



## **Ending Post-9/11 Veteran Suicide**

A summary of the causes of - and potential solutions to - a nation-wide scourge

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# Background

The Tristate Veterans Community Alliance (TVCA) is an independent, veteran-led non-profit organization dedicated to serving veterans and their families within both the Greater Cincinnati region and nation-wide as they transition from military to civilian life. The TVCA is a leading advocate for addressing veterans' transition issues. As part of their advocacy and thought leadership, they partner with a nation-wide network of veteran collaboratives across the country who, in turn, partner with state and local service providers, corporations, academic institutions and governmental organizations to increase awareness of and access to employment, education, health, wellness and family support services. As such, and with the stated goal of streamlining access to those services, this nation-wide network of veteran collaboratives supplements the efforts of federal agencies such as the Department of Defense (DOD), Veterans Affairs (VA), and the Department of Labor (DOL). As a "business model", veteran collaboratives serve as a regional convening organization or "hub" for veterans and their families seeking services in their regional communities upon transition from the military, enabling a direct connection to local, post-separation services from the military the government alone cannot provide.<sup>1</sup> In short, veteran collaboratives provide an optimal means to effectively navigate the "sea of goodwill."

As nearly all of its clients consist of veterans from the post-9/11 era, TVCA seeks to better understand the challenges facing post-9/11 veterans returning to civilian life, including factors impeding the development of their civilian identity, and the linkage between these challenges and an increased risk of suicide. For the past two decades, suicide has been the second leading cause of death for post-9/11 veterans (22.3 percent of all deaths), with the risk of suicide continuing to greatly increase after military service.<sup>2</sup>

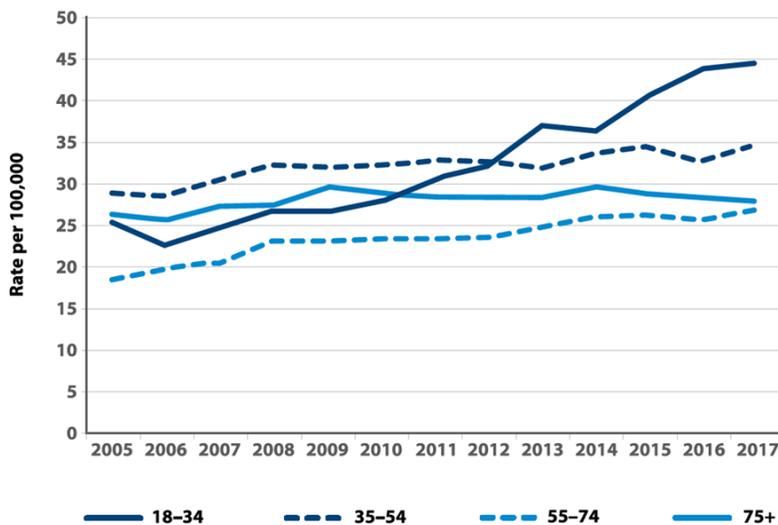
To be clear, most post-9/11 veterans successfully transition from the military and establish post-military careers. And further, these veterans should rightly bear some responsibility for those transition outcomes. However, for those who do not successfully transition and succumb to taking their own lives, this paper seeks to identify factors that lead to post-9/11 veteran suicide and suggest solutions to remedy them. Insights and conclusions within this paper are drawn from recent scientific studies which are noted throughout the document. Of note, this paper does not take into consideration any pre-existing conditions of the post-9/11 veteran and potential correlation with an increased risk of suicide. The goal of this paper is to inform national policy and strategic choices, as well as suggest tactical approaches that organizations supporting transition from the military may implement. The primary audience for this paper is governmental and non-governmental organizations at the national level seeking to end the scourge of post-9/11 veteran suicide, although we recognize and acknowledge that there may be parallel efforts underway at the state and local levels. We also recognize that many efforts have been undertaken in recent years by agencies noted in this paper in attempts to address this issue – all with varying degrees of success; our purpose is to shine a light on remaining gaps.

# Executive Summary

The suicide rate for post-9/11 era veterans, as a percentage of the total number of veterans serving during that era, is much higher than any other group of veterans and continues to increase (see Chart 1 below). In fact, the rate has more than doubled from 22 suicide deaths per 100,000 in 2006 to 45 per 100,000 in 2016.<sup>3</sup>

This rate of increase has been particularly alarming despite the fervent efforts of the federal government, its partners, and mental health professionals. In particular, studies demonstrate a strong correlation between an incomplete or unsatisfactory transition from the military and post-9/11 veteran suicide.

**Chart 1: Veteran Suicide Rates per 100,000, by Age Group, 2005–2017**



Source: 2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report

Several factors increase the risk of suicide, including the lack of development of a distinct civilian identity, and may be grouped as occurring pre-separation and post-separation from the military. While we would more heavily emphasize the pre-separation solutions as an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, post-separation solutions remain an ongoing need.

**Table 1: Pre- and Post-Separation Contributing Factors and Proposed Solutions**

Pre-Separation Contributing Factors	Potential Pre-Separation Solutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limitations of TAP</li> <li>• Barriers to an Effective Transition</li> <li>• Lack of Resocialization from a Military Identity to a Civilian Identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement Veteran Transition Universities or “Civilian Basic Training”</li> <li>• Supplement TAP with Programs that Support Identity Discovery</li> <li>• Further Involve Veteran Collaboratives and Non-Governmental Actors Prior to Separation</li> <li>• Educate the American Public on Valuable Role Veterans can play in Furthering its Institutions</li> </ul>

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Post-Separation Contributing Factors	Potential Post-Separation Solutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Loss of Military “tribal” Environment and Structure</li><li>• Growing Civil-Military Divide</li><li>• Lack of Coordinated Transition Support Services in Local Communities</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide Additional Private-Public Funding to Scale and Fully Utilize Veteran Collaboratives</li><li>• Establish Veteran Collaboratives as Centers of Excellence (COE)</li><li>• Provide Platform and/or Tools for Dating Sharing with Veteran Collaboratives</li><li>• Incentivize and Scale Formal Hiring Programs at Non-Federal, Civilian Employers</li></ul>

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Implementing these proposed solutions has the potential to provide numerous benefits – for veterans and their families, for their prospective employers, for broader society, and for the government.

Primary benefits include:

- Saved lives
- An increase in national security
- Improved resource allocation of veteran service providers
- A corresponding increase in the focus and impact of philanthropic funding

Secondary benefits include:

- Increased productivity of both organizations hiring veterans and the nation as a whole
- Cost savings for agencies which provide veteran unemployment services
- Economic benefits realized by the veteran (in the increased ability to accrue wealth)
- A reduction in veteran under-employment

The paper is a product of reviews of research studies and federal reports provided by subject matter experts as well as veteran support entities. With few exceptions, these sources presented information from a national perspective with few demographic distinctions (i.e., gender, geographic location, education).

## 1. Definitions

In this paper, the following definitions apply:

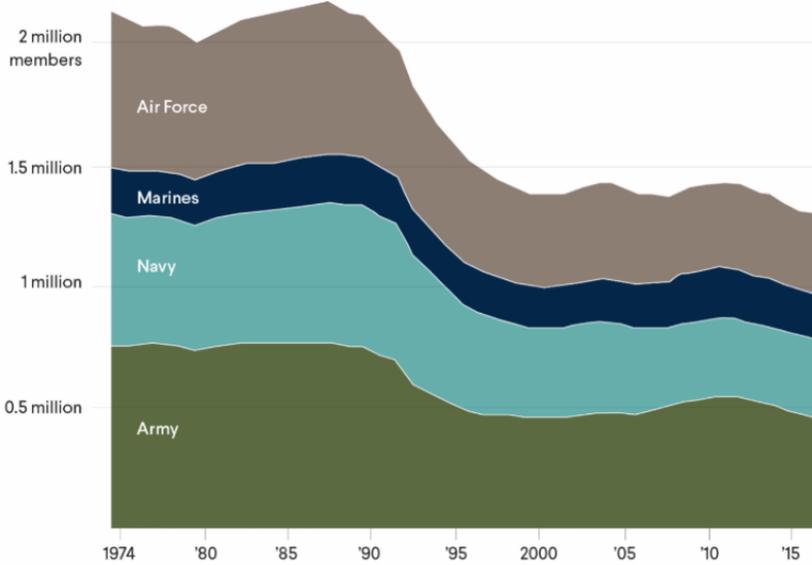
- **Centers of Excellence:** Model organization(s) selected to coordinate governmental and non-governmental services and programs for veterans at a regional level with the intent to address a plethora of pre- and post-transition needs (i.e., finance, healthcare, employment, housing, etc.)
- **Family Caregiver:** An individual providing personal care services to a veteran, such as an immediate member of the family (i.e., spouse, child, parent, etc.).<sup>4</sup>
- **Military to Civilian Transition:** The term for the experience and process, outside of DOD programs, for the transition from a military life or identity to a civilian role.
- **Military Identity:** An identity gained by a member of the military during the “socialization process into military specific behaviors, beliefs, dress, and rituals” which forms a personal cultural affiliation.<sup>5</sup>
- **Military Transition Assistance Program (TAP):** The mandatory, pre-separation counselling and transition program for active duty members overseen by DOD in close coordination with VA, DOL, and other supporting federal entities.
- **Post-9/11 Veterans:** Veterans of conflicts occurring after the attacks of 9/11 and comprising the U.S. military’s modern all-volunteer force. These include, but are not limited to, the following operations occurring after 9/11: Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF; Afghanistan), Operation New Dawn (OND; the continuing U.S. presence in Iraq). The post-9/11 distinction is significant due to the unique societal, health, and caregiver challenges faced post-separation.
- **Public-Private Partnership:** A voluntary, collaborative, and working relationship with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in which the goals, structures, governance, roles and responsibilities are mutually determined to try to deliver the best possible services.
- **Sea of Goodwill:** A term coined by former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, to recognize that, “Americans have pledged hundreds of thousands of jobs, hundreds of millions of dollars, and countless volunteer hours to recognize, assist, and thank our service members and their families in a groundswell of support.”<sup>6</sup> Today, this takes the form of the more than 45,000 VSOs in existence and the approximately 1800 state-level benefits for veterans to supplement the services offered by the federal government and VSOs.<sup>7</sup>
- **Successful Military Transition:** Occurs when a veteran finds meaningful employment aligned with their strengths and preferred career field, satisfies their and their family’s basic needs (food, healthcare, housing, etc.), identifies resources required to address any post-military transition needs, acquires healthy means to cope with the stressors of transition, has established 12-month personal and professional goals, and is prepared to positively contribute to the broader community of transitioning veterans.<sup>8</sup>
- **Transitioning Service Member:** Any member of the Armed Forces of the United States preparing to enter a civilian career outside of the military; this includes veterans, those receiving a less than honorable discharge, or otherwise involuntary separated.
- **Veteran:** By law and in terms of federal support, this is “a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable”.<sup>9</sup> However, for the purposes of this paper, the term includes those who served, may have been discharged under less than honorable conditions, and may be at risk of suicide.
- **Veteran Collaboratives:** Organizations formed to mutually enable public, private, and local community services for veterans and to support the dissemination of knowledge and understanding of available resources to local veterans. Facilitates the coordinated delivery of services provided by various Veteran Service Organizations.
- **Veteran Service Organization (VSO):** An organization which exists to support or advocate for veterans and provide veteran-specific resources. VSOs are mostly private, non-profit organizations run by volunteers with paid leadership and are either federally-chartered (officially recognized by Congress) or non-chartered. The vast majority of VSOs<sup>10</sup> are non-chartered entities.

## 2. Data and Analysis

The U.S. military is an all volunteer force comprised of approximately 1.3 million active service members (active component) and 800,000 national guard and reserve (reserve component) members (see Chart 2).<sup>11</sup> Each year, approximately 200,000 members transition out of the military into a civilian role, with varying degrees of success or difficulty.<sup>12</sup>

**Chart 2: Active Duty Personnel, 1974-2016**

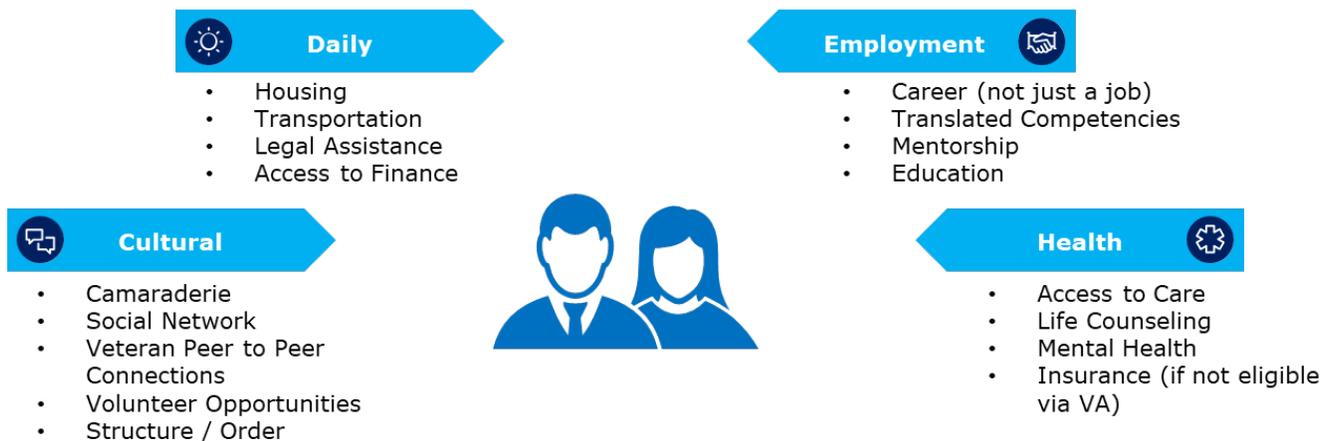
Active Duty Personnel, 1974–2016



Source: *Demographics of the U.S. Military*, Council on Foreign Relations

Upon their return from service, veterans may experience a multitude of changes as a part of their transition from being a member of the military to life as a civilian. For some, they confront a new and long list of needs (see Chart 3). The list is sufficiently long and impactful as to create an overwhelming burden for many veterans, resulting in significant stress for them and their families.

**Chart 3: Veteran Transition Needs**

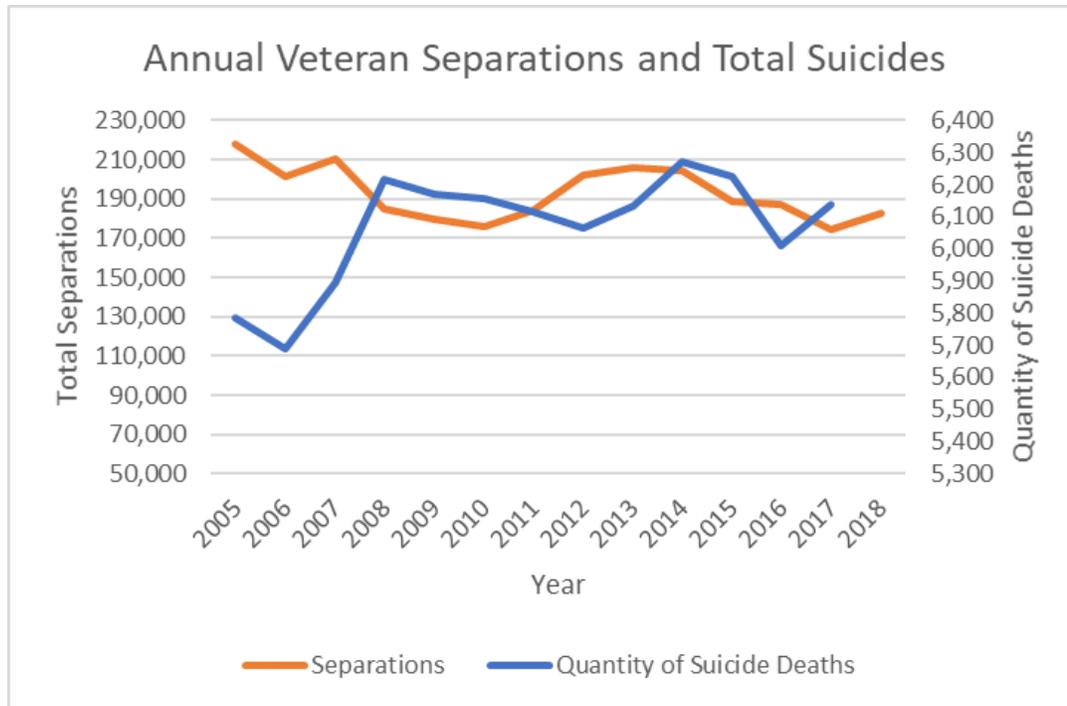


The socialization of individuals into the military is a thorough, almost year-long process, that results in strong identification of the self with the military, and an intimate connection with the shared norms, values, and people experienced during their time in service. In the military, for example, service members are told when to wake up, what to wear, what to eat, where to live, how to walk, how to talk, what equipment to use, what their salary is, and what health care they have, among other things. The up-side of this lack of freedom is fewer things to worry about. In leaving the military, veterans – and their families - suddenly have tremendous freedom regarding nearly all these things. For some, that may seem long overdue and most welcome; but for others, those things may pose an exhausting problem set that must be actively managed every day.<sup>13</sup> And so, as service members and their families are given limited time (the mandatory DOD TAP program lasts five days) to re-socialize as civilians, they may find it difficult to assimilate within civilian communities. Thus, veterans and family members can struggle to form an identity with social groups outside of the military and have a more difficult time transitioning to civilian life. When these difficulties exceed a veteran’s ability to cope, the stressors they encounter tend to put them at a higher risk for suicide.<sup>14</sup>

**2.1. Veteran Suicide Data**

Despite the gradually decreasing size of the active-duty military, the veteran suicide rate has been rising for the past decade, with an average of 16.8 veterans dying by suicide every day as of 2017 (see Chart 4).<sup>15</sup> Veterans represent eight percent of the total U.S. adult population; however, the suicide rate for veterans was 1.5 times that of non-veteran adults in 2017.<sup>16</sup> According to Rich Morin’s study, “44 percent of veterans experience high levels of difficulty when reintegrating into civilian life”<sup>17</sup>, which is of significant concern because veterans who experience the highest difficulty during their transition are 5.4 times more likely to experience suicidal ideation.<sup>18</sup>

**Chart 4: Annual Number of Veteran Suicides and Separations, 2005-2017**



Sources: 2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report and 2005-2018 DOD Annual Demographic Reports

The suicide rate is significantly higher among post-9/11 veterans, which comprise the 18-34 age group demographic (see Chart 1 above). Those rates have more than doubled from 2006 to 2016 despite improvements in mental health services and long-term care.<sup>19</sup> This age group's proximity to separation from the military matches the findings from recent scientific studies on the matter. A 2016 study "showed that the risk of suicide almost tripled during the first year after separation from the military and remained raised even after six years of separation."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, these findings were duplicated in a separate study of individuals who had left the UK armed forces. That study found that the risk of suicide in men younger than 24 who had left the armed forces was two to three times higher than the risks for the same age groups in both the general population and active duty population. Further, the risk of suicide for men aged 30-49 was at its highest in the first two years following separation.<sup>21</sup>

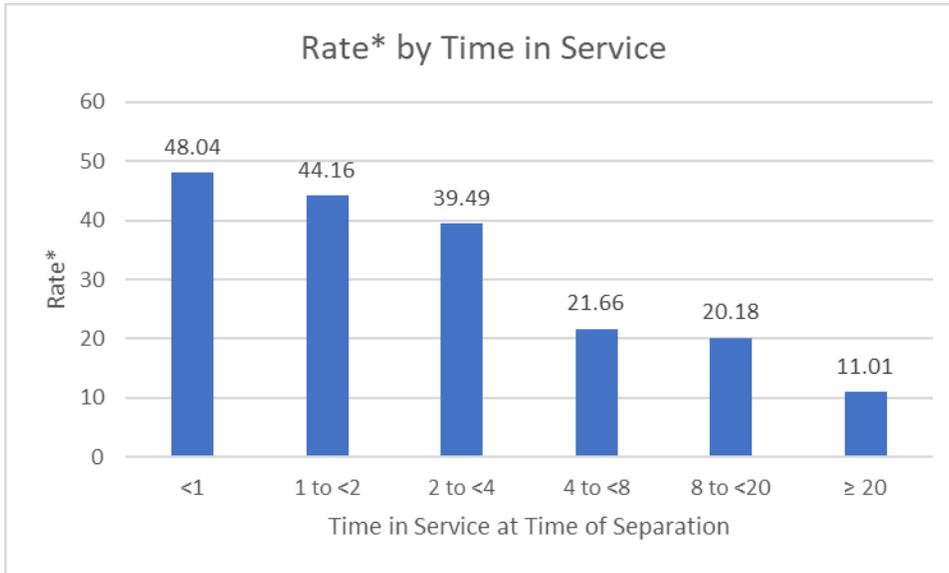
## **2.2. Effects of Combat Exposure and Deployments on Increased Suicide Risk**

Some studies investigated the idea that the trauma which may accompany a veteran's deployment - particularly in combat zones - substantially alters their ability to cope with daily life and increases the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

However, in his study, Mark Reger notes that combat experience and quantity of deployments do not directly contribute to higher incidents of suicide amongst veterans, but do impact veteran needs during their transition.<sup>22</sup> He also found that, in a comparison of service members who were deployed in OEF/OIF combat zones and those who were not, there is no significant difference in the hazard of suicide.<sup>23</sup> Despite this lack of correlation, related research by the Pew Research Center of post-9/11 veterans found that those who served in combat were significantly more likely than those who did not to say their readjustment was difficult, with 46 percent of those "with some combat experience" reporting "their readjustment to civilian life as difficult compared with 18 percent of those without combat experience."<sup>24</sup> And so, this indicates that combat experience should be taken into account in segmenting audiences during the formal transition process from the military.

In addition, separation from the military, especially after shorter periods of military service (<4 years), or if that separation is due to a discharge that is less than honorable, correlates with an increased risk of suicide (see Charts 5 and 6).<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that most veterans who attempt suicide make their first attempt after military separation.<sup>26</sup>

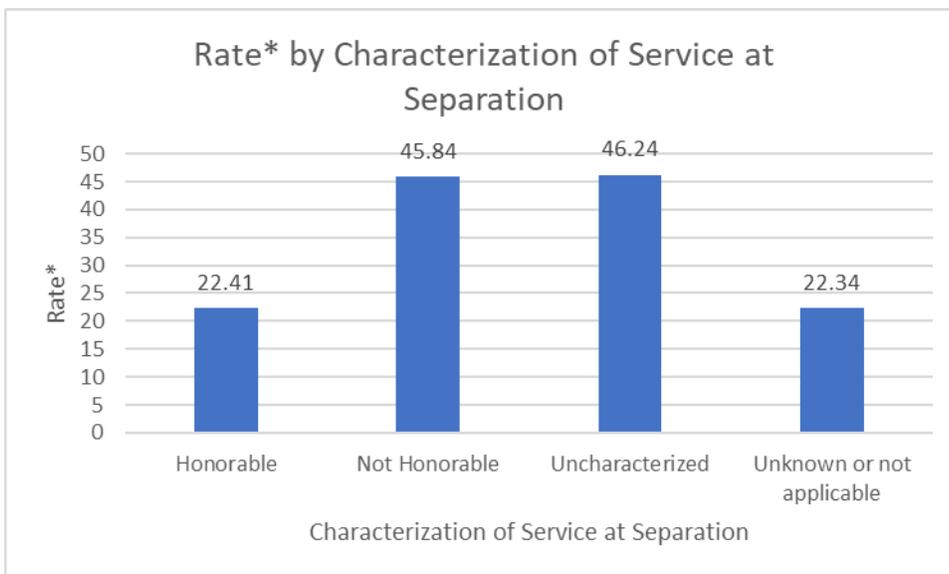
Chart 5: Suicide Rates Associated with Duration of Service at Separation



\*Rate per 100,000 person years

Source: Reger, et al. April 2015. Risk of Suicide Among US Military Service Members Following Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom Deployment and Separation from the US Military.

Chart 6: Suicide Rates Associated with Characterization of Service at Separation



\*Rate per 100,000 person years. "Uncharacterized" refers to separation initiated following <180 days of military service.

Source: Reger, et al. April 2015. Risk of Suicide Among US Military Service Members Following Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom Deployment and Separation from the US Military.

### **2.3. Federal Initiatives**

As a result of this concerning trend, President Trump issued an executive order entitled the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS) initiative, which seeks to empower a task force including the Secretaries of Veterans Affairs, Defense, and Health and Human Services to develop a roadmap to help prevent suicide.<sup>27</sup>

Both the DOD and the VA have attempted to take ownership of veteran transition; however, their goals often fall short due to institutional barriers. These barriers include a lack of consolidated, publicly-accessible data between federal agencies that captures sufficient outcome-based detail, inadequate time for transitional activities, the lack of a holistic care model, the potential for many hand-offs, and an ineffective one-size-fits-all approach to the wide range of individual veteran needs. If prepared sufficiently via coordination with regional support, veterans should be well-positioned to face the impending changes and challenges of transitioning. Unfortunately, there is currently minimal coordination between federal partners and community organizations, as well as among veteran service organizations themselves, due to the lack of incentives to encourage collective impact and collaboration.

In its data collection, the federal American Community Survey includes snapshots of the veteran experience; however, the 2010 Census did not capture veterans' status as part of its questionnaire and the 2020 Census lacks similar questions. However, the DOD and VA launched a private-public partnership known as The Veteran Metrics Initiative (TVMI) to begin to collect transition data from a selected pool of veterans during their first three years post-separation. The initiative's results are not currently publicly available or accessible by non-federal partners.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, the DOD and VA currently do not collect detailed countywide or regional demographic data on transitioning service members or their families. Personnel assessment data is often not publicly available in an aggregated and anonymized manner for use as part of a statistical analysis. Passage of the FY20 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) includes funding to develop a data collection and collaboration platform at the national level; however, this platform was not operational and accessible at the time of this paper's development.<sup>29</sup> In addition, DOD Instructional Directive 1332.35 and Executive Orders 13861 and 13822 also include recommendations and instruction for DOD to further evaluate data limitations and coordinate care to reduce transitional risks, but these have not been fully implemented as of this writing.

### **2.4. DOD Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Military Lifecycle Model (MLC)**

Prior to separation, statutory requirements mandate the DOD, via each respective service, enroll all eligible transitioning service members into their service's TAP. Those eligible must have 180 days of consecutive active duty service, performed either as a member of an active or reserve component. The DOD administers TAP primarily in partnership with the VA and the Department of Labor (DOL), with additional budgetary and operational support coming from the Departments of Education (ED), Homeland Security (DHS), Small Business Administration (SBA), and Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

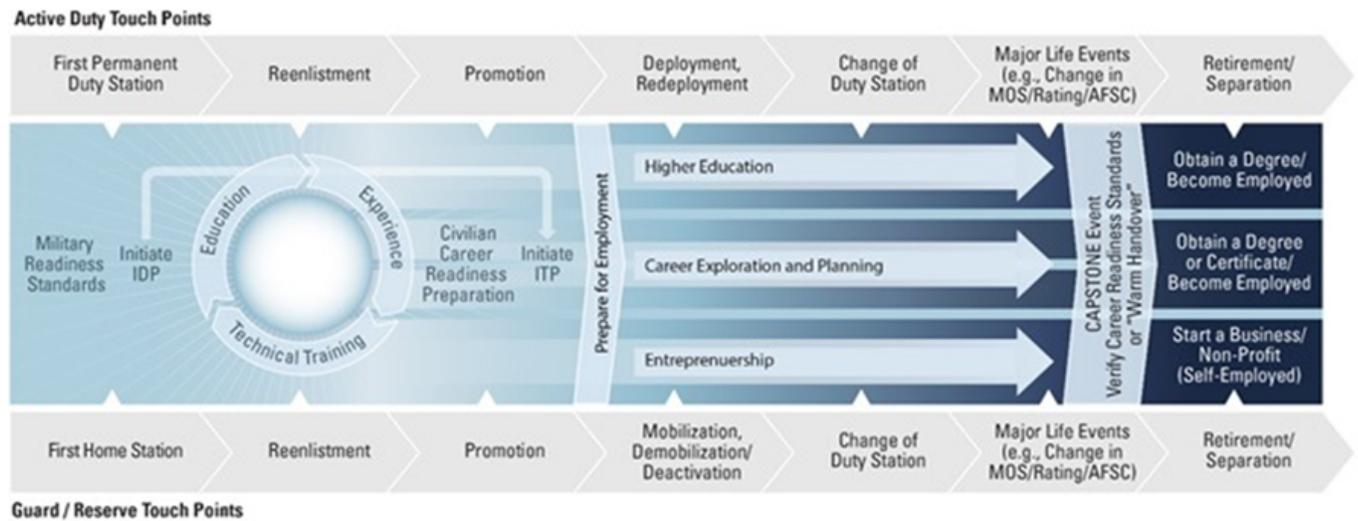
Due to high rates of veteran unemployment relative to the general population and challenges following the 2008 U.S. financial crisis, Congress mandated a redesign of TAP in 2011 (via the VOW to Hire Heroes Act) to supplement DOD Leadership and Executive Branch efforts to improve employment-based outcomes. As a result, the current TAP curriculum includes four hours of pre-separation counselling, five days of formal curriculum (two days of classroom training with three days of DOL career-focused follow-up), the completion of a capstone event, and an optional track to participate in additional two-day training offerings. Transitioning service members must take this course at least once (but may take it multiple times) within varying time frames. The current statute governing TAP stipulates that retiring members may begin TAP as early as 24 months prior to

retirement. Those leaving the military before retirement eligibility are given 12 months prior to their separation date to complete the program. Regardless of career track, TAP's programmatic requirements mandate that all eligible members must complete the program no less than 90 days prior to discharge. As identified by the Congressional Research Service, the current TAP has a narrow focus of primarily aiding members to prepare for finding post-military employment, education, and benefits.<sup>30</sup>

TAP also requires the completion of transitional milestones collectively known as Career Readiness Standards (CRSs), which include but are not limited to, completion of an individual needs assessment and employment gap analysis, development of a civilian resume, and completion of personal finance and budgeting exercises. CRSs must be completed prior to separation unless the service member is provided a waiver. Those who fail to complete their CRSs are provided with what is known as a "warm handover" in which they are provided with a direct connection to transitional services, career counselling, and VA counselling to finish the process.<sup>31</sup>

The DOD has introduced improvements to TAP via its Military Lifecycle (MLC) Transition Model (see Chart 7) to further increase the program's effectiveness and address feedback related to the program's length. This model attempts to proactively provide service members touch points throughout their MLC which enable opportunities to align their military career with their civilian goals. In theory, this empowers service members to make informed career decisions and take responsibility for advancing their personal goals. However, the formal TAP program and coordinating federal entities still lack the statutory authority and Congressionally appropriated funding necessary to expand TAP into a more intensive, longer duration offering.

**Chart 7: Military Lifecycle (MLC) Transition Model**



Source: DOD Tap, "Military Life Cycle (MLC) Model." <<https://webdm.dmdc.osd.mil/dodtap/mlc.html>>

### 3. Pre- and Post- Separation Contributing Factors

#### 3.1. Pre-Separation

##### 3.1.1. Limitations of TAP

As stated above, there is a correlation between an ineffective separation and increased risk of post-9/11 veteran suicide, especially for veterans with less than four years of service and those who experienced less than honorable discharges.<sup>32</sup> These veterans have substantially different needs and goals than service members who spend decades in the military and exit after forming most of their adult identity in service.

Research supports the argument that gradual transitions allow for healthy adjustments and new identity formation, while those occurring rapidly lead to increased “disorientation, distress, and profound impacts on well-being”.<sup>33</sup> Most veterans reported that the formal TAP process felt like “trying to drink from a firehose” because of the volume of information presented in a short period of time.<sup>34</sup> While the majority of veterans surveyed about the program felt the instructional staff were “knowledgeable, dedicated, and supportive”, they indicated the overall structure of the course made them feel less prepared than desired for their transition (45 percent of respondents).<sup>35</sup> In addition, and as noted in a survey of post-9/11 veterans, nearly 51 percent reported that their transition was far more difficult than expected for a variety of reasons in addition to the formal program structure (i.e., difficulty finding employment, “culture shock”, etc.).<sup>36</sup>

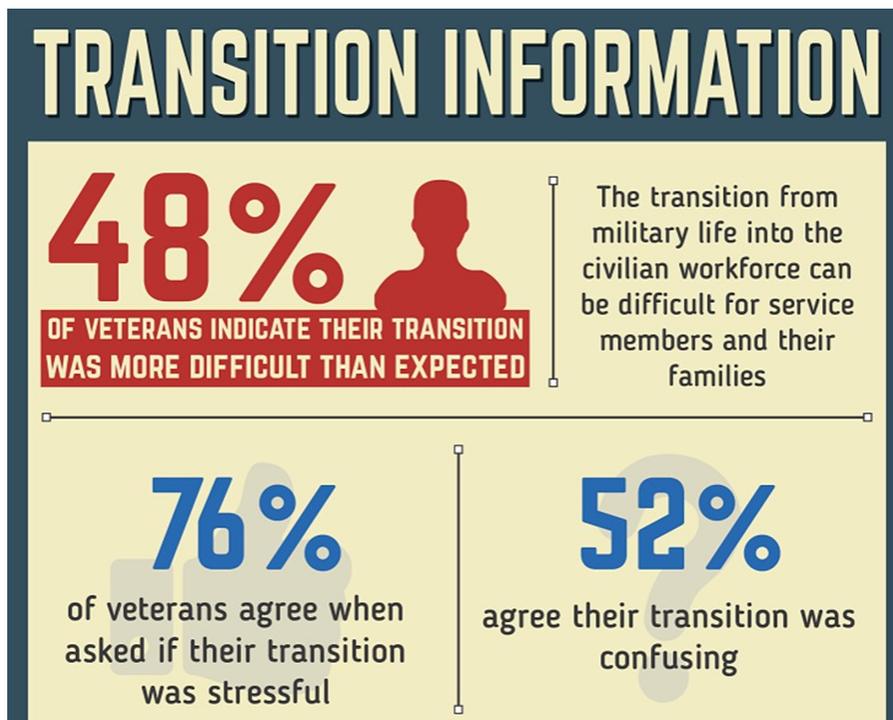
Each service branch deploys their own TAP using a standardized curriculum provided by DOD formerly known as Transition Goals, Plans, and Success (Transition GPS), which is undergoing a renaming and restructuring as of this writing. Regardless, a standardized curriculum fails to acknowledge the ways in which differences in demographics and specificities of military experience can impact the needs of each individual veteran (see Chart 3) as they separate from the service. In addition, much of the curriculum focuses on one aspect of transition needs (employment) due to the original intent of the 2011 program redesign.

The TAP program does include the collection of data; however, it is focused on operational performance outputs rather than outcomes.<sup>37</sup> For example, TAP tracks the number of personnel that have completed the course in each service and whether or not it was completed within the above stated timeframes. However, the data does not provide sufficiently granular detail to analyze challenges specific to subsets of the veteran population (i.e., the data broadly characterizes veterans as a whole rather by demographics, by state or location, education level, or even as post-9/11 veterans with or without college degrees).<sup>38</sup> While this may be due to the fact that TAP as well as other federal programs “follows a highly regulated process that provides continuity over time”, this approach to data collection does not provide the necessary insight to determine if a successful military transition has occurred (when defined using the definition above).<sup>39</sup>

Once matriculated from the TAP program, this data collection gap continues. DOD does not collect veteran experiential and qualitative transition data at a wide-scale post-separation. The qualitative transition data collection that does occur, if at all, normally happens on the part of local non-profits, VSOs, or collaboratives, where the data are “often unrepresentative, [having been] provided by convenience sampling of available populations and collected by disparate entities with varying degrees of detail.”<sup>40</sup> This, along with the previously listed data challenges at the federal level, limits the ability to inform post-separation care in a holistic way.

Since the needs of many post-9/11 veterans are different than those of the past, this absence of accessible and standardized data on each veteran subgroup further limits the ability to understand the underlying challenges for each group and to make corresponding enhancements to existing programs. For example, advances in medical care have resulted in higher rates of post-9/11 veterans surviving serious injury. As of May 2013, approximately 50,806 OIF/OEF veterans were wounded in action or 7.6 for each military casualty, compared to a ratio of 3.2 per casualty for Vietnam and 2.3 for World War II.<sup>41</sup> While the increased survivability of veterans is unquestionably a positive development, it changes the landscape of post-combat support and rehabilitation services needed to support these veterans. In TAP, little attention is given to their future needs to fully function such as adjusting to new work, educational, and cultural settings; meeting family transition needs; managing financial issues; procuring housing; dealing with trauma responses; or obtaining the individualized benefits and support they need.<sup>42</sup>

Chart 8: Veterans' Opinions on their Transitions



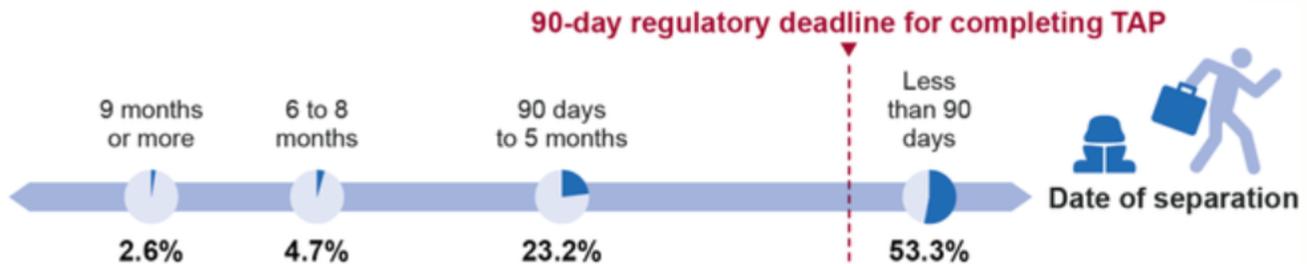
Source: Military-Transition, 2020 <<https://www.military-transition.org/graphics.html>>.

### 3.1.2. Barriers to an Effective Transition

While most veterans reported feeling “well-prepared for active duty” due to their intense introductory training and bootcamp, approximately 40 percent reported the overall duration of TAP and time allotted to the classroom experience specifically did not give them enough time to have a successful transition.<sup>43</sup> Younger servicemembers in particular often found it difficult to carve out the necessary time to complete the program before their final 90 days in service, with approximately 60 percent and 58 percent, respectively, of servicemembers in the 18-24 and 25-34 peer groups starting TAP within that timeframe.<sup>44</sup>

### Chart 9: Percent of Service Members Completing TAP within Mandatory Timeframe (FY16)

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



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

Source: Citation from GAO-18-225T, GAO Analysis of DOD FY16 Data

Despite efforts to incorporate components of TAP into ongoing service through the Military Lifecycle Transition program, veterans reported a need for a dedicated focus on transition activities. In addition, veterans across all age groups reported difficulty receiving the necessary support from their commanding officers to attend the program (~30 percent)<sup>45</sup>, general difficulties “being released from duties due to mission critical skills”, or being directed to make-up for time spent on TAP by clocking night shifts the same workweek.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, veterans reported even less satisfaction with the program when experiencing “rapid separations” or short-notice demobilization, lack of access to in-person classes due to remote duty stations, or when discharged in a “less-than-honorable status.”<sup>47</sup> These veterans who underwent a rapid separation often started the program with less than 90 days until separation or failed to attend at all. Participants reported not having time to develop their CRSs, digest material, or have the flexibility from commanding officers to access the supplemental materials. The GAO reported servicemembers in these circumstances, in particular, “cannot take advantage of additional transition services they learn about in class”, are also overwhelmingly pushed to the online courses that the majority of servicemembers report to be less effective, and cannot take advantage of crucial opportunities “to more fully prepare for life outside of the military.”<sup>48</sup>

High-risk veteran groups, such as those departing involuntarily due to medical or performance issues or less than honorable discharges were also less likely to complete TAP at all due to an even more truncated separation timeframe and factors associated with their cause of separation. These factors included circumstances “barring classroom attendance, restricted computer access, and stigma” associated with their separation.<sup>49</sup> As a result, less than 56 percent of servicemembers departing under these circumstances were able to complete TAP in FY16. The speed of these transitions and lack of ability to access tools adds to factors making these individuals high-risk for an incomplete transition and associated suicide risks.

Moreover, certain high-risk veteran groups are ineligible for TAP altogether and unable to receive the “warm handover” to post-separation support services that their peers receive.<sup>50</sup> These high-risk members often are those most in need of a tailored approach to their transition process and the development of a roadmap for post-separation.

The GAO found the DOD does “not track whether separations were unanticipated” and therefore does not have comprehensive data to determine if servicemembers required additional post-separation follow-up or were more likely to have been at risk for unsatisfactory separation.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, there is not currently a system in place that encourages veterans to be accountable and achieve the self-identified goals and needs that compose the submitted CRSs. As a result, while attempts are made to enable veterans to set personal goals for their transitions, there is minimal follow-through to guarantee success.

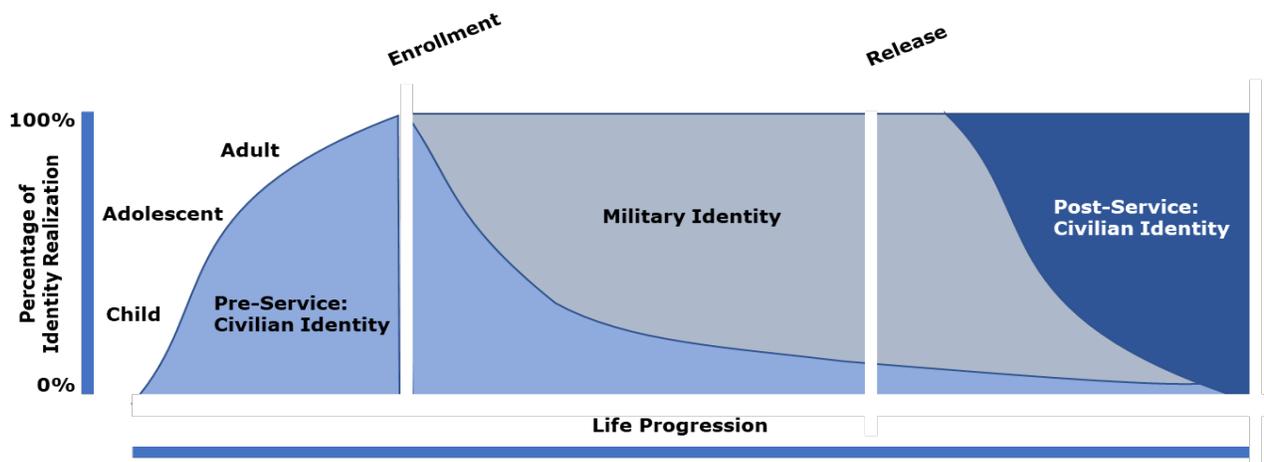
Beyond these limitations, the mission of caring for all veterans on a personal level unfortunately falls outside the scope of any one government agency. DOD has named operations and management of TAP as a funding priority in every budget request since FY14, yet Congress has not appropriated funding as a dedicated line item across impacted partner agencies in the yearly primary funding vehicle for such programs. The estimated \$100 million annually contributed by partner agencies is also a small fraction of the overall amount spent on the advertising, recruitment (NDAA FY2020 – \$706 million), and onboarding of active duty members. In addition, the available funding does not enable the expansion of TAP programming past its mandated minimum number of days.

### **3.1.3. Lack of Resocialization from a Military Identity to a Civilian Identity**

A key element related to the success or failure of a service member’s transition to civilian life is the ability to develop a civilian identity separate from their military identity (see Chart 10). Identity is different than a sense of “self”, or personally and individually distinguishable characteristics; identity is the categorization of where the individual believes he or she belongs and how they make sense of the world around them.<sup>52</sup> A large body of research links the challenges associated with a need to adopt a new identity, whether stemming from employment, immigration, or other life events, as a causal factor for distress and a lack of mental well-being during major transitions.<sup>53</sup>

The development of a so-called “military identity” has been a subject of study for social scientists since WWII, with the understanding that the creation of a civilian identity in the aftermath of service has predicted success in other aspects of life and has been a source of varying degrees of struggle for transitioning veterans. Veterans universally described their recruitment and bootcamp training experience “as an intense experience characterized by physical and cultural separation from their former civilian lives...,” akin to a “rite of passage”.<sup>54</sup> “There is consensus opinion that adjustment difficulties can have negative impacts on the well-being of veterans and their families”.<sup>55</sup> This same body of research shows that the inability to form a new identity during a major life transition leads to health problems and even plays a role in suicide.<sup>56</sup>

Chart 10: Life Course Evolution of Veterans' Identities



Source image found in: Thompson et al., "Veterans' Identities and Well-Being in Transition to Civilian Life" (2015).

Research also found that servicemembers joining the military during late adolescence faced further complications, having joined before developing their own adult or civilian identity to pre-date their military identity. While longitudinal research exists showing that an identity evolves throughout the stages of life, the full body of research also shows young adulthood as a crucial time for individuals to develop their own systems of beliefs and formative social circles. Additionally, this phase of life involves exploring the full range of identity options by cultivating passions via higher education, vocation, or starting a family.<sup>57</sup>

For individuals joining the service during this time, the "develop[ment] of a military identity displaces their emerging civilian identity" and thereby limits avenues to experience other options and leading to "implications when they transition back to civilian life".<sup>58</sup> This may lead to "compartmentalization" during separation in which the young veteran retains a distinct identity that leads to views of fellow civilians as the "other".<sup>59</sup> As this veteran peer group also faces challenges receiving the full benefits of the formal transition programs as cited earlier, this further compounds their difficulty adjusting to civilian life post-transition.

### 3.2. Post-Separation Contributing Factors

#### 3.2.1. Loss of Military "Tribal" Environment and Structure

Researchers have found transitioning from a military identity is often difficult due to the intensity of the shared experience of military service, the rigid structure and norms provided during service, and the extended period of training and immersion into service via basic training. The military purposefully develops a warrior identity with service members to support assimilation into military culture. This identity creation, which has been described as development of a "close-knit tribe", is intended to help new service members execute the demands of military service such as engaging in combat and enduring long deployments away from home.<sup>60</sup>

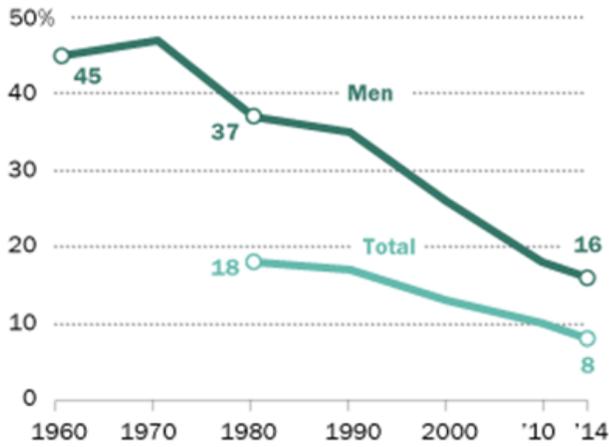
The socialization of individuals into the military results in strong identification of the self with the military and an intimate connection with the shared norms, values, and people comprising time in the service. Thus, the military to civilian transition challenges the most fundamental aspects of a military identity developed during time in service, as it includes interaction with a broader society whose norms, values, and day-to-day activities are often

drastically different than those ingrained during service.<sup>61</sup> The transition from a “preferred social group” or tribe is a distressing event that often also means a change in the material and psychological resources that members of the group have come to count on.<sup>62</sup> While the process of adopting a military identity is thorough, multifaceted, and supported at every step by peers and mentors, letting go of that identity in order to become successful in civilian life can be ambiguous, difficult, and isolating.<sup>63</sup> In cases of an incomplete transition, the “person feels burdensome, shamed and ruminates on real or perceived mistakes...and believes that suicide is the logical way to remove their “self” from their new societal tribe.”<sup>64</sup>

While in the military, service members are constantly surrounded by a network of peers and mentors to guide them; however, disconnection from former military social networks after separation, along with difficulties relating to one’s family and friends upon return to civilian life, leads many veterans to feel they do not belong. This isolation is exacerbated by feelings of fundamental misunderstanding, shame, and guilt.<sup>65</sup> Veteran collaboratives and related support groups can help address this need. As noted by Sebastian Junger in *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, the reasons for this are three-fold. First, these groups act as a cohesive and egalitarian tribal society, which helps mitigate the effects of any trauma. Modern societies are the exact opposite; hierarchical and alienating. Second, these groups don’t see veterans as a victim. They are not excused from fully functioning in society. Finally, and most important, “Veterans need to feel that they’re just as necessary and productive back in society as they were on the battlefield.” These “tribes” provide the social resilience that society lacks. Moreover, as H. A. Lyons observed, “When people are actively engaged in a cause their lives have more purpose... with a resulting improvement in mental health.” He added, “People will feel better psychologically if they have more involvement with their community.”<sup>66</sup>

### 3.2.2. Growing Civil-Military Divide

To further complicate the military to civilian transition, fewer men and women serve today as a percentage of the overall population than ever before (see Chart 11). This contributes to the so-called civil-military divide, in which many veterans returning to civilian life “do not feel understood by civilians and feel separate from their communities of origin”.<sup>67</sup> Approximately 99.5 percent of the American public has not served on active duty at any time since 9/11. More than 80 percent of post-9/11 veterans say the public does not understand well or at all the problems that those in the military face. That view is shared by 71 percent of the public.<sup>68</sup>

**Chart 11: Decline of Veterans in US population (Percent of Adults with Military Service)**

\*Total includes both men and women. Data for women not available prior to 1980.

Source: Pew Research Center, Analysis of 1960-2000 Decennial Census Data and 2010 and 2014 American Community Survey Data (IPUMS)

These factors contribute to an increased lack of societal and employer understanding of veteran experience and needs and impact the ability to find meaningful employment, which is a key tenet of a successful transition. As veterans comprise a much lower percentage of the population today than before, corporate America is currently staffed with the lowest percentage of skilled veterans in executive roles than at any other time in the last two centuries at 2.6 percent (with a nearly 90 percent drop between 1980 and 2006).<sup>69</sup> For servicemembers separating with a bachelor degree (or higher level of education) and more work experience, this creates multiple problems related to the ability of servicemembers to transition into a suitable civilian role that matches their skills and often results in underemployment. Moreover, research from the Workforce Readiness Alignment report cites that 62.6 percent of this subgroup's first jobs are not in their chosen career field and last an average of only 1.56 years.<sup>70</sup> This high level of turnover is not ideal for veterans, their families, or their employers. This has partially been attributed to many companies lacking leaders with an understanding of the unique requirements of integrating veterans into their workforce.

In addition, studies have shown challenges related to employment differ significantly by veteran subgroup, with veterans under the age of 34 or having served as enlisted service members less likely to have secured post-separation employment in comparison to commissioned officers or those in older age groups.<sup>71</sup> For those who have not obtained a degree or are departing with experience primarily falling within a traditionally "unskilled labor role", there are also challenges related to an overall shrinking of the manufacturing sector and a loss of jobs in the predominately rural areas where many of these veterans seek to return. While data supports the finding that veterans in the previously mentioned "skilled labor" subgroup actually outperform the general population in terms of earning potential and employment rate, that data alternatively supports that veterans seeking unskilled labor jobs faced additional challenges during their transition that may only continue to increase over time<sup>72</sup>. This latter subgroup also overlaps in terms of defining characteristics with those more likely to struggle with their transition overall (i.e., younger, less likely to complete TAP during a prolonged time-frame, etc.) and to be more at risk of suicide.

Compounding these issues, the lack of understanding created by the civil-military divide also leads to a harmful perception among some civilians that veterans' employment efforts are in some cases solely about addressing veteran suicide and PTSD rather than about adding real value to the workforce. Employers with this viewpoint may view veterans writ large as "emotionally unstable and prone to violence", or as "victims" of their service, which in turn suppresses any desire to hire them.<sup>73</sup> An additional, harmful perception also related to the civil-military divide is the viewpoint among some employers and even military leadership that certain segments of servicemen joined the military due to "not having been high academic achievers in high school".<sup>74</sup> This perception also undermines the desire to actively recruit veterans, especially in manufacturing or blue collar fields already facing industry contractions.

Furthermore, most civilian organizations are not organized to successfully hire veterans. A Korn Ferry study documented that fully 80 percent of organizations do not have veteran-specific recruiting programs. The study also documented that 71 percent of organizations do not provide training to hiring managers or recruiters on veteran hiring, and 52 percent do not provide onboarding or transition support to veteran hires.<sup>75</sup> Thus, despite the enormous potential up-side that this talent pool offers, few organizations are taking advantage.

There are some companies, however, like Amazon, Wal-Mart, and USAA that have acknowledged the benefits of hiring veterans of all backgrounds, citing the value of the "invaluable and intangible" leadership skills veterans have to offer, along with an unbeatable level of dedication to a mission and professionalism.<sup>76</sup> These skills only serve to enhance the potential success of any organization and promote the bottom line. Several private organizations have developed programs to better prepare veterans for success in the corporate world. One example is the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University's Onward to Opportunity (O2O), a free career training program that provides professional certification and job placement support to transitioning service members, veterans, and military spouses.<sup>77</sup> Other programs include the Honor Foundation, a group which targets transitioning special operations service members with a 15-week intensive transition program. Such efforts represent a good start, but a challenge lies in successfully scaling these types of programs.

### **3.2.3. Lack of Coordinated Transition Support Services in Local Communities**

Due to the financial and institutional constraints at the federal level, the TAP program does not have a robust role in the post-transition life of veterans (with the exception of the provision of online classes). To address existing needs, over 45,000 registered VSOs have formed to address a variety of post-transition needs of veterans, dependents and survivors.<sup>78</sup> Further, there are approximately 1800 state-level benefits for veterans to supplement the services offered by the federal government and VSOs.<sup>79</sup> This "sea of goodwill" comprises a fragmented yet overabundant provision of support resources for the general transition process and has fostered additional confusion and apathy while undermining their effectiveness.<sup>80</sup> To wit, transitioning service members seeking employment support have reported that "finding and applying for the benefits is often challenging" due to both the lack of coordination and differing needs of the veterans themselves.<sup>81</sup>

The federal government's limited resource allocation and the lack of direct formal ownership of post-separation transition efforts by one agency have further hindered coordination of activities through these downstream entities. As a result, VSOs are not able

to perform a fully integrated role in pre-separation activities, and the sheer number of available organizations makes navigation of the post-transition support landscape difficult.

In addition, a central platform at the federal level does not exist for the collection and distribution of veterans' data to assist with care via applicable partners. This means that veteran collaboratives and their related VSOs cannot readily access assessment data from TAP. There is currently no web-based database or process for transitioning veterans to easily opt-in to share personal information with stakeholders involved in the transition process.

As mentioned earlier, the transition data collected at the federal level focuses on operational metrics during pre-separation (such as participation rates in TAP, compliance, etc.) rather than outcomes during the post-transition period.<sup>82</sup> The federal government also currently does not provide standardized data capture practices or host a way for organizations to share outcomes-based information for broader distribution.<sup>83</sup> As a result, the relatively small amount of outcomes-based data sourced from disparate, local-led efforts is not shared at a national level to inform decisions on care and transition strategy.

Finally, the lack of follow-up after transition fails to capture changing conditions and challenges faced by veterans. Nearly all the veterans surveyed during a study at the University of Southern California noted they thought they were "mentally fine" as they were leaving the military. However, many reported significant challenges they either ignored or "pushed back into their mind" less than a month after transition.<sup>84</sup> The lack of formal follow-up in terms of outcomes-based measurements means these challenges were not captured by transition program designers in a format to inform collaboration at the local and state level.<sup>85</sup>

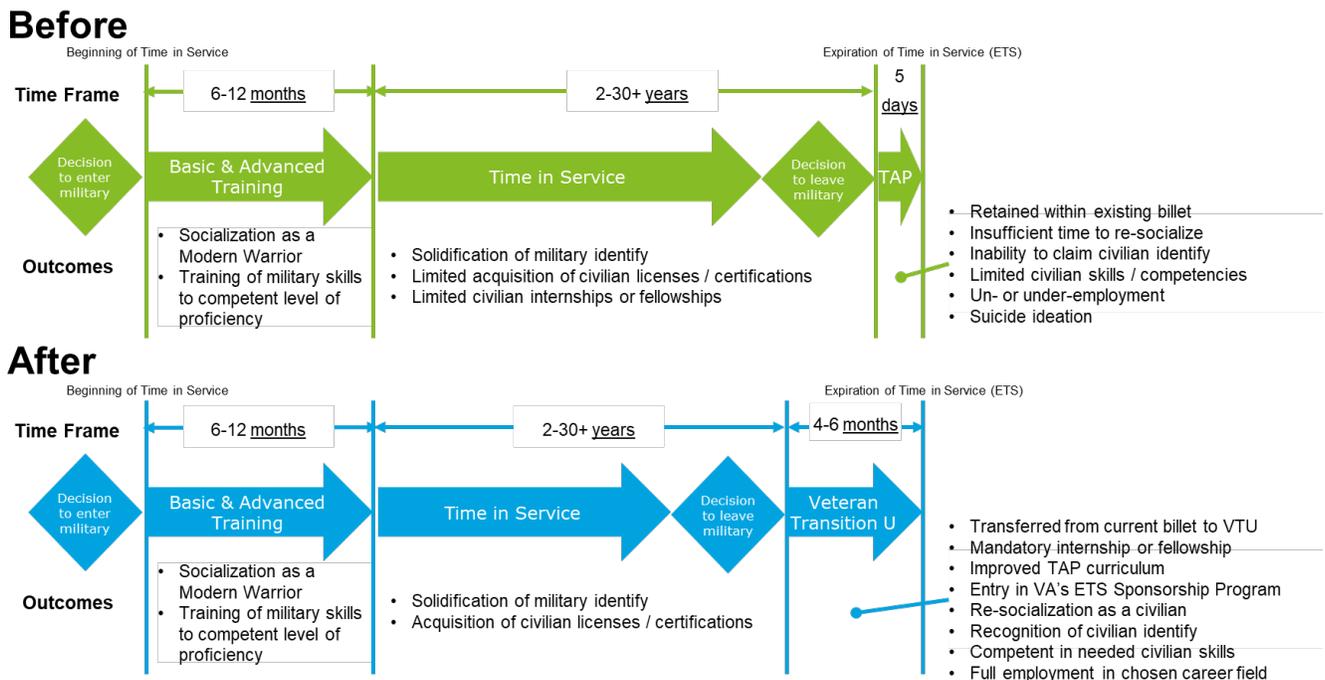
## 4. Proposed Solutions

If we are to be serious about addressing the national crisis that post-9/11 veteran suicide has become, we have to address its root causes and go beyond past approaches that have yet to have their intended impact. Thus, the solutions we propose include both a long-term approach and support structure beyond what the federal government and current transition programs alone can provide. New tactics and strategies should be deployed in multiple dimensions: The veteran, their prospective community, their prospective employer, and within government. There are incremental costs associated with these solutions, but costs that are necessary to realize an improved, if not ideal, future state. Not all of these will be borne by the government, but many will. Few would argue, however, that these lives are not worth the cost. And so, in order to successfully address the at-risk segments of the transitioning post-9/11 veteran population, we recommend the following pre-separation and post-separation improvements.

### 4.1. Pre-Separation Solutions

An overwhelming body of evidence suggests the duration of transitional efforts is inadequate to foster civilian identity formation, adequately connect veterans at risk with existing resources, or capture the type of qualitative data and feedback necessary to further target root causes and direct corresponding improvements. Chart 12 below summarizes the collective impact of our proposed pre-separation solutions.

Chart 12: Collective Impact of Proposed Pre-Separation Solutions



**Solution 1: Implement Veteran Transition Universities or "Civilian Basic Training":** The provision of more in-depth training for both veterans and their family members, modelled on the earlier pilot of "Off-Base Transition Training" (OBTT), and carried out within a time frame comparable to basic training.<sup>86</sup> The successful implementation of such a program should take the following factors into account:

- The Veteran Transition University (VTU) becomes the last duty station of all service members prior to separation. He or she is removed from the rolls of their previous command so that unit can back-fill those vacant positions. Doing so eliminates the inherent mission-first conflict that occurs when military leaders

are forced to send their personnel to TAP or other transition support programs in the face of pending (and seemingly higher priority) duties and missions. Moreover, it begins to establish a culture of recognizing transition as a normal part of one's military lifecycle and away from the current negative ostracized characterization that accompanies most who depart short of formal retirement.

- In order to meet their full potential, VTUs should be treated as an actual university and staffed by personnel sufficiently trained to enable the re-socialization of military personnel. These 'professors' should rightfully have graduate degrees and preferably include individuals with military backgrounds who can understand and relate to the students and the transition they are about to experience.
- Improve current measures of transition success: You get what you measure. In measuring the success of TAP and the VTUs, focus on measurable outcomes rather than operational outputs. This means going beyond simply measuring the number of individuals completing the course. Measure the time frame within which the service member attained a position within their preferred career field. Measure the retention rate of service members in their first role following active duty. Measure the level of happiness and satisfaction of their families and themselves 6-12 months following separation. Identify trends and their root causes and make corresponding programmatic improvements to address those root causes.
- The curriculum of the VTU should include, at a minimum:
  - A much-improved Transition Assistance Program, ideas for which are provided in Appendix C.
  - Inclusion of both transitioning veterans, their families, and caregivers.
  - A mandatory internship or fellowship. There exist many opportunities, and this could take one of many forms. See Appendix D for a list of examples.
  - Modules for the following topics:
    - Personal narrative development; understanding their identity and its place in society.
    - How societal values compare to the military.
    - How societal culture compares to the military.
    - How societal leadership styles compare to the military.
    - How societal structure compares to the military.
    - How societal communication styles compare to the military.
    - How to network, and the benefits of networking, within the organization.
    - How to influence others.
    - How to manage ambiguity.
    - Understanding societal behavior, conduct, and collaboration expectations.
    - Defining first year career objectives.
    - Finding meaning at work.
    - Understanding the typical career progression.
    - Understanding what career development support/processes may exist.
    - Understanding compensation and benefits and how they are different from the military.
    - Understanding what support organizations exist in their desired geographic location.
    - How caregivers and families can help support and cope with veteran transition.

**Solution 2: Supplement TAP with Programs that Support Identity Discovery:** Leverage the proactive touch points present in the Military Lifecycle Transition Model to address a veterans mental and emotional well-being. For example:

- **Conduct Qualitative Data Analysis:** Collect qualitative information throughout the transition process to develop a better understanding of servicemember needs within the various subgroups. Provide easily accessible ways for veterans to relay their experience to centralized sources at a national level in a standardized fashion, and for those sources to assess root causes and address stated needs while widely disseminating the findings and making the data available. Collect information specific to veteran population subgroups, which may include but is not limited to: women, those with disabilities, minorities, those separated under less than honorable conditions, those who are victims of criminal acts (sexual

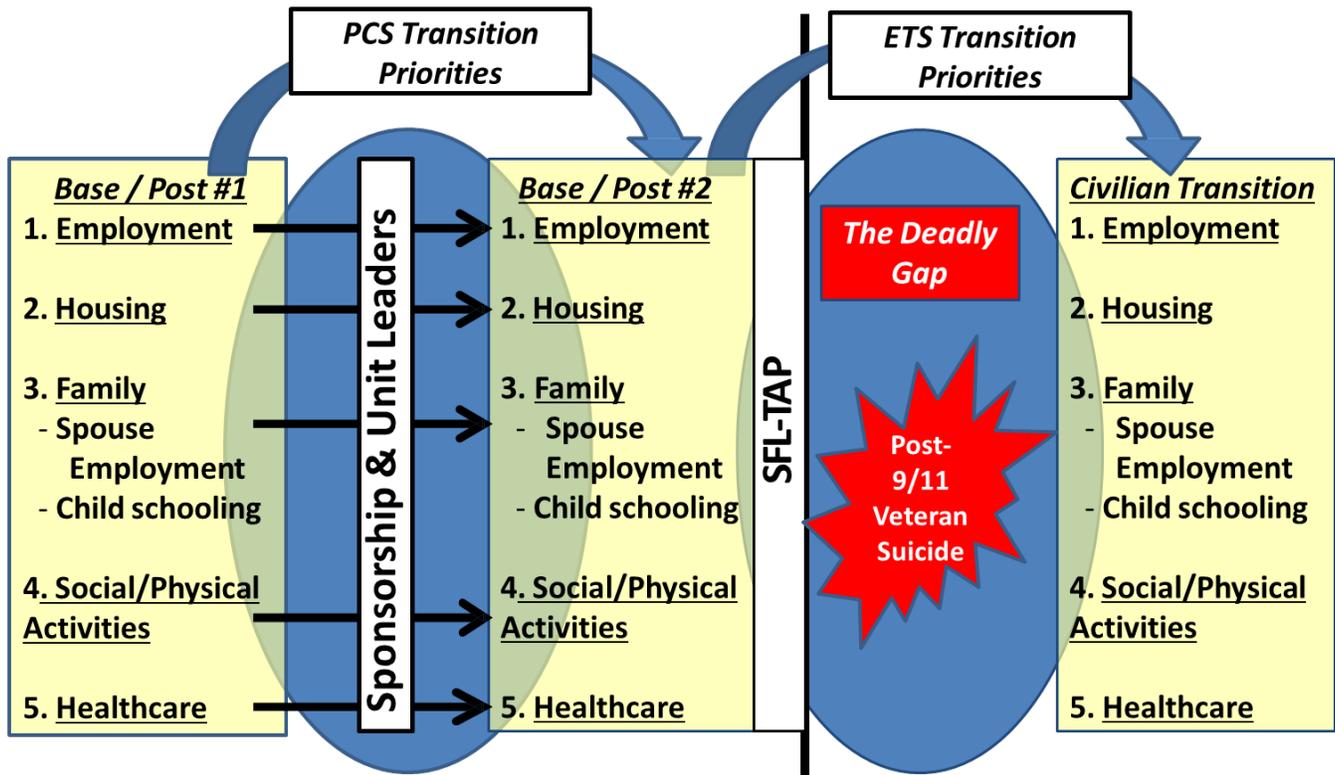
assault, domestic violence, etc.), retirees, and those with less than four years of service. Doing these things will better inform care of these individuals post-transition.

- **Assess transitioning members, regardless of discharge type:** Expand data collection to include all “high-risk” veterans, including those with less than honorable discharges and involvement in the justice system.

**Solution 3: Further Involve Veteran Collaboratives and Non-Governmental Actors Prior to Separation:** To facilitate improved transitions, additional coordination is needed between the military services, the VA, and veteran collaboratives to support a continuity of care for the veteran, communicate the specific needs of the veterans, and to assess if the veteran belongs to a high-risk group before separation. This includes:

- **Further Scale the VA’s ETS Sponsorship Program:** The VA’s Expiration of Time in Service (ETS) Program takes a public health approach to suicide prevention that acknowledges the VA must expand beyond a primary focus on clinical treatment, connect servicemembers to social support provided by veteran collaboratives and their broader communities in their post-military hometown prior to ETS, and address the precipitants to suicide in a way that is aligned with military culture and mitigates stigma.<sup>87</sup> It intends to address the “deadly gap” that occurs during ETS transitions by mimicking the Total Army Sponsorship Program that takes place when service members conduct a Permanent Change of Station (PCS) in moving from base-to-base or post-to-post while on active duty (see Chart 13). The goal of the Total Army Sponsorship Program is to “improve unit cohesion and readiness by decreasing distractions that hamper personal performance & mission accomplishment”<sup>88</sup> The ETS Sponsorship Program is a public-private partnership that synchronizes the efforts of governmental and non-governmental entities by matching transitioning servicemembers with veteran collaboratives and certified sponsors in their post-military hometowns six months prior to their ETS. Connecting transitioning veterans to these community networks has been shown to reduce transition stressors related to housing, employment, family matters, medical care, and community connection.<sup>89</sup> Current efforts are underway in New York (Middletown, New York City, Westchester County), Texas (Austin, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston, Rio Grande Valley, San Antonio), Boston, and Charlotte, NC. We would propose significantly scaling this effort nation-wide in concert with a nation-wide network of veteran collaboratives (see post-separation solutions).

### Chart 13: The “Deadly Gap” of ETS Transition<sup>90</sup>



- **Development of Pathways for Tailored Support:** In addition to the needs noted in Chart 3, veterans bring varying backgrounds with them to the civilian world which include, among others:
  - Education level (no college, some college, undergraduate degree, graduate degree)
  - Skill level (the length and depth of experience in one’s Military Occupational Specialty (MOS – Army, Marines), Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC), or Naval Enlistment Classification (NEC))
  - Supervisory experience (level of oversight as an enlisted or commissioned service member)
  - Interests (strengths, personal passions)
  - Subgroup status (as mentioned in Solution 2 above)

While TAP should do what it can to tailor support to these combination of factors, veteran collaboratives will inherit many of these issues following separation. To ensure continuity of care and accountability to the CRSs originated during TAP, veteran collaboratives should work to standardize a set of intake, assessment, and case management forms, leveraging the inputs for DOD and VA upon the decision of the service member to separate. This proactive identification will enable the veteran collaborative to coordinate appropriate provision of services for the veteran upon their arrival in the local community.

- **Identify What Post-Transition Performance Data to Collect and the Best Methods for Doing So:** Develop a national approach for experience-related, periodic feedback collection (i.e., end-user sentiment) using targeted sampling to gather representative data, with interviews, focus groups, and/or surveys designed and deployed to gather uniform qualitative datapoints. Involve veteran collaboratives and other non-governmental actors in the design phase of efforts to determine what data to capture, the best way to go about this data collection, and the optimal manner in which to share this information while protecting the Personally Identifiable Information (PII) or Protected Health Information (PHI) of individuals.<sup>91</sup>

**Solution 4: Educate the American public on the viability of our nation’s veterans and the valuable role they can play in furthering its institutions:** Beyond their deserved welcome and thanks for their time in service, which they do appreciate, veterans offer the nation an economic asset that often goes untapped or underutilized. They are eager to contribute and have much to add. But sometimes public perceptions get clouded by any number of stereotypes or myths advanced by television, Hollywood, or the media.

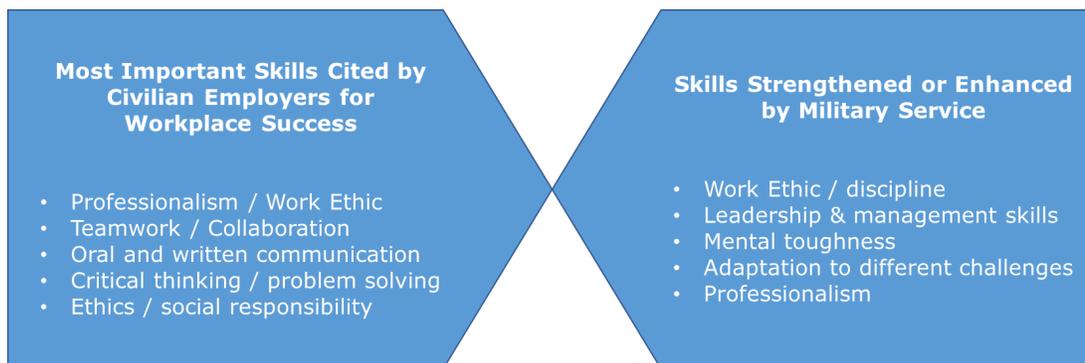
In order to improve the perception and willingness of non-federal employers to hire veterans of all backgrounds, there must be an active effort amongst support organizations and the federal government to frame the narrative around veterans’ hiring in terms of the skills brought to bear (versus messaging employment as a means of helping “victims of PTSD” or as a manner to aid in suicide prevention).

To that end, and as illustrated by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University, veterans draw from their military experience to apply relevant knowledge, skills, and competencies within an organization regardless of the career track (white versus blue collar). In their article, “The Business Case for Hiring a Veteran: Beyond the Clichés,” they summarize the following values that veterans bring to a competitive business environment:

- Veterans are entrepreneurial.
- Veterans assume high levels of trust.
- Veterans are adept at skills transfer across contexts/tasks.
- Veterans have advanced technical training.
- Veterans are adept in discontinuous environments.
- Veterans exhibit high levels of resiliency.
- Veterans exhibit advanced team-building skills.
- Veterans exhibit strong organizational commitment.
- Veterans have cross-cultural experiences.
- Veterans have experience in diverse work settings.<sup>92</sup>

In short, thanks to the skills developed during military service, veterans have the skills employers say are needed for success in the workplace at various levels of employment and experience (see Chart 14).

**Chart 14: Demand and Supply of Workplace Skills** <sup>93</sup>



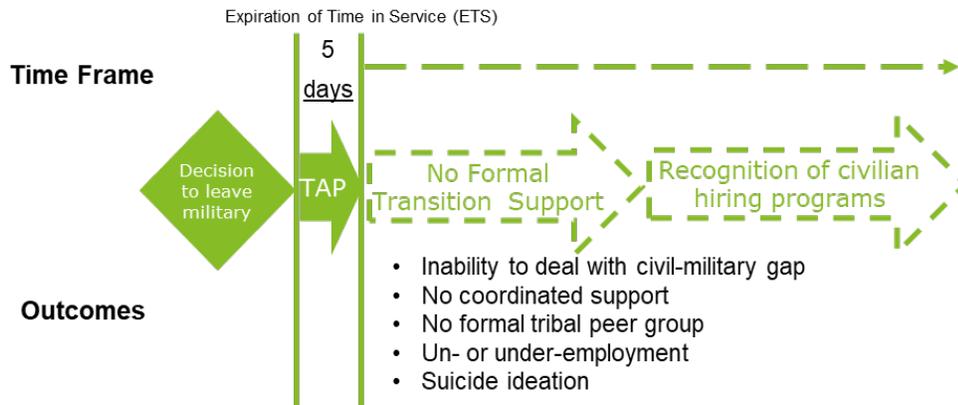
#### 4.2. Post-Separation Solutions

For the most part, limited programmatic government support exists to enable a veteran’s successful transition from the military once they depart. Upon the final physical move from the veteran’s last duty station, they are more or less left to fend for themselves to contend with the “sea of goodwill” represented by more than 45,000 veteran service organizations. This uncoordinated provision of services tends to be unsuccessful, as a veteran’s needs are often multi-faceted, needing to be

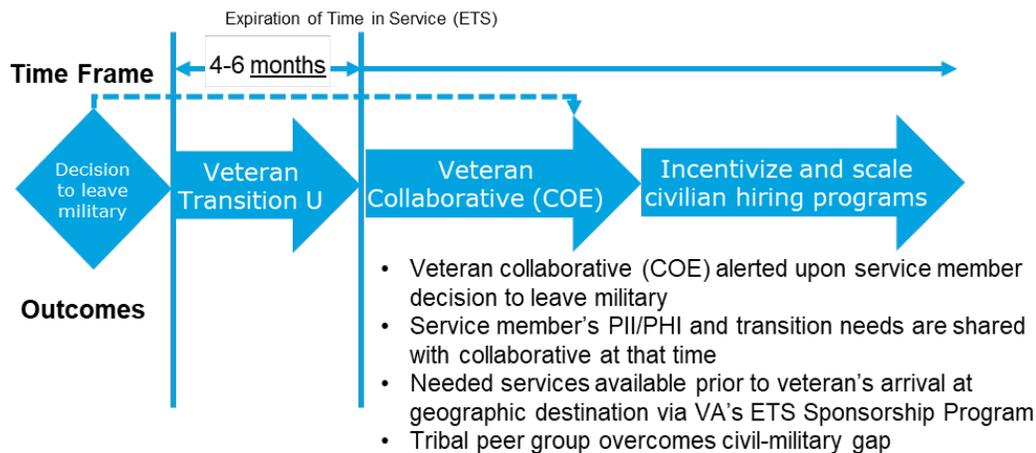
addressed by many organizations or agencies. Our proposed solutions below attempt to fill this void. Their collective impacts are noted in Chart 15 below.

**Chart 15: Collective Impact of Proposed Post-Separation Solutions**

## Before



## After



### **Solution 1: Provide Additional Public-Private Funding to Scale and Fully Utilize Veteran**

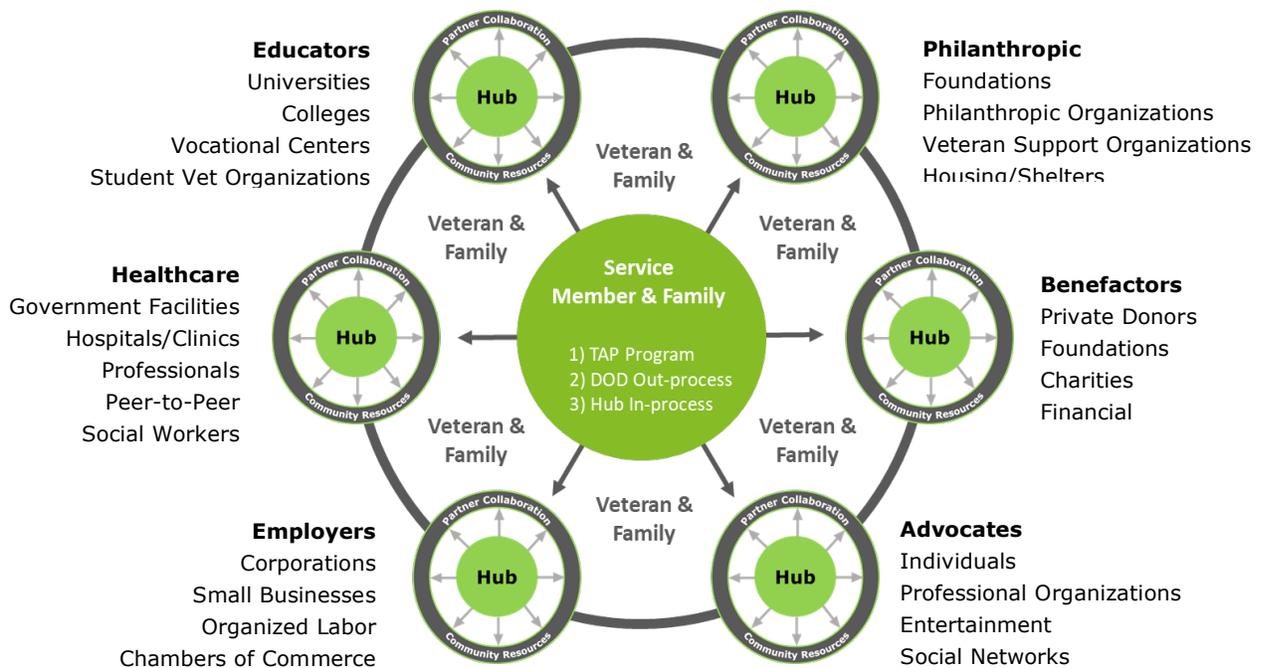
**Collaboratives:** The transition from civilian life to military life requires the government to provide support structures for the intake, processing, training, and employment of military men and women. The same holds true for veterans' transition back to civilian life upon completion of military service. As documented, the needs of transitioning veterans are voluminous and vary from individual to individual. The government alone can not meet this demand, and the resultant "sea of goodwill" tends to result in confusion, apathy, and unsought support. For the multitude of reasons described above, there is a significant need to effectively and efficiently provide post-separation governmental and non-governmental services in a coordinated manner to transitioning veterans.

To address this need, veteran collaboratives or "hubs" have sprung up across the country. These organizations are skilled at developing and sustaining community-centered partnerships. Veteran collaboratives are usually non-profit organizations led by veterans that focus on identifying the needs of their regional veteran populations and connecting veterans to partner organizations and the community resources they need to transition back to their community.<sup>94</sup> As non-governmental entities, they can provision their

services to all veterans departing the service, regardless of their discharge status. Think of these veteran collaboratives as a veteran’s in-processing center in their new community. As such, and in concert with the VA’s ETS Sponsorship Program, veteran collaboratives become the “catchers” or “receivers” of the military’s out-processing efforts.

The structure of these hubs can be centralized (i.e., a one-stop shop) if the region has limited external resources, decentralized (i.e., in-process, assess, and refer externally) if a region has abundant external resources, or a hybrid model. Ideally, veteran collaboratives are some of the first resources veterans seek out in their region if they are not proactively connected to them via the VA’s ETS Sponsorship Program. They can be incredibly helpful to employers as well.<sup>95</sup> We recommend the provision of public-private matching funds to sustainably enable this optimal “business model” to ensure the consistent connections between veterans and local communities around the country.

**Chart 16: Veteran Collaborative Support Model**



**Solution 2: Establish Veteran Collaboratives as Centers of Excellence (COE):** In order to incentivize cooperation and collaboration among VSOs, reduce duplication of effort, and streamline resource allocation, we recommend the VA or DOD enable veteran collaboratives to be formally designated as Centers of Excellence. This designation should be via a selective application and approval process, with defined requirements and measurable performance goals. This could occur via the addition of Center of Excellence eligibility and selection language to existing grant and funding streams, or through the creation of a new funding pool via the NDAA and provision of dedicated SMEs to support this effort. This is intended to mimic the success of the US Department of Agriculture’s Centers of Excellence program.<sup>96</sup>

- Once designated, Centers of Excellence would be given funding prioritization as well as be delegated a required partner for applicants (such as VSOs) to receive public funds. This would incentivize coordination and cooperation as part of the public funding process, thereby reducing unnecessary competition and enabling a no-wrong-door capacity for transitioning veterans.
- COEs would be authorized to receive veteran Personally Identifiable Information (PII) and Protected Health Information (PHI) to enable post-military follow up as well as to act as a means to gather the previously discussed qualitative data informing modifications of the pre- and post-transition process.

- In addition, as part of their agreement to act as a COE upon selection, COEs would be required to report outcomes-based data and support the collection of qualitative information in standardized formats. COEs would be an active partner in the development of improved approaches to both understanding veterans' needs and addressing those needs through the "field testing" of proposed and tailored strategies.

These Centers of Excellence would be tasked to accomplish the following strategic goals:

- Act as "on the ground" capacity builders for veteran support and transition efforts, amplifying existing local efforts by sharing materials, approaches, and connecting VSOs within an existing network of overarching activities.
- Effectively leverage and more efficiently utilize currently available resources (such as public-private partnerships, "institutions of higher education", or the federal government) and/or demonstrate fundraising ability outside of public funds.
- Increase return on investment by identifying, attracting, and directing partnerships to high priority, high impact veteran transition needs.
- Persuasively communicate veteran issues and leverage their public presence to bring further attention to efforts to address these issues.

Designation of a COE would enable veteran collaboratives to further improve upon their existing business models, strengthen their ability to pull in the disparate services offered by individual veteran service organizations, and further solidify their status as a local "one-stop-shop" for services.

**Solution 3: Provide Platform and/or Tools for Data Sharing with Veteran Collaboratives:** Create a single source, web-based database for disparate data collected across multiple government initiatives to improve the qualitative information available to inform transition efforts. This should include provision of a governance structure to coordinate, align, and evaluate disparate organizational efforts. Since it may take a few iterations to create a system that meets the needs of its users, these activities should include the development of delivery prototypes and curriculum with leading practices and actionable benchmarks. This deployment might be supported with an information and training campaign for veteran collaboratives, with identified user focus groups incorporated to give real-time feedback.

In addition to the veteran subgroup and transitional experience data types listed in the "Pre-Separation" Solutions 2 and 3, there are two types of data that should be shared and regularly updated:

- Personally Identifiable Information (PII) and Protected Health Information (PHI) of transitioning military personnel. The geographic relocation decisions of veterans may change over the course of the 4-6-month VTU curriculum; therefore, veteran collaboratives on the receiving end should be constantly updated with this data.
- An updated listing of peer-to-peer programs. This list should be provided both to the veteran collaboratives and the veterans themselves. These organizations use veteran peers to help colleagues overcome barriers and stigma to receiving care and support for finding fulfilling careers (see Appendix B).

In order to enable data to flow freely amongst the stakeholders involved with the veteran transition process, there will need to be changes to PII and PHI data collection during pre-separation activities, such as inclusion of an "opt-in" data-sharing option for veterans post-separation.

**Solution 4: Incentivize and Scale Formal Hiring Programs at Non-Federal, Civilian Employers:** In addition to the efforts of veteran collaboratives to further coordinate the various formal employment benefit programs and private hiring initiatives, there should be the provision of incentives for individual employers to further structure and incentivize support and reward systems. As a rule, most civilian employers want to do well by transitioning veterans as a whole. But because so few individuals within them have served, there is much they do not understand about how to effectively enable their goodwill. As noted earlier, 80 percent of

civilian organizations do not have veteran-specific recruiting programs. Moreover, 71 percent of them do not provide training to hiring managers or recruiters on veteran hiring, and 52 percent do not provide onboarding or transition support to veteran hires.<sup>97</sup> This must clearly improve. We suggest using veteran collaboratives to connect employers with existing resources (such as hiring toolkits) and other DOL resources. This will encourage an understanding of veteran skillsets, their value to business, and how to practically hire, train, and retain these resources. Among other requirements, such hiring programs would ideally include:

- Top-down support of senior executives
- Full-time staffers with military experience
- Formal onboarding programs tailored for various experience levels
  - No industry experience
  - Some industry experience
  - Undergraduate degree
  - Graduate degree
  - Military retiree
- Regular reporting on key performance indicators
- Cultural assimilation training for career counselors and managers of incoming veteran hires
- Veteran affinity groups and formal mentoring programs<sup>98</sup>

For those that do pursue such programs, there exist several recognition programs for civilian organizations hiring veterans:

- Department of Labor oversees the HIRE Vets Medallion Program under the Honoring Investments in Recruiting and Employing American Military Veterans Act (HIRE Vets Act).
- Chief Executive Magazine, in concert with the Thayer Leader Development Group at West Point, sponsors the annual Patriots in Business Award to recognize the best companies with military and veteran programs.
- Disabled American Veterans (DAV) sponsors an annual National Commander Employer Awards Program for small, midsize, and large businesses.
- The American Legion sponsors National Veterans Education & Employment Awards.
- AMVETS sponsors an annual Veteran Friendly Employer of the Year Awards program.<sup>99</sup>

These programs can be a boon to an organization's brand and spur others undertake similar programs.

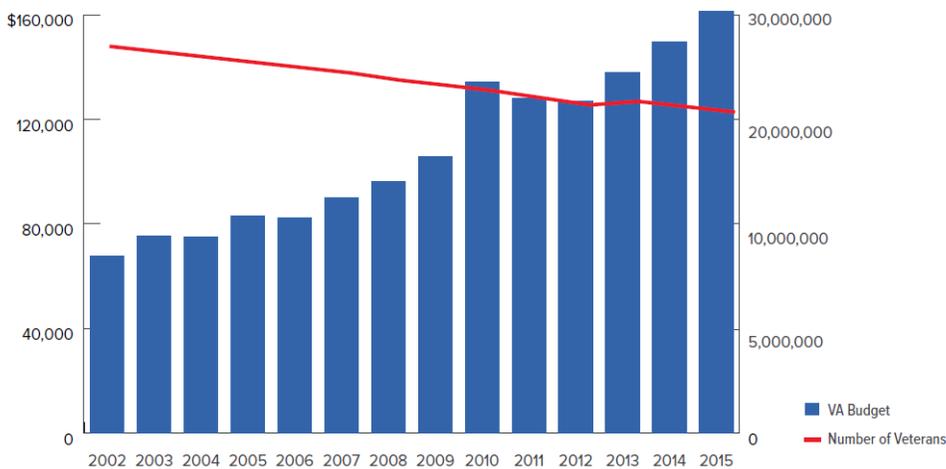
## 5. Conclusions and Outcomes

Implementation of the solutions proposed above will not be an easy task, but no task worth doing ever was. We believe that veteran lives are worth saving and are thus worth the effort and worth the cost. If implemented, we believe there will be significant benefits to the entirety of the American populace. The benefits to society of well-adjusted and transitioned veterans are numerous.

Primary benefits include:

- **Saved Lives** – As noted throughout this paper, post-9/11 veteran suicide rates are on the rise and this increase can be directly attributed to the quality of their transition and inability to adopt a new civilian identity. Providing the resources veterans need, especially to the veteran demographics with higher incidents of suicide, will have a direct life-saving impact and result in these additional benefits below.
- **Increase in National Security** - Saving the lives of future post-9/11 veterans and improving the outcomes of their transitions from the military will enable future generations of veterans to speak highly of their time in service and, as a result, will have a positive impact on future recruiting efforts. “Although veterans make up only ~8 percent of the nation’s adult population..., they have an out-sized influence over the future of the country’s all-volunteer force.... If military service is not seen as a positive experience and a gateway to successful civilian careers, future participants in the nation’s all-volunteer military may be dissuaded from serving.”<sup>100</sup> And so, “the success of veterans after service...is vital to the success of our military.”<sup>101</sup>
- **Resource Allocation** – Formally integrating veteran collaboratives into the veteran transition process will reduce the burden on federal agencies. A shift in responsibility for certain aspects of veteran care during a transition will allow for government agencies to better focus on their core mission. For example, The Department of Veterans Affairs has the primary responsibility for the veteran community within the federal government. This responsibility comes with a vast budget, totaling \$163.9 billion as of fiscal year (FY) 2015, with medical programs accounting for nearly \$60 billion and benefits account for over \$95 billion.<sup>102</sup> Chart 17 reflects significant VA budget increases while the veteran population declined. This reflects the reality that demand for VA support and services – not the size of the veteran population – drives the budget. And so, as our proposed solutions get implemented, we would expect post-9/11 veterans to be less dependent on services the VA and other federal agencies provide, allowing for those resources to be better allocated.

**Chart 17: Veteran Population vs. Department of Veterans Affairs Budget in Millions of Dollars (FY 2015 Constant)**



Source: Department of Veterans Affairs; Office of Management and Budget Historic Tables.

- Increased Focus and Impact of Philanthropic Funding – By latest measure, there are more than 45,000 veteran service organizations in the country. As of 2015, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) calculated that those organizations accounted for a total of \$2.8 billion in revenue and \$9.2 billion in assets, all provided via philanthropic capital.<sup>103</sup> Imagine if that incredible volume of goodwill were better focused on the challenges faced by post-9/11 veterans after our proposed solutions were implemented. The impact that the “sea of goodwill” could have would be exponentially more than what it is today. In structuring veteran collaboratives as Centers of Excellence and using them as conduits for federal funding, the resulting coordination will encourage this focus.

There will be a number of corollary effects of the primary benefits noted above. With fewer post-9/11 veterans committing suicide and more post-9/11 veterans finding initial employment in career fields of their choice following separation, there will be a number of secondary benefits as well. Those include:

- Increased Productivity – As a component of a diverse workforce, veterans add much potential to an organization’s competitiveness. Recent studies routinely demonstrate the business value of diverse and inclusive workplaces that include veterans, whether characterized by internal factors (employee acquisition and retention, productivity, and innovation) or external factors (organizational brand, market positioning, and customer engagement).<sup>104</sup> Some statistics:
  - The Level Playing Field Institute estimated U.S. corporations lose \$64 billion annually when work environments are not inclusive.<sup>105</sup>
  - Cumulative Gallup Workplace Studies uncovered a 22 percent increase in productivity at organizations that create inclusive environments.<sup>106</sup>
  - Donald Fan, Senior Director of Diversity at Walmart, found a direct link between diversity and innovation in a recent study.<sup>107</sup>
  - Research by Bersin revealed that organizations with the most inclusive and best talent management approaches has several advantages:
    - Realized 2.3 times higher cash flow per employee over a three-year period.
    - Smaller companies had 13 times higher mean cash flow from operations.
    - Were 1.8 times more likely to be change-ready and 1.7 times more likely to be innovation leaders in their market.
    - Were 3.8 times more likely to be able to coach people for improved performance, 3.6 times more able to deal with personnel performance problems, and 2.9 times more likely to identify and build leaders.<sup>108</sup>
- Economic Benefits – A increase in veteran participation in the workforce, in a profession at which the veteran will excel, benefits the veteran, the organizations they support, and the agencies heretofore providing services addressing prior unemployment gaps. For the veteran, “finding an initial position in their preferred career field will nearly double the earnings, job duration, and rate of retention,” resulting in a reduction of the un- and under-employment rates and an increase in overall productivity of the veteran population and the organizations they serve.<sup>109</sup> Additionally, incidents of homelessness, poverty, and underemployment – and the funding required to address them - will be reduced when the targeted needs of at-risk veterans are met. To wit, the federal government dedicates tens of millions of dollars to address veteran care issues. For example, in 2019 the VA set aside \$30 million in grants for the Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program and VA's Healthcare for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Contracted Residential Services (CRS) Program.<sup>110</sup> Additionally, in 2019 there were approximately 1.3 million veterans receiving supplemental assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) program. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), the average family of four receiving SNAP receives \$465 per month in SNAP assistance, which equates to over \$600 million spent annually to support low income veterans and their families.<sup>111</sup>

- Reduction in Veteran Under-employment. As of 2019, 33 percent of employed veterans are considered underemployed and the underemployment of veterans has been increasing steadily since 2010 (see Chart 18).<sup>112</sup> Veteran underemployment is defined as not having work which makes “full use of a person’s skills and abilities” and one of the root causes of the underemployment issue is that 70 percent of veterans take a civilian job less senior than the one they left in the military.<sup>113</sup> Veterans may fall victim to underemployment if they do not completely understand the value of their skills or are unable to translate their strengths to fit positions in the civilian job market. The outcome of reducing underemployment within the veteran population is increased wages, higher job satisfaction, increased retention, and an overall increase in worker productivity – all of which help address negative personal perceptions that lead to suicide.

**Chart 18: Veteran and Nonveteran Underemployment Statistics**



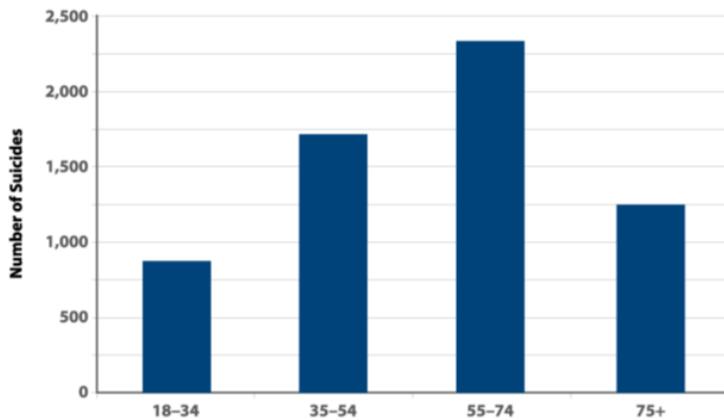
Source: LinkedIn, "Veteran Opportunity Report: Understanding an untapped talent pool," 2019.

This paper provides the information necessary to support a nation-wide expansion of veteran collaboratives to enhance long-term post-9/11 veteran care. The data provided highlights the need to build upon the programs currently offered by the agencies supporting a post-9/11 veteran’s transition. Long term care for post-9/11 veterans at high risk of suicide is important to help reduce their increasing rate of suicide. With increased partnership between government agencies, VSOs, and veteran collaboratives, the vast amount of organizations and resources attempting to address the welfare of post-9/11 veterans post-separation can be accurately targeted at a local, and more effective, level.

## Appendix A: Veteran Statistics

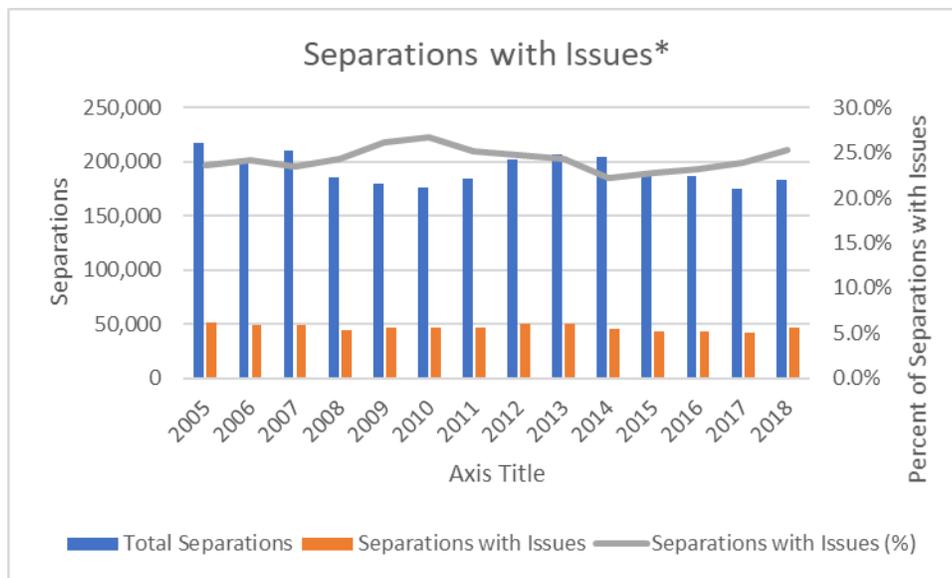
The following charts depict the quantity of suicides per age group (Chart 19) and the number of separations as a result of a less than honorable discharge from 2005 to 2018 (Chart 20).

**Chart 19: Veteran Suicide Counts by Age Group, 2017**



Source: 2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report

**Chart 20: Veteran separations with issues, 2005-2018**



\*Issues include the following categories: Military requirement, behaviour, performance, legal issues, standards of conduct

Source: 2005 – 2018 DOD Annual Demographics Reports

## Appendix B: List of Sample Veteran Support Programs

- Student-based Veteran Organizations
  - Student Veterans of America
  - MBA Veterans Network
- Hire Heroes USA
- American Job Centers
- Veteran Employment and Training Service (VETS)
- Federal Agency Hiring Programs
  - Vets to Feds (V2F)
  - Reintegration of Guard and Reserve Members
  - Disabled Veteran Affirmative Action Program
- Women Veteran Organizations
  - National Association of State Women Coordinators
  - Service Women’s Action Network (SWAN)
  - Veteran Women Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship (V-WISE)
  - Women Veterans ROCK
- DoD Education and Employment Initiative
- Corporate Transition Programs
  - American Corporate Partners (ACP)
  - Breakline
  - Honor Foundation
  - Onward to Opportunity (O2O)
- Nation-wide Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) that provide transition support
  - AMVETS
  - USO’s Pathfinder program
  - Wounded Warrior Project’s Warriors to Work program
  - National Veterans Foundation
  - Military Spouse Corporate Career Network (MSCCN)
- Entrepreneurship programs
  - Boots to Business
  - Bunker Labs
  - National Veterans Entrepreneurship Program (VEP)
  - VetFran
  - Veteran Business Outreach Centers (VBOCs) of the US Small Business Administration
  - 1836 Veterans<sup>114</sup>

- Peer-to-Peer Programs
  - Team Red, White & Blue
  - Rallypoint
  - Mission Continues
  - Travis Manion Foundation

## Appendix C: Ideas for Improving the Transition Assistance Program

Suggestions for further refining the current Transition Assistance Program include:

- Bifurcate the audience with specialized curricula tailored to various constituencies – women, retirees, those with less than four years' experience, less than honorable discharges, and all others.
- First focus the curricula to include a focus on veterans themselves. As Richard Nelson Bolles states in *What Color Is Your Parachute?* (the best-selling job-hunting book in the world), job hunts that start with doing research on yourself rather than the job market result in success 84 percent of the time.
- Focus on the importance of finding a career fit, not just a job.
- Put more focus on personal brand development and how to relate that to prospective employers.
- Incorporate real-time feedback and input from veterans in industry throughout the course.
- Incorporate the 26 Department of Labor competency models available for civilian industries. These competency models outline the skills and abilities that veterans would need to be successful in a given industry and enables an employer to have a common basis for understanding a veteran's knowledge, skills, and abilities – and how they relate to potential openings within their organization.
- Review in detail the functionality of social media platforms (i.e., LinkedIn) and the role they can play in the transition process.
- Incorporate lessons on appropriate civilian dress for various industries beyond the interview stage.
- Put less focus on overcoming unemployment and homelessness and more focus on overcoming attrition in the first role post-transition.
- Focus on the need for ongoing mentorship and the use of affinity groups to help overcome the civil-military cultural divide.
- Allow the course to be administered at all the nearly 2500 American Job Centers run by the Department of Labor.
- Suggest that those veterans seeking higher education take the free University Studies for Student Veterans Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) at Columbia University.
- Incorporate the DoD's Spouse Education Career Opportunities (SECO) program.
- Update the VA Benefits portion of the course as follows:
  - Provide additional detail on the disability compensation application process, contingencies that occur, and processes for dealing with them. Provide a series of tips or best practices for successfully maneuvering through the process.
  - Provide education on estate planning, including the following components: Wills, Living Wills, Powers of Attorney, Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care, and Trusts.
  - Make knowledge of benefits eligibility and application easier and more personally applicable. Provide a query tool that, following a series of self-identifying questions, identifies those programs that an individual veteran may be eligible for accompanied by a hyperlink to the application required for that benefit.
- In the spirit of the Army's Center for Lessons Learned, incorporate a feedback mechanism that allows recently transitioned veterans to impart lessons learned to their former peers about to undergo the same experience.

## Appendix D: Sample Internship and Fellowship Programs

- Federal Apprenticeship Programs
  - Post-9/11 GI Bill Apprenticeship Program
  - The Department of Labor
  - The US Chamber of Commerce Foundation Fellows program
  - Army Career Skills Program
  - Marine Corps Skillbridge Employment Training Program
  - Navy Skillbridge Training Program
  - Air Force Career Skills Program
  - The State Department’s Veterans Innovation Partnership (VIP) Fellowship
  - The Department of Energy’s Veterans Programs
  - Secretary of Defense Executive Fellows
  - United Services Military Apprenticeship Program (USMAP).
- Civilian Apprenticeship Programs
  - Fastport
  - Helmets to Hardhats
  - The Painters and Allied Trades Veterans Program
  - Purdue University’s Cyber Apprenticeship Program
  - Troops to Trades
  - United Association Veterans in Piping Program
  - Workshops® for Warriors
- Federal Agency Internships
  - Department of Defense’s Operation Warfighter
  - Department of State Wounded Warrior Non-Paid Work Initiative
  - Pathways
  - Department of Veterans Affairs Intern Programs
- Military Scholars Fellowships
  - Tillman Scholars Program
  - Veterans in Global Leadership Fellowship
  - Mission Continues Fellowship
  - ServiceCorps Fellowship
- Governmental Fellowships
  - Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Military Fellowship
  - White House Fellowship
  - Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)-Student Veterans of America (SVA)
  - Legislative Fellowship
  - Anna Sobol Levy Foundation Fellowships
  - Department of Homeland Security’s Secretary’s Honors Program
  - The Smith Richardson Foundation Strategy and Policy Fellows Program
  - Hertog War Studies Program
  - Belfer Center Fellowships<sup>115</sup>

# About the Authors

**Matthew J. Louis** is the author of the HarperCollins book **Mission Transition: Navigating the Opportunities and Obstacles of Your Post-Military Career**, a practical guide for veterans in career transition, and serves on the board of TVCA. Louis holds an MBA in operations and finance from the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University and a BS in mechanical engineering from West Point. He is a graduate of the US Army Command and General Staff College. Louis served in the Southwest Asia combat theater and on the staff of the US Army's Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations. He is a retired Lieutenant Colonel.

**Nate Pelletier** is the Managing Partner of The Leadgion Group, LLC., and the co-founder and former Chairman of the Board of TVCA. Pelletier is a national thought leader on military transition and served as an advisor to the Congressional Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Military Transition and currently serves as an advisor to the US Department of Veterans Affairs ETS Sponsorship Program. Pelletier holds a BS in systems engineering from West Point and an MBA from Northwestern University. He commanded Army combat units in Iraq and is a former Army Captain.

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## END NOTES

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### **About TVCA**

The Tristate Veterans Community Alliance (TVCA) is an independent, veteran-led nonprofit organization dedicated to serving veterans and their families within the 16-county, Greater Cincinnati region as they transition from military to civilian life.

TVCA partners with more than 200 local service providers, corporations, academic institutions and government organizations to increase awareness and access to services in the areas of employment, education, health, wellness and family support. Please see <http://www.tristatevca.org/> to learn more about our organization.