

**STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
FIELD HEARING
INDIANA UNIVERSITY-SOUTH BEND, INDIANA**

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Madame 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. Dennis Kuewa, Director of the Indianapolis 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 Indianapolis 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). 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 health care, 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 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.

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 5 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% since 2003.

<i>Fiscal Year</i>	<i>Briefings</i>	<i>Attendees</i>	<i>Interviews</i>
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 March 2008)	3,962	161,749	39,917

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 servicemember.

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, creation of the new Employment Coordinator position, training for the new Employment Coordinators, training for all field staff on the Five Tracks to Employment process, creation of an on-line employment services website - www.Vetsuccess.gov, and the establishment of Job Resource Labs in all regional offices.

The Employment Coordinator (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 Specialists (DVOPS) 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 3 VA regional offices and 3 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 5 locations overseas (3 in Korea and 2 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 Veterans Disability Benefits Commission, VA and DoD launched a Disability Evaluation System (DES) pilot on November 27, 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, counseling 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 assigns the evaluation for the unfit condition(s) as well as any other claimed conditions. The VA rating for the unfit condition is generally binding on 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

<i>Fiscal Year</i>	<i>Briefings</i>	<i>Attendees</i>	<i>Interviews</i>
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	791	56,372	5,377

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. VA has participated in subsequent annual refresher training, as well as monthly TAA conference calls.

Outreach for Indiana Servicemembers

The Indianapolis Regional Office (RO) conducts several outreach initiatives for Indiana veterans and servicemembers. In FY 2007, the RO

conducted more than 40 briefings, attended by over 6,000 active-duty personnel and their families. Through March 2008, the RO conducted 16 briefings for over 1,600 attendees.

As of March 2008, the RO Veterans Service Center and VR&E Division jointly provided a full-time presence at the Roudebush VA Medical Center Seamless Transition Integrated Care Clinic (STICC). To provide better services to veterans in Northern Indiana, the VR&E Division operates a satellite office at the Northern Indiana Healthcare System Medical Center in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. The RO is also in the process of establishing an out-based office at both Camp Atterbury and in Logansport, Indiana. The Indianapolis VR&E Division has established a number of working partnerships with Federal, State, and local government entities. One of the partnerships includes a pilot program with the Crane Learning and Employment Center for Veterans with Disabilities. Veterans who complete the program are offered jobs at the Naval Support Activity at Crane, Indiana.

Madame 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.