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July 21, 2021

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
The Honorable James M. Inhofe
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Adam Smith
Chairman
The Honorable Mike Rogers
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

Military Personnel: DOD's Transition Assistance Program at Small or Remote Installations

Approximately 200,000 servicemembers leave the military and transition to civilian life each year. To help servicemembers with potential challenges they may face during this transition, such as finding and maintaining employment, one section of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (VOW Act) mandates the Department of Defense (DOD) to require that eligible separating servicemembers participate in the Transition Assistance Program (TAP).[1] TAP provides counseling, employment assistance, and information on federal veteran benefits, among other supports, to transitioning servicemembers.

House Report 116-442, accompanying a bill for the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, included a provision for us to review TAP at small or remote military installations. This report describes (1) the extent to which active-duty servicemembers at selected small or remote military installations within the United States are receiving required transition services; (2) the extent to which DOD monitors TAP at small or remote military installations; and (3) challenges that exist in implementing TAP at selected small or remote military installations.

House Report 116-442 defined remote installations as an installation that is located more than 50 miles from any city with a population of 50,000 people or more (as determined by the Office of Management and Budget) and defined small installations as an installation with no more than 10,000 servicemembers assigned. According to officials from the Army, the Navy, and the Marine Corps, the criteria of 10,000 servicemembers would encompass most military installations. Instead, officials from these services said they use annual, projected separations to determine which installations are small for the purposes of TAP. Based on our interviews

[1]Pub. L. No. 112-56 §221 *codified at* 10 U.S.C. 1144(c).

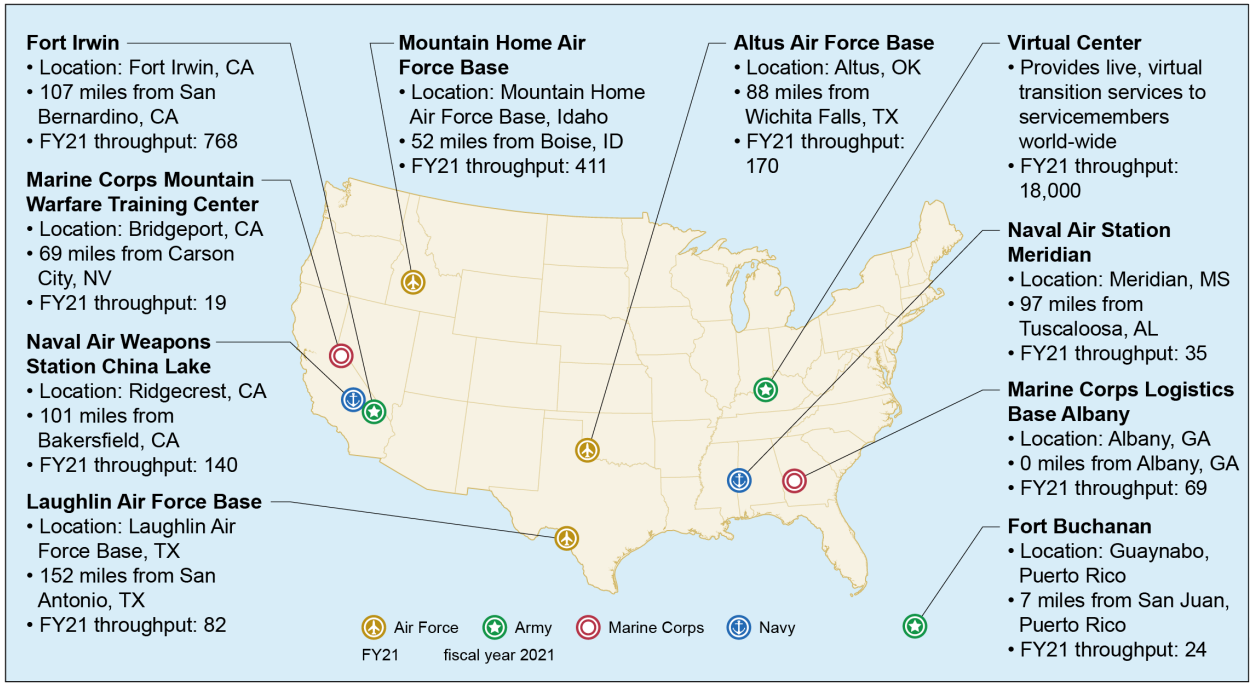
with these officials and our review of projected separation data for fiscal year 2021, we identified 350 or fewer projected separations as the clearest break point for identifying the smallest of installations for TAP. We identified remote installations as those 50 or more miles from a city of 50,000 people or more as outlined in House Report 116-442.

We provided a briefing on the results of our review to committee staff of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees on June 1, 2021, in accordance with the mandate. Those briefing slides are attached in an enclosure to this letter (see enc. I).

For objective one, we reviewed relevant laws and guidance related to TAP administration and participation at small or remote installations and interviewed officials from the Military-Civilian Transition Office (MCTO) and each of the military services' TAP offices to obtain information about how TAP is implemented at small or remote installations. We also reviewed and analyzed data from MCTO and the military services on annual servicemember separations and TAP compliance (i.e., a separated servicemember completing all TAP requirements) from fiscal years 2018 through 2020 for each military service overall and a non-generalizable sample of nine small or remote military installations.[2] As previously noted, we analyzed DOD data to identify installations with fewer than 350 projected separations for fiscal year 2021 (i.e., small installations for the purpose of our review). We compared a list of all military installations in the United States provided by the services to a list of census-designated metropolitan areas to identify installations more than 50 miles from any city with a population of 50,000 people or more (i.e. remote installations). We then selected nine installations to achieve at least two installations in each military service and variation in geographic location. Figure 1 shows the installations we selected as part of our review.

[2]DOD's key performance indicator of 85 percent TAP compliance is measured by a completed DD form 2648, where the service member participated in pre-separation assessments and counseling, the DOL Employment Workshop, and the VA Benefits and Services prior to their separation.

Figure 1: Map of Small or Remote Military Installations That GAO Selected



Source: GAO; Map Resources (map). | GAO-21-104608

Text of Figure 1: Map of Small or Remote Military Installations That GAO Selected

1. Fort Irwin

- Location: Fort Irwin, CA
- 107 miles from San Bernardino, CA
- FY21 throughput: 768

2. Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center

- Location: Bridgeport, CA
- 69 miles from Carson City, NV
- FY21 throughput: 19

3. Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake

- Location: Ridgecrest, CA
- 101 miles from Bakersfield, CA
- FY21 throughput: 140

4. Laughlin Air Force Base

- Location: Laughlin Air Force Base, TX
- 152 miles from San Antonio, TX
- FY21 throughput: 82

5. Mountain Home Air Force Base

- Location: Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho
- 52 miles from Boise, ID
- FY21 throughput: 411

6. Altus Air Force Base

- Location: Altus, OK
- 88 miles from Wichita Falls, TX
- FY21 throughput: 170

7. Virtual Center

- Provides live, virtual transition services to servicemembers world-wide
- FY21 throughput: 18,000

8. Naval Air Station Meridian

- Location: Meridian, MS
- 97 miles from Tuscaloosa, AL
- FY21 throughput: 35

9. Marine Corps Logistics Base Albany

- Location: Albany, GA
- 0 miles from Albany, GA
- FY21 throughput: 69

10. Fort Buchanan

- Location: Guaynabo, Puerto Rico
- 7 miles from San Juan, Puerto Rico
- FY21 throughput: 24

Source: GAO; Map Resources (map). | GAO-21-104608

Note: Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 data is projected throughput of separating servicemembers. Some of the smallest and most-isolated installations do not have a physical TAP office with TAP staff on-site. Therefore, we interviewed officials at some military installations that were not small or remote based on our criteria, but that provide TAP services to those installations that do not have a physical TAP office. For example, the Marine Corps installation Twentynine Palms, which is a large installation, provides TAP support and services to the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center. Additionally, some of the Army's smallest or most-isolated installations receive transition services through the Army Virtual Center, another military service installation, or, as a last resort, Transition Online Learning (virtual, self-paced training).

Finally, we compared the compliance data provided by MCTO and the military services against DOD's key performance indicator of 85 percent TAP compliance to determine how the selected small or remote installations in our review compared to each other and service-wide TAP compliance. We spoke with military service officials responsible for the data and manually tested this data and determined it to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of presenting annual installation transition numbers and for determining average compliance rates.

For objective two, we reviewed relevant TAP guidance and interviewed officials from MCTO and military services' TAP offices to obtain information about how TAP is monitored. We also

reviewed data from MCTO and the military services on annual servicemember separations and TAP compliance from fiscal years 2018 through 2020.

For objective three, we interviewed the TAP managers and staff at the nine selected installations. We also interviewed officials at the Army's Virtual Center.[3] We conducted these interviews from March to April 2021. We analyzed the interview responses to identify any common challenges to implementing TAP among the installations in our review. We also reviewed any TAP inspection reports for fiscal years 2018 through 2021, to the extent they existed, for the installations we interviewed to identify additional challenges, if any.

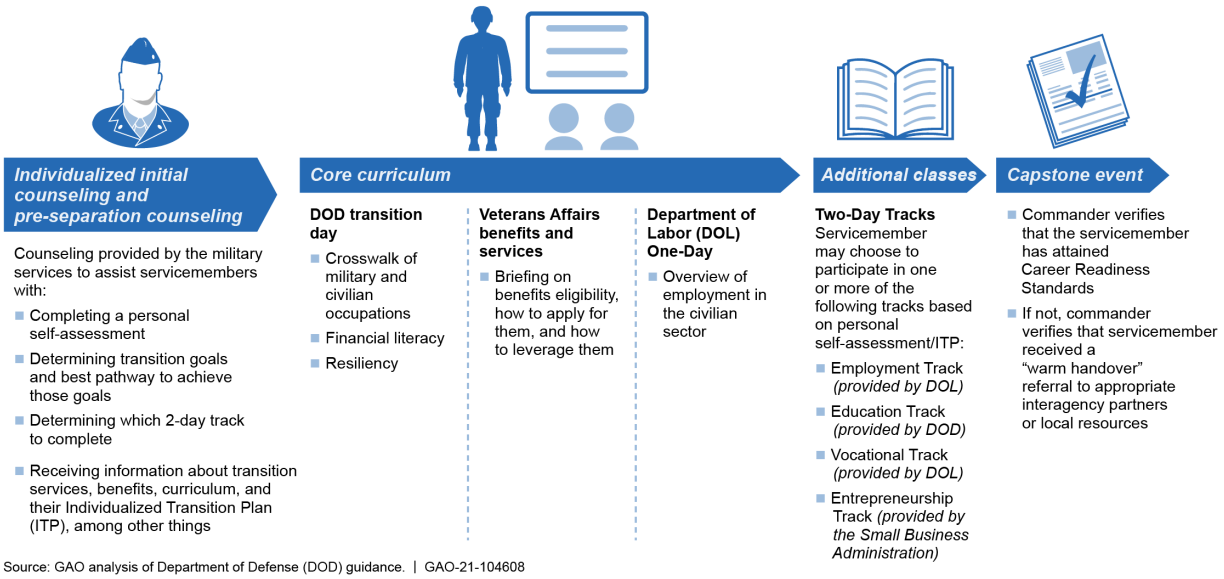
We conducted this performance audit from November 2020 to July 2021 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Transitioning servicemembers who are eligible to participate in TAP include those who have at least 180 continuous days or more on active duty. Servicemembers begin TAP by participating in initial counseling, which includes a personal self-assessment to determine their transition needs and goals, and pre-separation counseling on various benefits, services, tools, and resources. TAP pre-separation counseling must generally begin no later than 365 days prior to the servicemember's anticipated date of separation. Servicemembers then complete the TAP core curriculum, taught by DOD, the Department of Labor (DOL), and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Servicemembers may choose to participate in a 2-day track of additional training on topics including education, employment, vocation, or entrepreneurship. TAP culminates with the Capstone event, where the commander verifies that the service member has attained Career Readiness Standards (CRS) or has received a "warm handover" referral to appropriate interagency partners or local resources. Figure 2 identifies TAP services provided to separating members.

[3]The Army Virtual Center is an interactive, virtual platform that provides transition services to all servicemembers, 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, 362 days per year (with the exception of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's). Servicemembers can access the platform at any time to speak with transition counselors. The Virtual Center provides instructor-led training for all mandated components of TAP. According to Army officials, the Army Virtual Center allows transitioning Soldiers at small and remote sites to receive the same quality counseling and interaction with live counselors/facilitators available at large installations with TAP centers.

Figure 2: Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Services Provided to Separating Servicemembers



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) guidance. | GAO-21-104608

Text of Figure 2: Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Services Provided to Separating Servicemembers

1. Individualized initial counseling and pre-separation counseling

Counseling provided by the military services to assist servicememberswith:

- Completing a personal self-assessment
- Determining transition goals and best pathway to achieve those goals
- Determining which 2-day track to complete
- Receiving information about transition services, benefits, curriculum, and their Individualized Transition Plan (ITP), among other things

2. Core Curriculum

DOD transition day

- Crosswalk of military and civilian occupations
- Financial literacy
- Resiliency

Veterans Affairs benefits andservices

- Briefing on benefits eligibility, how to apply for them, and how to leverage them

Department of Labor (DOL) One-Day

- Overview of employment in the civilian sector

3. Additional Classes

Two-Day Tracks Servicemember may choose to participate in one or more of the following tracks based on personal self-assessment/ITP:

- Employment Track (provided by DOL)

- Education Track (provided by DOD)
- Vocational Track (provided by DOL)
- Entrepreneurship Track (provided by the Small Business Administration)

4. Capstone Event

- Commander verifies that the servicemember has attained Career Readiness Standards
- If not, commander verifies that servicemember received a "warm handover" referral to appropriate interagency partners or local resources

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) guidance. | GAO-21-104608

Note: The John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (2019 NDAA) added the new requirement of individualized initial counseling. It also generally required that pre-separation counseling start no later than 365 days prior to a servicemember's separation from the military. Eligible members who have fewer than 365 days before their anticipated date of separation, among other circumstances, will begin the initial counseling as soon as possible within the remaining period of service. Prior to these new requirements, servicemembers were expected to begin TAP as soon as possible during the 12-month period preceding their separation date, but no later than 90 days before separation.

Summary

Seven of the nine small or remote installations we selected exceeded DOD's key performance indicator of 85 percent TAP compliance for active-duty servicemembers from fiscal years 2018 through 2020. All required components of TAP, whether delivered in person or virtually, are standard across all military installations, regardless of the size or location of the installation. Additionally, DOD monitors TAP across all installations regardless of size or geographic location using the DD Form 2648 and by conducting course surveys. MCTO and the military services stated that there are no additional monitoring activities or metrics that are tracked specifically for small or remote installations. Finally, according to TAP managers at the small or remote installations we selected, these installations have experienced some challenges, such as limited local post-military employment opportunities and access to certain training during the COVID-19 pandemic, but have taken some steps to mitigate those challenges.

Transition services.

The required components of TAP are standard across all military installations, regardless of the size or location of the installation. We found that the majority of the installations in our review (seven of nine) exceeded DOD's key performance indicator of 85 percent TAP compliance for active-duty servicemembers, on average, from fiscal years 2018 through 2020.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only certain servicemembers were eligible to take TAP virtually, including those servicemembers in remote or geographically isolated locations. According to MCTO officials, servicemembers who took TAP virtually prior to the pandemic received the same transition information as those who took TAP in person. Officials at each of the military services stated that their service's TAP program began allowing fully virtual TAP delivery at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Monitoring TAP.

DOD monitors TAP data and compliance across all installations through its electronic DD Form 2648 and by conducting course surveys. While the military services use different electronic systems to monitor servicemember progress through TAP, officials at a majority of the small or remote installations in our review said that they were responsible for monitoring servicemember completion of the DD Form 2648, which verifies TAP compliance.

Implementation challenges.

Small or remote installations in our review have experienced some challenges in implementing TAP because of their location, size, and the COVID-19 pandemic, according to TAP officials. However, they stated that they took steps when possible to mitigate these challenges.

For example, officials at six of the nine installations we met with said that employment opportunities around their installation were limited, which can affect the networking opportunities servicemembers have when searching for post-military employment. To mitigate this challenge, some installation officials have built relationships with local employers to provide networking opportunities to servicemembers. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic caused the military services to shift to virtual TAP delivery for nearly all servicemembers. At the time of our interviews, officials at six of the nine installations in our review said that the VA had not provided live, virtual instruction for the veterans benefits briefing since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, servicemembers had to complete the VA benefits briefing through self-paced virtual learning. An official at one installation said the installation was able to provide servicemembers access to informal VA information sessions with their local VA office to supplement the self-paced virtual VA briefing.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOD for review and comment. DOD provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

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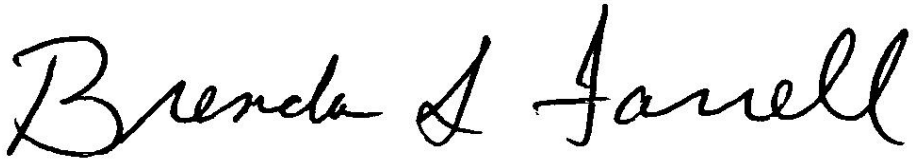
We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, and other interested parties. This report also is available at no charge on the GAO website at http://www.gao.gov

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report include Vincent Balloon (Assistant Director), James Krustapentus (Analyst-in-Charge), Taylor Bailey, Amie Lesser, Juliee Conde Medina, Serena Lo, and Benjamin Moser made key contributions to this report.



Brenda S. Farrell
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management

Enclosure(s) – 1

Enclosure I: Briefing Slides (See attached PDF)

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