

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

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General Daniel R. Hokanson
Chief, National Guard Bureau
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Dear Service Chiefs:

We are writing to you today to express our concern regarding the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). The Armed Services do a superb job training Marines, Sailors, Sentinels, Soldiers, Airmen, and Guardians—and now we need to take that same focused approach and care to prepare our servicemembers to return to the civilian world with the tools and support they need to thrive in their next endeavors.

The Services are falling short on requirements to assist transitioning servicemembers. The Fiscal Year 2019 National Defense Authorization Act required individualized initial counseling and pre-separation counseling components of TAP occur no later than 365 days before service members are expected to leave military service, with some exceptions such as unanticipated, short-notice separations or retirements.

In its December 2022 report (GAO-23-104538), the Government Accountability Office (GAO) stated that the majority (70%) of transitioning servicemembers did not begin TAP at least 365 days before leaving military service, while only 25% met this timeliness requirement. The FY19 NDAA also required that pre-separation counseling should be completed at least 365 days in advance of separation, but GAO found that only 11% of servicemembers met this requirement, while 82% did not.

Furthermore, service branches and the TAP policy office collect performance information on 2-day class attendance and timeliness. However, two GAO reports from 2017 (GAO-18-23) and 2022 (GAO-23-104538) outline how the services do not fully leverage this information to improve attendance or inform decisions regarding TAP programming.

Servicemembers who start TAP late face challenges with their transition to civilian life, such as being unable to take advantage of programs like SkillBridge or apply for disability benefits before leaving active service. We can and must do a better job to ensure our servicemembers are supported in their transition back to the civilian life.

We need your support in addressing factors that are impeding the proper implementation of the law, some of which have been identified by the GAO to include:

- Unit mission requirements interfering with TAP attendance.
- Lack of support from direct supervisors and unit commanders to attend TAP.
- Lack of individual servicemember understanding of the TAP requirement timeline.
- Lack of use of collected TAP attendance and performance data.

Therefore, we request that each of you respond at a minimum to the following questions:

1. What challenges have you identified to improve TAP attendance and participation, and how are you addressing them?
2. How are you addressing the shortfalls in the transition process to improve TAP attendance and participation identified by the GAO?
3. Are the TAP attendance and timeliness reports routinely shared with installation leadership and unit commanders?
4. Given that timeliness has been a longstanding issue, could additional steps be taken to hold commanders accountable?
5. How can the Congress be helpful with providing the resources and authorities you require to support transitioning servicemembers?

Moreover, we urge you to work with State Bureaus of Veteran Services and Veteran Services Organizations to improve warm hand-offs for transitioning servicemembers to community contacts in civilian life. Therefore, we request that each of you respond to these additional questions:

1. What efforts are being made to engage State Bureaus of Veteran Services as part of TAP to improve warm hand-offs into the community?
2. What efforts are being made to utilize VSO, or VSO service officers, as part of TAP into the community?
3. What authorities would be helpful in improving the warm hand-off process utilizing State Bureaus of Veteran Services and VSOs within the TAP process?

We look forward to receiving your individual responses addressing these matters. We stand ready to assist you as members of the Senate Armed Services and Veterans Affairs Committees to ensure your commanders have the proper authorities and resources to accomplish this mission. Thank you for your consideration and continued service to our country.

Sincerely,

Angus S. King Jr.
United States Senator

Kevin Cramer
United States Senator

Cc: Josh Jacobs, Department of Veterans Affairs; Gilbert Cisneros, Department of Defense