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VETERANS EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF LABOR  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE

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Chairman Craig, Ranking Member Akaka, and distinguished members of the Committee.

It is my honor to appear before this subcommittee today on behalf of Secretary Elaine Chao. I would like to take this opportunity to update you on the efforts of this Department with respect to ensuring that our service members returning home from active duty military, or following activations in the National Guard or Reserve, are afforded the opportunity to transition to civilian life in the most seamless fashion.

The Department of Labor is very proud of the men and women in uniform, both active and reserve, who have served in the extraordinary campaign to liberate the people of Iraq and Afghanistan and protect us as a nation from terrorism, as well as those who have served at any other time in our nation's history. We value their service. They were there for us when we needed them, and as Secretary Chao has said on numerous occasions, it is our turn to be there for them. We support them by providing separating service members, military spouses and veterans with the help that they need to succeed in the 21st century workforce.

We are committed to connecting these men and women with employers who are very eager to tap their dedication, their talent and their skills. The Department of Labor has many offices and programs available to help service members and spouses transition more easily between job markets. Through its Employment and Training Administration (ETA), Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS), or any other office within the Department, veterans, transitioning service members, and their spouses remain an important focus.

VETS is ideally structured to ensure these services are provided through its network of directors located in every state, who work in close cooperation with the network of state veterans employment representatives provided through the Jobs for Veterans Act Grant.

#### Transition Assistance Program

Since 1990, when the Department of Labor began providing TAP workshops, over one million separating and retiring military members have been given job preparation assistance. In general,

service members who have been on active duty for at least 180 days are eligible for TAP, and those separating due to disability are eligible regardless of the length of their active duty service.

TAP is a partnership between the Departments of Labor, Defense, Homeland Security, and Veterans Affairs. Title 10, U.S.C. Chapter 58, authorizes the Department of Labor to assist the Departments of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) in providing transition assistance services to separating service members and their spouses. The role of the Department of Labor is to work through VETS to conduct as many employment preparation workshops as possible, based on projections made by each of the Armed Services and the Department of Homeland Security (U.S. Coast Guard).

VETS provides comprehensive workshops where participants learn about job searches, career decision-making, current occupational and labor market conditions, resume and cover letter preparation and interviewing techniques. Participants are also provided an evaluation of their employability relative to the job market. Components of a TAP workshop include:

- ? Personal Appraisal
- ? Career Exploration
- ? Strategies for an effective job search
- ? Interviews
- ? Reviewing job offers
- ? Other support and assistance

Public Law 108-183 added section 4113 to Title 38, U.S.C. Chapter 41 mandating VETS to provide TAP services at military installations overseas. Before this law took effect, VETS began facilitating TAP workshops at overseas military installations where, by previous interagency agreement, the Department of Defense had provided TAP workshops since the program's inception. VETS currently offers TAP workshops at 49 sites in Germany, the United Kingdom, Guam, Mainland Japan, Okinawa, Korea, and Italy. In FY 2004, 5,939 separating service personnel attended these workshops in 286 separate classes. VETS continues to expand additional overseas sites in FY 2005 and beyond. Our goal is to provide TAP at every location requested by the Armed Services.

State Workforce Agency Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVER) are the primary source for TAP workshop facilitation stateside. However, because of the distances from many of the State Employment Offices to the military installations, and to assist with the rapid growth of the program, contract facilitators and VETS' Federal staff also assist with TAP.

TAP program participants receive valuable training and information that gives them an edge over other applicants for employment. TAP helps service members and their spouses make the initial transition from military service to the civilian workplace with less difficulty. An independent national evaluation of the program estimated that service members who had participated in TAP, on average, found their first post-military job three weeks sooner than those who did not participate in TAP.

Service members leaving the military with a service-connected disability are offered the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) from the VA representatives. DTAP includes

about four additional hours of individual instruction beyond the normal two and one half day TAP workshop to help determine job readiness and address the special needs of veterans with disabilities.

#### Employment Services and Programs for Veterans

Mr. Chairman, under the Jobs for Veterans Act (Public Law 107-288) passed in 2002, veterans receive priority in all DOL-funded employment and training programs. Separating service members attending TAP may register with the workforce investment system, meaning once they are discharged and attain veteran status, they are eligible for priority in the services offered at One-Stop Career Centers nationwide.

The public workforce investment system plays an important role in meeting employers' demands for a skilled workforce. The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) was groundbreaking legislation that sparked improvements in the delivery of employment and training services nationwide through its One-Stop delivery system. Priority of service is available to veterans in all Department of Labor funded employment and training programs, which was a significant reform under the Jobs for Veterans Act. Today, our challenge is to take those reforms a dramatic step further to promote further innovation, to strengthen the One-Stop Career Center system to better serve all workers and businesses, and to make the system even more responsive to the needs of local labor markets.

We must design a flexible workforce investment system that empowers state and local officials to create workforce solutions customized to that area's workers and employers. We must make certain that outstanding plans for innovative strategies are not thwarted by the maze of conflicting funding streams, program eligibility requirements, reporting systems and performance measures.

This approach to workforce investment is at the heart of the President's proposal for job training reform. The centerpiece of the President's proposal is the consolidation of the WIA Adult, WIA Dislocated Worker, WIA Youth, and the Employment Service funding streams into a single grant to states. Governors would have the option of including an additional five programs, including Veterans Employment programs, into that single grant. Together, these programs represent over \$7.5 billion in Federal resources. The consolidated grant would have a single State Integration Plan and a single performance and reporting system, thereby simplifying planning and reporting requirements. While program-specific requirements will be minimized, drops in participant levels for targeted populations, such as veterans, will not be allowed. In addition, the veterans' priority of service provision that applies to all DOL-funded programs will continue to apply, consistent with the Jobs for Veterans Act.

#### Recovery and Employment Assistance Lifelines (REALifelines)

Mr. Chairman, I am sure you will agree that everyone who visits wounded soldiers -- whether at Walter Reed, at Bethesda, or other military hospitals around the country and around the world -- comes away with an overwhelming sense of pride, humility, and gratitude for the courage that these young men and women display as they confront the reality of their injuries. In these hospitals, many efforts are underway to do everything possible to help these wounded warriors

recover from their injuries. And the Department of Labor recognizes that we too need to do everything we can to help them rebuild their lives.

Secretary Chao set out to do just that when she launched a new program last October at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. It is called the Recovery and Employment Assistance Lifelines or ? REALifelines? Program.

The REALifelines program is the culmination of a collaborative planning process that began in November 2003 and has included participation from the Federal Departments of Defense and Veterans' Affairs, state governments, state workforce agencies, veteran service organizations, private employers and even military service organizations like the USO. This program was built from the ground-up by service providers, by disabled veterans and even veterans of the Gulf War and Operation Iraqi Freedom. The purpose of REALifelines is to provide wounded and injured service members and their families with personal assistance to ensure a successful transition to civilian life and to prepare them for rewarding careers. In addition to assisting wounded and injured service members, REALifelines makes job training and employment services available to spouses in families that have suffered an active duty casualty, as well as to family members who have temporarily left their jobs to be with their loved ones during recovery.

REALifelines representatives are currently stationed at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Bethesda National Naval Medical Center, and new specialists have begun work with the 654th Medical Holding Company at Fort Lewis, Washington, and Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. REALifelines representatives are state workforce system employees with experience in career coaching, case management, job searches, transition assistance, reemployment rights and crisis intervention. And because they are an integral part of the state workforce system in which that base or holding company is located, they have full knowledge of, and access to, One-Stop Career Center Services, and become powerful advocates for priority of service. We are in the process of placing these employment representatives at additional military medical centers and medical holding companies.

The Department of Labor is also a key participant in the recently established DoD Military Severely Injured Joint Support Operations Center. We have on-site, a full-time REALifelines staff member to ensure the coordination of the full array of employment and training services provided through the public workforce system, and have just added an employer-relations liaison to coordinate direct hiring by private sector employers. As you know, the Joint Center is also partnered with the Transportation Security Administration to ensure that those severely injured traverse our nations' airports in a safe, respectful and non-invasive manner.

The most important aspect of this program is person to person assistance. In an age where web and online utilities and technologies are gaining dominance over human interaction, it is our belief that there is still no substitute for direct person to person relationships ? face to face as much as possible ? when assisting people and families struggling with the challenges of wounds, injuries, crisis and post-traumatic reintegration. Therefore, the first task of REALifelines representatives is to establish for the service members and their family a personal contact in their hometown community with whom they can begin to plan for their recovery and reemployment even before they are discharged from the military service. The REALifelines program looks first

to the resources at hand, builds efficiency within those systems, and then works actively to fill gaps where they exist.

The greatest challenge we face is that of information collection and sharing. At present, we are tracking service members through their voluntary enrollment in state employment systems and through follow-up calls made by the Job Accommodation Network, which has been operating a demonstration program to facilitate referral, outcome measures and problem resolution.

Our goal in partnership with DoD and Veterans' Affairs is to establish a joint database and shared processes for tracking and reporting outcomes. For this reason, we have placed staff at the Joint Operations Center and circulated recommendations for joint data elements both for service member employment profiles, and for job information from hiring employers. Labor participants are working daily with employment focused working groups from the Joint Operations Center and the Army's Council of Colonels, which provides policy and leadership for the Disabled Soldier Support System. Our goal is to be able to share this valuable data at the federal level.

REALifelines is about closing the gaps between federal, state, local and private systems. It is about creating greater efficiency, being proactive, and assuring responsiveness to the needs of our returning wounded and injured service members and their families. Our early successes are proving the value of this program. We are reducing the number of service members returning home without jobs and we are reducing the number of service members losing their jobs upon return. We have provided a practical, personal resource for service members to address the biggest issue they will face outside of their recovery ?their economic and career success.

New initiatives are being developed in partnership with DoD and the VA, such as mentorship and federal internship opportunities. The Department of Labor intends to be a model in federal hiring, and in the provision of mentorship opportunities for service members during their recovery. We believe that opportunity is a very powerful and effective tool for recovery and reintegration.

#### National Guard and Reserve

Mr. Chairman, the world has changed dramatically since the attacks of September 2001 and the commencement of the Global War on Terrorism. Our worldwide military commitments have necessitated a mobilization of National Guard and Reserve members that is unprecedented in modern times.

The use of the National Guard and Reserves has increased dramatically in recent years, with more called to active duty than at any other time since the Korean War. Over 485,000 men and women of the National Guard and Reserve components have been called to active duty since September 2001. Over 310,000 of these ?citizen-soldiers? have returned and been demobilized or separated from the military. The Bush Administration is deeply committed to protecting the reemployment rights of the Guardsmen and Reservists who so bravely serve America in Iraq, Afghanistan and around the world. To this end, the Department administers and enforces the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA), which provides reemployment rights following qualifying military service and prohibits employer discrimination

against those who perform military service. The Department of Justice and the Office of the Special Counsel also provide USERRA enforcement services.

Our service members deserve the peace of mind that comes with knowing that upon their return from military service, they will be entitled to prompt reemployment in the position that they would have held had they been continuously employed by the civilian employer during their period of service, or in some cases to a comparable position, including all attendant benefits. Our strong commitment to supporting our citizen-soldiers is underscored by the development, for the first time, of comprehensive regulations on USERRA. These regulations will provide an authoritative interpretation of the law and procedures for enforcement and will serve to improve USERRA compliance. The proposed regulations were published for comment in the Federal Register on Monday, September 20, 2004, and it is anticipated that final regulations will be published this year.

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) staff has conducted briefings and provided technical assistance to over 240,000 people and groups on their rights and responsibilities under USERRA. Audiences include National Guard and Reserve units, employer groups, and the media. While we endeavor to brief each returning service member on their reemployment rights, we know that, with extended mobilizations, there is also a need to provide more comprehensive transition assistance.

As a result, 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. However, recently we launched three formal Reserve Component TAP demonstration programs in Oregon, Michigan and Minnesota, where there was a compelling need for these workshops. The idea behind the Reserve Component TAP demonstrations is to work with returning units and provide a flexible format that allows for a tailored transition assistance package that meets local demands. The approach in each location is unique. Once we evaluate the success of these programs and review any feedback from participants, we will work with the National Guard Bureau and Office of the Chief of Army Reserve to create flexible models that can be adapted to fit any situation.

#### Employer Outreach and the President's National Hire Veterans Committee

The Jobs for Veterans Act established the President's National Hire Veterans Committee, which was announced by Secretary Chao in February, 2004. There are 21 members who are reaching out to employers to make veterans more visible in our 21st century workforce.

This committee is responsible for raising awareness among employers on the advantages of hiring veterans and transitioning military members. Last year, the committee launched a national campaign designed to drive employers to One-Stop Career Centers and to reinforce the outreach efforts of our LVERs and DVOPs. The committee has also reached out to Governors, and to date, 30 gubernatorial proclamations have been announced declaring HireVetsFirst months in their respective states. We expect all states will announce these proclamations by the end of FY 2005. The Committee has also forged significant strategic partnerships with major American businesses and corporations.

The message of this campaign is simple; it is good business to hire a veteran, and it's a message the President's National Hire Veterans Committee is carrying all across America to employers and veterans.

### Partnership with DoD

On July 11, 2003, the Secretary of Labor and the Secretary of Defense signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which directs the Departments to study and undertake activities of mutual interest that may expand recruitment, job search services, training, placement, licensing and certification, and other services for military personnel, veterans, and their families. Under the MOU, work has focused in three key areas ? recruitment, retention, and reentry. VETS, along with other key agencies in the Department of Labor, has fully participated in this collaboration, which has resulted in a wide array of new and/or enhanced strategies for serving these audiences.

An area of particular focus in which VETS played a key role is enhancing the connection of transitioning military personnel to One-Stop Career Centers through the TAP program. For example, one of the products has been a supplement to the TAP manual providing detailed information about One-Stop Career Center services and how to access them.

In addition, the Departments are working on a compilation of successful partnering strategies now employed by TAP staff and One-Stop Career Centers in the field. This guide to best practices will soon be distributed to TAP offices and the workforce investment system nationwide.

The goal of these efforts is to educate program staff about the benefits and commitments involved in local partnerships and encourage them to leverage their resources. Direct business connections to TAP workshops are constrained by the mandated curriculum and limited time of the TAP workshops. However, promoting ties between the TAP offices and One-Stop Career Centers generally will help separating service personnel connect with businesses.

The impact of these changes to the existing TAP program and workshops as well as the education and encouragement of local partnerships between TAP and the workforce investment system will ensure that transitioning military personnel are aware of and utilize all of the resources available to them as they search for employment and training opportunities.

### National Emergency Grants for Military Spouses

The Department of Labor has also established a policy that States may apply for National Emergency Grant funds to enable the spouses of returning Guard or Reserve members, widows of military personnel who lost their lives on active duty, and certain other military spouses, to be provided employment and retraining assistance.

### Summary

In summary Mr. Chairman, the Department of Labor is working hard to improve the quality of life for former, current, and transitioning service members and their spouses. The transition of these individuals into the civilian workforce serves to benefit the entire American labor force.

Most importantly, through our efforts, we express our gratitude and support for all that our military members and their families do for us.