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

Briefing for Staff Members of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees

June 1, 2021

Accessible Version

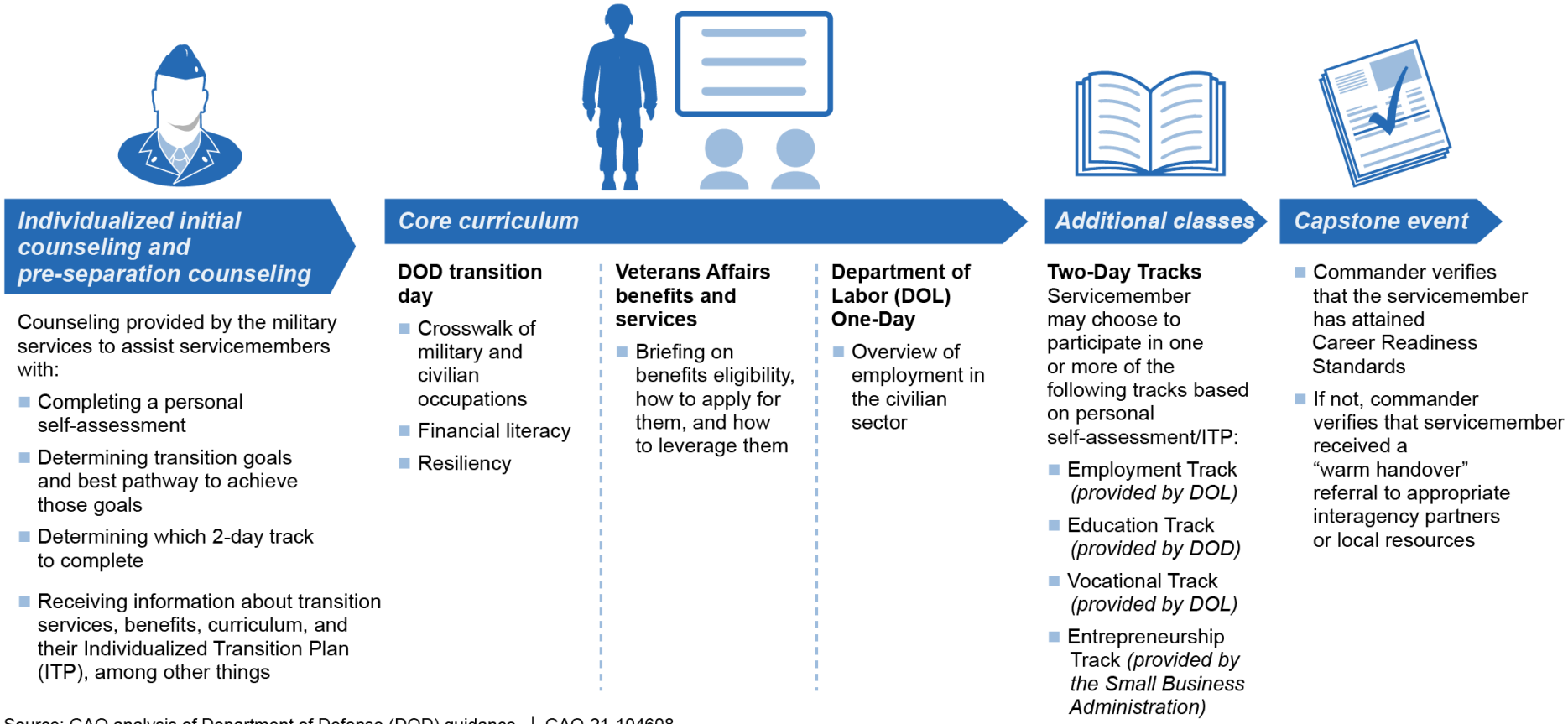
Introduction and Background

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 veterans benefits, among other support, to transitioning servicemembers. Eligible transitioning servicemembers include those who have at least 180 continuous days on active duty. TAP pre-separation counseling generally must begin no later than 365 days prior to a servicemember's anticipated date of separation.

Servicemembers begin TAP by participating in initial counseling, which includes a personal self-assessment to determine their transition needs and goals, followed by pre-separation counseling on various benefits, services, tools, and resources. Servicemembers then complete the TAP core curriculum, taught by DOD, the Department of Labor (DOL), and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Servicemembers select two additional days of instruction that are dedicated to one of the following topics, as determined by their personal self-assessment: employment, education, vocation, or entrepreneurship. TAP culminates with the Capstone event, where commanders verify achievement of Career Readiness Standards (CRS). Completion of TAP components is tracked through an electronic form–-DD Form 2648. Figure 1 outlines the TAP process.

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

Figure 1: Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Services Provided to Separating Servicemembers



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 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.

Text of Figure 1: 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

Introduction and Background (cont.)

Based on our review of DOD guidance documents, DOD does not specifically identify a definition for small or remote installations, except for Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) services purposes. However, DOD Instruction 1332.35, which establishes TAP policy, states that servicemembers who are considered remote or geographically isolated may use virtual TAP curriculum. The Marine Corps, the Navy, and the Army have their own definitions for remote or geographically isolated servicemembers. Military service officials we spoke with stated they generally use installation transition numbers to determine which installations are considered small or to allocate TAP resources.

Source of Work and Objectives

Source of Work

- House Report 116-442, accompanying a bill for the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2021, included a provision for us to review servicemember participation in formal Transition Assistance Programs at small or remote military installations in the U.S.

Objectives

- The extent to which active-duty servicemembers at selected small or remote military installations within the United States are receiving required transition services;
- The extent to which DOD monitors TAP at small or remote military installations;
- Challenges that exist in implementing TAP at selected small or remote military installations.

Scope

Our scope included officials from the Military-Civilian Transition Office (MCTO); officials in the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps, and the Air Force TAP offices, and TAP staff at small or remote military installations that we selected.

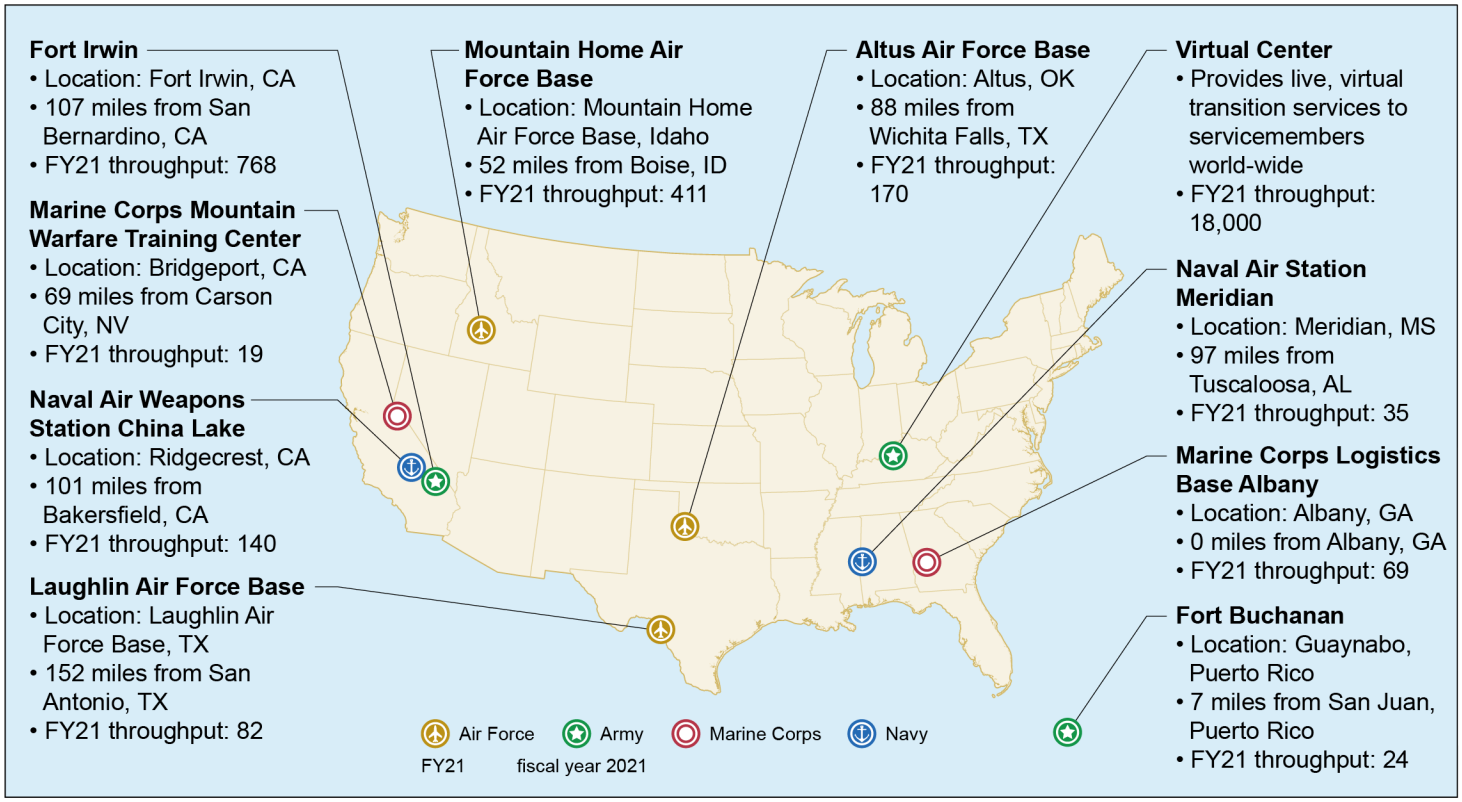
Absent a definition in DOD TAP guidance for small or remote installations, we based our installation selections on interviews with military service officials and TAP projected separation data for fiscal year 2021. More specifically, we selected a non-generalizable sample of nine installations (at least two for each military service and that were geographically dispersed) that met our criteria of being small (with 350 or fewer projected separations in fiscal year 2021) or remote (50 or more miles from a city of 50,000 or more).[2] Based on our interviews with service officials, we identified 350 or fewer projected separations as the clearest break point for identifying the smallest of installations for TAP. To determine which installations are remote, we compared the list of military installations provided by the services to a list of census-designated metropolitan areas to identify a non-generalizable sample of remote installations for each military service. We also interviewed officials at the Army's Virtual Center.[3] Figure 2 shows the installations we selected as part of our review.

[2]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 having 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 with these officials, we used 350 or fewer projected separating servicemembers within a year to determine which installations were small because it provided a clear break point for which installations to consider in our review and encompassed the smallest installations across all four services.

[3]According to Army officials, 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). Army officials stated that servicemembers can access the platform at any time to speak with transition counselors. Officials also stated that the Virtual Center provides instructor-led training for all mandated components of TAP.

Scope (cont.)

Figure 2: Map of Small or Remote Military Installations That GAO Selected



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 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 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).

Text of Figure 2: Map of Small or Remote Military Installations That GAO Selected

5. Fort Irwin

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

6. Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center

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

7. Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake

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

8. Laughlin Air Force Base

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

9. Mountain Home Air Force Base

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

- FY21 throughput: 411

10. Altus Air Force Base

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

11. Virtual Center

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

12. Naval Air Station Meridian

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

13. Marine Corps Logistics Base Albany

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

14. Fort Buchanan

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

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

Methodology

We reviewed relevant laws and guidance related to implementing and monitoring TAP.

We interviewed officials at MCTO and each of the military service's TAP offices to gain an understanding of program implementation and monitoring at small or remote installations.

We reviewed TAP data provided by MCTO and the military services on TAP installation transition numbers and compliance rates from fiscal years 2018 through 2020 to determine whether the nine small or remote installations in our review met DOD's key TAP performance indicator of 85 percent compliance, as measured by completed DD Forms 2648. We interviewed DOD officials and manually tested the data and determined these data to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of presenting installation transition numbers and determining average compliance rates.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with TAP managers and staff at the nine small or remote military installations that we selected. We analyzed interview responses to determine if there were any common themes regarding TAP participation, monitoring, challenges, and steps taken to mitigate any challenges. We also interviewed staff at the Army's Virtual Center, which is one of the platforms that servicemembers who do not have TAP services on-site can use to participate in TAP.

We reviewed TAP inspection reports from fiscal years 2018 through 2020, where applicable, for the selected small or remote installations to determine if there were any additional common challenges among installations or military services.

We shared the contents of this briefing with DOD and requested their technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

Results in Brief

- Seven of the nine installation we selected exceeded DOD's key performance indicator of 85 percent TAP compliance for active-duty servicemembers from fiscal years 2018 through 2020. Additionally, small or remote installations that we selected provided separating servicemembers all required transition services.
- DOD monitors TAP across all installations regardless of size or geographic location through a standard form—DD Form 2648—used by all four military services and by conducting course surveys. Officials with MCTO and the military services stated that there are no additional monitoring activities or metrics that are tracked specifically for small or remote installations.
- 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.

Small or Remote Installations We Selected Provided All Required Transition Services and the Installations Generally Met or Exceeded DOD's 85 Percent TAP Compliance Target

DOD has a key performance indicator of 85 percent compliance for eligible servicemembers, as measured by completed DD Form 2648, where the servicemember participated in pre-separation assessments and counseling, the DOL Employment Workshop, and the VA Benefits and Services prior to their separation. Seven of the nine small or remote installations in our sample exceeded this performance measure for active-duty servicemembers from fiscal year 2018 through 2020 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Verified Compliance Rates for Active-Duty Servicemembers at Selected Small or Remote Military Installations

Service	Installation	Average Annual Servicemember Transitions (Fiscal Years 2018 – 2020)	Average TAP Compliance (Fiscal Years 2018 – 2020) (percent)
Navy	Naval Air Station Meridian	33	97
	Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake	56	100
	All Active Duty Navy Servicemembers	*26,216*	*95*
Air Force	Laughlin Air Force Base	70	95
	Altus Air Force Base	143	96
	Mountain Home Air Force Base	347	99
	All Active Duty Air Force Servicemembers	*26,527*	*93*
Marine Corps	Marine Corps Logistics Base Albany	42	99
	Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center	19	98
	All Active Duty Marine Corps Servicemembers	*25,404*	*99*
Army	Fort Irwin	833	70
	Fort Buchanan	43	66
	All Active Duty Army Servicemembers	*69,266*	*74*

Source: GAO analysis of Military-Civilian Transition Office, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Army TAP data. | GAO-21-104608

Small or Remote Installations We Selected Provided All Required Transition Services and the Installations Generally Met or Exceeded DOD's 85 Percent TAP Compliance Target (cont.)

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. The DOD instruction governing TAP states that the program will provide transition counseling and employment assistance, establish transition career readiness standards, and provide transition assistance information concerning potential benefits to all eligible servicemembers, regardless of their location.

Officials at each of the military services stated that their service's TAP program allowed fully virtual TAP delivery at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the 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 received TAP services in person.

TAP Pre-Pandemic

- The frequency of TAP classes varied by installation, according to officials at the nine small or remote installations that we selected. For example, TAP classes at Laughlin Air Force Base, which had an average of 70 transitions per year, are offered monthly, while at Fort Irwin, which had an average of about 833 transitions per year, TAP classes are offered two to three times per month.

Small or Remote Installations We Selected Provided All Required Transition Services and the Installations Generally Met or Exceeded DOD's 85 Percent TAP Compliance Target (cont.)

- Officials whom we interviewed at six of the nine installations said that travel was allowed for remote servicemembers to participate in TAP on the installation, or for servicemembers at the installation to take TAP at a different location. Officials at three of the installations we interviewed said that such travel requests are handled by the unit command, not the installation's TAP office.

- Officials whom we interviewed at all nine installations said that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, TAP was delivered to servicemembers in person. However, some servicemembers were eligible to complete TAP virtually, such as remote servicemembers, servicemembers with short separations, or servicemembers undergoing administrative discharge, according to installation officials. According to Army officials, the Army's Virtual Center has provided live virtual instruction to servicemembers since 2012. The other services used self-paced virtual learning through the TAP Events/Joint Knowledge Online (JKO) portal, according to Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps officials.

<u>TAP During the Pandemic</u>

- At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to installation officials, all nine installations shifted to virtual TAP delivery. A few of the installations had a 3 to 4-month transition period, where servicemembers participated in TAP via the TAP Events/JKO portal until the installation could set up a virtual platform with live instruction, such as ZOOM. As of March 2021, five of the nine installations had returned to in-person classes or hybrid (in-person and virtual) TAP classes with social distancing measures in place.

Small or Remote Installations We Selected Provided All Required Transition Services and the Installations Generally Met or Exceeded DOD's 85 Percent TAP Compliance Target (cont.)

- According to Air Force officials, the Air Force saw a slight decrease in TAP compliance overall at the start of the pandemic. Similarly, Army officials stated that the pandemic is likely to affect compliance rates overall, but that it is too soon to tell the extent of that effect. In contrast, Navy officials stated that they do not believe the pandemic will cause compliance issues, which they attributed to a smooth transition to a virtual platform.

DOD Monitors TAP Across All Installations Regardless of Size or Geographic Location

DOD monitors TAP across all military installations regardless of the installation's size or geographic location, according to MCTO officials. The military services use different electronic systems to track servicemember progress through TAP. However, all the military services are required to document servicemember participation in TAP using the DD Form 2648, which ultimately verifies TAP compliance. Officials whom we interviewed at the majority of the small or remote installations said that they are responsible for tracking servicemember completion of the DD Form 2648.

MCTO has the ability to review TAP metrics at the Unit Identification Code (UIC)-level, but there have not been any TAP evaluations that have looked at small or remote installations specifically, according to MCTO officials. TAP officials at the nine selected installations stated that they did not track any TAP metrics that were specific to small or remote installations.

Servicemembers participating in TAP can complete voluntary, end-of-course assessments on the different TAP classes. According to officials from the Army and the Navy, the assessments are mostly used to improve the TAP curriculum. Army officials told us that they also have Interactive Customer Evaluations (ICE) that allow servicemembers to make comments to the garrison command team, including comments on the TAP process at the installation. Any ICE comments related to TAP go to TAP officials at the installation.

Selected Small or Remote Installations Have Experienced Some Challenges, but Have Taken Some Steps to Mitigate Them

The small or remote installations in our review faced the following challenges, but were able to mitigate them in some cases:

- **Local employment opportunities:** Officials whom we interviewed at six installations said that employment opportunities in the local area are limited, which can affect the networking opportunities servicemembers have when searching for post-military employment. However, officials at two installations said that they have built relationships with the local government or private-sector employers to help connect servicemembers with potential jobs in the local area. Additionally, officials at the Army Virtual Center said that the Virtual Center provides virtual career fairs that all servicemembers can access, regardless of their location. Army officials stated that in a recent Virtual Center career fair, there were over 3,000 private chats that occurred between servicemembers and prospective employers.

- **Minimum class sizes:** Marine Corps officials stated that small installations sometimes do not have the mandatory minimum of 10 students that is required to hold an in-person class.[4] As a result, the class has to be cancelled or postponed and the servicemember has to wait for the next offering or take the class at another installation or virtually, depending on their transition timeline. An official at one of the Navy installations in our review said that the installation faced the same issue with virtual classes during the pandemic.

[4]Marine Corps officials indicated that the 10-student requirement is based on a Memorandum of Understanding between the military services and the DOL and VA.

Selected Small or Remote Installations Have Experienced Some Challenges, but Have Taken Some Steps to Mitigate Them (cont.)

- **Access to remote installations:** Officials at two remote and mountainous installations said that the local topography can make it difficult for instructors to access the installation due to inclement weather or can cause poor internet connectivity.

Challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **No live virtual VA briefing:** Officials at six of the installations in our review said that the VA did not offer live virtual instruction for the veterans benefits briefing after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the only way for servicemembers to complete the VA benefits requirement was through self-paced virtual learning. Installation officials at a few locations expressed their disappointment with this situation because the VA briefing is one that servicemembers highly anticipate attending. An official at one installation that we interviewed said that they had begun offering informal VA information sessions to servicemembers through a personal VA contact, but made it clear that these sessions would not count toward any TAP requirements.

- **Access to virtual TAP services:** Officials at two of the installations in our review and the Army Virtual Center said that the influx of servicemembers participating in TAP virtually has resulted in challenges. Caps on the number of virtual participants due to platform licenses has limited access to live instruction for some servicemembers who end up having to take TAP through self-paced virtual platforms. Officials at the Army Virtual Center stated that the Virtual Center was able to increase the number of platform licenses at the beginning of the pandemic so no servicemember was turned away from a class. Officials further stated that the large influx of servicemembers using the Army Virtual Center has increased call wait times for servicemembers.