



## Testimony

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

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# SERVICEMEMBERS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE

## DOD Could Enhance the Transition Assistance Program by Better Leveraging Performance Information

Statement of Dawn G. Locke, Director, Strategic Issues

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-106793](#), testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

More than half a million servicemembers are expected to participate in TAP over the next few years. TAP is a mandatory program designed to assist separating servicemembers who may face challenges in choosing a career path, finding employment, or deciding which college to attend. The program was recently tailored to meet individual servicemember needs by assigning them to counseling pathways based on how prepared they are to transition back to civilian life.

This testimony summarizes GAO's [December 2022](#) report on the TAP program, including GAO's findings on the implementation of TAP counseling pathways and transitioning servicemembers' participation in these pathways.

For that report, GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, policies, and agency documents and interviewed officials from relevant federal agencies, service branches, and five installations. The installations were selected for diversity in numbers served, location, and service branch. In addition, GAO analyzed the most recent available TAP data, and determined they were sufficiently reliable for active-duty members of the DOD service branches but not DOD reserve component or Coast Guard servicemembers.

## What GAO Recommends

In its December 2022 report, GAO made eight recommendations—that the service branches and DOD TAP policy office more fully leverage the performance information they collect to develop and implement plans to improve: (1) 2-day class attendance and (2) TAP timeliness. DOD agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-23-106793](#). For more information, contact Dawn G. Locke at (202) 512-7215 or [locked@gao.gov](mailto:locked@gao.gov).

May 17, 2023

# SERVICEMEMBERS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE

## DOD Could Enhance the Transition Assistance Program by Better Leveraging Performance Information

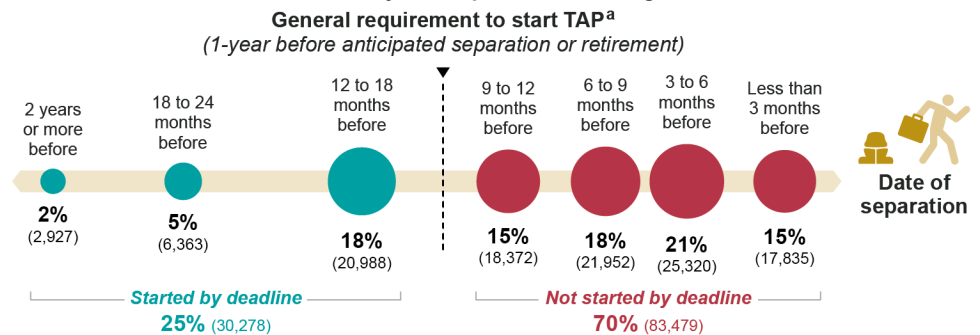
### What GAO Found

To improve the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), federal law required the service branches to establish counseling pathways, among other actions. GAO found that DOD service branches had fully implemented the TAP counseling pathways. These pathways include a self-assessment, individualized initial counseling, tier assignment that reflects servicemembers' transition preparedness, and a revised core curriculum. Service branch officials, TAP staff, and servicemembers GAO interviewed from selected installations generally expressed positive feedback on the TAP counseling pathways.

Over 90 percent of transitioning servicemembers participated in the TAP counseling pathways, according to GAO's analysis of TAP data from April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022. Although participation increased in 2-day tailored classes on issues like higher education or vocational training, the service branches waived many servicemembers from attending them. Per service branch policies, servicemembers who need maximum transition support must attend a 2-day class, but GAO found that nearly a quarter of them did not. GAO also found that most servicemembers (70 percent) did not start TAP at least 1 year in advance, as generally required.

The service branches and the TAP policy office collect and review performance information on 2-day class attendance and timeliness. However, they do not fully leverage this information to understand and improve results, inconsistent with leading practices for using performance information. For example, DOD does not use data it collects on servicemembers who start TAP less than 1 year in advance, including why they started late. Better understanding root causes would help DOD officials to craft and implement effective corrective action plans and improve servicemembers' ability to benefit from the full range of transition resources available to them.

### Time Frames for Starting the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for DOD Active-Duty Servicemembers Who Left the Military from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | [GAO-23-106793](#)

Note: For the remaining servicemembers, the timing of when the servicemember started TAP was unknown due to missing data or not applicable because the servicemember separated under short notice. The 1-year time frame does not apply when servicemembers face an unanticipated separation or retirement. Therefore, in some cases the requirement may have been met although the servicemember started TAP less than 1 year before separation or retirement.

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Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our work on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). More than 500,000 transitioning servicemembers are expected to participate in TAP over the next few years. TAP is a mandatory program designed to help transitioning servicemembers access veteran benefits and develop post-transition plans and goals, such as choosing a career path, finding employment, starting a business, or deciding which college or vocational school to attend.<sup>1</sup> In fiscal year 2021, the Department of Defense (DOD) and its interagency partners collectively reported obligating over \$160 million to implement the program.

The John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (FY 2019 NDAA) included various provisions to improve TAP.<sup>2</sup> Among other things, the new provisions required all transitioning servicemembers eligible for TAP to meet with a TAP counselor to complete a self-assessment, and to attend revised core TAP classes as well as tailored 2-day classes aligned with the servicemembers' post-transition goals.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the FY 2019 NDAA required the service branches to establish counseling pathways, which the service branches have done by assigning servicemembers to one of three tiers depending on how prepared they are to transition and how much transition support they need.<sup>4</sup> We use the phrase "TAP counseling pathways" to refer to the key program elements that were changed by the FY 2019 NDAA.<sup>5</sup>

My statement summarizes the findings from our December 2022 report, which addresses: (1) implementation of the TAP counseling pathways by

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<sup>1</sup>Under 10 U.S.C. § 1144, the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of Homeland Security shall require the participation of servicemembers who are being separated from active duty, with limited exceptions.

<sup>2</sup>Pub. L. No. 115-232, div. A, tit. V, § 552, 132 Stat. 1636, 1769-72 (2018).

<sup>3</sup>In general, to be eligible for TAP, servicemembers must have served 180 or more continuous days on active duty.

<sup>4</sup>Servicemembers deemed fully prepared to transition are assigned to tier 1. Those deemed moderately prepared to transition are assigned to tier 2. Finally, servicemembers deemed not fully prepared to transition are assigned to tier 3.

<sup>5</sup>FY 2019 NDAA also included a provision for GAO to review the status of the TAP counseling pathways.

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service branches and selected installations; (2) the extent to which transitioning servicemembers participated in the TAP counseling pathways; and (3) DOD and its interagency partners' efforts to measure performance and assess the effectiveness of TAP counseling pathways.<sup>6</sup>

This statement is based on our December 2022 report on the TAP counseling pathways established by the service branches in response to FY 2019 NDAA requirements. Our report made eight recommendations to the DOD service branches and TAP policy office. DOD agreed with all eight recommendations.

For our December 2022 report, we reviewed relevant federal laws, policies, and agency documents and interviewed officials from relevant federal agencies, service branches, and five installations. We selected the installations for diversity in numbers served, location, and service branch. In addition, we analyzed TAP data on eligible servicemembers who left military service between April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022, the most recent period for which data were available at the time of our review. GAO determined these data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our review for active-duty members of the DOD service branches but not DOD reserve component or Coast Guard servicemembers. A more detailed explanation of our methodology is available in our December 2022 report. The work upon which this statement is based was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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## Implementation of TAP Counseling Pathways

All of the key components of the TAP counseling pathways, including the self-assessment, individualized initial counseling, and assignment of servicemembers to a tier (tier placement), have been fully implemented by the DOD service branches. The Coast Guard has partially implemented key components of the TAP counseling pathways. According to officials, the Coast Guard aims to have TAP pathways fully implemented by the end of 2023.

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<sup>6</sup>GAO, *Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Can Better Leverage Performance Information to Improve Participation in Counseling Pathways*, [GAO-23-104538](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 12, 2022).

**Table 1: Extent to Which the Service Branches Have Implemented TAP Counseling Pathways, as of November 2022**

Pathway component	Service branches				
	Air Force	Army	Coast Guard	Marine Corps	Navy
Individualized initial counseling (including a self-assessment and tier placement)	●	●	◐	●	●
Revised core TAP classes	●	●	◐	●	●
Tailored 2-day TAP classes	●	●	◐	●	●

● = Fully implemented ◐ = Partially Implemented

Source: GAO analysis of service branch Transition Assistance Program (TAP) policies and interviews with Department of Defense (DOD) officials. | GAO-23-106793

Note: We define fully implemented as having met two criteria: (1) a policy had been established to guide implementation, and (2) that policy had been communicated to the local installations and was typically being followed. Partially implemented means that a policy was in place but had not yet been communicated to installations and incorporated into their TAP operations.

Service branch officials, installation staff, and servicemembers we interviewed for our December 2022 report generally expressed positive feedback about the TAP counseling pathways and said the pathways have improved the TAP program overall. For example, officials from each service branch said the addition of individualized initial counseling and tier-based placement have allowed them to tailor TAP delivery to better meet servicemembers’ needs.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, TAP managers and counselors at the five selected installations said they appreciated the individualized approach to transitioning over a “one-size-fits-all” approach and supported the time frames for starting TAP. In addition, more than half of the servicemembers (18 out of 34) we interviewed representing the various tiers said their experiences with TAP had been positive.

## TAP Participation

### Counseling Pathways and Core Curriculum

More than 90 percent of DOD active-duty transitioning servicemembers participated in the TAP counseling pathways, according to our December 2022 analysis of DOD data. Specifically, they completed their self-assessment, participated in individualized initial counseling, and were assigned to a tier based on their level of preparedness for transition. They also attended TAP’s core curriculum classes: DOD Transition Day,

<sup>7</sup>Among TAP-eligible servicemembers who left military service between April 1, 2021 and March 31, 2022, the highest proportion (41 percent) were deemed to require maximum transition support and therefore assigned to tier 3.

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Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Benefits and Services, and the Department of Labor (DOL) Employment Fundamentals class.

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## Tailored 2-Day Classes

Attendance in tailored 2-day classes increased since the FY 2019 NDAA made servicemembers' participation in one of these classes mandatory, unless waived. Specifically, the percentage of transitioning servicemembers who attended at least one of the 2-day classes on employment, higher education, vocational training, or entrepreneurship increased from 14 percent in fiscal year 2016 to 56 percent for the year from April 2021 through March 2022.

While 2-day class attendance is now generally mandatory, the Secretary of Defense or Homeland Security, as appropriate, may waive participation for certain servicemembers.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, the 2-day class requirement can be waived for "groups or classifications" of servicemembers if there is "extraordinarily high reason" to believe they are unlikely to face major challenges with readjustment, health care, employment, or other areas as they transition to civilian life.<sup>9</sup> DOD policy allows the Secretaries of the military departments to determine when waivers are appropriate, and service branches' TAP policies specify which groups of servicemembers are required to attend the 2-day classes.

Under the service branches' TAP policies, tier 1 servicemembers, who are considered fully prepared for transition, are not required to attend tailored 2-day classes, though they may opt to do so. In contrast, the branches' policies require all tier 3 servicemembers to attend a 2-day class. However, service branch policies vary for tier 2 servicemembers. For example, tier 2 servicemembers are not required to attend a 2-day class under Air Force and Navy policy, while participation is decided on an individual basis under Army and Marine Corps policy.

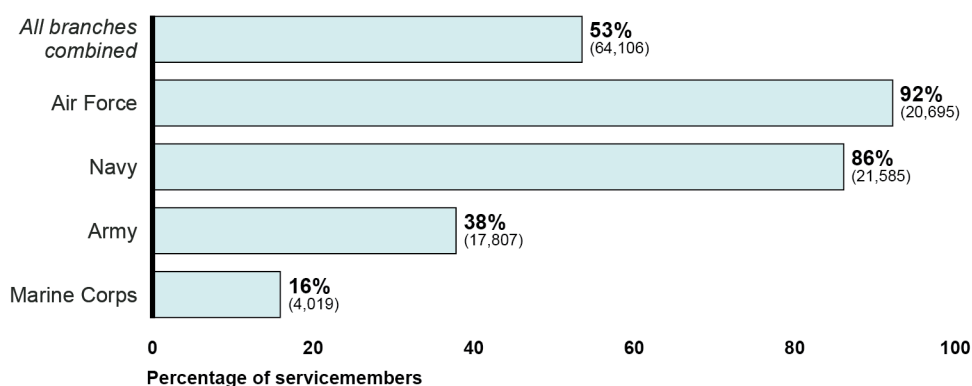
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<sup>8</sup>Under 10 U.S.C. § 1144(c)(2), program participation can be waived by the Secretary of Defense or Secretary of Homeland Security. Per DOD policy, the Secretaries of the military departments have the "delegated authority and flexibility to determine if a participation waiver is appropriate to exempt, as prescribed in Section 1144(c)(2) of Title 10, U.S.C., a servicemember from attending the 'two days of instruction' prescribed in Section 1144(F)(D) of Title 10, U.S.C. (DODI 1332.35)."

<sup>9</sup>10 U.S.C. § 1144(c)(2)(A). Participation may also be waived for "individual members possessing specialized skills who, due to unavoidable circumstances, are needed to support a unit's imminent deployment." 10 U.S.C. § 1144(c)(2)(B).

Our December 2022 analysis of DOD data and service branch policies shows that service branches waived attendance in a tailored 2-day class for 53 percent (64,106) of servicemembers who left military service from April 2021 through March 2022 (see fig. 1).<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 1: Extent to Which the Service Branches Waived the 2-Day Class Attendance Requirement, for DOD Active-Duty Servicemembers Who Left the Military from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-23-106793

Note: In accordance with the service branches' Transition Assistance Program (TAP) policies, we counted tier 1 servicemembers as waived and tier 3 servicemembers as not waived from attending 2-day classes. We also counted tier 2 servicemembers from the Air Force and Navy as waived, per those service branches' TAP policies. Because tier 2 servicemembers in the Marines Corps and Army may be required to attend 2-day classes, we counted those branches' tier 2 servicemembers as not waived unless a waiver was documented in DOD's TAP data system.

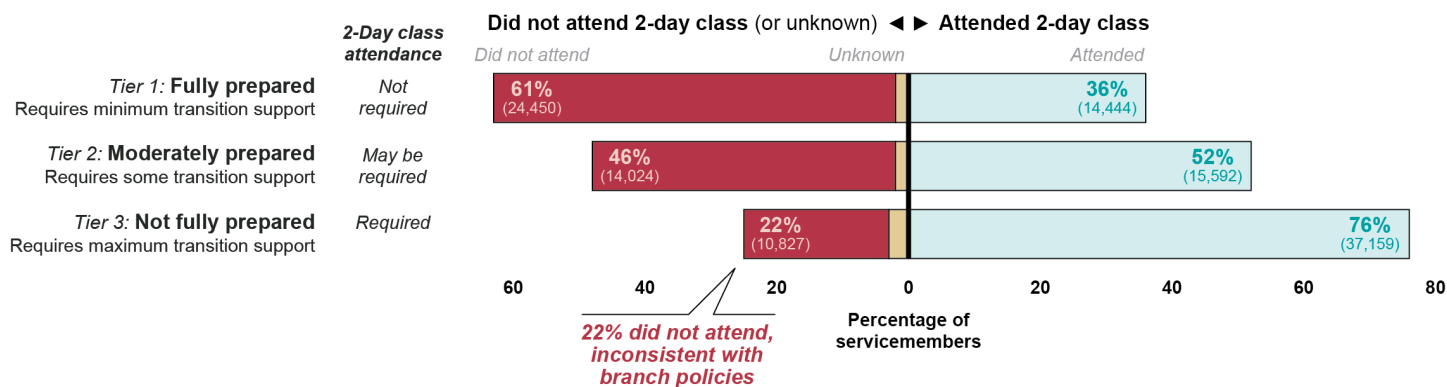
TAP staff we interviewed at two installations expressed concern that 2-day class attendance was waived for too many servicemembers, which could undermine their successful transition. For example, one TAP manager said that almost all servicemembers need more than the 3-day TAP core curriculum to prepare sufficiently for their transition.

Service branch TAP policies stipulate that all tier 3 servicemembers—those deemed to require maximum transition support—must attend at least one 2-day class, but we found nearly 11,000 (22 percent) did not (see fig. 2). Transitioning servicemembers eligible for TAP may still elect

<sup>10</sup>We considered servicemembers' attendance in a 2-day class to have been waived by the Secretary of their military department if: (1) a waiver was documented on the servicemember's eForm or (2) the servicemember was assigned to a tier for which 2-day class attendance is not required under their service branch's policy.

to attend a 2-day class, even if their service branch waived the attendance requirement for their tier, according to a TAP policy official.

**Figure 2: 2-Day Class Attendance by Tier, for DOD Active-Duty Servicemembers Who Left Military Service from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-23-106793

Note: We considered 2-day class attendance unknown for servicemembers whose eForm (which documents Transition Assistance Program participation data) had not been signed.

Service branch officials cited the following reasons why some tier 3 servicemembers may not have attended a 2-day class as required: the servicemember refused to attend or was unable to attend because of hospitalization; the servicemember was undergoing a medical discharge; the servicemember was deployed immediately before leaving military service; the pandemic affected operations; and levels of command support varied. Our discussions with TAP staff at selected installations also indicated that a lack of command support may be a factor. Specifically, TAP managers and counselors at three of the five installations said that although commanders are responsible for ensuring that transitioning servicemembers under their command complete TAP requirements, commanders generally do not face consequences if requirements are not met, including 2-day class attendance.

Service branch and DOD TAP policy officials have taken steps to monitor 2-day class attendance. They collect performance information; conduct inspections; and review compliance reports, as available. Nonetheless, in our December 2022 report, we found they had not fully leveraged available data to understand and improve results, inconsistent with leading practices for using performance information and with priorities set by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to increase federal



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agencies' use of data to inform their decision-making.<sup>11</sup> DOD's TAP data include information on servicemembers' characteristics, such as their years of service, rank, and the unit and installation to which they are assigned. However, DOD officials have not analyzed the data to determine whether tier 3 servicemembers who do not attend a 2-day class share common characteristics. Such analyses could help DOD officials better understand which tier 3 servicemembers are at greatest risk of not attending a 2-day class.

More fully leveraging available information would better position service branch officials to develop tailored and effective corrective action plans, and to hold entities accountable for implementing such plans, as appropriate. This could help DOD more effectively ensure that those servicemembers most at risk of struggling during their transition to civilian life attend a 2-day class and achieve their post-transition goals. In December 2022, we recommended that each of the service branches, in concert with the TAP policy office, should better leverage TAP performance information on 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate, particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support. DOD agreed with our recommendations and each service branch identified planned steps and time frames for implementation.

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**Timing of TAP participation** Servicemembers must generally start TAP at least 1 year before they are expected to leave military service.<sup>12</sup> This did not occur for the majority of transitioning servicemembers. In our December 2022 report, our data analysis showed that from April 2021 through March 2022, 25 percent of active-duty DOD servicemembers started TAP on time while 70 percent started TAP less than 1 year before their anticipated separation or

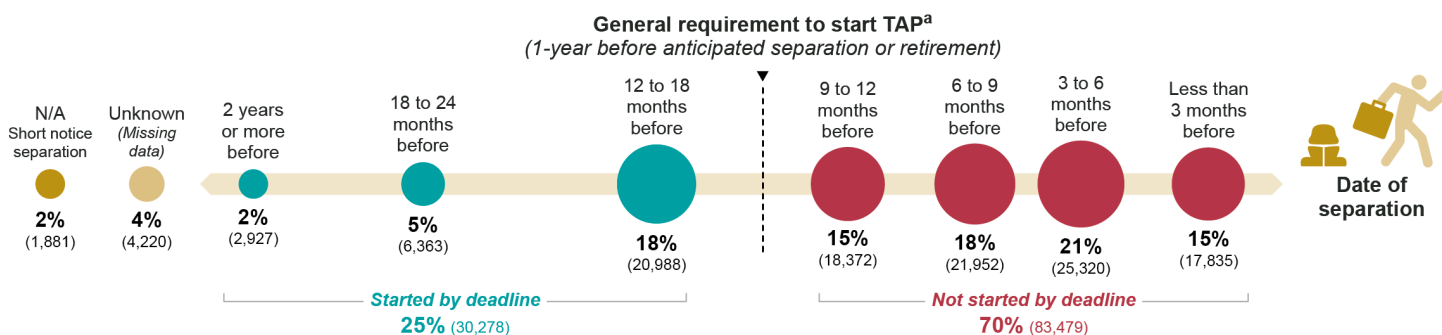
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<sup>11</sup>GAO has reported that performance information can help decision makers understand and improve results at federal agencies. See GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Survey Results Suggest Increased Use of Performance Information across the Federal Government*, [GAO-22-103910](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 3, 2021). In that report, GAO identified various actions the Executive Branch had taken that were intended to improve agencies' use of performance information and other evidence in decision making. For additional information on leading practices for using performance information, see *Managing for Results: Enhancing Agency Use of Performance Information for Management Decision Making*, [GAO-05-927](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2005).

<sup>12</sup>Servicemembers facing an unanticipated separation or retirement are to begin TAP as soon as possible within the remaining period of service, according to DOD TAP policy.

retirement date (see fig. 3).<sup>13</sup> However, the latter group may include some servicemembers not required to meet the 1-year requirement, such as those undergoing unanticipated separations with less than 1 year of service remaining.

**Figure 3: Time Frames for Starting the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), for DOD Active-Duty Servicemembers Who Left the Military from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-23-106793

Note: The 1-year time frame does not apply when servicemembers face an unanticipated separation or retirement or, for reserve component members, when demobilization operations make the time frame unfeasible. Therefore, in some cases the requirement may have been met although the servicemember started TAP less than 1 year before separation or retirement. We classified time frames for starting TAP as unknown for servicemembers with unsigned eForms (which document TAP participation data), with anticipated separation dates that preceded their individualized initial counseling dates, or for whom the individualized initial counseling or anticipated separation dates were missing. Because we found the data for DOD reserve component servicemembers unreliable, this figure does not include those groups. The percentages shown for N/A and unknown do not add to 5 percent due to rounding.

<sup>a</sup>Servicemembers start TAP by attending individualized initial counseling.

Servicemembers who start TAP less than 1 year before separating may face challenges with their transition to civilian life, according to TAP staff we interviewed at the five selected installations for our December 2022 report. For example, TAP staff at one installation said that servicemembers who start TAP late often cannot take advantage of

<sup>13</sup>For the remaining servicemembers, the timing of when the servicemember started TAP was unknown due to missing data (4 percent) or not applicable because the servicemember separated under short notice (2 percent). The percentages for those two categories do not add to 5 percent due to rounding. To analyze how far in advance servicemembers started TAP, we compared the date servicemembers attended individualized initial counseling to their anticipated separation or retirement date as recorded in DOD's TAP data system. GAO's analysis should not be used to draw conclusions about the service branches' legal compliance.

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additional transition resources they learn about in class. One such resource is DOD's SkillBridge program that provides on-the-job training opportunities with civilian employers during the last 6 months of military service. Servicemembers who start TAP late may also miss the chance to apply for disability benefits and obtain a disability rating before leaving military service, according to TAP officials at 3 of 5 selected installations.<sup>14</sup>

TAP policy officials said the requirement to begin TAP no later than 1 year before their anticipated separation or retirement requires a significant culture change. Service branch officials cited various factors that delay start dates for TAP, including unit mission requirements, unit deployments, servicemembers' uncertainty about their futures, and lack of awareness of TAP's requirements among both servicemembers and commanders. In addition, TAP staff we interviewed at all five installations said timely participation can be challenging when support from servicemembers' immediate command or front-line supervisor is lacking. TAP officials at 2 of the 5 installations suggested additional accountability could help to ensure that servicemembers can start TAP on time.

In December 2022, we also found that a relatively low percentage of servicemembers are completing the pre-separation counseling briefing at least 1 year in advance, as generally required. Although pre-separation counseling should occur after individualized initial counseling, DOD TAP policy specifies the same deadline for both events—1 year before an anticipated separation or retirement.<sup>15</sup> Our analysis of DOD data from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022 showed that 11 percent of servicemembers completed pre-separation counseling at least 1 year in advance and that 82 percent did not.<sup>16</sup> However, the latter figure may

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<sup>14</sup>Qualifying veterans may be eligible for disability benefit payments for service-connected disabilities. 38 U.S.C. § 1101 et seq.

<sup>15</sup>Servicemembers with unanticipated separations or retirements or, for reserve component members, when demobilization operations make time frames unfeasible, should begin TAP as soon as possible within their remaining period of service.

<sup>16</sup>The extent to which pre-separation counseling occurred at least 1 year before servicemembers were expected to leave military service was unknown for 6 percent of servicemembers due to missing data. Moreover, the 1-year requirement was not applicable for the 1 percent of servicemembers who were identified as separating on short-notice. GAO's analysis should not be used to draw conclusions about the service branches legal compliance.

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include servicemembers with unanticipated separations or retirements, to whom the 1-year requirement does not apply.

The service branches and TAP policy office collect and review performance information on the timing of initial and pre-separation counseling, including reasons for the timing. However, they do not fully leverage this information to understand and improve results, inconsistent with leading practices for using performance information and with priorities set by OMB to increase federal agencies' use of data to inform their decision-making.<sup>17</sup> These practices call for agencies to leverage performance information to improve results.

DOD collects information that could help officials understand why certain servicemembers start TAP late and leverage this information to improve performance. For example, DOD collects data on the reason certain servicemembers attended pre-separation counseling less than 1 year before their anticipated separation or retirement date but has not systematically analyzed these data, according to DOD TAP policy officials we interviewed for our December 2022 report.

Analyzing these data could help DOD officials better understand the root causes underlying timeliness performance metrics, which would better position the service branches to develop and implement effective corrective action plans. This, in turn, could improve servicemembers' ability to benefit from the full range of transition resources available to them before separating or retiring from the military. In December 2022, we recommended that each of the service branches, in concert with the TAP policy office, better leverage TAP performance information on when servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness. DOD agreed with our recommendations and each service branch identified planned actions and time frames for implementation.

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<sup>17</sup>[GAO-22-103910](#) and [GAO-05-927](#).

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## TAP Performance and Effectiveness

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### Performance Measures

The TAP policy office has established a performance goal and measure—known as TAP Compliance—that covers all key components of the TAP counseling pathways and that is used to assess service branches' compliance with TAP requirements. To be considered TAP compliant for this performance measure, the service branch must ensure that servicemembers meet eight criteria, according to DOD TAP policy officials.<sup>18</sup> DOD has established an annual performance target of 85 percent for TAP Compliance.<sup>19</sup> In August 2022, DOD TAP policy officials told us the performance goal for active-duty servicemembers had not been met for servicemembers who left the military between January 1 and March 31, 2022. TAP policy officials said the main factor negatively affecting compliance is tier 3 servicemembers not attending 2-day classes as required.

In addition, for our December 2022 report, DOD's TAP policy officials said the Performance Management Work Group had recently established a new timeliness performance measure called Timeliness of TAP Requirements.<sup>20</sup> This measure tracks the extent to which the service branches are ensuring that servicemembers begin TAP at least 1 year before leaving military service and complete it at least 90 days before transitioning, as generally required.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>The eight criteria include: (1) completed a self-assessment and was assigned a tier, (2) completed initial counseling, (3) completed pre-separation counseling, (4) attended a VA Benefits and Services briefing, (5) attended a DOL Employment Fundamentals class, (6) attended DOD Transition Day/pre-separation training classes, (7) attended a tailored 2-day class based on tier assignment, and (8) obtained commander's signature verifying review of TAP eForm data.

<sup>19</sup>The goal applies to active-duty servicemembers and members of the National Guard and Reserve. Coast Guard officials said it will also apply to Coast Guard servicemembers once the service branch fully implements the TAP counseling pathways. DOD officials calculate TAP compliance for DOD overall and for each service branch.

<sup>20</sup>The Performance Management Work Group tracks TAP performance measures and collaborates on TAP evaluations, according to officials we interviewed who are part of the working group.

<sup>21</sup>The measure also includes whether servicemembers complete pre-separation counseling at least 1 year before leaving military service.

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## TAP Evaluations and Data Sharing Agreements

DOD and the interagency partners that participate in the Performance Management Work Group published a TAP evaluation plan in April 2021 that describes ongoing and planned evaluations of TAP's long-term outcomes, according to DOD TAP policy officials.<sup>22</sup>

Evaluative information helps the executive branch and congressional committees make decisions about the programs they oversee; that is, evaluative information tells them whether and why a program is working well or not.<sup>23</sup> As part of its overarching evaluating efforts, DOD and its interagency partners are sponsoring studies examining TAP's long-term effectiveness. For details on these evaluations, see our December 2022 report.

As we reported in December 2022, DOD TAP policy officials noted several recent efforts that will improve their ability to assess how well TAP prepares veterans to achieve and retain civilian employment. These include:

- **Technology upgrades.** DOD plans to transition to a new information technology platform during fiscal year 2024 that DOD officials said will help researchers assess TAP's effectiveness and measure long-term outcomes. Among other things, officials said the new system will help them assess the extent to which TAP participation mitigates servicemembers' risk of experiencing negative post-transition outcomes, such as struggling to find employment or housing.

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<sup>22</sup>Transition Assistance Program Interagency Evaluation Plan Fiscal Year 2021-2025. Performance Management Work Group officials we interviewed said officials representing the Departments of Defense, Labor, Veterans Affairs, Homeland Security, Education, and the Small Business Administration and Office of Personnel Management serve on the group.

<sup>23</sup>GAO, *Veterans Justice Outreach Program: VA Could Improve Management by Establishing Performance Measures and More Fully Assessing Risks*, [GAO-16-393](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr 28, 2016); *Military and Veteran Support: Performance Goals Could Strengthen Programs that Help Servicemembers Obtain Civilian Employment*, [GAO-20-416](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 9, 2020); *Program Evaluation: Strategies to Facilitate Agencies' Use of Evaluation in Program Management and Policy Making*, [GAO-13-570](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2013); *Performance Measurement and Evaluation: Definitions and Relationships*, [GAO-11-646SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2, 2011) and *Program Evaluation: Key Terms and Concepts*, [GAO-21-404SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 22, 2021).

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- **Data sharing agreements.** To access data on veterans' long-term outcomes, TAP interagency partners have established two data sharing agreements with other federal agencies:
    - The DOD/Census Bureau Data Agreement, which allows DOD to access Census survey data on veterans' social, demographic, and economic characteristics and Internal Revenue Service federal income tax data.
    - The DOL/Department of Health and Human Services Data Agreement, which allows DOL to access National Directory of New Hires data.<sup>24</sup>

According to members of the Performance Management Work Group, these agreements will allow the agencies to merge individual servicemembers' military data—including data on their TAP participation—with data on their post-transition employment and education outcomes. Among other things, the group plans to use the data to measure whether veterans attained the primary post-transition goal they identified during TAP and to determine which aspects of TAP lead to favorable post-transition outcomes, such as how quickly veterans get a job and how much they earn.

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Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Levin, and Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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## GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions about this statement please contact Dawn G. Locke at (202) 512-7215 or [locked@gao.gov](mailto:locked@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement.

In addition to the contact named above, Meeta Engle (Assistant Director), Amy MacDonald (Analyst in Charge), Linda Keefer, Walker Adams, and Aaron Olszewski made key contributions. Also contributing to this report were Holly Dye, Benjamin Licht, and Almeta Spencer. Key contributors for the previous work on which this testimony is based are listed in the previously issued product.

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<sup>24</sup>The National Directory of New Hires is a centralized database of wage and employment information. It includes individual-level data on quarterly wages, unemployment benefits, and newly hired employees.

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