



A Grateful Nation: Maximizing Veterans' Success after Service

Prepared for:

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Testimony by:

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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today about how we may collectively better support the military-to-civilian transition process, so our nation's veterans and their families thrive after service.

About the IVMF

The D'Aniello Institute for Veterans & Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University was founded in 2011, as higher-education's first interdisciplinary academic institute singularly focused on advancing economic, social, and wellness outcomes on behalf of the nation's military, veterans, and their families. Each year, more than 20,000 individuals participate in IVMF programs and services, from entrepreneurship and career training to connecting individuals with local resources in their communities. Since its founding, the IVMF has served over 230,000 service members, veterans, and their families, all underpinned by the Institute's research, evaluation, and community insights team.

Our policy priorities are shaped not only by the data we collect, but also by the lived experiences surfaced through our programs and partnerships. Many of the challenges facing the military and veteran community—such as employment and health—require coordinated efforts across government, nonprofit, philanthropic, and private sectors, our work positions us to identify where policy can better enable collaboration and drive systemic impact. We remain committed to bridging gaps across sectors to strengthen the continuum of support for those transitioning from military to civilian life.

Getting Transition Right

Each year, [approximately 200,000](#) individuals leave active military service. The number grows significantly when we account for military spouses, members of the National Guard, and

Reservists. The transition period—especially the [first three years](#)—can be fraught with challenges. In fact, more than half of veterans [report](#) difficulty adjusting to civilian life. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has even labeled the first year post-separation as “[the deadly gap](#),” highlighting the heightened risk of suicide during this vulnerable time. Factors like finding purpose and connection, securing employment and financial stability, and receiving the right support at the right time can help mitigate serious personal, social, and economic consequences.

These consequences extend beyond individual well-being to the strength of our society and national security. There is growing concern that not only are younger generations increasingly hesitant to consider military service, those currently serving are also becoming reluctant to recommend military service.

[Research from Ipsos](#), conducted in partnership with the Call of Duty Endowment and Mission Roll Call, found that 55% of adults are unlikely to suggest military careers to teens, and 80% of teens themselves are not interested in pursuing military service—despite generally favorable views of veterans. Nearly half of the adults surveyed believe that recruitment challenges pose a serious threat to national security.

Additional [data](#) from our collaboration on the Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS) shows despite nearly 70% of active-duty family respondents reporting the positive impact of military service on their families, only about one-third would encourage a young relative to enlist. More concerning, forthcoming research, also from the MFLS, found that less than half of veteran family respondents are confident that veterans and their families will obtain the long-term support that they need. In fact, 23% believe that “veterans and their families will be increasingly overlooked.”

Our nation’s commitment to those who serve must be unwavering, but also adaptive. The support we offer must reflect the evolving needs, experiences, and aspirations of each individual transitioning from military to civilian life. Achieving that goal begins with an honest assessment of today’s transition landscape including what’s working, what isn’t, and where innovation is most needed.

Current Transition Landscape

While each experience separating from the military is unique, one of the most pressing challenges veterans and their families [report](#) during transition is navigating the benefits and resources available to them. Data from our community partners repeatedly shows that veterans and their families experience multiple needs concurrently. For example, in a recent [analysis](#) of NCSServe, a navigation network coordinating referrals across health and nonprofit organizations

in North Carolina, across the last ten years there was a strong correlation between housing and other needs like employment, benefits navigation, and food.

Yet, when looking for help, veterans and their families confront an overwhelming number of options for obtaining assistance during transition—whether from the federal government, state and local government, nonprofit organizations, or the private sector. It is taxing to move between systems of care due to the lack of data sharing and warm handoffs, in turn compounding the burdens on both the individual and these systems. Even within the VA there are obstacles to sharing data between the Health Administration (VHA) and the Benefits Administration (VBA), let alone between federal agencies or from federal agencies to states. More work needs to be done to reduce barriers that would make navigating our maze of support easier, and the results more effective. Solutions like NCServes and similar initiatives prove this approach is possible, but we have a long way to go to scale these models in a way that preserves their efficacy.

Navigation: Everyone Has a Role to Play

Each high-quality program, service, or resource has a place in the system of transition supports; it is more a matter of determining which individuals should be directed to which resources at which intervention point.

There is a growing body of evidence governing how to implement effective navigation and referral models. Research shows providing even a customized list of resources only results in success about one-third of the time, compared to approaches that include guidance from a human navigator. For example, referrals made by trained “care coordinators” in NCServes resulted in success 75% of the time, and we see similar data with our partners across the nation, such as in Pennsylvania and the National Capitol Region. Moreover, these coordinators are able to track when and why help is unable to be provided, which helps communities improve how they serve veterans and their families over time.

Importantly, networks like NCServes, PAServes, and ServingTogether include the ability to make and measure referrals to county and state agencies, VBA, and VHA. Our research conducted with the VA found that veterans enrolled in VA healthcare who also sought services from community organizations had *better* non-clinical outcomes when collaboration with local VA Medical Centers was strong.

Relatedly, The Veteran Metrics Initiative (TVMI), a national longitudinal study of post-9/11 veterans managed by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Pennsylvania State University, found that during the first three months after transition, 66% of veterans used at least one program aside from TAP and 33% of veterans used multiple programs and services. These

additional programs include both public and private offerings, and **veterans who utilized more programs experienced better outcomes.**

Looking forward, we continue to see promising efforts around the country to replicate these models to address different transition needs. For example, a collective of veteran-serving organizations (VSOs) are formally coming together to refine the referral process for employment services and to report the collective impact of those efforts. This work is about reducing navigation friction for veterans and partnering with organizations that have validated outcomes to deliver the multiple meaningful interventions needed to successfully transition.

The Need vs. Our System: The Example of Employment

Why is resource navigation so central to a successful military transition and post-service life for veterans? Data shows that most veterans are seeking employment after service, even those also interested in school or starting a business—all while they adjust to civilian life. Moreover, recent research from the 2023 MFLS showed that there may be a continuous need for “employment and career development” resources and yet 29% of non-retired, post-9/11 veterans respondents said that they needed but did not get these resources.

Ultimately, the landscape of veteran employment need is complex—veteran unemployment has generally been low; however, veteran *underemployment* remains high even after more than six years post-service, based on self-reported educational attainment and the veteran’s current job compared with education required for the job per Department of Labor (DOL) classifications. And yet, the “complexity” in this key aspect of military transition and post-service life and the needs gap that exists is emblematic of the larger systemic issues in the transition process.

First, while many programs exist in regard to military transition, **misalignment between needs and services remains.** According to RAND’s comprehensive report on this topic, in the federal government alone, there are 46 separate programs administered by 12 government agencies supporting military to civilian transition. However, RAND also found that 95% of the federal expenditures—over \$13 billion per year—is focused on general education services and that there is overlap among these programs while noted gaps remain.

Second, the report **found that these programs lack transparency and oversight, with almost no rigorous evaluation to date.** However, a second report illustrated the important role the nonprofit sector plays in the transition system, propped up in large part by philanthropy. RAND further noted that some nonprofits are tracking their performance and spending, albeit with minimal common standards, and were able to compile some of their publicly available data.

On the ground, many nonprofits are stepping up to fill the gap, particularly around employment and navigation. For example, Onward to Opportunity (O2O), the IVMF's flagship career preparation and employment initiative, fills a need and provides career exploration and employability skills training, along with access to industry-recognized certifications to over 10,000 transitioning service members, veterans, and spouses every year. More importantly, O2O committed to third-party evaluation and demonstrated its efficacy at helping transitioning service members—especially those leaving the military from junior enlisted ranks—secure better salaries.

Additionally, as the nature of work becomes more dynamic, employers will increasingly depend on soft skills such as problem-solving, adaptability, and motivation. [Veterans possess many of these in-demand traits](#), as well as technical and learning capabilities cultivated throughout their service. VSOs augment federal transition programs in supporting veterans. VSOs such as Hiring Our Heroes and VetJobs appoint advisors that help veterans and their spouses identify which career path they prefer, how their expertise and soft skills align with that career path, and can even upskill veterans so that they are sufficiently qualified. VSOs also provide a vital networking connection between employees and veterans that increases the likelihood of successful employment outcomes.

More broadly, veterans also bring valuable skills to our economy, including in key industries like energy and semiconductor manufacturing. Through O2O, we've built a national infrastructure that connects transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses to high-demand careers. Leveraging that foundation, and with support from Micron Technology, we have established a semiconductor hub for the military-connected community. This initiative provides industry-aligned upskilling, technical training, and direct pathways to employment in one of America's most strategically important and fastest-growing sectors.

For example, the semiconductor industry is projected to nearly double in global revenue over the next decade, driven by rapid advancements in artificial intelligence, defense systems, and clean energy technologies. Yet, meeting this growth will require hundreds of thousands of new skilled workers across engineering, manufacturing, and supply-chain roles. By aligning O2O's proven training model with Micron's leadership and industry demand, the IVMF is helping ensure that veterans and military families are not only part of this growth—but are positioned at its forefront.

Lastly, as we seek to fill the gaps in the military to civilian transition process, the needs of military families, particularly related to the employment of military spouses also require additional work and support. Many military spouses find themselves with employment-related needs during a time of transition; however, the constraints they face often begin well before their families go through the transition process. Reinforcing longstanding research on military spouse

employment challenges, a recent [IVMF publication](#) utilizing the American Community Survey (ACS) data found that military spouses have an unemployment rate four times higher than civilian peers. Moreover, they often earn 42 percent less and endure loss of income after each military relocation. These employment-related challenges have long-term implications for the financial health and well-being of military families from time in service, the moment of military transition, and beyond.

Accountability: Better Outcomes, Smarter Spending

As suggested by the comprehensive RAND report, measurement and accountability of transition related programs will be key to understanding what makes impactful outcomes in the long term. Given their unique circumstances and varying levels of need, veterans will accordingly rely on different programs at different times. TVMI data shows prevalent utilization of supports from approximately one year prior to separation through three years after separation. Therefore, methods of evaluation must be more holistic, balancing program level outcomes with measures of individual well-being. We should also take into consideration each service member's assessment data at the beginning of the transition process—so that success is weighed against a baseline.

At the program level, everyone must be held equally accountable, whether government, private, or nonprofit. When determining effectiveness, organizations must track outputs but move beyond outputs to outcomes to demonstrate efficacy. These outcomes should reflect evidence-based aspects of how well an individual is doing. For instance, a veteran obtaining a job is not necessarily a success. Other factors that must be considered are underemployment, whether the veteran has a living wage for their family, and veteran spouse careers.

At the individual level, well-being can be measured across key domains like health, education, employment, and social connectedness. It is essential that these elements are monitored over time, given that 19% of veterans in TVMI reported not feeling fully transitioned after as many as six and a half years.

Ultimately, without clearly defined outcomes that are universally measured, we will not know what actually works, for whom, and under what conditions.

Recommendations

A process as complex as military-to-civilian transition, and with as many well-intentioned stakeholders spanning agencies and sectors, requires a comprehensive and collaborative solution. The IVMF has long advocated for a National Veterans Strategy—a whole of government approach to ensuring veterans and their families thrive after service.

This type of approach has the potential to align agencies and non-governmental programs, rather than exist as a stand-alone proposal within one area of jurisdiction. It would also create more collective accountability and should include a process to revisit the strategy over time to course correct and meet new demands.

Specifically with respect to transition, we suggest a National Veterans Strategy should:

- Create national standards for transition program outcomes;
- Design and implement a holistic evaluation of both transition programs and individual well-being;
- Support cross-sector pilots that improve navigation and coordination.

Outcome Standards

To even understand how well a program or person is doing, collectively we must agree on a set of outcome definitions and benchmarks. Many research and evaluation organizations have established bodies of evidence for different types of programs, as well as the outcomes appropriate for each type. For example, as part of TVMI, PSU has classified key measures by domain, or area of need. The data also suggests correlations between certain types of program elements and better outcomes. Recently, RAND initiated a study funded by The Heinz Endowments to create a standard underemployment definition and metric.

Holistic Evaluation

With standards, we will have the ability to address RAND's recommendation about oversight and rigorous evaluation of federal programs. In turn, this will enable us to streamline duplicative programs, redirect funding to promising initiatives, and make improvements overall. This type of assessment should be ongoing and funded as part of a program's budget. Additionally, we should establish a national longitudinal outcomes study modeled after TVMI. While TVMI is the most representative data we have tracking veterans over time, the current sample includes service members who separated in 2016. This type of information needs to be refreshed to reflect our changing population and national landscape. It should be collected routinely by VA, in partnership with other agencies. Critically, all data should be transparently shared.

Navigation

To achieve this quality oversight and evaluation, we must make warm handoffs easier between federal agencies, as well as between the federal government to states, counties, communities, healthcare, and employers. We need to better support data sharing and enrollment in benefits and services at the VA, DOL, state, and local levels for those that choose to do so once they officially separate from the military. We must decrease barriers for individuals to move between the

military and new systems of care. Programs like the VA's Staff Sergeant Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program have acknowledged the importance of addressing clinical and non-clinical needs concurrently to meet veterans where they are, upstream from crisis. However, challenges persist for grantees when trying to collaborate with the VA; states and VSOs face similar challenges with federal agencies. A stronger commitment should be made to the models following leading practices, with more investment to empower them to scale.

Conclusion

At a time when those who serve represent a decreasing share of our population, there is an increasing share of civilians who may not understand the barriers veterans and their families face after they separate from the military. While government programs attempt to facilitate the process of military to civilian transition, adjustments are still needed to align the resources available along this complicated journey for veterans and their families. Fortunately, many veteran and military serving nonprofits have stepped up to fill the unmet needs, but more work remains to confirm that programs are indeed addressing the needs of transition in the short and long term.

This work is important not only because our veterans and families deserve a chance at successful integration into civilian life, but it is also an investment that we are making on behalf of our country. Our military veterans and their families are assets in our society. Civically, many care deeply about their communities, and they want to **continue to serve** beyond wearing the uniform, whether it is through volunteering or participating politically. Economically, in many cases, veterans leave military service with decades long experience leading complex organizations and missions. Some have unique skills that can further benefit industries seeking specialized technical know-how. Many transitioning veterans are also eager to learn new skills or seek a bridge that can help harness their existing expertise for further contributions in a new industry. Our nation should harness the skills and the enthusiasm that veterans have to offer—both civically and economically.

Fundamentally, we believe that when we get transition “right,” our country is stronger. At the D'Aniello IVMF, we are convinced that achieving a National Veterans Strategy is possible—finding measures we all agree upon, holding ourselves accountable, and making the necessary adjustments along the way.

We are deeply appreciative of the Committee's steadfast interest and commitment to serving those who have served our nation. In return, we reaffirm our commitment to providing timely insights, implementing evidence-based practice in programs, and advocating for what works. Together, we can guarantee that every veteran receives the support they deserve.