite is Section 1002.225. Is the employee entitled to any specific re-employment benefits if he or she has a disability that was incurred in or aggravated during the period of service?

A disabled servicemember is entitled to the escalator position he or she would have obtained but for uniformed service. If the employee has a disability incurred in or aggravated during the period of service, the employer must make reasonable efforts to accommodate that disability and to help the employee become qualified to perform the duties.

If the employee is not qualified for re-employment in the escalator position because of a disability, then a reasonable effort by the employer to accommodate the disability and to help the employee to become qualified, the employee must be re-employed in, A, a position that is equivalent in seniority, status, and pay to the escalated position or, B, a position that is the nearest approximation to the equivalent position consistent with the circumstances of the employee's case. A position that is the nearest approximation to the equivalent position may be a higher or lower position, depending on circumstances.

The last section being referenced is 1002.226. If the employee has a disability that was incurred or aggravated during the period of service, what evidence must the employer make to help him or her become qualified for the re-employment position?

USERRA, A, requires that the employee be qualified for re-employment, regardless of any disability. The employer must make reasonable effort to help the employee to become qualified to perform the duties of his position. The employer is not required to re-employ the employee if, after reasonable efforts by the employer, the employee does not qualify for re-employment positions or, B, qualified has the same meaning here as it is in 1002.198, the first section I referenced.

South Dakota ESGR has 16 trained ombudsmen throughout the State. These ombudsmen respond to inquiries and conflicts regarding USERRA presented by any employees or employers. Since October 1, 2007, South Dakota ombudsmen have fielded 116 information cases only and mediated 14 USERRA cases. South Dakota has not had a USERRA case go to the United States Department of Labor for the past 18 months.

I hope this has been able to clarify the role played by the South Dakota ESGR in helping employers and servicemembers transition from military service to civilian employment.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Keplin appears on p. 80.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you for your testimony. Mr. Fillman, thank you for being here. We look forward to your testimony. You are now recognized.

STATEMENT OF WILLIAM D. FILLMAN, JR.

Mr. FILLMAN. Thank you, Madam Chair. Madam Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin and Ranking Member Boozman and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs Transition Assistance Program and local outreach efforts to support separating servicemembers and their families during the transition from military to civilian life. With me today is Mr. John Smith, Director of the Dakota Regional Office.

The Transition Assistance Program is a joint effort of the VA, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Labor. TAP briefings are conducted nationwide and in Europe to prepare retiring or separating military personnel for return to civilian life. Members of the National Guard and Reserves may also elect to attend TAP.

At these briefings, servicemembers are informed of the array of VA benefits and services available, instructed on how to complete VA application forms, and advised on what evidence is needed to support their claims.

Following the general instruction segment, personal interviews are conducted with those servicemembers who would like assistance in preparing and submitting their applications for compensation and/or vocational rehabilitation and employment benefits. Additionally, servicemembers receive employment assistance, to include resume writing, skills marketing, job referral, and other transitional services.

In fiscal year 2007, the VA conducted 3,778 TAP briefings with 164,853 participants. As of June 30th of this year, we have conducted 3,083 TAP briefings for 128,600 participants. The participants included 111,113 active-duty members, 14,805 members of the Guard and Reserve, and 2,682 family members.

The Sioux Falls VA Regional Office actively supports the commitment to provide a seamless transition for retiring military members. In fiscal year 2007, the office conducted 16 TAP briefings for 467 participants. As of June 30th, the office has conducted 11 TAP briefings for 242 participants. The participants included 231 active-duty members, 6 members of the Guard and Reserve, and 5 family members.

The Sioux Falls Regional Office is working diligently to ensure members of the Guard and Reserve understand the VA benefits to which they may be entitled. In addition to TAP, the office has completed six outreach events for the Army National Guard and for the South Dakota Air National Guard since October of 2006. These events provided benefit information to 517 members of the Guard.

Madam Chairwoman, we at the VA are proud of our continuing role in serving this Nation's veterans. We continually evaluate and seek opportunities to improve the quality and the scope of our outreach efforts to members of the military and their families.

I hope that my testimony today has provided you and the Subcommittee with a better understanding of the Transition Assistance Program. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

This concludes my testimony. Mr. Smith and I will be pleased to answer any questions from Members of the Subcommittee.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Fillman appears on p. 81.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you, Mr. Fillman. I'll start with a question for you, based on some conversations I had during our short break, on the need to coordinate even more effectively in South Dakota.

You do a very good job among agencies, and in coordination and partnership but to get more part-time Guard and Reserve into TAP. So the figures that you just mentioned in your testimony, since June of 2008 in South Dakota, the office has conducted 11 TAP briefings for 242 participants in which six were members of the Guard and Reserve and five family members. Is this an average number of Guard, Reserve, and family members that participate in TAP on a monthly basis?

Mr. FILLMAN. I think I would have to ask John to answer that question.

Mr. SMITH. I would say that that represents an average of those. What we try to do when we have our scheduled TAP briefings at Ellsworth Air Force Base, we schedule it around them. If we have Guard units or Reserve units that are seeking assistance on one of their weekend drills, we do send a member from our office there to do some transitional briefings and also about what the VA can offer.

As far as the statistics that you see, they are pretty accurate.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. That number seems low to me. What kind of outreach is your office doing? Are you taking any steps to increase the participation of Guard and Reserve beyond just sending a representative to a weekend drill versus maybe stronger partnership with General Doohen, with some of the other agencies that can be more active in encouraging part-time Guard and Reserve participation? Especially because there may be a desire for a career change after deployment. There may not be, but there very well may be.

Any comments there?

Mr. SMITH. Well, I would say that participation at this point is an individual choice; and anybody that needs assistance, we will be there.

Now, I can tell you, a member of my staff was in the Naval Reserve; and he recognized the need to establish more of an outreach for benefit information at the VA office. He put together a package during one of his weekend drills after we sent it to him, and it was well received. Similar type of events we would welcome, but we would need to have some participation.

I was listening through testimony today where they're looking at mandatory TAP attendance; and I would say, from my perspective, it takes the same amount of energy and resources to talk about VA benefits to 5 people as it does to 50 or 500. But the more people that you have in attendance, the more efficient the programs become, the more they can understand and become aware. We're not

going to teach in a very small period of time what all the VA does, but just so they're aware that there's a point of contact.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. I don't see her here, and I wish I would have asked her this question when she was on the prior panel, but Ms. Machetta said that there is room for more National Guard. Oh, is she still here? There she is. I just want that concern for the record.

Ms. MACHETTA. Absolutely.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. So we're going to have you come down here, perhaps? Do you mind if we have Ms. Machetta come back down?

If there is room for more part-time Guards to participate? If there is a flexibility to provide those, not just at Ellsworth, but perhaps in Sioux Falls, I would think this is something, like you said, it increases the efficiency of the program.

Mr. Fillman, you have a comment?

Mr. FILLMAN. Yes, ma'am. This is not unique to South Dakota. This is a problem nationwide. When the Guard Reserve come back and they transition back from military service, as you heard earlier, they're ready to go home. They don't want to stay for the TAP briefings.

In the Guards, that presents a unique problem, because they're out in the various communities. And so we try to work with the Adjunct General's office in each State to make sure they're aware that we will provide service wherever—whenever it is requested, and if they would have a meeting on a weekend or would like us to bring a lobbyist over there, we would be very happy to do that.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. I appreciate that, Mr. Fillman.

Ms. Machetta, do you want to make a statement on the official record?

Ms. MACHETTA. Yes. We put a lot of our Web sites—all of our information out on a Web site that is worldwide now. People can reach that. Having spent 8 years in the Guard in the beginning of my career, I've always felt that that was really important.

We have room for at least 10 to 15 part-time Guard members and their spouses to come every month. Some months there's even room for more. And we can afford the opportunity to maybe have some TDYs, if necessary. We can work out funding for that if that would be helpful to maybe provide one in Pierre once in a while, one in South Dakota, maybe over in Sioux Falls.

If we put our heads together, I'm sure there are ways to reach it. But the big thing is the people have to know the benefits are out there, some of it, or there's no reason to ever increase it. So the word of mouth is really a critical part, and then from there I think we can take care of it. Even just training our folks from the same, you know, sister agencies. It doesn't have to be me. It doesn't have to be any one of us teaching it. We just have to have good quality of information to get out.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. I appreciate that.

Mr. Boozman, did you have any questions for the panel?

Mr. BOOZMAN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. McWilliam, I appreciate—we've been working on this now for several years, and I really do appreciate your working hard to try

and increase the numbers in the Transition Assistance Program. I know you've worked really hard at doing that.

You mentioned that we have 60-percent active, but the goal is 80 percent. I think the Marines is mandatory, and yet, theirs is not anywhere near a hundred percent.

I guess my question is, where do we go from here? You know, we've—one of the major things that we've overcome that came up a few years ago was the retention thing. The military was very concerned that if you told them about civilian benefits, they were going to leave.

And yet what we're finding, Mike was saying that, in the Navy, they found a 30-percent retention rate once they went out and they were comparing what they had in the military versus when they got out, not realizing because they hadn't heard of those benefits since they were recruited.

I guess, like I said, my questions are: Where do we go from here? What do we need to do? What help can we give you to push it forward? Is it just the fact that we're at war and stretched thin or is it—where do you see kind of the underlying structural things? It seems like everybody has bought into this now, but why aren't we getting it done?

Mr. MCWILLIAM. Mr. Boozman, as you mentioned, there has been an agreement with the Department of Defense to reach a goal of 85 percent that has been briefed at the highest levels within DoD. The service secretaries or the service chiefs have all had to present a plan to the Deputy Secretary of Defense on how they will achieve that record, that number, and they are moving toward that.

There is a Department of Defense memorandum that says once a servicemember elects to attend TAP, they have to be allowed to attend. So that's very positive. That's been out for over a year.

I think, for the Reservists, the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program is very good. It has the mandatory 30-, 60-, and 90-day unit assemblies; and TAP employment workshops are specifically mentioned as one of the services to be provided.

I think the Department of Defense is working very hard on moving this forward; and I think it just takes a while, as you mentioned, to achieve the numbers.

Mr. BOOZMAN. At the 85 percent level, do you have the staff to do that? I mean, do you all have to ramp up somewhat, you know, to get those kind of numbers done compared to 60 percent that you're doing now?

Mr. MCWILLIAM. Yes. Mr. Boozman, we are not interested in just doubling the class size. That's too many participants in the class. We have in the President's budget for 2009 included an increase specifically for TAP, which will allow us to support that higher figure.

Mr. BOOZMAN. Very good.

Mr. Fillman, how does the VA know where to send the VA discharge packets?

Mr. FILLMAN. They would come off the address from the DD–214s, I believe, sir, which is the discharge, and we would send those on out.

Mr. BOOZMAN. Is that a problem finding that and getting that done?

Mr. FILLMAN. It would all depend, I believe, on the address that's listed on the DD–214. If it's a current address, they should be able to receive it.

Mr. BOOZMAN. How many members have been processed through the BDD program?

Mr. FILLMAN. Sir, I'm not positive of the number. I think they have approximately 125 cases working their way through. There's only been, I believe, two that have completed the process. I'm not exactly sure on that because I haven't had a current briefing on that.

Mr. BOOZMAN. Tell us—tell me what's going on with the call center. How is it—the new call center in Muskogee, how is that going?

Mr. FILLMAN. The National Education Call Center in Muskogee, we got that implemented back in February. We were going to phase that in between February and July. We were able to move much quicker than that and had it totally implemented by the end of April. It's working real well, I'm proud to say.

The problem in education was we were not communicating—we didn't have an effective communication system with the phones. The lost call rate varied from—the best for RPO was about 10 percent, and the worst was about 25 percent. That's people who would hang up before they talked to a counselor. And the blocked call rate varied from, again, 10 percent to about 30 percent on calls not even able to get into the RPO they were trying to call.

I'm proud to say that, with the advent of the National Call Center for Education, the lost call rate is less than three percent, and there is a blocked call rate of zero percent, so everyone is able to get in. So it's working real well. We're very, very proud of that.

Mr. BOOZMAN. Very good.

Mr. Smith, does the staff in North Dakota Regional Office process BDD claims? And, if so, what's the process of that?

Mr. SMITH. On the BDD claims, we don't currently process any. Those that are on the pre-discharge exams, the claims that we get, we are running about 3 months, about 90 days on average to process those.

The members that are separating from active duty that have gone through the TAP program and are applying for benefits would be the types that can apply within 6 months to us for benefits. What we are finding is that they wait until about 2 to 3 weeks before their discharge and then give us their application at that time. If we had it sooner than before their discharge date—and, again, we mean 6 months—that would allow us some additional time to go through the process of that. We are obligated to approve his service notes that are done.

That is our number one delay in processing our claims, is getting the military treatment records. Of everything that I've done, that's been our biggest delay.

And from what I've heard here, they're not getting their DD–214 at the time of discharge. That, again, will delay our processes, because we need to have certain proof to show that they are now discharged from active duty.

But right now, South Dakota, on the total claims, we are running about 93 days on the average. And it's almost the leader in the Nation. It's number two in the Nation. That's basically the service

we're giving for our discharged members. We can improve our service if we can have better access to the military records.

Mr. BOOZMAN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Again, thank you, all of you all, for your service, working hard for veterans, and we really do appreciate the job that you're doing and hopefully can continue to help you.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you, Mr. Boozman.

I have a couple of questions.

Mr. McWilliam, you stated that in fiscal year 2007 almost 146,000 separating military personnel and spouses were trained in 4,715 TAPs worldwide. Is that active duty only?

Mr. MCWILLIAM. The majority of that is active duty only, yes, ma'am. There are some Reservists who attend those workshops. I don't have the number in front of me, but it's a very small number.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Could you follow up with us and get us the actual breakdown?

Mr. MCWILLIAM. Certainly.

[The information appears in the post-hearing questions and responses for the record, which appears on p. 86.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Can you tell us how many servicemembers separated in fiscal year 2007?

Mr. MCWILLIAM. It's approximately 200,000, ma'am, but I'd have to ask DoD to get that back to you.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Okay. Do you have any numbers specific to South Dakota, or can you give that to us as well?

Mr. MCWILLIAM. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Both for separation and Reservists?

Mr. MCWILLIAM. Yes, ma'am.

[The information appears in the post-hearing questions and responses for the record, which appears on p. 86.]

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. On the veterans' employment workshop that you mentioned, I think this is a great service, but I was wondering if you could identify what you think is the major reason that servicemembers and their families opt not to participate.

Mr. MCWILLIAM. Ma'am, I believe—and this is very anecdotal, based on trips that my Assistant Secretary and I have made to military installations. It was mentioned earlier the operational tempo of the military is very high right now. I think many people come back, especially from deployment and active duty, and they have one interest and that's to leave the service and to get out as quickly as they can, and that's what they do.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. A final question for you, Mr. McWilliam. You've mentioned that spouses have also received employment and job training assistance. Are families generally informed that these programs are available to them; and if so, how?

Mr. MCWILLIAM. Ma'am, spouses are eligible to attend the employment workshops. Approximately 3,100 have over the last year.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. How are they informed?

Mr. MCWILLIAM. I don't know, ma'am. I would assume they are through the Department of Defense and through the publicity for the TAP employment workshop, but I will ask the Department of Defense people and get back to you.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Okay. It's too bad we can't ask them ourselves here today, but I appreciate that, Mr. McWilliam.

Mr. KELPIN. Okay, so there are 16 trained ombudsmen here in South Dakota. Correct? That's just here in South Dakota.

Mr. KELPIN. Yes, ma'am. We have 16 trained in the State of South Dakota.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. I think you said that there were 116 information request filings and 14 cases, but no cases had been sent on in 18 months, that those were fielded and mediated by the ombudsmen.

Mr. KELPIN. That is correct.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Understanding the privacy concerns here, as it relates to employment and their rights, can you tell us generally for the Subcommittee's edification, have you seen any trends identified in those information cases? Was it just generally an employer not being as familiar as they might otherwise be with USERRA rights? Anything related to the disability in combination that you mentioned specific to PTSD? Can you offer the Subcommittee anything, as to what the outcomes might have been of some of those cases that were fielded and mediated?

Mr. KELPIN. The breakdown of fiscal year 2007 issues that our ombudsmen dealt with: We had five retirements. We ended up with seven seniority or status type positions, six termination for vacation, six dealt with benefits, and one was over promotions.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Okay. But those were all mediated over the last 18 months.

Mr. KELPIN. That is correct, successfully.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Very good.

One last question for you, Mr. Fillman. It's helpful to hear that the VA and DoD are working together to ensure wider dissemination of information with regard to the array of benefits and services offered. One of the things that we learned in Indiana, at a field hearing there, is that—when we did have someone from DoD at that field hearing testifying—was some of the information that was being disseminated was only available to active-duty servicemembers. We had a spouse of a Reservist testifying firsthand of receiving no information, and the DoD witness acknowledged that that information about benefits wasn't distributed, it was almost like DoD didn't feel it was their responsibility to give it to National Guardsmen and women and Reservists.

Can you share with us examples of the information that you are providing? I assume that this is going out to Guardsmen and women in terms of the information that the VA is sending out, understanding the issue of the delay and the questions Mr. Boozman posed about where you're sending it and that's the address put on the DD–214.

Mr. SMITH. Well, I don't know specifically how to answer that question, other than that, I do know that those that were activated when they are at the demobolization sites, there are people that are giving the TAP sessions, so they're aware of that.

And, as I mentioned before, we are available to go out to the various Guard units, but I would offer that they do need improvement on more information as to what is available, so I would offer any additional resources or invitations to them.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. I appreciate that, Mr. Smith. You and Mr. Fillman may be aware that we have a legislative hearing in the Subcommittee on a bill introduced by Congressman Dennis Cardoza that would actually authorize a compact disc with that information being disseminated to every servicemember following deployment. We are working with Mr. Cardoza to try to move that bill.

While it has been identified by the Congressional Budget Office having costs associated with it, we think it's far worth whatever cost it is to be able to distribute and contact veterans with this benefit information for our military members and their families. We hope to be able to have some good news on that from this Congress early next Congress to facilitate the efforts of your office.

Unless Mr. Boozman has any final questions? I want to thank all of you on this final panel as well for being here. The testimony you've offered and the insights that you've shared and your service to the Nation's veterans and in your respective capacities with the—working with the employers, working with the VA, and certainly with the Department of Labor, all of them do great work on behalf of our servicemembers.

I also want to take a moment to thank, again, Mr. Boozman for traveling to South Dakota once again. We like having our Arkansans in South Dakota, especially during the summer, so you can take the good word back to get out of the humidity and come up to South Dakota during your summer vacations, to your constituents down there.

I want to thank those here at Rapid City Central High School for accommodating us, those in the auditorium to work these field hearings, the Rapid City community for always being so open and receptive to anything that we're doing in our official capacity to help our servicemembers, and our veterans.

And, of course, very strong words of appreciation for members of our Subcommittee staff who are here, who counsel us effectively, who help us prepare, who work during all of the preparation but also the important followup that we'll be pursuing and all of the logistics associated, again, with getting us out of Washington, DC, and out in the field to be with all of you.

We thank all of the folks that are here from our offices, as well as the folks from the community, and those of you with the TAP programs who have traveled here as well, and also those who served on our panels. Thank you very much.

The hearing now stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 1:26 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

Prepared Statement of Hon. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, Chairwoman, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

It is an honor and a privilege to be here with you in South Dakota. I would like to thank our servicemembers, their families and everyone here with us today. I would also like to thank the distinguished Ranking Member John Boozman, of Arkansas, for joining us here in Rapid City.

Like other States across the country, South Dakota has seen many of its servicemembers activated in support of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Over two-thirds of the South Dakota Air National Guard's 1,012 members have actively supported the Global War on Terrorism, since the September 11 attacks on America, either at home or abroad in 15 countries. In addition, since the terrorist attacks on America, the South Dakota Army National Guard has mobilized more than 3,100 soldiers. Also, 200 airmen and women from Ellsworth Air Force Base, which has been supporting missions in the Middle East since 9/11, and are currently preparing to deploy to Southwest Asia.

Many of our brave service men and women in South Dakota are returning in need of healthcare, employment, housing, educational, and other services. They, like all our veterans across the country, deserve our best efforts in providing the resources to ensure a seamless transition from military service to civilian life.

On June 19, 2006, the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, under the leadership of then Chairman Boozman, held a field hearing nearby at Ellsworth Air Force Base to discuss the Transition Assistance Program and the Montgomery GI Bill. During that hearing, some of our panelists suggested expanding evening classes or online resources to accommodate servicemembers and their spouses' working schedules. Others had brought up the prospect of making the program mandatory for separating servicemembers and expanding existing Montgomery G. I. Bill benefits.

Today, we are gathered here again to reexamine the Transition Assistance Program and the progress we have made from two years ago. We will also have the opportunity to learn how the program is assisting our veterans in a seamless transition into employment and community life.

As many of you know, the Transition Assistance Program was established to meet the needs of separating servicemembers during their period of readjustment into civilian life. The program offers job-search assistance and related services such as workshops on resume writing, interview process, labor market overviews, personal appraisal, and VA benefits. The program seeks to provide veterans with the skills and services needed to transition into the workforce.

During my time in office, I have had the opportunity to meet with many local government officials and veterans here in South Dakota. In addition, this Subcommittee has received many recommendations from government and military officials, veteran service organizations, and concerned citizens from across the country. I am glad to note that we succeeded in making progress for our servicemembers and veterans. Included in the final version of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2008, we were able to gain bipartisan support for language that would allow mobilized members of the Reserve Forces to use their Reserve Educational Assistance Program, also known as REAP, benefits for 10 years after they separated from the Guard or Reserve.

Furthermore, we made great progress in passing the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act that was recently enacted into law. This Act will enable most veterans to attend a public four-year school and provide a housing stipend based on the veteran's zip-code. The new program will also help pay for the cost of books and other expenses associated with attending school. Many of their dependents will also be eligible to receive these benefits if the servicemember meets certain enlistment requirements. While this progress is long overdue, we must remain committed to reviewing all benefits to help meet the needs of our servicemembers and veterans.

We are glad to see some of our panelists here today who were with us two years ago. We hope to hear more from all our panelists with regards to how the Transition Assistance Program can better serve our veterans.

I look forward to working with Ranking Member Boozman and other Members of this Subcommittee to ensure that our servicemembers and veterans are provided proper benefits to help them succeed in life after the military. The men and women who serve our Nation honorably deserve and should receive the best our country can offer.

Prepared Statement of Hon. John Boozman, Ranking Republican Member, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

Good afternoon Madam Chairwoman.

I believe we were here about 2 years ago and I remember the warm hospitality extended to me by the citizens of South Dakota and I greatly appreciate that.

I would like to announce that your Congresswoman did such a good job as my Ranking Member during the 109th Congress that I thought she should get a chance to be the Chairwoman during the 110th Congress. I need to start negotiating with her to get my old job back.

We are here to hear from South Dakotans about their experiences with the Transition Assistance Program or TAP. TAP is designed to provide servicemembers with the basic skills and knowledge to reenter the civilian world. As such, TAP appears to have mixed results.

It is a success because the information being put out touches a wide variety of topics of importance to those leaving military service. Unfortunately, a significant portion of servicemembers either choose not to attend or are not allowed to attend TAP training.

According to a July 17, 2008 audit by the VA Inspector General titled Veterans Benefits Administration Transition Assistance for Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom servicemembers and veterans, in 2006 and 2007, only 43 percent and 47 percent of OEF/OIF servicemembers participated in TAP, falling short of VBA's goal of 53 percent. Clearly VBA needs to do a much better job in reaching out to veterans.

I am also very disturbed that the same Inspector General report shows that the highly touted Benefits Delivery at Discharge or BDD program is not meeting its goal to process benefit claims for severely wounded OEF/OIF veterans within 30 days. The IG noted that of the nearly 5,000 claims received by Regional Offices, only 24 percent were processed within 30 days. The other 76 percent of claims averaged 114 days with some taking as long as 504 days.

Madam Chairwoman, while oversight of the basic claims processing system falls outside of our Subcommittee, its performance certainly delays a disabled veteran's ability to access programs within our jurisdiction such as vocational rehabilitation benefits and specially adapted housing benefits. These two programs alone are essential to a smooth transition to civilian life for disabled veterans.

With most locations providing TAP over a two and a half day period, members are literally deluged with information and if they don't pay attention, they will likely miss something important.

Members of the National Guard and Reserves pose a special challenge because of the dispersed nature of their duty stations. In my mind, we need to do a better job preparing members of the Guard and Reserves, especially those who own businesses, prior to deployment. When those members return, we need to ensure they have full access to all benefits and programs for which they are eligible.

Finally, many of those leaving military service will enter school or training programs under the GI Bill. I'm sure that most servicemembers are aware that Congress passed and the President signed into law a new, much more generous GI Bill education and training benefit. I want to recognize your efforts to improve education benefits by introducing and passing H.R. 5684, a greatly improved education benefit that I believe was superior in many ways to the new GI Bill program now signed into law. It did not make the final cut, but it was a great bill.

Madam Chairwoman, you have brought us an excellent group of witnesses, even a husband a wife team and I am eager to hear from them.

Prepared Statement of Yvette S. Lassegard Rapid City, SD
(Veteran's Spouse)

Thank you, Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin and other committee members for the opportunity to speak with you about my experiences with transition. My name is Yvette Lassegard. My husband Ole is a sergeant for the 235th Military Police Company in the South Dakota Army National Guard. We have one son Aric, he is 6 years old.

Ole is a war veteran, having served twice in support of Iraqi Freedom. His first deployment was a stateside mission at Ft. Carson Colorado from February 2003 to January 2004, and most recently he served in Afghanistan from October 2006 to January 2008 (12 months in country 3 months training).

I served as the Lead-Volunteer for the Family Readiness Group of our unit during both deployments and through the down time in between. This job was not always very easy, but it will be an experience I will carry with me for a lifetime.

During the first deployment, our soldiers were stateside, which even though they were on home ground and it was not as stressful in the sense of the constant danger, it was no easier than their deployment overseas. They still were not (home). The transition back into our family and civilian lives I think went pretty smoothly at a personal level. However, even though these soldiers were considered veterans, after this deployment, I don't think they always were treated as veterans by society. They heard a lot of "Oh you were only stateside, that's not so bad." It was no different in most ways, they were still away from their families, civilian jobs, homes and they were treated as "deployed soldiers" by the military. These soldiers did have many of the same sacrifices, even though some people did not understand that.

When our unit was activated to go to Afghanistan about two years later, it was very different. The stress level was higher, they were in a war zone, again away from families, jobs, and home, but there was more support from the public. People were more accepting of this "real deployment." When they came home this time they were treated like veterans, even though most of them already were veterans before they were in foreign soil. Transition this time, I think has been different; we both have become stronger and a little more independent in our time apart. Different things are more important to us, the most important being each other and our son. This time I worry about things like PTSD, and what other things Ole might be experiencing but, I do know that I felt more prepared to help with what he may need.

I think that our State does a wonderful job with helping the families and the soldiers both during deployments and transitions back into civilian life. Our State Family Assistance Center offers amazing support and information. They worked with me and the rest of the Family Readiness Group to help keep the families across our State informed about what was going on with their soldiers during deployment as well as help them prepare for the returning soldiers. The programs that are offered are outstanding, *Military OneSource*, Troop and Family Counseling, the TRICARE benefits, and the benefits that the VA offers. I think that continued education for both the families as well as the soldiers about these programs is very important, especially after a deployment. I also think that trying to continue to educate the public is important. When a National Guard unit is deployed it affects everyone in the community, not only do loved ones leave, but employees, employers, community volunteers, and friends. These deployments bring back changed soldiers, whether it is a stateside mission or an overseas mission if more people are aware of the effects deployments can have as a whole, I think that transitions would be easier for everyone especially the soldiers.

Thank you for your time.

Prepared Statement of Sergeant Ole D. Lassegard, USANG,
Member, 235th Military Police Company,
South Dakota Army National Guard

Thank you, Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin and other committee members for the opportunity to speak with you. My name is Ole Lassegard I am a sergeant with the 235th Military Police Company in the South Dakota Army National Guard. My wife Yvette and I have one son Aric, he is six.

I joined the Army National Guard in September 1993 in order to pay for college. I will have completed 15 years of service in September of this year, and will have 19 and a half years of service when my current enlistment is finished. I do plan to serve twenty or more years.

During my 14 years of service I have been on State duty for 1 fire in the Black Hills (Jasper), helped with snow and power pole removal near Watertown South Da-

kota after a major blizzard, and did security detail at Camp Rapid after 9/11. I have also serviced on active duty orders twice.

My first deployment was a stateside mission in Ft. Carson Colorado from February 2003 to January 2004. During this deployment we conducted law and order missions while the active duty Military Police from Ft. Carson went overseas.

My second deployment was an overseas mission to Afghanistan from October 2006 to February 2008. During this deployment my unit conducted missions that consisted of detainee Ops (enemy prisoner of war), convoy security, law and order on some of the smaller forward observation bases (F.O.B.'s), customs missions on several smaller outlying F.O.B.'s, and village assessments.

Being away from my family was not easy either time. During my time in Ft. Carson it was very frustrating to be so close to home, but not be at home. My integration back into my family life and my civilian job was fairly smooth. While deployed to Afghanistan, things were different. I was half way around the world from my family and home. Being in a war zone was very stressful. This time when I came home, integration back into my civilian life has been a little different. Yvette and I have both become stronger more independent people. My son Aric had finished preschool and was almost done with kindergarten and had grown up so much. The most important part of our lives now, is our time together as a family. My transition back to my civilian job has gone good without any major problems.

Our demobilization was at Ft. Carson Colorado. The out processing including briefings/debriefings were long and drawn out. We felt that some of it could have been completed at our home station Camp Rapid so we could have been with our families after having been gone for more than a year. Once I was home, I was able to get into the VA at Ft. Meade for a dental appointment within a week. However my post deployment medical check up before going back to work was not as easy. I was told at first I should get an appointment in 30 days. This did not happen. I was told several different times that they were "full" and I would have to wait. When checking back in with them I was getting several different stories, depending on whom I would talk to. Things were finally straightened out and I was able to get the appointments I needed. It was very frustrating for me to have had to deal with this, but in all the VA has been a nice benefit in which I will continue to use as needed.

Thank you for your time.

Prepared Statement of Master Sergeant Roxanne Krebs, USAF, Ellsworth Air Force Base, SD

Madam Chairwoman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present my experience with the Transition Assistance Program or TAP.

I have been in the Air Force for 21 years and will be retiring at the end of this year. Since the Air Force has been my only career since the age of 18, I've never had the opportunity to gain the experience my civilian counterparts have with conducting a job search, preparing a resume or holding a job interview. Although my military career has allowed me to grow and develop into a leader who will be successful in any job I hold, the TAP workshop provided me with the fine tuning I needed to effectively market myself to a potential civilian employer.

Over the past few years I had numerous friends who went to TAP workshops here at Ellsworth Air Force Base and overseas at Osan Air Base in the Republic of Korea and every one of them couldn't say enough about the program. Although I had heard wonderful things about TAP over the past few years, I kept putting it off because something would come up. Finally in May of this year I realized I needed to figure out how I was going to start searching for a job after retirement, so I finally signed up for the 3-day June workshop through the Ellsworth Air Force Base Airmen and Family Readiness Center. This was the best decision of my career. Now I can't stop talking about the workshop to everyone I know who is separating or even thinking about retiring.

During the TAP workshop, we not only learned how to write a resume, conduct ourselves during a job interview, and what veterans programs and benefits are available, but we were also provided opportunities to speak with real civilian employers. The employers provided us opportunities to discuss with them what they are looking for in potential employees, how they view resumes and their tips on conducting an interview. Once they finished briefing the whole group, we were provided one-on-one opportunities to meet with the employers for further individualized feedback. One final aspect I really appreciated was the volume of reference materials

we were provided. From Web sites to magazines to books all covering different aspects of the job search. One of the most priceless reference Web sites showed me how to convert military terminology into the equivalent civilian terminology which allows my resume to be competitive.

Some people would argue why offer a career workshop which costs time and money the Department of Defense doesn't have when an individual could just go to a local college and pay for a similar class. I would argue that a local college can't provide a class designed to meet the unique and specific needs of our military culture. Only a program created for and run by both veterans and the military can meet the unique needs of transitioning military personnel. I truly believe this was one of the most comprehensive and informative workshops I have ever taken throughout my life and believe it will continue to help make a big difference in the lives of all military personnel. Thank you again for allowing me the opportunity to present my experience with the Transition Assistance Program.

Prepared Statement of Mark Koopman, Servicemember, Ellsworth Air Force Base, SD (Recent Transition Assistance Program Attendee)

Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin, Ranking Member Boozman, and members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the Transition Assistance Program attendees and instructors for several governmental agencies, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to present information concerning my experience with the Transition Assistance Program and give you three reasons why I support it.

After being out of the civilian workforce for 20 plus years, day one of TAP gave me a wealth of knowledge on getting back "in the game." I no longer felt like an outsider looking in. Granted, I experienced "information overload" but now felt like I had been given the competitive edge that I needed for my job search, with access to tools such as Web sites, job search, personal appraisal information, financial guidance, etc.

Day two of TAP was even more valuable. It consisted of teaching me how to fill out a job application, understand the five different types of resumes (chronological, functional, combination, federal and targeted), the importance of and know-how on completing cover letters, and finally, writing my own resume.

Day three was equally important as it consisted of the interview process. They taught us basic elements such as preparation (know the company), and knowing the job description. As basic as this sounds, we needed to be reminded of this. Getting my "30 second commercial" done—having to sell myself! Finding out that there are so many types of interviews: phone, board, one-on-one, e-mail—and that I had to always be ready to interview. We discussed tough questions and how to handle them in interviews. I understood that I must be able show in the interview how I can contribute to this company—by increasing their profits or satisfying their need. Without the last half of the day to learn about personal veteran benefits, I know that I would not have been able to protect my family and best use the benefits that are available to me.

In summary, I've explained why the three day TAP class has benefited me and why I believe it is invaluable to all veterans. Please continue to support it as I do.

Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin, Ranking Member Boozman, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for taking the time to hear about my experience with the Transition Assistance Program. This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Prepared Statement of Kimberly S. Geffre, Servicemember, Ellsworth Air Force Base, SD (Recent Transition Assistance Program Attendee)

Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin, Ranking Member Boozman, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present information concerning my experience with the Ellsworth Air Force Base's Transition Assistance Program and reasons why I support it.

I am honored to have served my country over 19 years. In May 2007, I deployed to Iraq and shortly after my departure, my husband was relocated for a one-year assignment in Central America. I have had the opportunity to benefit from many of the services provided at Ellsworth Air Force Base including pre-deployment and post-deployment services and most recently the Transition Assistance Program.

I have been out of the civilian workforce for almost 20 years, and was intimidated on the transition back into civilian life. This course provided me great insight into

areas I should consider prior to separating. I was given information to assist me in job search, access to tools such as Web sites, personal appraisal information, financial guidance, etc. I only wish I would have attended earlier and had more time to get prepared.

The training I received was very informative and presented in a logical format. Lessons included how to fill out job applications, understand different types of resumes, the importance of cover letters, and the instructors even provided assistance to me in drafting my own resume. I learned keys to job searching such as preparation (knowing the company), knowing the job description, and different types of interviews. The last day I learned about my veteran's benefits and specifically about programs I didn't know were available to me. Every military member should attend this class.

There is one area of concern I have in applying for civil service following military service. Although benefits and preferences are available for veterans after separation, the hiring systems for civil service may not allow you to take advantage of veteran's preferences until you receive the final DD Form 214. In the past, a copy of this document was provided to the member during their last appointment to outprocess. It is now mailed to the servicemember and can take more than a month from the date of separation. Many members who are retiring spend up to 60 days on terminal leave attempting to secure employment, and in some cases remain unemployed for as long as 3 months before they can take advantage of the VA preferences because they have not received the DD Form 214. Compounding this problem is the complicated hiring system. In my current position, I have worked through this difficult hiring process to hire a civilian employee and it took months. On USAJOBS.com, positions were listed that were not truly open (two other civilian positions in my office) and there were positions open for months that remained unfilled because someone in the reviewing process determined the applicant was unqualified. This process was very difficult for the unit waiting for the position to be filled, and frustrating for applicants who needed employment and had applied but did not receive feedback on why they were found to not be qualified. This hiring system needs significant work.

Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin, Ranking Member Boozman, and members of the Subcommittee, I support your efforts to review and improve the Transition Assistance Programs offered throughout our Nation and hope that the information provided here today is of help to you. This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Prepared Statement of Major General Steven R. Doohen, Adjutant General, South Dakota National Guard, and Secretary, South Dakota Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

Madam Chairwoman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to the issues regarding the care, treatment and benefits of our Soldiers, Airmen and families. Soldiers and Airmen of the South Dakota National Guard continue to answer the call on behalf of our Nation and State of South Dakota. As you know, the National Guard is a dual mission organization. We have a State mission supporting the Governor and our citizens in their time of need, responding to man-made and natural disasters of our state. Our other mission is the Federal mission of reinforcing the Army and Air Force and their missions all over the world. Since 9/11, the South Dakota National Guard has and continues to do a superb job answering the call, supporting our great nation. We currently have over 4,100 Soldiers and Airmen assigned. Fortunately we are over 100 percent of personnel assigned and constantly rank within the top five states relating to recruiting and retention. The South Dakota Army National Guard has deployed over 3,200 Soldiers which is over 94 percent of their personnel, while the South Dakota Air Guard has deployed over 900 Airmen which is over 90 percent fighting against the global war on terror.

These unprecedented deployments required us to change the way we take care of our Soldiers, Airmen, and families. Before our units deployed, my predecessor determined we should prepare ourselves for the return of these heroes and provide better assistance for their families. They held several mental health summits with the State's mental health professionals, Veteran's Administration officials, State Health officials, and the Veteran's service organization. These summits helped us organize a plan for the reunion and reintegration of our Soldier and Airman. We continue to enhance our programs providing the best possible services, recently we revised our Reintegration program.

Reintegration and transition is a process rather then an event. We pave the road to reintegration even before the service members are deployed. We emphasize communications to family members and supply letter writing kits, morale purpose computers and free software for Internet audio-visual sessions.

During the deployment, we continue building strong families through family readiness group activities and positive youth programs.

The program is most popular for the pre-deployment efforts but these could not be successful without a robust program that also addresses pre-mobilization and mobilization involvement.

We have an eight phases, Yellow Ribbon Reunion and Reintegration program.

PHASE 1—Preparation for the returning servicemembers.

Phase to occur eight to twelve weeks in advance of Service Member Return. Focus on providing awareness to families about expectations of the return.

- Send Families the *Down Range to Iraq and Back Book* or *Courage After Fire Book* 60–90 days prior to the returning unit. The book is accompanied with a letter encouraging the family to read and share with families both of the books which cover topics of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Transitional issues such as returning to community, employment, parental and spousal roles. The books offer insight on dealing with the challenges of deployment as well as resources available upon return to assist in the reintegration process.
- Thirty to sixty days prior to the return of the deployed unit, a meeting for the awaiting Families is hosted by the Chaplain Team to discusses the emotional stages of reintegration. The focus of the meeting is to create awareness for all family dynamics; children, parents, significant others. The topics of discussion provide education and awareness of the signs and symptoms of PTSD.
- After the prior steps have been conducted (separate meeting) our Family Assistance Center provides entitlement and benefit information to the awaiting Families. The meeting is set up to provide an introduction of entitlements, resources and service agencies available to support our returning Veterans and Families. The following topics make up the agenda and the message is provided by the representative responsible for the service. The concept is truly surrounding "community partnerships."

TRICARE—Health Care changes with reintegration
Education—entitlements for Veterans both State and Federal
Vet Center—services and resources available
Family Assistance Center—"easy button" easy access to support and resources
County Veteran Service Officer—the CVSO responsible for the returning unit and overview of VA medical centers
Employer Support—re-employment rights and contacts
Troop & Family counseling service
Military OneSource and community mental health clinics.

PHASE 2—Preparing the Community for the return

Reintegration extends beyond Families. The concept to offer training, awareness and support to our great South Dakota Communities building strength in our churches, employers and local businesses. WORK IN PROGRESS—working to identify solution and success.

PHASE 3—WELCOME HOME—South Dakota READY

Welcoming our returning Service Members home at the Demobilization Station. Sending South Dakota representation to greet and provide contacts to Service Members as they prepare to return to home station. Representation sent to de-mobilization site; County Veteran Service Officers, Chaplain, Family Readiness Staff, SD National Guard Medical Staff. Placing a name with a face.

PHASE 4—Deactivation Ceremony

The opportunity for South Dakota to reunite with returning Service Members through ceremony and local community events.

PHASE 5—Outreach

Thirty to forty-five days upon Service Member return a letter is sent to the Service Member and Family reminding of support available. The letter highlights services, resources and "easy button" options available. Enclosed with the letter handouts of Mental Wellness Offices, Strong Bonds advertisement and Family Assistance Center resources are included.

PHASE 6—Wellness Call

A phone call made to the Service Member thirty to sixty days from release of active duty. The purpose of the call is to touch base, ensure Service Member knows

support is a phone call away and offer answers to any pending questions, concerns or issues.

PHASE 7—Reunion Drill

MANDATORY PARTICIPATION—First drill back Service Member required and Family (spouse and parents) invited/strongly encouraged. The drill is family oriented and takes place away from the armory and at a hotel. The drill is a paid drill and reimbursement is provided to cover mileage, hotel expenses and child care is available to maximize participation from families. This event is all about the Military Family. The agenda of the weekend is as follows:

Friday—travel day and social event in the evening.

Saturday—9 am start only one hour of presentation with introduction of all supporting offices and representatives.

Service Members and Families are provided with a checklist that has the following listed:

TRICARE
Family Assistance Center
VA Hospital
County Veteran Service Officer
Chaplain Office
Vet Center
Employer Support
Education
Counseling and Mental Health—Military Family Life Consultants
Community mental health clinics

After the introductions are complete Service Members with Family Members go to each one of the stations. The concept is to minimize Service Members from feeling uneasy about visiting with any one provider by requiring everyone to go to each station. This also allows for both the Service Member and his/her family to address questions and concerns direct to individual need. Breaking down intimidation barriers and ensuring everyone leaves with a great knowledge of available support and resources. Based upon the size of the event creates the number of representatives at each station. The goal would be for the Service Mmembers and Families to continue to move freely from station to station and not a weekend of wait.

The only other group presentation is the mental wellness brief. Through the services of Military Life Consultants a Counselor(s) are brought in to have an interactive group session. The goal is to create a comfortable setting for open discussion about the transitions of deployment thus far and potential issues to come. Attempt to set up in a circle setting with counselor sitting within the group. Open discussions hopefully providing comfort in knowing "you are not alone" as well as creating an atmosphere to feel comfortable with sharing and communicating.

The First Drill Back occurs sixty to ninety days upon return from deployment. Loads of great information is available about resources, benefits and support. The most important function of the event is to provide our Service Members with the opportunity to reunite in a stress free environment with fellow Service Members, and just as important Families having the same opportunity to reunite with one another.

PHASE 8—Post Deployment Health Reassessment (PDHRA)

Medical Screening done at second drill back. Testing on many different levels from physical issues caused by deployment to mental wellness issues caused by deployment. Atmosphere is focused on confidentiality and encouragement to speak freely about needs. Matters brought up are identified and Soldiers are referred to the Veterans Administration. Education on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder to recognize within self as well as others and seeking support to address matters.

Prior to 9/11, the staffing of the South Dakota National Guard was either 1–2 people deep or non-existent concerning Veteran's Services to Service Members and Families. Since 9/11 and the multiple deployments of our Guardsmen we have created a Family Wellness Branch. This branch consists of: our Family Programs, Veteran's Transition Assistance, Chaplain, Funeral Honors, and Employer Support Guard/Reserve.

The creation of the Wellness Branch was designed to assist Service Members, Families, and Employers during the entire period of service being performed by our Service member. This innovative approach to a combined effort lessened the administrative burdens on the traditional administrative personnel sections, and provides a unified focus for benefits and services for the Service Member and Family.

I would be remised if I did not discuss a major issue facing our returning HEROES, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Ever time I meet with Soldier, Airmen, and Veteran, I stress the important of obtaining help should you need assist-

ance in regard to PTSD or any other reunion or reintegration issue. South Dakota is very fortunate that we have a wonderful Veteran Administration health care system and several Veterans Centers that provide outstanding service and support to our Veterans.

We continue to work on the stigma our service members feel about obtaining the necessary mental health care they require. We are grateful that the Department of Defense's decision to change a question on the government security clearance form referencing an applicant's mental health history. "Question 21" on Standard Form 86 specifically asked applicants whether they ever received treatment for mental health issues. This is a big step toward removing the stigma relating to mental health care, since service members often feel they place their security clearance at risk should they seek mental health care.

I thank you, key members of Congress, for providing the funding for programs such as the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program. Programs such as these that care for our soldiers and families prior to deployment, during deployments and long after their return from deployment is critical to their proper reintegration back into their civilian careers. As a nation we have come along way of taking care of those that are serving our country. I thank all of you for the support you have given to our Heroes that have volunteered to serve their State and Country. I thank you for the privilege and opportunity to be with you today. I am very proud to wear the uniform and serve in the ranks of these great young men and women.

Madam Chairwoman, this concludes my testimony. Are there any questions?

Prepared Statement of Susan Machetta, Community Readiness Consultant, Transition Assistance Program Coordinator, Ellsworth Air Force Base, SD, Transition Assistance Program

Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin, Ranking Member Boozman, and members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the Transition Assistance Program attendees and instructors for several governmental agencies, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to present information concerning Ellsworth Air Force Base's Transition Assistance Program.

Deciding to leave the service, whether through retirement or separation, is an incredibly personal decision and it is essential that we make this program available early in the member's decision-making process. For the program to do what it is intended to do, ease the transition to civilian life as well as ensure that the member is making a fully considered choice as to his or her career path, it is often needed two to three years prior to making the final decision. If the decision only involved where to work and what to wear, transition would be easy. But when you consider the financial and emotional aspects of this decision for the member and his or her family, how and where to settle, how to make best use of educational opportunities, how to best use the skills gained while in our service, and most importantly, how and when to access their benefits, this is a decision that should not be made in the last weeks or months of service.

Each quarter, we have increased attendance at the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) classes and we feel this is due to the quality of service and the flexibility with which we provide our services. A strong cohesive team built with our Airman and Family Readiness Center, Ellsworth's senior leadership and all of the partner agencies from the Department of Labor and Department of Veterans' Affairs help to solidify and strengthen our program. When we asked that commander's attention be given to the needs of the service members and that they be allowed to attend early in the decision process (up to 3 years before actual separation or retirement), our commanders and first sergeants concurred and are now, where possible, allowing members to attend early to begin planning. Members are highly encouraged to bring spouses to the class and we are seeing an increase in spouse attendance. Having two sets of ears to capture all of the information provided greatly eases family stress—and ensures the spouse knows of the benefits available to them as well.

We encourage members to come back for refresher training and take advantage of just-in-time assistance with portions of the class as they reach the final stage of their career. Flexibility has been a must to make this happen. They may only need a private visit or an hour or two of the class—but if they need it, we make sure they have access to it. We see a huge concern of members is whether or not they will be prepared for employment as they leave the service. One individual attending class last year discovered that by staying in for an additional tour of duty, he could add $11,000.00 in benefit to his GI bill and begin working on a doctorate by finishing up his master's degree while on active duty. In his case, attending the class

was a valuable recruiting tool for the Air Force. Many others struggled with not knowing what they were qualified to do, or how to begin writing their resumes. To ease that burden, we provide over 100 open and valid job announcements from a variety of sources each and every month so they are working on solid employer needs as they craft their resume—and they have, through our joined staff efforts, many individuals to assist with fine tuning their resume before the end of class.

By attending the program early, they have a better understanding of what they will need, who can assist them, and immediate access to literally hundreds of employment and benefit Web sites and services. With attendance at the class taken care of, we have been able to assist many members from deployed locations with finalizing resumes, assisting them with search engines, preparing budgets that will actually work for them, ensuring insurance needs are taken care of, etc. Templates for cover letters, resumes, grammar tools, immediate access to detailed position descriptions, VA benefits—all are available through our local website—no matter who needs access or where they are located. When word got out at some of our deployed locations that Ellsworth members were able to work on resumes and benefits during down times, service members from sister agencies were able to immediately access the same information and receive assistance with editing or other needs. Members from other installations and services have specifically requested TDY orders to come from as far away as Oregon to attend our offering because of the personal service offered. An Air Force Reserve commander from Oregon recently brought his wife with him to a class as he knew he would be retiring near here in about six months. On the way back to Oregon from his TDY, he had a heart attack. His wife, who had stayed behind to assist family in the local area, found it tremendously helpful to have attended the program. She was able to assist him and his doctors in ensuring their lives would not be devastated by what had happened. He was able to finish his career and look into the benefits of regular or disability retirement and together, they made a decision that was right for them.

We continually monitor statistics on attendance and quality of service provided. Our Department of Labor folks review all statistics as well and have quickly responded to our needs—adding four additional classes per year for the past two years so that we can confidently say we never turn away any veteran or spouse of a veteran wanting to attend. One of the most critical areas of statistics that I see is the need to ensure financial stability of the veteran and ensure they understand the difference between pay and entitlements while in the service and what will be received after separation. When first assuming responsibility for this program, I saw that three-quarters of our separating or retiring people were greatly concerned about their finances. Unfortunately, when we only saw them in the program during the last month or two of their careers, there was little we could do. Now that we have changed the emphasis on when to attend to at least one to three years before retirement, the member has time to fully comprehend what will be needed and make necessary adjustments. Individual assistance with debt load or assistance with planning can now be provided. The results are significant—members are seeking assistance early on and are much more aware of what they need. We see fewer people stressed over finances—and new attendees to the class are often indicating they are attending not because of orders or brochures, but because a friend or co-worker recommended the program to them. We help our members create solutions and minimize stress!

Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin, Ranking Member Boozman, and members of the Subcommittee, we support your efforts to review and improve the Transition Assistance Programs offered throughout our nation and hope that the information provided here today is of help to you. This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Prepared Statement of Shane A. Olivier, Veterans Education Program Specialist, South Dakota State Approving Agency

Introduction

Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin, Ranking Member Boozman and members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, I am pleased to appear before you today on behalf of the South Dakota State Approving Agency to provide comments on the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Chapter 33) and the value of the South Dakota State Approving Agency.

Remarks

Public Law 110–252

(Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008—Chapter 33)

We are very pleased with the enactment of Public Law 110–252 (Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008—Chapter 33). The South Dakota State Approving Agency and the National Association of State Approving Agencies, of which we are a member, worked hard over the last several years to bring improvements to the educational assistance programs for those who defend the freedoms that we all so thoroughly enjoy. Our goal of attaining a Total Force GI Bill—one that truly provides equal opportunities and benefits for equal service rendered to the nation—will finally be realized on August 1, 2009, for those seeking a college degree. All service members, active duty and selected reserve will be equally recognized for their sacrifices and contributions.

Additionally, our goal of having the "GI Bill" keep pace with the escalating costs of education also will be achieved. Veterans will no longer have to forgo the use of their education benefits because of family responsibilities or work a significant number of hours per week in order to enroll in an education or training program. The new law will provide greater opportunities to maintain a better balance between the pursuit of new or improved career opportunities and meeting family and community obligations.

As I have stated, Chapter 33 is definitely a major improvement in the earned benefits for those serving in our current war on terrorism. The "new" GI Bill focuses only on degree programs. In fact there are several types of educational institutions as well as training establishments that are not included in Chapter 33.

First, Chapter 33 veterans cannot use their benefits at non-college degree educational institutions. Some examples of these institutions are: business and trade schools, cosmetology schools, barber schools, public area vocational technical schools, etc. Although not as many in number as colleges/universities, a significant number of veterans do attend non-college degree institutions. They should have the same opportunity to use their Chapter 33 benefits. The training for many outstanding occupations is provided by these institutions. In addition, flight training institutions and correspondence schools are not included.

Second, Chapter 33 veterans cannot use their benefits in apprenticeship/on-the-job training programs. On-the-job training programs must be at least 6 months in length and no longer than 2 years in length. Apprenticeship programs can vary from 1 year to 5 years in length. The basic difference between apprenticeship training programs and on-the-job training programs is that apprenticeship programs have theoretical related instruction as a requirement. Some examples of training programs are: carpenter, electrician, plumber, automotive technician, truck driver, police officer, deputy sheriff, welder, etc.

Since the original GI Bill, an important component for all VA educational programs has been the ability for approval of training programs so that eligible veterans/dependents can use their earned benefits while actually performing a job and earning wages. "*VA educational benefits should not just be for classrooms.*" Some individuals learn better from practical hands-on training. Training on the job assists employers in hiring and retaining skilled workers which will provide our country and State with a highly educated and productive workforce. South Dakota has had a long tradition of promoting this type of training opportunity for those eligible to receive VA educational benefits. This has enriched our citizens, their communities and our state's economy.

The basic concept is the payment of benefits while the individual is in a training status. Generally speaking, individuals begin at a trainee (lower) wage and progress in wages as their skills improve. This is also the rationale for benefits decreasing at periodic intervals. It needs to be noted that many of the training programs start at a relatively low wage. Since many veterans have family commitments, the beginning of their training program is where they need the greatest benefit.

The last benefit for the trainee (and probably the most important) is a simple fact. The veteran already has the job. Once they finish the training program they continue their employment. It is not a case where the veteran spends a substantial amount of time and money in school and then must obtain employment after graduation. Also, some of the most utilized training programs are in career fields where there is a definite need for increased participation. These include: transportation occupations (heavy and light truck drivers); law enforcement (police officer, deputy sheriff, firefighter); construction trades (electricians, carpenters, plumbers, welders), and automotive technicians. The table below illustrates the growing demand in the above career fields.

Occupational Growth Demand (2006–2016)

Industry	*Occupation*	*Projected Demand*
Transportation	Heavy Truck Driver Light Truck Driver	523,000 275,000
Law Enforcement	Police Officer/Deputy Sheriff Firefighters	243,000 142,000
Construction	Carpenters Electricians Plumbers Welders	348,000 234,000 157,000 107,000
Automotive	Automotive Technician	265,000
Grand Total	**All Above Occupations**	**2,294,000**

Each of the above occupations would hold a bright future for our Nations' veterans. They should have the opportunity to utilize their benefits in a way that will best suit their needs and aptitudes.

There is no doubt that the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Chapter 33) will have a positive effect on education and provide the benefits earned by the brave men and women who have served (and are currently serving) our country. These veterans should not be limited in the manner in which they can use their benefits. It is time to enhance the new GI Bill to include non-college degree programs, flight training, correspondence programs and apprenticeship/on-the-job training programs.

We also would recommend reconsideration to other "GI Bill" improvement measures that were introduced in the 110th Congress, but have not been fully acted upon. Some great features were included in these bills and should receive the attention of the Congress before the end of the session. Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin's bill, HR 5684, for example, addresses in addition to the costs of education, the importance of lifelong learning in the 21st century as one of the major forces to maintaining a skilled and viable workforce in our global economy. It also addresses GI Bill issues associated with Student Financial Aid under Title IV of the Higher Education Act 1965 as amended and provides additional financial support to the educational institutions which provide programs and services to our veterans.

The new Chapter 33 is very comprehensive, but it also is complex. It will require a high level of cooperation and collaboration between all partners and stakeholders to achieve maximum success. The Congressional Veterans Affairs Committees, the federal Department of Veterans Affairs, State Approving Agencies, educational organizations and educational institutions will need to work closely with each other in order to ensure that all service members and veterans know of the opportunities available to them and that the operations of the new program are carried out in an effective and efficient manner with minimal disruption. Encouragement from the Congress in this regard could prove to be invaluable. There is an enormous amount of expertise outside the federal government that can be used to ensure the success of the program. The State Approving Agencies across this country stand ready to assist in any way possible; many of my associates have decades of experience with veterans educational programs and truly are an asset the Department of Veterans Affairs should not overlook.

Value of the South Dakota State Approving Agency

A key aspect of our agency's mission is customer service; this is accomplished through outreach, using the Internet, promotional mailings, and networking with other agencies, organizations, and individuals. South Dakota has been a national leader in the outreach to the many troops activated, deployed, and returned from service overseas or within the states in recent times. Our agency continues to partner with other agencies in developing new and innovative ways to create and distribute information concerning programs and services that are available to our returning service personnel. Examples of these efforts follow:

1. Our agency took the lead in the creation of our state's Welcome Home brochure. To date over 15,000 copies have been distributed to our returning troops

since 2004. This is a comprehensive guide to programs and services available to our state's veterans and their families.

2. After the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act was signed into law, within 30 days our agency had created a fact sheet on the changes relative to Chapter 1606/1607. We then distributed this information electronically to the South Dakota Veterans Service Network, provided a mailing to our County/Tribal Veterans Service Officers and worked with the South Dakota National Guard to distribute this information to active Guard members.
3. After the Post 9/11 GI Bill—Chapter 33 was signed into law, our agency printed 1,000 fact sheets from the electronic copy provided by the Veterans Administration. We then provided an electronic copy to our South Dakota Veterans Service Network and the South Dakota School Certifying Officials, a mailing to County/Tribal Veterans Service Officers and then had these fact sheets distributed at five outreach meetings. This was all completed within 18 days of the bill being signed.

Our agency and our counterparts across the nation are able to respond quickly to the demands and needs of our customers, the veterans. We are the "*Front Line Responders*" to the GI Bill and have been for over 60 years. Our agency continues to be involved nationally, statewide, and locally to advance and promote the cause, and advocate for individuals who wish to utilize their GI Bill benefits.

Our staff continues to provide technical and liaison assistance to schools, training establishments and veterans, guardsmen/reservists and dependents/survivors. Last fiscal year there were over 1,900 of these actions taken; additionally, over 200 facilities were visited and over 1,100 approval actions were completed. Our agency is the face of veterans' educational programs in South Dakota.

Our agency has developed a new database system. This new database system was designed with organization in mind, for ease of data entry and information retrieval and creating reports. This new system has combined five databases into one data system. This will improve productivity, data retrieval and provide a better reporting system.

The statement Mr. Summerside made in his April 2007 testimony bears repeating today, "*Our true value rests in the heart of each of the dedicated staff whose sole purpose is the approval of quality programs of education for those eligible for VA educational benefits. Our agencies' worth is measured by this dedicated devotion to excellence, and our nation's Veterans deserve no less.*"

The true solution to readjusting from the war zone to home is quality medical care and the availability of comprehensive counseling services for those that need someone to listen and understand their pain. After the veterans' medical needs are met the bridge to their future would be the realization of their educational or vocational dreams. Schools and job training will bring our young men and women all the way back. These brave Americans deserve the very best programs and services this country can provide.

Closing

In closing, Madam Chairwoman, I would like to thank you again for the opportunity to discuss our views on the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Chapter 33) and the value of the South Dakota State Approving Agency. I very much appreciate your efforts to make improvements to the educational assistance programs for those who defend the freedoms that we so often take for granted. From a grateful nation, they deserve no less. I would be happy to respond to any questions that you might have.

Prepared Statement of Todd Kolden, Administrator, South Dakota Department of Labor

Madam Chair Herseth Sandlin, Ranking Member Boozman, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

Good morning, my name is Todd Kolden, Administrator, with the South Dakota Department of Labor. One of the programs I administer for the department is Veterans' Services. I also serve as an active member of the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA), Veterans Affairs Committee; and I am the State Employment Chairman for the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and the Disabled American Veterans (DAV). It is my honor to appear before this committee today on behalf of South Dakota Secretary of Labor Pamela Roberts to present the views of the South Dakota Department of Labor (SDDoL) regarding the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) workshop and to discuss any questions or issues you may

have. As we feel all benefits owed to veterans are important, my testimony this morning will focus primarily on TAP.

In order for TAP to be successful the partnerships between the Department of Defense (Ellsworth AFB), VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E), South Dakota Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Labor/Veterans' Employment and Training Service (U.S.DoL/VETS), and the SDDoL need to be solidly in place. I'm pleased to say these partnerships are well established in South Dakota and have been instrumental in the success of TAP facilitated at Ellsworth AFB. Without these solid partnerships, veterans attending TAP would not be receiving the full benefit of transition services they richly deserve. South Dakota's current TAP Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), dated February 1, 2008 includes Ellsworth AFB, U.S.DoL/VETS, SDDoL, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. However, we do ask your assistance to ensure these partnerships can continue to function successfully.

The importance of our Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP) Specialists and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVER) is not only serving veterans in the local office but also conducting outreach. One of the best opportunities for outreach is during the facilitation of TAP workshops. In South Dakota, our DVOP Specialists and LVER's facilitate approximately 80 percent of the TAP workshop and 25 percent of the Disabled TAP (DTAP) workshop which is conducted approximately 16 times each year. On average our workshops average between 25–30 participants. The majority are Air Force personnel, but members of other services, including the National Guard and Reserve often attend. TAP is also available to spouses and they are strongly encouraged to attend. Often through a TAP workshop, transitioning service members develop a one-on-one working relationship with a DVOP Specialist or LVER which enhances a successful transition. For those service members leaving South Dakota, we provide a DVOP/LVER contact for the States which they are relocating to.

As this Subcommittee is aware, there has been discussion to make TAP workshops mandatory for active duty service members and to facilitate TAP workshops for Guard and Reserve components before transitioning or retiring from military service. SDDoL feels it should be mandatory for active duty personnel since many of these service members have been in the military for more than four years and most likely have been serving since a fairly young age. Many have probably never held a civilian job, and this transition will be an abrupt change. For Guard and Reserve components, SDDoL feels this should be made mandatory coming from the command level. In other words, it should be mandatory for the Adjutant Generals of each state to inform their units about the TAP workshops and allow them the opportunity to attend a TAP workshop if they desire by sending them on no-cost TDY (or TAD) orders. As you know, many of these individuals may already have jobs they are returning to and may not have a desire or need to attend TAP. But again, they should at least be given the opportunity. In South Dakota, SDDoL made this request nearly five years ago to the Adjutant General and thanks to the partnership we have established, there is an informal agreement in place and this was recently affirmed with the new Adjutant General. Currently, there are full-time Guard members attending TAP when they retire or separate. DoL/VETS reports that about 60 percent of our service members are attending TAP, and a goal of 80 percent has been set to be achieved over the next few years. We support this initiative and feel making TAP mandatory by these means will help bolster this percentage and more importantly, the successful transition of service members. Of note, for those service members who are assigned to Ellsworth AFB and unable to attend TAP prior to separation, one of our DVOP's will provide an abbreviated TAP presentation at the mandatory Pre-Separation briefing. While this is not meant to replace TAP, it does provide valuable and needed information to separating personnel. We always encourage participation in the full TAP workshop. If this is not possible, usually due to individual time constraints or short-notice separations, we recommend attendance at a TAP workshop at the nearest military facility when they complete their move.

Another example of the strong partnership is reflected by who facilitates a TAP workshop. Being job-ready after attending TAP and leaving the military is very important, but it's not the only service that takes place. During the TAP workshop we have the following services presented:

- Finances
- Labor Market/Services Overview
- Personal Appraisal
- Job Search Techniques
- Employment Applications

- Resume/Cover Letter (including work groups and each servicemember leaves the workshop with a resume in hand)
- Interview Process (including the opportunity for mock interviews)
- VA Benefits
- County Veterans Services
- Vet Center
- A one-half day Disabled TAP workshop is facilitated for service members who have or may have service-connected disabilities, focusing on the benefits available to them (including Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, etc).

As you can see, TAP informs service members not only about how to get ready to make the transition and receive benefits, but also what they are entitled to and how to go about receiving these benefits. Again, we feel this instills the importance of the partnerships involved to successfully assist in the transition of our service members.

I would like to share my personal experience with TAP. When I retired from military service, I was given the opportunity to attend TAP. The information I learned and the resources I was provided helped me immensely and immediately. TAP assisted me in the seamless transition from military to civilian life as I had employment waiting for me when I retired. It also assisted in ensuring all of my benefits were in place prior to my transition and what to do and where to go if I required further assistance. I feel the TAP workshop is one of the best resources we currently have for our service members who are making the transition from military to civilian life and for Guard and Reserve individuals who want to make a career change.

Finally, I would like to mention that often times an important part of transition is training separated service members so they can enter a particular employment field. Some of you might remember or are aware of, the service members Occupational Conversion and Training Act (SMOCTA) 1992, which was an act that provided funding for training service members after separating from military service and was highly successful in South Dakota. Recently, H.R. 6272, which would reauthorize SMOCTA was marked up by this Subcommittee and forwarded to the Full Committee for consideration, I urge your continued support.

Again, I want to thank the Subcommittee for allowing me to testify. This concludes my testimony and I would be happy to discuss or respond to any questions you may have regarding TAP or Veterans' Services in South Dakota.

Prepared Statement of Luverne L. Boes, District 13 Commander, American Legion, Department of South Dakota

Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee:

The American Legion would like to begin this hearing by expressing our gratitude to you and your colleagues for holding this hearing on such an important issue. With the ending of the Cold War, the Department of Defense (DoD) dramatically downsized its personnel strength. In 1990, in an attempt to assist separating service members in making a successful transition back into the civilian workforce, Congress enacted Public Law (P.L.) 101–510 which authorized the creation of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP). This law was intended to assist service members who possessed certain critical military specialties that could not be easily transferred to a civilian work environment and to assist others, especially those with service-connected medical conditions, with educational and career choices.

DoD's TAP and DTAP programs are designed, in conjunction with Department of Labor (DoL) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), to help prepare not only separating service members, but also their families for a seamless transition to civilian life. Last year in FY 2007, more than 386,200 service members were discharged from active duty status and over 500, 534 service members demobilized from active duty service. Public Law (P.L.) 101–510 (Chapter 58, section 1142) mandates preseparation counseling for transitioning service members. These programs consist of specific components: pre-separation counseling; employment assistance; relocation assistance; education, training, health and life insurance counseling; finance counseling; reserve affiliation; and disabled transition assistance seminars. DTAP is designed to educate and facilitate disabled veterans to overcome potential barriers to meaningful employment. Currently, VA, DoL, and DoD operate 215 transition offices around the world.

While the TAP program assists transitioning service members leaving the military under their own accord, the DTAP program focuses on the specialized needs of the service members who are separating for medical reasons. The DTAP work-

shop is a half-day seminar sponsored jointly by DoL, DoD and VA. The workshop provides specialized information on VA's many disability benefits:

- Medical Care
- CHAMPVA
- Disability Compensation
- Vocational Rehabilitation
- Disabled Veterans Insurance

In this current era of a significantly smaller all-volunteer military, the reliance on the National Guard and Reserves to fight the present Global War on Terror is unprecedented. The Reserve Forces have become an essential part of all current DoD operations. Reservists in Iraq and Afghanistan make up close to 40 percent of the total force in any given month, and DoD reports that continued reliance on the 1.8 million Reserves and National Guard will continue well into the foreseeable future. Attracting and retaining well qualified individuals to execute the fundamental functions of a strong and viable national defense is paramount. Without providing proper incentives for service members to enlist and reenlist, the military will continue to be hard pressed to effectively accomplish their Global War on Terror mission.

Reservists Return to Find No Jobs

Countless numbers of National Guard and Reserve troops have returned from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan only to encounter difficulties with their Federal and civilian employers at home. In numerous cases brought to the attention of The American Legion by veterans and other sources, many of these returning service members have lost jobs, lost promotions or benefits, and in a few rare cases, they have encountered job demotions. According to the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA), employers must by law protect the old jobs of deployed service members, or provide them with equivalent positions. Benefits, raises, and promotions must be protected, as if the service member had never left. For whatever reasons, in many cases this law has not been able to protect many returning service members across the country. From all accounts most Reservists and those in the National Guard appear to be well informed about their active duty legal rights due to the Department of Labor's efforts. However, in the loss of a job, The American Legion strongly endorses the belief that service members would greatly benefit by having access to the resources and knowledge that the Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) can provide, but the program should have a stronger employment, mental health, and small business component.

H.R. 6272, The SMOCTA Reauthorization Act of 2008

This proposed legislation would authorize discretionary appropriations to carry out the Service Members Occupational Conversion and Training Act 1992 (SMOCTA). SMOCTA was developed as a transitional tool designed to provide job training and employment to eligible veterans discharged after August 1, 1990. When created, SMOCTA was the only Federal job training program available strictly for veterans and the only Federal job training program specifically designed for use by State veterans' employment personnel to assist veterans with barriers to employment. Veterans eligible for assistance under SMOCTA were those with primary or secondary military occupational specialty that DoD determined was not readily transferable to the civilian workforce or those veterans with a service-connected disability rating of 30 percent or higher. SMOCTA is a unique job-training program because it successfully returned veterans to the civilian workforce.

The American Legion strongly endorses this bill along with the proposed funding request.

The Effects of Reserve Call-ups on Civilian Employers and Veteran Owned Business

The impact of deployment on self-employed Reservists is tragic with a reported 40 percent of all businesses owned by veterans suffering financial losses and in some cases bankruptcies. Many small businesses have discovered they are unable to operate and suffer some form of financial loss when key employees are activated. The Congressional Budget Office in a report "*The Effects of Reserve Call-Ups on Civilian Employers*" stated that it "expects that as many as 30,000 small businesses and 55,000 self-employed individuals may be more severely affected if their Reservist employee or owner is activated." The American Legion is a strong supporter of the "Hope at Home Act of 2005," which is a bipartisan bill that would not only require the Federal government to close the pay gap between the Reserves and National Guard service member's civilian and military pay, but it would additionally provide tax credits up to $30,000 for small businesses with service members who

are activated. Currently, the Small Business Administration (SBA) offers a program billed as the Military Reservist Economic Injury Disaster Loans. This program offers businesses that meet certain eligibility criteria loans that help them to offset the economic consequences of the loss of their Reservist personnel. To qualify, a company must be able to show that the activated Reservist is critical to the success of the company. The American Legion recommends that the SBA should be part of any Reservist and National Guard TAP, and act in an advisory capacity to businesses owned by veterans, to assist them with resources and information to help lessen the impact of activation on their bottom line.

Education and the GI Bill

Historically, The American Legion has encouraged the development of essential benefits to help attract and retain service members into the Armed Services, as well as to assist them in making the best possible transition back to the civilian community. On June 22, 1944, then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, which later became known as the GI Bill of Rights.

This historic piece of legislation, authored by the leadership of The American Legion, enabled veterans to purchase their first homes, attend college, and start private businesses. The emergence of the American middle class, the suburbs, civil rights, and finally a worldwide economic boom can be attributed to this important legislation. The majority of individuals who join the National Guard or Reserves enter the Armed Forces straight out of high school, and many are full and part time students. With the number of activations since September 11, these same Reservists are discovering that their graduation will take longer than once anticipated.

Currently, the Montgomery GI Bill pays the average Reservist $317.00 a month compared to the active duty counterpart who is paid $1,321.00 a month. With the rising cost of tuition many Reservists feel forced to apply for commercial loans and other sources of loans or grants to supplement the GI Bill. Unit activations generally take place during the middle or end of a school semester. When a service member withdraws from school the commercial loan must still be paid regardless of whether the student finishes the course or courses, adding to the accumulated debt of that service member. Most service members are not aware of other programs or ways of paying for school; for example, currently, if a service member serves 24 months on active duty their GI benefits become comparable to active duty. The American Legion recommends that TAP have an education representative to provide National Guard and Reservist members this kind of information so they can have the option to make informed decisions on how to best incorporate their military service with their civilian employment and education options.

According to a 2004 survey conducted by GFK Custom Research, the leading reason why people enlist, despite the Global War on Terror, is the desire for an affordable education. The American Legion is currently consulting with VA's Advisory Committee on Education to discuss pursuing one education program for both active duty and Reserves. If it is true that young people enlist or reenlist primarily for an education, instead of giving them bonuses ($35,000 bonus and up to get people to enlist and reenlist) we should promise them an education.

Recently the President signed into law the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act which will significantly change veterans' education in August 2009. The American Legion strongly supported this much needed change and deeply appreciated the bipartisan support this bill received. It truly represents the thanks of a grateful nation. Once the final rules and regulations have been finalized, TAP/DTAP will serve as an excellent venue to brief recently separated service members, especially those in the National Guard and Reserves, on the new enhanced educational benefits.

The Service Members Civil Relief Act (SCRA)

On December 19, 2003, the President signed into law a complete update of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Civil Relief Act 1940. This helps ease the economic and legal burdens on military personnel called to active duty status in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. SCRA provides certain legal protections for individuals called to active duty. Relief extends to actions terminating leases, evictions, foreclosures and repossessions, default judgments, lower interest rates on credit cards and loans and protects against lapses or termination of insurance policies.

In recent months, there have been a number of news articles reporting that some creditors make illegal demands on active duty soldiers. With the military's increased reliance on National Guard and Reserve units, creditors residing in remote areas of the country outside of the traditional military towns are not aware of this act, including members of the Reserve component. Therefore, service members are expe-

riencing serious financial difficulties while on active duty—their cars are repossessed, homes foreclosed and credit histories ruined because this piece of legislation is unknown.

The American Legion has produced a brochure on active duty legal rights, copies of which will be distributed across the country. If TAP was mandatory, service members and local community businesses would also know of this program, and a lot of frustration, time and misunderstandings could be avoided. A few services, such as the Navy, discuss personal financial planning during workshops and seminars. However, the Reserve components need to have this issue addressed during TAP.

Make TAP/DTAP a Mandatory Program

DoL estimates that 60 percent to 65 percent of all separating active duty service members attend the employment TAP seminars and 30 percent of all separating National Guard and Reservists attend a portion of TAP. The American Legion believes this low attendance number is a disservice to all transitioning service members. Many service members and most National Guard and Reservists are unaware of the assistance and resources offered by TAP. Without this program, service members who have served their country bravely return to the civilian workforce less equipped than their counterparts who took advantage of the information provided by TAP.

According to written testimony from John M. McWilliam, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Veterans' Employment and Training, Department of Labor, May 12, 2005, "we have been working with the National Guard and Reserve on providing TAP services to these returning service members in many states on an informal and as needed basis. In this regard, three Reserve Component TAP demonstration programs are underway in Oregon, Michigan and Minnesota." As a present day follow up with Mr. McWilliam "those demonstration projects went well, we learned a lot and we are currently offering segments of our program to any Reserve or National Guard command requesting them."

The American Legion was informed during that period by representatives of DoD and DoL that in Oregon, 40 percent of those part time service members who attended the TAP session were looking for employment. The American Legion recognizes the value of this program and recommends that it become a mandatory requirement for all transitioning service members.

Access to TAP

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, *Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard*, May 2005, reports TAP is not made available to the National Guard and Reserves. "TAP managers with DoD and the military services explained that the chief problem is lack of time during demobilization, which is often completed in 5 days."

The American Legion recommends that TAP be instituted in the following ways:

- Incorporate TAP into the unit's training schedule months before activation;
- Have a TAP briefing during a unit's organization day that includes spouses;
- Activate a unit for a weekend either before or after a deployment;
- Most units spend three to eight weeks at an installation site preparing to move into theater; therefore, include TAP; and
- Spend extra day or two at a demobilization site to include TAP.

The GAO report also states that many service members are not interested in the employment segment because they believe they have jobs waiting for them once they return home. That might have been true with the first rotations into theater; however, that is not the case now for many veterans, especially with back to back deployments. A number of complaints have surfaced from service members around the country that some businesses are reluctant to hire veterans still in the military and businesses have allegedly started putting pressure on veterans who have deployed once not to deploy a second time.

Transitional Assistance Program for National Guard and Reserves:

Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Maryland

The TAP program located at Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Maryland, has been called a unique program and still highly regarded as a model for all the Army. It is currently the only program that offers transition assistance to Guard and Reserves with an 8-hour presentation, that consists of full range of services and benefits briefing. A list of the benefits briefing are in the fields of Finance, Education, USERRA, VA compensation and disability claims, Employment assistance, Mental Health Counseling Services, and TRICARE. The program also has a number of unique partnerships with many Federal, State and local agencies. Some of those partnerships include: the Maryland Division of Workforce Development, The Perry

Point VA Hospital, Department of Labor, Walter Reed Army Medical Center and the Ft. Monmouth, N.J., Transition Office. The program has a pro-active philosophy. Some examples include:

- Service members needing employment are given immediate assistance. In some cases this has led to immediate hires, and those service members returned home with a job while avoiding unemployment. If the veteran lives outside the state, a point of contact is given for that individual to ensure there is a Veteran Representative waiting with job service resources.
- The Perry Point VA Hospital offers immediate shelter to service members who may be homeless, which lessens the numbers of homeless veterans on the nation's streets. VA reports that more than 175,000 veterans are currently homeless and another 250,000 are homeless over a period of time. VA has also reported that the number of homeless veterans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan is increasing, especially among women with children. The American Legion believes the first line in defense in preventing additional homeless cases is to have a strong and pro-active transitional assistance program.
- Service members who need assistance with filling out compensation and disability claims are offered immediate assistance by visiting VA representatives. The program has received positive feedback by service members and commanders.

Assessing Services Rendered

The American Legion recommends that Congress require Federal agencies that deliver TAP/DTAP services to develop a management-monitoring program to better assess how well services are being delivered to transitioning service members. Currently, the effectiveness of services provided by TAP agencies is unknown because adequate performance goals and benchmarking measures have never been instituted. Consequently, there is a lack of any verifiable outcome data. Performance measures should be instituted to hold all Federal agencies involved in TAP/DTAP accountable for services rendered.

Summary

America asks her young people to serve in her armed forces to guard and defend this great Nation and its way of life. Their selfless service provides millions of their fellow Americans with the opportunity to pursue their vocational endeavors. The successful transition of that service member back into the civilian workforce must be a shared responsibility, especially if that service member has suffered service-connected disabilities. There is much talk about "seamless transition" between DoD and VA, but it goes beyond that. It should be a "seamless transition" between all Federal agencies involved in a transition assistance program. That means:

- Ensuring service members know their active duty legal rights and that those Federal agencies involved should monitor and assist in the compliance with those rights;
- Prompt adjudication of disability claims;
- Prompt adjudication of educational claims;
- Timely access to TRICARE and VA quality healthcare;
- Housing of the homeless;
- Employment assistance;
- Small business assistance;
- Vocational training for veterans; and
- Any other Federal assistance as needed.

The American Legion reaffirms its strong support of the Transition Assistance Program, but also encourages the Department of Defense to require that all separating, active-duty service members, including those from the Reserves and the National Guard, be given an opportunity to participate in Transition Assistance Program training not more than 180 days prior to their separation or retirement from the Armed Forces, and follow-up counseling not later than 180 days after separation from active duty. The American Legion will also support any legislative initiatives to mandate that all service members be given the opportunity to participate in TAP/DTAP.

Prepared Statement of Doris Ann Werlinger, Past Department President of South Dakota, American Legion Auxiliary

Madam Chairwoman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting the American Legion Auxiliary to appear before you today to discuss the Transition Assistance Program (TAP.)

Today I represent the American Legion Auxiliary (Auxiliary), the world's largest women's patriotic service organization with 900,000 members in 8,900 communities across the country. Here in South Dakota we have 16,000 members in 221 communities. We are an 89-year-old organization whose members are female veterans and mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, granddaughters or great-granddaughters of American Legion members. Our mission is to serve veterans, their families and their communities. Personally, I have four nephews serving on active duty. Two serving in the Air Force, one in the Navy and one with the Marine Corps.

Reformat TAP

The goal of TAP is to provide those separating from military service, including Guard and Reserve, and their families the tools to make a seamless transition to civilian life. The curriculum for this program has included a narrowly defined yet broad-based agenda with the intent to impart as much information as possible to the active duty component. Guard and Reserve members haven't had the benefit of a comprehensive TAP. While there is little debate as to the value of the information being shared during TAP, we hear continually from service members and their families that TAP is either too much or too little given at the wrong time and in the wrong setting with the expectation that all service members hear the same message at the same time and in the same way. So, what changes need to be made for TAP to be more effective?

First, one size doesn't fit all. The retiree may need different information than the three year enlistee; a degreed service member who may have a variety of professions to chose from needs different resource options from the service member entering a trade, going back to school or who is undecided. If you're not disabled, why sit through two hours of DTAP briefings? Guard and Reserve members are further alienated as they return back to civilian lives that are now very different then when they left.

Second, timing matters. Hitting a service member and his or her family too early or too late can dilute the message. Delivering any message in anticipation of or immediately following a deployment that isn't directly related to "getting back to home and family" has no chance of sticking.

Third, accuracy, no matter the delivery or message line is critical. We hear of miscommunication too many times. Hearing you're not eligible for the GI Bill because your high school GPA isn't high enough is just wrong. Not being given clear and compelling reasons to enroll in the VA immediately upon separation to claim the five-years eligibility for VA healthcare is wrong.

Fourth, too much information being delivered at one time in combination of any of the above issues means much of it gets lost or not absorbed. We all know what happens to brochures, CD's, workbooks—they get lost or tossed.

Fifth, while technically the civilian job of a Guard or Reserve member is covered under USERRA, we all know that in practice, these service members have difficulty re-entering the workforce or picking up their careers because of subtle hiring practices that don't work in their favor. Employers don't want to hire someone who may be leaving again in a year.

What changes might make TAP effective?

Following the example of Turbo TAP, which was designed with the National Guard in mind, any face-to-face program must be appropriately timed, relevant and to the point. It must take into consideration that one size doesn't fit all. To over simplify, the Auxiliary feels strongly that TAP needs a more contemporary face. Instead of giving service members and their families what we think they need, we need to give them the option of choosing what they know they need.

We recommend establishing a program that collectively is no more than 24 hours of content with an agenda flexible and varied enough to appeal to participants at all stages of readiness for transition. The program should consist of a menu of presentations and/or workshops with minimum and mandatory requirements established for participation. The program should be established in such a way that one or two mandatory general sessions start TAP followed by a diverse agenda of programs that would appeal to participants on a variety of levels and stages. If planned right, this format change would not require additional staff resources, would include much of the same content and material currently being used but focus on what's important to the participant.

The Model of Turbo TAP

In an effort to better serve our Guard and Reserve forces, Turbo TAP was created to assist service members and their families handle the multiple and rapid transitions to and from civilian life. Online, interactive and available 24/7, Turbo TAP has become one of the most robust and popular tools for reintegration available to service members and their families. Its well-organized content contains valuable up-to-date information on resources and earned benefits.

Since its debut, we have heard nothing but positive response to the program.

Make TAP a Mandatory Program

The most current Department of Labor statistics report that 60 to 65 percent of all separating active duty service members attend TAP seminars and 30 percent of all separating National Guard and Reservists attend a portion of TAP. According to written testimony from John M. McWilliam, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Veterans' Employment and Training, Department of Labor, May 16, 2008, the DoD has adopted the recommendation from the Task Force on Returning Global War of Terror Heroes to increase attendance at TAP sessions to 85 percent of separating service members.

We wholeheartedly support this DoD initiative but believe that they should take it one step further. Currently, the only branch of the military to make TAP required is the Marine Corps. The American Legion Auxiliary recommends that each branch of the military make TAP a mandatory requirement for all transitioning service members bringing participation to 100 percent.

Creation of Measurable Outcomes

The Auxiliary is further recommending that a clear set of measurable standards be established at multiple levels of the program to ensure excellence.

- The DoL is accountable for a high standard of delivery and therefore outcome;
- DoD must hold each branch accountable for administration and implementation of TAP;
- Uniform performance goals need to be established for commanding officers responsible for TAP, regardless of branch;
- Measurement outcomes need to be established to gauge the effectiveness of the program on its participant's ability to successfully reintegrate after service.

Summary

Our men and women in uniform have made tremendous sacrifices defending our Nation. They go through initial training to prepare them to endure unique stress and perform actions that are not present in civilian life. It is only right that at the conclusion of their service, they go through a transition program that meets them on their terms ensuring a seamless transition back to civilian life. The American Legion Auxiliary recommends:

- Reformatting TAP to fulfill the needs of specific service members—including our Guard and Reserve;
- Requiring TAP mandatory for all separating service members;
- Creating measurable standards to gauge effectiveness and success.

TAP is an essential component of reintegration for all members of our military regardless of branch or rank. TAP done right becomes an invaluable step in successful reintegration.

Thank you again for allowing me to represent the opinions of the American Legion Auxiliary through this testimony. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Prepared Statement of Diane Hickenbotham, President, Veterans of Foreign Wars Ladies Auxiliary, Department of South Dakota

Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin and distinguished Members of the Committee:

I thank-you for the opportunity to discuss what the Transition Assistance Program is doing to provide Service members and their families with the information and resources necessary to facilitate a successful transition from military to civilian life. I am honored to be asked to be here as the Department President of the State of South Dakota of the Ladies Auxiliary to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. We are the wives, widows, mothers, grandmothers, daughters, granddaughters, and sisters (this includes all half, step, and foster (who attained that status prior to age sixteen and for whom the duties of parent were performed) of persons who were or are eligible for membership in the Veterans of Foreign Wars by having served our great

country in a Foreign war/hostile region. The Ladies Auxiliary to the Veterans of Foreign Wars serves Veterans and their families as our primary function. I am the wife of a 100 percent combat disabled Vietnam veteran and a strong advocate for all veterans and their families. I am from the city of Aberdeen, SD where many of our National Guard and Army Reserve Units have been deployed. I speak as a wife, advocate for all veterans and our troops and their families, and as the President of the Department of SD Ladies Auxiliary to the VFW, representing more than 8000 Auxiliary members in our State.

Collaboration

I express great appreciation and gratitude that the VA, DoD, DoL are working together to provide needed and desirable transition programs for our returning troops and their families. I am especially grateful that you have included the Ladies Auxiliary to both the VFW and American Legion. It does let us know that you are considering the effect and opinions of the families involved in the lives of our returning troops.

Turbo TAP

In speaking with some returning National Guard and Reserve members they have expressed that this technology has been a valuable tool for those returning from Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom. This web-based system seems to work well for delivery of transition information and assistance. Service members have rapid accessibility to locate One-Stop Career Centers for employment assistance and well as medical care by locating the closest VA Medical Center. This program is helping returning service members increase their participation and awareness of military benefits allowing for a easier transition to civilian life.

What improvements and additions can be made that might make TAP more effective?

There has been significant progress in the efforts to provide transition assistance to the soldier and their families since this program was implemented. However, I have spent much time visiting with families of soldiers as to how they can be better served by the TAP program; the following are some of their concerns.

- Families need more assistance to emotionally support their families while their spouse is deployed. This includes readjustment to parenting jointly again for when the spouse returns. Many feel the Family Readiness Leader or group was all they know about. When another parent returns there is often conflict in discipline with their children.
- Some spouses feel the returning soldier is shuffled around too much for testing and receiving Transitional assistance when they return home. Sending from Aberdeen to Fort Carson, CO only causes another separation for the family.
- Many feel a need for Credit Counseling. We often think of the spouse at home in charge of the checkbook for the family and spending the money. There are times when the soldier has only been in charge of their needs and is unaware of the financial situation at home.
- Many need assistance and support in dealing with the idea that the soldier will be called up again. This seems to hang over the heads of the children very intently. The parent was gone once and the fear of it happening again causes much anxiety to some within the family unit. This isn't openly addressed and dealt with through the proper channels.
- Families feel the time to utilize the program is too short and doesn't start soon enough with those at home to make for a easier transition into civilian life once again. Spouse often become "battle buddies" and their knowledge of support services such as counseling must be known to them as soon as possible.

Summary

Many of the above listed concerns seem to deal with the communication within the TAP program with the family. We recommend that Communication with the families become a priority in a timely manner. The time table and availability of transition assistance must be communicated frequently and soon enough to accommodate the soldier and family for smoother transition into civilian life. Family Readiness leaders are an important tool in this program and their training needs to be comprehensive and supportive.

I thank you for allowing me to present this testimony on behalf of our organization the Ladies Auxiliary to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Know that we deeply appreciate the implementation of this program. The men and women that have worn the uniform of this great Nation deserve all the help and transitional assistance that we can give them to deal with the stress of war and separation. Every

soldier deserves all the support that we as Americans can give them. Each and every soldier and family member deserves for the great sacrifice they all have given.

Prepared Statement of John M. McWilliam, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Veterans' Employment and Training Service, U.S. Department of Labor

Madam Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin, Ranking Member Boozman, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this Subcommittee to discuss the role of the U.S. Department of Labor's (DoL) Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) in providing transition assistance to our returning servicemembers.

The mission of VETS is to provide veterans and transitioning servicemembers with the resources and services to succeed in the 21st century workforce. One of the most important ways that we meet that mission is by providing employment workshops to separating active, Guard, and Reserve servicemembers as part of their transition to civilian life. Our services are provided through the Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

TAP is a Department of Defense (DoD) program that partners with DoL, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the Department of Homeland Security. TAP has four components:

1. Pre-separation counseling—this is mandatory for all transitioning servicemembers and is provided by the military services;
2. TAP employment workshops—these are voluntary on the part of the transitioning servicemember and are administered through DoL and its State partners;
3. VA benefits briefing—these briefings are also voluntary and administered by the VA; and
4. Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP)—also voluntary and administered by the VA.

Sixty to 65 percent of active-duty transitioning servicemembers have attended the TAP employment workshops. This has risen from a 50 percent participation rate in 2001. As a result of recommendations of the President's Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes, each of the military services has established a goal of 85 percent attendance.

Since 1991, when DoL began providing employment workshops pursuant to section 502 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991 (P.L. 101–510), over one million separating and retiring military members and their spouses have been provided employment and job training assistance and other transitional services. DoL was further directed to provide these services at overseas locations by section 309 of the Veterans Benefits Act of 2003 (P.L. 108–183). Before this law took effect, VETS began facilitating TAP workshops at overseas military installations where, by previous interagency agreement, the DoD had provided TAP workshops since the program's inception. VETS continued to expand to additional overseas sites and we are extending efforts to provide workshops whenever requested to those Guard and Reserve units returning from the Global War on Terror. We are currently conducting TAP employment workshops at 55 sites overseas including Germany, Japan, Italy, Korea, Guam and the United Kingdom. Our mission is to provide TAP at every location requested by the Armed Services or National Guard and Reserve Component.

Employment Workshop Overview

DoL is authorized by Chapter 58 of title 10, U.S. Code, to assist the DoD and VA in providing transition assistance services to separating servicemembers and their spouses. The role of VETS in this effort is to conduct employment workshops based on projections made by each of the armed services and the Department of Homeland Security for the U.S. Coast Guard. DoL funded Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVER) lead most employment workshops that take place in the United States. In some cases, due to the distances from State employment offices to the military installations, and to assist with the rapid growth of the program, contract facilitators were added in early Fiscal Year (FY) 1992 and Federal staff in FY 1996. In overseas locations, contract staff leads most workshops.

To maintain a quality of service delivery and ensure uniformity between locations, all workshops use a common workbook and standard program of instruction. In ad-

dition, all facilitators, whether DVOP/LVER, Federal staff, or contract, are trained and certified by the National Veterans' Training Institute.

In FY 2007, over 146,000 separating military personnel and spouses were trained in 4,716 employment workshops at military installations worldwide. In FY 2008, VETS plans to provide employment workshops to over 150,000 servicemembers and spouses at military installations around the world.

The DoL facilitated transition employment workshop is a comprehensive two and one-half day session where participants learn about job searches, career decision making and current occupational and labor market conditions. Practical exercises are conducted in resume writing and interviewing techniques. Participants are also provided an evaluation of their employability relative to the job market and receive information on the most current veterans' benefits. Components of an employment workshop include: career self-assessment; resume development; job search and interview techniques; U.S. labor market information; civilian workplace requirements; and documentation of military skills.

Reserve Component (RC) and National Guard (NG) Employment Workshop

Global military commitments have necessitated a mobilization of Guard and Reserve members that is unprecedented in modern times. The longer mobilization periods result in these servicemembers now being eligible for veterans' benefits, including TAP. The employment workshop is available for most servicemembers at one of the 215 transition offices located on military installations in the United States as well as overseas locations.

However, Reserve and Guard members usually transition at fewer locations, referred to as demobilization sites. Typically the demobilization process is rapid, taking a matter of days once the servicemembers arrive back in the United States from overseas. During demobilization, servicemembers may be expected to participate in many separate briefings and activities. This leaves little or no time for a full two and one-half day employment workshop. Nevertheless, we have found that many Guard and Reserve service members would benefit from such transition assistance. Our State Directors have coordinated with each State Adjutant General and they work directly with the individual reserve and guard commanders to make special arrangements following demobilization in order to present a modified TAP employment workshop to Guard and Reserve service members on an 'as requested' basis. Based on requests from Reserve Component Commanders or Adjutant Generals and through coordination with our VETS' state directors, VETS has offered to tailor the workshops to the identified needs of the transitioning Reserve and Guard members.

In fact, since 2001 VETS has provided transition services to over 146,000 National Guard and Reservists. These transition services range in size and content from mobilization and demobilization briefings to the full scale TAP employment workshops. They are provided in 43 States and the District of Columbia. In some States, National Guardsmen and Reservists have been allowed to attend the regular TAP for Active Component servicemembers. The services provided to the Guard and Reserve are tailored to the needs and requests by the DoD.

To meet the transition needs of the National Guard and Reserves, in FY 2007, DoL directed the National Veterans' Training Institute (NVTI) to develop a modular version of the TAP employment workshop. The traditional TAP employment workshop was turned into a 15-module menu that Reserve/National Guard commanders may choose from in providing these services to their unit members. This training includes a mandatory module that covers local labor market information, USERRA, the One-Stop Career Center system, small business opportunities, and the risks of homelessness. The other 14 modules consist of the current TAP employment workshop curriculum broken down into logical and connected blocks of instruction. This is not a new or separate curriculum for the Reserves and National Guard; rather it has been packaged to better serve this community.

South Dakota Programs

I have provided an overview of what is being done to assist those servicemembers transitioning from the military to civilian life. I would now like to focus on what we are doing in the State of South Dakota.

VETS recognizes the need to provide employment transition assistance and has taken the initiative to provide employment based briefings at demobilization sites for National Guard and Reserve Units. These briefings are held along with our other Federal and State partners. The two major demobilization locations in the Dallas Region, which South Dakota is part of, are Fort Sill in Lawton, Oklahoma and Fort Carson in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

VETS State directors in Oklahoma and Colorado conduct these briefings and make sure each and every returning service member from South Dakota has the VETS South Dakota office contact information so we can schedule demobilization briefings and discuss other employment transition assistance needs. Since September 11, 2001, for Guard and Reserve units, we have conducted eight TAP workshops in South Dakota with 345 participants. In FY 2007 alone we conducted 14 active-duty TAP workshops in South Dakota that included 403 total participants, including some Reserve and National Guard members. In FY 2008, through June 2008, we have conducted 11 workshops that included 299 participants.

In closing, I again thank you for allowing me to address you today on this very important issue and program. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.

Prepared Statement of Don Keplin, State Chairman, South Dakota Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, U.S. Department of Defense

Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin and members of the committee: thank you for the invitation to offer my perspective on issues relating to the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR), as it applies to South Dakota National Guard and Reserve members.

I have volunteered with ESGR since 1996. I served as the Acting State Chairman from May 2005 until the National Chairman for the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve appointed me as the State Chairman in October 2005.

The National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve was established in 1972 by Presidential proclamation, as an operational Committee under the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

The Vietnam War had ended and the all-volunteer military became a reality. In 1978, ESGR was expanded to include a community-based volunteer network. Today, that network has expanded to include more than 4,400 ESGR volunteers in 55 Committees—one in each State (California with 2 Committees), the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the District of Columbia. South Dakota ESGR consists of 40 volunteer members located throughout the State and two paid staff in Rapid City. Our volunteers are leaders in business, government, academia and senior military representatives.

ESGR is a Department of Defense agency that seeks to promote a culture in which all American employers support and value the military service of their employees. ESGR volunteers recognize outstanding employer support, increase awareness of the law, and resolve conflicts through mediation.

The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA), title 38, United States Code, chapter 43, was enacted by Congress and signed into law by President Clinton on October 13, 1994. Congress amended the law in 1996, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2004 and 2006. Congress enacted USERRA to protect the rights of persons who voluntarily or involuntarily leave employment positions to undertake military service. The law establishes certain rights and benefits for employees and duties for employers. USERRA affects employment, reemployment, and retention in employment, when employees serve or have served in the uniformed services.

There are two types of transitions for servicemembers; one when they transition after deployment and the other when the transition after enlistment obligations. I will reference three significant sections of the Federal Regulations for USERRA, 20 CFR Part 1002, that pertain to today's hearing regarding the transition of servicemembers.

The first is 1002.198; *What efforts must the employer make to help the employee become qualified for the reemployment position?*

The employee must be qualified for the reemployment position. The employer must make reasonable efforts to help the employee become qualified to perform the duties of this position. These efforts include providing refresher training, and any training necessary to update a returning employee's skills in situations where the employee is no longer qualified due to technological advances.

The second section I will cite is section 1002.225; *Is the employee entitled to any specific reemployment benefits if he or she has a disability that was incurred in, or aggravated during, the period of service?*

A disabled servicemember is entitled, to the same extent as any other individual, to the escalator position he or she would have attained but for uniformed service. If the employee has a disability incurred in, or aggravated during, the period of service in the uniformed services, the employer must make reasonable efforts to ac-

commodate that disability and to help the employee become qualified to perform the duties of his or her reemployment position. If the employee is not qualified for reemployment in the escalator position because of a disability after reasonable efforts by the employer to accommodate the disability and to help the employee to become qualified, the employee must be reemployed in a position according to the following priority. The employer must make reasonable efforts to accommodate the employee's disability and to help him or her to become qualified to perform the duties of one of these positions:

(a) A position that is equivalent in seniority, status, and pay to the escalator position; or,
(b) A position that is the nearest approximation to the equivalent position, consistent with the circumstances of the employee's case, in terms of seniority, status, and pay. A position that is the nearest approximation to the equivalent position may be a higher or lower position, depending on the circumstances.

The last section being referenced is 1002.226; *If the employee has a disability that was incurred in, or aggravated during, the period of service, what efforts must the employer make to help him or her become qualified for the reemployment position?*

(a) USERRA requires that the employee be qualified for the reemployment position regardless of any disability. The employer must make reasonable efforts to help the employee to become qualified to perform the duties of this position. The employer is not required to reemploy the employee on his or her return from service if he or she cannot, after reasonable efforts by the employer, qualify for the appropriate reemployment position.
(b) "Qualified" has the same meaning here as in § 1002.198, the first section I referenced.

South Dakota ESGR helps to ensure that servicemembers transitioning from military service back to civilian employment, and the employers that hire them, understand their rights and responsibilities under USERRA. South Dakota ESGR has 16 trained ombudsmen throughout the State. These ombudsmen respond to inquiries and conflicts regarding USERRA presented by employees or employers. Since Oct 1, 2007, South Dakota ombudsmen have fielded 116 information-only cases and mediated 14 USERRA cases. South Dakota has not had a USERRA case go to the United States Department of Labor for the past 18 months.

I hope that I have been able to clarify the role played by the South Dakota ESGR in helping employers and servicemembers transitioning from military service to civilian employment. Thank you.

Prepared Statement of William D. Fillman, Jr., Director, Central Area, Veterans Benefits Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and other outreach efforts to support separating servicemembers and their families during their transition from military to civilian life. I am accompanied by Mr. John Smith, Director of the Sioux Falls Regional Office. My testimony today will cover the comprehensive transitional assistance VA provides to all servicemembers, including members of the National Guard and Reserves, as well as the current outreach efforts by the Sioux Falls Regional Office.

VA Outreach Efforts

VA currently conducts outreach initiatives to servicemembers that explain VA benefits at various stages of enlistment, as well as following discharge. Many of these activities are done in conjunction with the Department of Defense (DoD) and Department of Labor. VA and DoD are working through joint initiatives to ensure wide dissemination of information on the array of benefits and services available to servicemembers; including healthcare, educational assistance, home loans, vocational rehabilitation and employment, disability compensation, pension, insurance, burial, and memorial services.

Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

Transition Assistance Program (TAP) briefings are conducted nationwide and in Europe to prepare retiring or separating military personnel for return to civilian life. At these briefings, servicemembers are informed of the array of VA benefits and services available, instructed on how to complete VA application forms, and advised on what evidence is needed to support their claims. Following the general instruc-

tion segment, personal interviews are conducted with those servicemembers who would like assistance in preparing and submitting their applications for compensation and/or vocational rehabilitation and employment benefits.

Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP)

Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) is an integral component of transition assistance for servicemembers who may be released because of disability. Through VA's DTAP briefings, VBA advises transitioning servicemembers about the benefits available through VBA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program (VR&E). The goal of DTAP is to encourage and assist potentially eligible servicemembers to make an informed decision about the VR&E program and expedite delivery of these services to eligible persons.

While TAP and DTAP briefings are central to VA's efforts to inform servicemembers about VA benefits and services, VA also provides briefings to servicemembers about military separation and retirement services programs, military medical facilities, Physical Evaluation Boards, Casualty Assistance Services, and various other military liaison activities.

The chart below reflects the number of briefings and personal interviews conducted by VBA representatives for the past five years. This includes briefings conducted for regular active duty military members, pre- and post-deployment briefings for Reserve and National Guard members, and briefings conducted overseas. VA has increased the number of briefings presented by 39.6 percent since 2003.

Fiscal Year	*Briefings*	*Attendees*	*Interviews*
2003	5,840	210,015	102,402
2004	7,834	276,574	122,120
2005	8,184	326,664	124,092
2006	8,541	393,345	93,431
2007	8,154	296,855	100,976
2008 (Through June)	6,363	248,452	67,726

Veterans Assistance at Discharge System (VADS)

VA also distributes information on benefits and services through the Veterans Assistance at Discharge System (VADS), which generates a "Welcome Home Package" for all recently separated veterans (including Reserve and National Guard members). The package contains a letter from the Secretary, pamphlets describing VA benefits and services, and a benefits timetable. In addition to the VADS mailings, a separate personal letter from the Secretary, along with benefits information, is sent to each returning OEF/OIF veteran.

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR&E) "Five Tracks to Employment"

Based on the 2004 Secretary's Task Force on Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, VA redesigned the delivery of VR&E benefits into a program that emphasizes veterans' informed choice and employment at the beginning of the process. This redesign, entitled the "Five Tracks to Employment" process, included the development and implementation of a standardized orientation program, training for the new Employment Coordinators, training for all field staff on the Five Tracks to Employment process, creation of an online employment services Web site—www.Vetsuccess.gov, and the establishment of Job Resource Labs in all regional offices.

Additionally, the Employment Specialist position, created in 1999, was redesigned and renamed Employment Coordinator (EC). The re-design streamlined the duties and focused the position on employment-related outreach and education. The EC serves as an expert in the VR&E program to provide services to enhance veterans' job readiness and assist veterans to become employed within their interests, aptitudes, and abilities. The EC also serves as an expert about the local labor market, assisting Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors to develop rehabilitation plans that match current employer hiring demands. The EC works collaboratively with the Department of Labor VETS' program Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVERS) in the provision of direct job placement services for veterans and also partners with community

employers to develop future career opportunities for veterans served through the VR&E program. Combined, all of these activities serve to focus the VR&E program on its most vital outcome goal of assisting veterans to obtain and maintain suitable employment.

Benefits Delivery at Discharge

The Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program is an initiative jointly sponsored by VA and DoD. The program provides transition assistance to separating or retiring servicemembers who have disabilities related to their military service. VA began accepting disability compensation claims from servicemembers in the BDD program at three VA regional offices and three Army installations in 1995. National expansion of the program began in 1998. In November 2004, VA and DoD signed a national memorandum of agreement to establish a single cooperative examination that meets the requirements of a military separation examination and a VA disability rating examination.

Current BDD program participants include 40 regional offices and 153 military installations (142 DoD sites and 11 Homeland Security Coast Guard sites). This number includes five locations overseas (three in Korea and two in Germany). Participation in the BDD program is offered to servicemembers who are within 60 to 180 days of release from active duty and who remain in the area in order to complete the medical examinations.

Disability Evaluation System (DES)

In response to recommendations by the Dole-Shalala Commission, West/Marsh Independent Review Group, Secretary Nicholson's Global War on Terrorism Returning Heroes Commission and the anticipated recommendations of the Veterans Disability Benefits Commission, VA and DoD launched a Disability Evaluation System (DES) pilot in the fall of 2007, scheduled to run for one year. The pilot program differs from the existing DoD DES process in the following significant ways: 1. VA is brought into the process at the Medical Evaluation Board (MEB) stage, assisting the servicemember and taking a claim for disability compensation; 2. One examination is performed according to VA protocols, normally done by VA, which forms the basis for the MEB and Physical Evaluation Board (PEB) decision making as well as the VA disability rating, should the member be found unfit. If the PEB determines that the member is unfit, VA evaluates the extent of disability caused by the unfitting condition(s) as well as any other claimed conditions. The VA rating for the unfit condition is used by DoD for purposes of determining the amount of severance pay or placement on the temporary or permanent disability retired list. In conjunction with the DES pilot, VA is also initiating enhanced data sharing between DoD and VA regarding medical information.

Seamless Transition Program

With the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), VA expanded its outreach efforts even further with the Seamless Transition Program. In 2003, VA began to assign permanent, full-time representatives at key military treatment facilities where seriously injured OEF/OIF returnees are hospitalized; including Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Bethesda Naval Medical Center, Eisenhower Medical Center, Brooke Medical Center, and Madigan Army Medical Center.

VA representatives at these facilities provide benefits information and assist in filing claims. They monitor patient progress and coordinate the submission and smooth transfer of claims to VA regional offices. Each veteran's claim is then case-managed at the appropriate regional office of jurisdiction to expedite processing. Additionally, VA assigns special benefits counselors, social workers, and case-managers to work with these servicemembers and their families throughout the transition to VA care and benefits systems to ensure expedited delivery of all benefits.

VA also began hiring Recovery Care Coordinators, who are charged with assisting seriously ill, injured, or wounded servicemembers navigate the various systems and benefits programs to which they may be entitled.

National Guard and Reserve Members

In peacetime, outreach to Reserve and National Guard members is generally accomplished on an "on call" or "as requested" basis. But, with the onset of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) and the activation and deployment of large numbers of Reserve and National Guard members, VBA's outreach to this group has been greatly expanded. VA has made arrangements with Reserve and Guard officials to schedule briefings for members being mobilized and demobilized. These benefits briefings for Guard and Reserve members increased from 821

briefings for more than 46,000 attendees in FY 2003 to over 1,800 briefings for more than 96,000 attendees in FY 2007.

RESERVE/GUARD BRIEFINGS

Fiscal Year	*Briefings*	*Attendees*	*Interviews*
2003	821	46,675	N/A
2004	1,399	88,366	N/A
2005	1,984	118,658	N/A
2006	1,298	93,361	10,515
2007	1,868	96,355	11,488
2008 (Through June)	1,280	66,404	12,447

VA has also published a brochure, A Summary of VA Benefits for National Guard and Reserve Personnel, which is widely distributed to Guard and Reserve units. A special page on VA's main Web site is dedicated for use by Guard and Reserve members.

Transition Assistance Advisors (TAAs)

A memorandum of agreement was signed in 2005 between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the National Guard Bureau to institutionalize a partnership and to support better communication between the two. VA is encouraging State National Guard Coalitions to improve local communication and coordination of benefits briefings to assure that National Guard and Reserve members are fully aware of benefits. As a part of this partnership, the National Guard Bureau employs 57 Transition Assistance Advisors (TAA) for the 50 States and 4 territories.

The TAA's primary function is to serve as the statewide point of contact and coordinator. They also provide advice regarding VA benefits and services to Guard members and their families and assist in resolving problems with VA healthcare, benefits, and TRICARE. VA and the National Guard Bureau teamed up at the beginning of the program in February 2006 to provide training to the TAAs on VA services and benefits as well as define their role as VA advocates. In addition, VA has participated in annual refresher training and monthly TAA conference calls.

TAP in South Dakota

The Sioux Falls VA Regional Office (RO) actively supports the commitment to provide a seamless transition for returning military members. In FY 2007, the office conducted 16 TAP briefings for 467 participants. As of June 30, 2008, the office has conducted 11 TAP briefings for 242 participants. The participants included 231 active-duty members, 6 members of the Guard and Reserve, and 5 family members.

Outreach to the Guard in South Dakota

The Sioux Falls Regional Office is working diligently to ensure members of the Guard and Reserve understand the VA benefits to which they may be entitled. In addition to TAP, the office has completed 6 outreach events for the Army National Guard and the SD Air National Guard since October 2006. These events provided benefit information to 517 members of the Guard.

Madam Chairwoman, we at VA are proud of our continuing role in the transition of servicemembers from military to civilian life, and seek to continually improve the quality and breadth of our outreach efforts to active duty, Reserve, and National Guard members.

Thank you for allowing me to appear before you today. I would be pleased to respond to any questions from members of the Subcommittee.

Statement of William D. Elmore, Associate Administrator for Veterans Business Development, Office of Veterans Business Development, U.S. Small Business Administration

I want to thank Chairwoman Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, other distinguished members of the Committee, and members of the National Guard and Reserves for

this opportunity to inform you of SBA's efforts to support service members and reservists participating in the Transition Assistance Program.

First, I would like to express the personal gratitude of SBA Acting Administrator Carranza, myself and all SBA employees, to those members of the National Guard and Reserves who are with us today not only for their service, but also for the sacrifices their families make when their loved one is activated for military service. We thank you for your service in defense of our great Nation.

As the Associate Administrator for the Office of Veterans Business Development (OVBD), I am the lead official at the Small Business Administration (SBA) responsible for our veteran outreach initiatives. I am happy to report to this Committee the tremendous level of work that the SBA has done for our nation's veterans and our work with the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). TAP was established to meet the needs of separating service members during their period of transition into civilian life by offering job-search and career assistance and related services.

There are four components of TAP, and I will address two in my testimony. The first is the segment for TAP-eligible service members who meet with a DoD counselor after filling out DD Form 2648 (for Active Component Service Member), or DD Form 2648–1 (for Reserve Component Service Member). Today, DD Forms 2648 and 2648–1 both now include information relating to SBA services, which are also available through our Web site (*http://www.sba.gov*), and contain information about available SBA Loans.

The second component of the TAP program I will address is the actual multi-day DoL-TAP seminar managed by DoL field staff or contractors. SBA is continually working with DoL in an effort to increase SBA's participation, utilizing both SBA district offices staff (which includes Veteran Business Development Officers) and SBA Resource Partners like SCORE, SBDC and VBOC's. SBA currently participates in TAP seminars nationwide.

We have also taken a number of other significant steps beyond TAP to ensure that discharging and deactivating service members and reservists have access to, or are informed about SBA services, and are provided information necessary to consider entrepreneurship as a potential vocation.

In 2001, SBA initiated the Military Reservists Economic Injury Disaster Loan (MREIDL) program which provides low interest disaster loans with very flexible terms to small businesses suffering economic injury when a Reservist who is an essential employee is activated.

Additionally, the OVBD implemented the Self Employed Reserve and Guard (SERG) initiative as we realized that small business owners in the reserves may be called to Title 10 duty in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11. As part of that initiative, OVBD established a Web site specifically for Reservists (*http://www.sba.gov/reservists*), and we began working with the Department of Defense's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Reserve Affairs, as well as the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) to conduct outreach to Reserve component members.

Also, as part of SERG, we have distributed hundreds of thousands of the SBA Reservist Fact Sheets and designed and produced comprehensive Pre and Post Mobilization Business Planning Guides, disabled veteran procurement guides, SBA Program Guides, and Patriot Express Loan Program Guides to organizations and individuals that interact with Reserve component members. This has included Reservists Mobilization and De-Mobilization sites, DoD-TAP program sites, Military Family Support Centers, ESGR State offices, SBDCs, SCORE Chapters, SBA district offices, State Departments of Veterans Services, veteran service organization service officers, State National Guard Adjutants General and hundreds of other locations. In the last year alone, OVBD has received requests for and has distributed more than 100,000 "Reserve and Guard Kits," containing all the above information and more.

In 2007, SBA launched the Patriot Express Pilot Loan initiative (Patriot Express), and has distributed hundreds of thousands of Patriot Express brochures nationwide, including to DoD-TAP locations.

Patriot Express specifically targets veterans, service-disabled veterans, Reserve Component members, discharging service members eligible for TAP, spouses of the above, spouses of all active service members and widows of service members who died in service or who died of a service-connected disability.

In the first year of the Patriot Express, more than 850 lending partners signed up to offer the program and SBA guaranteed more than 1,600 loans totaling more than $164,000,000.

In cooperation with the Department of Labor and the Department of Defense, we are providing discharging service members and spouses with information regarding entrepreneurship, SBA services, SBA programs and SBA resource partners. These

materials are contained in both the DoL TAP Manual and in a number of different sections in the TurboTAP online system.

With the cooperation of the Department of Labor, we included a special section in its National Hire Veterans First Web site which specifically targeted to entrepreneurship and highlighting SBA services and programs for veterans and reservists.

Our program materials are also included on the Department of Veterans Affairs' Center for Veteran Enterprise Web site and we have recently initiated a more formative relationship with the Department of Veterans Affairs' Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Services program. This will give us access to a pool of 100,000 service disabled veterans some of whom have the desire and potential to become entrepreneurs.

In closing, the SBA is dedicated to continually improve and increase assistance for veterans and reservists. We are working to improve our programs, and will be announcing additional program enhancements in MREIDL, SBDC and Veterans Business Development programs in the near future.

While we are proud of the work we have done, and the improvements we have made, we also recognize that we can never do enough to fully repay the sacrifices that our service members and their families make. We will continue to improve the depth of our programs for veterans and reservists and we will continue to grow our ability to reach, offer and provide assistance to America's true patriots as they choose to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this information.

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Washington, DC.
August 1, 2008

Mr. John McWilliam
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Veterans' Employment and Training Service
U.S. Department of Labor
200 Constitution Ave., NW
Room S-2220
Washington, DC 20210

Dear Mr. McWilliam:

In reference to our House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Field Hearing on "Transition Assistance Program" on July 28, 2008, I would appreciate it if you could answer the enclosed hearing questions by no later than August 29, 2008.

In an effort to reduce printing costs, the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, in cooperation with the Joint Committee on Printing, is implementing some formatting changes for material for all full committee and subcommittee hearings. Therefore, it would be appreciated if you could provide your answers consecutively on letter size paper, single-spaced. In addition, please restate the question in its entirety before the answer.

Due to the delay in receiving mail, please provide your response to Ms. Orfa Torres by fax at (202) 225–2034. If you have any questions, please call (202) 226–4150.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Herseth Sandlin
Chairwoman

U.S. Department of Labor
Office of the Assistant Secretary for
Veterans' Employment and Training
Washington, DC.

Hon. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin
Chairwoman
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin:

This is in response to your inquiry following the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Field Hearing on "Transition Assistance Program" on July 28, 2008. Your questions and our responses are listed on the following pages.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee and for your continued support of employment services for America's veterans.

Sincerely,

John M. McWilliam
Deputy Assistant Secretary

Enclosure

Questions from the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Hearing on Transition Assistance Program
July 28, 2008

Question 1: In your written testimony, you state that in fiscal year 2007, over 146,000 separating military personnel and spouses were trained in 4,716 workshops worldwide. Is this active duty only?

Response: Of the 146,000 participants in TAP Employment Workshops in Fiscal Year 2007, there were 3,535 reservists (National Guard or Reserve Component servicemembers) and 3,182 spouses.

Question 1(a): Can you tell us how many servicemembers separated in fiscal year 2007?

Response: The Department of Defense has informed us that in Fiscal Year 2007 there were 213,305 active duty transitions worldwide.

Question 1(b): Do you have numbers specific to South Dakota? (separation and participation)

Response: The Department of Defense has informed us that in Fiscal Year 2007 there were 424 active duty transitions in South Dakota.

There were 403 participants in TAP Employment Workshops in Fiscal Year 2007, of which 8 were reservists (National Guard or Reserve Component servicemembers) and 16 were spouses.

Question 2: You mentioned in your written testimony that spouses have also received employment and job training assistance. Are families generally informed that these programs are available to them?

Question 2(a): If so, how?

Response: As mentioned in my testimony, spouses have been provided employment and job training services through the TAP Employment Workshops. The Department of Defense has informed us that while spouses are eligible and encouraged to attend any and all TAP sessions which are advertised via normal means (Family Centers, newcomer's orientations, etc.), the servicemember is primarily responsible for informing the spouse.

During pre-separation counseling, which is the only portion of the TAP process that is mandatory by law, the servicemember is briefed on the range of topics available during TAP sessions. On the pre-separation counseling form (DD Form 2648/2648–1), the servicemember is required to check a block by each applicable presentation topic whether his/her spouse will also attend with the member. Spouses are encouraged to attend presentations on veterans benefits, health and life insurance, finances, education/training, and relocation and employment assistance.

○