

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106248](#), a report to the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Hundreds of thousands of service members transition from military service to civilian life each year, and some can be at risk for unemployment, homelessness, or gaps in medical care. To help them succeed, DOD provides certain service members with a warm handover to other agencies and organizations for additional assistance.

Senate report 117-130 includes a provision for GAO to review DOD's warm handover process. GAO's report addresses the extent to which DOD: (1) ensures that service members receive a warm handover as appropriate, (2) assesses information on the helpfulness of warm handovers, and (3) collaborates with VA and DOL in their efforts to refine the warm handover process.

GAO analyzed DOD program data for April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2023, the most recent available. GAO also reviewed relevant federal laws, policies, and agency documents, and interviewed officials from relevant federal agencies and five military installations selected for diversity in numbers of transitioning service members, geographic location, and service branch.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making eight recommendations, including that DOD develop plans to analyze warm handover data and assess the helpfulness of warm handovers, and that DOD, VA, and DOL coordinate to identify criteria for scaling piloted approaches. The three agencies agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106248](#). For more information, contact Dawn G. Locke at (202) 512-7215 or locked@gao.gov

March 2024

SERVICE MEMBERS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE

Agencies Can Improve Warm Handovers for Additional Assistance

What GAO Found

To assist certain service members who may be at risk for a difficult transition from military to civilian life, the Department of Defense (DOD) provides them with a person-to-person connection, known as a "warm handover," to other agencies. These other agencies include the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Labor (DOL), which can help the service members obtain additional transition services. Through its Transition Assistance Program, DOD ensures these service members receive agency contact information, but does not ensure that a connection with a person actually occurs (see figure). DOD provided at least one warm handover to about 41,000 service members, according to available data from April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2023. However, during this same time period the agency did not provide a warm handover to over 4,300 other service members who were also considered at-risk of having a challenging transition. DOD officials said the agency has not analyzed the reasons why these service members did not receive a warm handover. Without developing a written plan to analyze its data, DOD cannot ensure that the thousands of service members transitioning annually have access to the additional assistance they need and the benefits they have earned.

DOD's Warm Handover Process Does Not Ensure Service Members Connect with Agencies for Additional Assistance with Their Transition to Civilian Life



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data and policy and interviews with DOD officials. Images (GAO). | GAO-24-106248

Transition Assistance Program counselors and others told GAO that warm handovers could be helpful to some service members, but DOD has not assessed their helpfulness. DOD has recently worked with VA and DOL on pilot projects that will provide some additional information, but these efforts are expected to provide limited information on warm handovers, and other agency efforts to assess the Transition Assistance Program do not focus on warm handovers. Without a plan to assess the helpfulness of warm handovers, program officials may be missing opportunities to ensure they are meeting the needs of service members.

Agencies generally collaborated effectively to implement pilot projects aimed at refining warm handovers, but they have not identified criteria to make decisions about scaling all of the piloted approaches. Without identifying specific criteria, these agencies risk not collecting data needed to decide whether and how to scale the piloted approaches to the broader Transition Assistance Program and warm handover processes.