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# MILITARY AND VETERANS' BENEFITS

## Improvements Needed in Transition Assistance Services for Reserves and National Guard

Statement of Cynthia Bascetta, Director  
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues





Highlights of GAO-05-844T, a testimony to the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives

### Why GAO Did This Study

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 service members transition to civilian life. GAO was asked to testify on its May 2005 report *Military and Veterans' Benefits: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard* (GAO-05-544) and to highlight its concerns about TAP for the Reserves and National Guard. That report (1) assessed TAP administration, including program participation, and (2) identified actions agencies are taking and challenges they face in improving TAP.

### What GAO Recommends

To ensure that members of the Reserves and National Guard have the opportunity to benefit from transition assistance, we recommended in our report that DOD, in conjunction with the DOL and VA, determine what demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members need to make a smooth transition and explore options for providing that assistance. We also recommended that VA keep track of service members who attend the Disabled TAP component to ensure that adequate follow-up is possible with this population, which may be in particular need of the services. All three agencies concurred with our findings and recommendations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-844T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-844T).

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](mailto:bascettac@gao.gov).

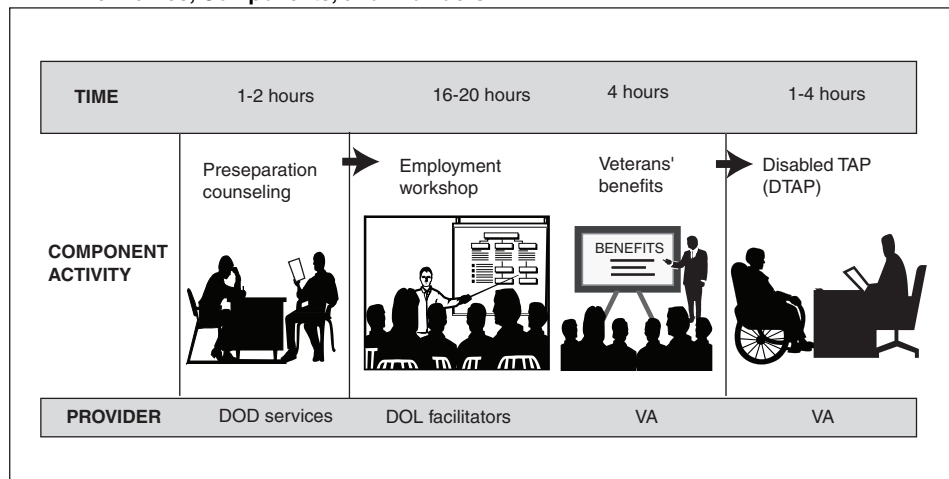
## MILITARY AND VETERANS' BENEFITS

### Improvements Needed in Transition Assistance Services for Reserves and National Guard

#### What GAO Found

Jointly administered by the Departments of Defense (DOD), Labor (DOL), and Veterans Affairs (VA), the transition assistance program (TAP) is intended to help service men and women successfully adjust to civilian life after serving in the military. Originally created in 1990, TAP is composed of four components that are coordinated through meetings of TAP managers and interagency agreements. In fiscal year 2004, about 309,000 service members were released from active duty after serving at least 180 days and were eligible for TAP, including about 38 percent who were members of the Reserves and National Guard.

**TAP Time Frames, Components, and Providers**



Source: GAO analysis.

Both the method of delivery and level of participation in the program components vary. Notably, few members of the Reserves and National Guard have time to attend most of TAP. Because they demobilize within days after returning from overseas, members of the Reserves and National Guard participate in an abbreviated version of some components and generally do not have time for any employment preparation. Participation of service members in the Disabled TAP component is unknown because VA does not track this information.

DOD, DOL, and VA have taken actions to improve TAP's content and increase participation among full-time active duty service members. However, they continue to face challenges serving Reserve and National Guard members because of their rapid demobilization. To improve program content, the agencies have updated, or plan to update, their manuals, forms, and briefing materials. To increase participation, DOL and VA provide some employment workshops and veterans' benefits briefings overseas, and DOD is considering a policy change that would mandate 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 members return home.

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our review of transition assistance for members of the armed forces, including members of the Reserves and National Guard. 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 service members successfully transition from the military back to civilian life. Originally created in 1990, the transition assistance program (TAP) has four components: (1) preseparation counseling, (2) employment workshops, (3) briefings on veteran's benefits, and (4) information for veterans with disabilities. Overall these components provide a range of information on specific services and benefits, 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 are released after at least 180 days of active duty. About 309,000 service members who left active military service met these criteria in fiscal year 2004, including about 38 percent who were Reserve and National Guard members.

As you requested, today I will discuss our recent report<sup>1</sup> on transition assistance, which (1) assesses TAP's administration, including program participation and (2) identifies actions agencies are taking and challenges they face in improving TAP. My comments highlight concerns we identified regarding how transition assistance is being provided to members of the Reserves and National Guard.

To develop the information for our report, we reviewed the legislative history of TAP, its program materials, and participation statistics. We also interviewed responsible officials from each of the three administering agencies, the armed forces, Reserve Affairs, and the National Guard Bureau.<sup>2</sup> In addition, we visited Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where many

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<sup>1</sup>GAO, *Military and Veterans' Benefits: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard*, [GAO-05-544](#) (Washington, D.C: May 20, 2005).

<sup>2</sup>As agreed, our report did not include the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees the Coast Guard, although both are part of TAP.

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Army service members are sent after serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. Our purpose was to observe TAP firsthand and talk with those who participated, including members of the Army Reserve and National Guard who were briefed during their demobilization. We also used for reference the body of prior GAO work on related issues shown at the end of this testimony. We conducted our work from December 2004 through April 2005 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

In summary, we found variations in the delivery and participation in the program components. Notably, few members of the Reserves and National Guard had time to attend most of TAP. The delivery of TAP varied in the amount of personal attention participants receive, the length of the components, and the instructional methods used. Participation also varied. For example, participation was higher for the mandated pre-separation counseling and generally lower for the employment workshops, where attendance is voluntary. In addition, while full-time active duty service members may participate in the full range of TAP services, members of the Reserves and National Guard participate in an abbreviated version of some components and generally receive no employment preparation because they are often released from active duty within days after they return from overseas. The agencies administering TAP have taken actions to improve its content and increase participation, but they continue to face challenges serving Reserve and National Guard members because of their rapid demobilization. To improve program content, the agencies have updated, or plan to update, their manuals, forms, and other briefing 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 a policy change that would mandate 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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## 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. All service members who have been on

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active duty for at least 180 days are eligible for TAP, and those separating because of disability are eligible regardless of the length of their active duty service.<sup>3</sup>

About 309,000 servicemen and women separated from the military in fiscal year 2004 with sufficient time on active duty to meet the TAP eligibility criteria.<sup>4</sup> Of these, about 192,000 were members of the full-time active duty armed forces—the Air Force, Army, Navy, or Marine Corps. The remaining 117,000 were members of the Reserves and National Guard, many of whom had been employed in civilian occupations before they were called to active duty. In recent years, more members of the Reserves and National Guard have been called to active duty and sent overseas than at any time since the Korean War. Further, 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 Reserves and National Guard members serving on active duty for a year or more on average.

Each agency administering TAP is responsible for the content and delivery of one of the program's four core components, as shown in figure 1. In the first component, DOD provides preseparation counseling, which includes a brief overview of available services and benefits. Separating service members complete a checklist during this component, certifying that they have been informed of the services available to them and identifying any subsequent services they wish to receive. 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. VA also conducts the fourth component—the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP)—which offers information and counseling, primarily on vocational rehabilitation

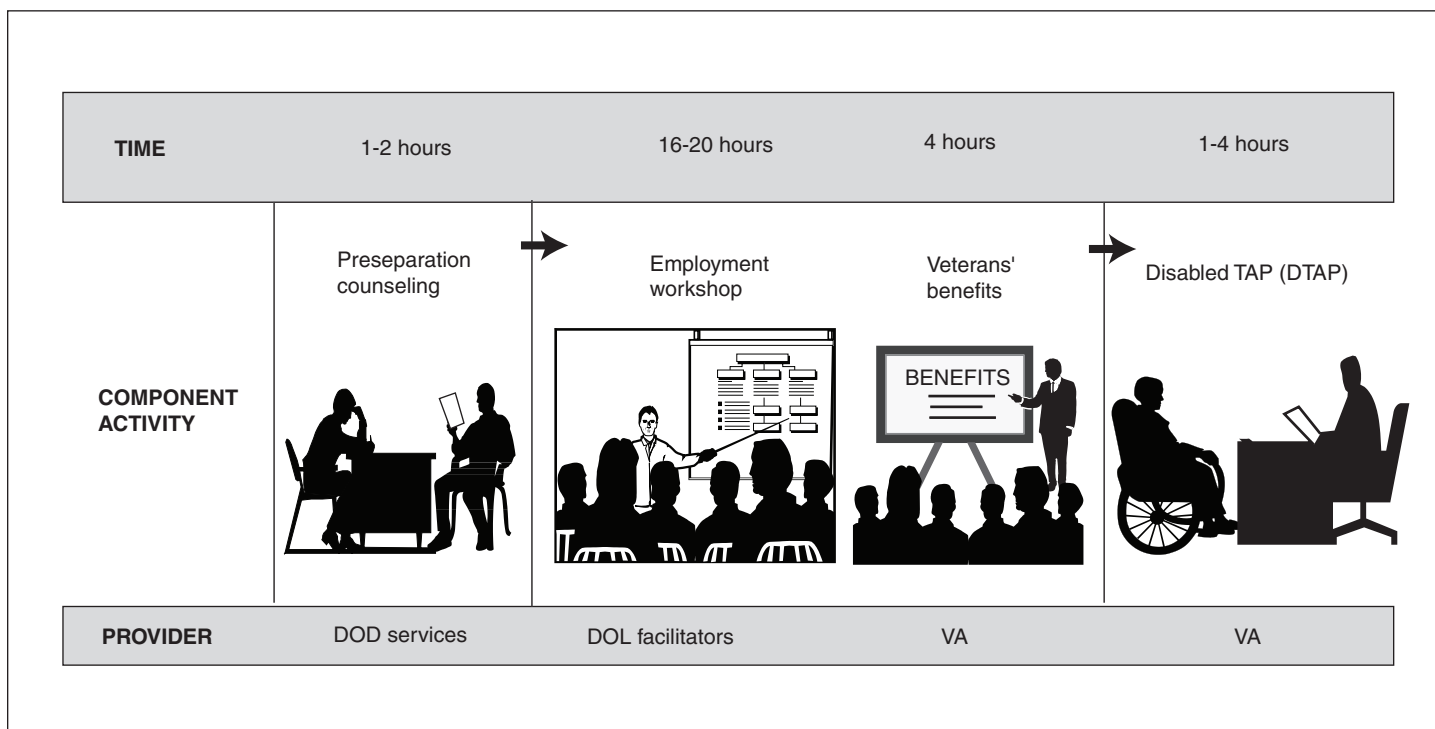
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<sup>3</sup>Eligible service members must be provided TAP while they are on active duty and receiving military pay, either as soon as possible within the 2 years prior to their anticipated retirement date or in the 1 year prior to their anticipated 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.

<sup>4</sup>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. 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.

and employment options. Service members are required to attend pre-separation counseling by law; participation in the other components is voluntary, unless DOD or the armed forces decide otherwise. For example, participation in the employment workshop has been mandatory for those separating from the Marine Corps since the policy went into effect in December 2001.

**Figure 1: TAP Time Frames, Components, and Providers**



Source: GAO analysis.

Considerable time is set aside for the employment workshops. From 22 to 30 hours are scheduled for the delivery of all TAP components, with 16 to 20 hours devoted to the employment workshop. This emphasis on preparation for civilian employment is consistent with the purpose of TAP, which was designed to serve full-time active duty service members who generally had little prior civilian employment experience and might have difficulty transferring skills acquired in the military to the civilian economy.

To facilitate interagency coordination and oversight, the administering agencies established the TAP Steering Committee. Chaired by DOL, the

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committee consists of TAP managers from each agency and each of the armed forces. These TAP managers meet quarterly to discuss issues, propose initiatives, and act as a sounding board. In addition, as required by law, an interagency agreement called a memorandum of understanding clarifies the roles and responsibilities of the agencies involved in all components of transition assistance except preseparation counseling, where DOD has sole responsibility. However, separate DOD and armed forces guidelines establish the procedures governing demobilization of Reserve and National Guard members. Further, local installation commanders rather than TAP managers control demobilization schedules.

Most benefits available to separating service members become available once they have separated and are veterans. However, service members must take specific actions while they are still on active duty to be eligible for certain benefits. Changes enacted in 2004, for example, permit Reserve and National Guard members called to active duty after September 11, 2001, to obtain a year's worth of health insurance coverage once they are released from active duty.<sup>5</sup> However, they must select coverage while on active duty and enroll within 180 days of release from active duty or forfeit their right to this benefit. Similarly, to obtain certain education benefits under the Montgomery GI Bill, members of the Reserves and National Guard must apply for these benefits while still on active duty.

Delivery of the TAP components for most participants occurs at one of the 215 transition offices located on military installations. However, Reserve and National Guard members usually transition at fewer locations, referred to as demobilization sites. Typically the demobilization process is rapid, often occurring within a matter of a few days once the service members arrive back in the United States from overseas. During demobilization, service members may be expected to participate in as many as 18 separate briefings on various topics, such as legal and medical issues, and scheduled activities, such as physical examinations.

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## TAP's Delivery and Participation Vary

The delivery of TAP varies in the amount of personal attention participants receive, the length of the components, and the instructional methods used. Preseparation counseling, for example, may take the form of individualized, one-on-one counseling sessions of an hour or more, or it

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<sup>5</sup>Service members and their families can obtain a year's worth of health insurance coverage for themselves and their families 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 once they are released from active duty.

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may take the form of group briefings, depending in part on the time available and the numbers being counseled. Group sessions are more common at large bases like those of 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. In the Navy, TAP may take place on board ships rather than at military installations. At some remote locations on land, TAP may be delivered by video or telephone due to the lack of trained personnel on-site.

Participation in TAP also varies. For example, from fiscal year 2002 through 2004, the Army had about 229,000 service members attending preseparation counseling—twice as many as any one of the other services. 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. While participation was higher for the mandated preseparation counseling, it was generally lower for the employment workshops, where attendance is voluntary. No data, however, are available regarding 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 should be about the same as the rates for the employment workshops. Regarding DTAP, no data are available to determine the number of eligible individuals, and VA's records do not distinguish the number who participate in this component from the total of all recipients of VA outreach briefings.<sup>6</sup> To develop more accurate program statistics, we recommended 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. VA responded that it is developing a system to track attendance.

Because of their circumstances, particularly their rapid 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. For example, members of the Reserves

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<sup>6</sup>In March 2004, VA released its VR&E Task Force report, *The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program for the 21st Century Veteran*, with several recommendations, including one calling for goals and measures of success to improve VA's administration of TAP and DTAP.



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and National Guard may be offered a 45-minute veterans' briefing by VA, while 3 to 4 hours of veterans' benefits briefing are provided to other military personnel. Very few members of the Reserve and National Guard are able to attend the 2 to 2 ½ days of employment workshops, although they receive preseparation counseling. The TAP managers with DOD and the military services explained that the chief problem is the lack of time during demobilization, which is often completed in 5 days. In addition, many of the service members are anxious to return home and are not interested in prolonging their stay to attend workshops. Further, many may have jobs at home that are being held for them, so they may not need to attend the employment workshop. However, employment information may be useful and relevant for those Reserve and National Guard members whose 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, while others might prefer to find better jobs than the ones they had before they went on active duty.

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

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

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## Several Actions Directed at Improving Program Content

To improve program content, the three agencies administering TAP have plans to take, or have taken, actions to update their TAP manuals, forms, and other briefing materials, including Internet sites. For example, 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, and to meet the needs of demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members, it has drafted a separate counseling checklist tailored to their circumstances.<sup>7</sup> This new

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<sup>7</sup>These new forms were approved for use on June 15, 2005.

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checklist provides benefit information applicable to demobilizing Reserve and National Guard 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 in an attempt to make the materials more relevant for Reserve and National Guard members.

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. 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. In addition, VA has developed a new curriculum with video, slides, and a script for DTAP presenters to follow. 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. Along with this new effort, VA continues its outreach campaign to contact all service members in need of these services.

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## **Actions Are Planned or Under Way to Increase Participation in TAP**

Several actions are also planned or under way to increase participation in TAP. For instance, 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. This policy change would be expected to improve program consistency, increase overall program access, and encourage commanders to release service members to attend TAP programs. In our review of TAP in 2002,<sup>8</sup> we found that 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. In addition, DOL and VA are expanding the availability of their employment workshops and veterans' benefit briefings by offering them at some overseas bases where service members that are likely to separate may access them. Further, the

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<sup>8</sup>See GAO, *Military and Veterans' Benefits: Observations on the Transition Assistance Program*, [GAO-02-914T](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 18, 2002).

TAP managers with DOD and the military services are discussing the development of a centralized database that would automate and manage information on service member participation in TAP. The new system would also provide a means to analyze information specifically relevant to active duty or to Reserve and National Guard service members.

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

Despite the actions 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. For example, 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 schedules for demobilization vary by service and demobilization site. Commanders are challenged with trying to balance demobilizing some units while at the same time mobilizing others. They also must balance getting Reserve and National Guard members back to their families as quickly as possible with the extra time needed for transition assistance. 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**

<b>Demobilizing Reserve and National Guard members</b>	<b>Full-time active duty members</b>
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.

We found that during their rapid demobilization, 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 we spoke to did not know that they needed to apply for certain benefits while still on active duty.

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To deal with the logistical challenges, the TAP managers for DOD and the military services told us that they are considering the option of providing some TAP components to Reserves and National Guard members after they have been demobilized. For instance, VA could present its benefits briefing and DTAP, where applicable, during a scheduled drill weekend, after the service members have been home for 45 to 60 days. However, the TAP managers told us they did not know how many Reserves and National Guard members might be interested and able to attend such activities. They also believed such an option would require additional resources and a directive that Reserve and National Guard commanders allow sufficient time for staff to provide the transition assistance. Meanwhile, DOL officials told us that the agency was involved in three state pilot programs that will offer a version of the employment workshops to the Reserve and National Guard after they have been released from active duty and have returned home. The pilot programs should provide DOL with a better understanding of what is needed to ensure that the employment workshops meet the needs of Reserve and National Guard members.

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. To ensure that members of the Reserves and National Guard have the opportunity to benefit from transition assistance, we recommended 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. DOD concurred with our recommendation.

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Mr. Chairman, this completes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have at this time.

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## Contact and Acknowledgments

For further information, please contact Cynthia A. Bascetta at (202) 512-7101. Also contributing to this statement were Irene Chu, Patricia L. Elston, and William E. Hutchinson.

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# Related GAO Products

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*Military and Veterans' Benefits: Enhanced Services Could Improve Transition Assistance for Reserves and National Guard.* [GAO-05-544](#). Washington, D.C.: May 20, 2005.

*DOD and VA: Systematic Data Sharing Would Help Expedite Servicemembers' Transition to VA Services.* [GAO-05-722T](#). Washington, D.C.: May 19, 2005.

*Vocational Rehabilitation: VA Has Opportunities to Improve Services, but Faces Significant Challenges.* [GAO-05-572T](#) Washington, D.C.: April 20, 2005.

*VA Disability Benefits and Health Care: Providing Certain Services to the Seriously Injured Poses Challenges.* [GAO-05-444T](#). Washington, D.C.: March 17, 2005.

*Military Pay: Gaps in Pay and Benefits Create Financial Hardships for Injured Army National Guard and Reserve Soldiers.* [GAO-05-125](#). Washington, D.C.: Feb. 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.: Feb. 17, 2005.

*Vocational Rehabilitation: More VA and DOD Collaboration Needed to Expedite Services for Seriously Injured Servicemembers.* [GAO-05-167](#). Washington, D.C.: Jan. 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.: Sept. 15, 2004.

*Military Personnel: DOD Actions Needed to Improve the Efficiency of Mobilizations for Reserve Forces.* [GAO-03-921](#). Washington, D.C.: Aug. 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.: Jan. 21, 1994.

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