



December 2022

SERVICEMEMBERS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE

DOD Can Better Leverage Performance Information to Improve Participation in Counseling Pathways

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-104538](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

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

The NDAA for Fiscal Year 2019 included a provision for GAO to review the TAP counseling pathways. This report addresses, among other things, the implementation of TAP counseling pathways and transitioning servicemembers' participation in these pathways.

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

What GAO Recommends

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

View [GAO-23-104538](#). For more information, contact Dawn G. Locke at (202) 512-7215 or locked@gao.gov.

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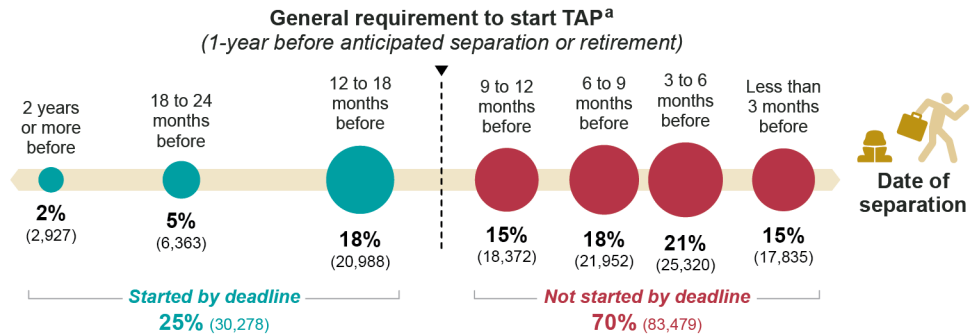
What GAO Found

To improve the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (FY 2019 NDAA) includes provisions requiring the service branches to establish counseling pathways, among other actions. GAO found that DOD service branches had fully implemented the TAP counseling pathways. These pathways include a self-assessment, individualized initial counseling, tier assignment that reflects servicemembers' transition preparedness, and a revised core curriculum. Service branch officials, TAP staff, and servicemembers GAO interviewed from selected installations generally expressed positive feedback on the TAP counseling pathways.

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

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

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



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-23-104538

Note: The 1-year time frame does not apply when servicemembers face an unanticipated separation or retirement or, for reserve component servicemembers, when demobilization makes the time frame unfeasible. Therefore, in some cases the requirement may have been met although the servicemember started TAP less than 1 year before separation or retirement.

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Abbreviations

Census	U.S. Census Bureau
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOD	Department of Defense
DOL	Department of Labor
DMDC	Defense Manpower Data Center
FY 2019 NDAA	John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
QLIK	Quality Learning Interaction Knowledge data analytics platform
SBA	Small Business Administration
TAP	Transition Assistance Program
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs
VETS	Veterans' Employment and Training Service

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December 12, 2022

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
The Honorable James M. Inhofe
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Adam Smith
Chairman
The Honorable Mike Rogers
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

More than 500,000 servicemembers are expected to participate in the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) over the next few years. TAP is a mandatory program for separating servicemembers that provides career readiness services and information on veterans' benefits, among other things.¹ The program is designed to assist transitioning servicemembers in accessing veteran benefits and developing post-transition plans and goals, such as choosing a career path, finding employment, starting a business, or deciding which college or vocational school to attend.

The John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (FY 2019 NDAA) included various provisions to improve TAP.² Among other things, the new provisions required all transitioning servicemembers eligible for TAP to meet with a TAP counselor to complete a self-assessment, and to attend revised core TAP classes as well as tailored 2-day classes.³ In addition, FY 2019 NDAA required the service branches to establish counseling pathways, which they have done by assigning servicemembers to one of three tiers depending on how

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

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

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

prepared they are to transition and how much transition support they need. In this report, we use the phrase “TAP counseling pathways” to refer to the key program elements that were changed by FY 2019 NDAA. Although TAP is primarily administered by the Department of Defense (DOD), the department collaborates with multiple federal agencies in implementing the program. The TAP interagency governance structure includes senior officials from seven federal agencies, including the Departments of Labor and Veterans Affairs.⁴ In fiscal year 2021, these agencies collectively reported obligating over \$160 million to implement TAP.

FY 2019 NDAA included a provision for GAO to review the status of the TAP counseling pathways. This report addresses (1) implementation of the TAP counseling pathways by service branches and selected installations; (2) the extent to which transitioning servicemembers participated in the TAP counseling pathways; and (3) DOD and its interagency partners’ efforts to measure performance and assess the effectiveness of TAP counseling pathways.

To describe the implementation of the TAP counseling pathways by service branches, and selected installations, we reviewed relevant federal laws, policies, and key agency documents. We also interviewed officials from relevant federal agencies—the Departments of Defense (DOD), Homeland Security (DHS), Education, Labor (DOL), and Veterans Affairs (VA), as well as the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the Small Business Administration (SBA)—and each service branch (Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Coast Guard).⁵ In addition, we conducted interviews and discussion groups at five installations that were selected for variation in location, service branch, and projected volume of transitioning servicemembers:

⁴The seven agencies are referred to as TAP interagency partners and include the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, Education, Labor, and Veterans Affairs, as well as the Office of Personnel Management and the Small Business Administration.

⁵While DOD oversees TAP implementation for Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Navy servicemembers, DHS generally oversees TAP implementation for Coast Guard servicemembers. Under DODI 1332.35, “the Secretary of the Navy develops joint implementation instructions to ensure statutory compliance for all eligible transitioning USCG personnel whenever the Coast Guard operates as a Service in the Navy in accordance with Titles 10 and 14, U.S.C.”

1. Fort Bliss, El Paso, Texas (Army),
2. Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Honolulu, Hawaii (Air Force and Navy),
3. Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point, North Carolina (Marine Corps),
4. Scott Air Force Base, St. Clair County, Illinois (Air Force), and
5. U.S. Army Garrison, Bavaria in Germany (Army).⁶

At each installation, we interviewed the TAP manager and key TAP staff who conduct individualized initial counseling sessions with servicemembers.⁷ To learn about selected servicemembers' experiences participating in the TAP counseling pathways, we also conducted 12 discussion groups at the five selected installations that collectively included 34 servicemembers. To select servicemembers for the discussion groups, we identified the characteristics of servicemembers we wanted to interview and asked TAP managers to identify individuals who reflected those characteristics. We selected these characteristics to achieve variation in how well servicemembers are prepared to transition to civilian life when they start TAP and to represent a mix of those serving on active-duty⁸ and reserve component orders.⁹ While their views are not generalizable, the discussions provide illustrative examples and helpful context to supplement our data analysis findings.

To assess transitioning servicemembers' participation in the TAP counseling pathways, we analyzed participant-level TAP data from the

⁶According to the DOD data we used to select these five installations, there were 318 installations in fiscal year 2021 from which servicemembers were expected to separate.

⁷For the Navy, uniformed personnel called "Command Career Counselors" conduct individualized initial counseling sessions, according to Navy TAP policy officials.

⁸In particular, we asked to interview servicemembers from each of the three tiers established by DOD: those identified as being fully prepared and career-ready (tier 1), moderately prepared or career-ready (tier 2), and not fully prepared or career-ready (tier 3). We also asked to interview separating members of the reserve component, if appropriate for the installation.

⁹DOD 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, (5) Air National Guard and (6) Air Force Reserve. The Department of Homeland Security oversees the seventh individual reserve component—the Coast Guard Reserve. 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. 10 U.S.C. § 10102.

Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) on eligible servicemembers who left military service between April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022, the most recent period for which data were available at the time of our review. We analyzed these data to review the extent to which transitioning and retiring servicemembers participated in key elements of the TAP counseling pathways and the extent to which they started TAP at least a year in advance of their anticipated separation or retirement date, as generally required. We compared the participation data to program requirements articulated in DOD policy. GAO's analysis should not be used to draw conclusions about the service branches' legal compliance.

We also reviewed documents and interviewed officials from DOD and service branches regarding their activities to monitor TAP participation. Further, we examined DOD and the service branches' efforts to use TAP data to improve performance. We compared those efforts to leading practices for leveraging performance information, including priorities set by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to increase federal agencies use of data and evidence to inform decision-making.¹⁰

We assessed the reliability of DMDC's participant-level data by electronically testing required data elements, reviewing documentation, and interviewing agency officials knowledgeable about the data.¹¹ We found DMDC's participant-level data for DOD active-duty servicemembers to be reliable for our purposes. However, as discussed later in this report, we determined that data for Coast Guard servicemembers and members of DOD's reserve component were not sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our report because of the extent of missing data for those groups.

¹⁰GAO has reported that performance information can help decision makers understand and improve results at federal agencies. See GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Survey Results Suggest Increased Use of Performance Information across the Federal Government*, [GAO-22-103910](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 3, 2021). In that report, GAO states that the executive branch has taken actions intended to improve the use of performance information and other evidence in decision-making. For additional information on leading practices for using performance information, see [GAO-05-927](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2005).

¹¹Specifically, we assessed the extent to which data were missing for particular variables and groups of servicemembers and examined the data for outliers and logical inconsistencies, such as records that showed servicemembers starting TAP after their anticipated separation date.

To describe DOD and its interagency partners' efforts to measure performance and assess the effectiveness of TAP counseling pathways, we identified the performance measures that DOD and TAP partner agencies established regarding the TAP counseling pathways and we examined agency efforts to evaluate TAP. We compared these efforts to key elements of an effective program performance assessment system identified in previous GAO reports.¹² Specifically, we reviewed key interagency documents such as the TAP interagency evaluation plan and the most recent available TAP program evaluations. We also interviewed key agency officials who serve on the TAP interagency Performance Management Work Group.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2020 to December 2022 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

Overview of TAP Counseling Pathways

Servicemembers start the transition process by completing a self-assessment and attending an individualized initial counseling session (see fig. 1).¹³ Individualized initial counseling should occur no later than 365 days (1 year) before the servicemember is expected to leave military

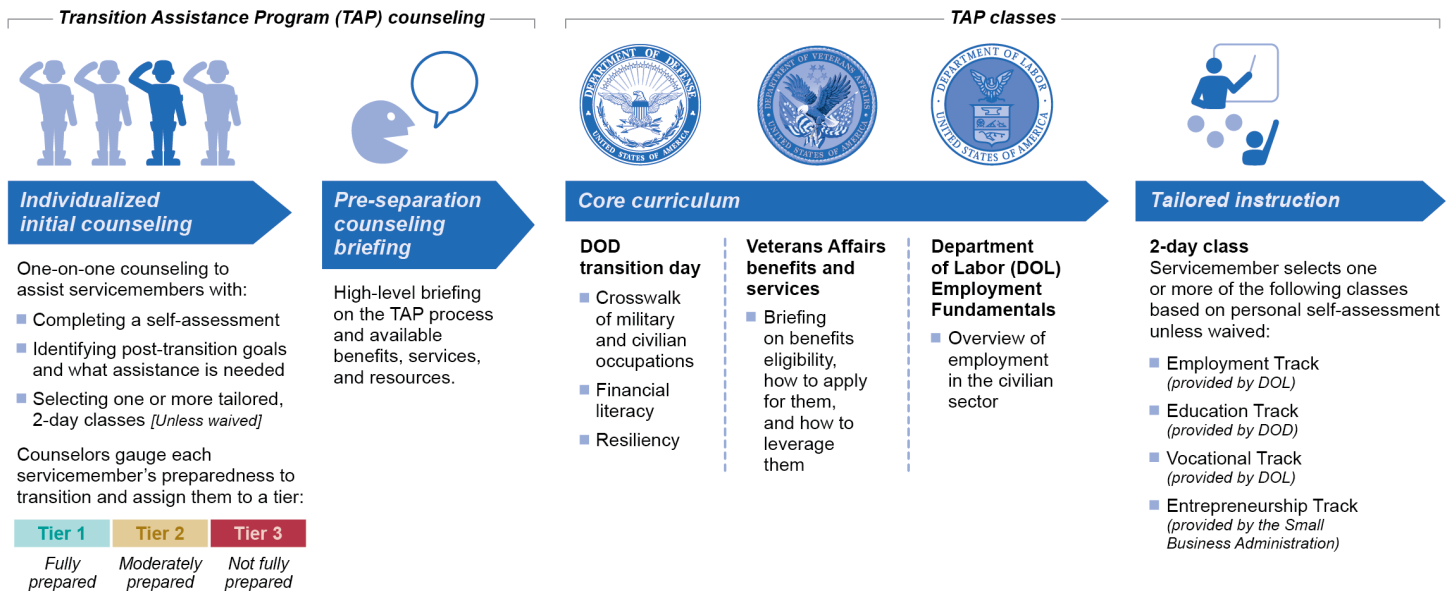
¹²GAO has previously reported that an effective program performance assessment system contains three key elements: program goals, performance measures, and program evaluations. GAO, *Program Evaluation: Strategies to Facilitate Agencies' Use of Evaluation in Program Management and Policy Making*, [GAO-13-570](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2013); *Performance Measurement and Evaluation: Definitions and Relationships*, [GAO-11-646SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2011); and *Managing for Results: Enhancing Agency Use of Performance Information for Management Decision Making*, [GAO-05-927](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2005).

¹³The FY 2019 NDAA amendments to the TAP program included a requirement for the service branches to administer self-assessments and provide individualized initial counseling sessions to servicemembers planning to leave service.

service, with some exceptions.¹⁴ During individualized initial counseling, counselors talk to servicemembers face-to-face or by video conference about their post-transition goals and plans to determine the level of transition assistance servicemembers require. Servicemembers are then assigned to one of three tiers based on how well they are prepared for transition:

- Tier 1: Fully prepared and career-ready, requiring minimum transition support,
- Tier 2: Moderately prepared or career-ready, requiring some transition support, or
- Tier 3: Not fully prepared or career-ready, requiring maximum transition support.

Figure 1: Overview of the Transition Assistance Program Counseling Pathways



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) guidance. | GAO-23-104538

¹⁴See 10 U.S.C. § 1142(a)(3). For clarity, in this report we use “1 year” rather than 365 days. In the case of unanticipated separations or retirements that occur 365 or fewer days before leaving active duty, or for reserve component members, when demobilization operations make the time frame unfeasible, servicemembers should begin “as soon as possible within the remaining period of service.” Before the passage of FY 2019 NDAA, TAP was to be started no later than 90 days before the date of discharge or release from military service.

Note: TAP concludes with a phase known as Capstone, during which commanders verify that servicemembers have successfully completed all TAP requirements or have been referred to an interagency partner or local resources.

The level of transition assistance servicemembers receive depends on the tier to which they are assigned and their service branch's TAP policies. After completing individualized initial counseling, servicemembers attend a mandatory briefing known as pre-separation counseling on available services, benefits, and transition-related deliverables, among other things. Pre-separation counseling should occur after individualized initial counseling and begin at least 1 year prior to anticipated separations, or as soon as possible for unanticipated separations or retirements.¹⁵

Following individualized initial counseling and the pre-separation counseling briefing, servicemembers attend TAP classes. These include 3 days of core curriculum classes and 2 days of tailored instruction. The core curriculum classes cover topics such as financial readiness, translating military skills to a civilian environment, VA benefits and services, and an overview of civilian employment.¹⁶ The tailored 2-day class servicemembers attend depends on their post-transition goals, which may include (1) employment, (2) education, (3) vocational training, and (4) entrepreneurship.¹⁷ Counselors help servicemembers select the appropriate 2-day class during individualized initial counseling. Servicemembers must attend a 2-day class unless their participation is waived.¹⁸ Waivers are permitted for groups or classifications of servicemembers unlikely to face major challenges in adjusting to civilian life. Similarly, waivers are permitted for servicemembers possessing

¹⁵See 10 U.S.C. § 1142(a)(3).

¹⁶The FY 2019 NDAA specified that 1 day of instruction cover preparation for employment, which is generally mandatory for all separating and retiring servicemembers. Prior to the FY 2019 NDAA, preparation for employment information was provided over 3 days.

¹⁷The 2-day classes on education, vocational training, and entrepreneurship were previously offered as optional classes outside of the core TAP curriculum. The 2-day class on employment was added after the FY 2019 NDAA took effect.

¹⁸Under 10 U.S.C. § 1144(c)(2), the Secretary of Defense or Secretary of Homeland Security may waive the participation requirement. Per DOD policy, the Secretaries of the military departments have the "delegated authority and flexibility to determine if a participation waiver is appropriate to exempt, as prescribed in Section 1144(c)(2) of Title 10, U.S.C., a servicemember from attending the "two days of instruction" prescribed in Section 1144(F)(D) of Title 10, U.S.C." (See DODI 1332.35).

specialized skills who, due to unavoidable circumstances, are needed to support a unit's imminent deployment.¹⁹

Interagency Collaboration

Although TAP is administered by DOD, multiple federal agencies collaborate to deliver the curriculum and assess the program. For example, both VA and DOL deliver part of TAP's core curriculum. The TAP interagency governance structure includes senior officials from DOD, Education, DHS, DOL, VA, OPM, and SBA. Representatives from these agencies participate in regular meetings and are tasked to particular interagency work groups. The work groups focus on specific aspects of TAP, such as the curriculum or performance measures. One such working group is the Performance Management Work Group that oversees the TAP interagency evaluation plan. This plan includes monitoring performance measures related to TAP requirements, indicators of post-program outcomes, and formal evaluations sponsored by interagency partners.

TAP Counseling Pathways Have Largely Been Implemented and Adapted to a Virtual Environment

All of the key components of the TAP counseling pathways have been implemented by the DOD service branches and at selected installations we reviewed.²⁰ In addition, officials at the service branches and installations generally expressed positive feedback about the TAP counseling pathways and said they had improved TAP overall. However, installation TAP managers and counselors raised some concerns to us regarding how well the program meets the needs of certain groups of servicemembers, such as members of the reserve component. In

¹⁹See 10 U.S.C. § 1144(c)(2) and (f)(1)(D).

²⁰While DOD oversees TAP implementation for Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Navy servicemembers, DHS generally oversees TAP implementation for Coast Guard servicemembers. Under DODI 1332.35, "the Secretary of the Navy develops joint implementation instructions to ensure statutory compliance for all eligible transitioning USCG personnel whenever the Coast Guard operates as a Service in the Navy in accordance with Titles 10 and 14, U.S.C." The Coast Guard issued an updated TAP policy document in November of 2021. However, according to officials, the pathways will not be fully implemented until the end of 2023.

addition, some implementation challenges were encountered when shifting to a largely virtual environment as a result of the pandemic, including technological challenges and delays in offering live and virtually facilitated VA Benefits and Services briefings.

The DOD Service Branches Have Fully Implemented the TAP Counseling Pathways While the Coast Guard Has Partially Implemented Them

All of the key components of the TAP counseling pathways, including the self-assessment, individualized initial counseling, and tier placement, have been fully implemented by the DOD service branches. The Coast Guard has partially implemented key components of the TAP counseling pathways. According to officials, the Coast Guard aims to have TAP pathways fully implemented by the end of 2023 (see table 1).²¹

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

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

Fully = Fully implemented, Partial = Partially Implemented.

Source: GAO analysis of service branch Transition Assistance Program (TAP) policies and interviews with Department of Defense (DOD) officials. | GAO-23-104538

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

DOD service branches. The FY 2019 NDAA provided the service branches some flexibility to independently tailor their programs, and four DOD services branches have established service-specific TAP policies to implement the counseling pathways consistent with their needs. For example, service branches have developed their own version of the

²¹In this report, we define fully implemented as having met two criteria: (1) a policy had been established to guide implementation, and (2) that policy had been communicated to the installations and incorporated into their TAP operations. Partially implemented means that a policy had been established to guide implementation, but the policy had not been communicated to installations and incorporated into their TAP operations.

personal self-assessment that servicemembers complete when they first start TAP. According to DOD officials, most service branches—the Air Force, Marine Corps, and Navy—built upon DOD’s paper-based self-assessment, while the Army opted to use a web-based self-assessment it had previously designed for a pilot program. In addition, the service branches have given TAP counselors one or more tools to help place servicemembers into appropriate tiers and given them flexibility to adjust the tier assignments.²² For example, the Navy developed a spreadsheet-based tool that considers 15 factors, including servicemembers’ financial readiness, education history, and employment plans. Counselors assess servicemembers’ circumstances for each given factor and the tool generates a suggested tier level based on that assessment. The Air Force and Marine Corps have also adapted this spreadsheet-based tool, according to DOD officials.

Coast Guard. The Coast Guard has partially implemented the TAP counseling pathways, and in November 2021 updated a TAP policy document that established policies and procedures related to servicemembers’ participation. The policy document established officials’ roles and responsibilities for administering the program and described how TAP should be implemented. Under the updated policy, Coast Guard TAP staff are now responsible for administering self-assessments, providing individualized initial counseling sessions, and tracking TAP participation for between 4,000 and 5,000 servicemembers each year, according to Coast Guard officials. To account for these increased responsibilities, Coast Guard officials said they requested five additional TAP managers and \$2.5 million for the program in the Fiscal Year 2023 President’s Budget. Coast Guard officials also said they are developing an implementation plan and expect TAP’s counseling pathways to be fully implemented by the end of 2023.

²²According to DOD officials, the tools identify the minimum tier to which a servicemember should be assigned using information entered by the TAP counselor. Counselors are allowed to assign a higher tier if deemed necessary to support servicemembers’ transition goals. For example, a counselor could re-assign a servicemember from tier 2 to tier 3 if their initial discussion with the servicemember indicated the need for greater transition assistance.

Feedback on Counseling Pathways Has Generally Been Positive but TAP Managers and Counselors Have Expressed Some Concerns

Service branch officials, installation staff, and servicemembers we interviewed generally expressed positive feedback about the TAP counseling pathways and said they have improved the TAP program overall. Officials from each service branch said the addition of individualized initial counseling and tier-based placement have allowed them to tailor TAP delivery to better meet servicemembers' individual needs. Similarly, TAP managers and counselors at the five selected installations said they appreciated the individualized approach to transitioning over a "one-size-fits-all" approach. In addition, more than half of the servicemembers (18 out of 34) we interviewed representing the various tiers said their experiences with TAP had been positive. TAP staff at these installations also supported the time frames for starting TAP. For example, a TAP manager at one installation said that spreading transition preparation over the course of a year or more helps servicemembers better process material and take advantage of other transition resources available at the installation, such as job search and resume assistance. Officials from the Air Force TAP policy office also emphasized that it is important to spread transition preparation over a year.

However, TAP managers and counselors at the selected installations said some TAP components seemed to be geared more toward active-duty service members than members of the reserve component. TAP staff at four of five installations said the tier system and some of the questions used to assign servicemembers into a tier are not a good fit for some servicemembers. For example, a TAP manager who works exclusively with reservists said these servicemembers will likely be returning to their prior civilian jobs and already have their own homes and transportation. Consequently, some elements of the TAP curriculum—such as financial readiness and employment—do not apply, according to TAP managers and counselors at two installations.²³ However, TAP counselors at two installations said they customize individualized initial counseling by

²³A Marine Corps TAP policy official noted that the tier based system provides more flexibility to reserve component servicemembers than was previously available and that servicemembers identified as needing minimum transition support—those assigned to tier 1—no longer have to complete all TAP elements. Air Force TAP policy officials said that to meet the unique needs of their reserve component, the Air Force developed a supplemental policy so reserve component servicemembers are no longer required to take TAP every time they are activated for 180 or more days.

discussing only those topics that are relevant to a servicemember's particular situation. Moreover, a Navy TAP policy official said TAP is designed to assist reserve component servicemembers as they transition from active-duty service. Transitioning members of the reserve component who are returning to a civilian job are placed in a lower tier than those who are not, according to this official. According to the TAP manager at one installation, reservists who are hesitant to take TAP will often change their mind after the briefing and realize TAP had value for them.

TAP Shifted to a Virtual Environment Due to COVID-19 and Experienced Some Challenges

All of the interagency partners and installations adjusted their delivery of TAP due to the COVID-19 pandemic by offering virtual classes and individualized initial counseling, according to DOD officials. Not all installations completely closed their TAP offices; some offered both in-person and virtual classes. At the start of the pandemic, all of the interagency partners and installations offered virtual training using a variety of delivery methods. During the pandemic, officials at one of the installations we interviewed said that all individualized initial counseling sessions were conducted via videoconference, though some TAP counselors conducted the sessions outdoors, while masked, for servicemembers who strongly preferred an in-person meeting. Officials at other installations said they conducted individualized initial counseling sessions by telephone or videoconference.

Some service branch and installation officials we interviewed reported initial challenges with virtual delivery. For example, according to VA officials, the VA Benefits and Services class was only available as self-paced and web-based training for approximately a year after the pandemic began. VA officials said their rollout of live, instructor-led virtual classes was delayed because the existing contract did not include instructor-led virtual delivery. In-person classes were available at all installations in April 2021. In addition, TAP staff at two of five installations told us they faced initial challenges with supporting multiple virtual delivery platforms (e.g., Zoom and Adobe Connect), and reported having technological challenges with connectivity and lack of bandwidth. TAP counselors at one installation said the lack of a common delivery platform for TAP classes was confusing to servicemembers and exacerbated the connectivity issues servicemembers reported experiencing.

Examples of Technological Challenges Reported by Servicemembers

Servicemembers in 3 of 12 discussion groups reported experiencing technological challenges while accessing TAP online classes remotely. For example, one servicemember told us his online classes were managed through multiple platforms, one of which experienced interruptions to the internet connection that caused the instructor to periodically be dropped from the class. Another servicemember said she had problems accessing the TAP training website at her worksite because reception was unreliable. As a result, she had to take the classes on her home laptop and on her own time. Moreover, servicemembers in 8 of 12 discussion groups said they preferred in-person instruction because it allowed for more personal interactions with the instructor and other attendees.

Source: GAO discussion groups with selected servicemembers. | GAO-23-104538

Despite technical challenges with delivering and accessing TAP virtually, online delivery during the pandemic promoted increased access to TAP for some servicemembers, their spouses, and caregivers. For example, according to a service branch official, a spouse whose child care or other responsibilities may have precluded attending in-person TAP classes was able to join online and participate virtually alongside the servicemember.²⁴ Officials at one service branch said servicemembers would like installations to continue offering virtual TAP classes. Based on the positive feedback, officials said the service branch is evaluating its virtual options in the future.

Most Servicemembers Participated in TAP Counseling Pathways, but Many Did Not Attend 2-Day Classes or Begin TAP on Time

Most transitioning servicemembers who left military service between April 1, 2021 and March 31, 2022 participated in the TAP counseling pathways.²⁵ More than 90 percent of DOD active-duty transitioning

²⁴According to DOD TAP policy, spouses of TAP-eligible servicemembers are encouraged to participate in transition assistance programming, as resources and capacity allow.

²⁵This does not include transitioning servicemembers who were members of the Coast Guard or Reserve components. We determined that data for those groups were not reliable for our purposes. Specifically, we found that verified TAP data were not available for a relatively high percentage of transitioning servicemembers in these groups. Coast Guard officials said fully implementing the counseling pathways will improve the quality of TAP data on Coast Guard servicemembers. A Coast Guard official said they expect to have fully implemented the TAP counseling pathways by the end of 2023. The official said the Coast Guard will train TAP staff and commanders how to use the TAP data collection system during implementation. For their part, DOD officials said they are working with service branch officials to collect more complete information on TAP participation for reserve component servicemembers.

servicemembers completed a self-assessment, attended individualized initial counseling, were assigned to a tier, and attended core TAP classes. More than 40 percent of these servicemembers were deemed to require maximum transition support and consequently assigned to tier 3. Participation in tailored 2-day classes increased after the classes became mandatory, but the service branches waived participation for many servicemembers. Further, we found that nearly a quarter of the servicemembers deemed to need maximum transition support—those assigned to tier 3—did not attend a 2-day class, inconsistent with service branch TAP policies. Last, we found that most servicemembers did not attend individualized initial counseling or the pre-separation counseling briefing more than a year in advance, as generally required.

Most Servicemembers Participated in TAP Counseling Pathways, and over 40 Percent Were Deemed to Require Maximum Transition Support

More than 90 percent of DOD active-duty transitioning servicemembers participated in the TAP counseling pathways, according to our analysis of DOD data. Specifically, they completed their self-assessment, participated in individualized initial counseling, and were assigned to a tier based on their level of preparedness for transition. They also attended TAP's core curriculum: DOD Transition Day, VA Benefits and Services, and DOL Employment Fundamentals class. Among TAP-eligible servicemembers who left military service between April 1, 2021 and March 31, 2022, the highest proportion (41 percent) were deemed to require maximum transition support and therefore assigned to tier 3, as shown in table 2.

The proportion of servicemembers assigned to different tiers varied across each service branch due in part to differences in the specific military culture of the branch and hiring requirements, according to DOD officials. For example, half of transitioning Air Force servicemembers, who are, on average, more senior and more likely to have an advanced degree than servicemembers in other branches—were assigned to tier 1 and deemed fully prepared to transition. In contrast, three-quarters of Marine Corps servicemembers, who are, on average, younger and have fewer advanced degrees—were assigned to tier 3 and deemed to require maximum transition support.

Table 2: Tier Assignments by Service Branch, for DOD Active-Duty Servicemembers Who Left the Military from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022

Service branch	Tier 1		Tier 2		Tier 3	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Air Force	11,139	50%	9,670	43%	1,579	7%
Army	14,572	31%	6,761	14%	25,525	54%
Marine Corps	2,240	9%	3,956	16%	19,028	75%
Navy	11,846	47%	9,860	39%	3,085	12%
DOD average	39,797	33%	30,247	25%	49,217	41%

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-23-104538

Note: Percentages by service branch may not total to 100 percent because of rounding.

Attendance in Tailored 2-Day Classes Increased, but Attendance Was Waived for Many Servicemembers

Attendance in tailored 2-day classes increased since the FY2019 NDAA made participation in these classes mandatory, unless waived. Specifically, the percentage of transitioning servicemembers who attended at least one of the 2-day classes on employment, higher education, vocational training, or entrepreneurship increased from 14 percent in fiscal year 2016 to 56 percent for the year from April 2021 through March 2022 (see table 3).²⁶

Table 3: Tailored 2-Day Class Attendance, for DOD Active-Duty Transitioning Servicemembers Who Left Military Service in Fiscal Year 2016 and from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022

Tailored 2-day class	2016		April 2021 through March 2022	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Employment	— ^a	— ^a	46,366	39%
Higher education	16,701	11%	21,570	18%
Vocational	6,893	4%	11,674	10%
Entrepreneurship	15,988	8%	8,637	7%
Attended at least one of these courses	22,468	14%	67,195	56%

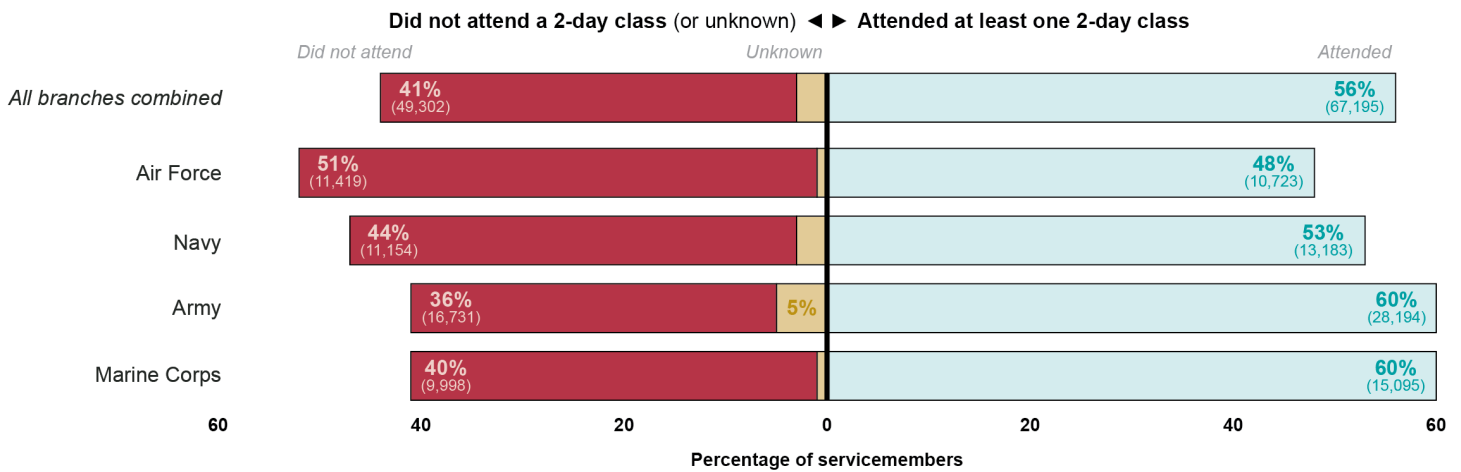
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data | GAO-23-104538

^aThe 2-day employment class was established after the FY 2019 NDAA changes took effect.

²⁶Some servicemembers may have the requirement to participate in the 2-day class waived. GAO had previously reported the fiscal year 2016 data on 2-day class attendance. See [GAO-18-23](#).

The percentage of servicemembers who attended at least one 2-day class varied by service branch, with higher percentages of Army and Marine Corps servicemembers participating in these classes than members of the Air Force or Navy (see fig. 2).

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



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-23-104538

Note: We classified 2-day class attendance as unknown for servicemembers whose eForms had not been signed. Generally, servicemembers must attend 2-day classes unless their participation is waived.

	Percentage that did not attend a 2-day class	Percentage with unknown attendance	Percentage that attended a 2-day class
All branches combined	41% (49,302 servicemembers)	3	56% (67,195)
Air Force	51% (11,419)	1	48% (10,723)
Navy	44% (11,154)	3	53% (13,183)
Army	36% (16,731)	5	60% (28,194)
Marine Corps	40% (9,998)	1	60% (15,095)

While 2-day class attendance is now generally mandatory, the Secretary of Defense or Homeland Security, as appropriate, may waive participation for certain servicemembers.²⁷ Specifically, the 2-day class requirement can be waived for “groups or classifications” of servicemembers if there is “extraordinarily high reason” to believe they are unlikely to face major challenges with readjustment, health care, employment, or other areas as they transition to civilian life.²⁸ DOD policy allows the Secretaries of the military departments to determine when waivers are appropriate. Under the service branches’ TAP policies, tier 1 servicemembers, who are considered fully prepared for transition, are not required to attend tailored 2-day classes, though they may opt to do so. In contrast, the branch policies require all tier 3 servicemembers to attend a 2-day class. However, service branch policies vary for tier 2 servicemembers. For example, tier 2 servicemembers are not required to attend a 2-day class (under Air Force and Navy policy) while participation is decided on an individual basis (under Army and Marine Corps policy).

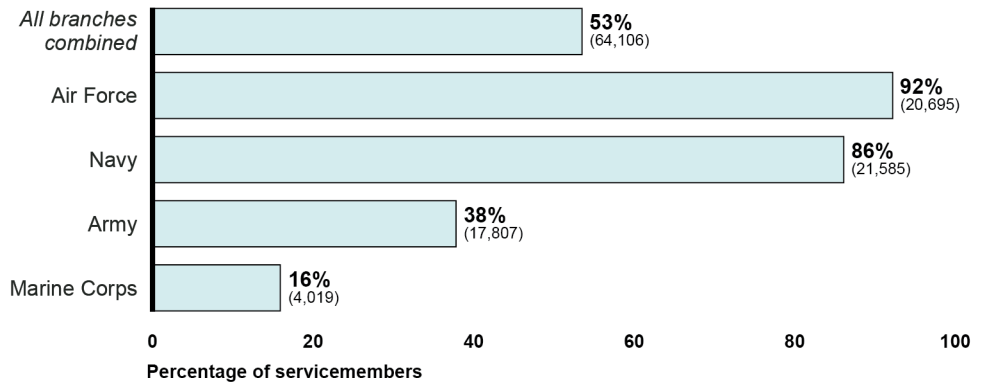
Our analysis of DOD data and servicebranch policies shows that service branches waived attendance in a tailored 2-day class for 53 percent (64,106) of servicemembers who left military service from April 2021 through March 2022 (see fig. 3).²⁹

²⁷Under 10 U.S.C. § 1144(c)(2), program participation can be waived by the Secretary of Defense or Secretary of Homeland Security. Per DOD policy, the Secretaries of the military departments have the “delegated authority and flexibility to determine if a participation waiver is appropriate to exempt, as prescribed in Section 1144(c)(2) of Title 10, U.S.C., a servicemember from attending the “two days of instruction” prescribed in Section 1144(F)(D) of Title 10, U.S.C. (DODI 1332.35).

²⁸10 U.S.C. § 1144(c)(2)(A). Participation may also be waived for “individual members possessing specialized skills who, due to unavoidable circumstances, are needed to support a unit’s imminent deployment.” 10 U.S.C. § 1144(c)(2)(B).

²⁹We considered servicemembers’ attendance in a 2-day class to have been waived by the Secretary of their military department if: (1) a waiver was documented on the servicemember’s eForm or (2) the servicemember was assigned to a tier for which 2-day class attendance is not required under their service branch’s policy.

Figure 3: Extent to Which the Service Branches Waived the 2-Day Class Attendance Requirement, for DOD Active-Duty Servicemembers Who Left the Military from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-23-104538

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

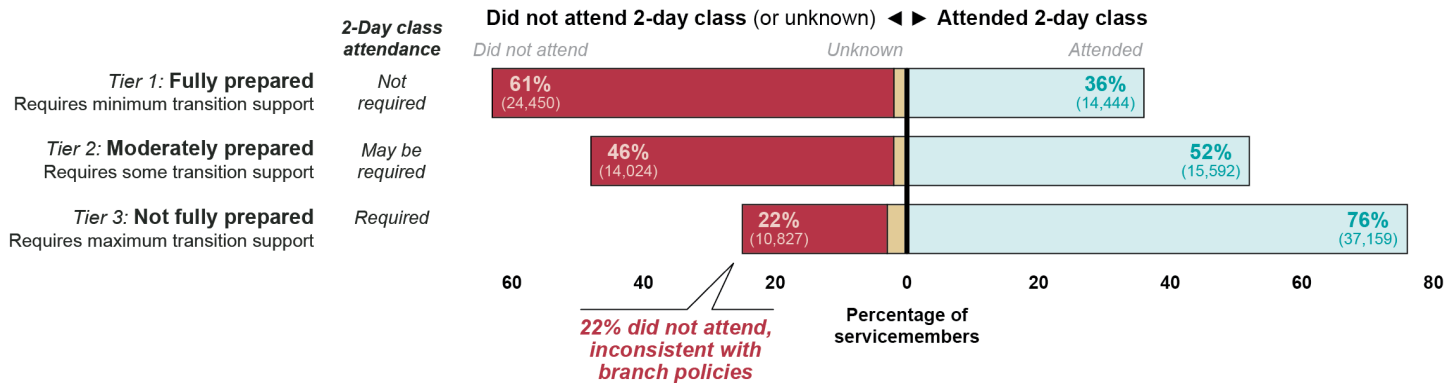
	Percentage of servicemembers	Number of servicemembers
All branches combined	53.5	64,106
Air Force	92.2	20,695
Navy	86.1	21,585
Army	37.8	17,807
Marine Corps	15.9	4,019

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

DOD Has Not Fully Leveraged Performance Information to Improve 2-Day Class Attendance

Service branch TAP policies stipulate that all tier 3 servicemembers must attend at least one 2-day class, but we found nearly 11,000 (22 percent) did not.³⁰ In contrast, over 37,000 tier 3 servicemembers (76 percent)—those deemed to require maximum transition support—did attend a 2-day class (see fig. 4).³¹ Transitioning servicemembers eligible for TAP may elect to attend a 2-day class, even if their service branch waived the attendance requirement for their tier, according to a TAP policy official.

Figure 4: 2-Day Class Attendance by Tier, for DOD Active-Duty Servicemembers Who Left Military Service from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-23-104538

Note: We considered 2-day class attendance unknown for servicemembers whose eForms had not been signed.

³⁰Marine Corps TAP policy officials said that they had identified data discrepancies on 2-day class attendance in the data the DOD TAP policy officials use to measure compliance with TAP requirements, which they access through the QLIK data analytics system, and that such discrepancies may have contributed to this result. For the purposes of our reporting objectives, we refer to these data as “QLIK data.” However, we analyzed participant-level data provided directly by DMDC, not the QLIK data the TAP policy office analyzes.

³¹GAO’s analysis should not be used to draw conclusions about the service branches legal compliance.

Letter

	2-Day class attendance	Percentage that did not attend a 2-day class	Percentage with unknown attendance	Percentage that attended a 2-day class
Tier 1: Fully prepared (Requires minimum transition support)	Not required	61% (24,450)	2	36% (14,444)
Tier 2: Moderately prepared (Requires some transition support)	May be required	46% (14,024)	2	52% (15,592)
Tier 3: Not fully prepared (Requires maximum transition support)	Required	22% (10,827)	3	76% (37,159)

Our analysis of DOD data shows that the percentage of tier 3 servicemembers who did not attend a 2-day class, as required by branch TAP policies, was highest for the Marine Corps at 33 percent (6,324), followed by the Navy at 23 percent (709).³² The percentages for the Army at 14 percent (3,675), and Air Force at 8 percent (119) were lower, but the Army accounted for a sizable proportion of tier 3 servicemembers DOD-wide who did not attend a 2-day class.

Officials from all four service branches said they have established oversight mechanisms to help ensure that tier 3 servicemembers attend a 2-day class. Air Force officials said that counselors check whether tier 3 servicemembers attended a 2-day class before allowing them to proceed to the final phase of TAP, during which TAP counselors and commanders assess whether servicemembers need additional transition support and provide referrals, as appropriate.³³ Army officials said they provide oversight through installation visits and inspections and that planned changes to the Army's TAP data system will enhance their ability to oversee 2-day class attendance for those required to attend. Marine Corps officials said oversight is provided through inspections conducted by Marine Corps headquarters and installation TAP staff using a checklist posted on the Marine Corps Inspector General's website. The officials said installations' execution and reporting of all mandated TAP phases is also reviewed during Marine and Family Program Certifications, which occur every 4 years.

Navy TAP policy officials said that they conduct routine TAP inspections to assess and monitor the extent to which individual commands are ensuring that their transitioning servicemembers participate in TAP as

³²Marine Corps and Air Force officials said they are attempting to validate these data with the DOD TAP policy officials.

³³This final phase of TAP is referred to as Capstone.

prescribed by DOD and Navy TAP policies. In addition, commanders and sailors responsible for overseeing TAP participation for their unit can access monthly unit-level tracking reports using the Navy's Retention Monitoring System, according to Navy TAP policy officials. The Navy developed this system in 2014 to help commanders track and monitor TAP compliance for their units, according to TAP policy officials. Navy officials said that counselors must give these reports to their unit's commanding officer each month. Navy TAP officials said they are currently working to update those reports to make them more useful to the front-line staff who use them to monitor TAP implementation for their unit.

In addition, officials from DOD's TAP policy office said they generally provide monthly TAP compliance reports that include some information regarding 2-day class attendance for tier 3 servicemembers, but service branch officials reported needing additional information. Specifically, service branch officials from the Air Force, Marine Corps, and Navy said they had not yet received or only recently received participant-level data they requested from the TAP policy office so they could verify whether some tier 3 servicemembers did not attend 2-day classes, as required. Moreover, officials from two service branches said they have not regularly received the TAP compliance reports. DOD TAP policy officials said that for several months in 2021 their ability to provide the compliance reports was constrained by technical problems.³⁴ Specifically, they said they faced challenges in accurately transferring DMDC data into the Quality Learning Interaction Knowledge (QLIK) data analytics platform, but noted that those issues have since been resolved.³⁵ More recently, staffing challenges contributed to delays in issuing the April, May, and June 2022 compliance reports, according to these officials. DOD officials said they have identified, assessed, and corrected these staffing challenges and expect to release the reports by the end of calendar year 2022.

³⁴For the purposes of our reporting objectives, we refer to DOD's Military to Civilian Transition Office as the "DOD TAP policy office." Similarly, we refer to the officials working within this office as "DOD TAP policy officials."

³⁵According to DOD TAP policy officials, QLIK is a data management system that DOD TAP policy officials sometimes use to analyze TAP data provided by DMDC. When QLIK is fully operational, selected officials can use the system to access TAP compliance or timeliness data at the service branch or installation levels, according to DOD TAP policy officials. However, as of August 2022, DOD TAP policy officials reported calculating TAP compliance outside of the system, which they said was being updated to reflect changes to TAP requirements.

Service branch officials cited the following reasons why some tier 3 servicemembers may not have attended a 2-day class as required: the servicemember refused to attend or was unable to attend because of hospitalization; the servicemember was undergoing a medical discharge; the servicemember was deployed immediately before leaving military service; the pandemic affected operations; and levels of command support varied. Our discussions with TAP staff at selected installations also indicated that a lack of command support may be a factor. Specifically, TAP managers and counselors at three of the five installations said that although commanders are responsible for ensuring that transitioning servicemembers under their command complete TAP requirements, commanders generally do not face consequences if requirements are not met, including 2-day class attendance. DOD TAP policy officials said they are taking steps to increase commanders' understanding of TAP requirements and its importance to servicemembers, such as offering additional training. In addition, a Navy TAP policy official said that the Navy has included TAP compliance as part of its annual Career Development Program Assessment since 2015. These assessments, in turn, help determine whether commanders are eligible to receive the Navy's annual Retention Excellence Award, commonly called the Golden Anchor award.³⁶

Service branch and DOD TAP policy officials have taken steps to monitor 2-day class attendance. They collect performance information; conduct inspections; and review compliance reports, as available. Nonetheless, they have not fully leveraged available data to understand and improve results, inconsistent with leading practices for using performance information and with priorities set by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to increase federal agencies' use of data to inform their decision-making.³⁷ DOD's TAP data include information on servicemembers' characteristics, such as their years of service, rank, and

³⁶Commands that earn the award are authorized to paint the anchor on their deployable ship gold and fly a special banner as a symbol of earning the award. Each year a command must either maintain the distinction or return the anchor to the original Navy gray color.

³⁷GAO has reported that performance information can help decision makers understand and improve results at federal agencies. See GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Survey Results Suggest Increased Use of Performance Information across the Federal Government*, [GAO-22-103910](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 3, 2021). In that report, GAO states that the executive branch has taken actions intended to improve agencies' use of performance information and other evidence in decision making. For additional information on leading practices for using performance information, see [GAO-05-927](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2005).

the unit and installation to which they are assigned. However, DOD officials have not analyzed the data to determine whether tier 3 servicemembers who do not attend a 2-day class share common characteristics. Such analyses could help DOD officials better understand which tier 3 servicemembers are at greatest risk of not attending a 2-day class. It could also help them develop effective corrective action plans.

GAO has reported that performance information can help decision makers understand and improve results at federal agencies.³⁸ It has also reported that for the last 5 years the executive branch has prioritized agencies' use of performance information to improve their decision-making.³⁹ For example, the 2018 President's Management Agenda established the Federal Data Strategy and a related action plan to help agencies fully leverage the value of data to fulfill their missions and serve the public. To help agencies leverage the value of data, the action plan identifies specific practices agencies can take to build cultures that value data and promote its efficient and appropriate use, among other things.⁴⁰ Such practices include: (1) identifying data needs to answer key agency questions, (2) using data to guide decision-making, and (3) using data to increase accountability.

More fully leveraging available information would better position service branch officials to develop tailored and effective corrective action plans, and to hold entities accountable for implementing such plans, as appropriate. This could help DOD more effectively ensure that those servicemembers most at risk of struggling during their transition to civilian life attend a 2-day class and achieve their post-transition goals.

Most Servicemembers Did Not Start at Least 1 Year before Their Transition and DOD Has Not Fully Leveraged Performance Information to Improve Timeliness

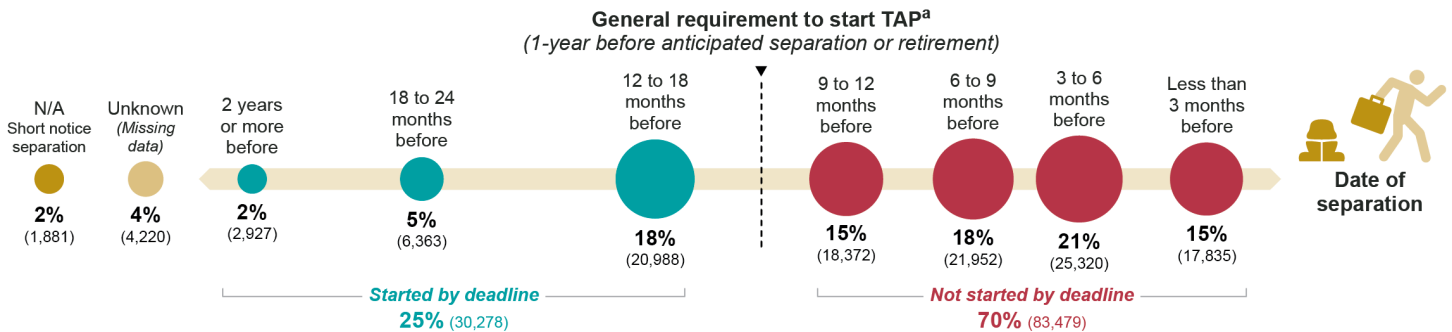
³⁸[GAO-22-103910](#).

³⁹[GAO-22-103910](#).

⁴⁰Office of Management and Budget, *The 2020 Federal Data Strategy Action Plan*.

Servicemembers must generally start TAP at least 1 year before they are expected to leave military service.⁴¹ This did not occur for the majority of transitioning servicemembers. Our data analysis shows that from April 2021 through March 2022, 25 percent of active-duty DOD servicemembers started TAP on time while 70 percent started TAP less than 1 year before their anticipated separation or retirement date (see fig. 5).⁴² However, the latter group may include some servicemembers not required to meet the 1-year requirement, such as those undergoing unanticipated separations with less than 1 year of service remaining.

Figure 5: Time Frames for Starting the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), for DOD Active-Duty Servicemembers Who Left the Military from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-23-104538

Note: The 1-year time frame does not apply when servicemembers face an unanticipated separation or retirement or, for reserve component members, when demobilization operations make the time frame unfeasible. Therefore, in some cases the requirement may have been met although the servicemember started TAP less than 1 year before separation or retirement. We classified time frames for starting TAP as unknown for servicemembers with unsigned eForms, with anticipated separation dates that preceded their individualized initial counseling dates, or for whom the individualized initial counseling or anticipated separation dates were missing. Because we found the data for DOD reserve component members unreliable, this figure does not include those categories.

^aServicemembers start TAP by attending individualized initial counseling.

⁴¹Servicemembers facing an unanticipated separation or retirement are to begin TAP as soon as possible within the remaining period of service, according to DOD TAP policy.

⁴²For the remaining 6 percent, the timing of when the servicemember started TAP was unknown due to missing data (4 percent) or not applicable because the servicemember separated under short notice (2 percent). To analyze how far in advance servicemembers started TAP, we compared the date servicemembers attended individualized initial counseling to their anticipated separation or retirement date as recorded in DOD's TAP data system. GAO's analysis should not be used to draw conclusions about the service branches' legal compliance.

Not applicable or missing data

	Percentage	Number
Not applicable (Short-notice separation)	2.0	1,881
Unknown (Missing data)	3.5	4,220

Started by deadline: 25% (30,278)

	Percentage	Number
2 years or more before	2.4	2,927
18 to 24 months before	5.3	6,363
12 to 18 months before	17.5	20,988

Not started by deadline: 70% (83,479)

	Percentage	Number
9 to 12 months before	15.3	18,372
6 to 9 months before	18.3	21,952
3 to 6 months before	21.1	25,320
Less than 3 months before	14.9	17,835

Servicemembers who start TAP less than 1 year before separating may face challenges with their challenge to civilian life, according to TAP staff we interviewed at the five selected installations. For example, TAP staff at one installation said that servicemembers who take TAP during the last year of their military service often cannot take advantage of additional transition resources they learn about in class. One such resource is DOD’s SkillBridge program that provides on-the-job training opportunities with civilian employers during the last 6 months of military service. TAP staff said that to participate in SkillBridge, servicemembers must (1) research participating employers, (2) submit applications to one or more employers, (3) complete interviews, and (4) obtain their commander’s permission to participate if selected by an employer. This process can take several months, according to TAP staff at 2 of 5 selected installations. As a result, servicemembers who start less than a year in advance may not have enough time to participate in SkillBridge and may miss opportunities to obtain a job upon leaving the military. Six of the 34 servicemembers we interviewed said they wished they had learned about SkillBridge earlier so they could participate in this program.

Servicemembers who start TAP late may also miss the chance to apply for disability benefits and obtain a disability decision from VA before

leaving military service, according to TAP officials at 3 of 5 selected installations.⁴³ Disability benefits can provide financial security to recently transitioned veterans and their families, according to TAP managers we interviewed at 3 of 5 selected installations. One of these officials noted that receiving a disability rating while in military service also helps transitioning servicemembers make informed decisions about their post-transition plans. To receive a pre-discharge disability decision, servicemembers must file their disability claim 180 to 90 days before their anticipated separation date, be available to attend VA exams for 45 days from the date they submitted their claim, and provide a copy of their service treatment records for their current period of service.⁴⁴

Servicemember Quotes Related to the Timing of Participating in the TAP Counseling Pathways:

“In retrospect, I wish I had started TAP 2 years in advance so I could take the program twice and fully absorb all of the information. The volume of information presented is overwhelming. In particular, attending the VA Benefits briefing was like trying to drink from a firehose. It would have been nice to take things a bit more slowly to ask questions and process the information. I found a transition coach through a nonprofit and hired someone to help me hone my resume, but I might not have needed to if I’d started TAP earlier.” — Marine Corps servicemember in tier 2

“Most people feel like they need a lot more time. Preparing to transition is like being on a train going 120 miles an hour. The whole process has been totally overwhelming.” — Army servicemember in tier 1

Source: GAO discussion groups with selected servicemembers. | GAO-23-104538

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

⁴³Qualifying veterans may be eligible for disability benefit payments for service-connected disabilities. 38 U.S.C. § 1101 et seq.

⁴⁴According to VA officials, submitting a pre-discharge claim through the Benefits Delivery at Discharge program may speed up the claim decision process and help transitioning servicemembers receive their benefits sooner.

DOD and service branch officials reported various efforts to monitor timeliness. DOD officials said they provide timeliness information to the service branches through QLIK, a data management system. DOD officials said that service branch officials will be able to use the system to generate reports at the service branch or installation levels once it has been fully updated to reflect program changes made after FY 2019 NDAA took effect.⁴⁵ However, officials from two service branches said the system is hard to use. In addition, officials from one branch said that due to service branch staff turnover, none of their TAP leads have been trained on the system. Officials from yet another service branch said that the system had been unreliable and that relevant information had not been accessible at the installation or unit level. DOD TAP policy officials said most of the technical issues within the system had been resolved as of July 2022. They also said they are taking steps to provide training to service branch officials and ensure they can access installation- and unit-level data.

Officials from all four service branches have also taken steps to monitor the timeliness of starting TAP either on an ongoing basis or during periodic inspections. For example, the Army regularly produces reports that show the percentage of servicemembers who attended individualized initial counseling and pre-separation counseling at least 1 year in advance, according to Army officials. Moreover, Army officials assess the extent to which servicemembers met the 1-year requirement during installation command inspections that occur every 3 years, according to officials. Navy officials said that command staff who oversee TAP participation can monitor timeliness by downloading monthly reports that show when initial and pre-separation counseling were completed. In addition, the Navy grades commands on timeliness during annual assessments, according to a Navy TAP policy official. The Air Force assesses timeliness during inspections conducted by the Inspector General, while Marine Corps officials said compliance with TAP requirements is assessed during command inspections that occur every 2 to 4 years.

We also found that a relatively low percentage of servicemembers are completing the pre-separation counseling briefing at least 1 year in advance, as generally required. Although pre-separation counseling

⁴⁵Officials from the TAP policy office said they have issued 40 QLIK licenses DOD-wide. They added that the licenses are available to each service branch, which, in turn, determines who may use them and at what level (service branch or installation level).

should occur after individualized initial counseling, DOD TAP policy specifies the same deadline for both events—1 year before an anticipated separation or retirement.⁴⁶ Our analysis of DOD data from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022 showed that 11 percent of servicemembers completed pre-separation counseling at least 1 year in advance and that 82 percent did not.⁴⁷ However, the latter figure may include servicemembers with unanticipated separations or retirements, to whom the 1-year requirement does not apply.

The service branches and TAP policy office collect and review performance information on the timing of initial and pre-separation counseling, including reasons for the timing. However, they do not fully leverage this information to understand and improve results, inconsistent with leading practices for using performance information and with priorities set by OMB to increase federal agencies' use of data to inform their decision making.⁴⁸ These practices call for agencies to leverage performance information to improve results. For example, agencies can use the information to identify root causes of problems, identify and share effective approaches, and take corrective action accordingly. Nonetheless, the service branches and TAP policy office do not fully leverage available data on servicemembers who start TAP late.

DOD collects information that could help officials understand why certain servicemembers start TAP late and leverage this information to improve performance. For example, DOD collects data on the reason certain servicemembers attended pre-separation counseling less than 1-year before their anticipated separation or retirement date but has not systematically analyzed these data, according to DOD TAP policy officials. The TAP data system also documents why servicemembers left the military, including whether they separated or retired voluntarily or left due to a medical condition. It also documents servicemembers' years in service, the unit and installation where they were stationed, and whether

⁴⁶Servicemembers with unanticipated separations or retirements should begin TAP as soon as possible within their remaining period of service.

⁴⁷The extent to which pre-separation counseling occurred at least 1 year before servicemembers were expected to leave military service was unknown for 6 percent of servicemembers due to missing data. Moreover, the 1-year requirement was not applicable for the 1 percent of servicemembers who were identified as separating on short-notice. GAO's analysis should not be used to draw conclusions about the service branches legal compliance.

⁴⁸[GAO-22-103910](#) and [GAO-05-927](#).

they left military service in good standing or for disciplinary reasons.⁴⁹ Analyzing these data could help DOD officials better understand the root causes underlying timeliness performance metrics, which would better position the service branches to develop and implement effective corrective action plans. This, in turn, could improve servicemembers' ability to benefit from the full range of transition resources available to them before separating or retiring from the military.

Promising Practice for Improving Timeliness: Commander Scorecard

To bolster compliance with TAP timeliness requirements, an installation TAP manager we interviewed created a monthly "commander's scorecard." The scorecard shows the extent to which servicemembers within each unit started TAP at least 1 year before leaving military service, as required. The TAP manager also coordinated with installation leadership to issue orders requiring unit commanders to attend monthly TAP meetings, during which the scorecard is discussed. Providing transparency and visibility into installation and unit-level performance has heightened commander attention and commitment to the timeliness requirement, according to the TAP manager.

Source: GAO interview with a TAP manager. | GAO-23-104538

TAP Interagency Partners Are Measuring Performance and Taking Steps to Assess TAP Effectiveness

DOD and its TAP interagency partners have established a performance goal and measure that covers all key components of the TAP counseling pathways. They have also established a goal and measure for the timeliness of participation in certain TAP components, including initial and pre-separation counseling. To assess TAP's effectiveness, interagency partners are conducting multiple evaluations and have established data sharing agreements with other agencies to obtain long-term outcome information.

⁴⁹This is often called the servicemembers' "character of discharge."

DOD and Its TAP Interagency Partners Have Established Performance Goals and Measures

GAO has previously reported that an effective program performance assessment system contains three key elements: program goals, performance measures, and program evaluations.⁵⁰ The TAP policy office has established a performance goal and measure that covers all key components of the TAP counseling pathways and is used to assess compliance with TAP requirements. According to DOD TAP policy officials, this measure—known as TAP Compliance—applies to servicemembers who began TAP on or after October 8, 2019. To be considered TAP compliant for this performance measure, the service branch must ensure that servicemembers meet eight criteria, according to DOD TAP policy officials (see fig. 6). DOD has established an annual performance target of 85 percent for TAP Compliance.⁵¹ In August 2022, DOD TAP policy officials told us the performance goal for active-duty servicemembers had not been met for servicemembers who left the military between January 1 and March 31, 2022. TAP policy officials said the main factor negatively affecting compliance is tier 3 servicemembers not attending 2-day classes as required. The method used to determine compliance is also a contributing factor, according to service branch officials. To be considered compliant, the servicemember must have attended the specific 2-day class they initially planned to take versus the class they actually attended, according to officials from DOD's TAP policy office.

⁵⁰GAO, *Program Evaluation: Strategies to Facilitate Agencies' Use of Evaluation in Program Management and Policy Making*, [GAO-13-570](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2013); *Performance Measurement and Evaluation: Definitions and Relationships*, [GAO-11-646SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2011); *Program Evaluation: Key Terms and Concepts*, [GAO-21-404SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 2021); *Veterans Justice Outreach Program: VA Could Improve Management by Establishing Performance Measures and Fully Assessing Risks*, [GAO-16-393](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr 28, 2016); and *Managing for Results: Enhancing Agency Use of Performance Information for Management Decision Making*, [GAO-05-927](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2005).

⁵¹The goal applies to active-duty servicemembers and members of the National Guard and Reserve. Coast Guard officials said it will also apply to Coast Guard servicemembers once the service branch fully implements the TAP counseling pathways. DOD officials calculate TAP compliance for DOD overall and for each service branch.

Figure 6: Overview of Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Compliance Performance Goal and Measure

Criteria for meeting TAP compliance measure

- Completed a self-assessment and was assigned a tier
- Completed initial counseling
- Completed pre-separation counseling
- Attended a Veterans Affairs Benefits and Services Briefing
- Attended Department of Labor Employment Fundamentals class (Unless waived by the Secretary)
- Attended DOD Transition Day/pre-separation training classes
- Attended a tailored 2-day class based on tier assignment (Unless waived by the Secretary)
- Obtained commander's signature verifying review of TAP eForm data

The eight criteria comprise the TAP compliance measure

**Department of Defense (DOD)
TAP Compliance Measure**
Performance goal is 85%
Including active-duty servicemembers and members of the National Guard and Reserve

Source: GAO analysis of Transition Assistance Program (TAP) information. | GAO-23-104538

In addition, DOD's TAP policy officials said the Performance Management Work Group recently established a new timeliness performance measure called Timeliness of TAP Requirements.⁵² This measure tracks the extent to which the service branches are ensuring that servicemembers begin TAP at least 1 year before leaving military service and complete it at least 90 days before transitioning, as generally required.⁵³

Interagency Partners Are Evaluating TAP and Have Established Data Sharing Agreements to Obtain Long-Term Outcome Information

DOD and the interagency partners that participate in the Performance Management Work Group published a TAP evaluation plan in April 2021 that describes ongoing and planned evaluations of TAP's long-term outcomes, according to DOD TAP policy officials.⁵⁴ The plan also identifies indicators to help assess TAP's effectiveness, including long-

⁵²In addition to the TAP compliance measure and timeliness measure, the Performance Management Work Group plans to track progress on 19 other TAP-related indicators, some of which provide additional information on TAP's counseling pathways, such as the number of transitioning servicemembers assigned to each tier, according to TAP policy officials.

⁵³The measure also includes whether servicemembers complete pre-separation counseling at least 1 year before leaving military service.

⁵⁴*Transition Assistance Program Interagency Evaluation Plan for Fiscal Year 2021-2025.* Performance Management Work Group officials we interviewed said officials representing DOD, DOL, VA, DHS, Education, SBA, and OPM serve on the group.

term outcomes such as veterans' use of Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits and employment by the federal government.

Evaluation studies. Evaluative information helps the executive branch and congressional committees make decisions about the programs they oversee; that is, evaluative information tells them whether and why a program is working well or not.⁵⁵ As part of its overarching evaluating efforts, DOD and its interagency partners are sponsoring studies examining TAP's long-term effectiveness. (For details on these evaluations, see appendix I).

- VA is conducting two evaluations to determine factors that drive satisfaction with the TAP program and to assess overall program effectiveness:
 - The Post-Separation Transition Assistance Program evaluation, according to VA officials, is an ongoing 5-year study (fiscal year 2019 to fiscal year 2024) that examines veterans' feedback on the usefulness of TAP classes and veterans' post-transition experiences. The study is designed to measure post-transition outcomes in five areas: (1) employment, (2) education, (3) health and relationships, (4) financial circumstances, and (5) general satisfaction and well-being. It also compares the outcomes of veterans who took TAP to those who did not, such as whether TAP participants apply for VA benefits at higher rates than nonparticipants.
 - An independent 1-year assessment of TAP effectiveness focused on outcome evaluation and program review to meet requirements of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans' Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020.⁵⁶ This assessment is expected to define successful program outcomes, determine if servicemembers achieve those outcomes, and assess whether

⁵⁵GAO, *Veterans Justice Outreach Program: VA Could Improve Management by Establishing Performance Measures and More Fully Assessing Risks*, [GAO-16-393](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr 28, 2016); *Military and Veteran Support: Performance Goals Could Strengthen Programs that Help Servicemembers Obtain Civilian Employment*, [GAO-20-416](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 9, 2020); *Program Evaluation: Strategies to Facilitate Agencies' Use of Evaluation in Program Management and Policy Making*, [GAO-13-570](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2013); *Performance Measurement and Evaluation: Definitions and Relationships*, [GAO-11-646SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2011) and *Program Evaluation: Key Terms and Concepts*, [GAO-21-404SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 2021).

⁵⁶Pub. L. No. 116-315, tit. IV, § 4305, 134 Stat. 4932, 5019-20 (2021).

TAP effectively addresses the challenges veterans face entering the civilian workforce, among other things. The assessment is due to be completed in December 2022.

- DOL is also conducting two long-term outcome studies, two studies of TAP-related pilot programs for transitioning servicemembers, and a study examining how to improve outreach for transitioning veterans. One outcome study, known as the Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) TAP Evaluation, focuses on TAP's long-term effectiveness by examining how data can inform current or future TAP program strategies, such as by identifying factors that can predict positive employment outcomes. The final report is expected to be completed in March 2023. The second outcome study, the Transition Assistance Program Evaluation and Employment Navigation Study, which is described below, focuses on employment outcomes and is ongoing. The other three studies include the following:
 - VETS TAP Employment Navigator Study—examines DOL's implementation of the Employment Navigator Pilot program, which provides one-on-one employment assistance to transitioning servicemembers at 13 selected military installations. The study is expected to be completed in January 2023.
 - VETS Behavioral Intervention Study—will focus on ways DOL can improve outreach and services to transitioning servicemembers by analyzing how people make and act on decisions. This study is still in the scoping phase.
 - VETS Apprenticeship Pilot Study—evaluates the design, delivery, and implementation of apprenticeship services provided through the pilot program to transitioning servicemembers. As of December 2022, the final report was in the process of being finalized.

Technology upgrades and measuring long-term outcomes. In addition, DOD TAP policy officials said that DOD plans to transition to a new information technology platform—the Defense Transition and Reintegration Suite—which will help researchers assess TAP's effectiveness and measure long-term outcomes. DOD officials said they expect the new system to become fully operational during fiscal year 2024. The Performance Management Work Group officials also said this new system will capture and integrate records on individual servicemembers, TAP attendance data, and information from participant assessment surveys—information currently collected through independent, discrete systems, according to DOD TAP policy officials. The Performance Management Work Group officials said the new system

will streamline data collection and improve efficiency. Officials from the Performance Management Work Group also said that the new system will measure servicemembers' preparedness for transition to civilian life before and after participating in TAP. According to these officials, this will help them assess the extent to which TAP training mitigated servicemembers' risk of experiencing negative post-transition outcomes, such as struggling to find employment or housing. Officials from the TAP Performance Management Work Group said they plan to use these data to assess how well TAP prepares veterans to achieve and retain civilian employment.

Data sharing agreements. To access veterans' long-term outcome data, TAP interagency partners have established two data sharing agreements with other federal agencies:

- **DOD/Census Bureau Data Agreement:** This memorandum of understanding, which was finalized and signed by DOD and the Census Bureau in May 2022, allows DOD to access Census survey data on veterans' social, demographic and economic characteristics, as well as Internal Revenue Service federal income tax data.⁵⁷
- **DOL/ Department of Health and Human Services Data Agreement:** This memorandum of understanding, which went into effect on November 1, 2021, allows DOL to access National Directory of New Hires data.⁵⁸

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

⁵⁷This is a memorandum of understanding among the U.S. Census Bureau (Census), DOD's Defense Manpower Data Center, and the Military-Civilian Transition Office. It establishes a working relationship between the Census and DOD to produce statistical data products, including answering questions about employment, income, and labor force experience of veterans.

⁵⁸The National Directory of New Hires is a centralized database of wage and employment information. It includes individual-level data on quarterly wages, unemployment benefits, and newly hired employees.

whether servicemembers who start TAP on time attain better post-transition outcomes than those who start late and whether attending certain TAP classes is associated with achieving better outcomes. As of August 2022, DOL is leveraging data from the National Directory of New Hires for the Transition Assistance Program Evaluation and Employment Navigation Study. The study is comprised of two outcome analyses:

- **TAP Effectiveness Outcome Analysis:** This long-term outcome study will analyze TAP participants' employment outcomes to assess how well the program prepares and trains eligible separating servicemembers to successfully transition into the civilian labor force. This study will examine the timing of TAP courses before separation from the military and possible correlations between military occupation and employment outcomes.
- **Employment Navigator Outcome Analysis:** This study will compare the employment outcomes of transitioning servicemembers who have used employment services provided through the Employment Navigators and Partnership Pilot program and those who have not.

Conclusions

A substantial number of servicemembers have navigated 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. TAP officials, staff, and servicemembers we interviewed supported efforts to tailor TAP to servicemembers' transition needs and emphasized the importance of starting TAP well in advance of leaving military service. However, nearly one-quarter of servicemembers identified as needing maximum transition support did not attend a tailored 2-day class, as generally required. In addition, the majority of transitioning servicemembers did not start TAP at least 1 year before leaving military service.

While DOD collects and analyzes performance information on 2-day class attendance and the timeliness of starting TAP, it does not fully leverage this information to inform its decisions and improve results. More fully leveraging available information, consistent with leading practices for using performance information and with priorities set by OMB to increase federal agencies' use of data to inform their decision making, would better position DOD to develop and implement effective correction action plans to improve TAP participation. For example, more fully leveraging available information could help DOD understand the root causes driving missed

performance targets. That, in turn, would better position DOD to develop and implement corrective action plans tailored to address those causes. It would also help them hold entities responsible for implementing those plans accountable for doing so. Thus, better leveraging available performance information would help DOD meet its TAP compliance goal while enabling servicemembers to benefit from the full range of transition resources to successfully adjust to civilian life.

Furthermore, going forward, DOD's planned new TAP information technology platform may further enhance its ability to leverage performance information. DOD anticipates that the new platform will become fully operational in 2024. In the interim, DOD has the opportunity to solicit input from TAP stakeholders, including officials at the service branches, installations, and TAP Performance Management Work Group. These stakeholders may offer valuable insights on what performance information would be most useful to inform decision making.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following eight recommendations:

The Secretary of the Air Force, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate, particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of the Army, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate, particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on Marine Corps servicemembers' 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate, particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of the Navy, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate, particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support. (Recommendation 4)

The Secretary of the Air Force, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness. (Recommendation 5)

The Secretary of the Army, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness. (Recommendation 6)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when Marine Corps servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness. (Recommendation 7)

The Secretary of the Navy, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness. (Recommendation 8)

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. We received written comments from the Department of Defense (DOD) that are reproduced in appendix II. DOD concurred with all of our recommendations. The Departments of Homeland Security and Labor provided technical comments that we

incorporated into the report as appropriate. The remaining agencies did not have any comments on the draft report.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretaries of Defense, Education, Homeland Security, Labor, and Veterans Affairs, the Director of the Office of Personnel Management, the Administrator of the Small Business Administration, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is 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 locked@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 III.



Dawn G. Locke
Acting Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

Appendix I: Ongoing and Planned Studies of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

Table 4: Ongoing and Planned Studies of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

Study name	Study type	Objectives	Description
Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)			
The Post-Separation Transition Assistance Program Assessment	Long-term evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify factors driving veterans' satisfaction with TAP. Determine how VA can improve TAP training and operations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This ongoing, 5-year study that began in June 2019 examines veterans' post transition experiences over time, according to VA officials. Surveys are administered annually in June. Reports on survey findings are released in May or June of the next year.
TAP assessment required by the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, MD Veterans' Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 ^a	Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess how: (1) TAP interagency partners and Veterans Service Organizations define successful program outcomes, (2) TAP affects outcomes for transitioning servicemembers, veterans, and their families, and (3) the TAP program could be improved. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This study is a 1-year independent assessment of TAP's effectiveness, expected to be completed in December 2022. The act outlines study requirements, including topics to be addressed. Among others, these include assessing the appropriateness of the TAP career readiness standards, the appropriate metrics regarding the outcomes for servicemembers 1 year after separation, and whether TAP effectively addresses the challenges veterans face entering the civilian workforce.
Department of Labor (DOL)			
The Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) TAP Evaluation	Long-term evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine TAP's long-term effectiveness in helping transitioning servicemembers attain employment. Better understand the employment and training needs of transitioning servicemembers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The VETS TAP Evaluation is an ongoing study of TAP that examines how data can inform current or future TAP program strategies, such as by identifying factors that are predictive of positive employment outcomes. According to VA officials, the final report is expected to be completed in March 2023.

Appendix I: Ongoing and Planned Studies of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

Study name	Study type	Objectives	Description
Transition Assistance Program Evaluation and Employment Navigation Study	Long-term evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TAP Effectiveness Outcome Analysis: To better understand employment outcomes associated with mandatory TAP participation; and to analyze how well TAP trains and prepares eligible separating servicemembers to successfully transition into the civilian labor force. • Employment Navigator Outcome Analysis: To evaluate how services provided by Employment Navigators affect transitioning servicemembers' employment outcomes. • The data for the Transition Assistance Program Evaluation and Employment Navigation study will allow Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) officials to analyze trends in transitioning servicemember characteristics. It will also enable them to measure the extent to which servicemembers receive warm-handover referrals to DOL grantee staff in American Job Centers. DOL VETS and Chief Evaluation Office staff will match these data to National Directory of New Hires data on employment and wages. DOL VETS and Chief Evaluation Office staff will then create shareable reports. Long-term study goals include improving TAP overall, reporting employment outcomes of transitioning servicemembers, evaluating a pilot program, and sharing information with DOD and its partners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This long-term outcome study will analyze TAP participants' employment outcomes. For example, the study will examine how the timing of servicemembers' TAP participation or their military occupation affects their employment outcomes. • This study will compare the employment outcomes of transitioning servicemembers who have used employment services provided through the Employment Navigators and Partnership Program to those who have not. • To facilitate data matching, DOD officials are currently working to create DOD data files to submit to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). DOL officials plan to submit these data extract files to HHS each quarter beginning in fiscal year 2023. DOL plans to continue this analysis annually. The studies will culminate in separate reports.

**Appendix I: Ongoing and Planned Studies of
the Transition Assistance Program (TAP)**

Study name	Study type	Objectives	Description
VETS TAP Employment Navigator Study	TAP-related pilot program implementation study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate the program's service delivery and outputs. Support subsequent, more rigorous evaluations of the pilot, such as outcomes or impacts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This study examines an ongoing pilot program through which DOL provides one-on-one employment assistance to transitioning servicemembers at 13 military installations. The pilot is expected to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the referrals servicemembers receive to other agencies when they are less prepared to transition and need more assistance. It is also expected to help DOL and partner agencies track how transitioning servicemembers receive services from various entities.^b The study is expected to assess whether the program was implemented as designed, if interim outcomes were achieved, and how implementation varied across sites. The study is expected to be completed in January 2023.
VETS Behavioral Intervention Study	TAP-related study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve outreach and services to transitioning servicemembers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The VETS Behavioral Intervention Study is expected to help identify areas where behavioral science—the study of how people make and act on decisions—could inform program design and improve outreach and communication to transitioning service members. This study is in the scoping phase.
VETS TAP Apprenticeship Pilot Study	TAP-related pilot program implementation study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe service delivery and implementation challenges, highlight promising practices, and identify topics for further research. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This study examines the specific strategies, activities, and resources used to help transitioning servicemembers find apprenticeship opportunities; apprenticeship placement outcomes; and servicemembers' experiences with the program, among other things. As of December 2022, the final report was in the process of being finalized and posted to DOL's website.

**Appendix I: Ongoing and Planned Studies of
the Transition Assistance Program (TAP)**

Study name	Study type	Objectives	Description
Small Business Administration (SBA)			
SBA Evaluation of Virtual Delivery of TAP's Boots to Business Class	Ongoing evaluation of TAP's 2-day entrepreneurship class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better understand how receiving TAP entrepreneurship training affects outcomes related to small business formation. Inform decision-making for future virtual Boots to Business course offerings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This evaluation examines SBA's virtual delivery of its 2-day entrepreneurship class known as "Boots to Business," including 1) how the course can most effectively be implemented in a virtual environment; and 2) which best practices SBA can incorporate into the development and delivery of virtual training. The study was published in July 2022.

Source: GAO analysis of information provided by the Departments of Labor and Veterans Affairs and Small Business Administration. | GAO-23-104538

^aPub. L. No. 116-315, tit. IV, § 4305, 134 Stat. 4932, 5019-20 (2021).

^bThese referrals are known as "warm handovers."

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense



MANPOWER AND
RESERVE AFFAIRS

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
1500 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-1500

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

Dear Ms. Locke:

I am transmitting the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report, GAO-23-104538, 'Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Can Better Leverage Performance Information to Improve Participation in Counseling Pathways' dated October 19, 2022 (GAO Code 104538).

My point of contact is Mr. Michael C. Miller who can be reached at 571-481-7132 or michael.c.miller.civ@mail.mil.

Sincerely,

MARTIN.DAVID
.G.1056365997

Digitally signed by
MARTIN.DAVID G.1056365997
Date: 2022.11.18 14:47:07 -0500

Thomas A. Constable
Acting

Enclosure:
As stated

**GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED OCTOBER 19, 2022
GAO-23-104538 (GAO CODE 104538)**

**“SERVICEMEMBERS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE: DOD CAN BETTER
LEVERAGE PERFORMANCE INFORMATION TO IMPROVE PARTICIPATION IN
COUNSELING PATHWAYS”**

**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS**

RECOMMENDATION 1: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Air Force, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Secretary of the Department of the Air Force to develop and implement, as appropriate, a corrective action plan for improving attendance at the 2-day tracks as appropriate for Service members who require maximum transition support.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Army, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Secretary of the Department of the Army to develop and implement, as appropriate a corrective action plan for improving attendance at the 2-day tracks as appropriate for Service members who require maximum transition support.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on Marine Corps servicemembers’ 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Commandant of the Marine Corps to develop and implement, as appropriate a corrective action plan for improving attendance at the 2-day tracks as appropriate for Service members who require maximum transition support.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Navy, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Secretary of the Department of the Navy to develop and implement, as appropriate a corrective action plan for improving attendance at the 2-day tracks as appropriate for Service members who require maximum transition support.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Air Force, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Secretary of Department of the Air Force to develop and implement, as appropriate a corrective action plan in to improve timeliness for attendance at the initial counseling and pre-separation counseling.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Army, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Secretary of Department of the Army to develop and implement, as appropriate a corrective action plan to improve timeliness for attendance at the initial counseling and pre-separation counseling.

RECOMMENDATION 7: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when Marine Corps servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

**Appendix II: Comments from the Department
of Defense**

3

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Commandant of the Marine Corps to develop and implement, as appropriate a corrective action plan to improve timeliness for attendance at the initial counseling and pre-separation counseling.

RECOMMENDATION 8: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Navy, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Secretary of Department of the Navy to develop and implement, as appropriate a corrective action plan to improve timeliness for attendance at the initial counseling and pre-separation counseling.

Agency Comment Letter

Text of Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense

Ms. Dawn Locke

Acting Director Education,
Workforce, and Income Security
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW

Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Locke:

I am transmitting the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report, GAO-23-104538, 'Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Can Better Leverage Performance Information to Improve Participation in Counseling Pathways' dated October 19, 2022 (GAO Code 104538).

My point of contact is Mr. Michael C. Miller who can be reached at 571-481-7132 or michael.c.miller.civ@mail.mil.

Sincerely,

Thomas A. Constable, Acting

Enclosure: As stated

GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED OCTOBER 19, 2022 GAO-23-104538 (GAO CODE 104538)

“SERVICEMEMBERS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE: DOD CAN BETTER LEVERAGE PERFORMANCE INFORMATION TO IMPROVE PARTICIPATION IN COUNSELING PATHWAYS”

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Air Force, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a

corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Secretary of the Department of the Air Force to develop and implement, as appropriate, a corrective action plan for improving attendance at the 2-day tracks as appropriate for Service members who require maximum transition support.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Army, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Secretary of the Department of the Army to develop and implement, as appropriate a corrective action plan for improving attendance at the 2-day tracks as appropriate for Service members who require maximum transition support.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on Marine Corps servicemembers' 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Commandant of the Marine Corps to develop and implement, as appropriate a corrective action plan for improving attendance at the 2-day tracks as appropriate for Service members who require maximum transition support.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Navy, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary

of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on 2-day class attendance to develop and implement a corrective action plan for improving attendance, as appropriate particularly for servicemembers deemed to require maximum transition support.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Secretary of the Department of the Navy to develop and implement, as appropriate a corrective action plan for improving attendance at the 2-day tracks as appropriate for Service members who require maximum transition support.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Air Force, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Secretary of Department of the Air Force to develop and implement, as appropriate a corrective action plan in to improve timeliness for attendance at the initial counseling and pre-separation counseling.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Army, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Secretary of Department of the Army to develop and implement, as appropriate a corrective action plan to improve timeliness for attendance at the initial counseling and pre-separation counseling.

RECOMMENDATION 7: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when

Marine Corps servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Commandant of the Marine Corps to develop and implement, as appropriate a corrective action plan to improve timeliness for attendance at the initial counseling and pre-separation counseling.

RECOMMENDATION 8: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Department of the Navy, in coordination with the Secretary of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, should better leverage TAP performance information on when servicemembers begin initial and pre-separation counseling to develop and implement a corrective action plan to improve timeliness.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will coordinate with the Secretary of Department of the Navy to develop and implement, as appropriate a corrective action plan to improve timeliness for attendance at the initial counseling and pre-separation counseling.

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Dawn G. Locke at (202) 512-7215 or locked@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments:

In addition to the contact named above, Meeta Engle (Assistant Director), Amy MacDonald (Analyst-in-Charge), Vernetta G. Shaw, Linda Keefer, Cynthia Grant, Aaron J. Olszewski, and Maria Strudwick made key contributions to this report.

Also contributing to this report were James Bennett, Mark T. Bird, Vincent Balloon, Holly Dye, Pin-En Annie Chou, Brenda Farrell, David Forgosh, Alexander Galuten, Erin Godtland, Meredith Graves, Dawn Hoff, James Krustapentus, Benjamin Licht, David Lin, Kimberly Mayo, Cynthia Nelson, Lauren Shaman, William Shear, Monica Savoy, Almeta Spencer, Kathleen Van Gelder, and James Whitcomb.

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