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Transition to Civilian Life: Better Collection and Analysis of Military Service Data Needed to Improve Oversight of the SkillBridge Program

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Q&A Report to Congressional Committees

August 22, 2024

Why This Matters

The Department of Defense (DOD) offers the SkillBridge program to provide industry training to service members who are transitioning out of their military career to civilian life. The SkillBridge program allows service members of any rank, enlisted or officer, to participate in civilian job and employment training starting up to 180 days before they separate from military service and transition to the civilian workforce. Such training can include job training, employment skills training, apprenticeships, and internships.

Around 200,000 service members transition from military service to civilian life each year. In fiscal year 2022, the SkillBridge program reported that over 22,500 service members either enrolled in or completed a SkillBridge program. As of June 2024, the SkillBridge program offered 7,959 opportunities through 4,867 industry partners.

DOD has reported that to participate in the SkillBridge program, a service member must have completed appropriate parts of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) as directed by their military service and have 180 days of service or fewer remaining prior to their discharge. TAP is a mandatory program for separating service members that provides career readiness assistance and information on veterans' benefits, among other things.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 included provisions for us to review the use of the SkillBridge program by members of the Armed Forces (hereafter referred to collectively as military services and includes the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Space Force, and the Coast Guard), including how the Secretary of Defense determines eligibility of service members to participate in the program; characteristics of personnel participating in the program; and the incorporation of relevant federal ethics rules regarding internships. (Pub. L. No. 118-31, § 572(b) (2023).)

Key Takeaways

- The SkillBridge program is a voluntary transition program available to service members. Participation in the program is not guaranteed through the application process, is dependent on mission readiness, and is at the discretion of the service member's commanding officer. According to data

provided by the military services, almost 12,000 service members across DOD and the Coast Guard participated in the SkillBridge program during the first two quarters of fiscal year 2024.

- The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 included provisions for us to specifically report on SkillBridge program participant data, including participation by rank and full-time offers of employment received upon completion of the program for fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2023. We found that data for these metrics currently do not exist for all the military services or has been tracked inconsistently. However, the military services collected some SkillBridge program participant information for fiscal year 2024, which we assessed. For example, we found that about 83 percent of those participating in the SkillBridge program during the first half of fiscal year 2024 were enlisted personnel, according to data reported by the military services.

- As a result of the ad hoc data collection, the military services are unable to assess if the SkillBridge program is meeting service members' needs and are also unable to formulate corrective action plans to address any identified issues or challenges. Moreover, this absence of data, analysis, and corrective action plans could make it difficult for key decision-makers to provide oversight to the program.

- We recommend that the Secretary of Defense update SkillBridge program guidance to include what SkillBridge program data should be collected and analyzed by the military services and reported to key decision-makers.

- We also recommend that each of the military services collect and analyze SkillBridge program data and report that data to the appropriate key decision-makers along with any associated corrective action plans.

What is the SkillBridge Program?

The SkillBridge program is provided through DOD to support transitioning service members with opportunities to bridge gaps in their skillsets and develop additional professional experience that might apply to the civilian workforce more directly.[1] Service members of any rank, enlisted or officer, are eligible to participate in civilian job and employment trainings offered through the SkillBridge program starting up to 180 days before they separate from military service and transition to the civilian workforce.[2]

According to DOD, the Military-Civilian Transition Office (MCTO) started overseeing the SkillBridge program in May 2023 and is responsible for the administration and oversight of the program. Participation in the program is voluntary and service members interested in the SkillBridge program generally must have completed TAP prior to starting the application process for a SkillBridge internship or apprenticeship.[3]

Service members start the transition process through TAP by completing a self-assessment and attending an individualized initial counseling session. Individualized initial counseling is required to occur no later than 1 year before the service member is expected to leave military service, with some exceptions.[4] During individualized initial counseling, TAP counselors talk to service members about their post-transition goals and plans and then assign them 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; and

- Tier 3: Not fully prepared or career-ready, requiring maximum transition support.

However, we previously reported that about 70 percent of service members started TAP less than 1 year before their anticipated separation or retirement date.[5] In that report, we found that DOD does not use data it collects on service members who start TAP less than 1 year in advance, including why they started late and whether they involuntarily left service for disciplinary reasons. According to TAP staff, service members who start TAP late often cannot take advantage of additional transition resources, such as the SkillBridge program. For example, service members who started TAP late might not have the time to complete the application process to participate in the SkillBridge program prior to their discharge dates.

Following the initiation of TAP, service members interested in participating in the SkillBridge program initiate the process by identifying SkillBridge opportunities, pending eligibility. From there, the service members must then obtain approval from their chain of command and complete any additional participation requirements included in their respective military service policy, including completing ethics educational requirements.

Additionally, the MCTO reviews and evaluates proposed internships and apprenticeships offered through the SkillBridge program. DOD Instruction 1322.29 indicates that industry partners interested in participating in the SkillBridge program should:

- Have a defined job training and career development program designed for service members to gain necessary employment skills, knowledge, and abilities for the civilian workforce;

- Ensure a high probability the service member will receive a position at the end of their SkillBridge program; and

- Be an industry that is in sufficient demand and has opportunities for professional advancement beyond initial employment.[6]

To be approved by the SkillBridge program, the industry partner is required to submit a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that outlines its responsibilities as a SkillBridge program employer. The industry partner is then included in the list of SkillBridge programs on the SkillBridge website.

DOD officials also stated that their plan for the SkillBridge program is to ensure the program results in interviews and job offers for service members participating in the program. These officials stated that as they review and renew MOUs with industry partners, they plan to require those participating partners to report metrics to the MCTO on interviews and job offers to help DOD better understand the SkillBridge program's impact.

How do the Military Services determine eligibility for service member participation in the SkillBridge program?

The MCTO sets the overarching eligibility for participants in the SkillBridge program. DOD Instruction 1322.29 outlines SkillBridge program eligibility and states that a service member who has completed at least 180 days of active-duty service and is within 180 days of discharge or release from active-duty service is eligible to participate in the program.[7]

However, each military service is responsible for implementing the program for their respective service members and has the authority to implement additional eligibility requirements that service members must meet prior to participating in the program.[8] Service-level eligibility requirements are largely consistent with some variations depending on the military service as shown in table 1.

Table 1: Military Services Eligibility Requirements for the SkillBridge Program

Military Service	Eligibility requirements
Army[a]	• Completed Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Career Readiness Standards requirements. • Received approval from the Commanding Officer. • Expected to transition off active duty with characterization of general discharge (under honorable conditions) or higher.

Navy[b]	• Completed TAP requirements.
	• SkillBridge program length is determined by pay grade:
	  • Tier 1 (Enlisted E5 and below) – 180 days or less;
	  • Tier 2 (Enlisted E6 – E9) – 120 days or less;
	  • Tier 3 (O4 and below) – 120 days or less;
	  • Tier 4 (Officers O5 and above) – 90 days or less.
	• Be separating from the Navy and have sufficient time remaining under their contract to complete the program prior to established separation date.
	• Have successfully passed their most recent physical fitness assessment.
	• Be recommended for advancement or promotion and retention on most recent evaluation or fitness report.
	• Received Commanding Officer approval to ensure it will not result in a gap in service. Tier 4 service members must receive approval from Director of Military Personnel Plans and Policy.

Marine Corps[c]	• Completed TAP requirements.
	• Have sufficient time remaining on contract to complete the SkillBridge program prior to the established separation date.
	• Expect to be discharged as honorable, including general discharge (under honorable conditions).
	• Received approval from Commander, who has the authority to approve, deny, or modify participation on personal conduct or needs of the command.
	Effective August 31, 2024 (based on guidance issued in June 2024)
	• SkillBridge program length is determined by rank:
	  • Category I (ranks E1-E5) – Up to 120 days
	  • Category II (ranks E6-E7, WO-CWO3, O1-O4) - Up to 90 days
	  • Category III (ranks E8-E9, CWO4-CWO5, O5 and above) -Up to 90 days.
	  • Category III requires approval from a General Officer and participation cannot result in a gapped billet.

Air Force[d]	• Completed TAP requirements. • Expect to be discharged as honorable or under honorable conditions. • Received approval from Unit or Squadron Commanders, who have the authority to terminate an airman's participation based on unit and mission requirements.

Military Service	Eligibility requirements
Space Force[e]	• Completed TAP requirements. • Expect to be discharged as honorable or under honorable conditions. • Received approval from Unit or Squadron Commanders, who have the authority to terminate a guardian's participation based on unit and mission requirements.
Coast Guard[f]	• Completed or confirmed enrollment in TAP. • Reasonably anticipate being released from active duty with an Honorable or General (under Honorable conditions) characterization within 180 days of the date of starting the SkillBridge program. • Have an approved retirement, separation, or resignation on file with the Coast Guard Personnel Support Command. • Have satisfactory evaluations. • Received approval from Commanding Officer, who has the authority to approve or deny a request on ability to backfill a position or if unit will face a gap in service.

Source: GAO analysis of military services' SkillBridge program guidance. I GAO-24-107352

Note: At the time of this report, SkillBridge program officials stated that Space Force was operating under the Air Force SkillBridge program guidance.

[a]Army Regulation 600-81, *Transition Assistance Program (*Mar. 12, 2024) (effective Apr. 12, 2024).

[b]Department of the Navy, NAVADMIN 160/22, *Skillbridge Employment Skills Training Guidance* (July 22, 2022); Department of the Navy, NAVADMIN 064/23, *Skillridge Employment Skills Training Guidance Update (*June 2019).

[c]Department of the Navy, NAVMC 1700.2, *Marine Corps Skillbridge Employment Training Program* (Dec. 15, 2022); Department of the Navy, NAVADMIN 064/23, *Skillridge Employment Skills Training Guidance Update (*June 2019); Department of the Navy, MARADMINS 280/24, *Interim Guidance on the Implementation of the Skillbridge Program* (June 17, 2024).

[d]Department of the Air Force, Instruction 36-2670, *Total Force Development* (June 25, 2020) (incorporating change 4, Mar. 31, 2023); *see also* Department of the Air Force Instruction 36-2670, *Total Force Development* (June 25, 2020) (incorporating change 7, May 7, 2024) (issued as this review was in its final stages).

[e]Department of the Air Force Instruction 36-2670.

[f]U.S. Coast Guard, Commandant Instruction 1040.7, *Transition of Service Members with Job Training Opportunities and Employment Skills Under the Department of Defense (DOD) Skillbridge Voluntary Employment Skills Training Program (*Feb. 2, 2022)

What barriers or challenges exist for service members to participate in the SkillBridge program?

Military service officials stated that the most significant barrier to service members participating in the SkillBridge program is mission readiness concerns. Additionally, they stated that the inability to backfill positions for the duration that a service member participates in a SkillBridge program was also a challenge.

Program officials from the Air Force and Space Force stated that commanders are generally supportive of service members participating in the SkillBridge program and will work with a service member to balance participation in the SkillBridge program with mission needs, such as adjusting the program length or timing. However, program officials from across the military services stated participation in the SkillBridge program is highly dependent on the unit a service member is assigned to, specifically if a Commander can backfill a service member's position in the unit, which can especially be a challenge for smaller units.

Army SkillBridge officials added that SkillBridge program participation can be impacted by brigade rotations and service member training requirements. Program officials stated that required trainings and brigade rotation schedules can limit the time a service member has to complete TAP requirements, as well as limit a service member's ability to complete the application process for a SkillBridge program.

Prior to starting a SkillBridge program, the service member needs to identify programs of interest; apply to, and interview for the program; and then receive approval to participate through their commanding officers. Installation-level program officials stated that limited time to complete these steps can limit or prevent a service member's participation in the program since the SkillBridge program is required to be completed prior to a service member's discharge date.

To what extent do service members participate in the SkillBridge program?

DOD and the Coast Guard have not collected and analyzed comprehensive data on SkillBridge program participation, but some data was available. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 included provisions for us to report on SkillBridge program participant data, including participation by rank and full-time offers of employment received upon completion of the program for fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2023.[9] The data for these metrics currently do not exist for all the military services or has been tracked inconsistently. However, we collected and analyzed some data for the first two quarters of fiscal year 2024.

Analysis of Data for the First Two Quarters of Fiscal Year 2024

According to data provided by the military services, almost 12,000 service members across DOD participated in the SkillBridge program in the first two quarters of fiscal year 2024 (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: SkillBridge Program Participants Reported by Military Service from October 1, 2023–March 30, 2024
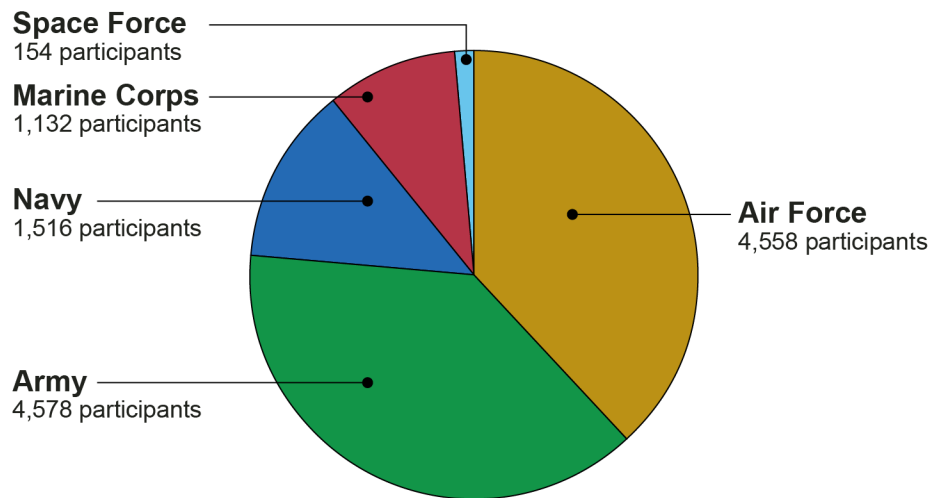
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-24-107352

Accessible Data for Figure 1: SkillBridge Program Participants Reported by Military Service from October 1, 2023–March 30, 2024

	Number of Service Members
Air Force	4,558
Army	4,578
Marine Corps	1,132
Navy	1,516
Space Force	154

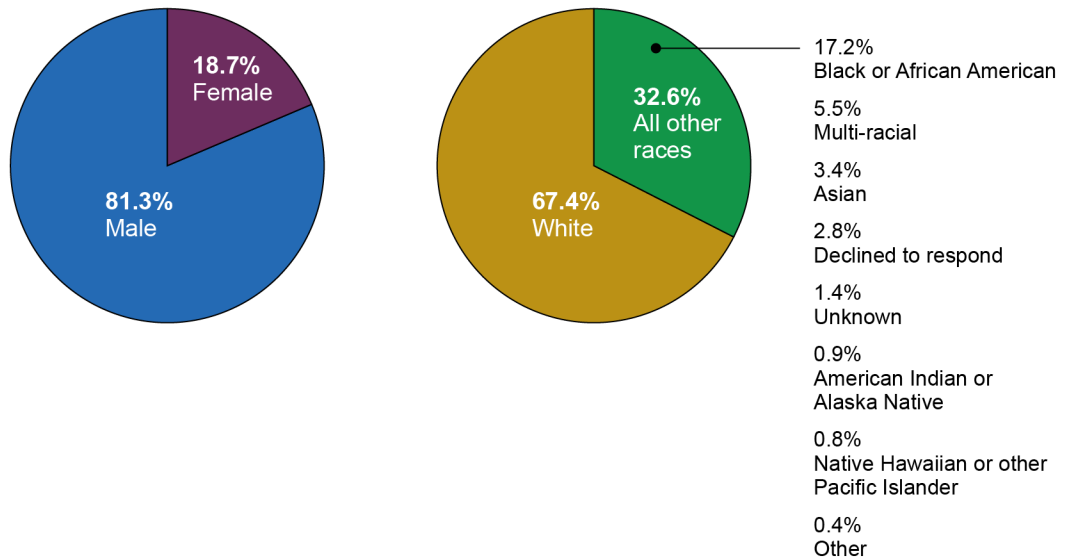Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. I GAO-24-107352

In addition, we found:

- The Air Force and Army had the highest number of participants in the SkillBridge program for this time period.

- The Coast Guard does not collect data on SkillBridge program participants because the office responsible for the SkillBridge program does not have the resources needed according to DHS and Coast Guard program officials. However, officials stated that the Coast Guard had at least 39 participants for the first two quarters of fiscal year 2024.

Analysis of Participant Characteristic Data for the First Two Quarters of Fiscal Year 2024

We also examined the SkillBridge program data by gender and race from the first two quarters of fiscal year 2024 (see fig. 2).

Figure 2: SkillBridge Program Participation by Gender and Race as Reported by Military Service for October 1, 2023–March 30, 2024

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-24-107352

Note: Due to rounding, the subtotal may not add up to 100 percent.

We examined SkillBridge program applicants according to Tier, or how prepared they are for participation in the program. Figure 3 provides a breakdown of participation in the SkillBridge program by military service and Tier.

Accessible Data for Figure 2: SkillBridge Program Participation by Gender and Race as Reported by Military Service for October 1, 2023–March 30, 2024

Gender	Percentage
Female	18.7
Male	81.3

Race	Percentage
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.9
Asian	3.4
Black or African American	17.2
Declined to respond	2.8

Multi-racial	5.5
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.8
Other	0.4
Unknown	1.4
White	67.4

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. I GAO-24-107352

Figure 3: SkillBridge Program Participation by Tier as Reported by Military Services for October 1, 2023–March 30, 2024

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-24-107352

Accessible Data for Figure 3: SkillBridge Program Participation by Tier as Reported by Military Services for October 1, 2023–March 30, 2024

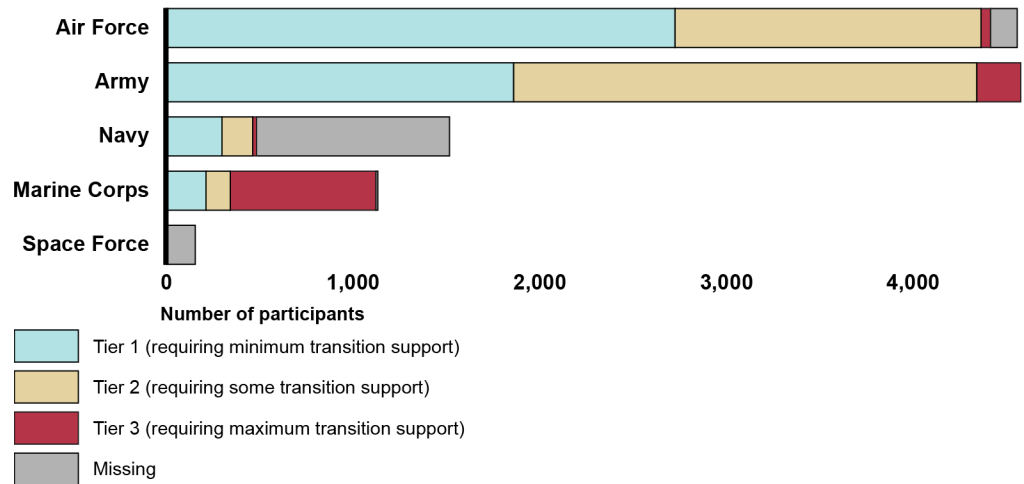|	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3	Missing
Air Force	2,724	1,639	51	143
Army	1,859	2,481	236	0
Marine Corps	211	131	779	11
Navy	297	165	20	1,034
Space Force	0	0	0	154

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. I GAO-24-107352

According to our analysis of available data:

- The majority of Air Force and Army SkillBridge program participants were either Tier 1 or Tier 2, meaning they were either fully prepared and career-ready, requiring minimum transition support or moderately prepared or career-ready, requiring some transition support, respectively.

- The majority of Marine Corps SkillBridge program participants were Tier 3, or not fully prepared or career-ready, requiring maximum transition support.

- For the Navy and Space Force, data for assigned Tier for the majority of participants was missing.

Finally, we examined the available data to determine SkillBridge program participation by military rank. Figure 4 provides a breakdown by enlisted, officer, and warrant officer.

Figure 4: Participation in the SkillBridge Program by Enlisted, Officer, and Warrant Officer as Reported by the Military Services for October 1, 2023–March 30, 2024
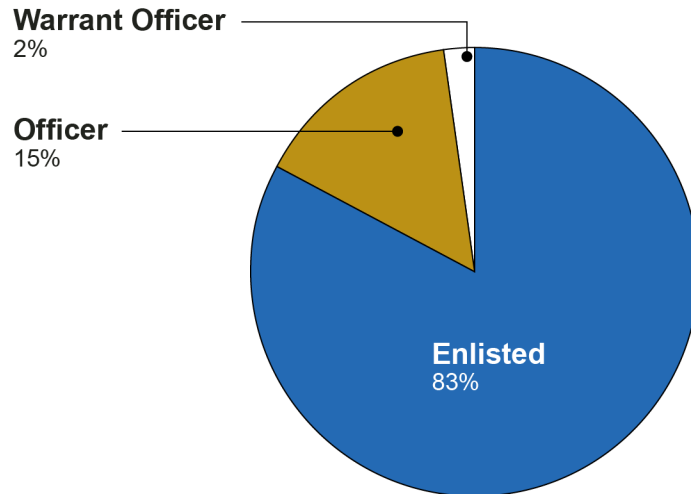
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-24-107352

Accessible Data for Figure 4: Participation in the SkillBridge Program by Enlisted, Officer, and Warrant Officer as Reported by the Military Services for October 1, 2023–March 30, 2024

	Percent
Enlisted	83
Officer	15
Warrant Officer	2

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. I GAO-24-107352

We found that:

- About 83 percent of those who participated in the SkillBridge program during the first half of fiscal year 2024 were enlisted personnel according to data reported by the military services.

- The majority of enlisted personnel who participated in the SkillBridge program are between the ranks of E-4 and E-6 for each military service.

Figure 5 provides a more detailed breakdown of ranks by military service who participated in the SkillBridge program.

Figure 5: SkillBridge Program Participation by Rank as Reported by the Military Services for October 1, 2023–March 30, 2024

Air Force
- E1-E3: 18
- E4-E6: 2,583
- E7-E9: 1,413
- O1-O3: 219
- O3-O6: 325
- W1-W5: 0

Army
- E1-E3: 16
- E4-E6: 2,702
- E7-E9: 733
- O1-O3: 553
- O3-O6: 383
- W1-W5: 159

Marine Corps
- E1-E3: 155
- E4-E6: 736
- E7-E9: 152
- O1-O3: 37
- O3-O6: 29
- W1-W5: 23

Navy
- E1-E3: 44
- E4-E6: 1,031
- E7-E9: 235
- O1-O3: 112
- O3-O6: 81
- W1-W5: 13

Space Force
- E1-E3: 1
- E4-E6: 63
- E7-E9: 33
- O1-O3: 21
- O3-O6: 36
- W1-W5: 0

Personnel

0   500   1,000   1,500   2,000   2,500   3,000
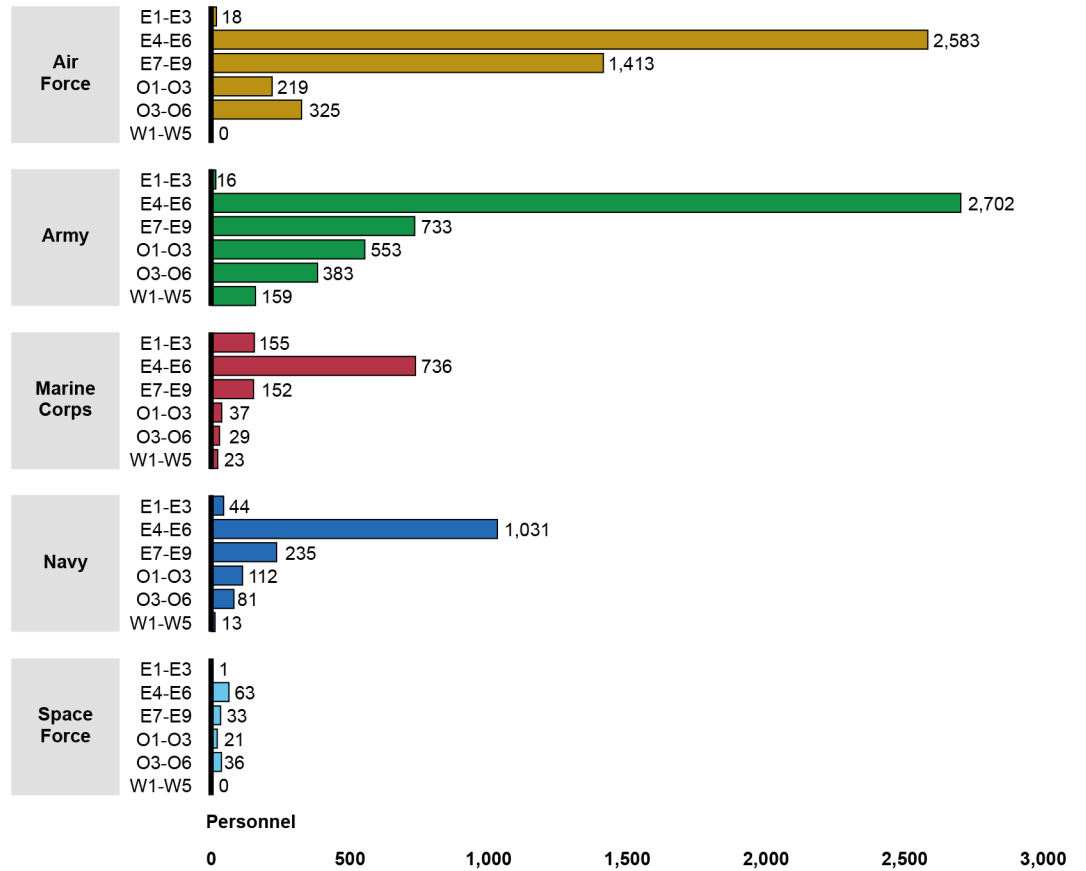
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-24-107352

Accessible Data for Figure 5: SkillBridge Program Participation by Rank as Reported by the Military Services for October 1, 2023–March 30, 2024

Category	Subcategory	E1-E3	E4-E6	E7-E9
Air Force	Enlisted	18	2,583	1,413

Categoryorce	Subcategory	O1-O3	O3-O6
Air Force	Officer	219	325

Category	Subcategory	E1-E3	E4-E6	E7-E9
Army	Enlisted	16	2,702	733

Category	Subcategory	O1-O3	O3-O6
Army	Officer	553	383

Category	Subcategory	W1-W5
Army	Warrant Officer	159

Category	Subcategory	E1-E3	E4-E6	E7-E9
Marine Corps	Enlisted	155	736	152

Category	Subcategory	O1-O3	O3-O6
Marine Corps	Officer	37	29

Category	Subcategory	W1-W5
Marine Corps	Warrant Officer	23

Category	Subcategory	E1-E3	E4-E6	E7-E9
Navy	Enlisted	44	1,031	235

Category	Subcategory	O1-O3	O3-O6
Navy	Officer	112	81

Category	Subcategory	W1-W5
Navy	Warrant Officer	13

Category	Subcategory	E1-E3	E4-E6	E7-E9
Space Force	Enlisted	1	63	33

Category	Subcategory	O1-O3	O3-O6
Space Force	Officer	21	36

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. I GAO-24-107352

DOD and DHS Collection and Analysis of Data

According to multiple DOD and DHS officials we spoke with, tracking SkillBridge-related program data varies between the military services, and specific analysis of SkillBridge program data does not exist at the department level. Moreover, none of the military services have conducted a comprehensive analysis of

SkillBridge program data to ascertain if the program is meeting the needs of its service members.[10] For example, as part of our data collection efforts, we found:

- The Army collects SkillBridge program participant data and started to standardize its data collection in May 2023.

- The Air Force and the Space Force collect some data on SkillBridge program participation, but both military services had to manually retrieve data from separate data sources.

- The Navy collects some data on SkillBridge program participation, but it had to manually pull data from separate data sources.

- The Marine Corps collects some data on SkillBridge program participation, but officials stated that the data we requested was new to them since they collect data on SkillBridge participation separately from TAP and transition data. As a result, the Marine Corps had to manually pull and combine the data for our request.

- The Coast Guard officials noted that their SkillBridge program office is not resourced to track and analyze this data. However, officials stated that the Navy has offered to allow the Coast Guard to leverage its data system moving forward.

We have reported that performance information can help decision-makers understand and improve results at federal agencies.[11] We also reported that for the last 5 years, the executive branch has prioritized agencies' use of performance information to improve their decision-making. For example, the Office of Management and Budget established the 2019 Federal Data Strategy and a subsequent action plan to help agencies fully leverage the value of data to fulfill their missions and serve the public.[12] 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 efficient and appropriate data use, among other things. 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.

Additionally, the *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* state that federal program managers should use quality information to achieve a program's objectives and make informed decisions.[13] Moreover, the *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* state that management should obtain timely and relevant data, analyze that data, formulate corrective actions, as appropriate, and communicate—both internally and externally—those results to ensure proper oversight.

Military service officials we spoke with noted a variety of reasons why data collection and analysis are ad hoc. For example, military service officials stated that there is not a requirement in the overall SkillBridge program guidance specifying the types of data to collect and that data collection varies from year-to-year. With updated guidance, MCTO would better understand participation data, including the number of applications submitted; participation approval and denial rates; completion of a SkillBridge program; and employment outcomes. MCTO officials stated they plan to update the SkillBridge program guidance in the future to include these types of requirements. Service-level officials stated that they are waiting on this updated guidance from MCTO before adjusting their own military service-level guidance.

MCTO is taking steps to identify if SkillBridge program opportunities are resulting in interviews and job offers for service members participating in the program, a

key piece of data. However, without an updated policy requirement for the military services to collect standardized data on the SkillBridge program, analyze the data, and report the results of those analyses to key decision-makers, neither MCTO nor the military services will be positioned to ascertain if the SkillBridge program is meeting its intended goals.

More fully leveraging available information would better position the military services to identify potential shortcomings with the SkillBridge program or challenges facing service members participating in the program and why those challenges may occur. Further, it would allow the military services to develop tailored and effective corrective action plans, and to hold themselves accountable for implementing such plans, as appropriate. Finally, this could also help DOD and DHS more effectively ensure that the SkillBridge program is meeting its purpose and meeting the needs of those service members participating in the program by strengthening DOD and DHS's oversight responsibilities.

How do DOD and the Military Services incorporate ethics standards into the SkillBridge Program?

Officials from the SkillBridge program stated that there are several established DOD policies the program uses to educate service members on ethical standards and to prevent conflicts of interest while participating in the program. Additionally, the military services have implemented additional practices to educate service members on their ethical responsibilities while in the program. Lastly, at the installation level, attorneys are available to review SkillBridge program applications for concerns related to conflict of interest or other ethical concerns.

On the SkillBridge program website, service members have access to a SkillBridge Program Participants Ethics Brief which outlines the general ethical responsibilities a service member is required to follow while in the program.[14] The website includes specific information on:

- **Sections 207 – 208 of Title 18, U.S. Code.** When selecting a SkillBridge program, participants cannot represent the organization in affairs related to the DOD and are not an authorized representative for the DOD in any business transactions with the industry partner. Additionally, service members should not participate in a SkillBridge program where they have a personal financial interest.

- **Joint Ethics Regulation, Section 3 – 201.** While in the SkillBridge program, participants retain their status as a military member and are not allowed to act as an official DOD liaison officer and should not represent DOD in official matters with non-federal entities.

- **DOD Instruction 1322.29.** Participants in the SkillBridge program are not eligible to receive wages, training stipends, or any other form of financial compensation during their time participating in an internship or apprenticeship program.

Officials from across the military services stated that they use different approaches when educating service members about their respective ethical responsibilities while participating in the SkillBridge program as illustrated in table 2.

Table 2: Military Service Approaches for Ethics for the SkillBridge Program

Military Service	Restricted to Department of Defense vetted SkillBridge programs	Review SkillBridge program participants ethics briefing	Required ethics class	Required legal review	Required to submit outside activities form
Army		x		x	
Marine Corps	x		x		
Air Force	x	x			
Space Force	x	x			
Navy	x	x			
Coast Guard	x	x	x	x	x

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with military service officials. I GAO-24-107352

According to military service officials, a service member's completion of the ethics educational requirements is generally tracked through the application process. For example, officials from the Air Force stated that service members must select that they completed the SkillBridge program participants ethics briefing before the service member can advance in the application. In Coast Guard guidance, service members submit proof of the required ethics training and provide the legal review of the SkillBridge program as part of their application.[15] Additionally, the service member must submit an outside activities form signed by the service member's command prior to the anticipated start date of the SkillBridge program.[16]

Conclusions

The SkillBridge program aims to help service members gain skills and additional professional experience to support their transition to the civilian workforce. However, the program does not have standardized data collection across the military services and has not conducted an analysis of participation data. Without standardized data collection and analysis, key decision-makers are not able to determine if the SkillBridge program is meeting its intended goals.

In addition, without systematic data collection and analysis of participation data the military services administering the SkillBridge program, along with MCTO, are not able to identify potential shortcomings of the program or identify barriers that might prevent service members from participating in the SkillBridge program.

Systematically collecting and analyzing this information would better position MCTO and the military services to understand external factors that affect service members participation in the SkillBridge program and to monitor its achievement of program goals.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making a total of seven recommendations, including six to DOD and one to DHS. Specifically:

The Secretary of Defense should update SkillBridge program guidance to include what types of SkillBridge program data should be tracked by each of the military services and how that data should be reported to the department. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Defense should, once SkillBridge program guidance is updated, ensure the Secretary of the Army directs the Chief of Staff of the Army to collect and analyze SkillBridge program data and report that data to the Military-Civilian Transition Office along with any associated corrective action plans. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of Defense should, once SkillBridge program guidance is updated, ensure the Secretary of the Navy directs the Chief of Naval Operations to collect and analyze SkillBridge program data and report that data to the Military-Civilian Transition Office along with any associated corrective action plans. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of Defense should, once SkillBridge program guidance is updated, ensure the Secretary of the Navy directs the Commandant of the Marine Corps to collect and analyze SkillBridge program data and report that data to the Military-Civilian Transition Office along with any associated corrective action plans. (Recommendation 4)

The Secretary of Defense should, once SkillBridge program guidance is updated, ensure the Secretary of the Air Force directs the Chief of Staff of the Air Force to collect and analyze Air Force SkillBridge program data and report that data to the Military-Civilian Transition Office along with any associated corrective action plans. (Recommendation 5)

The Secretary of Defense should, once SkillBridge program guidance is updated, ensure the Secretary of the Air Force directs the Chief of Space Operations to collect and analyze Space Force SkillBridge program data and report that data to the Military-Civilian Transition Office along with any associated corrective action plans. (Recommendation 6)

The Secretary of Homeland Security, should, once SkillBridge program guidance is updated, direct the Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard to collect and analyze SkillBridge program data and share that data, along with any corrective action plans, with DOD's Military-Civilian Transition Office, as appropriate. (Recommendation 7)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOD and DHS for review and comment. DOD concurred with all 6 recommendations and noted how it will address each recommendation, including plans to issue new guidance and track data by military service. DOD also provided technical comments which we incorporated as appropriate. DHS concurred with our recommendation and stated it will update guidance to strengthen data collection, analysis, and sharing and will continue to work with the DOD MCTO as appropriate with an estimated completion date of April 30, 2025. See Appendix I and Appendix II for more details.

How GAO Did This Study

To describe how service member eligibility for the SkillBridge program is determined, we collected, analyzed, and compared relevant DOD and military services guidance on the SkillBridge program. We also interviewed DOD, DHS, and SkillBridge program officials from the military services, as well as officials responsible for the SkillBridge program at selected military installations to determine how guidance is implemented and what challenges or barriers for service member participation exist, if any.

To evaluate the extent to which service members participate in the SkillBridge program, we collected and analyzed military services data on participants in the program. At the time of this review, the available data common across the military services were the first two quarters of fiscal year 2024. We analyzed the available data to the extent that was practical.

To ensure the reliability of the data we obtained, we reviewed it for completeness and conducted interviews with service-level SkillBridge program officials who are responsible for maintaining the data. We determined the data was sufficiently reliable for the purposes of analyzing and reporting on some basic characteristics of service members participating in the SkillBridge program.

To assess how the military services incorporate federal ethics rules into the SkillBridge program, we reviewed relevant sections of federal law and collected and analyzed DOD and military services guidance and documentation. In addition, we interviewed DOD, DHS, SkillBridge program officials from the military services, and officials responsible for the SkillBridge program and the associated legal office responsible for ethics compliance at selected military installations.

We conducted this performance audit from January 2024 to August 2024 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.

List of Addressees

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

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

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at https://www.gao.gov.

GAO Contact Information

For more information, contact: Kristy Williams, Director, Defense Capabilities & Management, Williamsk@gao.gov, (404) 679-1893.

Sarah Kaczmarek, Acting Managing Director, Public Affairs, kaczmareks@gao.gov, (202) 512-8590.

A. Nicole Clowers, Managing Director, Congressional Relations, ClowersA@gao.gov, (202) 512-4400.

Staff Acknowledgments: Vincent Balloon (Assistant Director), James Krustapentus (Analyst-in-Charge), John Bornmann, Brenda S. Farrell, John Mingus, Kyle O'Brien, Clarice Ransom, Theologos Voudouris, and Kiley Wilson.

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Appendix I: Comments from the Department of Defense

DEFENSE HUMAN RESOURCES ACTIVITY
4800 MARK CENTER DRIVE, SUITE 06J25-01
ALEXANDRIA, VA 22350-4000

Ms. Kristy Williams
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Williams,

    This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report, GAO-24-107352, "Transition to Civilian Life: Better Collection and Analysis of Military Service Data Needed to Improve SkillBridge Program Oversight," dated July 1, 2024. DoD concurs with the overall position of the draft report.

    Enclosed is DoD's response to the report recommendations and technical corrections to the draft report. My point of contact is Dr. Yashika D. Neaves who can be reached at yashika.d.neaves.civ@mail.mil or (703) 477- 4014.

Sincerely,

REGISTER.JEFFR
EY.RAYMOND.104
6072339
Digitally signed by
REGISTER.JEFFREY.RAYMON
D.1046072339
Date: 2024.07.24 13:58:05 -04'00'

Jeffrey R. Register
Director

Enclosures:
As stated

"TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE: BETTER COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OF MILITARY SERVICE DATA NEEDED TO IMPROVE SKILLBRIDGE PROGRAM OVERSIGHT"

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATION

RECOMMENDATION 1: The Secretary of Defense should update SkillBridge guidance to include what types of SkillBridge program data should be tracked by each of the Armed Forces and how that data should be reported to the department.

DoD RESPONSE: **CONCUR**
The Department will update SkillBridge guidance that will cancel and replace Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 1322.29 with new policy in a Transition and Reintegration DoDI with an accompanying SkillBridge Manual inclusive of the types of data that should be tracked and how that data should be reported by each of the Armed Forces.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Secretary of Defense should, once SkillBridge guidance is updated, ensure the Secretary of the Army directs the Chief of Staff of the Army to collect and analyze SkillBridge data and report that data to the Military-Civilian Transition Office along with any associated corrective action plans.

DoD RESPONSE: **CONCUR**
The Department will coordinate with the Secretary of the Army to ensure the Chief of Staff of the Army collects, analyzes, and reports, as appropriate, SkillBridge data to the Military-Civilian Transition Office, along with any associated corrective action plans.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Secretary of Defense should, once SkillBridge guidance is updated, ensure the Secretary of the Navy directs the Chief of Naval Operations to collect and analyze SkillBridge data and report that data to the Military Civilian Transition Office along with any associated corrective action plans.

DoD RESPONSE: **CONCUR**
The Department will coordinate with the Secretary of the Navy to ensure the Chief of Naval Operations collects, analyzes, and reports, as appropriate, SkillBridge data to the Military-Civilian Transition Office, along with any associated corrective action plans.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Secretary of Defense should, once SkillBridge guidance is updated, ensure the Secretary of the Navy directs the Commandant of the Marine Corps to collect and analyze SkillBridge data and report that data to the Military Civilian Transition Office along with any associated corrective action plans.

DoD RESPONSE: **CONCUR**
The Department will coordinate with the Secretary of the Navy to ensure the Commandant of the Marine Corps collects, analyzes, and reports, as appropriate, SkillBridge data to the Military-Civilian Transition Office, along with any associated corrective action plans.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The Secretary of Defense should, once SkillBridge guidance is updated, ensure the Secretary of the Air Force directs the Chief of Staff of the Air Force to collect and analyze Air Force SkillBridge data and report that data to the Military Civilian Transition Office along with any associated corrective action plans.

DoD RESPONSE: **CONCUR**
The Department will coordinate with the Secretary of the Air Force to ensure the Chief of Staff of the Air Force collects, analyzes, and reports, as appropriate, SkillBridge data to the Military-Civilian Transition Office, along with any associated corrective action plans.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The Secretary of Defense should, once SkillBridge guidance is updated, ensure the Secretary of the Air Force directs the Chief of Space Operations to collect and analyze Space Force SkillBridge data and report that data to the Military Civilian Transition Office along with any associated corrective action plans.

DoD RESPONSE: **CONCUR**
The Department will coordinate with the Secretary of the Air Force to ensure the Chief of Space Operations collects, analyzes, and reports, as appropriate, SkillBridge data to the Military-Civilian Transition Office, along with any associated corrective action plans.

Accessible Text for Appendix I: Comments from the Department of Defense

Ms. Kristy Williams
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Williams,

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Sincerely,

REGISTER.JEFFREY.RAYMOND.104 6072339

Digitally signed by
REGISTER.JEFFREY.RAYMON
D.1046072339
Date: 2024.07.24 13:58:05 -04'00'

Jeffrey R. Register
Director

Enclosures:
As stated

GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED JULY 1, 2024
GAO-24-107352 (GAO CODE 107352)

"TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE: BETTER COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OF MILITARY SERVICE DATA NEEDED TO IMPROVE SKILLBRIDGE PROGRAM OVERSIGHT"

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATION

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RECOMMENDATION 2: The Secretary of Defense should, once SkillBridge guidance is updated, ensure the Secretary of the Army directs the Chief of Staff of the Army to collect and analyze SkillBridge data and report that data to the Military-Civilian Transition Office along with any associated corrective action plans.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR
The Department will coordinate with the Secretary of the Army to ensure the Chief of Staff of the Army collects, analyzes, and reports, as appropriate, SkillBridge data to the Military-Civilian Transition Office, along with any associated corrective action plans.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Secretary of Defense should, once SkillBridge guidance is updated, ensure the Secretary of the Navy directs the Chief of Naval Operations to collect and analyze SkillBridge data and report that data to the Military Civilian Transition Office along with any associated corrective action plans.

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DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR
The Department will coordinate with the Secretary of the Air Force to ensure the Chief of Staff of the Air Force collects, analyzes, and reports, as appropriate, SkillBridge data to the Military- Civilian Transition Office, along with any associated corrective action plans.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The Secretary of Defense should, once SkillBridge guidance is updated, ensure the Secretary of the Air Force directs the Chief of Space Operations to collect and analyze Space Force SkillBridge data and report that data to the Military Civilian Transition Office along with any associated corrective action plans.

DoD RESPONSE: CONCUR
The Department will coordinate with the Secretary of the Air Force to ensure the Chief of Space Operations collects, analyzes, and reports, as appropriate,

SkillBridge data to the Military- Civilian Transition Office, along with any associated corrective action plans.

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

Homeland Security

<u>BY ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION</u>

July 23, 2024

Kristy Williams
Director, Defense Capabilities & Management
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548-0001

Re: Management Response to Draft Report GAO-24-107352, "Transition to Civilian Life: Better Collection and Analysis of Military Service Data Needed to Improve SkillBridge Program Oversight"

Dear Ms. Williams:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS, or the Department) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

DHS leadership is pleased to note GAO's recognition of the U.S. Coast Guard's participation in the SkillBridge program. The Coast Guard is committed to supporting separating and retiring servicemembers transition from military service while effectively balancing unit needs, Coast Guard operations, and the member's transition intentions.

The draft report contained seven recommendations, including one for DHS with which the Department concurs. Enclosed find our detailed response to the recommendation. DHS previously submitted technical comments addressing accuracy, contextual, and other issues under a separate cover for GAO's consideration, as appropriate.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. We look forward to working with you again in the future.

Sincerely,

JIM H CRUMPACKER Digitally signed by JIM H CRUMPACKER
Date: 2024.07.23 08:32:20 -04'00'

JIM H. CRUMPACKER
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Enclosure

**Enclosure: Management Response to Recommendations
Contained in GAO-24-107352**

GAO recommended that the Secretary of Homeland Security direct the Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard to:

Recommendation 7: Once SkillBridge guidance is updated, collect and analyze SkillBridge data and share that data, along with any corrective action plans, with DOD's [U.S. Department of Defense] Military Civilian Transition Office, as appropriate.

Response: Concur. The Coast Guard Office of Work-Life (CG-1K12) will update the current Commandant Instruction, COMDTINST 1040.7,[1] to strengthen opportunities for collecting, analyzing, and sharing SkillBridge program data and help ensure that key decisionmakers are able to determine whether the program is meeting its intended goals. This will include continuing to work with the DOD Military Civilian Transition Office, as appropriate. Estimated Completion Date: April 30, 2025.

---

[1] "Transition of Service Members with Job Training Opportunities and Employment Skills Under the Department of Defense (DOD) SkillBridge Voluntary Employment Skills Training Program," dated February 2022; https://media.defense.gov/2022/Feb/03/2002932607/-1/-1/0/CI_1040_7.PDF.

2

Accessible Text for Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

BY ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION

July 23, 2024

Kristy Williams
Director, Defense Capabilities & Management
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548-0001

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JIM H CRUMPACKER

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Date: 2024.07.23 08:32:20 -04'00'

JIM H. CRUMPACKER
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Enclosure

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Endnotes

[1] For the purpose of this report, we will use the term 'service member' to refer to active-duty members of the Armed Forces, including the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, Navy, Space Force, and United States Coast Guard.

[2] 10 U.S.C. § 1143(e); *see also* Department of Defense Instruction 1322.29, *Job Training, Employment Skills Training, Apprenticeships, and Internships (JTEST-AI) for Eligible Service Members* (Jan. 24, 2014) (incorporating change 1, effective May 5, 2020).

[3] Department of Defense, *Improvements to Transition Assistance Program,* Report to the Committees on Armed Services of the Senate and the House of Representatives; the Committees on Veterans' Affairs of the Senate and the House of Representatives; the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation of the Senate; and the Committee of Transportation and Infrastructure of the House of Representatives (Nov. 13, 2023).

[4] GAO, Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Can Better Leverage Performance Information to Improve Participation in Counseling Pathways, GAO-23-104538 (Washington, D.C: Dec. 12, 2022).

[5] GAO, Servicemembers Transitioning to Civilian Life: DOD Could Enhance the Transition Assistance Program by Better Leveraging Performance Information, GAO-23-106793 (Washington, D.C: May. 17, 2023).

[6] Department of Defense Instruction 1322.29.

[7] Department of Defense Instruction 1322.29.

[8] Department of Defense Instruction 1322.29.

[9] Pub. L. No. 118-31, § 572(b) (2023).

[10] DOD Instruction 1322.29 states the Secretaries of the Military Departments will develop methodology and standards for collecting and reporting metrics data. Enclosure 5 of the instruction outlines seven metrics such as the number of applicants and the number of service members who received a job offer. While we found some of this data was available, such as the number of service members participating, we also found that some of this data may be incomplete. For example, SkillBridge program officials with the military services indicated that they do not have comprehensive data on SkillBridge application denials. In addition, SkillBridge program officials with three of the military services stated they do not have complete information on whether a SkillBridge opportunity resulted in employment after military service.

[11] 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, we stated 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).

[12] Office of Management and Budget Memorandum M-19-18, *Federal Data Strategy – A Framework for Consistency* (June 4, 2019); Executive Office of the President, *Federal Data Strategy – 2020 Action Plan* (2020).

[13] GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO-14-704G (Washington, D.C: Sept.10, 2014).

[14] Department of Defense, "SkillBridge Program Participant Ethics Brief" (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 8, 2020), accessed February 12, 2024, https://skillbridge.osd.mil/docs/SkillBridge-Program-Participant-Ethics-Brief-V2.pptx.

[15] U.S. Coast Guard, Commandant Instruction 1040.7.

[16] U.S. Coast Guard, ALCOAST 475/22, Change to Standards of Ethical Conduct Implementing DHS Regulations Relating to Outside Activities (Dec. 1, 2022).