



Student Veterans of America
1012 14th Street NW, Suite 1200
Washington, DC 20005
www.studentveterans.org

**TESTIMONY OF
MS. LAUREN AUGUSTINE
VICE PRESIDENT OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS
STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA**

**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. SENATE
LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON THE TOPICS OF:
"PENDING LEGISLATION"**

AUGUST 1, 2018



Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our testimony on the pending legislation related to veteran transition and economic opportunity. With over 1,500 chapters and more than 1.1 million student veterans in schools across the country, we are pleased to share the perspective of those directly impacted by the subjects before this committee.

Established in 2008, SVA has grown to become a force and voice for the interests of veterans in higher education. With a myriad of programs supporting their success, rigorous research on ways to improve the landscape, and advocacy throughout the nation. We place the student veteran at the top of our organizational pyramid. As the future leaders of this country and some of the most successful students in higher education, fostering the success of veterans in school is paramount to their preparation for productive and impactful lives.¹

At SVA's 2018 annual national conference, the President and CEO of SVA, Jared Lyon, shared the story behind the quote on our tenth anniversary challenge coin, "Some attribute the following text to Thucydides and others note that it's a paraphrase of a book written by Sir William Francis Butler from the late 1800's. The reality, either way, rings as true today as it ever has, and the phrase goes like this, 'The nation that makes a great distinction between its scholars and its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools.'"² This quote encapsulates the importance of veterans in higher education, and transition as a significant pathway to higher education, among the veteran community and we thank the committee for putting forth thoughtful legislation that speaks to this importance.

○

DISCUSSION DRAFT; To improve the Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

The November 2017 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on TAP made it abundantly clear serious gaps existed in the program. Originally implemented in 1991 after being established in the 1990 National Defense Reauthorization Act, TAP has gone through dozens of improvements throughout the years, including, most recently, this past winter.^{3 4 5} The programs are vastly improved from prior iterations, though several important enhancements can be done to make the transition to civilian life significantly more impactful. This draft proposes key changes that will positively impact overall outcomes for individuals separating from the military, including the sections identified below.

Structure and Support. Military bases would be required to have one counselor for 250 service members eligible to take part in the TAP program and require every counselor to have at least two years of experience in civilian employment before becoming employed by the program. The Secretary of Defense would be required to give an annual report to Congress on the implementation of proposed changes including the number of counselors employed and the percentage of transitioning service members who took part in each of the pathways. Each Secretary involved in the program would also be required to provide a survey to members who complete the

¹ Shane, Leo. Military Times. *Report: Young vets are more successful than their civilian peers.* July 29, 2017.

<https://www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2017/07/29/report-young-vets-are-more-successful-than-their-civilian-peers/>

² Jared Lyon, *Defining Our Future: Today's Scholars, Tomorrow's Leaders*, Jan. 5, 2018, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/defining-our-future-todays-scholars-tomorrows-leaders-jared-lyon>

³ <https://ntrl.ntis.gov/NTRL/dashboard/searchResults/titleDetail/PB2006113212.xhtml> 21 GAO, *TRANSITIONING VETERANS: DOD Needs to Improve Performance Reporting and Monitoring for the Transition Assistance Program*, GAO 18-23, (Washington, D.C.; November 2017).

⁴ National Defense Reauthorization Act of 1990, Section 502, "Other Transition Benefits and Services."

<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-104/pdf/STATUTE-104-Pg1485.pdf>.

⁵ Senior VA officials facilitated the opportunity for select participants from various veteran organizations to attend the pilot implementation of the new TAP curriculum related to VA benefits seminars I and II in January and February of 2018.



program to assess their satisfaction with it and where improvements can be made to the program. SVA believes this is an important improvement that will catalyze the success of separating service members.

Curriculum. The bill does not change the current curriculum structure of TAP, which has a mandated five-day course with optional additional two-day tracks. As identified in the November 2017 GAO report, the so-called “optional tracks” were significantly and detrimentally under-utilized.⁶ Despite being misleadingly labeled as “optional,” the information available through these tracks provides critical knowledge for the successful pursuit of post-military success. For example, the Accessing Higher Education module is best utilized with sufficient time to apply to school, and to enhance choice for veterans by providing them the best information on how to connect education to career and transition goals. Taken too late, the effectiveness of the module’s information is greatly diminished and may delay the service member’s attendance at a school by several semesters.⁷ We strongly urge the inclusion of mandatory attendance to at least one of these tracks, as outlined in our review of other legislation before this committee. However, while facilitating greater access to these specialized courses is important, we also strongly urge the committee to mandate the participation in these specialized tracks in addition to, not in replace of, the existing five-day TAP curriculum.

Supporting Spouses. The bill would allow Spouses of transitioning service members to attend the TAP programs. This is an important recognition that access to the information in TAP seminars after separation for spouses and veterans can help improve the transition process. Indeed, when the family unit is successful, the transition process is vastly improved.

Creation of a Governing Board. The bill would direct the Secretary of the VA to create a governing board within the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to develop partnerships with community and federal organizations to help prevent suicides, substance abuse, and homelessness among veterans. This board will be responsible for tracking the suicide rate in each business line within VBA, the creation and distribution of educational material concerning these issues, maintaining consistent communication between the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and VBA and the management of the Gun Safety Lock Program for suicide prevention. Within a year of enactment, the Secretary of the VA must submit a report on the efforts of the board in these important areas. We appreciate the creation of the board to serve this important mission. SVA applauds the committee’s attention to the social and well-being aspects of transition and hopes to see significant coordination with VHA’s existing infrastructure addressing these same challenges.

Community Impact. The bill proposes a five-year pilot program that would provide up to \$10 million in matching grant funds to help community providers fund innovative transition services such as résumé assistance, interview training, job recruitment training, and related services. The bill would prioritize funds for programs that operate as a community “hub” and a single point of contact for all services for one community, with organizations applying for funding in consultation with VA and Department of Labor (DOL). Further, the bill proposes authorizing VA, in consultation with state entities that provide services to retired, separated, or discharged service members, to enter into a contract with a non-federal party to study and identify community providers who provide effective and efficient transition services to service members. These initiatives appropriately recognize the importance of local communities in the transition process, and we applaud the acknowledgement of community-based impact. SVA supports inclusion of such grant programs and is encouraged by the commitment to leveraging existing community programs and encourages this committee to also consider ways to partner with campus career centers to meet similar goals with student veterans.

⁶ GAO, *TRANSITIONING VETERANS: DOD Needs to Improve Performance Reporting and Monitoring for the Transition Assistance Program*, GAO 18-23, (Washington, D.C.; November 2017).

⁷ Joint Knowledge Online, “Accessing Higher Education Module,” TGPS-US009.

http://jko.jten.mil/courses/tap/TGPS%20Standalone%20Training/CourseWare/TGPS-US009_Standalone/launch.html.



Career Readiness and Professional Development. The discussion language includes an emphasis on career readiness and professional development for service members before the point of transition by requiring counseling on available professional development opportunities and the need to be career ready at important points of transition throughout the lifecycle of a service member. This is a step in a positive direction that will help create a more informed and career ready service member going into TAP and SVA applauds the inclusion of a more holistic view of transition.

Alumni Network. This language includes the creation of veteran alumni networks which aim to serve as warm hand-offs to new communities and opportunities once a service member transitions from the Armed Forces. As a chapter-based organization, SVA is acutely aware of the importance of peer connection and strongly supports continued conversations on how to best engage with veterans after service. We welcome the opportunity to discuss how SVA's existing chapters, numbering over 1,500, can serve as initial touch points for veterans after transition.⁸

Data and Research. This bill proposes several independent assessments of the effectiveness of TAP – to include an evaluation specific to veterans accessing higher education after transition – which will help better inform policy decision-making moving forward. As a data-driven organization, SVA relies heavily on data to inform our own advocacy efforts and we hope to see a commitment to data included in final bill language. As a suggestion to the current data and research aspects of this bill, SVA encourages the committee to consider including language on how the existing definition of graduation can be amended to better reflect the success rate of today's student veterans.

Important improvements to TAP have been highlighted through participation in roundtables this committee hosted and as a leader of the "Pre-Separation" component of the joint VA-DoD Military-Civilian Transition (MCT) convenings over the past year. We are pleased to see a majority of these bold initiatives included in this transformational piece of legislation. We continue to emphasize the importance of providing transition information to service members as early as their recruitment into the military.

S. 2748, BATTLE for Servicemembers Act

The Better Access to Technical Training, Learning, and Entrepreneurship (BATTLE) for Servicemembers Act seeks to strengthen the existing TAP by generally requiring transitioning service members to attend at least one specialized workshop in addition to the core TAP curriculum, with certain waivers available.

In addition to the mandatory core curriculum taught through TAP, there are three specialized workshops available to transitioning service members, which focus on opportunities in higher education, entrepreneurship, and technical career fields. These workshops allow for greater depth of discussion and education on the specific benefits and paths to success available to transitioning service members. However, under the current TAP model, these specialized workshops are optional, and as such are woefully underutilized with a 2017 GAO report finding only a 14 percent participation rate, as discussed above.⁹

We acknowledge that while the core curriculum is a great foundation of transition information, these specialized workshops are critical to empowering service members to make better-informed decisions about their future and should be more widely attended, as articulated in the *BATTLE Act*. Specific to higher education and student veterans, the information presented in the specialized workshop is particularly important considering approximately half of all transitioning service members will seek out higher education within six months of

⁸ Student Veterans of America Chapter Directory. <http://studentveterans.org/chapter/directory>.

⁹ GAO, *TRANSITIONING VETERANS: DOD Needs to Improve Performance Reporting and Monitoring for the Transition Assistance Program*, GAO 18-23, (Washington, D.C.; November 2017).



separation from the military. Removing the purely optional nature of the higher education workshop will better equip service members with knowledge of the educational benefits and services available to them and tools to effectively evaluate educational programs. Such information will better ensure transitioning service members become today's scholars and tomorrow's leaders.

This bill differs from the previously discussed discussion draft on TAP as it would make these additional courses supplements to the TAP program instead of a replacement of existing components of the program. We support this measure, which aims to improve the transition process and provide more detailed information on higher education to transitioning service members.

○

We thank the committee for its attention and commitment to the successful transition of service members, particularly as it relates to seeking higher education. We are encouraged by the bipartisan, bicameral efforts recently seen on TAP through the National Defense Authorization Act and hope to see similar efforts continue as the community and you as congressional leaders continue to improve the transition process.

As these discussions continue, we urge you to remember the success of veterans in higher education is no mistake or coincidence. Research consistently demonstrates this unique population of non-traditional students is far outpacing their peers in many measures of academic performance.¹⁰ Further, this success in higher education begets success in careers, in communities, and promotes family financial stability, holistic well-being, and provides the all-volunteer force with powerful tools for recruitment and retention when recruits know military service prepares them for success after service.

We again thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the committee members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education. As always, we welcome your feedback and questions, and we look forward to continuing to work with you all to ensure the success of all generations of veterans through education.

¹⁰ Cate, C.A., Lyon, J.S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B.Y. (2017). *National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A Report on the Academic Success of Student Veterans Using the Post-9/11 GI Bill*. Student Veterans of America, Washington, D.C., http://nvest.studentveterans.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NVEST-Report_FINAL.pdf.



**Lauren Augustine,
Vice President of Government Affairs**

After graduating from Virginia Tech, Lauren enlisted in the U.S. Army, quickly rising to the rank of sergeant, and served 12 months in Iraq with the First Infantry Division. She has worked as a senior legislative associate for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, a legislative representative for the American Federation of Government Employees, and the director of government relations for Got Your 6.

In these positions she advocated on behalf of veterans, their families, and the services and benefits provided by the VA. In recognition of her advocacy work, Lauren was named to the HillVets Top 100 in 2015 and awarded the Excellence by An Up and Coming Practitioner award from the Women in Professional Advocacy in 2016. She was also appointed to the Joint Leadership Council of Veteran Service Organizations for the Commonwealth of Virginia by Governor McAuliffe in 2016.