

From Service to Civilian: Redefining the Transition Assistance Program

Introducing the Problem

Every year, approximately 250,000 individuals embark on the formidable journey of transitioning from military service to civilian life as they complete their unwavering commitment to our nation. During this pivotal phase, veterans and their families must navigate the unfamiliar social, professional, and economic landscape of a society they have dutifully defended but now find somewhat alien. Whether they find themselves ill-equipped for this substantial shift away from the military's structure and unique culture, lack readily transferable skills, or carry the burden of mental or physical ailments, dire consequences are often faced; these include homelessness, substance abuse, unemployment, and even suicide.

Challenges such as these exert a substantial strain on public resources by imposing a significant burden on society. This burden exists on both a federal and local level. Because federally, veterans are not prepared and adequate programs do not exist to shoulder all of the burdens, it is then passed onto the local level. Therefore, states and local governments are left to provide the services to bridge the gap. Because of this, first responders are inundated by the veteran population, non-profit resources are stretched thin, and healthcare systems are overwhelmed. Though local and state governments have assumed accountability, the real responsibility for addressing the challenges veterans face should rest solely on the federal government, as soldiers do not fight for states; they fight for nations.

Furthermore, failure to assume responsibility and address these issues erodes public trust while undermining the fundamental value of military service. From the public's perspective, individuals who have fought and sacrificed should be cared for. It leaves society wondering: if those protecting this country are not adequately taken care of and promises are not honored, what is to become of average citizens? The perception that policymakers view veterans as expendable tools develops with far-reaching implications for their political aspirations and even national security due to the potential impact on future recruitment and retention efforts.

Historically, as the Cold War came to an end, public support for defense spending in the United States sharply declined. National priorities shifted to address domestic issues like infrastructure and education. Previously, these had taken a back seat to national security concerns but have now taken center stage in the budgeting process. Peacetime made a robust standing Army no longer necessary or viable, and therefore, Congress sought to reduce the military's size and budget while reining in spending for the federal deficit.

To confront these pressing challenges, Congress enacted the National Defense Authorization Act for F.Y. 1991, establishing the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) to alleviate veterans' challenges during reintegration into civilian society. Focused on aiding Service Members involuntarily separated by force reductions in the late 1980s, TAP educated transitioning veterans on employment, benefits, and job training. Under the Department of Defense's (DoD) oversight and coordination with multiple federal agencies, TAP became an enduring program of record for all service components and

remained virtually unchanged for nearly two decades (Congressional Research Service, 2018).

It was not until 2011 that significant changes to the program were required to meet the demands of modern transitioning Service Members. What was once a soldier separating from service with minimal combat experience in what was a period of peace, today's soldiers were transitioning only having known war. Because of this, transitioning veterans were in a different place, both mentally and physically, and the services needed to support the new needs of transitioning veterans adequately were drastically heightened.

To meet this realization, President Obama, with Executive Order 13518, directed the DoD and V.A. to redesign TAP and establish the Veterans' Employment Initiative Task Force (T.F.) while increasing the V.A. budget by more than 40 percent during his first term. The interagency T.F. expanded as needs became apparent, ultimately cementing a partnership between the DoD, VA, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Labor, and the Office of Personnel Management. The key outcome of this initiative was that service members would be prepared throughout their careers from initial entry through final out processing. More importantly, TAP was further strengthened by the passage of 'VOW to Hire Heros,' a piece of legislation that strictly required all service members to attend transition training. This not only strengthened TAP but made it mandatory for all service members and, ideally, more effective, with topics discussed during the formal transition-out processing being increased as directed by Congress.

By assigning overall administrative authority to the Department of Defense (DoD) and directing collaboration with other key government agencies such as the Department of Veterans Affairs (V.A.), the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Education, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Small Business Administration (SBA), and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), TAP became a resource-rich program. With access to educational and technical skills training, veterans seamlessly transitioned into colleges by utilizing the G.I. Bill and pursued careers outside of the military. Nationally, unemployment steadily declined over the decade, decreasing by 4.2%. Heavily monitored by Congress, TAP proved its value. Unfortunately, TAP's true successes remain to be discovered as only 11.2% (16,117 of 143,381) of Veterans opted to participate in the V.A.'s annual program assessment to provide personal feedback (US Government Accountability Office, 2017).

Due to the social acceptance and broad popularity in a political sense, veteran issues are ever present in the agenda universe. They are easily transitioned unopposed to enactment compared to many other social issues. Because veteran matters lack the traditional opposition experienced by other issues possessing more contentious policy ideas, TAP's components are more easily transitioned into the policymaking process.

Elements of the Policymaking Process

The events of September 11, 2001, and the Great Recession significantly impacted the nation's social, political, and economic realities, ushering in extreme changes to the policymaking environment. These developments tested the enduring

pillars of American political stability, introducing heightened intricacies into the policymaking process and profoundly impacting the future of TAP and veterans alike.

Social Element

Transformative changes in the nation's social fabric led to the evolving demographics of our veteran population. Following 9/11, civilians in mass lined up to join the military as patriotic sentiments spread to all corners of the country, leading to the most diverse military in our nation's history. Gone were the days of predominantly white males serving as the face of the military; instead, a variation of everyday Americans were signing up for the fight regardless of race, religion, or creed.

This shift in demographics also resulted in a national desire to change policies to promote equality and inclusiveness, removing discriminatory barriers to service, such as repealing 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell,' allowing LGBT individuals to serve openly. Even more transformative for the future is the DoD's decision to open Combat Arms roles to women. Women represent only 4% of these roles, projected to increase to 18% by 2040 (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). All minority groups are better represented across the force, reflecting the diversity of the American people. Today's military represents the most significant and varied segment of America's populace (*Veterans in the Labor Force: 6 Stats*, n.d.).

Economic Element

In 2008, nearly a decade after the War on Terror began, America experienced its worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. Although the Great Recession officially ended in June 2009, its residual effects continued to dominate the national

agenda for years to come. Over the next 26 months, the nation experienced ongoing job losses, with national unemployment rates nearing 10% in August 2011. During this time, veterans were disproportionately impacted, with 13.3 percent unemployed—4 percentage points higher than the national average.

Unemployment numbers highlight one of the most significant concerns for the policymaking environment; because of these staggering numbers, Congress increased its allocation to \$275 billion for programs that support veteran transition. While this seems like a large sum, thankfully, it is expected to increase as income security and healthcare support grow. Additionally, with the predicted population decline of 8.8 million servicemembers by 2024, there will be fewer veterans to support.

Public support for TAP is unlikely to fade as veteran services are considered a priority by 72% of Americans. This fact, coupled with the economic contribution 94% of veterans have on the workforce, namely transportation, maintenance and production where they hold jobs at a higher percentage than non-veterans, vets are proving its money well spent.

Political Element

With transitioning veterans maintaining a favorable public opinion that can effectively sway any political deviation, little has changed regarding the divisive nature of politics as shifting demographics are rewriting the social environment and its effects on policy. Unfortunately, there remains much distrust in the government due to rash decision-making such as the unpopular passage of the Patriot Act and the detainment of individual at Guantanamo Bay, all in the name of “National Security.” These actions

were contrary to the existing structures enacted to promote transparency. Naturally, these sentiments carry over to the military populace as service members question what they are fighting for and whether it is justified.

Official Actors

Official actors, or those motivated or mandated by their official position within the government, have played a significant role in developing and refining the TAP program. The Executive Branch placed veteran issues on the agenda, the Legislative Branch developed policies and provided oversight, while Administrative Agencies implemented the program. Since its initial introduction as part of the NDAA for F.Y. 1991, TAP remained a low priority for policymakers until 2011, when domestic challenges guided President Barack Obama to take action to improve veteran transition, resulting in significant changes to the program's implementation.

The Executive Branch

In response to developments in the economic environment of the policymaking system described in the previous section, President Obama, In August 2011 (a decade after the War on Terror began), requested Congress to pass meaningful legislation to help America's one million unemployed veterans find work, including tax credits to incentivize employers to hire them. Faced with declining popularity and uncertainty on the speed at which Congress would action his request, the President needed a swift win (*Obama Seeks Tax Credits to Aid Veterans in Tough Job Market*, 2011).

Wielding his authority over government agencies, President Obama directed the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (V.A.) to develop

a “reverse boot camp” program to train service members for the civilian workforce as their military service concluded (*Obama Seeks Tax Credits to Aid Veterans in Tough Job Market*, 2011).

The Legislative Branch

The most essential actor in the transformation and strengthening of TAP was Congress, with its passage of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act. In response to the President's request, Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL) introduced legislation to address the rising unemployment among American veterans. As the House Committee on Veterans Affairs Chairman, Rep. Miller possessed expert knowledge of veteran-related legislation, a common trait among committee members who balance legislative work in Congress. Recognizing the need to help veterans reintegrate into society with meaningful employment to address the nation's economic problems, the Veteran Opportunity to Work (VOW) Act of 2011 was introduced (*Press Releases | House Committee on Veterans Affairs*, 2011) .

The VOW Act intended to provide veterans with the training and education necessary to compete for jobs in the 21st century. Although the Labor Department reported 3.4 million job openings, many veterans needed more qualifications to pursue them. After passing the committee, the VOW Act (H.R. 2433) was considered and passed by the House on October 12, 2011. Simultaneously, the Senate passed the Hiring Our Heroes Act (S.951), as presented by the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Chairperson, Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA). In short order, these two bills were combined to create the VOW to Hire Heroes Act, representing proper bipartisan, bicameral, and comprehensive legislation that garnered unanimous support from both chambers and

was signed into law by President Obama. Although Congress was divided along party lines on many issues, support for veterans enjoyed bipartisan backing. Acting in support of veterans was both ethically correct and politically wise. It demonstrated Congress's commitment to those who serve and willingness to work across party lines, even if briefly.

Nonetheless, with the passage of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act, TAP underwent a complete transformation. Unlike the previous version, which was voluntary, TAP became mandatory for all service members by law. Aimed at providing the training and education necessary for veterans to compete in the 21st-century job market, VOW prescribed specific timelines for commencement before discharge to ensure equal opportunities for all transitioning veterans. It served as guidelines for the administrative agency responsible for implementing the program, with continued Congressional oversight.

Unofficial Actors

While lacking the authority to implement policies, unofficial actors played a crucial role in bringing attention to the challenges faced by transitioning veterans on a broader scale.

Non-profit organizations, exemplified by the Wounded Warrior Project, achieved household recognition by featuring impactful advertisements illustrating the enduring scars carried by wounded veterans. These campaigns not only shed light on the struggles of these heroes but also underscored governmental shortcomings and inadequate care and preparation following the transition.

As awareness of policy gaps grew, media outlets expanded their coverage, offering veterans a platform to discuss their challenges post-service openly. While primetime broadcasts targeted specific demographics, the advent of social media, particularly Facebook, revolutionized information dissemination, connecting individuals with shared experiences. Social networks and movements, epitomized by the “#22” Movement, a reference to daily amounts of veteran suicide, emerged as influential forces, thus amplifying the voices of transitioning veterans across diverse audiences.

Policy Design

Implementation

The administrative agency responsible for implementing the TAP stayed the same; however, the responsibilities did. As directed by the President, the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (V.A.) were charged with redesigning TAP and establishing the Veterans’ Employment Initiative Task Force. The critical outcome of this initiative was for service members to prepare throughout their careers, rather than only in the last year. Additionally, as directed by Congress, topics discussed during the formal transition-out processing, such as financial literacy and family life counseling, were increased (Congressional Research Service, 2018).

To achieve this now robust program, the DoD’s Transition to Veterans Program Office (TVPO) provided oversight and strategic planning for TAP. Although the “buck stopped at the Secretary of Defense,” many other departments and agencies (V.A., DOL, DHS, SBA, OPM) were critical to administering this program. Through executive steering committees, each generated buy-in on the trajectory and presented

opportunities for additional training to the Secretary of Defense, who holds approval authority.

Policy Tools & Structure

The structure of the delivery system is centralized, ensuring uniformity in content and delivery across military branches. This unified approach, guided by the VOW Act, is essential for maintaining consistency and standardization in providing critical services. The degree of centralization is a defining characteristic that influences the effectiveness of TAP, ensuring that transitioning individuals receive a standardized and high-quality level of support.

Strategically designed in conjunction with the VOW Act, TAP employed various capacity-building and learning tools, including workshops, counseling services, and employment assistance, to address the unique challenges transitioning military personnel face. The nature of these activities, such as resume-building workshops, counseling services, and employment assistance, underscores the comprehensive and structured approach required of TAP.

Social Construction

Understanding the target population's characteristics was paramount in tailoring TAP to the needs of transitioning military personnel. The authors of the VOW Act recognized the political and societal importance of supporting veterans, ensuring policies align with their role in the civilian workforce. TAP is designed to cater to the social construction of military personnel as disciplined, skilled individuals, a notion strengthened by the VOW Act's targeted support.

The effectiveness of TAP, underscored by the VOW Act, goes beyond immediate support. The extended counseling period mandated by the VOW Act ensures ongoing assistance, acknowledging that successful transitions require continuous effort and support. The reasons for TAP being mandatory is based on the behavioral assumption that personnel will not utilize the program unless directed, leading to suboptimal outcomes.

Political and administrative feasibility and effectiveness considerations were also instrumental in shaping TAP under the VOW Act. Politically, the VOW Act amplifies the commitment to veterans' well-being, aligning policy tools with societal concerns for a successful transition. Administratively, the VOW Act defined requirements absent from the NDAA FY91, introducing a structured timeline, with pre-separation counseling a year before separation, enhancing the feasibility of implementation. This adjustment was by design, as it was assumed that unit commanders would adhere to policies and follow orders.

Lessons Learned

Since its initiation, TAP has reported a compliance rate of roughly 95%. However, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported to Congress in 2017 that these numbers were inaccurate (closer to 47%) due to TAP not being prioritized by military leaders and ineffective reporting and monitoring. In response, after the War in Afghanistan, the DoD proposed more changes that would eventually be accepted by Congress and incorporated within the NDAA FY 19 (US Government Accountability Office, 2017)

By assessing the data from TAP's 20-year history, public administrators were able to compare lessons learned, positive and negative, from past implementations as previous iterations failed to adjust to meet the evolving needs of veterans over time, most notably mental health counseling for PTSD. Additionally, due to the Operational Tempo, those who desired to participate in the program were seldom allowed, thus creating a need for Congressional oversight in the process. The VOW Acts and accountability mechanisms ensure that administrators are responsible for continuous improvement and ensure adjustments in the implementation structure are made in a timely manner, fostering an environment of adaptability and responsiveness (MITRE Corporation, 2019).

The top-down approach for structuring the program's implementation proved ineffective early on as it fostered an environment where TAP was simply an additional task that fell by the wayside. In contrast, others took priority due to the overwhelming requirements placed on commanders (Street Level Bureaucrats). However, the changes in compliance were realized when top-down and bottom-up feedback were interconnected, providing input about TAP's failures, mainly compliance due to task saturation. This transition led the DoD to adjust internal policies to force compliance from commanders, less they faced administrative action. This also significantly reduced the number of annual training events, in effect creating additional time for utilizing and strengthening TAP while ensuring compliance from commanders through refined guidance and prioritization (VA Office of Transition and Economic Development, 2023).

Public administrators are crucial in ensuring the effectiveness of TAP. However, the VOW Act fails to provide accountability mechanisms to hold administrators

responsible for program failures. Aside from the Executive and Legislative Branches' power to remove Agency Directors, TAP does not identify specific performance measures. Also, the compliance burden is extended to unit Commanders at the echelon.

The Future of TAP

Since the passage of the VOW Act, TAP has demonstrated its ability to adapt to the ever-changing needs of transitioning service members through administrator guidance. However, Congressional oversight allows for continuous monitoring to provide feedback on the program's effectiveness. This is evidenced by the mandated improvements specified in the NDAA FY 19, which increased the time for transition preparation from 12 to 24 months (VA Office of Transition and Economic Development, 2023).

Moving forward, enhanced visibility will be crucial to bolster compliance and foster ongoing program success. While the program retains flexibility to adapt, substantial changes are improbable in the foreseeable future, especially as we shift towards a peacetime military.

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