United States Government Accountability Office

Report to Congressional Requesters

November 2017

TRANSITIONING VETERANS

DOD Needs to Improve Performance Reporting and Monitoring for the Transition Assistance Program

Accessible Version

GAO-18-23

GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-18-23, a report to congressional requesters

November 2017

TRANSITIONING VETERANS

DOD Needs to Improve Performance Reporting and Monitoring for the Transition Assistance Program

Why GAO Did This Study

Since fiscal year 2015, hundreds of thousands of servicemembers have left the military and transitioned into civilian life, with hundreds of thousands more soon to follow. To help ease their transition, pursuant to federal law DOD must require that all eligible separating servicemembers take TAP, with some exceptions. GAO's previous work on TAP implementation showed mixed results, and GAO was asked to re-examine the program.

This report examines, among other questions: 1) the extent of transparency in DOD's public performance reporting, 2) TAP participation levels and attainment of Career Readiness Standards or referrals for additional services, and 3) DOD's TAP monitoring and performance measures.

GAO surveyed all 181 installations that conduct TAP and achieved a 100 percent response rate; analyzed TAP data from fiscal year 2016; visited seven installations that reflected diversity in service, size, and geography; compared DOD's performance measures to GAO criteria; reviewed federal laws and regulations, and interviewed TAP staff, servicemembers, and DOD officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes six recommendations, including that DOD improve transparency in reporting TAP participation and career readiness rates and monitor certain key areas of TAP implementation. DOD generally agreed with all but the one on access to additional 2-day classes. GAO believes this recommendation is still

View GAO-18-23. For more information, contact Cindy S. Barnes at (202) 512-7215 or brownbarnesc@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

In fiscal year 2016, the Department of Defense (DOD) lacked data for 48 percent of National Guard and Reserve members and 12 percent of active duty servicemembers which resulted in DOD potentially misstating performance of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) in its public reporting. Under the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011, DOD must require that all eligible separating servicemembers participate in TAP, with some exceptions. However, the VOW Act compliance rates that DOD publicly reported were not based on all eligible servicemembers—they excluded servicemembers for whom DOD lacked data. For example, had DOD included all transitioning National Guard and Reserve members—including those for whom they lacked participation data—the resulting participation rate for Guard and Reserve members may have been as low as 47 percent instead of 94 percent, which DOD publicly reported in fiscal year 2016. In November 2016, DOD launched a new data collection system that officials say will improve data completeness and reporting abilities.

In fiscal year 2016, DOD met its goal of 85 percent of active duty servicemembers (i.e., not members of the National Guard and Reserves) who met VOW Act requirements and attained Career Readiness Standards, according to GAO's analysis. In order to complete TAP, servicemembers generally must participate in three required courses and have their Career Readiness Standards verified by a unit commander or designee. In addition, commanders or their designee must ensure that servicemembers who do not meet these standards are referred to staff of partner agencies, such as the Department of Labor and Department of Veterans Affairs, for additional services, commonly called a "warm handover." However, fewer than half of all eligible servicemembers completed TAP on time—90 days or more before separation.

Percent of Servicemembers Who Completed Required Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Activities, within Selected Time Frames, Fiscal Year 2016

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) fiscal year 2016 data. | GAO-18-225T

DOD monitors several key areas of TAP implementation, such as TAP participation and career readiness standards rates, but not others, including timeliness of participation in required courses and access to additional classes. Regulations require DOD to ensure that servicemembers complete TAP more than 90 days before leaving the military but DOD has not monitored timeliness because it has focused on ensuring participation. Federal law also requires DOD to ensure that servicemembers who want to attend additional 2-day classes, such as on higher education, can do so. However, DOD does not require the services to document the extent to which servicemembers can access these classes. Unless DOD monitors these and other TAP requirements, it cannot ensure they have been met.

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Abbreviations

CRS – Career Readiness Standards
DOD – Department of Defense
DOL – Department of Labor
SBA – U.S. Small Business Administration
TAP – Transition Assistance Program
TVPO – Transition to Veterans Program Office
VA – Department of Veterans Affairs
VOW Act – VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011

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U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE
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Congressional Requesters

Since 2015, hundreds of thousands of servicemembers have left the military with nearly as many more soon to follow. Some of these new veterans may face significant challenges as they transition to civilian life, such as finding and maintaining employment. To help them, one section of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (VOW Act) generally mandates the Department of Defense (DOD) to require that all separating servicemembers participate in TAP to receive counseling, employment assistance, and information on federal veteran benefits, among other supports.[1,2] Under the VOW Act, the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is designed to help servicemembers successfully prepare for civilian life.

Concurrently with the VOW Act, the prior administration initiated a redesign of TAP, which among other changes, created a standardized curriculum sometimes referred to as Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success.)[3] The redesign was led by an interagency task force that established a series of Career Readiness Standards and associated tasks for servicemembers to complete to demonstrate their readiness for civilian life.[4] Further, DOD expanded the TAP core curriculum to include courses aimed at helping servicemembers meet these standards, and required that unit commanders or their designees verify whether transitioning servicemembers under their command met these standards—and if not, received a "warm handover" referral to another partner agency or another appropriate resource. The redesigned TAP

[1]VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011, Pub. L. No. 112-56 Title II, 125 Stat. 711, 713-733.

[2]The VOW Act also mandates that the Department of Homeland Security provide such services to members of the Coast Guard. We plan to present findings specific to the Coast Guard in another report in the spring of 2018.

[3]While DOD often refers to the TAP curriculum as Transition Goals, Plans, Success (Transition GPS), for the purposes of this report we refer to Transition GPS as TAP. Similarly, we refer to the Army's Soldier for Life program and the Marine Corps' Transition Readiness programs as TAP.

[4]DOD and the Department of Veterans Affairs were tasked with leading the Veterans Employment Initiative Task Force to oversee the design and development of the revamped program. Other federal partners included the Departments of Education, Homeland Security, and Labor; the Office of Personnel Management; and the Small Business Administration.

also included additional 2-day classes for servicemembers interested in pursuing higher education, career technical training, or entrepreneurship. Our 2014 report noted that agencies were still in the process of implementing the redesigned TAP program, but in the meantime, we found that DOD needed to improve oversight and implementation.[5] In light of TAP's redesign, we were asked to examine various aspects of the program's implementation. This report addresses the following questions:

1. To what extent does DOD publicly report TAP performance transparently?
2. How many servicemembers participated in TAP and what factors affected participation?
3. How many servicemembers met Career Readiness Standards or received referrals to partner agencies for additional services?
4. To what extent does DOD monitor key areas of TAP implementation and how well do TAP's performance measures inform these monitoring efforts?

To address these questions, we surveyed all 181 DOD installations that conduct TAP full time and achieved a 100 percent response rate; analyzed DOD participation data for fiscal year 2016; reviewed TAP data reports and performance measures; and interviewed officials from DOD and its partner agencies. We also visited seven installations (two each for the Army, Navy, Air Force, and one for the Marine Corps) that we selected to achieve variation in branch of service, installation size, and geographic location. We assessed the reliability of DOD's data by electronically testing required data elements, reviewing documentation, and interviewing agency officials knowledgeable about the data. We found DOD data on TAP participation and Career Readiness Standard attainment to be reliable for active-duty servicemembers—in other words who are not members of the National Guard or Reserve—but not for National Guard and Reserve members due to the high percentage of missing data, as explained in this report. We included the number and percentage of National Guard and Reserve members DOD reported to have participated in TAP to illustrate the extent to which DOD is missing data for this population, but we excluded these populations from our participant-level analyses. Consequently, the scope of this report is generally relevant to active-duty servicemembers who are not members

[5]GAO, *Transitioning Veterans: Improved Oversight Needed to Enhance Implementation of Transition Assistance Program*, GAO-14-144 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 5, 2014).

of the National Guard and Reserve, unless otherwise noted. We discuss issues related to data reliability further in our report. With regard to monitoring and performance measures, our scope was limited to the duration of servicemembers' participation in TAP and excluded post-program evaluations and outcomes. See appendix I for more information on our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from February 2016 to November 2017 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

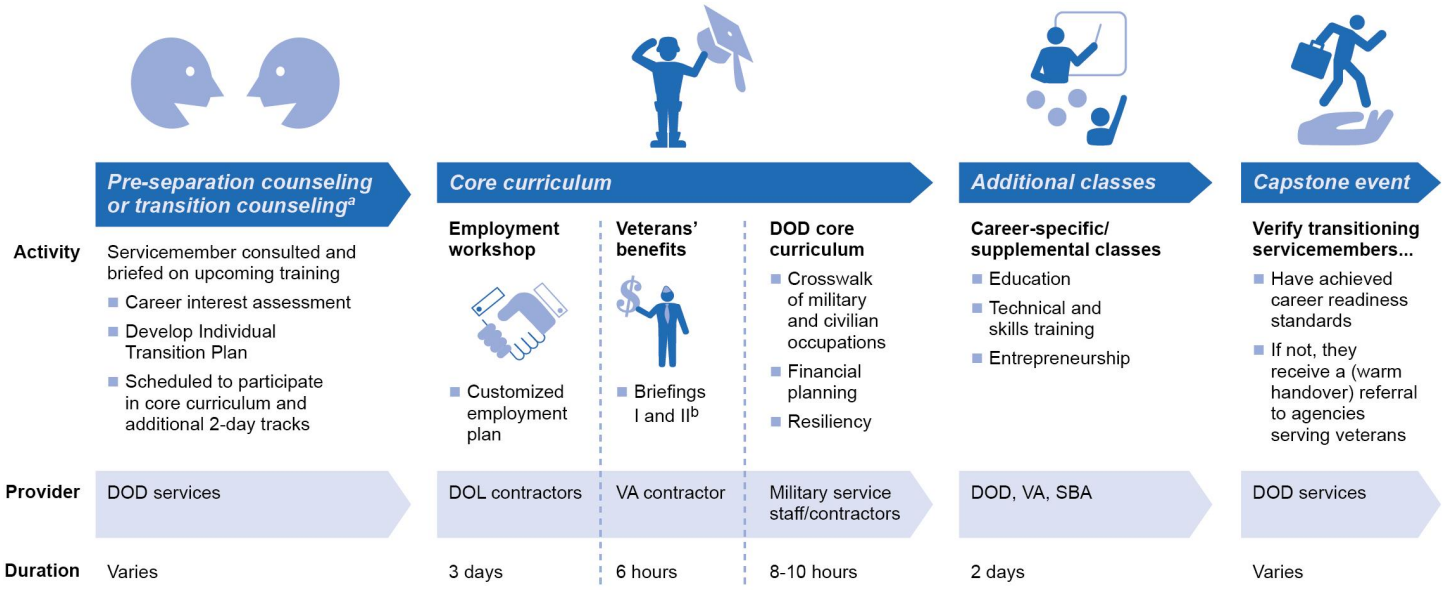
Background

TAP Process and Timing

Under the redesigned TAP, servicemembers begin their transition process by attending pre- separation counseling or transition counseling, during which a counselor describes TAP requirements, notifies servicemembers of available transition-related resources, provides a blank copy of an Individual Transition Plan to guide servicemembers through their transition planning, and discusses the servicemember's post-transition goals, among other things (see fig. 1).[6]

[6]Federal law requires DOD to require eligible servicemembers to participate in TAP, with some exceptions. In response to this statutory requirement, DOD has promulgated regulations and developed issuances that require servicemembers to complete the component parts of TAP, and that commanding officers ensure that servicemembers under their command complete these parts, with some exceptions. See 10 U.S.C. § 1142 et seq.; 32 C.F.R. pt. 88; Department of Defense Instruction 1332.35, *Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for Military Personnel* (Feb. 29, 2016).

Figure 1: Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Components and Activities Provided by the Departments of Defense (DOD), Labor (DOL), Veterans Affairs (VA), and the Small Business Administration (SBA)



Source: GAO analysis of implementing agency documentation. | GAO-18-23

Note: For clarity purposes, under the heading "DOD core curriculum" we group a number of modules. These DOD-led modules include (1) a TAP overview and orientation session; (2) a Military Occupation Codes Crosswalk module to begin the process of identifying skills, experience, credentials, and education that have been obtained while in the military and crosswalking them to civilian opportunities; (3) a Personal Financial Planning for Transition module to develop the financial aspects of servicemembers' transition goals and a written plan to achieve them; (4) a Resilient Transitions module to introduce servicemembers to topics such as transition stress, family considerations, and the value of a mentor; and (5) Individual Transition Plan review module that explains to servicemembers the importance of the individual training plan. It also explains how servicemembers can use their individual transition plans and keep them up-to-date as they transition. DOD officials noted that this plan is an evolving document.

[a]VA benefits I and II briefings are two sessions that provide an interactive overview of VA benefits and instruction on healthcare, eBenefits, disability compensation, and how to apply for benefits.

During or at the end of the pre-separation or transition counseling session, participants register for and attend TAP courses. These courses include a core curriculum comprised of three required courses—the Department of Labor (DOL) Employment Workshop and Veterans Affairs (VA) Benefit Briefings I and II—and DOD-provided curriculum that focuses on topics such as translating military skills to civilian jobs and preparing a financial plan. Participants may also elect to attend 2-day classes that are additional and include: 1) Accessing Higher Education, 2) Career Technical Training, and 3) Entrepreneurship.

TAP concludes with a Capstone event designed to verify whether transitioning servicemembers have either met Career Readiness

Standards and have a viable Individual Transition Plan or received a referral to staff at another federal partnering agency.[7] Per DOD regulations, verification of Career Readiness Standards is conducted in two stages. The first stage is an in-depth review by a transition or career counselor to determine if all of the standards have been completed. To meet the Career Readiness Standards, servicemembers are required, among other things, to complete (1) a 12-month post-separation budget, (2) an individual transition plan, (3) a job application package (that includes a resume) or a job offer letter, and (4) registration on VA's online benefit platform known as eBenefits.[8] During the second stage, commanders or their designee are required to ensure that servicemembers who do not meet one or more Career Readiness Standards or who need further assistance are referred to an appropriate interagency party or another appropriate resource—a process known as the "warm handover."[9] Regulations state that the referral should result in the servicemember receiving a person-to-person connection to needed services and follow-up resources.[10]The unit commander or their designee is responsible for making the final decision as to whether the Career Readiness Standards have been met and that the member has a viable Individual Transition Plan.

TAP regulations and Department of Defense Instructions establish time frames within which servicemembers with anticipated dates of separation, release from active duty, or retirement should begin and complete the program.[11] Specifically, servicemembers with anticipated separation dates are expected to begin as soon as possible during the 12-month period preceding that date, but not later than 90 days before separation.

[7]TAP is considered complete when a unit commander or commander's designee signs a form verifying, among other things, that they have reviewed the servicemember's Capstone review form.

[8]In all there are nine common Career Readiness Standards. Servicemembers seeking to obtain a degree from an accredited institution of higher education or earn a credential from a certified career technical program or institution are required to meet an additional four standards, including completing a standardized individual assessment tool to assess aptitudes, interests, strengths, or skills, and comparing options for higher education or career or technical training.

[9]Commanders or their designees have been directed to ensure that servicemembers who have not developed housing or transportation plans or who are separating under less than honorable circumstances receive warm handover referrals.

[10]32 C.F.R. pt. 88 app. H(a); 32 C.F.R. § 88.3.

[11]A DOD instruction is a DOD issuance that implements DOD policy.

Similarly, those with anticipated retirement dates are expected to begin TAP as soon as possible during the 24-month period preceding that date, but not later than 90 days before retirement. Servicemembers with unanticipated separations—those who learn they will leave the military in less than 90 days—are expected to begin TAP as soon as possible. With regard to completing the program, servicemembers are generally expected to complete the entire TAP process no later than 90 days before their anticipated date of separation or retirement.[12] TAP-eligible members of the National Guard and Reserve who are being demobilized or deactivated from active duty under circumstances in which operational requirements make the 90-day requirement unfeasible must begin TAP as soon as possible within the remaining period of service while on active duty.

Agency Priority Goals and TAP Public Reporting

In January 2011, the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA)[13] was significantly enhanced by the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA).[14] GPRAMA established a new framework aimed at taking a more crosscutting and integrated approach to focusing on results and improving government performance. Under GPRAMA, agencies are required to more frequently review and report the results they achieve.[15] Among other things, GPRAMA requires certain agencies to develop a

[12]Federal law generally requires servicemembers who are anticipating separation to begin pre-separation counseling 90 days before their anticipated date of discharge. 10 U.S.C. § 1142. DOD regulations require servicemembers to complete the capstone process 90 days prior to their anticipated separation. 32 C.F.R. pt. 88 app. H. DOD officials told us that by establishing a 90-day deadline for Capstone completion through regulations they intended to signal to the services that they would need to ensure servicemembers started TAP earlier than the 90-day threshold for beginning TAP set by law.

[13]Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285.

[14]Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866.

[15]31 U.S.C. § 1121.

limited number of agency priority goals every 2 years.[16] These goals are to reflect the highest priorities of each agency, as identified by the head of the agency, and be informed by broad crosscutting federal government priority goals as well as input from relevant congressional committees.[17] In implementing the agency priority goals under GPRAMA, agencies are required to identify the various organizations, program activities, and other activities—both within and external to the agency—that contribute to each goal, and to review progress on a quarterly basis.[18]

Since fiscal year 2014, DOD has publicly emphasized the importance of servicemembers' transition from military to civilian life by naming this transition one of its six agency priority goals—the Transition to Veterans agency priority goal.

[16]31 U.S.C. § 1120(b). This provision applies to the 24 agencies identified in the Chief Financial Officers (CFO) Act of 1990, as amended (31 U.S.C. § 901(b)), unless the Office of Management and Budget determines otherwise. The 24 CFO Act agencies, generally the largest federal agencies, are the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, the Interior, Justice, Labor, State, Transportation, the Treasury, and Veterans Affairs, as well as the Agency for International Development, Environmental Protection Agency, General Services Administration, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, National Science Foundation, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Office of Personnel Management, Small Business Administration, and Social Security Administration.

[17]These crosscutting goals are also known as cross-agency priority goals.

[18]Agencies are required to include this information in their performance plans for all agency goals, including agency priority goals. See 31 U.S.C. §§ 1115, 1121; see also GAO, *Managing for Results: Agencies Should More Fully Develop Priority Goals under the GPRA Modernization Act*, GAO-13-174 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 19, 2013), 1-2.

Department of Defense's (DOD) Transition to Veterans Agency Priority Goal

"By September 30, 2017, DOD will improve the career readiness of Service members transitioning to civilian life by: 1) ensuring at least 85 percent of eligible active duty Service members and 85 percent of eligible reserve component Service members complete the following required transition activities prior to separation from active duty: pre-separation counseling, a Department of Labor employment workshop, and Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits briefings; 2) verifying that at least 85 percent of eligible active duty Service members and 85 percent of eligible reserve component Service members meet established Career Readiness Standards or received a warm handover to appropriate partner agencies prior to separation from active duty; 3) accelerating the transition of recovering Service members into Veteran status by reducing the disability evaluation processing time; and 4) supporting the seamless transition of recovering Service members by sharing active recovery plans with the VA."

Source: Department of Defense | GAO-18-23

To measure progress on this goal, DOD established five measures, four of which relate to TAP performance, and has publicly reported performance on these measures in several ways, such as in annual performance reports.[19] Additionally, according to DOD officials, quarterly results are first shared with the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel Readiness and then sent to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to be published on performance.gov—a publicly available federal website.[20] DOD has also publicly reported these measures in annual performance reports and in statements delivered during

[19]The fifth measure relates to the percentage of servicemembers who meet the DOD Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) performance goals.

[20]OMB has not published fiscal year 2017 performance results on performance.gov. In June 2017, OMB posted a notice on performance.gov stating that the website was undergoing an overhaul as agencies develop updated goals and objectives for release in February 2018 with the President's next budget submission to Congress. On June 15, 2017, OMB issued a memo stating it had discontinued reporting on all previous administration agency priority goals through the end of fiscal year 2017 to be consistent with the intention that agency priority goals focus efforts toward achieving the priorities of current political leadership. DOD officials told us they have continued to report TAP-related agency priority goal results to the Office of the Secretary of Defense each quarter of fiscal year 2017, but said the data are difficult to interpret because of the implementation of a new electronic record-keeping system.

congressional hearings on TAP. Table 1 shows DOD's most recently reported TAP performance measure results.

Table 1: Department of Defense's (DOD) Publicly Reported Performance Measures for Its Agency Priority Goal on Transition to Veterans, Fiscal Year 2016

Performance Measure	DOD's Goal	DOD's Reported Outcome
Verified percent of known **eligible active duty** servicemembers who have separated and attended (a) pre-separation counseling, (b) a Department of Labor employment workshop, and (c) Veterans Affairs Benefits briefings prior to their separation or retirement.[a]	85%	96.8%
Verified percent of known **eligible National Guard and Reserve** servicemembers who have separated and attended transition counseling, (b) a Department of Labor employment workshop, and (c) Veterans Affairs Benefits briefings prior to their release from active duty.[b]	85%	94%
Verified percent of known **eligible active duty** servicemembers who separated and met Career Readiness Standards or received a warm handover to appropriate partner agencies prior to their separation or retirement.[a]	85%	96.9%
Verified percent of known **eligible National Guard and Reserve** servicemembers who separated and met Career Readiness Standards or received a warm handover to appropriate partner agencies prior to their release from active duty.[b]	85%	92.7%

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-18-23

Notes: [a]For this performance measure DOD uses the term "active duty" to refer collectively to active-duty servicemembers who are not members of the National Guard and Reserve, which DOD refers to as the "reserve component."

[b]For this performance measure DOD uses the term "reserve component" to refer collectively to the National Guard and Reserves.

Though federal law mandates that DOD require eligible servicemembers to participate in TAP, with some exceptions, DOD set performance goals below 100 percent participation among the population of servicemembers required to participate. 10 U.S.C. § 1144(c). GAO bolded selected text to emphasize the relevant population.

National Guard and Reserve

While most individuals who serve in the military work within what DOD refers to as the "active" component of the military services—the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Navy[21]—others serve in what DOD refers to as the "Reserve Component" (see table 2). Specifically, DOD uses the term "reserve component" to refer collectively to the six individual reserve components of the Armed Forces it oversees: the (1) Army National Guard, (2) Army Reserve, (3) Navy Reserve, (4) Marine Corps Reserve,

[21]Servicemembers on full-time training duty in the reserve component are also included in the active component of the military services.

(5) Air National Guard, and (6) Air Force Reserve.[22] In this report we refer to these six reserve components as the National Guard and Reserves. The purpose of the National Guard and Reserves is to provide trained units and qualified persons in time of war or national emergency or for other national security requirements, and to fill the needs of the armed forces whenever more units and persons are needed.[23] Additionally, when a Governor requests federal assistance in responding to a major disaster or emergency, the Secretary of Defense may order any reserve component member to active duty in order to respond to the request. Table 2 shows the number of TAP-eligible servicemembers who separated from military service in fiscal year 2016 from the different military services and reserve components.

Table 2: Number of Servicemembers Eligible for the Transition Assistance Program Who Separated from Military Service in Fiscal Year 2016, by Military Service, Component, and National Guard and Reserve Status

	Department of Defense (DOD) Component and Service	Number of Transitioning Servicemembers
Active	Army	75,544
	Navy	31,280
	Marine Corps	28,583
	Air Force	24,210
	DOD Active Component Total	**159,157**
National Guard and Reserve	***DOD National Guard and Reserves Total***	**42,080**
	DOD Total	**201,237**

Source: GAO Analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-18-23

Members of the National Guard and Reserves can be called for active duty for a year or more.[24] After serving on active duty for 180 continuous days or more, members of the National Guard and Reserves become eligible for TAP, and are required to complete the VOW Act requirements

[22]The Department of Homeland Security oversees the seventh individual reserve component—the Coast Guard Reserve—which was outside the scope of this review.

[23]10 U.S.C. § 10102.

[24]The four major statutory provisions under which members of the National Guard and Reserve can be involuntarily ordered to federal active duty are: 10 U.S.C. §§ 12301, 12302, 12304, 12304(b).

and meet the Career Readiness Standards when they leave active duty, either to return to the reserve components or to civilian life, except in certain limited circumstances.[25] DOD refers to the process of releasing activated members of the National Guard and Reserves from active duty status as demobilization or deactivation. As part of this process, according to DOD officials, activated members of the National Guard and Reserves generally must complete a range of medical and personnel requirements in addition to TAP before returning to their reserve component duty station—often called their home duty station.

According to DOD officials, responsibility for ensuring that National Guard and Reserve members attend TAP is jointly shared between active and reserve component commanders. The active duty unit commander to whom National Guard and Reserve members report has immediate responsibility for ensuring those servicemembers attend TAP as required under federal law.[26] The military service within which the activated member serves on active duty is also responsible for ensuring members of the National Guard and Reserves participate in TAP unless exempted. In addition, according to DOD officials, each reserve component generally has responsibility for ensuring that personnel requirements, including those pertaining to TAP, are fulfilled for members of the National Guard and Reserves.

Interagency collaboration

Although TAP is administered by DOD, multiple federal agencies collaborate closely to deliver and assess TAP. The TAP interagency governance structure includes senior officials from DOD, VA, DOL, Departments of Homeland Security and Education, U.S. Office of Personnel Management, and the Small Business Administration, all of whom participate in TAP Executive Council meetings each quarter and Senior Steering Group meetings at least every month, according to agency officials. Further, officials tasked to particular interagency working groups focused on specific elements of TAP, such as the curriculum or

[25]As defined by DOD, the VOW Act requirements include: a) attending pre-separation or transition counseling, b) attending the DOL Employment Workshop, unless exempt, and c) attending VA Benefits Briefings. Reserve component members may choose to decline pre-separation or transition counseling for each successive period of active duty under 10 U.S.C. 1142 consisting of 180 days or more of continuous active duty.

[26]10 U.S.C. § 1144(c); 32 C.F.R. pt. 88 app. H.

performance measures, meet more frequently as needed—typically at least once a month—and generally communicate weekly, according to agency officials. One such working group is the performance management working group that oversees the interagency TAP evaluation plan, which includes monitoring performance measures related to TAP requirements, indicators of post-program outcomes, and formal evaluations sponsored by interagency partners.[27]

DOD Lacked Data on Nearly Half of National Guard and Reserve Members and Its Public Reporting May Have Misstated TAP Performance

Missing Data Affected the Extent to Which DOD Was Able to Report on TAP Performance, Particularly for the National Guard and Reserve

DOD lacked TAP data for 48 percent of eligible National Guard and Reserve members and 12 percent of servicemembers who were not members of the National Guard and Reserve, according to our analysis of DOD data for fiscal year 2016.[28] DOD officials explained that prior to fiscal

[27]In 2014, GAO reported that the TAP evaluation plan lacked higher level evaluations to help gauge the effectiveness of the program, and recommended that DOD should work with partner agencies to develop a written strategy for determining which components and tracks to evaluate and the most appropriate evaluation methods (GAO-14-144). The report specified that the strategy should include a plan to use the results of evaluations to modify or redesign the program as appropriate. In 2014, the TAP interagency governance structure developed an interagency TAP evaluation plan and briefed the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) on the plan. OMB approved the plan in May 2014. As of October 2017, this recommendation remained open. GAO will consider the recommendation met once the TAP evaluation plan includes a definite strategy to rigorously evaluate TAP's impact on post-program outcomes and specifies how the interagency partners plan to use the results of any evaluations. Small Business Administration released results of an evaluation on the Boots to Business program. (U.S. Small Business Administration, *White Paper: Operation Boots to Business Veteran Entrepreneurship Assessment*, Syracuse, N.Y., Jun. 2016) DOL has an ongoing TAP evaluation of the employment workshop, and VA is in the process of contracting for a survey of veterans that will include questions regarding the transition services received under TAP, according to agency officials.

[28]Specifically, DOD lacked TAP data collected using DD Form 2958—the Service Members Career Readiness Standards/Individual Transition Plan Checklist—that includes verified data on participation in required TAP courses and Career Readiness Standards attainment.

year 2017, DOD collected TAP participation data using three paper-based forms that TAP staff or military personnel later manually entered into an electronic system.[29] DOD officials attributed missing data, in part, to challenges related to using these paper forms. They said that forms were not always turned in after a commander or commander's designee signed them, or data from completed forms were not always entered into the central TAP database before a servicemember's date of separation.[30] According to DOD officials, these challenges are more pronounced for members of the National Guard and Reserve than for other servicemembers because of the compressed time frames in which these individuals demobilize or deactivate.[31] For instance, TAP staff at both installations we visited where large numbers of National Guard and Reserve members reportedly demobilize, said that these individuals generally have 2 weeks or less to complete all demobilization activities—including TAP—before being released from active duty. Table 3 shows the number and percent of TAP-eligible individuals for whom DOD lacked data.

[29]We define participation as a servicemember or member of the National Guard or Reserve completing all required TAP courses: VA Benefits I and II and the DOL Employment Workshop, unless exempt. In some cases servicemembers and members of the National Guard and Reserve can be exempted from one portion of the TAP curriculum—the DOL Employment Workshop. For example, servicemembers who retire with over 20 years of active federal service in the military services and those who can document confirmed civilian employment or acceptance to an accredited institution of higher education are exempt from the requirement to attend the DOL Employment Workshop, but may attend if desired. In no cases are servicemembers exempted from pre-separation counseling, VA Benefits briefings, CRS attainment, or Capstone, according to DOD officials. Data on pre-separation counseling were collected, by TAP staff using the DD Form 2648 for servicemembers and 2648-1 for members of the National Guard and Reserve. Data on attendance in mandatory courses, Career Readiness Standards attainment, and warm handovers were collected and verified using DD form 2958 by TAP staff.

[30]TAP officials explained that for data from the paper forms to be officially included in a servicemember's record, these data must be entered into TAP's database before a servicemember's separation date. Officials added that if the data were entered after the servicemember's separation date, DOD would still be able to use the data for reporting purposes for that fiscal year.

[31]In 2014, GAO recommended that DOD systematically collect information on any challenges facing demobilizing members of the National Guard and Reserve regarding the logistics of the timing and location to attend TAP. DOD implemented this recommendation in February 2016. GAO-14-144.

Table 3: Number and Percent of Members of the National Guard and Reserve and Servicemembers for Whom Department of Defense (DOD) Lacked Data on Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Participation and Career Readiness Standard Attainment, Fiscal Year 2016

	Number TAP Eligible	Number with Missing Data	Percent with Missing Data
National Guard and Reserves	42,080	20,284	48.2
Servicemembers who are not members of the National Guard or Reserves	159,157	19,704	12.4
DOD Overall	201,237	39,988	19.9

Source: GAO analysis of DOD data. | GAO-18-23

Due to the high percentage of missing TAP data for members of the National Guard and Reserve (48 percent), we determined these data were not sufficiently reliable for our analysis of participation in TAP classes and attainment of Career Readiness Standards. We present the overall participation levels for this group to illustrate the extent to which DOD was missing data on the participation and Career Readiness Standard attainment of TAP-eligible members of the National Guard and Reserve. In contrast, we found data for active-duty servicemembers who are not members of the National Guard or Reserve to be sufficiently reliable both to describe what is known about participation overall and for more detailed participant-level analyses, such as break-outs by service. Consequently, the participant-level analyses presented in the second and third objectives of this report only include the 159,157 active-duty servicemembers DOD identified as being TAP eligible in fiscal year 2016 and do not include the 42,080 members of the National Guard and Reserve that DOD identified as being TAP eligible in that year.

DOD's Public Reporting of TAP Performance May Have Misstated the Extent to Which TAP Requirements Were Met

In fiscal year 2016, DOD's public reporting on the four performance measures under its Transition to Veterans agency priority goal may have misstated the extent to which underlying TAP requirements were met for National Guard and Reserve members and all other TAP- eligible

servicemembers.[32] According to federal internal control standards, management should use quality information to achieve the entity's objectives and to communicate quality information to external parties.[33] Moreover, GPRMA requires agencies to publicly report on how they ensure the accuracy and reliability of the performance information they use to measure progress towards the agency's priority goals.[34] However, when reporting publicly on TAP's performance, DOD did not disclose that the method it used to calculate the measure excluded 48 percent of TAP-eligible National Guard and Reserve members for whom it was missing

[32]Though federal law mandates that DOD require eligible servicemembers to participate in TAP, with some exceptions, DOD set performance goals below 100 percent participation among the population of servicemembers required to participate. 10 U.S.C. § 1144(c). DOD officials told us they assess performance targets each year and establish attainable but challenging performance goals. In fiscal year 2016, DOD's four TAP-related agency priority goal indicators were as follows: (1) verify that at least 85 percent of known eligible active duty servicemembers met Career Readiness Standards of received a warm handover to appropriate partner agencies prior to their separation or retirement from active duty; (2) verify that at least 85 percent of known eligible Reserve Component servicemembers met Career Readiness Standards or received a warm handover to appropriate partner agencies prior to their release from active duty; (3) verify that at least 85 percent of known eligible active-duty servicemembers attended (a) pre-separation counseling, (b) a Department of Labor employment workshop, and (c) Veterans Affairs Benefits briefings prior to their separation or retirement from active duty; and (4) verify that at least 85 percent of known eligible Reserve Component servicemembers attended (a) pre-separation counseling, (b) a Department of Labor employment workshop, and (c) Veterans Affairs Benefits briefings prior to their release from active duty.

[33]GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government,* GAO-14-704G (Washington, D.C.: September 2014). According to federal standards for internal control, quality information is complete, appropriate, current, accurate, accessible, and provided on a timely basis.

[34]31 U.S.C. §§ 1115(b)(8), 1116(c)(6), 1122(b)(5).

data.[35] Therefore, the denominator used to calculate the rate at which TAP's requirements were met was based on a subset (i.e., those for whom data were available). This had the effect of potentially misstating TAP's performance had the denominator been based on the entire TAP-eligible population (i.e., those for whom data were available plus those for whom data were missing). For example, by excluding those for whom data were missing, DOD publicly reported that 94 percent of National Guard and Reserve members attended transition counseling and completed the three required courses of TAP's core curriculum (mandatory elements) (see fig. 2).[36] Had the reported measure included all TAP-eligible members of the National Guard and Reserve for whom data were missing, the percentage known to have completed the mandatory elements would have been substantially lower—possibly as low as 47 percent instead of 94 percent—and DOD might not have met its performance goal of 85 percent.[37] Similarly, had the reported measure for servicemembers who were not members of the National Guard and Reserve included all TAP-eligible servicemembers, the percentage known

[35]Neither DOD's public reporting on performance.gov nor its Fiscal Year 2016 Organizational Assessment Report clearly explain that the measures do not include TAP-eligible individuals for whom participation data were not available, nor did they include the number or percentages of servicemembers or members of the National Guard and Reserve for whom TAP data were missing. DOD officials said that the extent of missing data was included and clearly conveyed in the information provided to the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness regarding fiscal year 2017 performance on the Transition to Veterans agency priority goal. According to officials, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness submits the performance information to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to post to performance.gov. However, OMB temporarily stopped publishing quarterly updates on priority goals on performance.gov in 2017. DOD's fiscal year 2015 Performance Accountability Report did include the overall number of eligible servicemembers for whom participation data were missing, but did not provide separate numbers for servicemembers and members of the National Guard and Reserve or percentages of these TAP-eligible populations for whom data were missing.

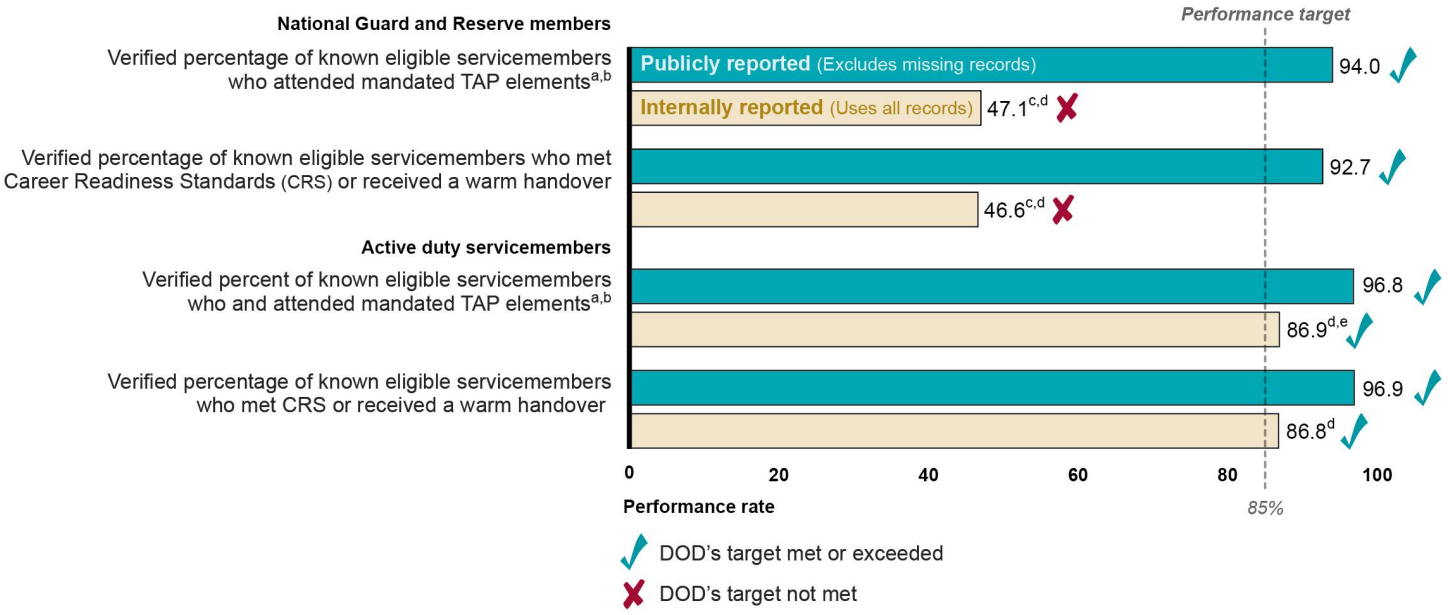
[36]While DOD officials refer to this measure as the VOW compliance rate, this engagement did not involve a legal compliance review.

[37]The exact rate cannot be determined due to missing data. If none of the members of the National Guard and Reserve for whom data were missing completed TAP the rate would be 47 percent. If the participation of members of the National Guard and Reserve with missing data mirrored that of those for whom data were available, the rate would be 94 percent. If every member of the National Guard and Reserve with missing data completed TAP the actual rate would be even higher—97 percent.

to have completed the mandatory elements could have been lower than what was publicly reported.[38]

[38]The exact rate cannot be determined due to missing data. If none of the active duty servicemembers (which excludes members of the National Guard and Reserve with missing data) completed TAP, the rate would be 86.9 percent. If the participation of active duty servicemembers with missing data mirrored participation of those for whom data were available, the rate would be 96.8 percent. If every active duty servicemember with missing data completed TAP, the actual rate would be even higher—97.3 percent.

Figure 2: Comparison of Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Performance Outcomes between Department of Defense's (DOD) Public and Internal Reports, Fiscal Year 2016



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) fiscal year 2016 data. | GAO-18-23

[a]Attended (a) pre-separation counseling, (b) a Department of Labor employment workshop, and (c) Veterans Affairs Benefits briefings prior to their separation. In its internal reports DOD refers to this as "VOW Compliance."

[b]DOD's definition notes the calculation is in accordance with statutory requirements that allowed exemptions determined by the Secretary of Defense in consultation with Department of Homeland Security, Department of Veterans' Affairs, and Department of Labor, as defined in law.

[c]DOD's internal monitoring reports present rates of VOW compliance and Career Readiness Standards attainment separately for members of the National Guard and members of the Reserve. To make it easier to compare DOD's two methods for calculating performance rates, GAO used DOD's reported numbers and methodology to calculate a combined measure that includes members of both the National Guard and Reserve.

[d]Actual participation rates may have differed from what available records show because DOD lacked participation data for 12 percent of eligible servicemembers and 48 percent of eligible members of the National Guard and Reserve. If the proportion of servicemembers or members of the National Guard or Reserve for whom data were missing completed TAP at the same rate as those for whom data were available, the percentage would likely parallel the percentage publicly reported. DOD officials said it is not accurate to calculate participation rates for servicemembers for whom data were missing because it is unknown whether those servicemembers met the performance criteria. However, we report this number to illustrate the discrepancy between what is known about performance for the entire TAP-eligible population and what DOD publicly reported.

[e]This rate, which DOD published in its public reports, differs slightly from the rate we calculated using the participant-level data provided by DOD, as shown in figure 2. DOD officials said our calculation differs from the published rates because additional data were entered after the official performance measure calculation was completed.

Missing data also affected DOD's public reporting of another indicator under its agency priority goal —the percentage of National Guard and Reserve members who met Career Readiness Standards or received a

warm handover. By excluding these servicemembers from its calculations, DOD's public reporting may have misstated TAP's actual performance.

DOD's internal reports are more complete and transparent than its public reports. Unlike its publicly-reported performance measures that excluded records with missing data, DOD staff regularly generated internal reports that included additional data showing what was known about compliance for the entire TAP-eligible population.[39] DOD's internal reports included performance information calculated using two methods—one excluded those with missing data and the other included those with missing data, although DOD officials said they use the first method only to show the extent of missing data.[40] Nonetheless, in its internal reports, DOD quantified the extent of missing data, which it has not consistently done in its public reporting. As a result of presenting program performance both ways and showing the scope of missing data, DOD presented a more complete picture of what was—and was not—known about TAP performance in its internal reports than it did in its public reports.

TAP officials from each of the military services told us they use the regularly-generated internal reports that include data about the entire TAP-eligible population to monitor TAP performance. Most of these officials told us that because their service is responsible for ensuring every TAP-eligible servicemember meets TAP requirements, the internal reports are more appropriate than public reports in monitoring whether this requirement has been met.

DOD Reports That Efforts Are Under Way to Collect More Complete Data

In November 2016, DOD launched a new system to electronically collect TAP-related data: the TAP-IT Enterprise System. Officials said they shifted to the new TAP-IT Enterprise System to standardize data

[39]DOD officials use the term "known eligible servicemembers" to signal whether data were available to verify servicemembers participation in TAP. For example, DOD staff noted that its calculations that exclude servicemembers with missing data "only include known eligible servicemembers" while the calculations that include servicemembers with missing data include "both the known and unknown eligible servicemembers."

[40]DOD officials said that they always assess compliance using participation rates that exclude servicemembers and members of the National Guard and Reserve with missing data.

collection across the services and improve data completeness and accuracy. The TAP-IT Enterprise System consolidates the three paper forms into a single online form that allows multiple authorized users—including transition counselors and commanders and their designees—to enter information directly into TAP's database, minimizing the risk that data will be lost. Officials said this is especially important for certain servicemembers, such as National Guard and Reserve members and those active duty servicemembers facing short-notice separations. As previously discussed, DOD officials said using the paper forms likely contributed to problems collecting TAP data on servicemembers who experienced short-notice separations, such as National Guard and Reserve members. Officials cited a number of other advantages to using the new TAP-IT Enterprise System, such as built-in data-entry flags that will notify users about missing information. The TAP-IT Enterprise System is also expected to identify when servicemembers start and complete the TAP process, thereby tracking more information related to the time frames of servicemembers' participation. While the system is being used at all installations to collect VOW compliance and Career Readiness Standards attainment data, the first full fiscal year of data collected under the system may not be available until the second quarter of fiscal year 2018. Moreover, installation and unit-command specific reports describing TAP performance levels may not be available until October 2018, according to a senior DOD official. Further, TAP managers and DOD officials will not be able to use the TAP-IT Enterprise System to generate unit-level or installation-level reports until October 2018, according to a senior DOD official.

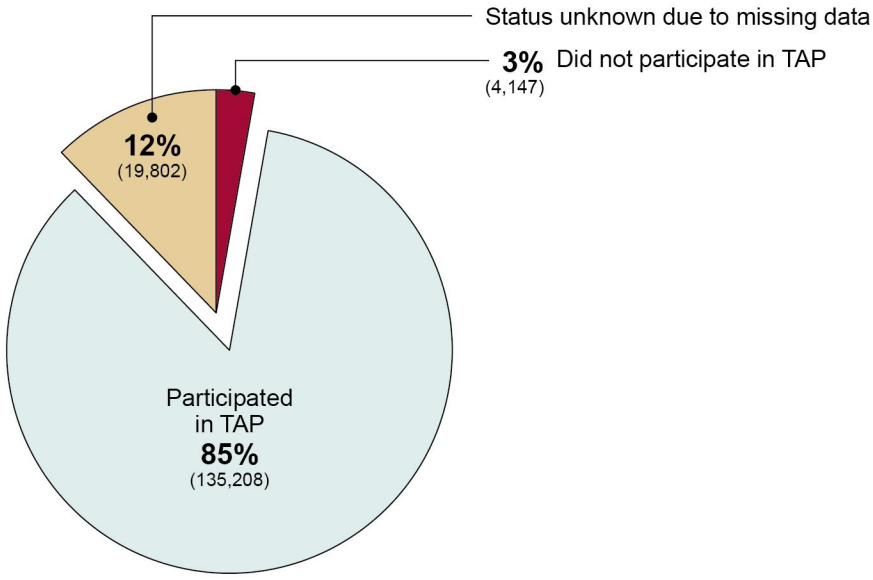
At Least 85 Percent of Servicemembers Participated in Required Courses but Not Always on Time, and Several Factors Were Reported to Affect Participation

At Least 85 Percent of Servicemembers Participated in TAP's Required Courses and Fewer Than 15 Percent Took Additional 2-Day Classes

At least 85 percent of servicemembers participated in TAP's required courses—the Employment Workshop and VA Benefit Briefings—

according to our analysis of DOD data for fiscal year 2016 (see fig. 3).[41] Therefore, DOD achieved its 85 percent performance goal for servicemember participation in mandatory elements of TAP.[42]

Figure 3: Participation Rates in Transition Assistance Program's (TAP) Required Courses, Fiscal Year 2016



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) fiscal year 2016 data. | GAO-18-23

Note: The participation rate is a measure of all servicemembers who met the following requirements: 1) either completed the employment workshop or were exempt from the requirement to participate in that

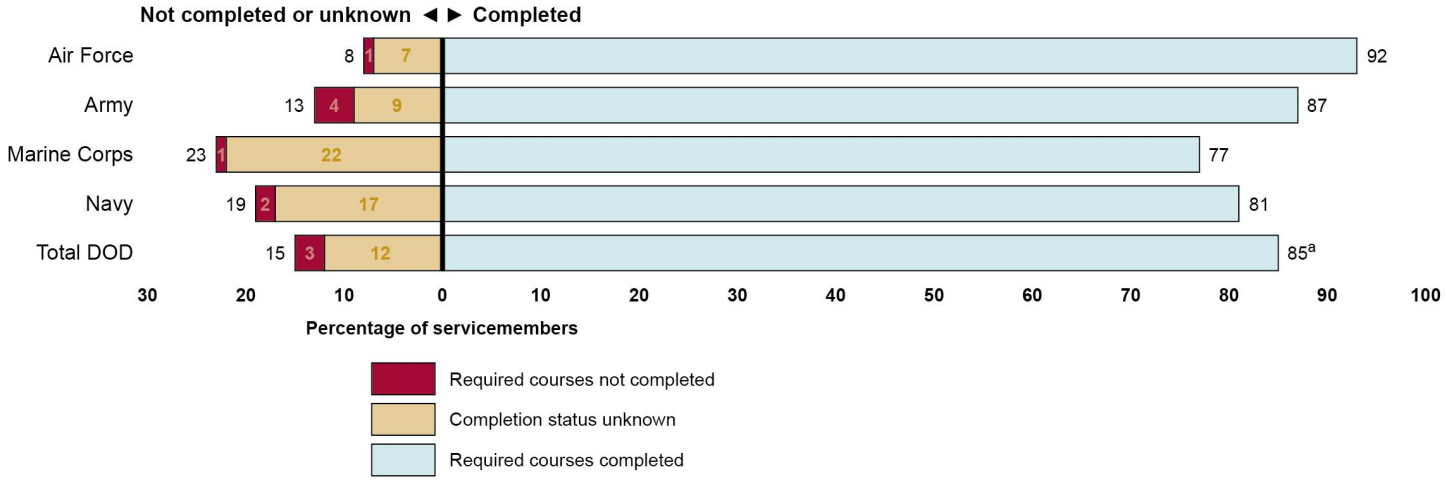
[41]More specifically, this measure includes all servicemembers who met the following requirements: 1) completed VA Benefits I and II courses, and 2) either completed the employment workshop or were exempt from the requirement to participate in that course. DOD's participation measure, the "VOW Compliance" rate, includes a third requirement—participation in pre-separation counseling. Our analysis of DOD data also showed that 85 percent of eligible servicemembers met all three of these requirements. Actual participation rates may have been higher than available records showed because DOD lacked participation data for 12 percent of eligible servicemembers.

[42]DOD calls completion of the following mandatory elements "VOW Compliance:" (1) attended pre-separation or transition counseling, (2) completed VA Benefits I and II courses, and (3) either completed the employment workshop or were exempt from the requirement to participate in that course. Federal law states the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of Homeland Security shall require the participation in TAP of the members eligible for assistance, with some exceptions for the DOL Employment Workshop portion of the curriculum. 10 U.S.C. § 1144. DOD's GPRAMA priority goal performance target for fiscal years 2016 and 2017 is set at 85 percent. The goal includes both servicemembers and members of the National Guard and Reserve. This performance target is not a statutory requirement.

course, and 2) completed VA Benefits I and II courses. Thus, our participation rate differs slightly from DOD's VOW compliance rate, which also included mandatory pre-separation counseling. Because GAO determined participation data were reliable for servicemembers but not for National Guard and Reserve members, this figure does not include members of the National Guard or Reserves. Actual participation rates may have differed from what available records show because DOD lacked participation data for 12 percent of eligible servicemembers. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Participation rates for TAP's required courses generally did not vary based on a servicemember's age, rank, years of service, or retirement status. Participation rates were lower for the Marine Corps and Navy than for the other services, due at least in part to higher levels of missing data (see fig. 4). Also, 86 percent of servicemembers who left the military with an honorable discharge participated in TAP's required courses compared to 56 percent of servicemembers who left the military with an other than honorable discharge.

Figure 4: Participation Rates in Transition Assistance Program's Required Courses, by Branch of Service, Fiscal Year 2016



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) fiscal year 2016 data. | GAO-18-23

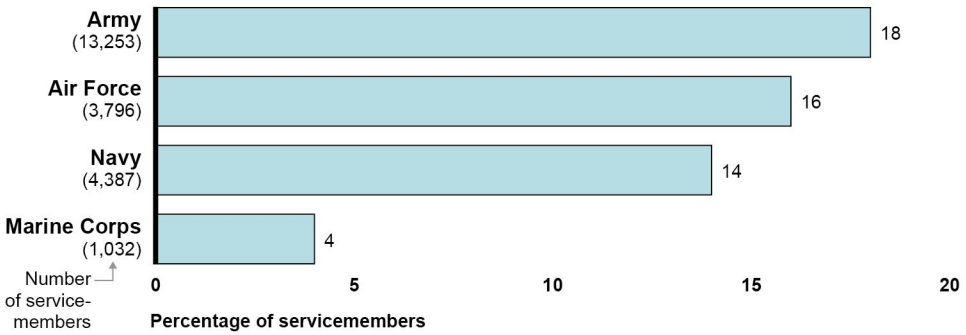
[a]This rate, which we calculated using the participant-level data provided by DOD, differs slightly from the rates DOD published in its public reports, as shown in figure 2. DOD officials explained this is because additional data were entered after the official performance measure calculation was completed.

Note: Because GAO determined participation data were reliable for active-duty servicemembers but not National Guard and Reserve members, this figure does not include the latter. Actual participation rates may have differed from what available records showed because DOD lacked participation data for 12 percent of eligible servicemembers. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Our analysis of DOD data found that relatively few servicemembers—fewer than 15 percent— participated in one or more of TAP's additional 2-day classes. Similar to TAP's required courses, participation in one or more of the additional 2-day classes generally did not vary based on servicemembers' age, or retirement status. However, our analysis of DOD

data found fewer officers (9 percent) participated in the 2-day tracks than enlisted servicemembers (15 percent). Our analysis of DOD data found that the participation rate for Marines was more than three times lower than the rates for servicemembers from the other branches of service (see fig. 5).[43] Also, servicemembers who left the military with an honorable discharge participated in the additional 2-day classes more than twice as often (14 percent) as servicemembers who left the military under another discharge status (5 percent).

Figure 5: Participation Rates of All Transition Assistance Program-Eligible Servicemembers Who Participated in at Least One Additional 2-day Class, by Branch of Service, Fiscal Year 2016



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) fiscal year 2016 data. | GAO-18-23

Note: Because GAO determined participation data were reliable for active-duty servicemembers but not National Guard and Reserve members, this figure does not include the latter. Actual participation rates may have differed from what available records showed because DOD lacked participation data for 12 percent of eligible servicemembers. This varied by service—DOD was missing data for 7 percent of servicemembers from the Air Force, 9 percent from the Army, 22 percent from the Marine Corps, and 17 percent from the Navy.

Although relatively few servicemembers participated in any of TAP's additional 2-day classes, those who did primarily participated in the class on Accessing Higher Education. Overall, of the 14.1 percent who attended at least one additional 2- day class, more than twice as many attended Accessing Higher Education than the other two classes, according to our analysis of DOD data (see table 4). However, we also found that more than twice as many servicemembers reported planning to

[43]In our previous TAP report we recommended DOD require all services to provide unit commanders and their leaders information on TAP participation levels of servicemembers under their command, a recommendation that remained open as of August 2017. DOD disagreed with the recommendation and stated that Marine Corps commanders leveraged the capabilities of the personnel system to identify eligible Marines and schedule their TAP attendance, and that the Marine Corps had mandated participation since the program's inception. GAO-14-144.

use VA education benefits to pursue higher education (37,616) than attended Accessing Higher Education (16,701). While some servicemembers interested in pursuing higher education may opt out of attending this optional class, it provides information on how to use publicly available resources to make more informed decisions about selecting a college.[44] DOL officials told us they hope to substantially boost servicemember participation in the Career Technical Training track in light of a recently issued presidential executive order on expanding apprenticeships in America.[45] DOL officials told us they hope to substantially boost servicemember participation in the Career Technical Training track in light of a recently issued presidential executive order on expanding apprenticeships in America.

Table 4: Number and Percentage of Servicemembers Participating in Additional 2-day Classes, Fiscal Year 2016

Additional class	Number	Percentage
Accessing Higher Education	16,701	10.5%
Career Technical Training	6,893	4.3%
Entrepreneurship[a]	15,988	7.9%
Attended at least one of these classes	22,468	14.1%

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data and data provided by the Small Business Administration. | GAO-18-23

Note: Because GAO determined participation data were reliable for active-duty servicemembers but not for National Guard and Reserves members, this figure does not include the latter. Actual participation rates may have differed from what available records showed because DOD lacked participation data for 12 percent of eligible servicemembers.

[a]Figures for the Entrepreneurship class were provided by the Small Business Administration (SBA). According to SBA, in fiscal year 2016, 11, 219 servicemembers attended this class in a classroom-setting within the continental United States (70.2 percent); 1,866 attended in a classroom setting outside the continental United States (11.7 percent); and 2,903 participated online through the Joint Knowledge Online platform (18.2 percent). Percentages do not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

[44]For example, the class teaches servicemembers how to use the GI Bill Comparison Tool to research colleges' graduation and employment rates and to learn if colleges provide veterans with additional supports.

[45]They also said that in light of a recent presidential executive order on expanding apprenticeships in America they hope to substantially boost servicemember attendance in this additional 2-day class. Specifically, this executive order—dated June 15, 2017—states that "it shall be the policy of the Federal Government to provide more affordable pathways to secure, high paying jobs by promoting apprenticeships and effective workforce development programs," and that "the Secretaries of Defense, Labor, and Education, shall, in consultation with each other and consistent with applicable law, promote apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships…for members of America's armed services and veterans."

The percentage of servicemembers who attended TAP courses in a classroom versus online could not be determined because DOD lacked sufficiently reliable data on the method of course delivery in fiscal year 2016.[46] However, classroom delivery was widely preferred by the TAP staff we interviewed. DOD policy states servicemembers should attend TAP in a classroom setting whenever possible, and we found that TAP staff at six of seven installations we visited told us they actively steered servicemembers away from taking TAP online because the classroom setting offered them more opportunity for hands-on activities and interaction with instructors and peers. In general, the online version of TAP was regarded as a less effective learning tool than classroom participation. Servicemembers from three of the seven installations we visited who took portions of TAP online told us they did not get much out of the online version in part because they tried to make their way through the slides as quickly as possible. Similarly, TAP installation staff at all seven installations we visited told us servicemembers taking online training may not absorb or retain much information because they try to complete the coursework quickly and do not have the benefit of interacting with and learning from their peers.

Still, online TAP was seen as beneficial in certain circumstances, such as for servicemembers facing short-notice separations, stationed remotely, or seeking to refresh their memory about particular topics covered in class. TAP staff at more than 80 percent of the installations we surveyed that operate TAP identified rapid separations as a reason why servicemembers typically access TAP training online. In addition, TAP staff we interviewed explained that servicemembers separating under short notice generally have little time to prepare for their transitions and may not have enough time to attend TAP in a classroom setting. However, DOD regulations state that in the case of unanticipated separations with 89 or fewer days before discharge or release from active duty, servicemembers still must meet all TAP requirements.[47]

[46]DOD policy is that the virtual curriculum provides an alternative delivery of the package of TAP resources and services that are used as a vehicle to enable eligible servicemembers to attain Career Readiness Standards in order to enable compliance with statutory mandates and attainment of Career Readiness Standards. Department of Defense Instruction 1332.35, Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for Military Personnel (Feb. 29, 2016).

[47]See 32 C.F.R. pt. 88 app. E(c)(4).

TAP staff at three of seven installations we visited told us that they had received a request from one or more commanders to have servicemembers under their command participate in TAP online rather than in a classroom. When this occurred, some staff said they reminded the commander of DOD policy as a way to reinforce the importance of classroom training. In addition, although we did not specifically ask TAP managers we surveyed to comment on the use of online TAP, TAP managers from 3 of the 181 installations we surveyed expressed concern that online TAP may be overused and that commanders at their installation have tried to push online training.

Examples of Concerns Expressed by Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Managers about Overuse of Online TAP

- "Because of the existence of [online TAP] some soldiers are never given the option by their chain of command to attend brick and mortar courses."
- "Leadership often misunderstands the intended use of the online portion. We find servicemembers who have been told to take the online portion for convenience or to make up for poor planning on the part of the command."
- "Stop Airmen from having to utilize the [online version] and require installations to have brick and mortar classes. [Online TAP] is greatly outdated and Airmen do not have the opportunity to ask the questions [they need]. They are virtually left alone in the room watching a video. This practice is unsatisfactory."

Source: GAO survey data. | GAO-18-23

Most Servicemembers Started TAP on Time, but TAP Staff Said Those Who Started Later Were Less Likely to Attend Required or Additional Courses

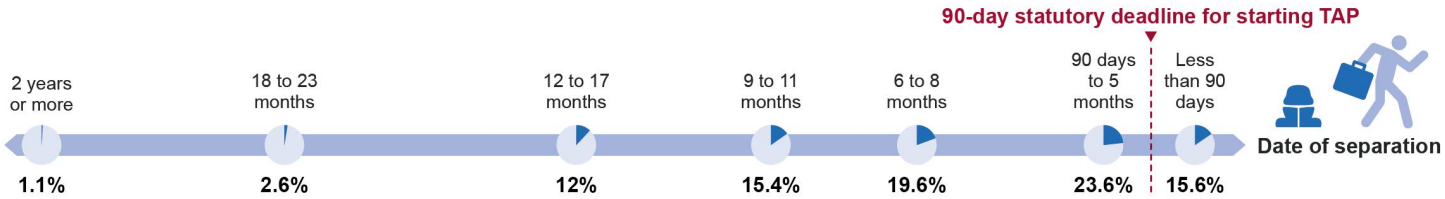
Federal law requires DOD to ensure that servicemembers generally start TAP at least 90 days before their date of separation, something that was accomplished for most servicemembers, according to our analysis of DOD data.[48] Although DOD does not track the timeliness of participation, we found that in fiscal year 2016, 74 percent of all TAP-eligible servicemembers started TAP 90 days or more before their date of separation while 16 percent started TAP fewer than 90 days before

[48]10 U.S.C. § 1142 (a)(3).

separating from military service (see fig. 6).[49] However, the group that started TAP late may include servicemembers not required to meet the 90-day requirement, such as those undergoing unanticipated, short-notice separations, to whom the timeliness standards do not apply.

According to DOD officials, DOD does not track whether separations were unanticipated, and therefore cannot differentiate between servicemembers who started late and those who are not required to meet the 90 day requirement. As a result, DOD lacks the data necessary to monitor compliance with timeliness standards.

Figure 6: Percent of Servicemembers Who Started the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) within Selected Time Frames, Fiscal Year 2016



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) fiscal year 2016 data. | GAO-18-23

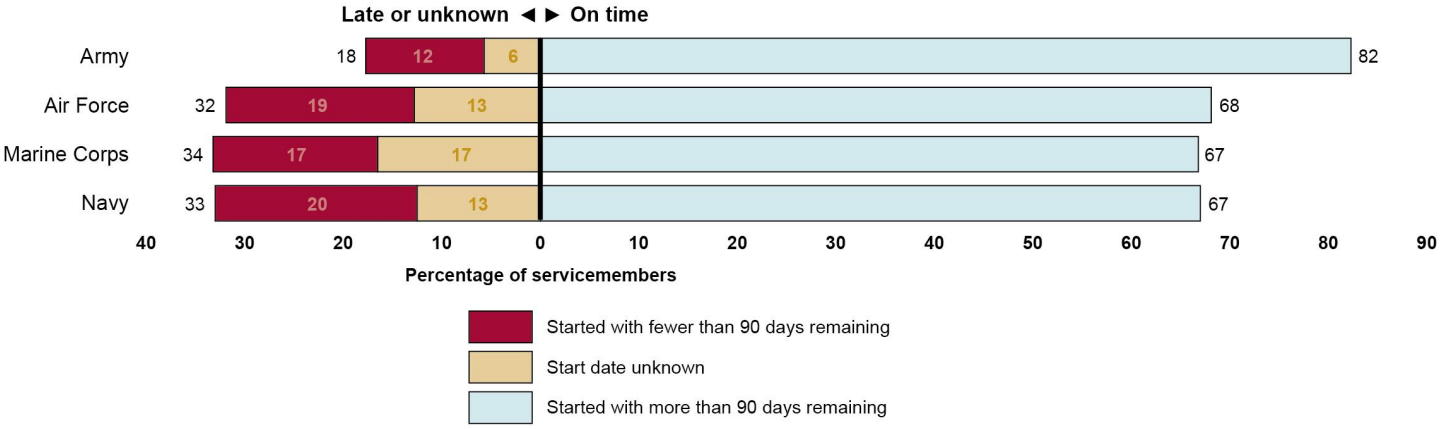
Notes: Because GAO determined participation data were reliable for active-duty servicemembers but not National Guard and Reserve members, this figure does not include the latter. Actual participation rates may have differed from what available records showed because DOD lacked data on the timeliness of beginning TAP for 10.1 percent of eligible servicemembers. The 90-day statutory timeliness threshold does not apply when servicemembers undergo unanticipated, rapid separations. Therefore, in some cases timeliness standards may have been met although the servicemember started TAP fewer than 90 days before separating.

Certain groups of servicemembers had a higher percentage than others in starting TAP shortly before separating from military service, according to our analysis of DOD data. For example, twice as high a percentage of enlisted servicemembers than officers started TAP shortly before leaving military service—17 percent compared to 8 percent. In addition, a higher percentage of younger servicemembers started TAP fewer than 90 days before separating. For example, 25 percent of servicemembers between the ages of 18 to 24 started TAP fewer than 90 days before their date of separation compared to 14 percent of servicemembers between the ages of 25 to 34 and over 5 percent for those 35 or more years of age. In addition, a higher percentage of servicemembers who were retiring

[49]In cases of unanticipated separations or retirements when there are 90 days or fewer before discharge or release from active duty, servicemembers are required to begin as soon as possible within the remaining period of service. See 32 C.F.R. pt. 88 app. C(b)(3)(i).

started TAP more than 90 days before leaving military service (87 percent) than those who were separating (70 percent). This mirrors what we were told during our site visits —TAP staff at three of seven installations told us that retirees generally started the TAP process sooner than separating servicemembers, and DOD officials said this is in line with TAP policy. Moreover, staff at four installations said that retirees generally faced fewer challenges attending classes than separating servicemembers given retirees' typical seniority in rank and control over their schedules compared to junior servicemembers. In addition, the extent to which servicemembers met the 90-day standard varied by service (see fig. 7).

Figure 7: Percent of Servicemembers Who Started the Transition Assistance Program 90 Days or More before Their Date of Separation, by Service, Fiscal Year 2016



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) fiscal year 2016 data. | GAO-18-23

Note: Because GAO determined participation data were reliable for active-duty servicemembers but not National Guard and Reserve members, this figure does not include the latter. Actual participation rates may have differed from what available records showed because DOD lacked participation data for 12 percent of eligible servicemembers. This varied by service—DOD was missing data for 6 percent of servicemembers from the Air Force, 8 percent from the Army, 22 percent from the Marine Corps, and 17 percent from the Navy. The 90-day statutory timeliness threshold does not apply when servicemembers undergo unanticipated, rapid separations. Therefore, in some cases timeliness standards may have been met although the servicemember started TAP fewer than 90 days before separating.

Perspectives on Timeliness of Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Participation

- "Commanders need to take more responsibility to ensure their members start the process at least one year out." *- Air Force TAP manager*
- "Enforce Commander's support [for] getting servicemembers to the program [no later than] 12 months before separation." - Army *TAP manager*
- "Navy commanders from the top down need to support attendance of sailors more than 2-3 months prior to separation." *- Navy TAP manager*

Source: GAO survey. | GAO-18-23

Servicemembers who start TAP fewer than 90 days before separating may face challenges completing TAP requirements or accessing additional transition resources, according to TAP staff at five of the seven installations we visited. For example, staff at one Navy installation told us that servicemembers who participate in TAP shortly before leaving military service often cannot take advantage of additional transition services they learn about in class, and thus miss opportunities to more fully prepare for life outside of the military. In addition, TAP staff across all seven installations we visited told us that servicemembers who separate under less than honorable circumstances are generally discharged as quickly as possible and may face additional challenges accessing TAP, including confinement (barring classroom attendance), restricted computer access (limiting online access), and stigma (being considered less worthy of receiving transition services than those being honorably discharged). DOL officials said they plan to amend the DOL Employment workshop to highlight when—ideally—servicemembers should start and complete different portions of the TAP curriculum.[50]

Limited Time and Mission Priorities Were Cited as Factors Hindering Participation, and Feedback about TAP Was Generally Positive

The two factors most frequently cited by installations in our survey as affecting TAP participation pertained to having limited time to engage in TAP: servicemembers going through rapid separations or starting the transition process too late to attend TAP (see table 5). Our interviews with TAP staff corroborate these findings: staff at six of seven installations we visited told us that it can be challenging to ensure rapidly separating servicemembers complete TAP. Staff at one Army installation told us that servicemembers facing disciplinary separations may start TAP just 1 day before they leave the military, severely limiting the transition assistance staff can provide to showing a video and offering a pre-separation briefing.

[50]DOL officials have created a graphic to communicate these ideal timeframes and have shared it with TAP Interagency partners, according to DOL officials. DOL officials also said the interagency partners provided positive feedback on their plan to add the graphic to the curriculum for the DOL Employment Workshop.

Table 5: Percentage of Installations Citing Various Factors That Affect Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Participation

Factor	Participation in TAP Core Curriculum	Participation in 2-day classes
Servicemember going through rapid separation (program losses, administrative separations, medical separations, or retirees)	76%	69%
Servicemember starting the transition process too late to attend	52%	58%
Servicemembers felt they could not leave their duties	43%	39%
Servicemember not being released from their duties due to having mission-critical skills	37%	38%
Servicemember not sufficiently aware of the need to attend TAP/ existence of 2-day track	31%	16%
Lack of support from direct supervisors	30%	35%
Servicemember was deployed	29%	22%
Servicemember was stationed in a geographically remote location	27%	25%
Lack of support from unit commanders	27%	24%
Servicemember refusing to attend	18%	15%
Lack of support from battalion/ squadron commanders	16%	17%
Course was full	12%	5%
Classrooms are too small or too few in number	10%	3%

Source: GAO survey of installations with full-time TAP operations. | GAO-18-23

The next two most frequently cited factors pertained to mission focus: servicemembers feeling they could not leave their duties or not being released from duties due to mission critical skills, according to our survey of installations with primarily full-time TAP operations. We heard similar themes during our site visits—TAP staff and servicemembers at five of seven installations told us that servicemembers sometimes had a hard time putting work aside to prepare for transition because they were used to focusing on their duties. Further, TAP staff and servicemembers at five installations we visited told us that servicemembers were not always released from their duties to engage in TAP. In addition, some servicemembers we interviewed said they were ordered to work a night shift after attending TAP class during the day.

Perspective on Commander Support for the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Participation

"Even if the command supports the program, the first line leader will often pull a Soldier for mission requirements. This is especially true of those on shift work. We also have Soldiers who come in for class after completing an entire night of shift and then try to stay awake during class, and then have to go on shift again that evening."

- Army TAP Manager

Source: GAO survey. | GAO-18-23

Example of Mission-First Culture Being Cited as Affecting the Transition Assistance Program

"TAP is a career decision- making process, not just a transition process. 'Transition' has become a nasty word to leaders trying to maintain operational readiness."

- Army TAP Manager

Source: GAO interview. | GAO-18-23

Thirty percent of TAP military installations with full-time TAP operations reported that lack of support from direct supervisors was a factor that affected participation and 27 percent reported that lack of support from unit commanders affected participation. Our discussions with TAP staff corroborated that lack of commander support, while not widespread, sometimes affected TAP participation. For example, staff from five of seven installations we visited told us commanders were not always supportive of their servicemembers attending TAP and some staff said that they occasionally had to reach out to commanders to reinforce that participation is mandatory. Staff from one Navy installation we visited told us commanders were typically much more focused on the mission of their unit and that transition services were a secondary concern. Staff added that mission requirements often took precedence over ensuring separating servicemembers were adequately prepared for their transition, due at least in part to long-standing military culture. We were also told that lack of commander support can affect classroom participation in the 2-day additional classes, despite federal law requiring services to ensure servicemembers are allowed to attend these classes if they so desire.[51] Specifically, staff at four of seven installations told us that commanders and direct supervisors were less inclined to allow servicemembers to attend these classes because they were considered optional.

While more than one quarter of military installations with primarily full-time TAP operations cited lack of command or supervisor support as a challenge overall, this factor was more frequently cited by certain types of installations. Specifically, among the installations that serve the highest numbers of transitioning servicemembers (1,000 or more per year), 42 percent reported that unit commander support affects TAP participation and 46 percent identified direct supervisor support as a factor.

[51] 10 U.S.C. § 1144(f)(2).

Examples of Positive Servicemember Feedback on the Transition Assistance Program

- "These classes have given me the knowledge to succeed once I transition into the civilian world."
  - Air Force servicemember
- "This program really means something to us. Most of the trainers are people who were veterans themselves and could get paid a lot more for their work. They are here serving again."
  - Navy servicemember

Source: GAO survey. | GAO-18-23

Feedback on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

- "I can honestly say that there is entirely too much information over the 5 days. . .people can't even remember what I told them on Monday."
  - Air Force TAP manager

Source: GAO survey. | GAO-18-23

Despite such challenges, we generally heard positive feedback on the TAP program during our interviews with transition staff and separating servicemembers. TAP staff at all of the installations we visited said the redesigned program offered critical information and guidance on preparing to leave the military. Similarly, servicemembers from six of the seven installations we visited said that the information they received during TAP would be important during their transition. TAP staff and servicemembers at all of the installations we visited said that mandating participation had improved the program, such as by expanding awareness about the importance of transition preparation, increasing access to transition resources, and reducing the stigma of attendance. Some servicemembers told us they found the information from the courses so important that they participated more than once. They also praised facilitators and TAP staff, noting they were knowledgeable, dedicated, and supportive. Nonetheless, many servicemembers said attending TAP was like "trying to drink from a firehose" because of the volume of information presented in a short period of time.[52] To better absorb the material, servicemembers from three of the seven installations we visited told us they had taken TAP more than once. For example, one servicemember told us he decided to attend twice so he could feel confident he had learned the most important information.

To tailor TAP delivery to the particular needs of certain groups of servicemembers, TAP staff at six of seven installations we visited said they offered separate classes by rank or for retiring and separating servicemembers, although the course curricula remained the same. Several TAP staff told us the separate classes allowed facilitators to focus their presentations on areas especially important to their particular audience. For example, staff from five of seven installations we visited said classes for retiring servicemembers may spend more time covering survivor benefits while classes for separating servicemembers may spend more time on how to use education benefits. In addition to the separate classes, some installations hosted job fairs and invited federal and state program representatives to answer questions or sign up participants for services between TAP classes.

[52]DOD officials noted that an ongoing DOD initiative to incorporate transition preparation throughout servicemembers careers—called the Military Lifecycle Transition Model—should help address this concern.

While Most Servicemembers Were Deemed Career Ready or Referred for Additional Services, Just over Half May Not Have Completed This Process on Time

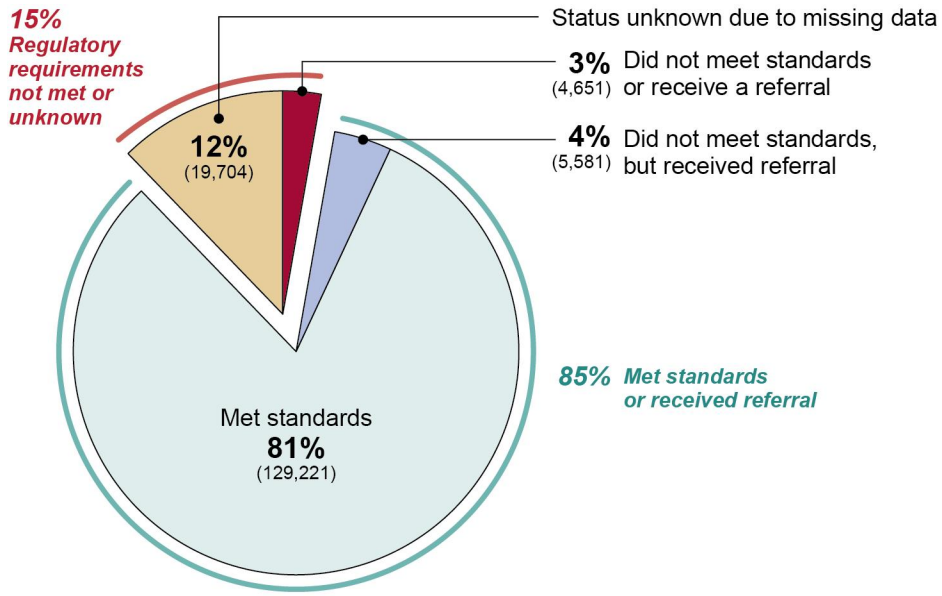
At Least 81 Percent of Servicemembers Met Career Readiness Standards, While 4 Percent Were Referred for Additional Services

Similar to its goal for TAP participation, DOD met its career readiness performance goal by ensuring at least 85 percent of servicemembers met their Career Readiness Standards or received a warm handover referral in fiscal year 2016.[53] Approximately 129,000, or 81 percent, of all active duty servicemembers met their Career Readiness Standards according to our analysis of DOD data. DOD ensured that another 4 percent of servicemembers received a warm-handover referral because their Career Readiness Standards had not been met. For relatively few servicemembers—another 3 percent—Career Readiness Standards were not met and a warm handover was not provided as required by regulations.[54] Due to missing data, it is unknown whether DOD ensured the remaining 12 percent of servicemembers met career readiness requirements (see fig. 8).

[53]For fiscal years 2016 and 2017, DOD set an 85 percent target for this agency priority goal.

[54]32 C.F.R. § 88.5(k)(7).

Figure 8: Number and Percent of Servicemembers Who Met Career Readiness Standards or Received a Warm Handover Referral, Fiscal Year 2016



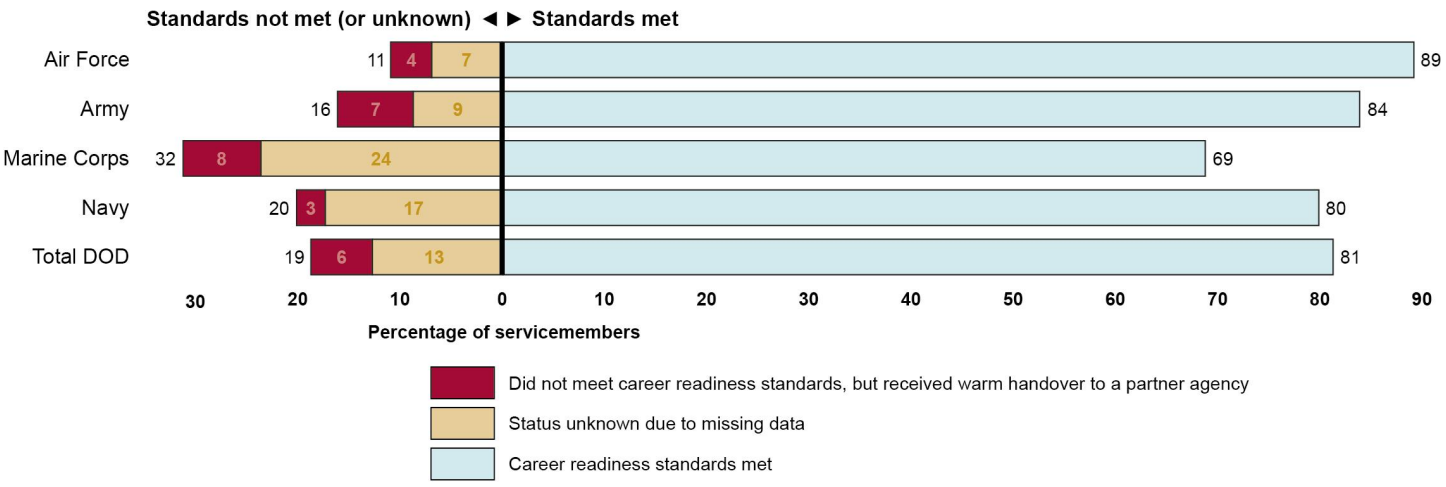
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-18-23

Notes: Commanders or their designees are required to ensure that servicemembers who do not meet one or more Career Readiness Standards or who need further assistance are referred to an appropriate interagency partner or another appropriate resource—a process known as a "warm handover." 32 C.F.R. § 88.5(k)(7).

Because GAO determined participation data were reliable for active-duty servicemembers but not National Guard and Reserve members, this figure does not include the latter. Actual participation rates may have differed from what available records showed because DOD lacked participation data for 12 percent of eligible servicemembers. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Servicemember attainment of Career Readiness Standards generally did not vary based on age, rank, years of service, or retirement status. However, we found lower attainment rates for servicemembers in the Marine Corps and Navy— the two services with higher levels of missing data (see fig. 9).

Figure 9: Percent of Servicemembers Who Met Career Readiness Standards, by Service, Fiscal Year 2016



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) fiscal year 2016 data. | GAO-18-23

Notes: Commanders or their designees are required to ensure that servicemembers who do not meet one or more Career Readiness Standards or who need further assistance are referred to an appropriate interagency partner or another appropriate resource—a process known as a "warm handover." 32 C.F.R. § 88.5(k)(7).

Because GAO determined Career Readiness Standards data were reliable for active-duty servicemembers but not National Guard and Reserve members, this figure does not include the latter. Actual Career Readiness Standards attainment rates may have differed from what available records showed because DOD lacked such data for 12 percent of eligible servicemembers. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

In fiscal year 2016, DOD lacked data to determine whether servicemembers who faced rapid separations met Career Readiness Standards as frequently as those who started TAP earlier, but TAP staff we interviewed told us it could be challenging to ensure that such servicemembers were able to meet the standards. For example, TAP staff at six of seven installations told us servicemembers facing rapid separations were less likely to meet Career Readiness Standards than those with more time before they separated. This finding is consistent with our survey and site visits that indicated servicemembers undergoing rapid separations have limited time to complete TAP. Further, servicemembers being discharged under less than honorable conditions—who were typically separated as quickly as possible according to TAP staff— faced additional challenges meeting standards.[55] According to our analysis of DOD data, fewer than 49 percent of such

[55]According to DOD officials, any servicemember separating under other than honorable reasons must receive a warm handover to DOL.

servicemembers met Career Readiness Standards, compared to 82 percent of those discharged under honorable conditions. Staff from one Navy installation told us that even those servicemembers facing short-term, administrative separations who complete TAP classes were unlikely to meet Career Readiness Standards before they left.

Our survey found that most of the methods used to provide servicemembers with warm handover referrals involved person-to-person contact, as regulations require.[56] In addition, more than two- thirds of military installations with full-time TAP staff reported they sometimes had servicemembers meet face-to-face with a partner agency representative (71 percent) or had the servicemember call a partner agency representative directly (81 percent). Although the methods most frequently cited by military installations with full-time TAP staff—providing website information (94 percent) and business cards (93 percent)—may not always have been sufficient to ensure person-to-person contact, survey responses indicate most installations used a combination of methods to conduct these referrals.

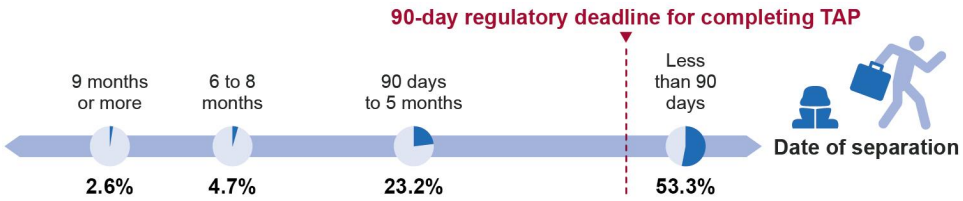
Career Readiness Assessments and Referrals May Not Have Been Timely for Over Half of Servicemembers

Federal regulations state that servicemembers will complete Capstone, the event that finalizes TAP completion, no later than 90 days before their date of anticipated separation, with some exceptions, and for about one-third of servicemembers that goal was achieved. However, for more than 53 percent of servicemembers, Capstone (i.e., verifying Career Readiness Standards were met or a warm handover was received) was not completed at least 90 days before their scheduled separation date, according to our analysis of DOD data (see fig. 10).[57]

[56]DOD regulations define warm handovers as a Capstone process between respective military departments and appropriate interagency parties that results in a person-to-person connection of the servicemember to services and follow-up resources as needed. 32 C.F.R. § 88.3.

[57]Because DOD does not collect data on which servicemembers had unanticipated separation dates, we were unable to disaggregate anticipated separations from unanticipated separations. The 90-day timeliness threshold does not apply when servicemembers undergo unanticipated, rapid separations. Therefore, in some cases regulatory timeliness standards may have been met although the servicemembers started TAP fewer than 90 days before separating.

Figure 10: Percent of Servicemembers Who Completed Required Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Activities, within Selected Time Frames, Fiscal Year 2016

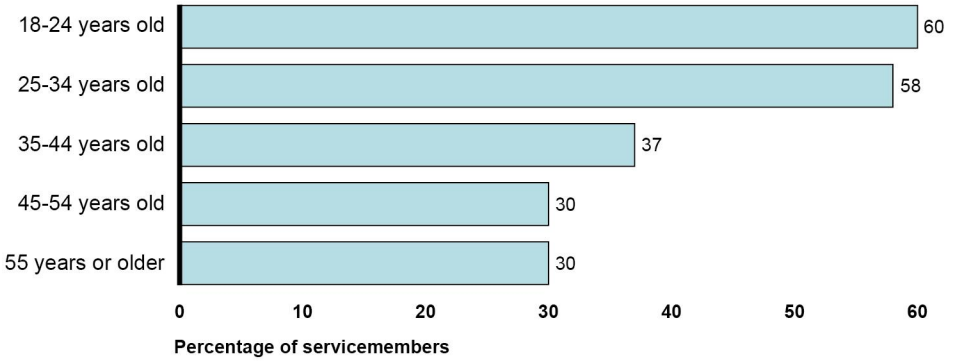


Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) fiscal year 2016 data. | GAO-18-23

Note: Because GAO determined Career Readiness Standards data were reliable for active duty servicemembers but not National Guard and Reserve members, this figure does not include the latter. Actual career readiness attainment rates may have differed from what available records showed because DOD lacked Career Readiness Standards data for 16 percent of eligible servicemembers. The 90-day regulatory timeliness threshold does not apply when servicemembers undergo unanticipated, rapid separations. Therefore, in some cases timeliness standards may have been met although the servicemember started TAP fewer than 90 days before separating.

Our analysis of fiscal year 2016 data showed that a higher percentage of younger and less senior servicemembers completed TAP shortly before leaving military service than were older, more highly ranked servicemembers. For example, a higher percentage of servicemembers aged 18-24 compared to older servicemembers completed TAP shortly before leaving military service (fewer than 90 days before their date of separation) even though DOD regulation requires that they receive priority of service. Specifically, 60 percent of servicemembers aged 18-24 and 58 percent of servicemembers aged 25-34 completed TAP shortly before leaving military service, compared to 37 percent of 35-44 year olds and 30 percent of those 45 or more years old (see fig. 11). Similarly, a higher percentage of enlisted servicemembers completed TAP shortly before leaving military service (55 percent) compared with officers (41 percent) and warrant officers (31 percent).

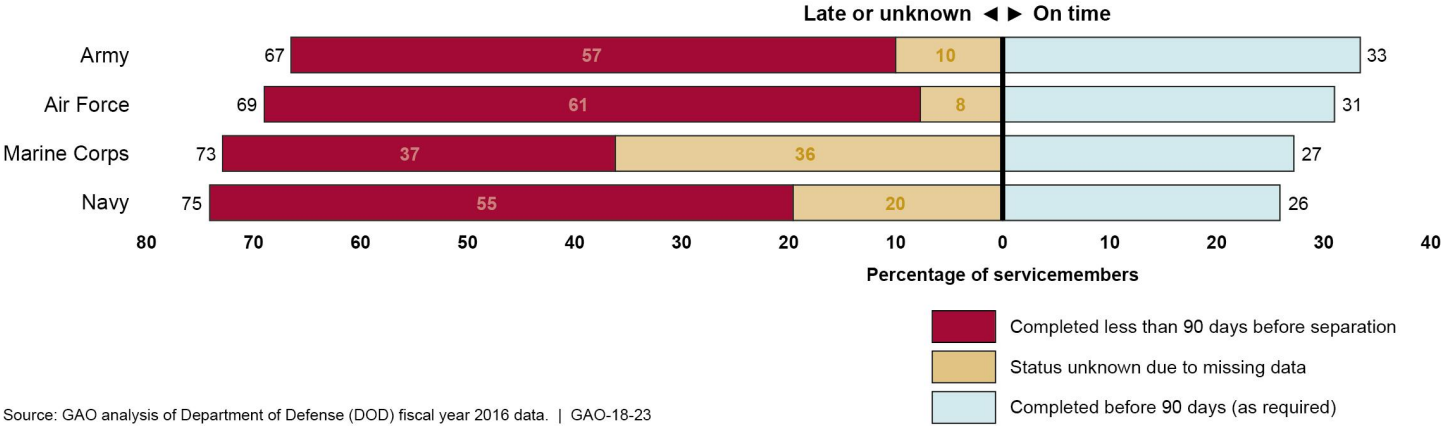
Figure 11: Percent of Servicemembers Who Completed the Transition Assistance Program Fewer than 90 Days Before Leaving Military Service, by Age, Fiscal Year 2016



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) fiscal year 2016 data. | GAO-18-23

Also, our analysis showed the extent to which servicemembers completed TAP more than 90-days before leaving the military as generally required, varied by service. (see fig. 12).

Figure 12: Percent of Servicemembers Who Completed the Transition Assistance Program on Time, by Service, Fiscal Year 2016



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) fiscal year 2016 data. | GAO-18-23

Note: Because GAO determined timeliness data were reliable for active duty servicemembers but not National Guard and Reserve members, this figure does not include the latter. In this figure we define on time as a servicemember completing the Capstone process no later than 90 days before their anticipated date of separation. Actual timeliness rates may have differed from what available records showed because DOD lacked data on the timeliness of program completion for 12 percent of eligible servicemembers. Federal regulations state that servicemembers will complete Capstone no later than 90 days before their date of anticipated separation, with some exceptions. 32 C.F.R. pt. 88 app. H(b).

Since servicemembers with unanticipated separations or retirements are not held to the timeliness standard, some of these servicemembers in this analysis may have met the standard because they were exempt. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole numbers.

While DOD Monitors Many Areas of TAP Implementation, It Does Not Monitor Several Important Requirements

DOD Monitors Key Areas of TAP Implementation Except for Timeliness of Participation, Access to Additional Classes, and Use of Online TAP

DOD monitors ongoing TAP implementation using a suite of five performance measures and eight regularly produced internal data reports.[58] DOD and its federal agency partners analyze the data reports to track progress against performance targets over time and to identify ways to improve TAP curriculum and delivery, according to DOD officials we interviewed. These measures and reports do not cover the timeliness of TAP participation, but do cover three other key areas of TAP implementation: (1) program access and attendance, (2) transition and career readiness preparation, and (3) participant satisfaction and knowledge gain. (For more information about DOD's monitoring of each key area of TAP implementation, see table 7 in app. II.)[59]

Timeliness of TAP participation

DOD does not currently monitor the timeliness of TAP participation, although DOD regulations establish a time frame for completing TAP requirements.[60] Without a systematic method for monitoring timeliness, DOD will not know whether servicemembers begin and complete the program on time and cannot hold services and commanders accountable for the timeliness of servicemembers' TAP participation. As previously

[58]According to DOD officials, four of these performance measures fall under DOD's Transition to Veterans Agency Priority Goal. The fifth performance measure was established and is tracked by the TAP interagency group as part of the TAP Interagency Evaluation Plan. In addition to these performance measures, DOD and its partner agencies in the TAP interagency governance structure track an additional 12 indicators mostly related to post-program outcomes, which were outside the scope of this review.

[59]The four key areas of TAP implementation GAO identified are (1) timeliness of TAP participation, (2) program access and attendance, (3) transition and career readiness preparation, and (4) participant satisfaction and knowledge gain.

[60]32 C.F.R. pt. 88 app. H(b)(2).

discussed, according to TAP staff we interviewed, servicemembers who separated under short notice generally have little time to prepare for their transitions and may not have enough time to prepare for their transitions and may not have enough time to attend TAP in a classroom setting. Further, servicemembers who start TAP shortly before leaving the military may be less able to pursue additional transition resources such as attending additional 2-day classes, potentially leaving them less prepared to transition to civilian life.

Program access and attendance

As previously discussed, DOD has established several methods to monitor program access and attendance: the VOW compliance performance measures it identified as agency priority goals, its public reports on those measures, and its internal data reports. However, DOD does not monitor and report on attendance in non-mandated portions of the TAP curriculum, such as financial planning, according to agency officials. DOD officials said this is because participation is not required for servicemembers who can meet their Career Readiness Standards without attending class. For example, servicemembers can provide a completed budget in lieu of attending the financial planning course, and those planning to pursue higher education can document completion of the four required Career Readiness Standards without attending the corresponding 2-day classes.[61]

Federal law requires that DOD ensure that servicemembers who elect to participate in an additional 2-day class are able to receive the training.[62] As we previously stated, relatively few servicemembers participated in the additional 2-day classes in fiscal year 2016, but DOD lacks the data to determine whether additional servicemembers wanted to attend the classes but were not able to participate. DOD tracks the number of servicemembers who participate in each additional 2-day class, but the agency does not collect additional data to monitor compliance with the requirement that DOD ensure that servicemembers who elect to receive

[61]Four additional Career Readiness Standards apply to servicemembers who plan to seek higher education or career technical training: (1) complete an assessment tool, (2) complete a comparison of academic or training institution choices, (3) complete a college, university, or technical training application or receive an acceptance letter; and (4) confirm their one-on-one counseling with a college, university, or technical training institution, advisor, or counselor.

[62]10 U.S.C. § 1144(f)(2).

this additional training are able to do so. Specifically, according to agency officials, DOD does not require the services to document which 2-day class servicemembers wished to attend, such as by documenting during pre-separation counseling whether servicemembers elected to participate in the classes. As a result, neither DOD nor the services can calculate the extent to which servicemembers who wished to attend were able to do so. Further, without documenting which servicemembers want to participate in these 2-day classes, DOD lacks a systematic method to forecast whether additional classes will be needed to meet demand. Until DOD monitors compliance with this requirement, it will not be able to identify and address problems that may exist with servicemembers' access to 2-day classes. Consequently, some servicemembers may miss the chance to attend additional 2-day classes that could help them make more informed career decisions.

Federal regulations state that DOD and the military services must ensure servicemembers participate in TAP in a classroom setting except in certain limited circumstances.[63] However, according to agency officials, DOD does not systematically monitor and report on the prevalence of online TAP participation, and as we previously stated, lacked reliable data on the method of course delivery in fiscal year 2016. Moreover, according to agency officials, DOD lacks the data to determine whether any online participation occurred under circumstances allowable under regulation because according to agency officials DOD does not require the services to document the reason servicemembers participated online. Without this information, DOD cannot assess whether virtual curricula are being used as intended. Moreover, without additional data, DOD will not be able to systematically assess the effectiveness of different modes of TAP delivery currently in use which are, according to agency officials: classroom-based TAP, online courses via Joint Knowledge Online, and facilitator-led online courses.[64] Without monitoring online TAP

[63]According to regulations, those eligible servicemembers who can use the virtual curricula include (1) those whose duty locations are in remote or isolated geographic areas, and (2) those undergoing short-notice separation who cannot access brick-and-mortar curricula in a timely manner. 32 C.F.R. pt. 88 app. G. According to DOD officials, isolated geographic areas are defined as being 50 or more miles away from the installation to which the servicemember is assigned.

[64]As of August 2017, the Army was the only service to offer live, facilitator-led online TAP courses, according to DOD officials.

participation, DOD will remain unable to ensure compliance with TAP requirements or identify and address problems in the use of online TAP.[65]

Transition and Career Readiness Preparation

DOD monitors Transition and Career Readiness Preparation through two publicly-reported performance measures related to Career Readiness Standards attainment rates under its agency priority goal, and three internal data reports.[66] As previously discussed, DOD's publicly-reported performance outcomes are higher than some outcomes depicted in its internal reports that are calculated using all TAP-eligible servicemembers. DOD also tracks progress on one additional performance measure related to transition preparation—credential attainment—established by the interagency TAP performance management working group.

Participant satisfaction and knowledge gain

DOD uses servicemembers' responses to its web-based Participant Assessment to monitor participant satisfaction and knowledge gain on individual TAP courses, the program overall, and to inform curriculum updates, according to agency officials. Each quarter, DOD produces four data reports that officials said compile feedback on the quality of instruction, content, and facilities. These reports also include measures of participants' knowledge of the information presented during training. Results are provided for each course and for TAP overall, including breakouts by servicemember characteristics such as rank and whether the servicemember is retiring or separating. The reports also provide results for classroom and online TAP separately. Completing the Participant Assessment is voluntary, and although servicemembers are strongly encouraged to fill it out, about 30 percent generally do so,

[65]According to DOD officials, the Transition GPS Participant Assessment—one methodology included in the TAP Interagency Evaluation Plan—assesses servicemembers' satisfaction and learning. Specifically, officials said the assessment provides information, overall, for those who participated in a classroom setting or online. They also said the data are currently used to identify problems or differences across the different delivery methods from participants' perspectives.

[66]The other two publicly reported performance measures under the Transition to Veterans agency priority goals pertain to Program Access and Attendance. The three internal data reports include a report by the TAP Interagency group that tracks credential attainment and two regular reports by DOD—the Form 2958 Service Component Report and the CRS and eBenefits report. For more information on these monitoring reports and other DOD monitoring efforts, see appendix II.

according to agency officials. [67],[68] Agency officials acknowledged the low response rate and said they have been working closely with the services to bolster it. Agency officials also said that this response rate is in line with response rates observed for other voluntary course evaluations. Nevertheless, they emphasized that the Participant Assessment provides valuable information used to improve the program, such as refining course content during comprehensive curriculum reviews.[69] Officials also noted they use the participant assessment to identify concerns that arise at particular installations and ensure they are promptly addressed.

Services Vary in the Types of Information They Use to Monitor TAP Implementation and the Extent to Which They Share Results of These Efforts with Commanders

Officials from each military service told us they use the internal data reports that DOD's TAP policy office provides as part of their ongoing monitoring efforts and that generally each commander determines to what extent adherence to TAP policy is included as part of their command's annual inspection. As previously discussed, officials from each military service said that they track their service's progress using the internally reported lower participation rates based on all TAP-eligible

[67]According to DOD officials, servicemembers are provided with the link to a web-based participant assessment and encouraged to complete it at the end of each TAP component they attend.

[68]Given this low response rate, we determined that the participant assessment results were not sufficiently reliable to cite for the purposes of this report. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance indicates that survey response rates should generally be 80 percent or above to be considered reliable unless a nonresponse bias analysis is conducted, which would not be feasible in the case of a voluntary, anonymous participant assessment. OMB, Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys (Washington, D.C. Sep. 2006). According to DOD officials, the Transition GPS participant assessment is a web-based course evaluation—not a survey—that was designed to measure and improve customer satisfaction with the Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success) curriculum and TAP. DOD officials also said the assessment is comparable to a course evaluation rather than a standardized attitude and opinion survey and that the 80 percent threshold specified in OMB guidance is therefore not appropriate criteria for assessing data reliability. They also said that a 30 percent response rate for a voluntary course evaluation is in line with typical response rates for such assessments.

[69]According to DOD officials, every 2 years, the TAP interagency curriculum working group conducts a comprehensive, in-depth review of the TAP curriculum. During interim years, the curriculum working group conducts a thorough technical review of the curriculum to ensure all content and links to relevant websites are up-to-date and the curriculum is current with all laws, regulations, and policies, according to DOD officials.

servicemembers, rather than the publicly reported rates. They told us this is because they are required to ensure all TAP-eligible servicemembers meet program requirements. Officials from the Navy told us that after the Navy incorporated VOW compliance rates into commanders' annual assessments, these rates increased substantially. Officials from another military service told us they created a checklist commands could use during annual inspections to assess compliance with TAP policy requirements. Officials from the other services said that each commander determines to what extent adherence to TAP policy is included as part of their command's annual inspection.

TAP policy officials from several services told us they also monitor participation and Career Readiness Standards attainment rates across installations and those data are available at the unit commander level. Officials from all four services told us that being able to generate performance information at the installation and unit command level had already been useful or would make the information more useful. Officials said this was either because of enhanced accountability or because reviewing performance this way would allow policy staff to identify installations or commands where additional outreach and education might be beneficial. For example, Air Force officials told us that each month they generate installation-specific reports that include the installations' overall participation and career readiness attainment rates, as well as the rates for the unit commanders assigned to that installation. These reports are discussed monthly at installation command meetings during which unit commanders must explain to installation leadership why any servicemember under his or her command did not fulfill TAP requirements. Similarly, Navy officials told us that they recently changed their award program criteria, so that only commanders who maintain at least an 85 percent VOW compliance rate are eligible to receive the Navy's Golden Anchor Award. Army officials similarly told us that their commanders can access real-time reports on VOW compliance, Career Readiness Standard attainment, and timeliness of participation, and that having real-time data at the unit command level is essential to effectively manage the program.

In contrast, Marine Corps officials told us they did not yet have a system to generate performance information at the command or installation level. However, according to DOD officials, once the DOD-wide system's capability to generate unit- and installation-level reports becomes fully operational in October 2018, the new TAP-IT enterprise system will enable every service to generate installation and unit command specific

reports on TAP participation levels and Career Readiness Standard attainment.[70]

However, even once fully implemented, DOD's new TAP-IT Enterprise system will not generate reports related to the timeliness of TAP participation, access to 2-day classes, and method of course delivery that can be shared with commanders at all levels of the military to help them ensure these TAP requirements are met. As previously noted, DOD does not yet monitor compliance with these requirements DOD-wide and thus is not positioned to share installation or unit command-level reports on these requirements. Consequently, unless the military services or individual commanders develop mechanisms to track compliance with these requirements, they will not know the extent to which requirements in these three areas are being met within the commands they oversee, even though TAP regulations specify commanders are responsible for ensuring compliance with statutory TAP requirements.[71] Further, federal internal control standards state that management should share quality information throughout an organization to enable personnel to perform key roles, and GAO has previously reported that by regularly sharing useful performance information with leaders at multiple levels of an organization, agencies can help leaders make informed decisions.[72] Providing commanders—including both unit commanders and the higher level commanders to whom they report—a way to access compliance rates for the commands they oversee could provide useful performance information that would enhance their ability to make informed decisions with regard to these three particular TAP requirements. Access to this information could also help commanders better ensure their

[70]In 2014, GAO recommended that the Secretary of Defense direct the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness to require that all services provide unit commanders and their leaders with information on TAP participation levels of servicemembers under their command. While DOD disagreed with our recommendation at that time, should the TAP-IT Enterprise system reporting capability to generate reports that show TAP participation and Career Readiness Standard attainment rates at the installation and unit-command level become fully operational, the intent of this recommendation will have been met. GAO-14-144

[71]32 C.F.R. pt. 88 app. H(a).

[72]GAO, Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government, GAO-14-704G (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

servicemembers meet all TAP requirements while balancing mission priorities.[73]

TAP Performance Measures Reflect Most Key Attributes of Successful Measures, but Are Not Always Clear, Objective, and Reliable

Our analysis of TAP's five performance measures showed they generally met selected GAO criteria for a successful performance management system.[74] In particular, all five had measurable targets and demonstrated linkage by aligning with DOD's "Transition to Veterans" agency priority goal (see table 6). Most of the measures also met GAO's criteria for objectivity, and the measures pertaining to servicemembers were found to yield reliable results. However, we identified shortcomings with regard to

[73]GAO has reported that useful performance information reflects the responsibilities and needs of the decision- makers who use it. See GAO, Managing for Results: Agencies Report Positive Effects of Data-Driven Reviews on Performance but Some Should Strengthen Practices, GAO-15-579 (Washington, D.C.: July 7, 2015), GAO, DHS Training: Improved Documentation, Resource Tracking, and Performance Measurement Could Strengthen Efforts, GAO-14-688 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2014); GAO, Program Evaluation: Strategies to Facilitate Agencies' Use of Evaluation in Program Management and Policy Making, GAO-13-570 (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2013); GAO, Managing For Results: Data-Driven Performance Reviews Show Promise But Agencies Should Explore How to Involve Other Relevant Agencies, GAO-13-288 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 27, 2013), and GAO, Managing for Results: Enhancing Agency Use of Performance Information for Management Decision Making, GAO-05-927 (Washington, D.C.: Sep. 9, 2005).

[74]Previous GAO reports provide established criteria for assessing performance measurement systems. (For example, see GAO, *Tax Administration: IRS Needs to Further Refine its Tax Filing Season Performance Measures GAO-03-143* (Washington D.C. November 2002.) Specifically, GAO identified nine key attributes of successful performance measures. For this report, four attributes were excluded from our analysis: limited overlap, balance, government-wide priorities, and core program activities. The first three were excluded because they are cross-cutting, and therefore less relevant for analyzing a subset of program specific measures than a complete suite of agency-wide performance measures. The fourth attribute was excluded to avoid duplicating our analysis of DOD's monitoring efforts of the four key areas of TAP implementation identified by GAO: Timeliness of TAP Participation, Program Access and Attendance, Career Readiness Attainment, and Participant Satisfaction and Knowledge Gain.

clarity and objectivity for several TAP measures, and in the reliability of TAP measures for National Guard and Reserve members.[75]

[75]DOD officials said that the measures themselves are reliable regardless of whether there are sufficient reliable data underpinning the measure. However, our definition for this key attribute is that the measure should produce the same results under similar conditions; therefore, it would not be possible to determine whether the results would be identical if fewer data were missing.

Table 6: Transition Assistance Program Performance Measures That Reflected Selected Key Attributes of Successful Performance Measures

Measure	Measurable Target	Linkage	Clarity	Objectivity	Reliability[b]
Verified VOW Compliance: Active duty[a]	fully met	fully met	Not met	fully met	fully met
Verified VOW Compliance: National Guard and Reserves[a]	fully met	fully met	Not met	fully met	Not met
Career Readiness Standard Attainment: Active duty[a]	fully met	fully met	Not met	Not met	fully met
Career Readiness Standard Attainment: National Guard and Reserves[a]	fully met	fully met	Not met	Not met	Not met
Credential Attainment	fully met	fully met	fully met	fully met	Partially met

Legend: ● = criteria met fully; ◐= criteria partially met; ○ = criteria not met

Source: GAO analysis of performance measures against selected key attributes of successful performance measures. | GAO-18-23

[a]DOD identified this measure as an Agency Priority Goal under the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010.

[b]Reliability criteria were determined to be partially met for Credential Attainment because the data underlying the measure were sufficient for the measure's stated purpose for active duty servicemembers but not for members of the National Guard and Reserve.

The VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (VOW Act) mandates the Department of Defense (DOD) to require that separating servicemembers participate in counseling, employment assistance, and information on federal veteran benefits, among other supports. DOD defines VOW compliance as follows: (1) attending pre-separation counseling, (2) attending VA Benefits I and II, and (3) attending the Department of Labor employment workshop, unless exempt.

Criteria were considered fully met if DOD's performance measure demonstrated the related attributes of a successful performance measure. In one instance where an attribute was determined to be met for active-duty servicemembers but not members of the National Guard and Reserves, the measure was determined to partially meet GAO criteria.

With respect to clarity, GAO's criteria stipulate that a measure should be clearly stated and its name should be consistent with the methodology used to calculate it. However, as previously discussed, DOD's definition and public reporting of its VOW compliance measures did not clearly signal that the calculation included only those servicemembers for whom

participation data were available.[76] Similarly, we found that DOD's Career Readiness Standard attainment measures also lacked clarity.

We found that DOD's performance measures related to Career Readiness Standard attainment lack objectivity. While GAO criteria state that subjective considerations or judgments should not greatly affect the measure's outcome, for some of the Career Readiness Standards determining whether a servicemember has met the standard requires professional judgment, and DOD has not developed guidance or quality standards that could minimize the subjectivity of such decisions. For example, as part of assessing career readiness, TAP staff, commanders, and commanders' designees must evaluate each servicemember's individual transition plan and resume.[77] However, it is unclear what constitutes a viable transition plan or resume.[78]

Moreover, according to our interviews and survey, DOD has not developed guidance across all the services, such as a checklist of things to look for when reviewing a resume, or training for those evaluating career readiness. During our site visits, some staff who conducted Capstone reviews—particularly uniformed commander designees who did so as an ancillary duty—told us they did not have expertise in reviewing civilian resumes and some said they would like more training or tools to

[76]On performance.gov this measure is defined for active duty servicemembers as the "verified percent of known eligible active duty Service members who have separated and attended (a) pre-separation counseling, (b) a Department of Labor employment workshop, and (c) Veterans Affairs Benefits briefings prior to their separation." Similarly, for reserve component servicemembers, performance.gov defines this measure as the "verified percent of known eligible reserve component Service members who have separated and attended (a) pre-separation counseling, (b) a Department of Labor employment workshop, and (c) Veterans Affairs Benefits briefings prior to their separation." While the site mentions challenges with data completeness, it does not explain that the percentages reported include only those servicemembers for whom participation data were submitted rather than for all TAP-eligible servicemembers. In other documents, DOD uses the term "known eligible" to refer to servicemembers "for whom a DD Form 2958 was received by the Defense Manpower Data Center." Absent such an explanation on performance.gov, a user might not understand the significance or meaning of the term.

[77]Other Career Readiness Standards—such as whether servicemembers documented requirements and eligibility for licensure, certification, and apprenticeship do not require subjective judgments.

[78]To meet Career Readiness Standards, servicemembers must demonstrate they have a viable individual transition plan and have completed a job application package, which include a resume.

help them better meet the needs of transitioning servicemembers.[79] While reviewing Career Readiness Standard attainment will likely involve some degree of subjectivity, tools such as guidance or training could potentially increase the consistency and objectivity of such evaluations and yield a more accurate measure of whether servicemembers attained Career Readiness Standards.

Finally, some of the measures yielded unreliable performance information for the purpose of measuring DOD's progress towards its stated fiscal year 2016 goals. Specifically, the high proportion of missing data for TAP-eligible members of the National Guard and Reserve rendered the participation and career readiness measures unreliable for this group.

Conclusions

A substantial number of servicemembers have made the transition to civilian life after leaving the military, whether pursuing additional education, finding a job, starting their own business, or retiring, and thousands more are expected to follow. To facilitate a successful transition, DOD and the services are required by law to ensure that all eligible servicemembers, with some exceptions, participate in TAP's required courses. DOD has publicly recognized the importance of TAP participation by setting two participation-related performance measures and two measures pertaining to career readiness under its agency priority goal on transitioning to veterans. It is therefore all the more important that DOD's public reporting of its agency priority goal make it clear that the number of reported servicemembers who attended TAP and met Career Readiness Standards, or received a warm handover, does not include all eligible servicemembers. While DOD is taking steps to reduce the number of missing records, such disclosures would help ensure TAP performance information provides a transparent, reliable measures of program outcomes, and Congress and the public may be able to more accurately gauge the program's success.

In addition, DOD does not monitor three TAP requirements established by federal law or regulation—the timeliness of TAP participation; ensuring servicemembers can attend additional 2-day classes if desired; and

[79]Some commander designees we interviewed said they would prefer trained career counselors to initially review Career Readiness Standards to ensure servicemembers get accurate, high quality feedback on whether they meet these standards.

ensuring servicemembers take TAP in a classroom rather than online except in certain, limited situations. By monitoring these three areas, DOD will be able to hold the services and unit commanders accountable for ensuring that servicemembers can complete the TAP required courses on time, that they avail themselves of additional opportunities offered by the 2-day classes, and that servicemembers participate in live classrooms instead of online classes whenever possible. Collecting information about classrooms versus online participation could also help DOD evaluate the effectiveness of the TAP delivery models currently in use, enhance TAP delivery, and ensure servicemembers receive effective transition preparation. Further, enabling commanders at all levels to access such information for the units they oversee could enhance accountability and help unit commanders fulfill their responsibility to ensure TAP compliance within their specific unit.

Finally, developing guidance or training for transition and career counselors, commanders, and commander designees can minimize subjectivity in assessing servicemembers' attainment of Career Readiness Standards. Such guidance or training could help uniformed career counselors, commanders, and their designees consistently evaluate servicemembers' transition plans, including their resume, and improve the accuracy of the Career Readiness Standard attainment measure.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We recommend the Secretary of Defense take the following six actions:

Publicly report DOD's performance regarding participation and career readiness attainment for all TAP-eligible servicemembers and members of the National Guard and Reserve rather than exclude those for whom data are missing or clarify the extent of missing data. (Recommendation 1)

Monitor and report on the extent to which servicemembers participate in TAP within prescribed timeframes. (Recommendation 2)

Monitor and report on the extent to which servicemembers who elect to receive additional 2-day classes are able to receive the training. (Recommendation 3)

Monitor and report on the extent to which servicemembers attend TAP in a classroom setting unless allowed by regulation to participate online. (Recommendation 4)

Enable unit commanders and their higher-level commanders to access DOD reports on timeliness, 2-day classes, and the use of online TAP—after DOD begins monitoring and reporting this information—to help ensure the specific units they oversee are compliant with all TAP requirements. (Recommendation 5)

Seek ways to minimize the subjectivity involved in making career readiness determinations, particularly where judgments are involved, such as the quality of the individual transition plan and the resume. This could include developing guidance or training that provides quality standards for assessing career readiness materials. (Recommendation 6)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to the Departments of Defense, Education, Homeland Security, Labor, and Veterans Affairs, the Office of Personnel Management, and the Small Business Administration for their review and comment. Written comments from the Department of Defense (DOD) are reproduced in appendix III. In addition, DOD, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Small Business Administration provided technical comments that we incorporated into the report as appropriate. The other agencies did not provide any comments.

In its written comments, DOD agreed with three of our recommendations, partially agreed with two, and did not agree with one.

With regard to our first recommendation, DOD partially agreed to base its publicly reported performance on all those who are TAP-eligible or to clarify the extent of missing data. DOD said that compliance should only be computed based on data that are known, but the agency agreed that its public reports should include a description of the extent of missing data. DOD also said that in fiscal year 2017 it had disclosed the extent of missing data when reporting performance on the Transition to Veterans agency priority goal and that this will be included in all its public reporting starting in the first quarter of fiscal year 2018 and beyond.[80] DOD said it will also continue working to reduce the extent of missing data.

[80]GAO focused on fiscal year 2016 public reporting data for this review to be consistent with the scope of our data analysis and because as of November 2017 fiscal year 2017 performance results had not been posted to performance.gov.

DOD agreed with our second and fourth recommendations, that the Secretary of Defense monitor and report on timeliness of TAP participation and the extent of online participation. Based on feasibility of data collection and availability of funds, DOD anticipates starting data collection in fiscal year 2019, followed by data reporting in fiscal year 2020 at the earliest.

DOD disagreed with our third recommendation that pertained to accessing the additional 2-day classes, saying it ensures access by offering 2-day classes both in classrooms and online. Moreover, it stated that the purpose of 2-day classes is to help servicemembers achieve Career Readiness Standards. However, GAO does not believe this is sufficient for DOD to know whether it is ensuring compliance with this particular law. We continue to believe that DOD needs to track whether those who elect to take these classes are able to receive the training.

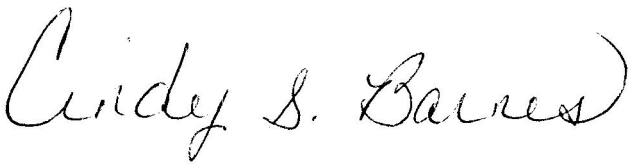
DOD partially agreed with our fifth recommendation on enabling unit and high-level commanders to access information to help ensure their specific units comply with all TAP requirements. DOD noted that once it has the capability to collect and report data on timeliness and extent of online and classroom participation, the military services will provide these data to commanders when feasible. DOD added that the intent of this recommendation should be met at the service level where transition staff can make this information available to commanders. As we noted in our report, some services share information on certain aspects of the program, such as participation and Career Readiness Standard attainment. However, DOD does not yet monitor timeliness of participation, access to 2-day classes, and online participation. Therefore, DOD is unable to share this particular information with commanders. While we understand that DOD needs to build its capability to collect these additional data, we urge DOD to disseminate this important information to commanders as soon as possible to enable them to fulfill their responsibility toward TAP compliance within their specific units. DOD's response did not address the monitoring and reporting of the additional 2-day classes. We, therefore, urge DOD to also report data on access to the additional 2-day classes so that commanders are able to ensure compliance with all statutory TAP requirements.

DOD agreed with our sixth recommendation on minimizing the subjectivity of certain career readiness determinations. DOD said that by the end of fiscal year 2018, it will work with the military departments and the Department of Labor to seek ways to minimize subjectivity in assessing such things as quality of the resume or job application package. This may

include developing guidance on quality standards for assessing particular career readiness materials. DOD also noted that all military services have personnel at the installation level who are trained in resume writing, resume review, and career planning and that installations can also call upon their local DOL partners for further support. Finally, DOD said it was important to note that commanders be allowed to exercise their best judgment on attainment of career readiness for their servicemembers, knowing that experts are housed within the transition assistance centers at their installation and are available to assist servicemembers.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretaries of Defense, Education, Homeland Security, Labor, and Veterans Affairs, the Administrator of the Small Business Administration; and to the Director of the Office of Personnel Management.. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at http://www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7215 or brownbarnesc@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.



Cindy S. Brown Barnes, Director
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

List of Requesters

The Honorable Johnny Isakson
Chairman
The Honorable Jon Tester
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Jodey Arrington
Chairman
The Honorable Beto O'Rourke
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
House of Representatives

The Honorable Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate

The Honorable Mark Takano
House of Representatives

The Honorable Brad Wenstrup, D.P.M
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report examines what is known about 1) the data the Department of Defense (DOD) collects to determine whether servicemembers have met Transition Assistance Program (TAP) requirements, 2) TAP participation levels and factors affecting servicemember participation, 3) the extent to which servicemembers met Career Readiness Standards (CRS) or received referrals to partner agencies for additional transition services, and 4) the extent DOD monitors key areas of TAP implementation and how TAP's performance measures inform these monitoring efforts. To address our research objectives, we surveyed all DOD installations that conduct TAP, analyzed DOD participation data for fiscal year 2016, visited seven installations that conduct TAP, interviewed officials from DOD and its partner agencies, including Armed Forces officials who oversee TAP for their branch of service, reviewed DOD's performance measures, data reports, and information sharing practices, and reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and policies.

Survey of Installations that Conduct TAP

We conducted a survey of all military installations in the United States and overseas that operate TAP full-time to learn about how the program is being implemented. In particular, the survey asked respondents about the accessibility of TAP components, challenges that servicemembers faced in attending the components, and the level of commander support for participation. Our survey targeted front-line TAP officials, primarily TAP managers, who could draw on the expertise of TAP course facilitators, transition counselors, career counselors, and any other key TAP staff as necessary to complete the survey. DOD provided the team with a list of all installations that operated TAP, by branch of service, for a total of 186 installations.[1]

After we drafted the survey questions, we contacted TAP officials at four installations that operate TAP to provide feedback to ensure that (1) the

[1]As part of our survey, we included Coast Guard installations that conducted TAP. The Department of Homeland Security, which has jurisdiction over the Coast Guard, provided a list of 13 Coast Guard installations that conducted TAP. We separately analyzed the survey responses from Coast Guard installations. See GAO-18-135.

questions were clear and unambiguous, (2) terminology was used correctly, (3) the survey did not place an undue burden on agency officials, (4) the information could feasibly be obtained, and (5) the survey was comprehensive and unbiased. We selected the sites for these pretests to include each branch of service: the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Navy. After each pretest, we revised the content and format of the survey, based on the feedback we received.[2]

We administered the survey online through a secure server. We sent an e-mail announcement to all 186 installations with a full-time TAP presence on October 24, 2016. We sent a second e-mail on October 31, 2016 to notify participants the survey was available online and provided their unique passwords and usernames. We sent follow-up e-mail messages on November 14, 2016 and November 28, 2016, to those who had not yet responded. Finally, we contacted all remaining nonrespondents by telephone starting December 5, 2016. We later removed 5 installations from our list because we learned that 4 were duplicates and 1 did not conduct TAP—bringing our total to 181 installations. The survey was available online until we reached a 100 percent response rate on January 18, 2017.[3]

Defense Manpower Data Center Data

To learn more about TAP participation and Career Readiness Standards attainment we obtained participant- level TAP data from the Defense Manpower Data Center. Specifically, we obtained participant- level data for the 201,237 servicemembers and National Guard and Reserve members who separated from the military in fiscal year 2016 that DOD identified as TAP-eligible. We assessed the reliability of these data in several ways: (1) by reviewing related documentation, (2) by interviewing knowledgeable agency officials, (3) by conducting electronic testing for missing data, outliers, and obvious errors, and (4) by comparing our

[2]We also included one Coast Guard installation as part of our pretest process. We went through the same steps listed for the pretests we had with DOD installations, but separately analyzed the survey responses from the Coast Guard installations. See GAO-18-135.

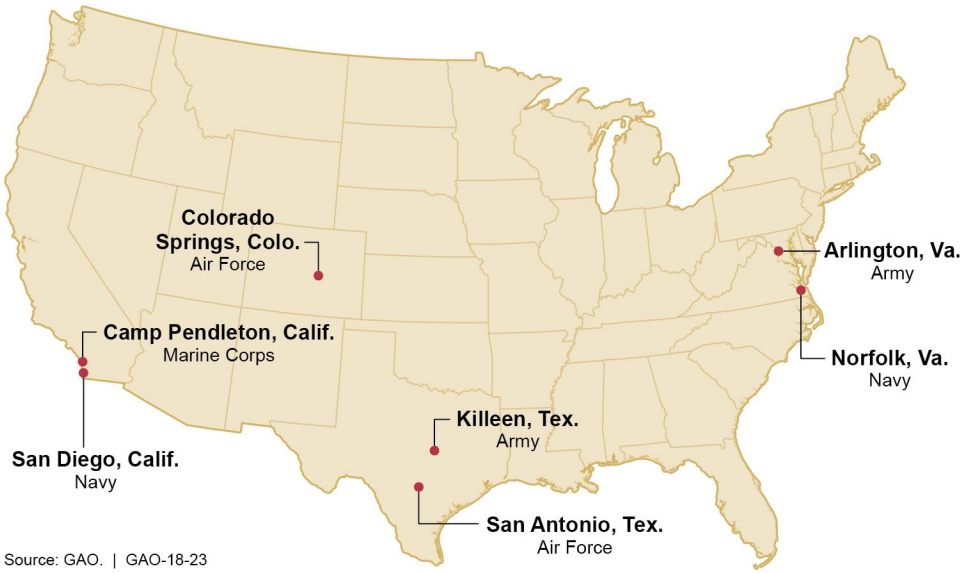
[3]We administered the survey the same way to the 13 Coast Guard installations. As we conducted the survey 1 Coast Guard installation was found not to be conducting TAP and was removed from the list of potential respondents for a total of 12 Coast Guard installations. We also received a 100 percent response rate from the Coast Guard installations, but separately analyzed their survey responses. See GAO-18-135.

calculations with DOD's internal and public data reports. We determined that the data for the 159,157 servicemembers who were not members of the National Guard or Reserve was sufficiently reliable for participant-level analyses. In contrast, we determined that the data for the 42,080 members of the National Guard and Reserve were not sufficiently reliable. We present overall participation levels for this group to illustrate the extent to which DOD was missing data on the participation and Career Readiness Standard attainment of TAP-eligible members of the National Guard and Reserve. Further, based on our electronic testing of data on the mode of TAP delivery (online versus classroom) we determined that these data were not sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our report. Specifically, for TAP required courses, data on the mode of course delivery for the Department of Labor's employment workshop were available for 59,488 servicemembers and missing for 141,750 servicemembers. Similarly, data on the mode of course delivery for the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) Benefits I and II was available for 75,684 servicemembers and missing for 125,554 servicemembers.

Site Visits

To increase our understanding into how TAP was being implemented at installations, we visited seven DOD installations across the continental United States. We selected the installations based on several factors including: branch of service; whether the installation provided TAP to National Guard and Reserve members or to wounded, ill, or injured servicemembers; the size of the installation; and geographic diversity. At each installation we visited, we interviewed the TAP managers and counselors who administer TAP; commanders or commanders' designees, who verify whether servicemembers met Career Readiness Standards; senior installation leadership; and on-base VA representatives. We also interviewed 88 servicemembers—both officers and enlisted personnel—who have participated in TAP, to learn about their experiences, their views on TAP's effectiveness, and any challenges they had experienced. During these interviews we asked each servicemember to complete a short questionnaire about his or her experiences with TAP and used their responses to guide our discussions. We also observed TAP staff conducting pre-separation counseling and Capstone reviews at each of the installations we visited (see fig. 13).

Figure 13: Map of Department of Defense Installations GAO Visited



Interviews with DOD and Armed Forces Personnel

We interviewed several DOD officials and Armed Forces personnel to learn about how installations implement TAP, what performance measures and data reports they use to monitor the program, how they report performance results with various levels of military and civilian leadership, and to what extent DOD uses the Transition GPS Participant Assessment. More specifically, we interviewed DOD officials from the Transition to Veteran Program Office and the TAP offices within each branch of the DOD Armed Forces overseeing TAP. During these interviews we also asked officials about the new TAP-IT enterprise system, including its purpose, the steps that were taken to implement the system worldwide, and how the system is expected to aid future monitoring efforts.[4]

[4]We also conducted interviews with Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Coast Guard officials to gather information on the policies and procedures that installations use to implement TAP, performance measures and data reports used in the monitoring efforts of TAP, how performance results are reported and shared with various levels of military and civilian leadership, and the extent to which DHS or the Coast Guard uses the Transition GPS Participant Assessment. During these interviews we also asked officials about the new e-form system, including its purpose and how the system is expected to aid future monitoring efforts of TAP. We separately reported the results in GAO-18-135.

Monitoring and Performance Measures

To assess DOD's monitoring efforts, we reviewed federal laws and regulations to identify four key areas of TAP implementation, reviewed DOD's ongoing monitoring efforts of those four areas to identify any gaps, and interviewed agency officials. The four key areas we identified were (1) timing of TAP participation, (2) program access and attendance, (3) transition and career readiness preparation, and (4) participant satisfaction and knowledge gain. DOD officials reviewed these categories and agreed that all were appropriate. We then requested examples of the data reports DOD routinely generates and distributes to monitor TAP implementation, interviewed TAP policy officials within the Transition to Veterans' Program Office and each military branch, and reviewed the TAP Interagency Evaluation Plan, which includes information on TAP's performance measures, asked DOD officials to verify that our list of monitoring activities was complete and accurate. Because DOD has identified four TAP performance measures as indicators of its Transition to Veterans agency priority goal, we also analyzed DOD's public reporting on these measures on performance.gov and in its most recent Performance Accountability Report. We also assessed the transparency of DOD's public reporting using criteria from GPRA Modernization Act of 2010, federal internal control standards, and findings from previous GAO reports on the reporting of agency priority goals.[5,6]

To assess the five performance measures DOD uses to monitor TAP implementation, we identified five of GAO's nine attributes for successful performance measures as pertinent to our analysis: measurable target, linkage, clarity, objectivity, and reliability. We excluded four attributes from our analysis: limited overlap, balance, government-wide priorities, and core program activities. The first three were excluded because they are cross-cutting, and therefore less relevant for analyzing a subset of program specific measures than a complete suite of agency-wide performance measures. The fourth was excluded so as not to duplicate a broader analysis that compared the extent to which DOD's monitoring efforts—including both performance measures and internal data reports—

[5]GPRA Modernization Act, Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866.

[6]GAO, *Managing For Results: OMB Improved Implementation of Cross-Agency Priority Goals, but Could Be More Transparent About Measuring Process,* GAO-16-509 (Washington, D.C.: May 20, 2016). GAO, *Managing For Results: Greater Transparency Needed in Public Reporting on the Quality of Performance Information for Selected Agencies' Priority Goals,* GAO-15-788 (Washington, D.C.: September 10, 2015).

covered in the four key areas of TAP implementation. The definitions of all nine attributes are as follows:[7]

(1) **Measurable Target:** measure has a numerical target/goal.

(2) **Linkage:** Measure is aligned with division and agency-wide goals and mission and clearly communicated throughout the organization.

(3) **Clarity:** Measure is clearly stated and the name and definition are consistent with the methodology used to calculate it.

(4) **Objectivity:** Measure is reasonably free from significant bias or manipulation.

(5) **Reliability:** Measure produces the same result under similar conditions.

(6) **Limited Overlap:** Measure should provide new information beyond that provided by other measures.

(7) **Balance:** Balance exists when a suite of measures ensures that an organization's various priorities are covered.

(8) **Government-wide Priorities:** Each measure should cover a priority such as quality, timeliness, and cost of service.

(9) **Core Program Activities:** Measures cover the activities that an entity is expected to perform to support the intent of the program.

We compared each of DOD's five implementation performance measures to the five attributes we identified as relevant for this review to determine whether they had been fully met or not met at all and these determinations were vetted by a reviewer to ensure their accuracy and appropriateness. One performance measure includes data for all TAP-eligible servicemembers combined—including members of the National Guard and Reserves--the credential attainment measure. In this case, we determined that the criteria had been partially met because while the

[7]GAO, *Tax Administration: IRS Needs to Further Refine Its Tax Filing Season Performance Measures,* GAO-03-143, (Washington, D.C.; Nov. 22, 2002).

criteria had been fully met for the active-duty servicemembers, they were not fully met for the data pertaining to National Guard and Reserve members.

Review of Relevant Literature

We also reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, DOD issuances, documents, and publications. For example, we reviewed the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011,[8] the Veterans Employment Initiative Task Force report,[9] and DOD's Instruction, which generally establishes the internal policies and procedures for implementing TAP world-wide.[10]

We conducted this performance audit from February 2016 to November 2017 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

[8]Pub. L. No. 112-56, Title II, 125 Stat. 711, 713-733.

[9]The Veterans Employment Initiative Task Force made a number of recommendations to change the Transition Assistance Program including establishing an extended curriculum, updating the employment workshop and briefings on federal veteran benefits, among others. Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, Veterans Employment Initiative Task Force. *Implementation Plan,* (Dec. 31, 2012).

[10]Department of Defense Instruction 1332.35, Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for Military Personnel (Feb. 29, 2016).

Appendix II: Performance Measures and Data Reports the Department of Defense Uses to Monitor Four Key Areas of Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Implementation

Table 7: Performance Measures and Data Reports the Department of Defense Uses to Monitor Four Key Areas of Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Implementation

	Monitoring Activity	Monitoring Method	Description
Key Area 1: Timeliness of TAP attendance	No performance measures or data reports		
Key Area 2: Program Access and Attendance	Tracking VOW[a] compliance: servicemembers *Agency Priority Goal and Department of Defense (DOD) Priority Goal*	Performance measure	Verified percent of known eligible active duty servicemembers who participate in a) pre-separation counseling, b) Department of Labor's (DOL) Employment Workshop, c) the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) Benefits Briefings prior to their separation or retirement from active duty.
	Tracking VOW compliance: Reserve Component (i.e., National Guard and Reserves) *Agency Priority Goal and DOD Priority Goal*	Performance measure	Verified percent of known eligible Reserve Component servicemembers who attended a) pre-separation counseling, b) DOL Employment Workshop, c) VA Benefits Briefings prior to their release from active duty.
	Producing and analyzing the VOW Act compliance summary data report (VOW Compliance Report)	Data report	Verified number and percentage of known-eligible servicemembers DOD determined to be VOW compliant based on their participation in pre-separation counseling, the DOL Employment Workshop, and VA Benefits Briefings prior to their separation or retirement from active duty. Percentages are shown two ways: 1) based on the number of servicemembers for whom participation data were available and 2) for all TAP-eligible servicemembers. Results are presented by service, component, and overall totals for both as well as by pre-separation counseling, DOL Employment Workshop, and VA Benefits Briefings.
	Producing and analyzing the VOW Act compliance report by service (VOW Act Service-Specific Compliance Report)	Data report	Same compliance information as for "VOW Compliance Report," but presented in separate tables for each service and component and by years of service and rank category

	Monitoring Activity	Monitoring Method	Description
	Tracking the number and percentage of servicemembers known to have participated in each 2-day career track[b] and to have attended pre-separation or transition counseling, the DOL Employment Workshop, and VA Benefits Briefings prior to separation, retirement, or release from active duty (Form 2958 Service Component Report)	Data report	This report identifies the verified number and percentage of servicemembers who attended Accessing Higher Education, Career and Technical Training, and Entrepreneurship classes prior to their separation, retirement, or release from active duty. The information is presented by service, component, and rank and has totals for service and component. Report includes all items collected during Capstone. The report also includes the verified percent of known eligible active duty servicemembers and members of the National Guard and Reserve who participate in a) pre-separation or transition counseling, b) Department of Labor's (DOL) Employment Workshop, c) the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) Benefits Briefings prior to their separation or retirement from active duty.
Key Area 3: Transition and career readiness preparation	Tracking Career Readiness Standards (CRS) compliance: servicemembers *Agency Priority Goal and DOD Priority Goal*	Performance measure	Verified percent of known-eligible active duty servicemembers who met CRS or received a warm handover to appropriate partner agencies prior to their separation or retirement from active duty.
	Tracking CRS compliance: reserve component (i.e., National Guard and Reserves) *Agency Priority Goal and DOD Priority Goal*	Performance measure	Verified percent of known-eligible reserve component servicemembers who separated and met CRS or received a warm handover to appropriate partner agencies prior to their release from active duty.
	Tracking credential attainment	Data report and performance measure	Reports the percentage of enlisted servicemembers receiving credential attainment prior to separation from military service.
	Tracking attainment levels of individual CRS and warm handovers: "DD Form 2958 Service Component Report"[b]	Data report	Identifies the number and percentage of servicemembers who met each of the CRS and/or obtained a warm handover to VA, DOL, or another entity prior to their separation, retirement, or release from active duty. Results are presented by service, component, and overall totals provided for both. All information collected during Capstone[c] is included. Percentages are shown two ways: 1) based on the number of servicemembers for whom participation data were available and 2) for all TAP-eligible servicemembers. According to agency officials, results are presented by service, component, and rank and have totals for service and components. The report also includes all items on the DD Form 2958 (all 16 Career Readiness Standards are documented, according to DOD officials.)

	Monitoring Activity	Monitoring Method	Description
	Tracking Career Readiness Standards and eBenefits registration compliance: "CRS and eBenefits Report"	Data report	Includes the verified number and percentage of servicemembers who 1) met CRS, 2) either met CRS or received a warm handover, and 3) had completed eBenefits registration prior to their separation, retirement, or release from active duty. Results are presented by Service, component, and overall totals for Service and component
Key Area 4: Participant Satisfaction	Producing and analyzing quarterly Transition Goals, Plans, Success (GPS) participant assessment report: "OPA MAIN TabData"	Data report	Spreadsheet that includes quantitative results produced for the Transition to Veterans Program Office (TVPO)[d] from the Office of People Analytics (OPA)[e] (detailed information for all modules/ tracks and TAP overall) on participant satisfaction and knowledge gain. Results for each question are presented by demographic information (e.g., component, rank, post-transition status) and by service, component, and instruction mode (whether classroom or online).
	Producing and analyzing participant assessment results dashboard: "Results Dashboard"	Data report	Spreadsheet produced by TVPO with a tab for all modules/ tracks and overall TAP program that provide detailed information, including graphics, on participant satisfaction and knowledge gain. The overall TAP module also provides perceived level of command support. The dashboard is designed to summarize data in a more user-friendly format and includes service-specific data presented by demographic group.
	Producing and analyzing participant assessment results by installation: "OPA Installation TabData"	Data report	Spreadsheet produced for TVPO by OPA that includes quantitative participant assessment results (detailed information for all modules/tracks and TAP overall) on participant satisfaction and knowledge gain. Results for each question are provided and presented for installations where the minimum level of responses were collected to allow for data reporting. Data are provided for each Transition GPS Participant Assessment question.
	Producing and analyzing write-in comments collected through the participant assessment survey: "OPA Written Comment File"	Data report	Spreadsheet produced for TVPO by OPA that includes qualitative written comments on TAP from the participant assessments (for all modules/ tracks and TAP overall). Comments on the curriculum, facilitators, facility, and overall program are presented separately for traditional classroom participants and for Joint Knowledge Online participants. Demographic information and installation is included for each comment, when available.

Source: GAO analysis of DOD data. | GAO-18-23

[a]DOD uses the term "VOW" to refer to the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011.

[b]Prior to the shift to its new electronic data-collection system in November 2016, DOD collected information on career readiness standard attainment using the DD Form 2958—the "Servicemember Career Readiness Standards/ Individual Transition Plan Checklist." DOD uses the same data report—the "Form DD2958 Service Component Report"—for three different monitoring activities 1) tracking the number and percentage of servicemembers known to have attended pre-separation counseling, the DOL Employment Workshop, and VA Benefits classes; 2) tracking the number and percentage of

servicemembers known to have participated in 2-day career tracks and 3) tracking attainment levels of individual Career Readiness Standards and warm handovers. Consequently, the number of rows with data reports as the monitoring method (11) exceeds the number of regularly produced data reports (9.)

[c]Capstone events are the final step in TAP designed to verify whether transitioning servicemembers have met Career Readiness Standards and have a viable Individual Transition Plan or received a referral to staff at another federal partnering agency.

[d]Among other things, the Transition to Veterans Program Office (TVPO) develops policy, strategic guidance, and program goals for TAP, oversees the military departments' implementation of TAP, and analyzes data to evaluate the overall performance of TAP.

[e]The Office of People Analytics (OPA), which DOD established in 2015 as part of the "Force of the Future" initiative, was created to enhance DOD's data analysis capabilities related to managing talent and to inform personnel policies to attract, recruit, and retain high performers within DOD.

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Defense

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MANPOWER AND
RESERVE AFFAIRS

OCT 2 6 2017

Ms. Cindy S. Barnes
Director
Education, Workforce, and Income Security
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Barnes,

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report 18-23, "Transitioning Veterans: DoD Needs to Improve Performance Reporting and Monitoring for the Transition Assistance Program" dated September 22, 2017, (GAO Code 100665). Overall, DoD concurs with the report.

The Department is providing official comments and responses for inclusion in the report.

Sincerely,

Matthew P. Dubois
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense
(Reserve Integration)

Enclosure:
DoD Comments and Responses

GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED AUG 29, 2017
GAO-18-23 (PROJECT CODE 100665)
"Transitioning Veterans: DOD Needs to Improve Performance Reporting and Monitoring for the Transition Assistance Program"

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE RESPONSES TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: We recommend that the Secretary of Defense publicly report DOD's performance and career readiness attainment for all TAP-eligible service members and members of the National Guard and Reserve rather than exclude those for whom data are missing or clarify the extent of missing data.

RECOMMENDED DoD RESPONSE: PARTIALLY CONCUR.
The DoD partially concurs. DoD acknowledges the FY16 Agency Priority Goals (APG) performance measures provided to the public via performance.gov did not provide a clear explanation regarding missing data. However, in FY17 DoD provided language in reporting its APG performance measures data that clearly addressed the extent of the missing data for the public. The following is an extract of DoD TVPO's FY17 third quarter "Separation VOW Compliance Reserve Component" performance measure language, as reported through DoD channels for publication to the public via performance.gov: "Compliance rate reflects only the known eligible Service members, that is – those for whom a completed DD Form 2648 (or legacy DD Form 2958) was received by the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC). Through May FYTD 2017, DMDC received completed DD Forms for 41.0% (8,953) of the 21,861 Reserve Component VOW Act eligible separations." Similar language was used in reporting VOW Compliance for Active Duty Service members.

In addition to the currently reported VOW Act compliance and career readiness standards attainment for VOW Act eligible Service members, the DoD will ensure an even more transparent description of the extent of the missing data is also provided along with the currently reported compliance rates to offer important insight as to the number of Service members for whom data is unknown. DoD feels strongly that compliance should only be computed based on data that is known and should include a description of the extent of the missing data to offer insight as to the number of Service members for who compliance data is unknown. This information will be included in the FY18 Q1 reporting and beyond. Note, as stated above, an explanation of the extent of missing, unknown data has been included in the DoD Agency Priority Goal: Transition to Veterans reporting for FY17, which was outside the scope of GAO's analysis for this report. DoD will also continue working to reduce the extent of missing data, as it is critical to be able to track VOW Act compliance and Career Readiness Standards attainment of all of our transitioning Service members.

RECOMMENDATION 2: We recommend that the Secretary of Defense monitor and report on the extent to which service members participate in TAP within prescribed timeframes.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

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The DoD acknowledges tracking when Service members participate in TAP is valuable for ensuring Service members receive effective transition preparation. The DoD currently has the capability to retrieve data documenting when a Service member begins the TAP process (i.e., with the Pre-Separation/Transition Counseling signature date) and his/her separation date. Comparing these dates, will enable the DoD to determine the extent to which Service members participate in TAP within prescribed timeframes. Likewise, the DoD can compare the date the Capstone event was completed to the Service member's separation date. However, the currently collected data will not allow for parsing out Service members who are short-notice separations; and, therefore, could not adhere to the prescribed timeframes. The capability to parse out such transition cases is critical for proper interpretation of the data and use of this data for future program improvements. In order to implement this recommendation, the DoD will first need to identify the IT requirement and associated cost (for example, what new field(s) may need to be added to the eForm), as well as any needed TAP staff training, to collect data denoting short-notice separations. Based on availability of funds for FY19, the DoD anticipates the earliest this data can be collected will be FY19, and the earliest for monitoring and accurate reporting of the data will be FY20.

RECOMMENDATION 3: We recommend that the Secretary of Defense monitor and report on the extent to which service members who elect to receive supplementary 2-day classes are able to receive training.

DOD RECOMMENDED RESPONSE: NONCONCUR
The DoD does not concur with this recommendation. The focus of the current Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is for transitioning Service members to meet Career Readiness Standards (CRS). Nine CRS are deemed common and applicable to all Service members. Moreover, for Service members interested in pursuing higher education and/or career technical training as part of their Individual Transition Plan (ITP), they must also meet four additional educational-oriented CRS. The 2-day tracks were developed and made available to help those who need assistance in meeting these additional CRS. While the additional 2-day tracks are voluntary on the part of the Service member, Service members are encouraged to take advantage of these tracks. All Service members are able to participate in the additional 2-day tracks, as these tracks are available both via classroom setting and online through Joint Knowledge Online. While the DoD does track the extent to which Service members attend the 2-day tracks, it is important to note that CRS attainment, not simply course participation, is the important variable to monitor and report. That being said, DoD will research whether there are barriers to Service members being allowed to access the additional 2-day tracks.

RECOMMENDATION 4: We recommend that the Secretary of Defense monitor and report on the extent to which service members attend TAP in a classroom settings unless allowed by regulation to participate online.

DOD RECOMMENDED RESPONSE: CONCUR

The DoD acknowledges tracking whether Service members participated in TAP in a classroom setting or online is important. This is feasible with existing data. However, it is not uncommon for Service members to take TAP courses both in a classroom and online. The DoD only tracks

2

Service member participation for their most recent TAP courses. For example, if a Service member completed the Accessing Higher Education Track in the classroom first and then completed it again online for a refresher, this would be tracked as online participation. The DoD anticipates the monitoring and reporting of the extent to which Service members participate in TAP via a classroom setting or online (using their most recently completed TAP course) will be by FY19.

Currently, data collected by the DoD does not capture the reason a Service member completes TAP online. The DoD will need to identify whether this particular data point could be captured (and how). Upon completion of this research, the DoD anticipates having the determination as to whether this action will be feasible and its associated estimated funding requirements in FY19.

RECOMMENDATION 5: We recommend that once DOD monitors and reports data on timeliness, 2-day classes, and the use of online TAP, enable unit commanders and high-level commanders to access this information to help ensure the specific units they oversee and are compliant with all TAP requirements.

DoD RECOMMENDED RESPONSE: PARTIALLY CONCUR
The DoD concurs once the capability to collect, track, and report data on TAP participation timeliness and the extent of online and classroom TAP participation has been accomplished, within 12 months the data will be provided to commanders when feasible. The intent of this recommendation should be met at the Service level. Each Military Service has transition staff who can make this information available to commanders. For example, the Air Force Airman and Family Readiness Centers are responsible for reporting/advising commanders on unit participation. Army Soldier For Life – Transition Assistance Program installation staff have the same capability, as do the other Services' transition staffs.

RECOMMENDATION 6: We recommend that the Secretary of Defense seek ways to minimize the subjectivity involved in career readiness determinations, particularly when judgements are involved, such as the quality of the individual transition plan and the resume. This could include developing guidance on training that provides quality standards for assessing career readiness materials.

DoD RECOMMENDED RESPONSE: CONCUR
The DoD will work with the Military Departments and the Department of Labor (DOL) to seek ways to minimize the subjectivity in judgments involving determining Service member attainment of particular career readiness standards, such as the quality of the resume or job application package. This may include developing guidance on quality standards for assessing particular career readiness materials. GAO should note the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps have personnel at the installation level who are trained in resume writing/review and career planning, and provide quality of life guidance to transitioning Service members and families. Installations can also call upon their local DOL partners for further support. If questions do arise, for example from a Commander about whether the quality of the resume is suitable for CRS attainment, Service members should be referred to their local transition personnel at the Fleet and Family Support Center, Airman and Family Readiness Center, Soldier-For-Life Transition Assistance Center, or the Marine Corps Community Service Center, as well

as DOL, for additional evaluation and support. Finally, it is important to note that Commanders must be allowed the ability to exercise their best judgement on CRS attainment for their Service members, with the full knowledge that they have experts available to assist them housed within their respective centers that provide transition assistance at their installation. The DoD will work with the Military Departments and the DOL to examine and implement ways, as appropriate, to minimize subjectivity in judgments involving determining Service member attainment of particular career readiness standards, such as the quality of the resume by the end of FY18.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

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Staff Acknowledgements

In addition to the contact named above, Meeta Engle (Assistant Director), Amy E. MacDonald (Analyst-in-Charge), James E. Bennett, Holly A. Dye, Alexander G. Galuten, Cynthia L. Grant, David J. Forgosh, Ying Long, Angela Marler, Jean L. McSween, Andrew Sherrill, Benjamin Sinoff and Timothy J. Young made significant contributions to this report.

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Appendix V: Accessible Data

Data Tables

Data Table for Highlights Percent of Servicemembers Who Completed Required Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Activities, within Selected Time Frames, Fiscal Year 2016

90-day regulatory deadline for completing TAP

Time to complete separation	Percent
9 months or more	2.6%
6 to 8 months	4.7%
90 days to 5 months	23.2%
Less than 90 days	53.3%

Data Table for Figure 1: Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Components and Activities Provided by the Departments of Defense (DOD), Labor (DOL), Veterans Affairs (VA), and the Small Business Administration (SBA)

	Pre-separation counseling or transition counseling[a]	Core curriculum (part 1)	Core curriculum (part 2)	Core curriculum (part 3)	Additional classes	Capstone event
Activity	Servicemember consulted and briefed on upcoming training • Career interest assessment • Develop Individual Transition Plan • Scheduled to participate in core curriculum and additional 2-day tracks	Employment workshop • Customized employment plan	Veterans' benefits • BriefingsI and II[b]	DOD core curriculum • Crosswalk of military and civilian occupations • Financial planning • Resiliency	Career-specific/ supplemental classes • Education • Technical and skills training • Entrepreneurship	Verify transitioning servicemembers... • Have achieved career readiness standards • If not, they receive a referral (warm handover) to agencies serving veterans
Provider	DOD services	DOL contractors	VA contractors	Military service staff or contractors		DOD services
Duration	Varies	3 days	6 hours	8-10 hours		Varies

Data Table for Figure 2: Comparison of Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Performance Outcomes between Department of Defense's (DOD) Public and Internal Reports, Fiscal Year 2016

	DOD's Performance target	Publicly reported (Excludes missing records)	Internal monitoring (Uses all records)
Verified percentage of known eligible National Guard and Reserve servicemembers who attended mandated TAP elements[a,b]	85	94	47.1[cd]
Verified percentage of known eligible National Guard and Reserve servicemembers who met Career Readiness Standards (CRS) or received a warm handover	85	92.7	46.6[cd]
Verified percent of known eligible Active Duty servicemembers who and attended mandated TAP elements[a,b]	85	96.8	86.9[de]
Verified percentage of known eligible Active Duty servicemembers who met CRS or received a warm handover	85	96.9	86.8[d]

Data Table for Figure 3: Participation Rates in Transition Assistance Program's (TAP) Required Courses, Fiscal Year 2016

	Number of servicemembers	Percentage of servicemembers
Participated in TAP	135,208	85%
Did not participate in TAP	4,147	3%
Status unknown due to missing data	19,802	12%

Data Table for Figure 4: Participation Rates in Transition Assistance Program's Required Courses, by Branch of Service, Fiscal Year 2016

	Required courses not completed	Completion status unknown	Required courses completed
Air Force	1	7	92
Army	4	9	87
Marine Corps	1	22	77
Navy	2	17	81
Total DOD	3	12	85[a]

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) fiscal year 2016 data. | GAO-18-23

Data Table for Figure 5: Participation Rates of All Transition Assistance Program-Eligible Servicemembers Who Participated in at Least One Additional 2-day Class, by Branch of Service, Fiscal Year 2016

	Number of servicemembers	Percentage of servicemembers
Army	13,253	18
Air Force	3,796	16
Navy	4,387	14
Marine Corps	1,032	4

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) fiscal year 2016 data. | GAO-18-23

Data Table for Figure 6: Percent of Servicemembers Who Started the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) within Selected Time Frames, Fiscal Year 2016

90-day regulatory deadline for completing TAP

Time to complete separation	Percent
9 months or more	2.6%
6 to 8 months	4.7%
90 days to 5 months	23.2%
Less than 90 days	53.3%

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) fiscal year 2016 data. | GAO-18-23

Data Table for Figure 7: Percent of Servicemembers Who Started the Transition Assistance Program 90 Days or More before Their Date of Separation, by Service, Fiscal Year 2016

	Started with fewer than 90 days remaining	Start date unknown	Started with more than 90 days remaining
Air Force	12	5.7	82.3
Army	19.1	12.8	68.1
Marine Corps	16.7	16.5	66.8
Navy	20.5	12.5	67

Data Table for Figure 8: Number and Percent of Servicemembers Who Met Career Readiness Standards or Received a Warm Handover Referral, Fiscal Year 2016

85% Met standards or received referral

- 81% Met standards (129,221 servicemembers)
- 4% Did not meet standards, but received referral (5,581

servicemembers)

15% Regulatory requirements not met or unknown

- 12% Status unknown due to missing data (19,704 servicemembers)
- 3% Did not meet standards or receive a referral (4,651 servicemembers)

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-18-23

Data Table for Figure 9: Percent of Servicemembers Who Met Career Readiness Standards, by Service, Fiscal Year 2016

	Did not meet career readiness standards, but received warm handover to a partner agency	Status unknown due to missing data	Career readiness standards met
Air Force	4	6.9	89.2
Army	7.4	8.7	83.9
Marine Corps	7.6	23.6	68.8
Navy	2.8	17.3	79.9
Total DOD	6	12.8	81.2

Data Table for Figure 10: Percent of Servicemembers Who Completed Required Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Activities, within Selected Time Frames, Fiscal Year 2016

90-day regulatory deadline for completing TAP

Time to complete separation	Percent
9 months or more	2.6%
6 to 8 months	4.7%
90 days to 5 months	23.2%
Less than 90 days	53.3%

Data Table for Figure 11: Percent of Servicemembers Who Completed the Transition Assistance Program Fewer than 90 Days Before Leaving Military Service, by Age, Fiscal Year 2016

Age group	Percent
18-24 years old	60
25-34 years old	58
35-44 years old	37
45-54 years old	30
55 years or older	30

Data Table for Figure 12: Percent of Servicemembers Who Completed the Transition Assistance Program on Time, by Service, Fiscal Year 2016

	Completed less than 90 days before separation (late)	Status unknown due to missing data	Completed before 90 days (On time)
Army	56.5	10	33.4
Air Force	61.3	7.7	31
Marine Corps	36.7	36.2	27.2
Navy	54.5	19.6	25.9

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) fiscal year 2016 data. | GAO-18-23

Data Table for Figure 13: Map of Department of Defense Installations GAO Visited

Map of continental United States locates seven bases visited for this report

City and state	Branch
Arlington, Va.	Army
Camp Pendleton, Calif.	Marine Corps
Colorado Springs, Colo.	Air Force
Killeen, Tex.	Army
Norfolk, Va.	Navy
San Antonio, Tex.	Air Force
San Diego, Calif.	Navy

Source: GAO. | GAO-18-23

Agency Comment Letter

Text of Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Defense

Page 1

Ms. Cindy S. Barnes Director

Education, Workforce, and Income Security

U.S. Government Accountability Office 441 G Street, NW

Washington, DC 20548 Dear Ms. Barnes,

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report 18-23,

"Transitioning Veterans: DoD Nee ds to Imp rove Performance Reporting and Monitoring for the Transition Assistance Program" dated September 22, 2017, (GAO Code 100665). Overall, DoD concurs with the report.

The Department is providing official comments and responses for inclusion in the report.

Mathew P. Dubois

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Reserve Integration)

Enclosure:

DoD Comments and Responses

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GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED AUG 29, 2017
GAO-18-23 (PROJECT CODE 100665)
"Transitioning Veterans: DOD Needs to Improve Performance Reporting and Monitoring for the Transition Assistance Program"
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE RESPONSES TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1:

We recommend that the Secretary of Defense publicly report DOD's performance and career readiness attainment for all TAP-eligible service members and members of the National Guard and Reserve rather than exclude those for whom data are missing or clarify the extent of missing data.

RECOMMENDED DoD RESPONSE: PARTIALLY CONCUR.

The DoD partially concurs. DoD acknowledges the FY16 Agency Priority Goals (APG) performance measures provided to the public via performance.gov did not provide a clear explanation regarding missing data. However, in FY17 DoD provided language in reporting its APG performance measures data that clearly addressed the extent of the missing data for the public. The following is an extract of DoD TVPO's FY17 third quarter "Separation VOW Compliance Reserve Component" performance measure language, as reported through DoD channels for publication to the public via performance.gov: "Compliance rate reflects only the known eligible Service members, that is – those for whom a completed DD Form 2648 (or legacy DD Form 2958) was received by the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC). Through May FYTD 2017, DMDC received completed DD Forms for 41.0% (8,953) of the 21,861 Reserve Component VOW Act eligible separations." Similar language was used in reporting VOW Compliance for Active Duty Service members.

In addition to the currently reported VOW Act compliance and career readiness standards attainment for VOW Act eligible Service members, the DoD will ensure an even more transparent description of the extent of the missing data is also provided along with the currently reported compliance rates to offer important insight as to the number of Service members for whom data is unknown. DoD feels strongly that compliance should only be computed based on data that is known and should include a description of the extent of the missing data to offer insight as to the number of Service members for who compliance data is unknown. This information will be included in the FY18 Q1 reporting and beyond. Note, as stated above, an explanation of the extent of missing, unknown data has been included in the DoD Agency Priority Goal: Transition to Veterans reporting for FY17, which was outside the scope of GAO's analysis for this report. DoD will also continue working to reduce the extent of missing data, as it is critical to be able to track VOW Act

compliance and Career Readiness Standards attainment of all of our transitioning Service members.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

We recommend that the Secretary of Defense monitor and report on the extent to which service members participate in TAP within prescribed timeframes.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

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The DoD acknowledges tracking when Service members participate in TAP is valuable for ensuring Service members receive effective transition preparation. The DoD currently has the capability to retrieve data documenting when a Service member begins the TAP process (i.e., with the Pre-Separation/Transition Counseling signature date) and his/her separation date. Comparing these dates, will enable the DoD to determine the extent to which Service members participate in TAP within prescribed timeframes. Likewise, the DoD can compare the date the Capstone event was completed to the Service member's separation date. However, the currently collected data will not allow for parsing out Service members who are short-notice separations; and, therefore, could not adhere to the prescribed timeframes. The capability to parse out such transition cases is critical for proper interpretation of the data and use of this data for future program improvements. In order to implement this recommendation, the DoD will first need to identify the IT requirement and associated cost (for example, what new field(s) may need to be added to the eForm), as well as any needed TAP staff training, to collect data denoting short-notice separations. Based on availability of funds for FY19, the DoD anticipates the earliest this data can be collected will be FY19, and the earliest for monitoring and accurate reporting of the data will be FY20.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

We recommend that the Secretary of Defense monitor and report on the extent to which service members who elect to receive supplementary 2-day classes are able to receive training.

DOD RECOMMENDED RESPONSE: NONCONCUR

The DoD does not concur with this recommendation. The focus of the current Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is for transitioning Service members to meet Career Readiness Standards (CRS). Nine CRS are deemed common and applicable to all Service members. Moreover, for Service members interested in pursuing higher education and/or career technical training as part of their Individual Transition Plan (ITP), they must also meet four additional educational-oriented CRS. The 2-day tracks were developed and made available to help those who need assistance in meeting these additional CRS. While the additional 2-day tracks are voluntary on the part of the Service member, Service members are encouraged to take advantage of these tracks. All Service members are able to participate in the additional 2-day tracks, as these tracks are available both via classroom setting and online through Joint Knowledge Online. While the DoD does track the extent to which Service members attend the 2-day tracks, it is important to note that CRS attainment, not simply course participation, is the important variable to monitor and report. That being said, DoD will research whether there are barriers to Service members being allowed to access the additional 2-day tracks.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

We recommend that the Secretary of Defense monitor and report on the extent to which service members attend TAP in a classroom settings unless allowed by regulation to participate online.

DOD RECOMMENDED RESPONSE: CONCUR

The DoD acknowledges tracking whether Service members participated in TAP in a classroom setting or online is important. This is feasible with existing data. However, it is not uncommon for Service members to take TAP courses both in a classroom and online. The DoD only tracks

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Service member participation for their most recent TAP courses. For example, if a Service member completed the Accessing Higher Education Track in the classroom first and then completed it again online for a refresher, this would be tracked as online participation. The DoD anticipates the monitoring and reporting of the extent to which Service members participate in TAP via a classroom setting or online (using their most recently completed TAP course) will be by FY19.

Currently, data collected by the DoD does not capture the reason a Service member completes TAP online. The DoD will need to identify whether this particular data point could be captured (and how). Upon completion of this research, the DoD anticipates having the determination as to whether this action will be feasible and its associated estimated funding requirements in FY19.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

We recommend that once DOD monitors and reports data on timeliness, 2-day classes, and the use of online TAP, enable unit commanders and high-level commanders to access this information to help ensure the specific units they oversee and are compliant with all TAP requirements.

DoD RECOMMENDED RESPONSE: PARTIALLY CONCUR

The DoD concurs once the capability to collect, track, and report data on TAP participation timeliness and the extent of online and classroom TAP participation has been accomplished, within 12 months the data will be provided to commanders when feasible. The intent of this recommendation should be met at the Service level. Each Military Service has transition staff who can make this information available to commanders. For example, the Air Force Airman and Family Readiness Centers are responsible for reporting/advising commanders on unit participation. Army Soldier For Life – Transition Assistance Program installation staff have the same capability, as do the other Services' transition staffs.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

We recommend that the Secretary of Defense seek ways to minimize the subjectivity involved in career readiness determinations, particularly when judgements are involved, such as the quality of the individual transition plan and the resume. This could include developing guidance on training that provides quality standards for assessing career readiness materials.

DoD RECOMMENDED RESPONSE: CONCUR

The DoD will work with the Military Departments and the Department of Labor (DOL) to seek ways to minimize the subjectivity in judgments involving determining Service member attainment of particular career readiness standards, such as the quality of the resume or job application package. This may include developing guidance on quality standards for

assessing particular career readiness materials. GAO should note the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps have personnel at the installation level who are trained in resume writing/review and career planning, and provide quality of life guidance to transitioning Service members and families. Installations can also call upon their local DOL partners for further support. If questions do arise, for example from a Commander about whether the quality of the resume is suitable for CRS attainment, Service members should be referred to their local transition personnel at the Fleet and Family Support Center, Airman and Family Readiness Center, Soldier-For-Life Transition Assistance Center, or the Marine Corps Community Service Center, as well

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as DOL, for additional evaluation and support. Finally, it is important to note that Commanders must be allowed the ability to exercise their best judgement on CRS attainment for their Service members, with the full knowledge that they have experts available to assist them housed within their respective centers that provide transition assistance at their installation. The DoD will work with the Military Departments and the DOL to examine and implement ways, as appropriate, to minimize subjectivity in judgments involving determining Service member attainment of particular career readiness standards, such as the quality of the resume by the end of FY18.

Related Products

GAO, *Department of Defense: Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for Military Personnel*, GAO-16-302R (Washington, D.C.: December 17, 2015).

GAO, *Veterans' Employment: Need for Further Workshops Should Be Considered before Making Decisions on Their Future*, GAO-15-518 (Washington, D.C.: July 16, 2015).

GAO, *Military and Veteran Support: DOD and VA Programs That Address the Effects of Combat and Transition to Civilian Life*, GAO-15-24 (Washington, D.C.: November 7, 2014).

GAO, *Veterans Affairs: Better Understanding Needed to Enhance Services to Veterans Readjusting to Civilian Life*, GAO-14-676 (Washington, D.C.: September 10, 2014).

GAO, *Transitioning Veterans: Improved Oversight Needed to Enhance Implementation of Transition Assistance Program*, GAO-14-144 (Washington, D.C.: March 5, 2014)

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

GAO, *Military and Veterans' Benefits: Observations on the Transition Assistance Program*, GAO-02-914T (July 18, 2002).

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