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May 2005

MILITARY AND VETERANS' BENEFITS

Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard

GAO-05-544

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-05-544, a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005 mandated that GAO review whether the transition assistance program (TAP) is meeting the needs of service members leaving the military. GAO (1) assessed TAP administration, including program participation, and (2) identified actions agencies are taking to improve TAP and challenges that remain.

TAP serves military personnel with at least 180 days of active duty who separate or retire and members of the Reserves and National Guard who are released from active duty, a process termed demobilization. Recently, the Reserves and National Guard have been called to active duty in greater numbers than at any other time since the Korean War.

What GAO Recommends

We recommend that DOD, in conjunction with DOL and VA, determine what demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members need to make a smooth transition and explore options to enhance their participation, such as employment workshops before or after their demobilization and timely information about the need to apply for certain benefits while still on active duty. GAO also recommends that VA take steps to ascertain the level of participation of service members in the Disabled TAP component. All three agencies concurred with our findings and recommendations.

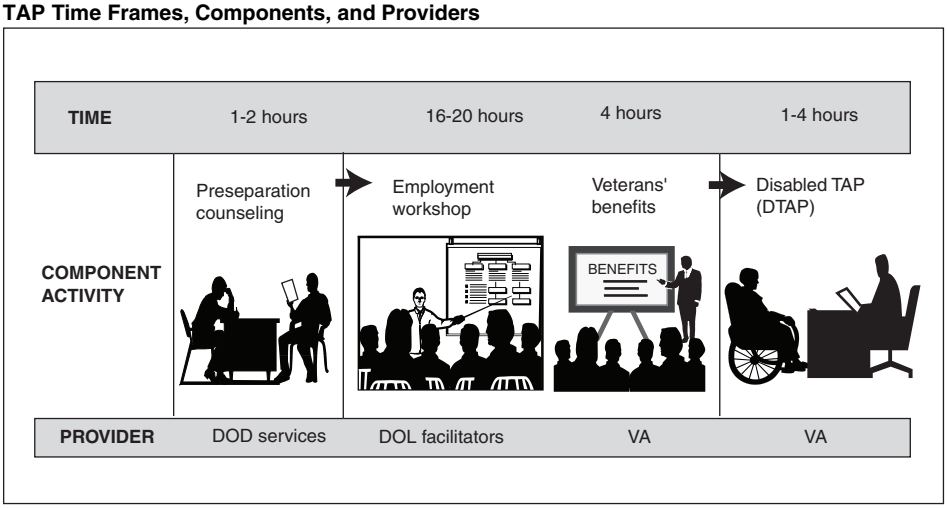
www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-544.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cynthia A. Bascetta at (202) 512-7101 or bascettac@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Transition assistance is intended to help service members successfully adjust to civilian life after serving in the military. Jointly administered by the Departments of Defense (DOD), Labor (DOL) and Veterans Affairs (VA), the four components of TAP are coordinated through meetings of agency TAP managers and interagency agreements.

TAP Time Frames, Components, and Providers



Source: GAO analysis.

Both the method of delivery and the level of participation may vary, with participation rates highest for the mandatory preseparation counseling. Because they demobilize within days after they return from overseas, generally members of the Reserves and National Guard may get similar information but not the time to participate fully in TAP. At demobilization they may complete their preseparation counseling forms as a group without individual attention; get 45 minutes of briefing on veterans' benefits rather than a half-day; and receive no employment preparation. Participation of service members in the Disabled TAP component is not known, because VA does not track this information.

The federal agencies have taken actions to improve TAP's content and increase participation among full-time active duty military personnel but face challenges serving Reserve and National Guard members because of their rapid demobilization. To improve content, the agencies have updated, or plan to update, their manuals, forms, and other materials, and DOL is assessing its employment workshop curriculum using focus groups and survey data. To increase participation, DOL and VA provide some employment workshops and veterans' benefits briefings overseas, and DOD is considering mandating participation in all components. While the agencies have not assessed when and where to offer TAP for members of the Reserves and National Guard, DOL has pilot programs in three states that will offer employment workshops after the members return home.

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Abbreviations

TAP	transition assistance program
DOL	Department of Labor
DOD	Department of Defense
DTAP	Disabled Transition Assistance Program
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs

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GAO
Accountability * Integrity * Reliability

United States Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

May 20, 2005

The Honorable John W. Warner
Chairman
The Honorable Carl Levin
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Duncan Hunter
Chairman
The Honorable Ike Skelton
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

The increased role of the armed forces in military operations around the world, and the greater reliance on the Reserves and National Guard, has focused national attention on what is done to help servicemen and women successfully transition to civilian life after serving in the military. Originally created in 1990, the transition assistance program (TAP) provides information on specific benefits and services, including employment and relocation assistance, education opportunities, health and life insurance, and financial planning. Jointly administered under agreements among the Departments of Defense (DOD), Labor (DOL), and Veterans Affairs (VA), TAP is intended to serve military personnel who separate and members of the Reserves and National Guard who demobilize after at least 180 days of active duty. Over 300,000 servicemen and women met these criteria and were eligible for TAP in fiscal year 2004.

Concerns about the needs of transitioning service members—including those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan—and whether TAP is meeting their needs—are raised in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005, which mandated a GAO report on TAP. This report (1) assesses TAP's administration, including program participation, and (2) identifies actions agencies are taking to improve TAP as well as the challenges that remain.

To develop the information for this report, we reviewed the legislative history of TAP, including records of congressional hearings, and interviewed responsible officials, including TAP program managers, from

DOD, the armed forces and commands, the National Guard Bureau, VA, and DOL. We also reviewed TAP program materials, including guides and manuals prepared for participants and facilitators as well as slides and videos. We compiled and analyzed statistics on TAP program participation and surveyed selected veterans' service organizations. We also visited Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to talk to participants and observe briefings for members of the Army Reserve and National Guard being demobilized there as well as TAP sessions for others separating at the base. As agreed, the Coast Guard, which is overseen by Homeland Security, was not included in our review. To assess the reliability of the data on the numbers separating and on their TAP program participation, we reviewed documentation on the data systems and data entry, interviewed knowledgeable agency officials, and worked closely with them to understand or correct discrepancies. We determined that the numbers of service members separating and participating were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report, but that the participation rates we derived from these numbers represent approximations, as explained in a more detailed description of our methodology in appendix I. We conducted our work from December 2004 through April 2005 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Results in Brief

While the federal agencies responsible for TAP work closely to coordinate their administration of the four components of TAP, the method of delivery and the level of participation may vary. The TAP components are

1. the armed forces' preseparation counseling on a range of services and benefits,
2. DOL's employment workshops,
3. VA's briefings on benefits available to all veterans, and
4. VA's disabled transition assistance program (DTAP) on vocational rehabilitation for individuals who have, or think they may have, a disability.

The program emphasizes the workshops that help service members prepare for civilian employment, but preseparation counseling is the only component where attendance is mandatory. The administration of TAP is coordinated through regular meetings of TAP managers from each federal agency and the armed forces in accordance with interagency agreements. The delivery of TAP may vary in terms of the amount of personal attention

participants receive, the length of the components, and the instructional methods used. Participation also varies, depending in part on the circumstances of the service members involved. For example, full-time active duty service members who are separating from the military may receive individual assistance in their preseparation counseling, a half day of information on veterans' benefits, and 2 days of employment workshops under TAP. By comparison, members of the Reserves and National Guard generally do not attend formal TAP components because they are often released from active duty a few days after they return from overseas. During demobilization, they receive preseparation counseling as a group and may also be briefed for 45 minutes on veterans' benefits, but few attend any employment workshops. For DTAP, the level of participation of Reserves, National Guard and other separating service members is unknown because VA does not track this information.

The agencies administering the transition program have taken several actions to improve TAP and increase participation, but they face challenges in tailoring the program to the Reserves and National Guard. To improve program content, the three agencies have plans to take, or have taken, actions to update their manuals, forms, and other briefing materials, including Internet sites. DOL is assessing its employment workshop curriculum using focus groups and survey data. To increase participation, both DOL and VA have expanded availability and now offer employment workshops and veterans' benefits briefings at some overseas bases so that service members likely to separate there have the opportunity to attend TAP. In addition, a draft DOD directive under consideration would require all service members to attend the VA briefings and allow all who indicate an interest to attend the employment workshops. However, agencies face the challenges of providing TAP so its timing and location can accommodate the Reserves and National Guard. During their rapid demobilization, the Reserve and National Guard members may not receive all the information on possible benefits to which they are entitled. Notably, certain education benefits and medical coverage require service members to apply while they are still on active duty. However, even after being briefed, some Reserve and National Guard members were not aware of the time frames within which they needed to act to secure certain benefits before returning home. In addition, most members of the Reserves and National Guard did not have the opportunity to attend an employment workshop during demobilization. TAP managers are concerned about meeting the needs of these service members but do not have information on the number interested, the appropriate topics, or the optimal timing and location. DOL told us that three state pilot programs will offer a

version of the employment workshop to the Reserves and National Guard after they have been released from active duty and have returned home.

We recommend that DOD, in conjunction with DOL and VA, determine what demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members need to make a smooth transition and explore options to enhance their participation in TAP. In addition, we recommend that VA take steps to determine the level of participation in DTAP to ensure those who may have especially complex needs are being served.

Background

The role of the armed forces in the global war on terrorism and in military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq has heightened concerns about the assistance that these and other service members receive when they transition back into civilian life. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005[1] mandated that GAO report on TAP for service members separating or retiring from the military and members of the Reserves and National Guard who are released from active duty in a process referred to as demobilization.[2]

All service members who have been on active duty for at least 180 days are eligible for TAP, but those separating because of a disability are eligible regardless of the length of their active duty service. The time frames for provision of TAP are spelled out in law. Eligible service members must be provided TAP while they are on active duty and receiving military pay, either as soon as possible within the 2 years prior to their anticipated retirement date or in the 1 year prior to their anticipated separation date-in either case, no later than 90 days prior to their discharge or release. The exception to this rule occurs when separations are not anticipated and less than 90 days of active duty remain. In such cases, TAP must be provided as soon as possible.

About 309,000 servicemen and women were discharged or released from active military service in fiscal year 2004 with sufficient time on active

[1]P.L. 108-375. This authorization also mandated a GAO review of mental health services provided by DOD and VA, including mental health services for service members and veterans with or at risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder.

[2]In this report we use the term *separation* to refer to the discharge or retirement of full time active duty service members and also to the release of members of the Reserves and National Guard from active duty.

duty to meet the TAP eligibility criteria. Of these, about 192,000 were members of the full-time active duty armed forces---the Air Force, Army, Navy, or Marine Corps. Generally, the remaining 117,000 were members of the Reserves and National Guard who had been called to active duty in response to a national emergency and were later released. Many of these service members had been employed in civilian occupations before they were called to active duty and were training for their military mission during certain weeks and weekends each year.

The use of the Reserves and National Guard has increased dramatically in recent years, with more called to active duty than at any other time since the Korean War. About 478,000 members of the Reserves and National Guard have been called to active duty since September 11, 2001, and about 181,000 members were on active duty as of April 2005. Most of these members were serving with the Army---many on overseas missions, and on the front lines in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Balkans. Not only have more members of the Reserves and National Guard been called to active duty and sent overseas, but the number of days they spend on average in active duty status has doubled since 1990, when TAP was established. DOD expects this trend to continue through at least fiscal year 2007, with Reserve and National Guard members serving on active duty for a year or more on average.[3]

Delivery of the TAP components for most participants occurs at one of the 215 transition offices located on military installations. This includes 82 Air Force TAP offices located in Family Support Centers, 53 Army offices that are part of the Army Career and Alumni Program, as well as the 62 Navy offices and 18 Marine Corps offices that constitute their respective Transition Assistance Management Programs. However, Reserve and National Guard members who were called to active duty, served, and are returning home usually transition at fewer locations, referred to as demobilization sites; for example, the Army has 27 demobilization sites and the Marine Corps has 5 sites. Typically the demobilization process is rapid, taking a matter of days once the service members arrive back in the United States from overseas. The Army standard is to demobilize units in 5 days, and it is not uncommon for military installations to get 2 days' or less advance notice before returning troops arrive. During demobilization, service members may be expected to participate in as many as 18 separate

[3]Authority to call Reserve and National Guard service members to involuntary active duty is currently limited to 24 months, but members can volunteer for extended duty.

briefings on various topics, such as legal and medical issues, and scheduled activities, such as physical examinations. According to officials we interviewed, control of the schedule for demobilization is in the hands of the commanders of the installations where demobilization occurs, subject to guidance from the armed forces on briefing topics and activities that must be covered.

TAP provides information and links to a broad range of benefits and services for separating service members to ease their transition to civilian life. The topics that must be covered in TAP are spelled out in law[4] and include employment and relocation assistance, education opportunities, health and life insurance, and financial planning. Most of the benefits become available to service members once they have separated and are veterans, but to be eligible for certain of these benefits, service members must take specific actions while they are still on active duty. The information that TAP provides on benefits and services needs to be accurate and up to date, reflecting the most recent changes in law. Changes enacted in 2004, for example, permit Reserve and National Guard members who were called to active duty after September 11, 2001, to obtain a year's worth of health insurance coverage for themselves and their family for each 90 days of active duty, as long as they contribute a share of the cost and continue to serve in a reserve capacity after they are released from active duty. Service members must select this coverage while on active duty and enroll within 180 days of release from active duty or they forfeit their right to this benefit.

To take advantage of the various benefits and services, separating service members need to be aware of the benefits and services and know how to access them. For example, service members who have been on active duty continuously for 24 months and plan to pursue an education may receive up to $816 a month under the Montgomery GI Bill, if they have not previously declined the benefit. According to DOD, about 5,800 members of the Reserves and National Guard had been on active duty long enough on January 31, 2005, to qualify for this benefit, which usually is available only to full-time active duty military personnel.

TAP is designed to serve as a gateway to additional information and services that are available, either while service members are on active duty or after they have separated and returned home. For example, the DOL

[4]See 10 USC 1142 and 1144 for required information and services that constitute TAP.

workshop highlights many of the skills and techniques helpful in obtaining employment. After completing the workshop, service members can benefit further by refining their résumés, practicing their interviewing skills, and using computers to conduct job searches. To take advantage of opportunities to do so, they are welcome to return to TAP offices on military installations. Even after service members have separated from active duty, DOD policy permits them to use the services at military installations during the 180 days following their separation. They are also encouraged to contact state workforce agencies' One-Stop Career Centers near their homes for further employment and training services.

In our review of TAP in 2002,[5] we found that the program was available to service members but not all participated. Some service members faced difficulties being released from military duties to attend TAP because of the priority accorded their military mission or the lack of supervisory support for TAP. For service members who were able to participate, TAP varied in content and delivery, in part because the armed forces were able to exercise their flexibility to tailor the program to better meet the circumstances of their service members. For example, some service members received additional services that were designed to enhance TAP; elsewhere, service members in remote locations got a shorter version of TAP or experienced the program through videos rather than on-site facilitators.

Administration of the Four Components of TAP and Participation Vary by Service

TAP consists of separate components offered by DOD, DOL, and VA. These federal agencies facilitate interagency coordination through regular meetings and formal agreements. Participation in TAP varies by the component offered and the military service responsible. Preseparation counseling is the only component mandated in law and, accordingly, has had the highest rates of participation over the 3 years ending in fiscal year 2004. In general, participation rates are lower for the voluntary employment workshop. Among the services, the Navy and Marine Corps report the highest rates for the employment workshop, with the Marine Corps attributing its high rate to its recent policy of mandatory attendance. Reserve and National Guard members returning from overseas may get similar information but generally do not have time to attend formal TAP

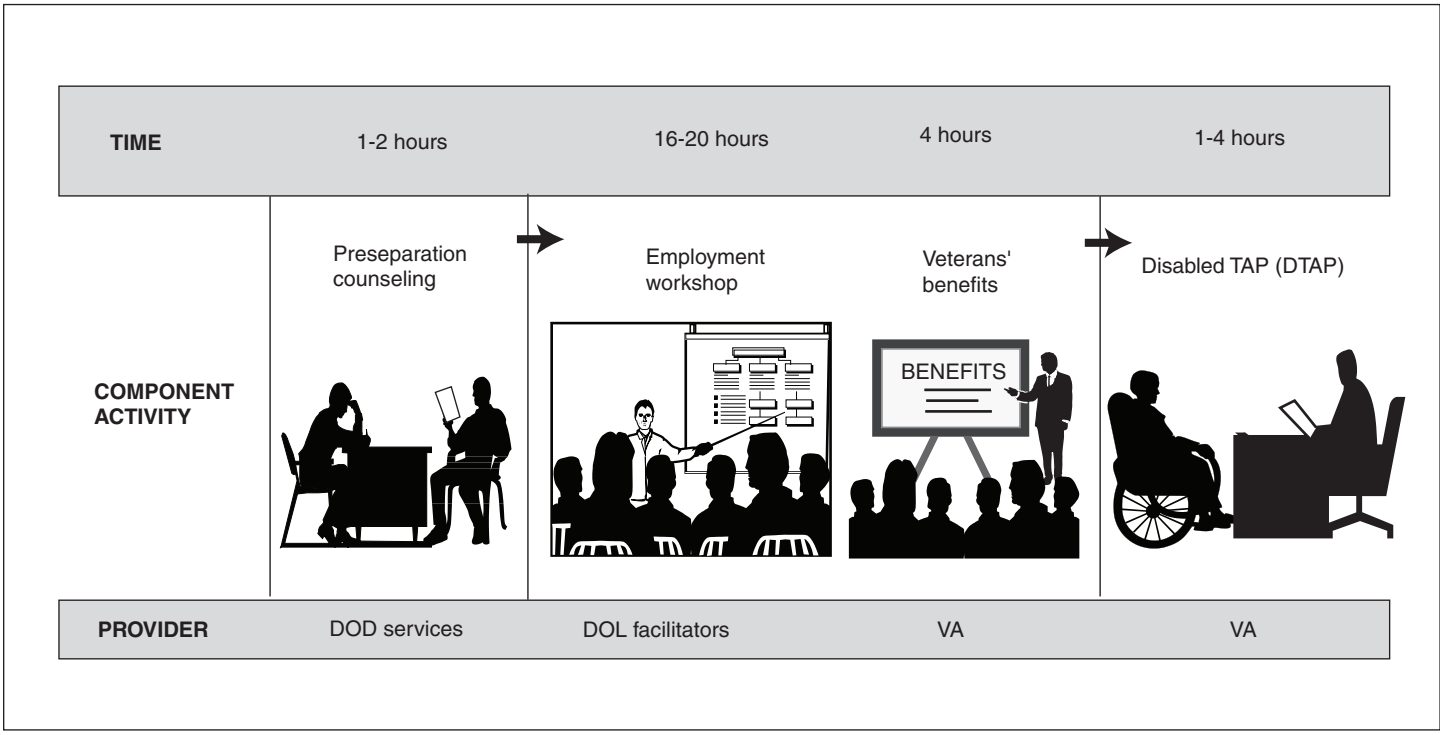
[5]See GAO, *Military and Veterans' Benefits: Observations on the Transition Assistance Program*, GAO-02-914T (Washington, D.C.: July 18, 2002).

components during demobilization. Local installation commanders rather than TAP managers control demobilization schedules.

TAP Emphasizes Civilian Employment and Provides Information on Other Services and Benefits

The TAP program consists of four core components with a specific federal agency responsible for the delivery and content of each, as shown in figure 1. According to DOD, the primary goal of TAP is to prepare separating service members and their families with the skills, tools, and self confidence necessary to ensure successful reentry into the nation's civilian workforce. TAP represents the completion of the military personnel "life cycle" that begins with recruitment, continues through active duty service, and ends when the service member returns to the civilian sector. The first component is preseparation counseling that provides a brief overview of services and benefits available to those who are separating and is conducted by the armed forces. The second component is an employment workshop conducted over 2 or 2 ½ days by certified facilitators following a DOL guide. The third component covers veterans' benefits, including disability compensation, and is often provided on the last day of the employment workshop by VA. The fourth component—the Disabled Transition Assistance Program, conducted by VA—offers information and counseling, primarily on vocational rehabilitation and employment options. It also covers insurance, specially adapted housing, and the Americans with Disabilities Act, for individuals who have or think they may have a service-connected disability.

Figure 1: TAP Time Frames, Components, and Providers



Source: GAO analysis.

Preseparation counseling is the only component where attendance is mandated in law; participation in all the other components is voluntary unless DOD or the services decide otherwise.[6] All separating service members with at least 180 days of active duty must receive preseparation counseling. This component introduces all the subsequent components, highlighting each of them briefly. Each military service is required to provide the counseling prior to release or discharge as specified in law and to identify the type and source of benefits and services available in the following areas: employment, relocation, education, health and life insurance, and financial planning. Separating service members complete a checklist during this component, certifying that they have been informed of the services available to them and indicating with a check mark any subsequent services they wish to receive, such as the employment

[6]Participation in the employment workshop, however, has been mandatory for those separating from the Marine Corps, since the policy went into effect in December 2001.

workshop. A copy of this signed checklist becomes a part of the individual service member's personnel record and, according to DOD officials, is required before the service member can be separated or demobilized. See appendix II for a complete list of the specific services and benefits covered, as indicated on the preseparation counseling checklist.

More hours are set aside for the employment workshop than for any other component. As shown in figure 1, from 22 to 30 hours are scheduled for the delivery of all TAP components, with 16 to 20 hours devoted to this workshop. This emphasis on preparation for civilian employment is consistent with the purpose of TAP when it was established in 1990. Agency managers explained that TAP was designed to serve full-time active duty service members who generally had little prior civilian employment experience and might have had difficulty transferring skills acquired in the military to the civilian economy. Many had specialized in critical skills, such as those utilized in combat arms, which could not be easily transferred to civilian occupations. Helping military personnel translate their military experience into skills valued in the civilian workforce was viewed as of paramount importance. Although the Reserves and National Guard were specifically identified in the law that established TAP, the program was designed to meet the needs of full-time active duty service members because most Reserve and National Guard members had not served in an active duty capacity long enough to be eligible for TAP.[7]

After separating service members complete one or more of the core TAP components, they may obtain additional, individualized counseling on specific benefits and services at TAP offices located on military installations. They may have access to automated tools designed to help them prepare résumés or cover letters to potential employers or opportunities to practice their job interview skills. Service members are also encouraged to contact state workforce agencies' One-Stop Career Centers and VA hospitals for additional services after they return home.

Although veterans' service organizations do not have a formal role in the provision of TAP, they often serve as an informal referral resource for service members who seek their assistance. To varying degrees, the

[7]Many members of the Reserve and National Guard were called to active duty for the Persian Gulf War, from 1990 to 1991, at the time when TAP was established, but they were demobilized after serving less than 180 days on average. For the next decade, relatively few were called to active duty.

veterans' service organizations that we contacted were primarily involved in helping service members complete claims such as those for VA disability compensation, as well as claims for other VA benefits and medical treatment. Other activities performed by the veterans' service organizations include briefings on VA benefits and advice and counseling on a range of issues. Many military installations have provided these organizations with office space where they can assist service members. Certain veterans' organizations, such as the Disabled American Veterans, AMVETS, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, have taken advantage of this opportunity. For example, the Disabled American Veterans reports that it has 25 staff members located on installations who assist service members at about 80 military installations and 18 military treatment facilities.

Interagency Meetings and Agreements Assist in Coordination and Oversight

To facilitate interagency coordination and oversight, the federal agency partners established the TAP Steering Committee, which is chaired by DOL. Each federal agency has also designated a single person as the point of contact for TAP, generally referred to as the agency TAP manager. In addition, within DOD, each of the armed forces has identified a single person who is responsible, generally referred to as the service TAP manager. The DOD managers meet as a group on a quarterly basis and also with other agency TAP managers on a quarterly basis to discuss issues, propose initiatives, and act as a sounding board. Any problems that develop and are not resolved at the local level can be sent back to the Steering Committee for resolution.[8]

Broad planning and budgeting for TAP takes place at the federal level within DOD and DOL—the only agencies that have funds dedicated to the support of TAP. DOD and the services estimate that about 200,000 service members, not including members of the Reserves and National Guard, have been eligible for TAP each fiscal year since 2001 and have provided an average of $45 million per year in budget authority. (See app. III for a breakout by military service.) DOL develops its TAP budget using DOD's estimates of the number separating and historical information that about 70 percent of those separating actually attend the employment workshops. DOL reports that in fiscal year 2004 it actually spent about $13 million on TAP. VA estimates that it spent $0.7 million in the same year for its

[8]In addition to the committee meetings, annual conferences held in 2000, 2001, and 2002 brought together all the entities responsible for TAP to share information on the program and, in some cases, propose improvements.

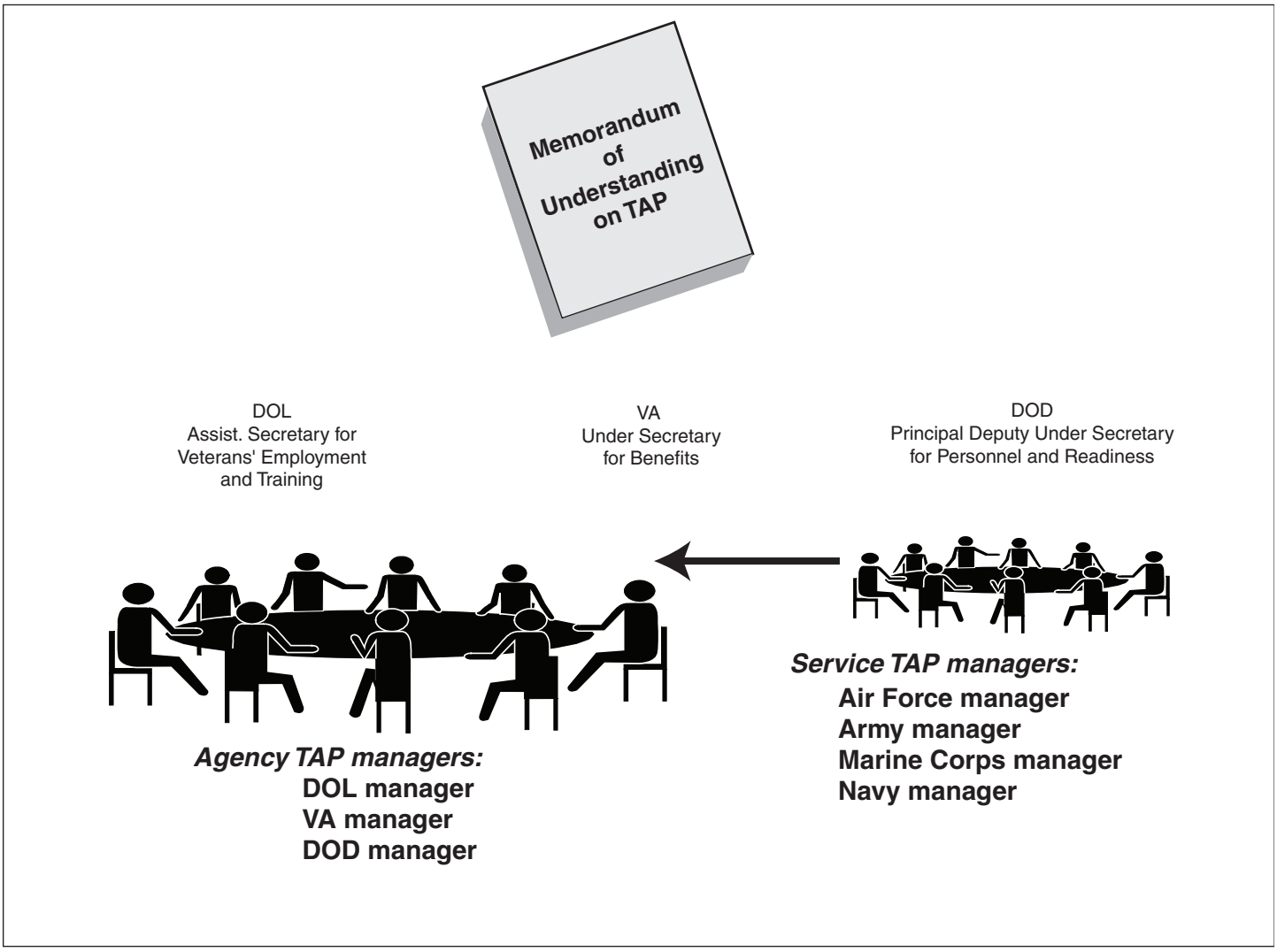
components of TAP. (For more information about the scheduling and delivery of employment workshops and other TAP components at the local installations, see app. IV.)

To clarify the roles of the federal agencies involved, an interagency agreement is required by law for all TAP components except preseparation counseling, where DOD has sole responsibility. Pursuant to law, the roles and responsibilities of DOD, DOL, and VA for the transition program are outlined in a 1994 agreement called a memorandum of understanding.[9] (See fig. 2.) Under this agreement, DOL has the leadership role in delivering the employment workshops, DOD ensures that service members participate and supplies logistical support, and VA provides information on veterans' benefits and delivers the DTAP component for separating members who have or may have service-connected disabilities. A separate 1993 agreement between DOD and VA outlines how VA provides its TAP components overseas, with VA providing the staff and DOD providing the funding and logistical support.[10] In addition to carrying out these agreements at the national level, the federal agencies encourage similar agreements among state and regional offices and the installations located in their areas.

[9]A revised agreement ready for signature in 2005 includes the Department of Homeland Security, the agency responsible for the Coast Guard.

[10]According to VA, DOD provided $364,000 to VA for this purpose in fiscal year 2004, a 23 percent increase from the prior year due to the fluctuating value of the U.S. dollar against other foreign currencies.

Figure 2: The Key Interagency Agreement and Committees Involved in Coordination and Oversight of TAP



Source: GAO analysis.

Uniformity in the content and quality of TAP is achieved in part by standardized guidebooks and manuals as well as certification of facilitators for one or more components. For both preseparation counseling and the employment workshop, participants receive guidebooks or manuals covering topics identified in the law that

established TAP.[11] Like instructional textbooks, the guidebooks and manuals help structure how these components are presented. In addition, manuals have been developed for use by the individuals who facilitate the employment workshops, and all workshop facilitators must be trained and certified by the National Veterans' Training Institute.[12] For oversight purposes and to help ensure the quality of the workshops, DOL asks participants to complete a critique form shown in appendix V. On the form, participants have an opportunity to provide comments and suggestions and also indicate on a scale how much they have gained from the information presented. DOL facilitators review the forms to assess the level of satisfaction of participants and consider suggestions for improvements. Although the VA components of TAP do not have comparable guides or manuals, VA officials explain that the slides and handouts they use can be more easily updated to conform to changes in the laws governing veterans' benefits.

The demobilization of Reserve and National Guard members, however, is outside the control of the TAP managers. DOD and armed forces guidelines establish the procedures governing demobilization and the topics to be covered, but individual installation commanders have discretion over the actual schedule. To provide TAP information to Reserve and National Guard members in 2003, the DOD TAP manager and service managers prepared written materials for distribution at demobilization. The materials included a laminated, pocket-sized preseparation guide written for Reserve and National Guard members that highlighted all of the benefits and services available and provided Web site addresses and toll-free numbers.

TAP's Delivery and Participation Vary by Circumstances, Component, and Service

Depending on the branch of military service or command responsible, the location, and other circumstances, the amount of time devoted to the TAP components may vary. Other variations include the extent of personal attention given participants and the instructional method used. Preseparation counseling may take the form of individualized, one-on-one

[11]For a copy of the October 2001 edition of DOD's participant guide to preseparation counseling, see http://www.dodtransportal.org/dav/lsnmedia/LSN/dodtransportal/. For the November 2002 edition of DOL's participant manual for the employment workshops, go to http://www.dol.gov/vets/programs/tap/main.htm.

[12]For a copy of the 2002 edition of DOL's manual for employment workshop facilitators, see http://www.nvti.cudenver.edu/tapfacilitator/home/index.htm. The Air Force also has a manual for personnel who conduct the Air Force preseparation counseling; see the March 2005 edition at http://www.afpc.randolph.af.mil/famops/trans.htm.

counseling sessions of an hour or more or it may take the form of group briefings, depending in part on the time available and the numbers to be counseled. Group sessions are more common at large bases like those maintained by the Army and Marine Corps, where many individuals are separating. Also, the Army has made use of technology and offers preseparation counseling at banks of computers that use interactive programs and include headphones so that participants can work independently and at their own pace while remaining part of a group. In the Navy, transition assistance may take place on board ship rather than at military installations.

TAP varies in part because the military services are able to exercise their flexibility to tailor the program to better meet the circumstances of their service members. While some service members receive additional services designed to enhance TAP, others at remote locations may participate in TAP by video or telephone because there are no trained personnel on-site. Because of the demobilization timetables, many Reserve and National Guard members cannot take advantage of TAP components offered to full time active duty military personnel and instead receive much shorter presentations as part of large groups at demobilization briefings.[13] For example, members of the Reserves and National Guard may be offered a 45-minute veterans' benefits briefing by VA at the demobilization briefing while 3 to 4 hours of veterans' benefits briefing are provided other military personnel on the last day of the TAP workshop.

Participation also varies by the military service involved and the component of TAP offered. For example, the Army had about twice as many service members attending preseparation counseling as any one of the other services from fiscal year 2002 through 2004. During the same period, the number of Army Reserve and Army National Guard members attending preseparation briefings at demobilization increased more than ten-fold, from about 9,000 to about 93,000. (App. VI shows the number of service members who separated and those who attended TAP components by military service.)

As expected, estimated participation rates have been the highest for preseparation counseling where attendance is mandated in law. The

[13]The 30-minute briefing on health insurance options we attended during demobilization at Fort Bragg was longer than the time provided during preseparation counseling for other service members, but the other members would generally have more time while still on active duty to obtain further information, study their options, and arrive at their decision.

average rates for the three years ending in 2004 have ranged from 76 percent to over 100 percent, depending on the military service.[14] Also as expected, the estimated participation rates are generally lower for the 3,000 or more employment workshops held each year, where attendance is voluntary. The average rates for the three years ranged from 56 percent to 86 percent. This represents the number attending the workshops as a percentage of all who separated and were eligible for TAP.[15] The Army reports that about 20 percent of those eligible each year indicated that they were not interested in attending the workshops. The Marine Corps, which has mandated attendance at the employment workshops, and the Navy show the highest participation rates over the three years. Although the Navy shows higher rates for participation in employment workshops than in preseparation counseling, the discrepancy is more likely a reflection of reporting problems than of actual attendance, and the actual numbers of service members receiving counseling is probably higher.[16] Retirees were disproportionately represented in the employment workshops. Across the armed forces, about one-third of all who participate are retirees, although they constitute about one-fifth of all who separate. The remainder are those separating or released prior to retirement.

No data are available for participation in the VA components of TAP. Because the veterans' benefits briefings are usually held on the last day of the employment workshops, VA officials indicated that the participation rates for their briefings are equivalent to the rates for the employment workshops. In addition, VA told us that DTAP is provided to all service

[14]Some rates shown in appendix IV for the Army and Marine Corps exceed 100 percent for participation in preseparation counseling after fiscal year 2002. DOD explains that these rates reflect three scenarios. Because of the "stop loss" policy, some service members who expected to separate and received the required counseling had to remain on active duty. Other service members chose to reenlist, including about 9,700 Army personnel in fiscal year 2004. Finally, because the counseling is encouraged so far in advance of separation, some participants who received counseling in one fiscal year did not separate until the following year.

[15]A more accurate rate would compare the attendance numbers with the numbers of those who indicated an interest in attending the workshop, but these data were not available for all services and years.

[16]In the Navy, uniformed military personnel conduct preseparation counseling. Because these personnel often have other responsibilities or they are located aboard ship for extended periods of time, the manual records of attendance that are forwarded to transition assistance staff may be incomplete or delayed. DOD told us that the Navy TAP manager is working to improve reporting.

members who are receiving care or separating from medical treatment facilities by VA counselors who are located at or make regular visits to these medical facilities.[17] However, no data are available to determine the number of individuals eligible for DTAP, and VA's records do not distinguish the number who participate in this component from the total of all recipients of VA outreach briefings.

Very few members of the Reserve or National Guard are able to attend the employment workshops, although at demobilization they complete their preseparation counseling checklists and may be briefed on veterans' benefits and health insurance coverage options, depending on the schedule developed for demobilization. The TAP managers with DOD and the military services explained that the chief problem is lack of time during demobilization, which is often completed in 5 days. In addition, many of these service members are anxious to return home and are not interested in prolonging their stay to attend workshops. Further, many have jobs at home that are being held for them, so they may not need to attend the employment workshop. However, the TAP managers also told us that they believe that employment information in some form is relevant and useful for some Reserve and National Guard members. They noted that some were self-employed before they went on active duty, and their businesses may have suffered or gone into bankruptcy in their absence. Other service members may have worked for companies that have gone out of business since their active duty began. Other members might prefer to find better jobs than the ones they held before they went on active duty. While TAP managers were not able to provide data on the number who might be interested in attending the employment workshop, members of the Reserves and National Guard we met generally confirmed the views of the TAP managers.

[17]DOD reports that about 3,500 service members were placed on the temporary disability retirement list in 2004. For information on DOD's disability system under which separating service members with disabilities may be placed on temporary retirement, see GAO, *DOD Disability: Overview of Compensation Program for Service Members Unfit for Duty*, GAO-01-622 (Washington, D.C. April 27, 2001).

Many Actions are Under Way to Improve TAP, but Challenges Remain in Meeting the Needs of Reserves and National Guard

The agencies administering the program have taken several actions to improve TAP program materials for all eligible personnel separating from the military, including Reserve and National Guard members. In addition, the agencies have taken steps to increase participation, primarily among full-time active duty military personnel. However, despite efforts so far, challenges remain, particularly in meeting the needs of demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members for transition assistance.

Several Actions Directed at Improving Program Content

DOD is updating information and reconsidering the topics to be covered during preseparation counseling, based on its assessment of the differing needs of participants. As a result, DOD plans to eliminate the "one size fits all" approach currently in place. For full-time active duty service members, it has drafted an updated counseling checklist. To meet the needs of demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members, it has drafted a separate counseling checklist tailored to their circumstances. (See app. VII for the changes that are planned to the form shown in app. II.) In updating the information for both groups, DOD added several Internet sites so that service members can follow up to obtain more information on available services and benefits, including sites explaining options for health insurance coverage. To better meet the needs of Reserve and National Guard members, their new checklist eliminates information on benefits that apply only to active duty members, such as relocation assistance and separation pay. Instead, the new form provides benefit information applicable to demobilizing Reserve and National Guard service members, such as reemployment rights, employer support, and loan relief.

DOD is taking the same approach to the revision of the guidebook and other materials used in preseparation counseling. DOD officials plan to update the preseparation guide that contains information on services and benefits available to service members separating from full-time active duty. In addition, they are developing a separate guide for demobilizing Reserve and National Guard personnel. Meanwhile, the military services have developed new materials specifically geared toward the needs of Reserve and National Guard service members. For instance, the Army reported that it uses a separate script and slides for preseparation counseling of demobilizing Reserve and National Guard service members and gives them a handout on services and benefits tailored to their needs as well as a calling card with the telephone number of a resource center that these service members can contact for one-on-one assistance.

DOL and VA are also taking actions to improve the information they provide on benefits and services available to separating service members. DOL plans to use focus groups and survey data to assess the strengths and weaknesses of its employment workshop curriculum in serving the needs of all service members.[18] VA has improved its marketing activities by issuing pamphlets, brochures, a videotape, and a wallet-size card with information on how to obtain further information about VA health care and benefits. One of its brochures is entitled "A Summary of VA Benefits for National Guard and Reserve Personnel."

To ensure that all participants have the information they need in DTAP, VA formed a task force in 2004 to restructure and standardize the DTAP curriculum to meet the needs of all separating service members who have or may have a disability and invited DOD and the military services to participate. As a result, VA has developed a new curriculum with video, slides, and a script for DTAP. This standardized DTAP curriculum is intended to provide extensive information on VA's vocational rehabilitation and employment services. VA also issued a quick reference guide to present information about vocational counseling, rehabilitation, and employment services available to active duty service members as well as veterans with service-connected disabilities. The guide is intended for distribution at DTAP sessions offered at military installations and treatment facilities and for other purposes and locations as appropriate. Along with this new effort, VA continues its outreach campaign to contact all service members in need of these services.

Actions Are Planned or Under Way to Increase Participation in TAP

DOD and its partner agencies are considering or have undertaken several actions designed to increase participation in TAP, including

- making attendance mandatory or mandating that service members receive permission to attend TAP, so that individuals have the opportunity to participate with the support of their commanders or other leaders;
- emphasizing the importance and relevance of veterans' benefits by offering this information before the employment workshop as a stand alone briefing by VA;

[18]In addition, DOL told us that the next update of its participant manual will include information on how a veteran with a service-connected disability who wants to own his or her own business could take advantage of the opportunity to obtain federal procurement contracts in accordance with Presidential Executive Order 13360, issued October 21, 2004.

- sending DOL contractors and VA staff overseas to present their TAP components to service members located at bases around the world; and
- developing a centralized database to automate and manage information on participation.

Recently, the TAP service representatives at DOD proposed to the Secretary of Defense that participation in TAP be mandatory. Under the proposed policy change, all service members would be required first to attend preseparation counseling. Following preseparation counseling, all service members would be required to attend the veterans' benefits briefing, because the range of benefits is extensive and likely to affect the lives of most separating service members. In addition, attendance at DTAP would be required of all service members who have or think they have a service-connected disability, are awaiting a medical discharge, or have incurred an injury or illness while on active duty, or aggravated a pre existing condition. Further, service members with an interest in attending the employment workshop who check "Yes" on the preseparation counseling form would receive permission, without exception, to attend the DOL- or service-sponsored employment workshop in its entirety.

The policy change in TAP participation is being proposed to (1) bring more consistency to the overall program, (2) allow more service members to access TAP, and (3) encourage commanders to release service members to attend the VA briefings and all other relevant components of TAP. In 2002, we reported that the support that commanders and supervisors have for transition services may determine the degree to which service members have access to the services. If supervisors are not supportive of the transition assistance, or if they feel that mission needs are too pressing, they may be reluctant to allow service members under them to access services offered. Some service members we met told us that they faced difficulties being released from military duties to attend TAP because of the priority accorded their military mission or the lack of supervisory support for TAP. They said that even when commanders support attendance at the workshop, others—such as the platoon, section, or unit leaders—may be reluctant to approve requests to attend the workshops. This proposed policy change is designed to address these issues.

In addition, VA and DOL are taking actions to improve access to transition assistance for active duty service members stationed overseas. It is important for service members stationed overseas to receive transition assistance there, especially for those who separate at overseas locations.

Starting in 1993, VA sent six military service coordinators or veterans' benefits counselors to U.S. military installations located in Europe and later increased the staff to seven, assigned them for tours of 3 to 6 months, and extended their territory beyond Europe. However, VA has no staff overseas for 3 months each year. In 2003, DOL began phasing in its employment workshops, first using its own staff and later contractor personnel living overseas, rather than relying on the military services to conduct overseas employment workshops, as had been the case previously. Standard operating procedures are being developed to clarify the roles and responsibilities of DOL, DOD, and VA in the delivery of employment workshops at overseas locations. Currently VA provides its benefits briefings at 68 military installations and plans to have a military service coordinator in Bahrain starting in May 2005,[19] while DOL provides its employment workshops at 49 military installations and plans to expand to additional installations. (See app. VIII for a list of locations overseas where DOL and VA offer TAP.)

In January 2005, the TAP managers with DOD and the military services met to discuss ways to better understand service member participation in TAP. In particular, they discussed the development of a centralized database to automate and manage information on the participation of active duty and Reserve and National Guard service members. This new information system is in the initial planning stages. It would provide DOD and the services with the capability of disaggregating data on service members attending preseparation counseling to identify those who are retiring or separating voluntarily or involuntarily. The system would also provide information on the reasons why service members do not receive preseparation counseling at least 90 days prior to separation or retirement, as required by law. In addition, the new information system would permit DOD and the services to analyze information specifically relevant to active duty service members or to Reserve and National Guard service members.

Challenges Remain in Meeting the Needs of Reserve and National Guard Service Members

Although several actions are under way or planned to improve TAP, challenges remain, particularly in designing transition services that better accommodate the schedules of demobilizing Reserve and National Guard service members. DOD acknowledges that this presents several unique challenges, that the service members have not been surveyed to determine

[19]Although VA is sending staff overseas to provide benefits briefings, it does not have the staff to provide DTAP overseas.

how to meet their needs, and that further study might suggest ways to address the challenges, primarily in the logistics of when and where to offer TAP. Table 1 describes some of the key differences in circumstances between Reserve and National Guard members and others separating that need to be considered.

Table 1: Circumstances of Reserve and National Guard Members Compared with Those of Others Separating

Demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members	Full-time active duty members
During the demobilization process, little or no time is available to address transition assistance issues thoroughly.	Most can begin accessing TAP services 12 months prior to separation or 24 months prior to retirement.
Most are demobilized at a location in which they do not work and live.	Most attend TAP at the same location where they work and live with their families
Some are likely to have serious financial issues.	Most do not have serious financial issues.
Most are anxious to reunite with their families and reintegrate into the community.	Reunion and reintegration are not issues for most.

Source: TAP managers with DOD and the military services.

The TAP managers for DOD and the military services identified several challenges in designing transition services that better meet the needs of demobilizing Reserve and National Guard service members. Staff who provide transition assistance may not know when Reserve and National Guard units are returning for demobilization, because national security concerns prevent the release of information on the movement of large numbers of service members. Moreover, the time scheduled for demobilization varies by service and demobilization site. Commanders are challenged with trying to balance demobilizing some units while at the same time mobilizing others. They also balance getting Reserve and National Guard members back to their families as quickly as possible with the extra time needed for transition assistance. Finally, DOD, VA, and DOL do not know the amount of resources needed to provide transition assistance in a different format, such as providing TAP after the Reserve and National Guard service members have returned home and begun to readjust to civilian life. At this point, they may be more receptive to TAP and better able to define their needs.

DOD's proposed policy revisions acknowledge logistical issues that limit access for Reserve and National Guard members to TAP. For example, the planned changes to the preseparation counseling checklist require that demobilizing service members be released by commanders to attend the employment workshop only if there is time to complete this component before they are released from active duty. Under current demobilization schedules, Reserve and National Guard members do not have sufficient

time to attend the workshops. Further, the TAP managers with DOD and the military services told us that they did not know how many demobilizing service members would be interested, if time could be made available, or how the content should be altered to meet their special needs.

To deal with the logistical challenges, the TAP managers for DOD and the military services are considering the option of providing some TAP components to Reserve and National Guard members after they have been demobilized, and DOL is involved in state pilot programs to test this option. DOD officials envision VA presenting its benefits briefing and DTAP, where applicable, during a scheduled drill weekend after the service members have been home for 45 to 60 days. DOD officials believe such an option would require additional resources and a mandate that Reserve and National Guard commanders allow sufficient time for staff to provide the transition assistance. However, the TAP managers do not know how many Reserve and National Guard members might be interested and able to attend such activities. Meanwhile, DOL is currently involved in three state pilot programs of employment workshops designed for returning Reserve and National Guard members. One in Minnesota will offer a shortened version of the employment workshop, using a curriculum based on input from unemployed or underemployed Reserve and National Guard service members. The pilot program will involve a change in National Guard rules so that members can be required to attend the activity 30 days after their release, when they may be facing financial and other problems. In Oregon, DOL is working closely with the National Guard and the state workforce agency to provide employment workshops to National Guard members. The first workshops were offered in March 2005. In Michigan, the state workforce agency is negotiating with the Reserves and National Guard to arrange a 4-day workshop, where these personnel will work alongside veterans who are receiving intensive case management services at the One-Stop Career Center.

Besides limiting access to the employment workshops, short demobilization time frames may also result in Reserve and National Guard members who are not informed in a timely manner of the requirement to apply for health insurance coverage and certain VA education benefits while on active duty. The National Guard members we spoke with who had attended the VA benefits briefing told us that they could not recall being informed of the need to apply for these benefits while on active duty; these members included one who believed that he had been on active duty long enough to qualify for the more generous education benefits. They indicated that too much information was covered in the 45-

minute benefits briefing they received from VA at demobilization and believed that at a minimum the VA should have highlighted the significance of applying immediately, explained what information was required, and told them where to submit the application. They added that they were unfamiliar with the services and layout of the installation where they were demobilizing, because they were only passing through on their way home.

Conclusions

The men and women who serve in our armed forces, particularly now that the U.S. military has increased its presence in contingency operations around the world, put their lives on the line every day. For this reason, it is important that the government do all it can to help servicemen and women successfully transition to civilian life after service ends. Unlike their full time active duty counterparts, however, the Reserves and National Guard members returning from active duty overseas who might opt for transition assistance do not always have the opportunity to participate in formal TAP components. Although they receive some of the same information in briefings at demobilization, they may be required to attend as many as 18 briefings and activities over 5 days, most dealing with issues other than TAP, such as legal and medical matters. As a result, the information on available benefits is often abbreviated and may not emphasize certain benefits, including some education and medical benefits, that they may forfeit if the service members do not apply while they are still on active duty. In addition, because these personnel are released from active duty within days of returning to the United States, any transition assistance must fit within this compressed time frame, and be offered overseas near the areas of combat or after the service members have returned home. The agencies responsible for TAP are aware of the challenge but have not determined the number interested, the appropriate topics, or the optimal timing and location. Moreover, for service members who have incurred disabilities, DTAP information is critical. Yet VA does not keep track of how many service members attend DTAP. Better program statistics in this area could help VA meet the needs of these service members and provide follow-up assistance.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To ensure that members of the Reserve and National Guard have the opportunity to benefit from transition assistance, we recommend that DOD, in conjunction with DOL and VA, determine what demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members need to make a smooth transition and explore the logistical options for providing that assistance, such as opportunities for employment workshops before or after their

demobilization and providing timely information about the need to apply for certain benefits while still on active duty. To develop more accurate program statistics, we also recommend that VA keep track of service members who attend DTAP to ensure that adequate follow-up is possible with this population, which may be in particular need of the services.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to DOD, DOL and VA for review and comment. All concurred with our findings and recommendations. The written comments from these agencies appear in appendixes IX through XI.

DOD said that the report accurately portrays the program and its operational processes and also recognizes logistical and other challenges in meeting the needs of Reserve and National Guard service members. DOD agreed with our recommendation and stated its commitment to work with its partner agencies to determine the needs of these service members for assistance, explore options to enhance their participation, and ensure that they receive timely information on the need to apply for certain benefits before they are released from active duty.

DOL acknowledged the need for continuous monitoring and refinement of the employment workshops. DOL stated it will offer its assistance to DOD in determining the TAP workshop requirements for members of the Reserves. In addition, DOL highlighted several initiatives described in the report that are designed to improve transition services, such as the pilot programs in three states that provide employment information to service members after their release from active duty. DOL noted that the lessons learned and best practices that are derived from these pilot programs will be disseminated widely.

VA said it recognizes the need to emphasize time limits for establishing eligibility for certain benefits while on active duty, especially education and medical benefits. VA added that it is developing a brochure to describe a new education benefit for members of the Reserves and National Guard. VA also explained that it is developing a process to track DTAP participation, as we recommended. In addition, an agreement with the National Guard Bureau has been drafted so that VA will know when and where demobilizing members return to their communities.

We are sending copies of this report to appropriate congressional committees, the Secretaries of DOD, DOL, and VA, and other interested parties. Copies will be made available to others upon request. In addition,

the report will be available at no charge on GAO's Web site at http://www.gao.gov. If you have any question about this report, please call me at (202) 512-7101. Key contributors are listed in appendix XII.

Cynthia A. Bascetta
Director, Education, Workforce, and
Income Security Issues

Appendix I: Scope and Methodology

To assess how the transition assistance program (TAP) is administered, we reviewed the legislative and regulatory history of TAP, including records of congressional hearings, and interviewed responsible officials, including TAP managers and other officials from the Departments of Defense (DOD), Labor (DOL), and Veterans Affairs (VA); the armed forces; Reserve Affairs; and the National Guard Bureau. We did not interview officials from the Department of Homeland Security concerning the Coast Guard. We reviewed memorandums of agreement among the federal agencies involved, minutes of Steering Committee meetings, as well as policy directives prepared by DOD and VA. We reviewed TAP program materials, including guidebooks and manuals prepared for participants and facilitators, slides, videos, and handouts. To examine the role of veterans' service organizations—the extent of their participation in TAP and their views on what their role should be—we conducted structured interviews with officials in the following organizations: AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, American Legion, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and Veterans of Foreign Wars.

To experience firsthand the challenges of providing TAP to members of the Reserve and National Guard returning from overseas, we visited Fort Bragg, North Carolina, on February 23-24, 2005. At Fort Bragg we observed a morning demobilization briefing given to members of the Army National Guard that covered several topics, including VA veterans' benefits, health insurance, and completion of the preseparation counseling checklist. We also attended the formal TAP preseparation counseling, two concurrent employment workshops, and the briefing on VA veterans' benefits for other service members. In addition, we discussed transition assistance with the installation command, program providers, and demobilizing service members who participated in the demobilization briefing as well as other service members who participated in the formal TAP components.

To show the level of participation in TAP for each of the armed forces for each fiscal year from 2002 through 2004, we obtained from the TAP managers the number of service members participating in two of the four components of transition services—preseparation counseling and the DOL employment workshop. VA data do not separately identify the number of service members attending its benefits briefings or Disabled Transition Assistance Program sessions. However, VA told us that in the United States the number of service members attending the employment workshop should approximate the number attending the VA benefits briefings, because the VA briefings usually follow the employment workshops.

To estimate the rate of participation in preseparation counseling, we used data from the armed forces on the number of service members discharged who had served on active duty for at least 180 days and data on the number of service members who had completed the preseparation counseling checklist. To estimate the rate of participation in the DOL employment workshop, we used data provided by DOL on service members completing the workshop and DOD data on service members discharged who had served on active duty for at least 180 days. We note that the DOL workshop is not mandatory and not all service members express an interest in taking the workshop. Because the number of service members interested in taking the workshop was not available for all the armed forces, our estimate represents the number of service members completing the workshop in relation to the number of service members discharged, not the number who indicate they wanted to attend the workshop. We would expect the estimated rate of participation in the DOL employment workshops to be higher if we were able to compare the number participating with the number expressing an interest in participating.

We consider the rates shown in appendix VI to be estimates, because many of the service members who participated in a component during one of the years shown were not among the service members who separated that same year. By law, the armed forces must try to provide preseparation counseling between 1 and 2 years prior to separation. This means that service members may participate in TAP in 2002 but not be counted as separating until 2004. Further, some service members who participate do not separate as planned, either because of their personal decision to extend or reenlist, or the armed forces' policy of stop loss. Stop loss keeps individuals on active duty beyond their normal date of separation or retirement and has been implemented at various times by all of the armed forces since September 2001. For these reasons, the estimated rates for the Army and Marine Corps in the mandatory preseparation counseling component exceeded 100 percent in 1 or more years.

To assess the reliability of the data on the number of service members discharged with at least 180 days of active duty service and the number participating in TAP, we reviewed documentation about the data systems and data entry, interviewed agency officials knowledgeable about the data, and worked closely with agency officials when we found discrepancies to understand or correct them. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report. We conducted our work from December 2004 through April 2005 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Appendix II: Checklist Used by the Armed Forces in Preseparation Counseling until Fiscal Year 2005

PRESEPARATION COUNSELING CHECKLIST

(Please read Privacy Act Statement below before completing this form.)

SECTION I - PRIVACY ACT STATEMENT

AUTHORITY: 10 USC 1142, E.O. 9397.

PRINCIPAL PURPOSE(S): To record preseparation services and benefits requested by and provided to Service members; to identify preseparation counseling areas of interest as a basis for development of an Individual Transition Plan (ITP). The signed preseparation counseling checklist will be maintained in the Service member's official personnel file. Title 10, USC 1142, requires that not later than 90 days before the date of separation, preseparation counseling for Service members be made available.

ROUTINE USE(S): None.

DISCLOSURE: Voluntary; however, it will not be possible to initiate preseparation services or develop an Individual Transition Plan (ITP) for a Service member if the information is not provided.

SECTION II - PERSONAL INFORMATION *(To be filled out by all applicants)*

1. NAME *(Last, First, Middle Initial)*		2. SSN	3. GRADE
4. SERVICE	5. DUTY STATION	6. EXPECTED SEPARATION DATE *(YYYYMMDD)*	7. DATE CHECKLIST PREPARED *(YYYYMMDD)*

SECTION III. ALL TRANSITIONING SERVICE MEMBERS MUST READ AND SIGN.

I was offered preseparation counseling on the above date (Item 7) on my transition benefits and services as appropriate. I understand that this preseparation counseling is provided to assist my transition process as required by Title 10, USC 1142.

I ☐ accept ☐ decline *(X appropriate block)* further transition assistance counseling. *(If you declined further transition assistance counseling, sign and date.)* I have checked those items where I desire further information or counseling. I have also been advised where to obtain assistance in developing an Individual Transition Plan (ITP).

8a. SERVICE MEMBER SIGNATURE	b. DATE *(YYYYMMDD)*	9a. TRANSITION COUNSELOR SIGNATURE	b. DATE *(YYYYMMDD)*

SECTION IV. Please indicate *(by checking YES or NO)* whether you *(or your spouse if applicable)* desire counseling for the following services and benefits. All benefits and services checked YES should be used in developing your ITP. The following services and benefits are available to all Service members, unless otherwise specified:

	SERVICE MEMBER			SPOUSE			REFERRED TO *(Input is optional)*
	YES	NO	N/A	YES	NO	N/A	
10. EFFECTS OF A CAREER CHANGE							
11. EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE							
a. Dept. of Labor sponsored Transition Assistance Workshops and Service sponsored Transition Seminars/Workshops							
b. Use of DD Form 2586 (Verification of Military Experience and Training)							
(1) Do you want a copy of your Verification of Military Experience and Training (VMET) Document? If yes, go to http://www.dmdc.osd.mil/vmet to download your VMET document.							
c. DoD Job Search Web site: dod.jobsearch.org							
d. Transition Bulletin Board (TBB) and Public and Community Service Opportunities (http://www.dmdc.osd.mil/ot/)							
e. Teacher and Teacher's Aide Opportunities/Troops to Teachers (http://voled.doded.mil/dantes/ttt)							
f. Federal Employment Opportunities							
g. Hiring Preference in Non-Appropriated Fund (NAF) jobs (Eligible Involuntary Separatees)							
h. State Employment Agencies/America's Job Bank							
12. RELOCATION ASSISTANCE ***NOTE: Status of Forces Agreement limitations apply for overseas Service members.**							
a. Permissive (TDY/TAD) and Excess leave							
*b. Travel and transportation allowances							
13. EDUCATION/TRAINING							
a. Education benefits (Montgomery GI Bill, Veterans Educational Assistance Program, Vietnam-era, etc.)							
b. Workforce Investment Act (WIA)							
c. Additional education or training options							

DD FORM 2648, JUL 2002 PREVIOUS EDITION MAY BE USED.

PRESEPARATION COUNSELING CHECKLIST SECTION IV *(Continued)*	NAME *(Last, First, Middle Initial)*						SSN
	SERVICE MEMBER			SPOUSE			REFERRED TO *(Input is optional)*
	YES	NO	N/A	YES	NO	N/A	
13. EDUCATION/TRAINING *(Continued)*							
d. Licensing and Certification Information (www.umet-vets.dol.gov)							
e. Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Educational Support (www.voled.doded.mil/)							
14. HEALTH AND LIFE INSURANCE							
a. 60-day or 120-day extended Military and limited Dental benefits (Eligible Involuntary Separatees)							
b. Option to purchase 18-month conversion health insurance. Concurrent pre-existing condition coverage with purchase of conversion health insurance.							
c. Veterans' Group Life Insurance							
15. FINANCES							
a. Financial Management (TSP, Retirement, SBP)							
b. Separation pay (Eligible Involuntary Separatees)							
c. Unemployment compensation							
d. Other financial assistance (VA Loans, SBA Loans, and other government grants and loans)							
16. RESERVE AFFILIATION							
17. DISABLED VETERANS BENEFITS							
a. Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP)							
b. VA Disability Benefits							
18. INDIVIDUAL TRANSITION PLAN (ITP)							
a. As a separating Service member, after receiving basic preseparation counseling information and completing this checklist, you and your spouse (if applicable) are entitled to receive assistance in developing an Individual Transition Plan (ITP) based on the areas of interest you have identified on this checklist. The preseparation counseling checklist addresses a variety of transition services and benefits to which you may be entitled. Each individual is strongly encouraged to take advantage of the opportunity to develop an ITP. The purpose of the ITP is to identify educational, training and employment objectives and to develop a plan to help you achieve these objectives. It is the Military Department's responsibility to offer Service members the opportunity and assistance to develop an ITP. It is the Service member's responsibility to develop an ITP based on his/her specific objectives and the objectives of his or her spouse, if appropriate.							
b. Based upon information received during Preseparation Counseling, do you desire assistance in developing your ITP? If yes, the Transition staff/Command Career Counselor is available to assist you.							

SECTION V - REMARKS

DD FORM 2648 (BACK), JUL 2002

Appendix III: Transition Assistance Funding by Military Service, Fiscal Years 2002 through 2004

In millions of dollars			
Military service	**FY 2002**	**FY 2003**	**FY 2004**
Air Force funding source			
DOD	$8.9	$8.8	$8.9
Air Force	0.6	0.7	1.4
Total	**9.5**	**9.5**	**10.3**
Army funding source			
DOD	13.3	13.3	13.3
Army	7.9	6.0	6.9
Total	**21.1**	**19.3**	**20.2**
Marine Corps funding source			
DOD	4.0	4.0	4.0
Marine Corps	0.5	0.7	0.5
Total	**4.5**	**4.7**	**4.5**
Navy funding source			
DOD	11.0	10.2	10.3
Navy	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	**11.0**	**10.2**	**10.3**
Total funding source			
DOD	37.2	36.3	36.5
Services	9.0	7.4	8.7
Total	**$46.2**	**$43.7**	**$45.3**

Source: DOD.

DOD's budget assumes an estimated 200,000 full-time active duty personnel have been eligible for TAP each fiscal year since 2001. The number of participants is based on lists drawn up by the military services of personnel who have indicated their interest in separating as well as those who may be uncertain about their decision. This list constitutes the anticipated separations but does not include unanticipated separations or demobilization of Reserve and National Guard members. DOD officials note that funding for TAP has been flat since fiscal year 1995; prior to that, we reported that DOD spent about $83 million in fiscal years 1992 and 1993.

Appendix IV: Scheduling and Delivery of TAP Components at Military Installations

The scheduling of employment preparation workshops generally takes place in one of the 44 states with medium to large military installations. DOL relies on federal Veterans' Employment and Training directors[1] assigned to each state and territory, who meet with the commanders of the military installations in their area and obtain estimates for the numbers separating at each installation. Based on these planning figures, workshop schedules are developed that are reviewed quarterly and may be adjusted more frequently as long as DOL has at least 14 days' warning. Generally DOL tries to have at least 15 participants in each workshop, but preferably 25 to 35. If many additional participants are expected, DOL officials told us that they will try to add a facilitator to give participants more individual attention during certain sessions, for example, when participants practice interviewing for jobs. In some cases, the services have requested separate workshops for retirees only or for senior personnel with different kinds of skills. Depending on its budget, the number of potential participants, and the availability of facilitators with the appropriate skills, DOL may honor such requests. For example, we observed two employment workshops running concurrently at Fort Bragg, one specifically for personnel in the higher pay grades.

The facilitators who conduct most of the employment workshops are state employees supported by DOL grants who specialize in providing services to veterans. They are either local veterans' employment representatives or disabled veterans' outreach program representatives[2] and must be trained and certified by the National Veterans' Training Institute. For the veterans' benefits component, VA generally relies on DOL to arrange for the workshops and contact a local or regional VA representative to conduct the VA briefing on veterans' benefits at the end of the workshop. Overseas and at about 70 military installations in the United States, the employment workshop facilitators are DOL contractors working for Native American Management Services, and they are also trained and certified by the institute. DOL officials we interviewed told us that they prefer to have VA personnel present information on veterans' benefits because the VA personnel usually have the expertise, experience, and most current

[1]These directors are employees of the U.S. Department of Labor who report to the Assistant Secretary for Veterans' Employment and Training.

[2]For more information about the other responsibilities of these employees, see GAO, *Veterans' Employment and Training Service: Greater Flexibility and Accountability Needed to Better Serve Veterans*, GAO-02-192T (Washington, D.C.: October 30, 2001).

information necessary to advise participants concerning their personal circumstances.

Appendix V: Employment Workshop Critique Form for Completion by Participants

TAP SEMINAR CRITIQUE FORM

Please answer the following questions as they relate to the TAP Workshop using the following scores: *1 = Poor, 2 = Fair, 3 = Acceptable, 4 = Good, 5 = Excellent*
Circle the number that most closely describes your opinion.

I would describe my...

Section 1
- Understanding of how to identify and utilize my transferable skills as 1 2 3 4 5
- Ability to utilize my personal preferences and values in transition as 1 2 3 4 5
- Ability to gather information and create a career catalog as 1 2 3 4 5

Section 2
- Understanding of how to identify and research career possibilities as 1 2 3 4 5
- Ability to evaluate my financial needs in relation to a job as 1 2 3 4 5

Section 3
- Understanding of establishing personal and professional goals as.....1 2 3 4 5
- Knowledge of how to plan an effective job search as 1 2 3 4 5
- Knowledge of how to analyze job announcements and ads as 1 2 3 4 5
- Ability to complete a job application form as 1 2 3 4 5
- Understanding of how to research potential employers as.....1 2 3 4 5
- Ability to write effective resumes and cover letters as 1 2 3 4 5
- Ability to translate my military experiences into civilian terms as 1 2 3 4 5

Section 4
- Ability to participate in an effective job interview as 1 2 3 4 5
- Knowledge of appropriate dress for an interview as.....1 2 3 4 5
- Knowledge of how to evaluate an interview as 1 2 3 4 5

Section 5
- Knowledge of how to evaluate job offers as 1 2 3 4 5
- Knowledge of how to effectively communicate my decision to employers as.....1 2 3 4 5

Course Instruction
- Instructor's knowledge of the content of the course materials as.....1 2 3 4 5
- Instructor's preparation to teach this course as.....1 2 3 4 5

General Comments

- How did you learn about the TAP Workshop?_____
- What are your overall impressions of the TAP Workshop?_____
- What would you like to see changed/added?_____

Appendix VI: Participation in Transition Assistance Program by Component, Fiscal Year, and Military Service

Military service	Fiscal year			
Air Force	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2002-2004**
Total eligible separations[a]	39,365	53,074	50,694	143,133
Preseparation counseling participants[a]	31,842	33,994	42,677	108,513
Preseparation participation rate[b]	80.9%	64.1%	84.2%	75.8%
Total eligible separations[c]	23,994	31,847	32,954	88,795
Employment workshop participants	18,725	20,449	22,611	61,785
Employment participation rate[b]	78.0%	64.2%	68.6%	69.6%
Army				
Total eligible separations[c]	73,450	62,541	80,001	215,992
Preseparation counseling participants	71,706	70,358	87,402	229,466
Preseparation participation rate[b]	97.6%	112.5%[d]	109.3%[d]	106.2%[d]
Employment workshop participants	36,441	40,238	44,109	120,788
Employment participation rate[b]	49.6%	64.3%	55.1%	55.9%
Marine Corps				
Total eligible separations[c]	31,002	29,670	31,047	91,719
Preseparation counseling participants	27,867	28,620	32,093	88,580
Preseparation participation rate[b]	89.9%	96.5%	103.4%[d]	96.6%
Employment workshop participants	19,964	27,132	28,424	75,520
Employment participation rate[b]	64.4%	91.4%	91.6%	82.3%
Navy				
Total eligible separations[c]	37,978	42,872	48,105	128,955
Preseparation counseling participants[e]	24,885	38,642	38,071	101,598
Preseparation participation rate[b]	65.5%	90.1%	79.1%	78.8%
Employment workshop participants[e]	32,647	36,680	41,003	110,330
Employment participation rate[b]	86.0%	85.6%	85.2%	85.6%

Source: GAO analysis of DOD and DOL data

[a]Numbers include Reserve and National Guard members who demobilized after at least 180 days of federal active duty. The Air Force count of preseparation counseling participants does not distinguish these members from other eligible members who participate. The Air Force TAP manager believes that a more reliable measure of participation is a December 2004 audit of 400 personnel records of members separated from various installations that shows 91percent had completed their preseparation counseling checklists.

[b]This is calculated as the percentage of total eligible separations. For the employment workshops where participation is voluntary, a better indicator would be the percentage of service members indicating an interest in attending, but these data are not available for all services and years.

[c]Number of service members separating with 180 days or more of active duty, not including Reserve and National Guard members.

[d]Rates may exceed 100 percent for several reasons. Participation in preseparation counseling is encouraged 1-2 years prior to separation, so some participants included in rate did not separate in that year; others chose to reenlist or were required to remain on active duty past their separation date because of the stop loss policy. The Army reports that in 2004 preseparation counseling participants included about 9,700 reenlistments that, if deducted from the numbers participating, would bring the Army's rate down from 109 percent to 97 percent.

[e]The Navy reports that the numbers of preseparation participants are understated because of incomplete or delayed reports from uniformed military personnel to transition staff, and that the actual numbers should more closely approximate the numbers of employment workshop participants.

Appendix VII: Changes Planned in 2005 to Checklists Used by the Armed Forces in Preseparation Counseling

Current checklist for all separating service members	Draft checklist for active duty excluding Reserve and National Guard	Draft checklist for Reserve and National Guard only
EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE		
Teacher and Teacher's Aide Opportunities/Troops to Teachers	Corrected Internet site www.proudtoserveagain.com	Same as active duty
Federal Employment Opportunities	Adds Internet sites www.us.jobs.com www.go-defense.com	Same as active duty
State Employment Agencies/America's Job Bank	Adds Internet Site www.ajb.org	Same as active duty
Not listed	Adds Career One-Stop www.careeronestop.org	Same as active duty
Not listed	Omitted, not applicable	Adds Reemployment Rights www.dol.gov/elaws/userra.htm
Not listed	Omitted, not applicable	Adds Employer Support for Guard and Reserve www.esgr.org
RELOCATION ASSISTANCE		
Permissive (TDY/TAD) and Excess Leave	No change	Omitted, not applicable
Travel and transportation allowances	No change	Omitted, not applicable
EDUCATION/TRAINING		
Education benefits (Montgomery GI Bill, Veterans Educational Assistance Program, Vietnam-era etc.)	Adds Internet site www.gibill.va.gov	Same as active duty
Additional education or training options	Adds Small Business Administration www.sba.gov	Same as active duty
Licensing and Certification information	Adds Apprenticeship to title and sites: (1) Department of Labor www.acinet.org (2) U.S. Army www.cool.army.mil (3) U.S. Military Apprenticeship Program www.cnet.navy.mil/usmap/ (4) DANTES www.dantes.doded.mil/dantesweb/certification/index.htm	Same as active duty

Current checklist for all separating service members	Draft checklist for active duty excluding Reserve and National Guard	Draft checklist for Reserve and National Guard only
Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Educational Support	Corrected Internet site www.dantes.doded.mil/	Same as active duty
HEALTH AND LIFE INSURANCE		
60-day or 120-day extended Military and limited Dental benefits (Eligible involuntary Separatees)	Transitional Health Care Benefit – for Eligibility Criteria and additional information go to www.tricare.osd.mil	Transitional Health Care Benefit – for Eligibility Criteria and additional information go to www.tricare.osd.mil
Not listed	Omitted, not applicable	(1) A member of a reserve component who is separated from active duty to which called or ordered in support of a contingency operation if the active duty is for a period of more than 30 days. (2) A member who is separated from active duty for which the member is involuntarily retained (Stop Loss) in support of a contingency operation. (3) A member who is separated from active duty served pursuant to a voluntary agreement of the member to remain on active duty for a period of less than one year in support of a contingency operation. www.tricare.osd.mil/TricareHandbook
Option to purchase 18-month conversion health insurance. Concurrent pre-existing condition coverage with purchase of conversion health insurance.	Adds Internet Site www.tricare.osd.mil/chcbp	Same as active duty
Veterans' Group Life Insurance	Adds Internet Site www.insurance.va.gov	Same as active duty
Not listed	Adds Veterans Centers www.va.gov/rcs	Same as active duty
FINANCES		
Financial Management (TSP, Retirement, SBP)	No change	Omitted, not applicable
Separation pay (Eligible involuntary Separatees)	No change	Omitted, not applicable
Not listed	Omitted, not applicable	Adds Post Deployment Pay—Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS) www.dfas.mil
RESERVE AFFILIATION	No change	Omitted, not applicable
DISABLED VETERANS' BENEFITS		
VA Disability Benefits	Adds Internet site www.va.gov	Same as active duty

Current checklist for all separating service members	Draft checklist for active duty excluding Reserve and National Guard	Draft checklist for Reserve and National Guard only
Not listed	Omitted, not applicable	Adds new section **SOLDIERS AND SAILORS RELIEF ACT** www.dod.mil/specials/Relief Act Revision
Not listed	Adds new section **POST GOVERNMENT SERVICE COUNSELING**	Omitted, not applicable

Source: GAO analysis of DOD documents.

Appendix VIII: Overseas Locations Where DOL and VA Provide TAP

Locations	DOL contractors at location as of April 2005	DOL plans to have contractors at locations in future	VA staff at locations as of April 2005	VA plans to have staff at locations in future
Belgium			X	
Iceland			X	
Spain		X[a]	X	
Azores			X	
Guam	X			
Japan	X		X	
Okinawa, Japan	X		X	
South Korea	X		X	
Germany	X		X	
Great Britain	X		X	
Italy	X[b]		X	
Bahrain		X[a]		X
Portugal		X[a]		
Turkey		X[a]		

Source: DOL and VA.

[a]DOL plans to add these additional locations, which are dependent on the result of Status of Forces Agreement negotiations.

[b]DOL's contractor in Italy has not yet scheduled any employment workshops, citing delays in ongoing Status of Forces Agreement negotiations.

Appendix IX: Comments from the Department of Defense

OFFICE OF THE UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-4000

PERSONNEL AND READINESS

MAY 9 2005

Ms. Cynthia A. Bascetta
Director
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Bascetta:

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO draft report, "MILITARY AND VETERANS' BENEFITS: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard," dated April 22, 2005 (GAO Code 130439)."

DoD appreciates the opportunity to comment on the draft report and concurs with the GAO findings and recommendations with the attached comments.

Please direct any questions to my point of contact on this matter, Mr. Gary Woods (functional) at (703) 602-4949, ext. 161 or Mr. Ronald L. Horne (alternate functional) at (703) 602-4949, ext. 115.

Sincerely,

John M. Molino
Deputy Under Secretary of Defense
(Military Community and Family Policy)

Enclosure:
Overall Comments

GAO DRAFT REPORT – DATED April 22, 2005
GAO CODE 130439/GAO-05-544

"MILITARY AND VETERANS' BENEFITS: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard"

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS

OVERALL COMMENTS:

This draft report provides a review of the Department of Defense (DoD), Department of Labor (DoL), and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) joint agency administration and implementation of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). The report accurately portrays the Transition Assistance Program across the Armed Forces and represents the operational processes utilized to provide the myriad of benefits and services prescribed by Congress.

RECOMMENDATION 1: The GAO recommended that the Secretary of Defense, in conjunction with the Departments of Labor and Veterans' Affairs, determine what demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members need to make a smooth transition and explore the logistical options for providing that assistance, such as opportunities for employment workshops before or after their demobilization and providing timely information about the need to apply for certain benefits while still on active duty. (Pages 24 and 25/GAO Draft Report)

DOD RESPONSE: DoD concurs with the above recommendation. The GAO report recognizes that there are challenges in meeting the needs of the Reserve and National Guard Service member for TAP. The GAO report also recognizes the challenges and demands of logistics, timeliness, timing, that must be addressed in order to meet the transition needs of the Guard and Reserves. Finally, the GAO reports recognizes that DoD, DoL, and VA must determine the "right content" of the four components that make up TAP that will meet the needs of Reserve and Guard Service members.

The Department is committed to work with the Departments of Labor and Veterans Affairs to determine what demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members need to make a smooth transition back into civilian life. The Department, in conjunction with DoL and VA will explore options to enhance Reserve and National Guard participation in TAP, as well as ensure that timely information about the need to apply for certain benefits while still on active duty is provided to them.

Appendix X: Comments from the Department of Labor

U.S. Department of Labor

Assistant Secretary for
Veteran's Employment and Training
Washington, D.C. 20210

MAY 10 2005

Ms. Cynthia A. Bascetta
Director, Education, Workforce and Income Security Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Bascetta:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the report "Military and Veterans Benefits". The Department of Labor Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) in general concurs with this report. VETS fully recognizes that in order to ensure continued success at providing Transition Assistance Program (TAP) workshops to separating service members, especially those in the National Guard and Armed Forces Reserves, monitoring and refinement of the existing model must be continuous. To that end VETS has undertaken several initiatives designed to improve our service to all members of the Armed Forces.

Shortly, I will sign a letter to the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Community and Family Policy to offer our assistance in determining TAP workshops requirements for members of the Armed Forces Reserves. As in the case of the National Guard, briefings on USERRA will continue.

We are very aware that reserve component units present special challenges. The three state DOL pilots identified on the report will produce lessons learned and best practices, information that will be disseminated widely. Through our Federal Directors of Veterans Employment and Training we have begun to make contact with the Adjutant General of each state to assist them in determining National Guard TAP requirements. Through our partners in the state workforce investment agencies, we are confident that we can identify and provide employment assistance to National Guard members who find themselves unemployed or underemployed as a result of their deployment. Briefings about the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) will continue as in the past.

TAP workshops are currently conducted at a number of overseas locations. These overseas workshops are provided to those service members and spouses who have been assigned to an overseas base and expect to separate from the service, either overseas, or immediately upon return to the United States. We have been very successful at this effort based on the evaluations received from workshop attendees. Our goal is to add more

overseas sites depending on the successful resolution of issues associated with the various Status of Forces Agreements.

We also recognize the necessity of continuing to improve our TAP employment workshops. To that end, VETS is undertaking a self-study program to ensure that the program remains relevant to the needs of transitioning service members and to improve its effectiveness.

The Transition Assistance Program workshops are one of the three primary missions of VETS. The men and women separating from the Armed Forces and reentering civilian society deserve our best efforts. We are proud of our success thus far. At the same time we know that improvements can be made to specific portions of our program. It is our intention to identify where those improvements can be made and implement them as soon as possible.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to comment on this report.

Sincerely,

Federico Juarbe Jr.

Appendix XI: Comments from the Department of Veterans Affairs

THE DEPUTY SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

May 13, 2005

Ms. Cynthia Bascetta
Director, Education, Workforce, and
Income Security Issues
U. S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Bascetta:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has reviewed the Government Accountability Office's (GAO) draft report, ***MILITARY AND VETERANS' BENEFITS: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard*** (GAO 05-544). VA concurs with GAO's findings and recommendation to VA. The enclosure provides comments for clarification.

VA appreciates the opportunity to comment on your draft report.

Sincerely yours,

Gordon H. Mansfield

Enclosures

Enclosure

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
COMMENTS TO
GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE (GAO) DRAFT REPORT,
MILITARY AND VETERANS' BENEFITS: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard
(GAO-05-544)

To ensure that members of the Reserve and National Guard have the opportunity to benefit from transition assistance, we recommend that DOD, in conjunction with DOL and VA, determine what demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members need to make a smooth transition and explore the logistical options for providing that assistance, such as opportunities for employment workshops before or after their demobilization and providing timely information about the need to apply for certain benefits while still on active duty. To develop more accurate program statistics, we also recommend that VA keep track of service members who attend DTAP to ensure that adequate follow-up is possible with this population, which may be in particular need of the services.

Concur – VA recognizes the need to emphasize time limits for establishing eligibility for certain VA benefits and services while still on active duty. This is especially important for Montgomery GI Bill enrollment. The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) provides information on education, medical, and other benefits and emphasizes time limits for applying for these benefits during VBA's National Guard and Reserve briefings. This information is also included in the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) briefings for Reserve and National Guard members. Information on the two-year medical care provision for combat theater veterans is also included in these briefings.

The respective reserve components are responsible for informing National Guard/Reserve members when they become eligible for the Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve Program (title 10 U. S. Code, Chapter 1606). Leadership at the reserve component determines eligibility based on Department of Defense (DoD) regulations. Once a National Guard/Reserve member becomes "eligible" and applies for benefits, VBA sends him/her a pamphlet each year containing current information. For the new Reserve Educational Assistance program (title 10, U. S. Code, Chapter 1607), the law clearly states that DoD must inform reservists in writing prior to their release from active duty that they are eligible for this new benefit. VBA is developing a Chapter 1607 brochure for returning National Guard/Reserve members that DoD will send to reservists as they are determined "eligible" for the Chapter 1607 benefit. VBA will also make this

Enclosure

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
COMMENTS TO
GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE (GAO) DRAFT REPORT,
MILITARY AND VETERANS' BENEFITS: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard
(GAO-05-544)

pamphlet available to returning National Guard/Reserve members during TAP and DTAP briefings.

VA concurs with GAO's recommendation to track DTAP attendees and to develop statistics concerning DTAP participation. VBA is currently developing a process to improve identification and tracking of DTAP participants. Specifically, the Compensation and Pension Service and the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service are developing criteria, e.g., what data elements need to be captured, the best method for capturing the data, and at what points in the process the data should be captured that will provide the most important information.

VBA is working with DoD to better coordinate VA briefings for National Guard and Reserve members who are being demobilized. Points of contact are being established at national and local levels to ensure National Guard and Reserve personnel are aware of VA benefits and services. VA and the National Guard Bureau are finalizing a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that will provide VA with timely and appropriate data regarding demobilization of National Guard units so that VBA will know where and when groups of demobilizing service members will return to their communities. VA anticipates a signing ceremony with the National Guard Bureau later this month.

In addition to the steps that VBA is taking to improve the TAP program, Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) Office of Public Health and Environmental Hazards assisted in developing a brochure that provides a summary of benefits for National Guard and Reserve personnel. Over one million copies of this brochure have been distributed to military personnel. A copy of this brochure is enclosed and may be found at the following web site address:

http://www.va.gov/environagents/docs/SVABENEFITS.pdf

Please note too, that the Joint VA/DoD Strategic Plan contains items that relate to Reserve and National Guard. Health Executive Council (HEC) Objective 2.4 states, "Develop and implement a plan to improve joint protocols and follow-up procedures to provide world-class healthcare to injured or ill service members and veterans, particularly members of the Reserve or National Guard", and

2

Enclosure

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
COMMENTS TO
GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE (GAO) DRAFT REPORT,
MILITARY AND VETERANS' BENEFITS: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard
(GAO-05-544)

Benefits Executive Council Objective 3.1 states, "Enhance collaborative efforts to educate active duty, reserve, and National Guard personnel on VA and DoD benefits programs, eligibility criteria and application processes." Plans and strategies to implement these objectives are in place and milestones are being met. For example, performance measures are currently being discussed and are in draft form. These performance measures are expected to be in place in the first quarter of FY 2006. The Seamless Transition Office has a draft plan that will specifically address access to health care for members of the National Guard and Reserves. Briefings at the unit level and at "Reunion Family Days" will be provided. Highest priority will be identifying members who are severely injured or ill and for those who will need seamless continuity of care as they transit from Military Treatment Facilities to VA.

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Appendix XII: GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Irene Chu (202) 512-7102
Patricia L. Elston (202) 512-3016

Acknowledgments

In addition to the contacts named above, William E. Hutchinson and Martin Scire made key contributions to this report. In addition, Roger Thomas provided legal assistance, William R. Chatlos assessed the reliability of participation data, and Corinna Nicolaou assisted in report development.

Related GAO Products

Military Pay: Gaps in Pay and Benefits Create Financial Hardships for Injured Army National Guard and Reserve Soldiers. GAO-05-125. Washington, D.C.: February 17, 2005.

Military Pay: Gaps in Pay and Benefits Create Financial Hardships for Injured Army National Guard and Reserve Soldiers. GAO-05-322T. Washington, D.C.: February 17, 2005.

Vocational Rehabilitation: More VA and DOD Collaboration Needed to Expedite Services for Seriously Injured Servicemembers. GAO-05-167. Washington, D.C.: January 14, 2005.

Military Personnel: DOD Needs to Address Long-term Reserve Force Availability and Related Mobilization and Demobilization Issues. GAO-04-1031. Washington, D.C.: September 15, 2004.

Military Personnel: DOD Actions Needed to Improve the Efficiency of Mobilizations for Reserve Forces. GAO-03-921. Washington, D.C.: August 21, 2003.

Military and Veterans' Benefits: Observations on the Transition Assistance Program. GAO-02-914T. Washington, D.C.: July 18, 2002.

Military Downsizing: Persons Returning to Civilian Life Need More Help from DOD. GAO/HEHS-94-39. Washington, D.C.: January 21, 1994.

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