

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
VETERANS' ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON REHABILITATION (VACOR)

COMMITTEE MINUTES

August 3-4, 2022

Virtual Meeting Washington DC

ATTENDEES

Committee Members Present:

1. Emily Kimmett - Chair
2. Nate Todd - Vice-Chair
3. Dr. Franco Santos
4. Dr. Terri Pogoda
5. Dr. Jennifer Martin
6. Dr. Thiru Annaswamy
7. Michelle Peterson
8. Tiffany Drain
9. Lawrence Rhone
10. Jacquelyn Brietenstein
11. Robert Hines
12. Dr. Lisa Ottomanelli

Ex-Officio Members Present:

- Jerry Elliott
- John Milam
- Dr. Christina Dillahunt-Aspillaga
- Dr. Kristi Hill

Committee Members Absent:

- Lorenza Hilliard
- William "Bill" Metheny

Department of Veterans Affairs Staff Present:

- Latrese Arnold, Designated Federal Officer (DFO)
- LeGuster Seawright, DFO
- David Smith, DFO

Public Attendees:

Wednesday, August 3, 2022

Welcome/Opening Remarks:

Ms. LeGuster Seawright, alternate designated federal officer (ADFO), opened the meeting and announced that it would be recorded for note purposes.

The official meeting began at 11:00am on Wednesday, August 3rd, 2022.

Ms. Emily Kimmett, VACOR Chair, welcomed the committee members. Ms. Kimmett stated the purpose of the meeting is to review and assess how effectively the rehabilitation needs of Veterans are met by VA programs. Ms. Kimmett proceeded with roll call for attendance.

Ms. Seawright informed the Committee that the new Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E) Deputy Director is Ms. Cheyenna Irwin who will briefly speak and will be introduced by Ms. Pamela Salazar, Acting Assistant Director.

Ms. Irwin addressed the Committee. Ms. Irwin stated that VR&E and VACOR are beginning to get some traction on the goals for the upcoming fiscal year and to identify where VACOR is headed for the future. She thanks everyone for their work on the Committee.

David Smith, (ADFO) - June 2022 Meeting Recap

During the June 2022 meeting, the Committee provided topics of interest and focused on how the VA assists service members with transitioning from the military to civilian workforce. The Committee was able to identify VA benefits, outreach efforts, and supported employment programs that they wanted to be briefed on. The suggestions were instrumental in assisting with selecting the speakers for this meeting.

During the June meeting, Mr. Nate Todd was selected to be the next VACOR Committee Chairman.

Mr. Smith stated that a vice-chair has not been selected. Mr. Smith asked the committee members submit nominations for consideration.

Ms. LeGuster Seawright - Ethics Training and Lobbyist Self-Certification Signature Form

Ms. Seawright reminded the Committee members to complete the required Ethics training and self-certification lobbyist form. The ethics training is required annually for special government employees, but if there were regular government employees that would like to complete the ethics training, that would be acceptable.

2022 Recommendations Overview and Update

Ms. Seawright informed the Committee that the 2022 recommendations have been submitted to VBA leadership for review and concurrence, will be forwarded to the Advisory Committee Management Office for review and forward to the Secretary's office for review and approval.

The 2020 recommendations were approved by the Secretary and addressed by the Chief of Staff during the April meeting

VACOR Briefings:

Linda Ritchie, VR&E Service, Acting Supervisor for the National Program Implementation Team – eVA updates

In quarter three of FY20, VR&E incorporated the use of the virtual assistant platform called the Electronic Virtual Assistant. E-VA is an artificial intelligence centric communication tool that provides modern streamlined and responsive customer service support to our Veterans. It also automates some routine administrative activities for our VRC's in the field and program support staff.

The system allows VR&E the ability to further connect with Veterans at a distance and provides prompt benefit related care to those Veterans who may not normally have that access. Normally, our Veterans and those in rural areas that are normally difficult to reach, E-VA has completely transformed the way that VR&E interacts with our Veteran population by breaking down the communication barrier and allowing Veterans to the ability to connect faster with their counselor.

To ensure Veteran care is provided in a manner that incorporates the continuum of care model, the VR&E Service implementation team has established a new partnership between the Electronic Virtual Assistant and the Veterans Crisis line. E-VA's artificial intelligence capabilities continuously scans communications with Veterans to identify potentially harmful language to provide early intervention. To improve automation efforts to help earning and creating a more seamless method for Veterans to sign and return required documents to their counselor, VR&E Service is in the process of incorporating a new workflow for the electronic virtual assistant. This new workflow process would include automatic uploading of the VR&E letters and forms to the VBMS electronic folder and would allow fields to have the ability to draft, edit and upload letters to VMS or send them to their Veterans via mail or e-mail from one centralized location.

Ms. Ritchie pointed out that the national training and rollout schedule is provided on the slides. User acceptance testing is scheduled to begin on August 22nd and will conclude on September 22nd. Once testing concludes, VR&E Service will work to remedy any

defects before national rollout and volunteers for this testing include support or counselors from the field.

Ms. Seawright asked if anyone on the Committee wanted to share their experience in from military to civilian workforce they could do so at this time.

Ms. Tiffany Drain, committee member, stated that she was medically retired from the Air Force. During her transition she was concerned about employment and was not aware of VR&E program. Ms. Drain stated although she was successful in her transition to work, it was because of her background with human resources, but she is aware that others are not as fortunate.

Mr. Lawrence Rhones, committee member, stated that he transitioned from service in 1991. When he was honorably discharged, he thought the process was good and he was able to transition from a director of operations into a job for security and diplomatic security. Mr. Rowan stated that he didn't become aware of the VR&E program until 2010 or 2012. Mr. Rhones reported that he is independently accredited with the Office of General Counsel to help Veterans in transitioning from military to civilian work life.

Ms. Jennifer Martin, committee member, indicated when she transitioned out of the military in 2008, she utilized VR&E benefits, as well as GI Bill benefits. Ms. Martin also stated that she was fortunate to participate in a program called "Troops to Students", which is in the Cal State University system. She stated returning to school was her last resort because she was pregnant with her second child, and her husband was still in the military.

Dr. Lisa Ottomanelli Slone, committee member, indicated that once a veteran is transitioned from the military, and has had a life or health event that causes a new disability, which has a significant life transition that would make them eligible or need vocational services. There may Veterans who have been discharged 10 years from their date of discharged and have a new injury (spinal cord or traumatic brain injury) that necessitates the need to either get retrained or vocational rehabilitation or both. We need to ensure that this group of Veterans are not forgotten when information about both benefits and services are discussed.

Shana K. Bakken, Ph.D., CRC, National Director, VHA Vocational Rehabilitation Service

Dr. Bakken provided a more in-depth overview of the services that Veterans receive when they're participating in VR&E outreach that's conducted to Veterans through VHA services.

Employment is not always one of the top things you think about when people hear healthcare. Dr. Bakken wanted to make that connection of the role that vocational rehabilitation plays as part of healthcare and maps directly to top VA priorities. Employment is protective for suicide, for homelessness, for substance use.

Employment promotes overall health and well-being and promotes community reintegration and recovery. The VHA Vocational Rehabilitation Services office is aligned under the Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. At the facility level, the program is aligned under mental health at some locations. They are also under social work or homelessness.

This office provides recovery oriented clinical vocational rehab services that are integrated with in-treatment and recovery-oriented treatment. This office assists Veterans who are living with a variety of conditions - mental health, physical impairments – and its focus is on assisting these individuals to be successful in obtaining and maintaining community integrated employment. This office has a broad eligibility criterion – participants must be Veterans, must be enrolled in VA healthcare, and they need to have a goal of competitive employment. Individuals in this program also need to be experiencing barriers or challenges to either obtaining or maintaining employment, and those barriers or challenges are resulting from mental health, physical and/or psychosocial needs.

The role of this office is not to find a Veteran that next job; it's about working with that Veteran to find meaningful work and to address the areas that are posing them with difficulty obtaining or maintaining employment.

Charles drubbing said employment can have important clinical benefits that rival many common clinical interventions. These include the benefits of physical activity, social contact and engagement, a broader sense of purpose and meaning, development of skills, opportunities for distraction from clinical symptoms, and the indirect benefits of earning income, such as paid leisure and employer supported healthcare benefits. Overall, through research we know that people who have meaningful work, not just any job, but meaningful work in their lives, tend to have more successful outcomes. Employment in VA is a healthcare intervention.

From a recent research study and early findings from Doctor Kristen Abraham, she looked at the relationship between employment status at the point of completion of compensated work therapy (CWT) and its association with suicide and non-suicide related mortality. Her findings were that employment was associated with a 45.9% lower suicide risk in the year following discharge from our VHA, vocational rehab services. However, this finding did not hold through the five years follow up or through 2019 in terms of suicide relationship. We also don't know the employment status at those follow up time frames, so we don't have that data.

When Dr. Abraham looked at the employment status at the point of discharge with mortality risk for other causes of death, natural cause, external cause, non-suicide and non-overdose, she found that employment was associated with the lower mortality risk across all of these. And when you combine all mortality risks, suicide and non-suicide. Employment at the time of discharge from our VA Vocational Rehab was associated with a 20% lower mortality risk through 2019.

Dr. Marina Kukla looked at the rates of inpatient hospitalization the year following engagement in the VHA vocational rehabilitation services, and she did this across three separate cohorts of Veterans, those who entered the VHA service in 2016, 2017 and 2018. Dr. Kukla looked at hospitalization rates the year before the vocational rehabilitation engagement, year of and the year after. Across all these cohorts, hospitalization rates decreased the year following engagement in vocational rehabilitation. When you look specifically at the group of Veterans who had an inpatient, she found that across those three cohorts, there was a reduction of 25,000 hospitalization days in the year. These findings were also supported in a study that was published by Dr. Abraham, and she looked at the same the same data set as her previous study.

His participation in vocational rehabilitation services and employment has a significant impact on the lives of the Veterans who are participating. Employment is the outcome that is anticipated resulting from our service. The competitive job provides an opportunity to work with Veterans and for Veterans to practice applying different skills that they're learning through their treatment, working through workplace issues or challenges that arise to increase their long-term success.

In 2019, vocational rehabilitation policies were incorporated into national policy. Dr. Bakken provided an overview of its supported employment. This is the most intensive model offered. If you think of the services on a continuum in terms of intensity, this would be at the higher end. Again, this follows the individual placement and support model. This is a highly researched and evidence-based practice. It was rolled out in 2005 for Veterans with serious mental illness. Since that time, there have been VA studies and pilot projects that have demonstrated it to be an effective model for other groups of Veterans who benefit from the intensive supports, including Veterans with traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder and spinal cord injury. In a 2019 directive, which is their national policy, it was required that services be maintained for that original population, which is Veterans with serious mental illness.

In accordance with this evidence-based model, the belief is that the current number is 28 randomized controlled trials. Looking at this model, the caseloads are 1 to 20 to 25. The model itself recommends 1 to 20. VHA has maintained that these are small

caseloads due to the clinical complexity of the Veterans who are participating and to the intensity of the services, which includes up to one-on-one job coaching as needed.

A slide was provided that showed the core principles that the IPS model is based on. Dr. Bakken stated that there is zero exclusion, so they don't exclude patterns for severity of their impairment or for symptoms. The program takes Veterans where they're at and work with them from that point.

Integration is a cornerstone of this model, and the focus is on competitive employment. The program provides follow along supports once a Veteran obtains a job to assist with job retention and the follow along supports continue if there continues to be a clinical need for it. And that's driven by the treatment plan. If the Veteran continues to desire the service and has a clinical need, this supports, and service can continue.

Dr. Bakken next described direct placement into competitive employment and services provided. These services are intended for Veterans who are self-directed and independent in their job search and need just minimal assistance such as resume assistance, interviewing skill development, job leads through a job club, etc. This is office based, whereas with supported employment, the staff are out in the community meeting with employers and meeting with the Veterans.

Vocational assistance is office based. The staff are providing vocational counseling and guidance assessment either in group or individual sessions. The goal being to assist Veterans to develop and improve the skills that they need to obtain their own employment.

Ms. Jessica Pierce, Assistant Director for Policy Staff, Compensation Service, presented on the impact of employment on compensation benefits.

Ms. Pierce provided a basic definition that disability compensation is a tax-free monetary benefit paid to Veterans with disabilities that are result of a disease or injury incurred or aggravated during active military service. VBA can also pay compensation for disabilities that are considered secondary to disabilities incurred in service or that are presumed to be related to service.

In general, there is not an income requirement to receive compensation and employment status would not affect a Veteran's eligibility to receive compensation. But there are a couple of exceptions. One of those is individual unemployability (IU) and the other one is reductions in service connection.

Attention must be given to whether the Veteran can perform the type of activities required by the occupation at issue. This will include vocational and educational history, such as type of work, length of employment, skills required, education, vocational skills,

as well as the actual functional limitation either physical or mental, and we have a variety of forms used in the IU application process, where we collect employment information from the Veteran and then if the Veteran does indicate that they have previous employment, we will send out a form to their employer asking the reason for the termination of the employment. Any special accommodations provided to the Veteran during the employment.

And then once the Veteran has already established eligibility for IU, there is an annual income monitoring process that is done through a match of data with the Social Security Administration, where they report any earned income. There's an annual match and then if the match indicates that a Veteran who's in receipt of IU had income over the poverty level, they will automatically be sent VA form 2141, Employment Questionnaire, and then they'll be asked to give information about their employment over the past year and then once that form has returned to VA, a rating decision will be completed considering all the evidence of record and to determine if the Veteran's IU will continue or if they are able to establish and maintain that substantially gainful employment.

The other circumstance where a Veteran's employment status may impact their compensation benefit is in the instance of reductions. Changes in the severity of a Veteran's service-connected disability can result in a reduction of the combined evaluation. The evidentiary standard for reductions is established in a court case, *Brown V Brown* and so improvement must be shown through a thorough exam that's adequate for writing purposes. That exam must be as thorough and complete as the initial exam used to base the initial evaluation. This is not for IU but for actual scheduler evaluations.

The key is that the disability reflected improvement in the ability to function under the ordinary conditions of life, including employment. That's where employment comes in. If evidence is received showing that a Veteran's disability may have improved, it's no longer meeting the severity of the evaluation that they're currently at. When a claims adjudicator is determining whether that evaluation should be reduced, you know they're not only looking at the medical symptoms they're looking at how that. Improvement plays out in their, which includes whether they're now able to maintain employment.

Reiterating *Brown V Brown*, it's something that has to be referenced whenever an adjudicator makes a decision on a reduction, the court has been very adamant over the years that any reduction that doesn't reference this court case is not considered sufficient, so the court wants to make sure that when reducing an evaluation, we're not just doing it based on minimal evidence, but we are considering the whole file and looking at that potential impact on employment. Furthermore, must be sustained improvement.

Sustained improvement is considered to have been demonstrated when the evidence shows that the lessening of the symptoms persisted over time across situations and

under the conditions of ordinary life, which includes employment. It can't be attributed to temporary or episodic improvement, temporary alleviation of symptoms by rest or a less thorough or complete examination.

Regina Yount, Assistant Director for Policy Procedures, Training and Business Applications for OTED,

One of the work streams that Ms. Yount's team is responsible for is the VA Solid START program and coordination to the oversight that provides VBA's national Call Center.

The VA Solid START program was a result of Executive Order 13822, which is focused on supporting Veterans during their transition from uniformed service to civilian life. It was signed by the president in 2018 and it focused resources and action to suicide rates among service members and Veteran population. VBA specifically targeted the one-year post separation population.

The Executive Order directed the U.S. Departments of Veteran Affairs, Defense and Homeland Security to work together to implement to joint action plan or to implement the requirements of the executive order. The Departments came together in a coordinated effort and outlined three goals for implementing the executive order, improving actions to ensure all transitioning service members, regardless of their service or status, were aware of and had access to mental health services and improve actions to ensure the needs of at-risk Veterans.

Early and consistent contact aims to connect with newly separated Veterans and connect them with resources and tools, especially healthcare that helps target specific challenges they're having during that period. We attempt to contact every recently separated Veteran regardless of their character of discharge, regardless of the branch of service that they served within guard and reserves. Everyone is covered, so we contact them and try to establish a relationship with Veterans so that it would increase the likelihood if they've built trust with VA and trust through that process that they would reach out to us earlier and utilize VA mental healthcare resources when needed.

We coordinate closely with DoD and receive a weekly list of individuals who are recently separated from service, and they also provide information on which of those individuals had a mental health care appointment during their last year of active duty. The Solid START program prioritizes contacting individuals who had a mental healthcare appointment to ensure a smooth transition into care and support on the VA side of the House.

During the Solid START interactions, agents receive specialized training and coordination with the Veterans crisis line to recognize individuals who are at risk, and

they can complete an immediate warm handover to the Veterans crisis line. If an individual is identified as at risk or is threatening or reaching even further than that point during that interaction that they're having.

The Solid START program was launched on December 2nd, 2019. It was developed in close partnership with VHA's Office of Mental Health, and it fundamentally changed the way VA interacts with newly separated Veterans. No longer are we waiting for Veterans to reach out to us during that first year. They are guaranteed that we're going to try to contact them at three periods. Trained VA representatives reach out by phone at three key periods during that critical first year after release from active duty, and we also reach out to them by electronic means as well. We e-mail them and provide information on social media.

This program is about establishing relationship. It isn't just about calling them and talking to them about compensation or talking to them about education services, it's reaching out to them to increase the likelihood that they will connect with VA earlier. Our agents are specially trained to identify issues or challenges that the Veteran may be experiencing at the time of the call.

Support is provided via VA benefits and our partner resources to address that issue or challenge. One of the key things about this program that's so helpful is that our calls are not scripted. They are very open and driven specifically by the needs of the Veteran during each interaction. Our agents ask very open-ended questions, such as, how are things going the last time we talked, you said you were going to pursue your education benefits? And How's your education journey going? They maintain information about previous conversations. As well as what the Veteran experienced or discussed during the last time they spoke, and that relationship continues to build and foster over that year. One of the things that we really try very hard to maintain is a one-to-one connection. Each Veteran is assigned to a Solid START representative that will stay with them to case manage that transition part within the solid start space for the full one period of eligibility.

It is very much a different kind of call looking at it from the context center perspective, this is very much a call where we're just calling and inviting a conversation with a Veteran. But it is very much whatever the Veteran needs when we speak with them. And sometimes it's just basically talking with them about what they're dealing with and the stress and challenges that they're having and how that they need assistance in getting care and support at VHA and VBA.

We do follow up emails, have a website and work in coordination with VBA's Office of Strategic Engagement and do target social media campaigns on the Solid START program and then established messages in various communication channels.

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Since the program launched in 2019 through June, the Solid START program has successfully connected with more than 243 recently separated Veterans representing 64% of the eligible population. And as a subset we've connected with more than 40,000 priority Veterans or almost 77% of that group. That number to me is extremely important. It's one that we really look to for achievement simply because that population is one that we want to ensure has awareness of and access and information about continuing that mental health care treatment and service on the VA side of the house.

We have successfully connected 42 Veterans with the crisis line. That is a low number, which is always a great thing to see, but I always reference it when we speak to it is because those 42 people were in crisis at the time, we happened to cold call them.

We have a few program enhancements that we're looking to implement. We will be expanding the modalities of communication channels with Veterans looking to push into text and chat over the upcoming year. We're also going to be providing Veterans with an opportunity to schedule their Solid START call for the daytime that works best for their schedule. Currently, we're calling randomly, and this affords them an opportunity to go in and use the scheduling tool to plan the appropriate day and time of their call.

We also are in the process of developing a customer experience survey through V signals with the Veterans Experience Office that should be implemented in 2023. We're very excited to get feedback from a more regulated manner instead of the anecdotal feedback that we've been receiving from Veterans, which is positive. We also adjusting our staffing model a bit to really focus attention where Veterans most want to be contacted looking to shift it later and potentially expand to a Saturday availability.

Public Comments:

None

Working Sessions:

The working session began with selecting Jennifer Martin as Vice Chair of VACOR committee, with Nate Todd serving as Chair.

VA Solid Start program started in 2019 which was very informative and positive. How do we reach out to the Veterans who did not have the option to participate in VA Solid Start program? It was noted that the Veteran Administration in general has made efforts in reaching out to Veterans via email and text. Transition Assistance Program (TAP) has been available for Veteran in the past 15 years.

Military Family Readiness has a memorandum of agreement with the Army and Airforce which both branches oversee their own TAP program that include online modules as well as briefers. Each presenter is different whereas the service member may receive a full or

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quick overview of the TAP. Since the briefing portion is not consistent, this may have the same impact on Veterans from several years ago not being informed of their choices.

During the TAP presentations, Veteran Readiness & Employment (VR&E) section is minimum, not much information on VR&E is provided. However, more information is provided on Post 9/11 GI Bill.

It was suggested that during the next meeting held in April 2023, that a presenter who is responsible for the briefings, content and quality of the TAP presentation would present to the committee.

VHA clinicians receives referrals – maybe improvement with educational marketing and outreach.

Items requiring follow-up:

- More information from disability compensation on where Veteran can secure information about how their benefits is impacted by employment.
- Is there a follow up program to the TAP for those Veterans who were not ready for transitioning or maybe have been preoccupied with the requirements of being discharged?
- Follow-up with VA Solid Start to inquire about those Veteran who are not responding to emails, text or phone calls, who follow up with those Veterans, is a wellness or home visit considered.
- A sample of an Individual Unemployability letter sent to Veteran should be provided to the committee.
- Veterans who are rated with Individual Unemployable benefits, are their benefits protected if they return to work, similar to Compensated Work Therapy program? If so, how? Also, it would be beneficial to add a paragraph explaining to the Veteran if you decide to return to work, here is a program that may be able to assist you. For example, supported employment.
- Is there any existing services that include referrals/connection for the provision of vocational rehabilitation services such as supported employment through VHA who apply for Individual unemployability and are denied?

Possible Recommendations:

- The term “unemployability” is very labeling and the language itself is a barrier. This term should be considered for rewording.

Meeting was adjourned at 3:30 pm EST.

Thursday, August 4, 2022

Welcome/Overview:

Ms. Seawright opened the meeting and welcomed Mr. Nick Pamperin, VR&E Service Executive Director.

Mr. Pamperin thanked the Committee for its work and provided the group with an overview of his VA experience. Mr. Pamperin expressed his believe that the VR&E program best line of business that VBA offers.

Mr. Todd commented on what was discussed during yesterday's meeting, specifically the discussion about Individual Unemployability (IU) and how its terminology is being used. Mr. Pamperin indicated that IU letters are with compensation but provide the committee with sample IU letter for their review the wording.

VBA Briefings:

Ms. Desiree Tiggart, Program Analyst, Office of Transition Economic Development (OTED): Economic Development Initiative (EDI).

Ms. Tiggart discussed economic development's vision to be recognized as a leader who advanced transitioning service members, Veterans and their families, economic well-being in their local community, by hosting economic development events. The goal of the economic development initiatives is to provide access to benefits and services to promote financial security, to educate unemployment opportunities within their communities, to collaborate with communities and other agencies to raise awareness of available economic resources.

An EDI connect transitioning service members, Veterans and their family members to VA benefits, economic information partners, services and tools they need to be successful. EDIs are multi day events that take place in a qualified opportunity zone. These qualified opportunity zones are designated by the IRS.

OTED began doing EDIs in 2018 to provide disadvantaged transitioning service members and Veteran's opportunities to achieve economic success and total well-being. As mentioned, EDI events are held in qualified opportunity zones that have been designated by the IRS. In addition to IRS's qualifications, we consider the Veteran population in that community the high rate of Veterans without a high school diploma, high poverty rate, unemployment rate, and homelessness, to name a few.

We offer Veterans an opportunity to file a claim if they have additional evidence at the time of the claims clinic and the RO can make a decision on the spot. Our last event was held in California where we paid out over \$42,000 worth of retro benefits to those

transitioning service members or Veterans. We are also considering conducting presentations and workshops to include financial literacy courses.

Mr. Joseph Lattimer, Program Analyst, OTED: Skill Bridge Program

Mr. Lattimer provided a presentation about the Skill Bridge Program, which is a DoD program that empowers transitioning service members to gain civilian work experience through employment, training, apprenticeships, and internship programs during their final 180 days of service. The Veterans have to complete training or internship program with the VA. It's up to 180 days, so if an organization with VA wants to make their training plan 90 days, we can work with that, but they recommend 180 days of military service.

The program helps to ease transition into civilian life. While they're still attached to DoD and part of Skill Bridge, they still get their DoD benefits, their housing allowance, military pay, and all their other benefits that they're allowed.

Mr. Lattimer explained the program and process as outlined in the slide's presentation. He explained that the primary office is at the Pentagon who helps with marketing at installations close to the VA. They have about 1,000 corporations and companies under their purview, who have great training programs.

Mr. Wayshak Hill, Program Analyst, OTED: Financial Literacy Program

The family, the caregivers and, of course, the transitioning service member so that we can help them get a solid beginning and a solid footing.

We have a financial literacy program that is scheduled to have a class every third Wednesday of the month. In every third Wednesday of the month, we meet and talk about a wide variety of different financial related items and the Memorandum of Agreement Prudential Financial is helping provide the information that is used in each of these Wellness Wednesday financial education classes.

Topics range from what do I do about my own personal financial planning? What do I do about college planning? What do I do about assess my own financial health? I encourage you to pass this to as many Veterans as you can so that they can do a self-assessment, read white papers on managing debt, et cetera. It's a very robust page that's available to all Veterans.

Inside the prudential partnership, they've created an online portal and in addition to the online portal, they bring together with us a certified financial planner, who's in the financial planning arena and they talk about the different things that the Veteran needs to hear and the important part about this.

All the Veteran has to do is show up and sign up and there's no pressure. There's no hidden anything. And what's more is once you attend one of these meetings with Prudential, you have the opportunity, or the Veteran has an opportunity to stay and sign up for a one hour 1 on one class where that professional will spend an hour with you or that Veteran and answer very specific detailed questions.

We've got another partner through an Education Foundation. I can't tell you which one just yet until the until it's been finalized.

In June, we had over 14,000 Veterans registered and have a 98.1% satisfaction rate in the last quarter and a 98.4% satisfaction rate from the beginning, which was April of last year, 2001.

The other thing that I wanted to share is Greenpath. Greenpath is also available to the Veteran community. This is exciting because one of the things that we get the most feedback from the Veteran and those that attend our class is the need to get out of debt and control high interest credit cards and Greenpath is available, free of charge, for the Veteran to call and meet with a counselor.

Public Comments

None

Tom Winter, Director of Transition Assistance Programs

Mr. Winter provided a presentation on Transition to Civilian Life – Employment Programs for Veterans. Mr. Winter stated that he is the TAP director at the Department of Labor Vets and was asked to provide an overview of what my office does within the Transition Assistance Program for Department of Labor.

The Transition Assistance Program was established with the National Defense Authorization Act of 1991, and it is an interagency collaboration between the Department of Defense and all the military services. The Department of Labor, Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Homeland Security, because of the inclusion of the Coast Guard within the program, Department of Education, Small Business Administration and then also the Office of Personnel Management. It is a collaboration amongst those agencies, and I think it's probably one of the best examples of intergovernmental interagency collaboration that has been going on now for over 30 years.

The point of the program is to assist service members make a smooth transition from being on active duty to civilian life and in particular to civilian employment. Transition starts no later than 365 days before they leave active duty, and it begins with an

individualized assessment and pre separation counseling conducted by the military service branches of that individual.

There is some core mandatory curriculum that that they go through. One of them is a DoD transition day which includes, a military occupation code crosswalk and then a financial planning for transition. All are included in the DoD mandatory one day. Then they also have one day of the VA benefits and services briefing. And then they have a mandatory one day from the Department of Labor, and that is our employment fundamentals of career transition. All service members who are transitioning go through all of those mandatory one days.

Next, the transitioning service members also select one of four two-day workshops. There is one for employment, one for vocational for education, and then also for entrepreneurship. The Department of Labor is responsible for two of those workshops, one being the two-day Department of Labor Employment Workshop.

The workshops, historically, have been kind of the core thing of what Labor provides in the Transition Assistance Program. And for the service members at installations around the world, we have pivoted to instructor LED virtual workshops using any number of platforms such as MS Teams and Zoom.

We are up to about 25 partners in the program and those partners submit an application form and must go through a vetting process and then we execute an MOU with each of those partners and agency in order to take part within the program.

The point is to get transitioning service members connected with the partner that can assist them in a career path that they want to take.

Mr. Winter mentioned that the program has come out now with specialized transition curriculum that we've developed within the last couple years. The first one is our transition employment assistance for military spouses. As long as TAP has been in place, military spouses have been, eligible to participate within the program. Historically, there have been very low participation from them. Spouses usually are 1 to 2%.

A few years ago, we decided to develop an employment workshop curriculum focused on the employment needs of military spouses and caregivers. Currently, we're doing a doing primarily virtually instructor lead workshops, but we also provide them in person, brick and mortar at installations.

The curriculum itself, which was initially geared towards transitioning service members. Now the office has re-worked the curriculum to break it into two-hour modules. The program offers a core of four of those modules at brick-and-mortar sites.

Within the last couple years, the program has been able to develop a robust data collection framework, and this runs down what really encompasses that. The first part is referred to the Veteran Data Exchange initiative. It's the data obtained from Defense, manpower and data center from their pre-separation forms.

Working Session

The working session began with the question how far outreach goes to Veterans in the rural areas. Even though everyone has gone virtual, reaching Veterans in the rural area is still a challenge.

Different platforms are being used to reach Veterans virtually such as the AARP and Community Out Base Clinics and others. Again, continuous and constant efforts are being made to reach all Veterans.

Most programs offer assistance to Veterans to transition into full time employment. What about those Veterans who are interested in part time work or work that is not consistent with what these programs are offering? Is there another route for Veterans to be considered for employment purposes? What is the scope of the jobs may be? VHA focus on customize employment such as their supported employment program. The Department of Labor (DOL) workforce consist of DVOT and LEVERS programs that work with disabled Veterans to secure employment. They also go out in the community to work with employers who will consider hiring Veterans. Each State should have a DVOT and LEVER program with DOL. They also assist with part time employment. There is a memorandum of understanding with the VA VR&E program that have job labs available for Veterans to conduct job search activities.

Questions:

- Is there a one-stop place for Veterans to have all the different federal and state programs, such as a page to learn about these programs?
- How do we meet Veterans where they are to where they would want to be as wholistic approach?

There are Apps and Kious being developed in high traffic areas such as Walmart, County Courts and other areas for Veterans to have access to different programs. It is critical for every Veteran to be enrolled in VA Healthcare.

Recommendations Proposed to Consider:

- VA to revisit the language used in IU, specifically "unemployability". Possibly change to something less stigmatized.

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- Lack of access to information for the Veterans (i.e., all the programs we have discussed during this meeting, financial planning, TAP, etc.). Looking to streamline this access.
- Lack of communication between government entities/programs (i.e., warm hand-off follow through)

Next meeting:

Administrative Meeting scheduled for Tuesday, October 25, 2022, 11:00 am EST to 3:00 pm EST.

Annual Meeting is tentatively scheduled for April 4, 5, and 6, 2023. Possible field visit: Seattle, WA (Seattle Regional Office), or Long Beach, CA (San Diego Regional Office, Los Angeles Regional Office, or Oakland Regional Office)

During the next annual meeting, it was suggested to have an active listening session to hear from a more diverse group of Veterans about their experience in transitioning to the civilian workforce.

Meeting was adjourned at 2:49 pm EST.

Submitted:



Ms. Emily Kimmett
VACOR Chair

September 08, 2022

Mr. David Smith
Alternate Designated Federal Officer

September 08, 2022