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WRITTEN STATEMENT

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TO THE

U.S. SENATE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

ON

VETERAN TRANSITION ASSISTANCE

DECEMBER 15, 2015

Dear Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for holding this hearing to discuss the transition assistance available to transitioning service members and veterans. I am pleased to share Easter Seals' perspectives on veteran transition, which are based on our experiences in working with veterans through the Easter Seals Dixon Center for Military and Veterans Services and our national affiliate network of community-based affiliates. My testimony will include background on Easter Seals and our commitment to America's veterans, our appreciation for the numerous improvements to the transition assistance program (TAP) made by Congress and the relevant federal agencies, a description of a growing public-private, pre-separation best practice to improve transition success, and the identification of the essential ingredient for all successful veteran reintegration—community—and our recommendations for investing in community-based solutions.

Easter Seals' Commitment to America's Veterans:

Easter Seals is a leading non-profit organization that assists veterans, military families, and others to reach their potential and succeed in their communities by providing and connecting them to local services and supports. Founded in 1919, Easter Seals began serving veterans after World War II to help address the unmet needs of service members returning home with service-connected disabilities. Through our national network of 74 community-based affiliates and Easter Seals Dixon Center for Military and Veterans Services, Easter Seals continues to fill the gap between the services veterans need and the services currently available through government or other entities.

Easter Seals was selected by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to develop and administer the National Veteran Caregiver Training Program that provides self-study workbook, online, and classroom caregiver training to eligible veteran caregivers. In addition, numerous Easter Seals affiliates provide employment, respite, adult day health, child care, and other ongoing reintegration services to veterans and their families through programs funded through private foundations and donors as well as federal grants, including the Department of Labor's (DOL) Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program and the VA's Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot. Recognizing emerging unmet needs of America's veterans and military families, Easter Seals developed the Easter Seals Dixon Center for Military and Veterans Services, under the leadership of retired U.S. Army Colonel David Sutherland, to expand and better coordinate community-based veteran services across Easter Seals' affiliate and partner network. Annually, Easter Seals provides direct services to about 165,000 veterans and military families.

Transition GPS – A Major Improvement Over “Death By PowerPoint:”

Easter Seals appreciates the opportunity to discuss the improvements made to TAP, the primary tool available to transitioning service members to help them prepare for their transition from military to civilian life. My colleague, Col. Sutherland, testified before a U.S. House panel in January 2015 about the great strides Congress and the Administration have made to make TAP more useful and meaningful for transitioning service members. Easter Seals applauded President Obama's announcement in 2011 of

a major reboot of the transition program and we supported the changes Congress made to TAP through the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011.

The previous TAP was often referred to as “death by PowerPoint” because it didn’t accomplish much more than check-the-box on the responsibility. Based on personal accounts from veterans who have participated in TAP and on available evaluation data, the new Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success) represents a marked improvement in both relevance and helping exiting service members achieve career readiness standards (CRS) for their next step, whether finding a job, starting a business, or pursuing additional education. Easter Seals is most familiar with the Department of Labor’s Employment Workshop, the three-day instruction to help service members translate their military skills, develop a resume, research job and labor market information, and practice their interview skills. Easter Seals also appreciates the availability of the optional tailored tracks with more focused, in-depth instruction for those individuals who want to pursue a college education, seek an industry-recognized credential, or start a business. Easter Seals welcomed DOL’s testimony that it plans to update its workshop to include more hands-on opportunities for TAP participants to develop their resumes and related materials.

***Easter Seals Recommendation:** Easter Seals urges Congress to continue its aggressive oversight of the TAP program, including seeking and making available TAP evaluation and assessment data, to ensure the improved program remains relevant and doesn’t, over time, face the similar challenges Transition GPS was developed to fix.*

Successful Transition Starts with a Job Before Military Separation:

While it didn’t receive the headlines of a bill signing, congressional action, or presidential speech, the U.S. Department of Defense’s release of a December 23, 2014 memorandum may, long-term, represent one of the more significant actions toward improving transition success. In the memo, former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel further clarified and encouraged installation commanders to allow nonprofit non-federal entities (nonprofit NFE’s) on military installations to help facilitate the delivery of transition services to service members and their families. The memo made clear that installation commanders should seriously consider requests from nonprofit NFE’s for access to the installation, including the use of space or logistical support to deliver transition support such as “career opportunities for transitioning service members.” Easter Seals understands how critical employment is to transition success and has long encouraged more supports and job-matching for service members prior to them leaving the military to foster greater transition success.

My colleagues at Easter Seals Dixon Center have been working to forge partnerships between interested installation commanders, employers, and credentialing organizations to give transitioning service members the opportunity to develop job-ready skills and industry-recognized credentials that are connected to a real job—all while still on active duty. Easter Seals Dixon Center advises the International Brotherhood of Teamsters on best practices in transitioning active duty personnel to successful transportation careers through their commercial driver’s licenses (CDL) credentialing

program. The Teamsters have partnered with a major transportation employer, ABF Freight, and the U.S. Army—at bases in Kansas and Oklahoma—to provide their six-week CDL training, free-of-charge, to interested transitioning service members. Graduates of the program have a guaranteed job with ABF Freight once they leave the military. A 14-year Army Sergeant who recently graduated from the program in Fort Sill in Oklahoma said the program was a great opportunity to go from one job straight into another. “I can actually start making money. That’s a good feeling to have something to go to from leaving the military.”

A young Marine Lance Corporal named Gary who had a similar employment goal when he exited the military in 2013 could have greatly benefited from a training-straight-to-job, pre-separation program like the one offered through the Teamsters. Gary participated in the redesigned Transition GPS program and gave it fairly high reviews, other than its lack of localized job market and community support information for where he was going (Cincinnati) rather than where he was stationed (North Carolina). That said, Gary and his young family had a plan and were ready for their next stage in life. But his thoughtful plan for a seamless transition quickly unraveled. A payment glitch delayed his final military paycheck, which was to cover his relocation bills, including the first month’s rent and living expenses during his job hunt. That one payroll mishap—which was out of his control—left Gary and his family homeless and their lives nearly spiraled out of control.

Gary’s story ends in success thanks to a community prepared to respond. Gary called a local helpline, which connected Gary to the Easter Seals in the region that specializes in employment services. With Easter Seals’ help, Gary quickly found a temporary job and received other community supports to help him secure an apartment for he and his family. The temporary job turned full-time, which helped him get his life back on track. But Gary wanted more than a job. He wanted a career. So he studied for and earned his CDL license in the summer of 2014, nearly a year after his initial military transition. While Gary was counted as a Transition GPS success—having earned his career readiness standards signoff at his Capstone event—Gary’s transition was far from smooth due to the payroll glitch. Gary’s situation could have been avoided if he had the opportunity to earn his CDL training and secure his chosen job as a truck driver before he separated the military.

Congress recently recognized the importance of the DOD memo and how nonprofits and veteran service organizations have stepped up to deliver meaningful, pre-separation supports and services to transitioning service members and their families. In its committee report (114-102, Part 1) for its Fiscal Year 2016 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the U.S. House Armed Services Committee described how “some installations have partnered with local non-profit and community based transition support organizations to enhance the Transition Assistance Program curriculum with great success, especially for those leaving the service and remaining in the local area.” The report goes on to direct the Secretary of Defense to brief Congress “on the feasibility of expanding this model of partnering with local community based support organizations department-wide to enhance the Transition Assistance Program.”

Easter Seals Recommendation: *Easter Seals urges Congress to encourage and promote continued use of public-private partnerships on military installations to help connect existing service members to credentialed training and meaningful careers. In particular, Easter Seals urges Congress to seek and release the DOD feasibility report, which was required for March 1, 2016, and to take other appropriate action to encourage or even incentivize installation commanders to allow and develop similar training-straight-to-job, pre-separation programs.*

Ongoing Reintegration Needs Best Addressed Locally:

In Gary's story, his community became the final catchall to help put him on a road to successful reintegration. No matter how well-meaning transition programs and government systems are designed and implemented, the community—and the welcoming, coordinated support it provides—continues to be the essential ingredient to transition success. The point of greatest transition impact on veterans' transition to civilian life occurs at the local level, where there are boots-on-the-ground to meet their individual needs and to connect them to available local resources and supports. The Center for a New American Security concluded, in its *Well After Service: Veteran Reintegration and American Communities* report, that the most effective veteran reintegration programs “are those that base operations at a credible, local nonprofit organization that coordinates and deploys both public and private resources and stakeholders to address the needs and recognize the skills of service members, veterans, and their families.”

That is the role that Easter Seals plays in a number of communities to assist veterans. Most recently, Easter Seals described its role in assisting female veterans during reintegration in a major policy white paper, *Call to Action: Support Community Efforts to Improve the Transition to Civilian Life for Women Veterans*. The paper highlighted the unique and growing needs of female veterans and how public and private investments in community-based reintegration services can lead to successful transitions. Women veterans often do not identify as veterans or feel comfortable within government systems. Instead, women veterans may access the transition supports they need, initially, through a community partner, which then reconnects them to the VA or other social service supports.

The Easter Seals *Call to Action* paper identified a lack of community-based reintegration supports and resources that are focused on crisis prevention rather than just crisis intervention. Easter Seals recommended expansions of early-intervention models that include five core components:

- Veteran-centered approach to focus on the unique and evolving needs of each veteran;
- Care coordination to holistically address reintegration through a coordinated team approach;
- Community connection to link veterans to VA and other key federal and local supports within their communities;
- Emergency financial assistance to meet unexpected, temporary financial barriers to successful reintegration; and,

- Ongoing preventative and follow along supports to recognize that reintegration challenges can surface throughout a veteran's lifetime.

Many publically and privately funded programs focus on resolving challenges, such as homelessness and long-term unemployment, rather than staving off these challenges before they occur through early access to local reintegration services and supports. Easter Seals applauds Congress for investing in public-private solutions through programs such as the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program, Supportive Services for Veterans Families, and the Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot. In addition, Easter Seals applauds the early-intervention, public-private partnership goals of H.R. 1843, a pilot proposal introduced in the United States House of Representatives that would provide veterans with disabilities with access to care coordination and local supports. These programs and legislative proposals represent models of effective public-private partnerships that can help meet the needs of veterans and transitioning service members.

***Easter Seals Recommendation:** Easter Seals urges Congress to fully fund existing public-private reintegration programs, including the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program and Supportive Services for Veterans Families Program; to reauthorize and expand the Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot to include other, non-rural underserved veteran communities; and to enact H.R. 1843 and other legislative proposals that recognize the ongoing reintegration needs of veterans and that promote local, preventative access to care coordination supports and direct services that help promote reintegration success.*

Conclusion:

Easter Seals applauds the Committee for its leadership in holding this hearing and in its past efforts to increase the transition assistance and supports available to America's service members and veterans. The improved Transition GPS and the growing number of pre-separation, training-straight-to-jobs programs are examples that separating service members are better equipped for their initial transition. However, more can and must be done to help expand community-based services and coordination of local supports, particularly in situations where challenges surface weeks or years after the initial transition. Easter Seals looks forward to working with this Committee to help expand crisis intervention reintegration supports. Thank you for the opportunity to share Easter Seals' view on transition assistance and our ideas for promoting reintegration success of all veterans.