



MEREDITH KLEYKAMP, JEFFREY B. WENGER,
ELIZABETH HASTINGS ROER, MATTHEW KUBASAK,
TRAVIS HUBBLE, LAUREN SKRABALA

Federal Programs to Assist Military-to-Civilian Employment Transitions

Limited Scrutiny and Substantial Investment
in Education Programs



Executive Summary

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About This Executive Summary

Service members make many transitions throughout their careers—from location to location, from military job to military job, and, eventually, to civilian life. For many service members, the military-to-civilian transition is the most fraught, requiring such important decisions as where to live and how to earn a living. As they prepare to enter the civilian labor market, transitioning service members and veterans can benefit from job-search support and opportunities to apply the skills that they developed during their time in the military. For some, the transition period is an ideal time to pursue additional training or education. The spouses of service members and veterans, who might have sacrificed career opportunities to the demands of military service, can also benefit from employment support.

To meet these diverse needs, the federal government funds a variety of programs to support military-to-civilian employment transitions. However, relatively little information is available about how these programs allocate their budgets and whether they effectively aid skilled veterans in finding civilian employment at a family-sustaining wage, despite these programs being funded by billions of dollars. Starting with a set of 45 programs identified by the U.S. Government Accountability Office as providing employment support for service members, veterans, and dependents, we have explored which programs consume outsized levels of funding relative to the number of participants they serve. We also identify gaps in the evaluation research, shortfalls in available budget and participation data, and opportunities to improve the return on federal investment and better meet the needs of those who depend on these programs as they reintegrate into civilian life.

Policymakers, those who design and implement programming, nonprofits that help in postseparation re-employment, and funders (including foundations and private philanthropies) that provide resources to the nonprofit sector all benefit from a clear and accurate understanding of the landscape in which they operate. This report complements another RAND report on nonprofit-sector programs that support transitioning service members, *Increasing Sustainability of Veteran-Serving Employment-Focused Nonprofits: Findings from a Mixed-Methods Study* (Kleykamp et al., forthcoming). Together, these reports provide a fuller picture of the resources available to this population, highlighting opportunities for closer collaboration and helping funders identify and fill unmet employment transition needs.

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Summary

The particulars of transitioning from military life to civilian life are different for every veteran. Success in translating the skills acquired during military service to the civilian labor market varies by military occupation and other variables, such as whether the service member was deployed, is married, has children, or spent a few or many years in service. Transition aids, such as training, education, career advice, and job support, can boost veterans' job prospects and help them find or develop fulfilling careers in civilian life. The U.S. government offers a transition support program to facilitate almost every conceivable military-to-civilian transition path. However, as prior RAND research has shown, many veterans still feel that they are unable to leverage their military skills in their civilian jobs (see Wenger et al., 2017).

The federal government spends more than \$13 billion each year on these transition programs. However, there has been little analysis of how this funding is apportioned, how programs use their funding, where there is potential overlap between programs, and how effective these programs are. In response to a request from Congress, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) assessed the federally funded programs that helped transitioning service members, veterans, and their families acquire skills and education to prepare them for civilian employment (GAO, 2019; GAO, 2020). GAO catalogued 45 such programs that are overseen by 11 federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). GAO found a great deal of overlap in the activities and goals of the 45 programs, as well as variation in their budgets and the extent to which the agencies evaluated the effectiveness of their programs. GAO also noted that more than 97 percent of federal expenditures were allocated to educational assistance across the 45 programs. Although further education is important for many veterans, most veterans enter the civilian workforce directly and might benefit from more employment-focused support.

To update and extend GAO's analysis and to ultimately help improve military-to-civilian transition outcomes for U.S. veterans, we seek to map the current landscape of employment-focused transition programs. We rely heavily on publicly available data, much of which comes from GAO reports; part of this reliance is because GAO reports are the only source of systematic data and programmatic information. In this study, we investigate costs of transition programs, identify the programs that are the most expensive, and examine the programs' effects on the transition landscape. We also explore the policy dynamics that have enabled programs to continue operating even though they have not published detailed data on the populations they serve, how they allocate their budgets, and how they track their performance.

How the Study Was Conducted

To facilitate this analysis, we review the literature on employment transition programs, assess budgetary and policy documents, and compile a comprehensive review of how federal transition programs function. In this report, we also seek to understand whom and how many people the programs serve and what evidence is available to indicate how the programs perform.

We find that little has changed since 2022, when GAO conducted its last study: The same 45 programs remain active, and, except for a few pilot programs, there have been no additions to the employment transition landscape. Thus, we have grouped, according to budget size, the same 45 programs that GAO originally identified. This allows the programs to be divided into the following four categories:

1. **“Big Four” budgetary programs:** the Post-9/11 GI Bill (PGIB), Veteran Readiness and Employment, DoD’s Tuition Assistance Program, and Survivors’ and Dependents’ Educational Assistance
2. **second-tier programs:** the Montgomery GI Bill and Jobs for Veterans State Grants
3. **third-tier program:** DoD’s Transition Assistance Program (TAP)
4. **small programs:** an assortment of additional programs with significantly smaller budgets that serve significantly smaller target populations than the other three categories of programs.

Key Findings

Most Employment Transition Programs Are Actually Focused on Education

Overall, we find that very few programs focus on military-to-civilian employment transitions. Specifically, little support is dedicated to helping service members and veterans translate their military skills to the civilian labor market. There is also limited assistance for finding civilian apprenticeships or jobs, and few resources are available for connecting them with civilian employers. In fact, nearly all the money for *career assistance programs*, as defined by GAO, is spent on upskilling, retraining, or education programs. With limited exceptions, such programs can take many months or years to complete. These programs offer valuable opportunities to enhance veterans’ knowledge, skills, and employment opportunities. Dedicating significant portions of the transition budget is also unsurprising because of the high and growing costs of college. However, many veterans want or need to move directly into employment. Programs that support immediate employment transitions beyond the mandatory TAP are surprisingly limited.

There Is Limited Evidence That Federally Funded Employment Transition Programs Are Effective

There is virtually no evidence that any of the programs we examine have had a direct effect on transition outcomes. In some cases, the evidence is counterintuitive; for example, the large, interagency TAP, which is overseen by DoD, is associated with lower wages for program participants. Similarly, the PGIB has resulted in modest increases in education but limited increases in earnings and, in some cases, has even resulted in negative returns on investment in schooling. Other programs have no reported data, evaluation plans, resources, or outcome measures. Perhaps as a result, there have been few evaluations of program effectiveness.

Transition Programs Face Limited Oversight and Budgetary Scrutiny

The largest budgetary program, the PGIB, provides little information on participation and outcomes, i.e., how many service members and veterans use it and whether they graduate from their programs. Overall, we find that oversight is weak across all 45 programs. This finding could be because oversight of these programs is fragmented; numerous congressional committees are responsible for overseeing portions of some programs, and various federal agencies are involved in operating these programs.

One outcome of this oversight challenge is that program redundancies are common. This is especially true for education programs that provide general counseling and services.

There Are Opportunities to Address Redundancies in Transition Programs and Services

We find numerous redundancies in available transition programs and services. There are many specific occupational skill-focused training programs that serve relatively limited numbers of participants. There are opportunities to consolidate multiple programs that provide on-the-job training in specific skill sets to reduce overhead costs, avoid duplication of effort, and improve outreach. The involvement of multiple federal agencies can make this consolidation challenging, so this is an area in need of more research. In general, a large number of transition programs serve a small population, and, without sufficient evaluation of the return on investment from these programs, it is difficult to identify which specific programs could be consolidated or discontinued to make resources available to others.

Recommendations

There is a great deal of inconsistency in how budgets are reported across the transition-assistance programs, even the large ones, and we encounter few robust evaluations of their outcomes in the employment transition landscape. Because the federal government spends an estimated \$13 billion annually on education, training, and other aspects of military-to-civilian employment transitions, it is critical that the agencies that receive these funds are held accountable for consistently reporting how their program budgets are allocated and whom

they have served. One challenge we faced is locating reliable, updated budget numbers; this could be a result of shortfalls in oversight and variations in reporting requirements.

The most notable gap is the paucity of program evaluations. Although there have been congressionally mandated assessments of some programs, much of the information we find on program effectiveness comes from small-scale or otherwise limited studies.

Our study suggests that there is a deep need to improve the military-to-civilian transition program landscape. The following recommendations can help policymakers identify opportunities to reduce spending on redundant or ineffective programs and to better address the needs of transitioning service members, veterans, and their families.

- **Conduct an independent evaluation of the largest programs to reduce inefficiencies and improve performance.** Most federal funding for employment transitions goes to programs that exclusively or primarily support educational opportunities. Many questions about the efficiency and effectiveness of these programs could be answered by an independent evaluation of the largest programs conducted by an agency that is empowered to access detailed budget information and performance evaluation results. For example, this evaluation might answer the research question: To what extent are federal funds going toward education at the *expense* of successful employment transitions?
- **Refocus military-to-civilian transition support on employment.** This study identifies ways to use federal funding to better help service members and veterans switch to civilian jobs. One option is to invest in programs that help them transition quickly, especially those programs offering personalized support. For example, TAP leadership might consider renewing the program’s focus on helping transitioning service members find jobs that align with their skills, as well as providing continuing support post-separation. Finally, there might be opportunities for DoD to outsource career counseling through vouchers for the services of local private-sector professionals. Such “boots-on-the-ground” personnel might be better positioned than federally employed career counselors to help veterans transition to the civilian labor market in their local area. They might also be able to provide long-term support.
- **Mandate consistent and routine budget reporting for all programs that support military-to-civilian transitions.** There is a need for policymaker intervention to require agencies to standardize their budget and performance reporting—a mandate that should not be limited to programs that support employment transitions. In its 2020 report, GAO relied on self-reported budgetary data from program representatives, which leads to questions about the completeness and accuracy of this information. As we have attempted to update those findings, we often find outdated and conflicting budgetary information, even for large programs.
- **Identify opportunities to streamline the employment transition landscape and improve oversight.** Although the smallest programs have limited budgets, they collectively receive millions of dollars in federal funding. Individually, these programs serve small numbers of beneficiaries, and there is little information about their performance.

Excess programs can complicate the benefit landscape for veterans who already need to navigate an enormous number of resources. Increased oversight, combined with a full-scale study of these small, federally funded employment transition programs, would provide the necessary evidence for decisions about which programs should be shuttered or combined with existing programs.

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This executive summary describes a report about federal military-to-civilian transition programs, their benefits, their costs, the most-expensive ones, and how their effects on transition outcomes for U.S. service members and veterans are evaluated.

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