

GAO

## Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Benefits, Committee on  
Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

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# MILITARY AND VETERANS' BENEFITS

## Observations on the Transition Assistance Program

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



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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting me to discuss the military's transition assistance program, which the Congress established in 1990 during a time of military downsizing to help service men and women return to civilian life. Since its inception, the program has served over one million separating and retiring military personnel and has been administered through the coordinated efforts of the Departments of Defense (DOD), Transportation (DOT), Labor (DOL), and Veterans Affairs (VA). In fiscal year 2001, the military branches and DOL spent approximately \$47.5 million to provide transition assistance to about 222,000 separating and retiring service members.

Today, I will describe the transition assistance offered by each military branch and how their transition assistance programs and services differ. I will also discuss what is known about how well program objectives, such as transitioning to civilian employment, have been met. To conduct our work, we analyzed program descriptions and administrative data from documentation provided by DOD, DOT, DOL, and VA. We also conducted structured group interviews during fieldwork at five locations, one at each military branch—the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard.<sup>1</sup> We talked to about 70 service members, including separatees and retirees as well as members expected to separate with a disability, who had participated in the transition assistance workshop. At each location, we also interviewed commanding officers, supervisors, and transition assistance program staff. While all military branches were represented, we cannot generalize from this information. In addition, we did not interview service members who did not receive transition assistance services. Finally, we reviewed existing studies of the transition assistance program. Our work was conducted from March 2002 through July 2002, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

In summary, while each branch of the military provides required pre-separation counseling and offers transition assistance workshops to help service members transition to civilian life, not all eligible service members

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<sup>1</sup> We conducted structured group interviews at Camp LeJeune, North Carolina; Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland; Fort Stewart, Georgia; Naval Air Station in Jacksonville, Florida; and U.S. Coast Guard Integrated Support Command Miami, Florida. We observed a transition assistance program workshop at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland. We also observed disabled transition assistance program workshops at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland and at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in the District of Columbia.

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receive transition assistance. Because the military branches have considerable flexibility in designing their programs to address the perceived needs of their service members, transition assistance varies in content and delivery across the military branches. For example, the Army uses contract staff and interactive job assistance tools to provide the level of employment-related assistance it believes many of its service members need. In addition, service members experience differences in access to transition assistance depending on their unique circumstances. For example, service members who receive transition assistance while stationed at remote locations often receive less extensive transition assistance than what is available at other locations. Service members we talked to liked the services they received, and several studies confirm participant satisfaction with transition assistance. However, isolating the impact of transition assistance on employment, education, and other outcomes is difficult because of data inadequacies and methodological challenges. Only two program evaluations from the early 1990s evaluated the effectiveness of transition assistance on employment and provided limited information. Moreover, they did not evaluate the impact of transition assistance on other potential goals, including recruitment and retention, which could have growing importance now that the military is no longer downsizing.

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## Background

When the Congress established the transition assistance program in 1990,<sup>2</sup> significant reductions in military force levels were expected. The law noted that many of these service personnel specialized in critical skills, such as combat arms, which would not transfer to the civilian workforce. Transition assistance, including employment and job training services, was established to help such service members make suitable educational and career choices as they readjusted to civilian life.

The law directed DOL, DOD, and VA to jointly administer the program. To do so, the agencies entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which spelled out each agency's role in the provision of services to members of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines. When the Coast Guard started to operate the transition assistance program in 1994, DOT entered into a similar agreement with VA and DOL.

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<sup>2</sup> National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991, P.L. 101-510, November 5, 1990.

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Each branch of the military is required to provide pre-separation counseling to all military personnel no later than 90 days prior to their separation from the military. Pre-separation counseling, according to the law, shall include information about education and vocational rehabilitation benefits, selective reserve options, job counseling and job search and placement information, relocation assistance services, medical and dental benefits, counseling on the effects of career change, and financial planning. The military branches are to provide space for the provision of transition services at locations with more than 500 active duty personnel. Separating service members must complete a pre-separation counseling checklist indicating that they have been informed of the services available to them and, on this checklist, they are to indicate the services they wish to receive, including if they wish to participate in the transition assistance workshop.

For locations in the United States, DOL is responsible for providing transition assistance workshops, which are generally 3-day training sessions focusing primarily on resume writing and job search strategies and includes a manual with basic information on the material covered in the workshop.<sup>3</sup> The MOU identifies specific workshop objectives, including preventing and reducing long-term unemployment, reducing unemployment compensation paid to veterans, and improving retention.

DOL spent about \$5 million in fiscal year 2001 to provide about 3,200 workshops, in addition to the funding spent on transition assistance by the military branches shown in table 1. The workshop and other transition services are to be accessible to service members two years prior to retirement and one year prior to separation.<sup>4</sup> As part of the transition assistance workshop, VA is responsible for providing information on veterans' benefits, including information on disability benefits. VA is also responsible for providing more detailed information and assistance to those service members separating or retiring due to a disability.

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<sup>3</sup> When available these seminars are facilitated by Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVER) or Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists, federally funded staff, who are part of states' employment service systems and provide direct employment services to eligible veterans. If they are unavailable, federal DOL staff or a DOL contractor facilitates the transition assistance workshop. At overseas locations, the workshops are facilitated by DOD.

<sup>4</sup> Veterans Education and Benefits Expansion Act of 2001, P.L. 107-103, Dec. 27, 2001, extended from 6 months to 1 year for separatees and from 1 year to 2 years for retirees, the time prior to separation that service members may access transition assistance.

**Table 1: Transition Assistance Funding by Military Branch, Fiscal Year 2001**

|  | <b>Army</b>      | <b>Air Force</b> | <b>Marine</b> | <b>Navy</b> | <b>Coast Guard</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|--|------------------|------------------|---------------|-------------|--------------------|--------------|
| Funding (in millions) <sup>a</sup>           |                  |                  |               |             |                    |              |
| DOD  | 13.5             | 8.9              | 4.0           | 10.3        | 0.0                | <b>36.7</b>  |
| Other  | 5.3 <sup>b</sup> | 0.0              | 0.0           | 0.0         | 0.5 <sup>c</sup>   | <b>5.8</b>   |
| <b>Total</b>                                 | <b>18.8</b>      | <b>8.9</b>       | <b>4.0</b>    | <b>10.3</b> | <b>0.5</b>         | <b>42.5</b>  |
| Transition Assistance Workshops <sup>d</sup> |                  |                  |               |             |                    |              |
| Number held                                  | 1,207            | 1,115            | 520           | 1,075       | 33                 | <b>3,950</b> |
| Length (in days)                             | 2-3              | 3                | 3-4           | 4           | 4                  | <b>N/A</b>   |
| Average class size                           | 24               | 25               | 41            | 38          | 35                 | <b>N/A</b>   |

<sup>a</sup> These amounts do not include DOL or VA funding, DOD overhead expenditures or any resources contributed by local installations.

<sup>b</sup> The Army provides funds to supplement transition assistance.

<sup>c</sup> This amount includes funds from both Coast Guard Headquarters and local Coast Guard installations.

<sup>d</sup> These numbers include both DOL facilitated and contractor facilitated workshops in the U.S. and DOD facilitated workshops overseas.

Source: DOD and DOT.

In 1996, Congress established the Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance and directed it to review programs that provide benefits and services to veterans and service members making the transition to civilian life. The Transition Commission examined pre-separation counseling and transition assistance program workshops as part of its work.<sup>5</sup>

## Transition Assistance Varies in Key Ways Across the Military Branches

Each branch of the military provides the required pre-separation counseling and offers workshops focusing on employment assistance and veterans' benefits, although not all service members participate. In addition, disabled service members are provided detailed information on benefits and services available to service members with disabilities as well as assistance in accessing these services. The military branches have considerable flexibility in designing their programs, allowing them to vary the content as well as the delivery of their programs. Moreover, the priorities of the military mission can also affect delivery and access to transition assistance.

<sup>5</sup> Report of the Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance (Washington, D.C.: 1999).

## Military Branches Provide Required Services, but Participation Varies

All military branches provide pre-separation counseling and offer transition workshops that include employment assistance and information on veterans' benefits. However, military branch data indicate that not all service members receive the required pre-separation counseling or participate in the workshops. As shown in table 2, in fiscal year 2001, 81 percent of service members received pre-separation counseling,<sup>6</sup> and 53 percent attended a transition workshop. The transition workshop participation rates for each branch ranged from 29 percent for the Coast Guard to 72 percent for the Navy. These participation rates may not be reliable because some branches' data include service members who participated but did not separate. To the extent that this is occurring, the percentages on participation are overstated.

**Table 2: Participation in Pre-Separation Counseling and Transition Assistance Workshops by Military Branch, Fiscal Year 2001**

| Participation  | Air Force        | Army          | Marines       | Navy                      | Coast Guard        | Total or Average |
|--|------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| <b>Total Separated/Retired</b>                               | <b>43,756</b>    | <b>85,190</b> | <b>31,319</b> | <b>57,452<sup>a</sup></b> | <b>4,037</b>       | <b>221,754</b>   |
| Number of pre-separation counselings                         | 39,375           | 77,146        | 27,849        | 30,508                    | N/A <sup>b</sup>   | <b>174,878</b>   |
| Percent receiving pre-separation counseling                  | 90% <sup>c</sup> | 91%           | 89%           | 53%                       | N/A <sup>b</sup>   | <b>81%</b>       |
| Number attending transition assistance workshop <sup>d</sup> | 27,815           | 28,464        | 21,397        | 41,181                    | 1,155 <sup>e</sup> | <b>120,012</b>   |
| Percent attending workshop                                   | 64%              | 33%           | 68%           | 72%                       | 29%                | <b>53%</b>       |

<sup>a</sup> According to the Navy, this total includes 8,387 service members in training who were not required to receive pre-separation counseling because they had less than 180 days of active duty.

<sup>b</sup> The Coast Guard does not have an automated system to collect these data.

<sup>c</sup> Air Force officials told us that a record audit conducted in 2000 indicated that 97 percent of its separating and retiring service members received pre-separation counseling in 1999. However, they did not provide more current audit results.

<sup>d</sup> We are not reporting participation in disabled transition assistance workshops because VA does not collect this information.

<sup>e</sup> This number represents Coast Guard service members who attended Coast Guard facilitated workshops.

Source: GAO analyses of data provided by the military branches.

In addition to pre-separation counseling and the transition assistance workshops, the military branches may provide optional services such as (1) help with resume writing, (2) career counseling, (3) training in job

<sup>6</sup> This does not include the percentage of Coast Guard service members who received pre-separation counseling.

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interview skills and strategies, (4) stress management, (5) job fairs, and (6) access to automated job listings.

Service members separating with a disability are offered more detailed information relevant to their unique needs. For these service members, VA offers detailed information on VA disability-related benefits such as disability compensation, health care and vocational rehabilitation, as well as assistance in accessing them.<sup>7</sup> These efforts are considered to be a part of the disability transition assistance program.

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### Service Members Experience Differences in Content, Delivery, and Access to Transition Services

Because the military experiences of the members in each branch are different, some branches tailor the content of transition services to better meet the needs of their service members. For example, the Army believes that many of its separating soldiers need additional employment-related assistance and more individualized attention. A large number of the Army's separating service members have held combat-related jobs, which provide skills that have limited transferability to jobs in the civilian labor market. Further, many of these soldiers are young and have little civilian work experience. Therefore, the Army supplements DOD transition assistance funds to provide additional one-on-one counseling and interactive job training and assistance.

The Coast Guard also tailors the content of its program to meet what it believes are the unique needs of its service members. According to the program manager, many separating members of the Coast Guard have unique classifications like Marine Science Technician, a job category not easily transferable to the civilian labor market. In an attempt to provide their members with transition assistance workshops that will help them find appropriate civilian employment, the Coast Guard hires contractors to facilitate its transition assistance workshops. The contractor staff is trained along with the Coast Guard's transition assistance coordinators to help service members identify their most marketable skills and communicate them in a way that will make them successful in the civilian labor market.

The military branches also have different methods of delivering both pre-separation counseling and workshops. For example, some military

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<sup>7</sup> VA compensates veterans who are disabled by injury or disease incurred or aggravated during active military service.

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branches provide pre-separation counseling in individual sessions prior to attendance at a transition workshop, while others may provide group counseling. In addition, the length of transition workshops can vary by location. While the transition assistance workshop was designed to take 3 days, the schedule of workshops for fiscal year 2002 shows the actual time ranges from 1 day to 5 days depending on the local arrangements between military installations and DOL. For example, according to the program manager, the Navy added a day to the 3-day workshop to provide more detailed information on military benefits. Further, program officials told us that at some locations different transition assistance workshops are provided to separating and retiring military members. For example, at one location we visited the separatees had a 2-day transition assistance workshop and the retirees had a 3-day workshop. Transition assistance program managers told us that workshops can be offered in a variety of settings. For example, at one location, the workshop was offered in a religious education building. At another, it was offered in space rented at a nearby hotel. At several locations we visited, class size greatly exceeded the maximum of 50, recommended in the MOU. At one location, to accommodate large numbers of service members separating with the number of workshops scheduled, the workshop had 300 participants.

Other adjustments to the delivery of transition assistance are potentially more far-reaching. For example, to create a more comprehensive approach to career planning, the Air Force is integrating transition assistance into the role of a work life consultant who works with airmen throughout their military career. This individual serves as a focal point for information on all personnel matters and helps with paperwork for anticipated separations and retirements. The Navy is providing transition assistance services earlier in a sailor's military career than the law requires to help them more easily translate their military experience into the civilian labor force when they do separate. The Navy has also broadened the mission of its transition assistance program to increase retention by providing professional career development resources throughout the service member's military career. Providing earlier services responds to comments from service members that they would benefit from beginning the transition process sooner than 90 days before separation.

The delivery of transition assistance for disabled service members appears to be more consistent across the branches. In the past, disabled service members were primarily offered separate disability transition assistance briefings supplemented by individualized assistance upon request. The current practice is generally to provide a basic discussion of disability benefits and services as part of the transition assistance workshop



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provided to all participants, supplemented by one-on-one sessions with disabled service members, upon request. However, some locations still offer a separate disability transition assistance briefing. In addition, as part of an initiative in two regions, VA provides special 3-5 day workshops focusing on the unique needs of disabled veterans seeking employment.

Service members also experience variation in access to transition assistance based on specific circumstances. Service members who are deployed, stationed in remote locations, or engaged in essential military duties may access a modified version of transition assistance services. For example, the Marines place a transition assistance specialist on some ships and give priority to those who will be separating from the military within 90 days or less. The specialist offers a condensed version of the transition assistance workshop and will meet with Marines during their free time, which could be anytime of the day or night.

Service members stationed in remote locations also received modified versions of transition assistance. For example, a significant percent of service members in the Coast Guard tend to be stationed in remote areas far from where the transition assistance workshops are offered. To address their needs for transition assistance, the Coast Guard sends a videotape accompanied by the DOL workbook. The videotape presents general information on how to conduct a job search and the workbook covers the topics offered in the transition assistance workshops. The Army also mails materials to soldiers in remote locations and follows up with distance counseling by telephone, fax, or e-mail. In addition, the Army will send transition assistance specialists periodically to remote sites with small populations of soldiers.

Even when service members are in locations where a range of transition services can be offered on site, military mission and the support that supervisors have for transition services may determine the degree to which they have access to the services. Because the military mission is always the top priority, it can be difficult for service members to be released from military duties to receive services. Service members, supervisors, commanders, and transition assistance program staff at the locations we visited told us that because of mission-related work priorities, service members may receive transition assistance later than is optimal. Several service members told us that they had to delay attending

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the transition workshop because of their military duties, thereby limiting their ability to utilize other transition services.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, 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. In 1994, we reported that lack of support from military commanders was one of the most frequently cited reasons for not using transition assistance.<sup>9</sup> In response, the Secretary of Defense issued a memorandum to the secretaries of the military departments and other key DOD officials underscoring the need for commander support of transition assistance for all service members. The Marines recently made participation in a transition assistance workshop a mandatory activity for all Marines because they recognized that service members were having difficulty being released from their military duties to attend the workshops. The Transition Commission noted that starting transition assistance earlier could provide commanders more flexibility to meet mission needs, because many service members are deployed during the last 6 months of their active duty. Reducing potential mission conflicts in this way could help increase commander support of the program, thereby resulting in increased participation.

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## Studies Provide Limited Information on the Effectiveness of the Transition Assistance Program

Several studies confirm participant satisfaction with transition assistance, but limited information is available about the overall effectiveness of the transition assistance program. Evaluating the effectiveness of these services is complicated by data inadequacies and methodological difficulties. For example, most of the data currently available are collected for purposes of program monitoring and are not comparable across the branches. Also, following up with service members who have separated is challenging. Moreover, the changing nature of transition assistance could result in a shift in emphasis on different goals, including recruitment and retention, in addition to civilian employment.

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<sup>8</sup> Although they are allowed to access these services after separation, many members return to areas that do not have these services.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *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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## Studies Indicate Participant Satisfaction with Services, but Less Is Known about Effectiveness

In 1994, we reported that service members and spouses we surveyed found seminars and employment assistance centers were beneficial in readjusting to civilian life. They said that they learned about individualized job search techniques and other benefits available to them. They also reported that their confidence had increased as a result of receiving these services, especially in the areas of resume preparation and job search and interview techniques.

During our interviews, service members told us that the transition assistance workshop either met or exceeded their expectations. Many service members told us that they thought the resume preparation and job search and interview techniques would be the most helpful in their transition. However, some felt that the workshop was not long enough for them to complete preparing their resumes and develop their job interviewing skills. Several service members told us that they had pursued or planned to pursue additional job-related transition assistance offered at their locations. Some service members also found other transition assistance informative, such as financial planning, stress management, and VA benefit information. Service members told us, however, that earlier access to this assistance would enable them to better utilize it and smaller class sizes would allow them adequate time for questions and answers.

In 1999, DOL sponsored a study to assess the attitudes and opinions of participants in the transition assistance workshop.<sup>10</sup> Twenty-one focus groups of persons who had attended a transition assistance workshop in the prior month were asked about the structure and content of the workshops and the extent to which they felt their participation helped prepare them to find civilian employment. Participants generally agreed that the services they received contributed to their knowledge and confidence about transitioning to civilian life. Many participants felt that attendance in the workshop should be mandatory and that receiving the service earlier in an individual's military career would be beneficial.

While participants generally appear to find assistance helpful, much less is known about the ultimate impact of transition services on employment or other outcomes, such as education and retention. Two studies conducted about 10 years ago found limited impact of transition assistance on employment. An early DOL evaluation required by the Congress assessed

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<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Labor/Veterans' Employment and Training, *TAP Focus Group Evaluation Final Report* (Washington, D.C.: 2000).

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the impact of the pilot transition assistance program on service members who transitioned to civilian life in 1992.<sup>11</sup> This study compared a sample of those who had attended a transition assistance workshop with those who had not to analyze whether transition assistance had any effect on post military job search and employment. Although both groups were found to have similar aspirations for jobs, careers and salaries, the results indicated little difference between the employability of those who had taken the workshop and those who had not. However, the study noted that service members who received transition assistance found jobs 3 to 7 weeks earlier than those who had not.

The Army sponsored an evaluation of its Job Assistance Centers to determine whether services provided at these centers affect soldiers' employment outcomes.<sup>12</sup> A group of ex-service members who separated between October 1, 1992, and September 30, 1993 were interviewed to determine whether the job assistance services they received affected their post-transition earnings, receipt of unemployment compensation, and ratings of preparedness for the job market. The study reported that individuals who said they had received more job search assistance services, and those who indicated a greater degree of satisfaction with the services, were more likely to feel prepared for the civilian labor market and were also more likely to have some increase in earnings. However, because this study did not verify the self reported information, the conclusions cannot be validated.

Currently at least two branches of the military, the Army and Navy, track the amount of unemployment compensation paid to separating service members as an indicator of program effectiveness. For example, the Army reports that the amount of unemployment compensation benefits paid to soldiers separating in fiscal year 2001 was about half that paid out in fiscal year 1994. However, Army officials concede that it would be difficult to attribute these changes to transition assistance services alone.

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<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Labor/Veterans' Employment and Training, *Transition Assistance Program: Phase III Impact Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Human Resources Research Organization/U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, *Final Report: Outcome Evaluation of the Army Career and Alumni Program's Job Assistance Centers* (Alexandria, Va.: 1995).

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## Evaluating Effectiveness of Transition Assistance is Challenging

Several factors complicate evaluating the effectiveness of human resource interventions, including the transition assistance program. First, achieving consensus on program goals is necessary to develop measurement and data collection strategies. Second, service branch data on what specific assistance service members received is necessary to compare the effects of different interventions. Third, following up periodically after separation with those who received services as well as those who did not is necessary to try to isolate the impact of transition assistance.

Assessing overall effectiveness of the transition assistance program would require agreement on what the program is trying to accomplish. When first piloted, the objectives of the program included helping the military meet its personnel needs as well as helping separating service members meet their needs. However, since that time, the goals have expanded as a result of changing military needs and service member expectations. When the program was fully implemented, it dropped the retention goal and focused on providing transition assistance, coinciding with the downsizing of the military. During this time, the program focused on employment-related transition assistance. The Transition Commission noted that transition assistance needs to continually evolve to remain capable of bridging the ever-changing military and civilian environments.

Service members also seek assistance with furthering their education or obtaining vocational rehabilitation in addition to employment-related transition assistance. For example, some service members enlisted with the specific intention of returning to school at the completion of their military service rather than working right away. Moreover, the military's personnel needs have changed from downsizing to recruiting and retaining service members. The Transition Commission reported, for example, that retention was positively affected by transition assistance because it offers a realistic view of civilian job market prospects. This may lead some service members to conclude that they need more preparation to reenter the civilian workforce and to postpone separation to gain additional skills, education, or income.

Data limitations also make transition assistance program evaluations difficult. There is limited data on the services individual service members actually receive and virtually no data collected on how they fare after leaving the military. DOL is required to collect participant data for the transition assistance workshops it provides, and although not required, the military branches collect data to monitor program participation. However, these data are often not comparable, and service members may also obtain military branch-sponsored assistance at locations where they are

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stationed. In addition, service members may obtain assistance from VA or community sources that might not be documented in DOL's or the military branches' records. This makes valid comparisons across branches very complicated.

Finally, following up periodically with individuals once they leave the military to assess how they are faring in civilian life is difficult. In its 1995 study of the transition assistance program, DOL reported the difficulty it experienced trying to follow up with separated service members. Officials we interviewed told us about similar experiences. For example, one transition assistance workshop facilitator told us that he was able to follow up with only about 20 percent of workshop participants. The Transition Commission noted that DOD, VA, and DOL each have separate data collection systems with their own information that could help determine the usefulness of transition assistance, but little has been accomplished to coordinate information requirements between the departments. Collecting the data necessary to track long-term usage and outcomes would help better position the departments to assess the value of transition assistance as well as determine ways to improve it.

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions that you or the other subcommittee members might have.

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## Contact and Acknowledgments

For further information regarding this testimony, please contact me at (202) 512-7101 or Shelia Drake at (202) 512-7172. Margaret Boeckmann, William R. Chatlos, Corinna Nicolaou, Linda Stokes, and Paul Wright also contributed to this statement.