

ISSUE BRIEF: EXPAND AND STRENGTHEN SERVICE MEMBER TRANSITION, EMPLOYMENT, AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR VETERANS

The Situation

- Roughly 250,000 service members per year leave military service and need transition assistance, along with employment and education opportunities. These services are fragmented between the Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA), Defense (DOD), Homeland Security (DHS), and Labor (DOL), resulting in some veterans receiving discordant or no services. Fragmentation of these services reduces access and awareness of existing employment opportunities and education services, as well as other vital information they may need.
- The DOL Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in November 2018, the veteran unemployment rate was 3.1 percent, down from 3.8 percent last year. However, the most recent data available shows that while the overall numbers have improved, veterans with a service-connected disability had an unemployment rate of 4.3 percent (August 2017).
- The Transition Goals, Plans and Success (GPS) Program prepares service members transitioning to civilian life to pursue their post-service career goals. The information provided in Transition GPS is becoming more consistent among military service branches through diligent advocacy by DAV and other veterans service organizations (VSO). Transition GPS, which the DOD launched in 2012, utilizes briefings that emphasize the service members' potential entitlement to benefits such as health care, disability compensation, education, employment, and other services and support provided by VSOs.

The Challenge

- Veterans' unemployment, especially rates among service-disabled veterans, remains a matter of concern. While services such as health care, education and housing matters are administered by the VA, veterans' employment assistance is administered by the DOL.
- The need for VA Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment (VR&E) services is escalating with the increase of separating service members returning from deployment in Southwest Asia. In addition, stagnant funding for VR&E has adversely impacted the congressionally recommended 1:125 counselor-to-client ratio, which is crucial to providing one-on-one counseling. Also of concern is the significant number of veterans who do not complete their VR&E plan. Another concern are those veterans who are considered successfully rehabilitated after only 60 days of employment despite many employment probationary periods exceeding a 60 day-period.
- Furthermore, while participation in the Transition Assistance Program is mandatory, not all discharging service members attend Transition GPS. A March 2014 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report noted the DOD attendance goal as 85 percent; however, GAO asserted this has not been achieved and in some cases reporting has been flawed or falsified. Transition GPS

must remain a focal point for separating service members, with the ability to adjust to the changing needs of this transitioning population.

The Solution

- Congress must provide the resources necessary to meet the VR&E counselor-to-client ratio of 1:125 to allow for better one-on-one counseling.
- VR&E should be required to follow-up after one year of employment to determine successful rehabilitation.
- DOD, VA, DOL, DHS must take whatever actions are necessary, including requesting additional funding, to ensure that 100 percent of transitioning service members participate in and complete Transition GPS.