

**Prepared Statement**

**of**

**Ms. Leslye A. Arsht**

**Deputy Under Secretary of Defense  
(Military Community and Family Policy)**

**Before the**

**House Veterans' Affairs  
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity**

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss issues relating to H.R. 2259, a bill to ensure that members of the National Guard and Reserves are able to fully participate in the Benefits Delivery at Discharge program administered jointly by the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

We require a great deal from our Armed Forces and I want to affirm the Department's commitment to all our Service members – Active, National Guard and Reserves and their families.

#### **VIEWS on H.R. 2259**

Returning to private life after serving in the military is a very complex undertaking. To assist them in doing so, we must empower Service members with the tools and information they need to fashion individual solutions to the challenges they will face as they return to civilian life. To that extent, the Department supports the intent of H.R. 2259, which is to inform National Guard and Reserve members of the rights and benefits available to them as a result of their military service. Transition programs are currently conducted at demobilization and other out-processing sites. Further, because the members of the guard and reserve are so geographically dispersed, the Department has just launched a new web portal at [www.TurboTAP.org](http://www.TurboTAP.org), which provides comprehensive information to Guard and Reserve members about their rights and benefits and enables them to build individual transition plans.

The Department has also formed the special working group with the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Labor—as required by section 676 of the John Warner National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2007—to identify and assess the needs of National Guard and Reserve members returning to civilian employment following deployment in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. Additionally, section 515 of the House-passed Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 would require the Department to establish another working group to identify, catalog and analyze the various existing programs currently being operated by different services, states, and commands—such as the programs in Minnesota, New Hampshire, Oregon, and Washington—to help returning Reserve component members make the transition back to civilian life. This working group will identify best practices and develop plans to incorporate the best practices across the services to meet the needs of Reserve component members, who are reintegrating following return from overseas operational deployment.

While well intended, H.R. 2259 is overly broad in its scope. H.R. 2259 would require DoD to develop a plan to provide every Reserve component member who has served on active duty since September 11, 2001—regardless of the length or purpose of the period of active duty—with the information contained in the Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program. Nearly all members of the Selected Reserve perform annual training. Therefore, to meet the requirements of this Bill, the Department would have to develop the means of informing each

member of their rights and benefits at least annually. Moreover, many active duty members transferred to the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) upon completion of their active duty service obligation, in order to complete their total military service obligation. At the time of their release from active duty, they completed a transition course. However, this Bill would require that DoD develop a plan to once again inform every active duty member transferred to the IRR after September 11, 2001, of their rights and benefits, even though they many not have performed any duty while in the IRR, and the service has had only periodic contact with the member since being released from active duty.

For these reasons, the Department does not support H.R. 2259.

## **TURBOTAP**

Because TurboTAP is available on the World Wide Web, complete transition information is already available at every military installation, armory, military family support center and activity conducting disability evaluations. TurboTAP will better meet the needs of the National Guard, Reserves and Active Component Service members and their families because it gives them the tools to connect and access the information to meet their needs when they are ready – present or future. This portal architecture will be the backbone of the updated DoD Transition Assistance Program (TAP) process for National Guard and Reserve Service members. Each Reservist and Guardsman will be able to create a lifelong account to which he/she or his/her spouse can refer, at any time during his/her life. Usability, flexibility, adaptability, and individual customization are

the keys to successful implementation of this new technology-enabled process.

TurboTAP allows an individual to develop and print out his or her own individual transition plan. The goal for this system is to increase Service member participation and satisfaction.

Some of the features of TurboTAP are:

- A comprehensive Transition Guide for the Guard and Reserves, as well as a comprehensive Preseparation Guide for Active Component Service members. These guides provide information on benefits and services available to transitioning Service members, as well as contact points for further assistance.
- Life long account for National Guard, Reserves and Active Component Service members, which allows them to use the system indefinitely;
- A personal profile that can be updated anytime;
- A customized, Individual Transition Plan;
- Transition information that can be accessed anytime, anywhere;
- An Employment Hub containing job searches, resume builder and military occupational translator using the O\*NET to convert to civilian occupational skills;
- A VA Benefits Hub providing information on VA benefits, services and programs and, finally,

- "Helpful checklists" to remind Service members about key things they should do before separating or being released from active duty.

TurboTAP allows Service members, veterans, retirees, and demobilizing members of the Reserve Components to locate and find the nearest DOL One-Stop Career Center, VA Regional Office, VA Vet Center, VA Medical Center, and military installation to where they live.

We have high expectations for this being a 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to delivering individualized information and benefits to Service members and families. With the expected success, we further plan to make transition an on-line transaction much like banking and bill paying have become. The success and accountability of transition will be managed on-line versus a form being hand carried to a personnel file. As we move down this road, we will solicit your approval and legislative support.

I now want to share with you some on-going transition initiatives in DoD as they relate to our severely injured Service members.

### **SUPPORT FOR SEVERELY INJURED**

As you are aware, DoD and VA established task forces to review how wounded Service members are served and how to better collaborate to meet the needs of the members and their families. The bipartisan Presidential Committee led by Senator Dole and Secretary Shalala is also addressing this issue. However, today, the Office of Seamless Transition Program, established by VA, in coordination with the Military Services, also facilitates a more timely receipt of

benefits for severely injured Service members. VA Veteran Benefits Administration (VBA) counselors visit all severely injured patients and inform them of the full range of VA services, including readjustment programs, employment programs, and information on educational and housing benefits.

Seamless Transition helps these personnel touch base with vocational rehabilitation and employment services, and assists in putting them in contact with other employment resources available through DOL, the Military Services, the Joint Seamless Transition Office, DoD and the Military Services severely injured and wounded programs, including DOL's special "Recovery and Employment Assistance Lifelines" or REALifelines. All of these are available to help Service members and their families connect with the employment assistance they need.

To expand employment assistance to our severely injured and wounded, the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, Civilian Personnel Management Service, has undertaken a broad outreach program called "Hiring Heroes Career Fairs" to assist severely injured Service members and their families in finding employment opportunities in the DoD, other Federal agencies, and the private sector.

Career fairs that support the Department's "Hiring Heroes" program have been offered at the following locations: Walter Reed Army Medical Center, DC; Fort Sam Houston, TX; Womack Army Medical Center, Fort Bragg, NC; Eisenhower Army Medical Center, Fort Gordon, GA; and Walson Army Medical Center, Fort Dix, NJ. Three career fairs have been conducted in partnership with

the Coalition to Salute America's Heroes, a non-profit organization. Over 2,000 Service members and their family members have attended these career fairs and several more are planned well into the future.

Corporate America has responded to the call; many Fortune 500 companies and small businesses are recruiting injured and wounded veterans for their skills, experience, maturity, and work ethic. Many of these companies are creating special programs geared specifically toward finding employment in their respective companies for these veterans and their family members.

It's important to note that DOD, along with DOL and the VA, has worked to provide separating Service members with a variety of tools. Examples of our collaborative efforts include the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Steering Committee and the Secretary of Labor's Advisory Committee on Veterans' Employment, Training, and Employer Outreach (ACVETEO). DoD and VA also partner extensively through the VA/DoD Joint Executive Council (JEC), the Benefits Executive Council (BEC), and the Health Executive Council (HEC)

### **OTHER BILLS**

We acknowledge that the Department of Veterans' Affairs defers to DoD on H.R. 513, H.R. 1598, and H.R. 1750, which are three bills related to the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act. We do not yet have cleared positions on those bills, but will provide them for the record.

## **CONCLUSION**

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. On behalf of the men and women in the military today and their families, I thank you and the members of the Subcommittee for your steadfast support during these demanding times.