



March 2024

SERVICE MEMBERS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE

Agencies Can Improve Warm Handovers for Additional Assistance

GAO Highlights

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

Why GAO Did This Study

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

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

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

What GAO Recommends

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

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

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What GAO Found

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

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



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

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

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

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Abbreviations

AJC	American Job Center
DMDC	Defense Manpower Data Center
DOD	Department of Defense
DOL	Department of Labor
EISA	Enterprise Individualized Self-Assessment
ENPP	Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot
MOU	memorandum of understanding
TAP	Transition Assistance Program
TEEN	TAP Evaluation and Employee Navigation
TSMRC	Transitioning Service Member Resource Connection
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs
VSO	veterans service organization

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March 21, 2024

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

Each year, hundreds of thousands of service members transition from military service to civilian life, a period that can be fraught with challenges, including entering the civilian workforce and reestablishing connections to the community. Service members may have injuries or other medical issues to navigate, and they can be at risk for unemployment, homelessness, or gaps in medical care. To help them succeed in their transition, the Department of Defense (DOD) provides certain service members who may be at risk for a difficult transition with a “warm handover” to other agencies, such as the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) or the Department of Labor (DOL). A warm handover occurs when the military makes a person-to-person connection between a service member and one of these agencies or other organizations for additional assistance.

Senate report 117-130 includes a provision for us to conduct a review of DOD’s warm handover process.¹ Our report examines (1) the extent to which DOD ensures that service members receive a warm handover for additional transition assistance, as appropriate; (2) the views of stakeholders regarding the helpfulness of warm handovers in connecting service members with needed transition assistance, and the extent to which DOD assesses information on the helpfulness of warm handovers; and (3) the extent to which DOD and its partner agencies—VA and DOL—collaborate in their efforts to refine the warm handover process and design effective pilot projects.

To determine the extent to which DOD ensures that service members receive a warm handover for additional transition assistance, we obtained and analyzed DOD Transition Assistance Program (TAP) participant-level data for active duty service members who separated from the Air Force, Army, Marines, or Navy, from April 2021 to March 2023, the most recent

¹S. Rep. No. 117-130, at 154 (2022).

data available at the time of our analysis.² To determine the reliability of these data, we reviewed related documentation, spoke with knowledgeable officials, and tested for missing data and inconsistencies. We found the data sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our review.³ We also reviewed federal laws and agency documents, including policies and procedures for warm handovers, and interviewed officials from DOD, VA, and DOL. We evaluated DOD's efforts to provide warm handovers using DOD policy and the federal standard for internal control that agencies use quality information to achieve their objectives.⁴

To obtain the view of stakeholders regarding the helpfulness of warm handovers in connecting service members with transition assistance and to understand how DOD assesses information on the helpfulness of warm handovers, we conducted in-person and virtual interviews and discussion groups at five military installations. We selected installations for variation in location, service branch, and the number of transitioning service members from April 2021 to March 2022. We conducted in-person site visits to Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton in California and the U.S. Navy's Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story in Virginia. Additionally, we conducted virtual site visits to three installations: U.S. Army Fort Riley in Kansas, Marine Corps Base Hawaii, and Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. In both the in-person and virtual site visits, we observed warm handovers when possible and conducted interviews or held discussion groups with TAP stakeholders. These stakeholders included TAP managers, TAP counselors, commanders, commander designees, and representatives from veterans service organizations (VSO) and American Job Centers (AJC).⁵ We also conducted a literature search for relevant research on warm handovers from 2013 to 2023. We evaluated DOD's efforts to assess information on the helpfulness of warm

²We did not include the Reserves, National Guard, Coast Guard, or Space Force. Army data from November 2022 to June 2023 were unavailable due to data migration and not included in our analysis.

³We did not independently verify information that was recorded in the TAP database.

⁴GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#). (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

⁵A commander may appoint a designee to review, verify, and approve a service member's transition assistance documentation. American Job Centers are a nationwide network of centers funded through DOL's Employment and Training Administration and operated by state and local workforce agencies. These centers provide a range of employment-related services to job seekers.

handovers using DOD policy⁶ and federal standards for internal control on monitoring effectiveness and communicating quality information.⁷

To determine the extent to which DOD, VA, and DOL collaborate in their efforts to refine the warm handover process, we assessed their efforts against leading practices for interagency collaboration and for designing pilot projects.⁸ We analyzed agencies' written responses to questions about their collaboration efforts and pilot projects related to warm handovers, and conducted interviews with agency officials. For more information on our objectives, scope, and methodology, see appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2022 to March 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Transition Assistance Program Process

TAP is a mandated program that provides transition assistance, information, training, counseling, and services for eligible service members separating, retiring, or being released from active duty. The goal of TAP is to help service members achieve career readiness standards prior to re-entering civilian life. Through TAP, service members can plan for higher education, pursue vocational training, seek employment in the public or private sector, plan to start their own business, or pursue other forms of self-employment. The program is administered by each military service branch, and it consists of a series of individualized sessions in which service members meet with TAP counselors, take tailored classes, and participate in a final review of

⁶Department of Defense Instruction 1332.35, *Transition Assistance Program (TAP) For Military Personnel* (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 26, 2019).

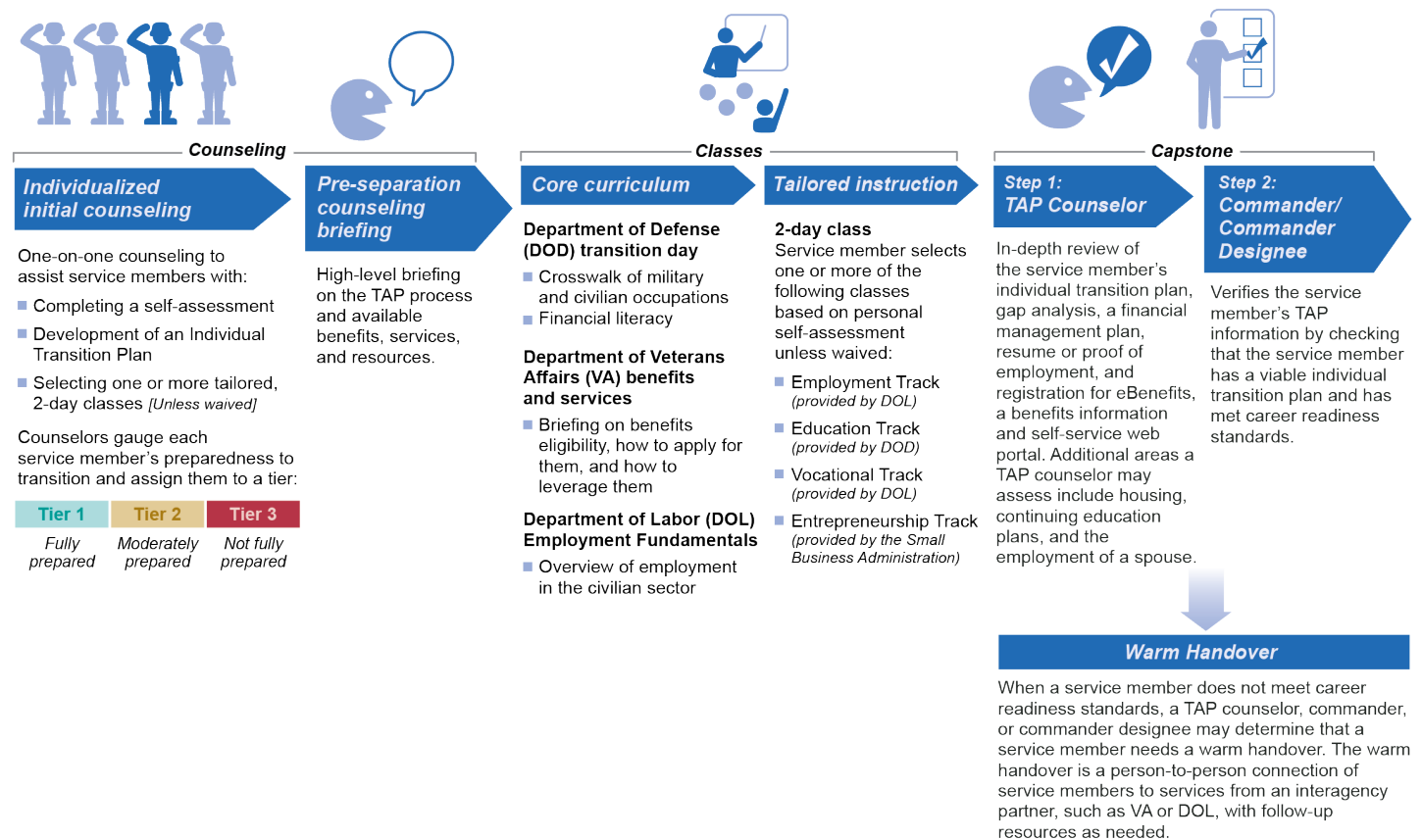
⁷[GAO-14-704G](#).

⁸GAO, *Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges*, [GAO-23-105520](#). (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023); and GAO, *Data Act: Section 5 Pilot Design Issues Need to Be Addressed to Meet Goal of Reducing Recipient Reporting Burden*, [GAO-16-438](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 19, 2016).

compliance with program requirements facilitated by a TAP counselor, commander, or commander designee.

TAP includes five phases: individualized initial counseling, pre-separation counseling briefing, core curriculum, tailored instruction, and a two-step capstone phase (see fig.1). According to DOD policy, service members are generally expected to begin TAP at least 1 year before they are expected to leave military service and complete it no later than 90 days before separation.⁹ Service members with short-notice separations—those who will leave the military in 90 days or fewer—are expected to begin TAP as soon as possible.

Figure 1: Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Process



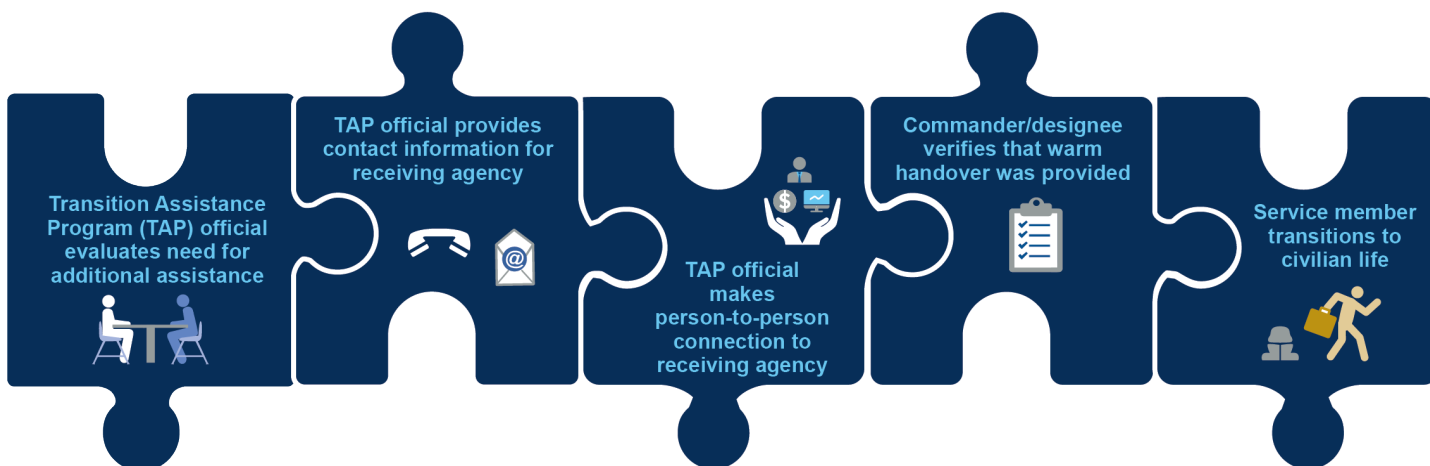
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) policy. | GAO-24-106248

⁹DOD Instruction 1332.35.

Warm Handover

According to DOD policy, a commander or commander’s designee is supposed to confirm a warm handover for service members who do not meet career readiness standards or who are anticipated to face other transition challenges.¹⁰ According to the policy, a warm handover is “a process between respective military services and appropriate interagency partner(s) resulting in the person-to-person connection of service members to services and follow-up resources as needed. The warm handover provides a confirmed introduction and assurance that the appropriate interagency partner acknowledge(s) that an eligible service member requires post-military assistance.” Further, the policy states that “the interagency partner follows through on providing assistance to meet the needs of service members, mitigate risk, and assist them in attaining their post-transition goals and a successful transition.” In doing so, the warm handover is designed to help vulnerable service members achieve a successful transition into civilian life (see fig. 2).

Figure 2: General Overview of the Warm Handover Process



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) policy. Images (GAO). | GAO-24-106248

TAP Governance and Pilot Projects

Multiple federal agencies collaborate to oversee and implement TAP. TAP is overseen by an interagency governance structure that includes senior officials from DOD, VA, DOL, the Departments of Education and Homeland Security, the Office of Personnel Management, and the Small Business Administration. TAP operates under an interagency

¹⁰DOD Instruction 1332.35.

memorandum of understanding.¹¹ Representatives from these agencies participate in regular meetings and are tasked to several interagency work groups. The Joint Executive Committee serves as the primary interagency body with senior executive leadership oversight of TAP. Under this committee, there are several committees and working groups, such as the Performance Management Work Group, which monitors evaluations of TAP and related pilot projects.

To improve transition support for service members, DOD, VA, and DOL are collaborating on several pilot projects:

- **DOD’s Enterprise Individualized Self-Assessment pilot (EISA)** is a self-administered web-based tool that measures service members’ transition-related readiness factors across nine multiple-life domains.¹² The purpose of this pilot is to standardize how military service branches assess service members’ transition-related needs at the start of the TAP program (more than 1 year prior to separation from the military) and again at the capstone phase (90 days prior to separation from the military). The first phase of this pilot began in March 2023 and, as of October 2023, it was being conducted at 17 installations. It is scheduled to be completed in February 2024, according to DOD officials.
- **VA’s Transitioning Service Member Resource Connection (TSMRC)** pilot is supported by DOD and aimed at improving support to transitioning service members and allowing VA to track and report when it receives a service member through a warm handover. It uses a centralized call center to connect transitioning service members who require a warm handover with VA services. This pilot began in May 2022 and, as of November 2023, was being conducted at 30 installations. It is scheduled to be completed by June 2024.
- **DOL’s Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot (ENPP)** provides one-on-one career assistance to interested transitioning service members and their spouses at select military installations

¹¹Memorandum of Understanding Among the Department of Defense, Department of Labor, Department of Education, Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Homeland Security (United States Coast Guard), U.S. Small Business Administration, and U.S. Office of Personnel Management regarding the Transition Assistance Program for Service Members Transitioning from Active Duty, September 8, 2021.

¹²The nine domains include: social and relational, sense of belonging, employment, housing, hope, financial, resilience, physical health resource knowledge, and mental health resource knowledge. DOD officials said this is not a clinical tool to be used for health assessments.

worldwide. DOL's Employment Navigators provide assistance outside the TAP classroom. They aim to help service members secure meaningful and lasting careers after leaving the military by helping them define their career path based on interests and values. They also help them plan out how to obtain the resources needed to meet their career goals. This pilot was conducted from April 2021 to September 2023. According to officials, it is now in the program implementation phase, and they are working on an implementation plan. The program is currently operating at 30 installations.¹³

DOD Ensures that Some Service Members Who Need a Warm Handover Receive Contact Information for Assistance but Does Not Ensure They Connect with Agencies

According to DOD's data, some transitioning service members receive warm handovers for additional assistance. However, the agency does not know why other service members who need a warm handover do not receive one. When providing warm handovers, TAP officials ensure that service members receive agency contact information, but this contact information may be outdated. Additionally, TAP officials do not ensure that service members make a person-to-person connection with a receiving agency official, as specified in DOD policy. Moreover, DOD lacks a reliable mechanism for verifying with service members that the warm handovers actually occurred.

Some Transitioning Service Members Receive Warm Handovers, but DOD Does Not Know Why Others Do Not

According to DOD's available TAP data, 267,745 service members separated from the military from April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2023.¹⁴ Of this group of service members, 40,998 (15 percent) received at least one warm handover.¹⁵ The data show that most of these warm handovers were to VA (40 percent) and DOL (34 percent). According to VA officials, service members receive warm handovers to their agency for a variety of reasons, including finding medical care and applying for disability

¹³In November 2023, DOL changed the name of the Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot to the "Employment Navigator and Partnership Program." Given that we analyzed it as a pilot, we refer to it by its original name throughout the report.

¹⁴These data do not include the Reserves, National Guard, Coast Guard, or the Space Force. Army data from November 2022 to June 2023 were unavailable due to data migration and not included in our analysis.

¹⁵These data reflect warm handovers as recorded in DOD data; however, we did not independently verify whether all steps in the warm handover process were completed. Service members may receive more than one warm handover.

benefits. DOL officials told us that warm handovers to their agency are primarily for assistance with obtaining employment, such as preparing a resume and searching for jobs through American Job Centers. Some transitioning service members receive a warm handover to Military OneSource, a DOD program with a call center and website that provides a wide range of information, consultations, and counseling to military families. (See appendix II for more detailed data on warm handovers provided during this period.)

According to our analysis of DOD's available TAP data and policy, at least 4,300 service members who separated from the military during this two-year period—April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2023—should have received a warm handover but did not.¹⁶ According to DOD's policy, service members who do not meet all applicable career readiness standards (such as developing a financial plan or completing an individual transition plan) are to receive a warm handover.¹⁷ The military is also to provide warm handovers to those who did not receive an honorable discharge, do not have a post-transition housing or transportation plan, identify as needing peer support, or are likely to face major readjustment, health care, employment, or other challenges associated with the transition to civilian life. See table 1 for the number of service members who did not meet selected career readiness standards and left the military without receiving a warm handover, according to DOD data.

¹⁶We did not independently verify information that was recorded in the TAP database.

¹⁷Career readiness standards that apply to an individual service member vary depending on the service member's level of preparedness assessed by TAP officials. At initial counseling, counselors assign service members to one of three tiers based on their level of preparedness: tier 1 service members are considered fully prepared for the transition, tier 2 service members are moderately prepared, and tier 3 are not fully prepared. Some of DOD's career readiness standards apply to all transitioning service members, whereas other standards only apply to certain service members based on their assigned tier level. For instance, DOD policy calls for all transitioning service members to have a viable individual transition plan that addresses a range of issues, including housing and health care; whereas only service members who are placed in tier 2 or 3 must complete a financial plan.

Table 1: Number of Service Members Who Did Not Meet Selected Required Career Readiness Standards but Did Not Receive a Warm Handover, Among Those Who Left the Military from April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2023

Career readiness standard not met	Number of transitioning service members
Did not complete a financial plan ^a	4,312
Attended a 2-day class but did not complete an associated track requirement ^b	3,673
Did not complete an individual transition plan	2,973
Did not register for VA's eBenefits	1,843

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-24-106248

Notes: These numbers represent the minimum number of service members who did not meet career readiness standards and did not receive a warm handover. A service member may not have met more than one career readiness standard. A total of 267,745 service members left the military from April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2023, according to DOD's available data. These data do not include the Reserves, National Guard, Coast Guard, or the Space Force. Army data from November 2022 to June 2023 were unavailable due to data migration and not included in our analysis.

^aThis career readiness standard applies to service members in tiers 2 and 3.

^bThis career readiness standard applies to service members in tiers 2 and 3. Only those in tier 3 are included here. This requirement is associated with the chosen track. For instance, if the service member chose the employment track, they must complete a resume or provide verification of employment. The entrepreneurship track has no associated career readiness standard requirement.

DOD does not know why some service members who do not meet career readiness standards are not receiving a warm handover, because DOD has not analyzed available data to determine the reasons why they did not receive them. DOD collects and maintains information on the activities that each service member completes, including whether they complete a financial plan or other requirements for the career readiness standards. However, DOD does not analyze data on the characteristics or circumstances of service members who did not meet these requirements and who did not receive a warm handover.

Moreover, in some cases, available data on why a warm handover is not provided may be limited. According to DOD officials, TAP counselors and commanders make individualized decisions on whether transitioning service members should receive a warm handover. In some cases, according to DOD officials, TAP officials may decide not to provide a warm handover even when the service members did not meet career readiness standards. However, TAP officials are not required to record a reason why the warm handover is not provided.

As previously noted, the purpose of the warm handover is to ensure a successful transition for service members who do not meet career

readiness standards. According to federal standards for internal control, agencies should use quality information to achieve their objectives and select appropriate methods of communication, such as a written document.¹⁸ DOD is in the process of developing a new data system that will integrate information about transitioning service members from multiple data sources, according to DOD officials.¹⁹ However, according to these officials, they do not have a written plan to analyze the data that will be available from this new system to determine why service members did not receive warm handovers. Without a written plan to guide the collection and analysis of the necessary data, DOD will continue to lack the information needed to identify and make programmatic adjustments. By better ensuring that service members who need warm handovers are receiving them, DOD can strengthen its assistance to service members in finding employment, accessing benefits, or using other resources available to them.

TAP Officials Provide Service Members with Agency Contact Information, Which May Be Outdated, but Do Not Ensure Service Members Receive a Person-to-Person Connection

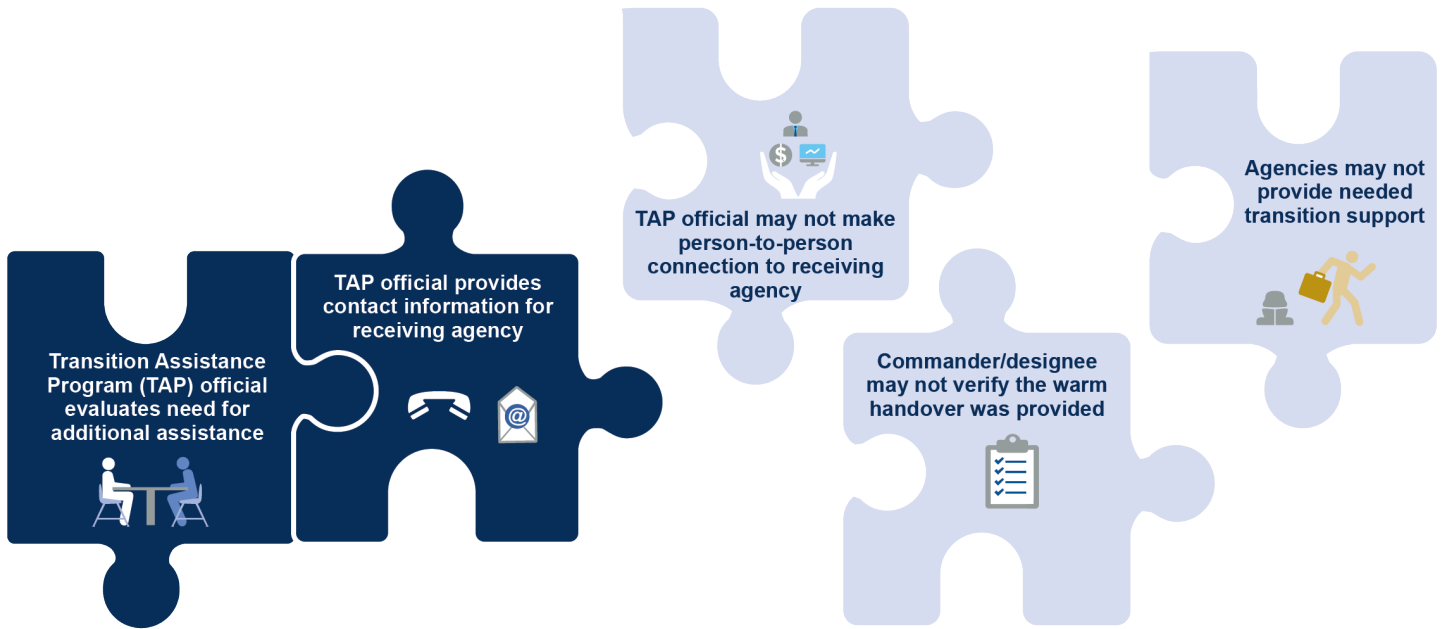
While TAP officials consistently provide service members with contact information for a warm handover, they do not ensure they make a person-to-person connection to the receiving agency official, as specified in DOD policy.²⁰ TAP officials, including counselors, attempt to provide warm handovers by either trying to reach a receiving agency official by phone, email, or in-person, or by providing the contact information to the transitioning service member and encouraging them to reach out to the agency official. TAP officials record warm handover information by entering the category, agency, representative name, and phone number into the TAP database. This contact information is provided to service members during their meetings with TAP officials and is also documented in their transition paperwork. However, if these interactions do not result in a person-to-person connection to a receiving agency for services and follow-up resources, they do not constitute a completed warm handover in accordance with policy (see fig. 3).

¹⁸[GAO-14-704G](#).

¹⁹This new data system is the Defense Transition and Reintegration Suite.

²⁰According to DOD policy, a warm handover results “in the person-to-person connection of service members to services and follow-up resources as needed.” DOD Instruction 1332.35.

Figure 3: DOD's Warm Handover Process Does Not Ensure Service Members Connect with Agencies for Additional Assistance with Their Transition to Civilian Life



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

TAP officials we interviewed said they had trouble making a person-to-person connection for service members due, in part, to outdated contact information on websites linked in the TAP database.²¹

²¹TAP officials we interviewed said they also had difficulty making a person-to-person connection when the service member and receiving agency's office are located in different time zones. For instance, Navy officials told us that it is difficult to make a person-to-person connection when the service member is on a ship far from the receiving agency's office.

Incomplete Warm Handover

At one military installation, we observed a Transition Assistance Program (TAP) counselor unsuccessfully attempt to complete a warm handover. After calling agency officials, the counselor was placed on hold multiple times, provided with four other phone numbers to call, and forwarded to a voicemail. After leaving a voicemail message, an agency official recommended that the service member independently contact another agency official. In this case, the service member did not receive a warm handover because a person-to-person connection was not made. DOD officials acknowledged that leaving a voicemail message is not a person-to-person connection but it is possible that it may be recorded as one in the TAP database.

Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106248

TAP counselors in three of our six discussion groups said that updating agency contact information on agency web sites would help them provide warm handovers with person-to-person connections. (See sidebar.)

While VA and DOL are responsible for keeping contact information updated on their websites, DOD does not have a process for regularly requesting updated contact information from the agencies.²² DOD officials said they were not aware of this as an area of concern for TAP officials, yet DOD policy requires that warm handovers provide a person-to-person connection from the service member to a receiving agency official. According to federal standards for internal control, management should use quality information to achieve the entity's objectives.²³ Without a process for ensuring quality information, such as updated contact information, it is more difficult for the TAP counselors or other TAP officials to identify the right contact and provide service members with warm handovers. It also increases the chances that a service member will not have the benefit of a person-to-person connection that could provide them with needed assistance.

DOD Is Not Reliably Verifying That Warm Handovers Occur

TAP officials we interviewed during our site visits said that many commanders and designees are not sure about their responsibility to verify with service members that warm handovers occur. According to DOD officials, commanders should set aside time to speak with the service member near the end of their service and independently verify with them that the warm handover occurred. TAP officials said commanders may be more fully aware of their service members' personal circumstances and how a warm handover could benefit them compared to TAP counselors who may only meet each service member once or twice. However, commanders and their designees lack a clear understanding of their role in the warm handover process, according to these officials. TAP officials told us that warm handover responsibilities are one of many responsibilities for commanders and their designees, and not their primary focus.

²²According to the TAP MOU, the partners will work with each other to coordinate a systematic and singular approach to develop, assess, evaluate and improve transition assistance. DOL will ensure its website has up-to-date contact information to assist commanders, military transition staff, and service members in locating the nearest local AJC where the service member plans to relocate. VA will provide assistance in connecting service members with the closest VA resources in the region where the service member plans to relocate.

²³[GAO-14-704G](#).

According to DOD policy, at the end of the TAP process, commanders must verify that eligible service members meet career readiness standards and demonstrate that they have a viable individual transition plan. According to TAP officials we interviewed on our site visits, they generally send commanders an email for each service member who has completed TAP with instructions for the commander to review the relevant information for the service member in the TAP database, and then verify that the service member meets all the requirements. If the service member does not meet career readiness standards or demonstrate that they have a viable individual transition plan, commanders or their designees are to verify that the service member received a warm handover in accordance with DOD policy and record their verification in the TAP database.

According to available DOD data for the two-year period (April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2023), commanders or their designees verified that about two-thirds (26,453 of 40,998) of the service members with a recorded warm handover received one (see fig. 4).²⁴ However, according to the same data, of the other 14,545 instances where a warm handover was recorded as provided, or for about a third of the service members, the commander or designee recorded that verification was not applicable, that no warm handover had occurred, or did not answer the question. In addition, the commanders or designees verified that a warm handover was provided to an additional 77,711 transitioning service members who were not recorded as receiving one—nearly triple the number of verified warm handovers—calling into question the reliability of commander/designee verifications.²⁵

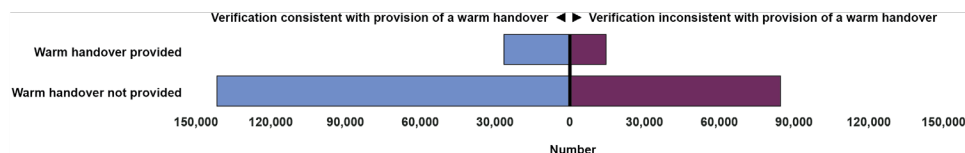
According to DOD officials familiar with the data on transitioning service members, commanders do not reliably verify warm handovers. For example, some may verify a warm handover occurred when one was not

²⁴These data do not include the Reserves, National Guard, Coast Guard, or the Space Force. Army data from November 2022 to June 2023 were unavailable due to data migration and not included in our analysis.

²⁵We considered a warm handover to have been provided when DOD's data included a warm handover reason and an agency type. If either of these data elements were missing, we considered no warm handover to have occurred.

applicable.²⁶ DOD policy requires commanders to verify whether warm handovers occur. In addition, according to federal standards for internal control, agencies should monitor and assess the effectiveness of internal control activities to identify potential deficiencies.²⁷ Because DOD commanders and their designees do not have a full understanding of how and when to verify and record warm handovers, DOD does not have a reliable mechanism for verifying that a warm handover has occurred.

Figure 4: Consistency of Commanders or Commander Designees' Verification With Whether a Warm Handover Was Provided to Service Members Who Left the Military from April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2023



Source: GAO analysis of DOD data. | GAO-24-106248

Note: Not included are 663 cases where it is unknown whether a warm handover was provided, according to DOD's data. These data do not include the Reserves, National Guard, Coast Guard, or the Space Force. Army data from November 2022 to June 2023 were unavailable due to data migration and not included in our analysis.

Stakeholders Said Transitioning Service Members Might Find Warm Handovers Helpful, but DOD Lacks Information on Their Helpfulness

Stakeholders we interviewed, including TAP counselors, said that warm handovers could be helpful to transitioning service members. TAP officials and others told us that warm handovers could help some service members with their transition to civilian life, especially those who are young or who are vulnerable to having a difficult transition, including service members who are facing short-notice, administrative, or medical separations.²⁸ However, once a service member receives a warm handover, DOD generally does not know whether the service member received services or achieved positive post-transition outcomes. Additionally, TAP officials said that they lack information on the

²⁶According to DOD officials, on August 1, 2019, they updated the TAP database to allow commanders or their designees to answer "not applicable" to this verification question. Prior to this change, commanders could have mistakenly answered "yes" that a warm handover was provided because their only other option was to say "no". However, since this change occurred 20 months prior to the beginning date of our data set (April 1, 2021), it did not affect our analysis and the data continued to show that commanders were verifying warm handovers when they did not occur.

²⁷GAO-14-704G.

²⁸Administrative separations could occur due to misconduct, unsatisfactory performance, or other reasons.

helpfulness of warm handovers from DOD and such information would be beneficial.

Program Officials and Others Told Us that Warm Handovers Could Help Some Service Members with Their Transition to Civilian Life

Stakeholders we interviewed generally said that certain groups of service members transitioning to civilian life could benefit from warm handovers. TAP counselors in four of the six discussion groups we held said that warm handovers could help service members facing a difficult transition (see fig. 5). Stakeholders said that warm handovers could be beneficial to younger and lower-ranked service members and to service members facing unanticipated separations for short-notice, administrative, or medical separations.

Figure 5: Transition Assistance Program Counselor Assessing a Service Member's Need for a Warm Handover



Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106248

Younger and lower-ranked service members. According to stakeholders, warm handovers could be particularly helpful for younger and lower-ranked service members who may be less prepared to re-enter civilian life. For example, TAP counselors at one installation said that younger service members often enter the military directly from high school and are not accustomed to independently planning for their future. With this lack of experience, these service members may lack an understanding of how to make informed decisions about their finances, healthcare, or housing. A financial advisor at one installation said that younger service members lack insight into the consequences of poor

financial decisions and may overestimate their earning potential post-transition. Further, they may not fully understand unfamiliar civilian expenses, such as healthcare costs outside of the military health care system and the cost of off-base housing.

According to DOD data, warm handovers are largely provided to younger and lower-ranked service members across the service branches. According to DOD data, of the service members who left the military from April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2023, and received a warm handover, 55 percent were the ages of 16 to 24, and 60 percent had 4 or fewer years of military experience.²⁹ Enlisted service members in the five lowest paygrades (E-1 to E-5) received 82 percent of the warm handovers during this time.³⁰ (For additional data on the characteristics of service members who received a warm handover, see appendix II.)

Short-notice separation. Service members who separate from the military with short notice may not have enough time to complete TAP but could benefit from additional assistance. According to DOD policy, a short notice separation is an unanticipated separation with 90 days or fewer before separation, retirement, or release from active duty.³¹ Service members with short notice separations who do not meet career readiness standards should receive a warm handover. Two TAP counselors in our discussion groups explained that service members with short-notice separations do not have enough time to complete their individual transition plans. Warm handovers, according to one TAP manager we interviewed, could be helpful to these service members by providing them with additional resources.

Administrative separation. Service members who receive an administrative separation from the military may benefit from warm handovers by being directed to other agencies for assistance after separation. Administrative separations could occur due to misconduct, unsatisfactory performance, the lack of a family care plan, or other reasons, and these service members may not qualify for certain VA

²⁹These data do not include the Reserves, National Guard, Coast Guard, or the Space Force. Army data from November 2022 to June 2023 were unavailable due to data migration and not included in our analysis.

³⁰Service members in paygrades E-1 through E-3 are usually in training status or on their initial assignment. U.S. Department of Defense, "U.S. Military Rank Insignia" (Washington, D.C.) accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/Resources/Insignia/#enlisted-insignia>.

³¹DOD Instruction 1332.35.

benefits depending on their discharge status.³² Service members who do not receive an honorable discharge may not qualify for certain VA educational benefits, for instance, but may be eligible for other benefits. A warm handover to VA can connect the service member with specialists to discuss what other benefits they qualify for, or to learn how to upgrade their discharge status. These service members can also receive help with obtaining employment. For example, we observed a TAP counselor meeting with a service member who was administratively separating from the Air Force for a failure to adapt to the military environment.³³ After determining that the service member was unaware that he might be able to qualify for certain VA benefits and lacked plans for employment, the TAP counselor attempted to administer a warm handover for this service member to VA and a local American Job Center.

Medical separation. Service members who separate from the military due to an injury or disability may benefit from a warm handover directly to VA for continuing care or assistance with processing their application for disability benefits. According to a TAP counselor we interviewed, when a service member has an injury that does not improve, the TAP counselor administers a warm handover to VA for continued care at a facility in the service member's local area. Warm handovers can be particularly helpful to these service members and their families because they provide a tailored approach to identifying resources for continued care and employment.

DOD Does Not Have a Plan to Assess Whether Warm Handovers Benefit Service Members

Although stakeholders identified potential benefits of warm handovers, DOD does not have a plan to assess whether service members received services from other agencies or organizations they were referred to or achieved positive post-transition outcomes after a warm handover is provided. DOD, VA, and DOL have administered pilot projects and long-term evaluations related to TAP, but these efforts are expected to provide

³²A family care plan is a document that outlines the person(s) who shall provide care for a service member's dependent family members to provide for a smooth, rapid transfer of responsibilities to the caregiver in the absence of the service member due to military duty. The plan also outlines the legal, medical, logistical, educational, monetary, and religious arrangements for care of the service member's dependent family members. Service members who fail to produce a family care plan may be subject to disciplinary or administrative action that may result in separation from the service. Department of Defense, DOD Instruction 1342.19 Family Care Plans.

³³An entry level service member may be discharged when their unsatisfactory performance or conduct shows they are not qualified to be productive members of the Air Force. Unsatisfactory performance or conduct may include a failure to adapt to the military environment prescribed in 7.22.2.2 of Department of the Air Force, *Instruction 36-3211*.

limited information on warm handovers.³⁴ VA and DOL also have several studies on the overall effectiveness of TAP planned or underway, as we have previously reported, but these will not provide information on the helpfulness of warm handovers.³⁵ Additionally, DOD established a data partnership with the U.S. Census Bureau that will merge Defense Manpower Data Center data on military personnel with employment and education data from the Census Bureau, Internal Revenue Service, and Social Security Administration. This merged data may be available in 2025, according to DOD officials. According to DOD officials, data from the DOD's partnership with the Census Bureau could be used to analyze outcomes for those who received warm handovers, but they currently have no specific plan to do so.

According to DOD policy, the TAP program is to prepare service members for their transition to civilian life and ensure they meet all career readiness standards or are directed to the appropriate interagency partner or local resource for additional assistance. In addition, DOD is to review and assess the efficiency and effectiveness of evidence-based practices within TAP.³⁶

While efforts to administer pilot projects and conduct evaluations and studies will generally expand DOD and partner agencies' data on TAP overall, these efforts do not include specific plans to assess whether warm handovers benefit service members. For example, DOD does not have a plan to gather outcome data on service members who receive warm handovers and compare them to outcomes for service members who do not receive warm handovers. Developing an assessment plan to

³⁴DOD officials said that VA's Transitioning Service Member Resource Connection (TSMRC) pilot will track those referred to VA for services through a warm handover, and DOL's Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot (ENPP) will track outcomes for those who receive one-on-one career assistance at participating installations, including those who connect with employment navigators through warm handovers. However, these pilot projects are limited to the participating installations and a relatively small subset of transitioning service members. We also found no prior research on the helpfulness or effectiveness of warm handovers from the last ten years in our literature search.

³⁵See appendix I: Ongoing and Planned Studies of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). [GAO-23-104538](#). The Small Business Administration (SBA) is also included in DOD-MCTO's, Transition and Reintegration Evaluation Plan for Fiscal Year 2022 to 2025. One VA long-term study seeks feedback on the overall TAP process, but it does not collect information on the helpfulness of warm handovers. Similarly, DOL's three long-term TAP studies are expected to report on service members who received a warm handover, however these reports are not expected to include data about outcomes for service members associated with a warm handover.

³⁶DOD Instruction 1332.35.

examine program outcomes would help DOD better understand the helpfulness of the warm handover process and inform future improvement efforts.

TAP Officials Said They Lack Information from DOD Needed to Improve Service Members' Warm Handover Experience

TAP officials said that they lack information on the helpfulness of warm handovers from DOD, but that such information would be beneficial. Participants in four of the five discussion groups we held with commanders or commander designees, for example, said that they do not receive any information on the helpfulness of warm handovers. TAP counselors said that they want to know whether the service member received relevant support, and if the resources were helpful in addressing their transition needs. VSO representatives said that they would like to receive feedback from service members and veterans pertaining to their VA disability claims after receiving a warm handover. With information on the helpfulness of warm handovers, TAP officials could potentially better select resources for service members and improve their outcomes post-transition.

According to DOD policy, TAP officials are required to help service members meet all career readiness standards and to direct service members to the appropriate interagency partner or local resource to mitigate risk and ensure a successful transition.³⁷ According to federal standards for internal control, agencies should monitor and assess the effectiveness of internal control activities to identify potential deficiencies.³⁸ Additionally, agencies should communicate quality information down and across reporting lines to enable personnel to perform key roles in achieving objectives, addressing risks, and supporting the internal control system.³⁹

DOD has not developed a process to share information on the helpfulness of warm handovers with TAP officials once it has collected such information. DOD and its partner agencies have been focused on the design and implementation of pilot projects and long-term studies and have not made plans for how to disseminate future findings to TAP officials. DOD officials said they rely upon the service branches to share information at the installation level. As DOD waits for data from partner agencies, TAP officials want to know whether warm handovers are helpful

³⁷DOD Instruction 1332.35.

³⁸[GAO-14-704G](#).

³⁹[GAO-14-704G](#).

and are ensuring a successful transition. Developing a process to share information on the helpfulness of warm handovers could help TAP officials understand how their efforts can better assist transitioning service members and help TAP officials select resources that are most relevant and useful for supporting service members' successful transitions.

Agencies Generally Collaborated Effectively on Pilot Projects but Have Not Identified Criteria to Inform Decisions about Expanding Two of Them

DOD, VA, and DOL have conducted pilot projects that could help to refine the warm handover process (see side bar). The agencies collaborate with each other on these efforts through a governance structure headed by the Joint Executive Committee, which includes representatives from each of the three agencies.⁴⁰ This committee oversees the TAP program and working groups that are generally scheduled to meet monthly to measure progress. The agencies also collaborate through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that defines roles and responsibilities and provides common definitions and terms.

⁴⁰Under the Joint Executive Committee is the Transition Executive Committee, which provides oversight and direction to the interagency partnership that formulates and delivers transition assistance.

Agency Pilot Projects

The Departments of Defense (DOD), Veterans Affairs (VA), and Labor (DOL) each have conducted pilot projects that could refine the warm handover process.

- DOD's Enterprise Individualized Self-Assessment is a self-administered web-based tool to measure service members' transition-related readiness factors and inform tier-level assignments.
- VA's Transitioning Service Member Resource Connection pilot focuses on confirming the transitioning service members' connection to VA services through warm handovers.
- DOL's Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot focused on providing one-on-one career assistance to transitioning service members and their spouses.

Source: DOD, VA, and DOL documents. | GAO-24-106248

We analyzed these projects using leading practices for collaboration and for designing pilot projects based on our prior work.⁴¹ We found that DOD, VA, and DOL generally follow leading collaboration practices in their efforts to refine warm handovers. We also found that these agencies generally follow leading pilot project design practices but that they have not identified criteria to identify whether or how to expand two of the projects.



DOD, VA, and DOL Generally Followed Leading Collaboration Practices in Their Efforts to Refine Warm Handovers




We found that DOD, VA, and DOL's collaborative efforts to refine warm handovers generally followed the leading practices for collaboration among agencies that we previously identified, including bridging organizational cultures and sustaining leadership (see table 2).⁴²



⁴¹GAO-23-105520 and GAO-16-438.

⁴²GAO-23-105520.

Table 2: Assessment of Departments of Defense (DOD), Veterans Affairs (VA), and Labor (DOL) Efforts to Refine Warm Handovers Against Leading Practices for Interagency Collaboration

Leading collaboration practices	Key considerations	Examples of actions	Extent to which agency actions follow leading collaboration practices ^a
 Define common outcomes	<p>Have the crosscutting challenges or opportunities been identified?</p> <p>Have short- and long-term outcomes been clearly defined?</p> <p>Have the outcomes been reassessed and updated, as needed?</p>	<p>DOD, VA, and DOL have identified opportunities to inform one another's efforts to refine the warm handover process. For example, because they are linked, according to officials, DOD's Enterprise Individualized Self-Assessment (EISA) pilot and the VA's Transitioning Service Member Resource Connection (TSMRC)^b pilot provide the opportunity for both agencies to share and compare data on warm handovers.</p> <p>DOD, VA, and DOL officials described clearly defined short- and long-term outcomes. DOD established several short-term and long-term outcomes for its joint collaboration with VA on the DOD EISA pilot and the VA TSMRC pilot. A long-term outcome, for example, is to identify any needed improvements to support programs. DOL's Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot (ENPP)^c plan also describes outcomes, such as measuring the number of referrals to American Job Centers.</p> <p>According to agency officials, DOL plans to reassess outcomes when it obtains more data, and DOD and VA plan to assess outcome data from one another's pilot projects to update outcomes. For example, the agencies plan to compare the number of warm handovers as determined through EISA, DOD's pilot web-based tool, to the number of service members VA connects to services through the TSMRC.</p>	Generally followed
 Ensure accountability	<p>What are the ways to monitor, assess, and communicate progress toward the short- and long-term outcomes?</p> <p>Have collaboration-competencies or performance standards been established against which individual performance can be evaluated?</p>	<p>For all three pilot projects (led by DOD, VA, and DOL), the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) governance structure, which includes the Joint Executive Committee, provides a mechanism to monitor and communicate agency performance. DOD established a metric for its pilot to measure the number of service members who attained their post-transition goal. VA established metrics in its pilot plan, including one to measure the number and percent of confirmed transitioning service member connections from DOD to VA resources during the warm handover process. According to officials, DOL has a specific data system to help track its pilot.</p> <p>Individual agency performance for DOD, VA, and DOL collaboration is covered by the overarching TAP governance structure. According to officials, under the TAP memorandum of understanding (MOU), working groups develop standards and criteria.</p>	Generally followed

Leading collaboration practices	Key considerations	Examples of actions	Extent to which agency actions follow leading collaboration practices ^a
 Bridge organizational cultures	<p>Have strategies to build trust among participants been developed?</p> <p>Have participating agencies established compatible policies, procedures, and other means to operate across agency boundaries?</p> <p>Have participating agencies agreed on common terminology and definitions?</p>	<p>DOD, VA, and DOL participate in the TAP interagency governing structure, including the Joint Executive Committee, which has a mission to oversee and evaluate TAP. Officials said this structure helps them operate across agency boundaries and provides opportunities to establish policies and procedures related to their efforts to refine warm handovers.</p> <p>DOD, VA, and DOL established compatible policies and procedures in the TAP MOU.</p> <p>The TAP MOU provides a list of common definitions for the interagency collaboration.</p>	Generally followed
 Identify and sustain leadership	<p>Has a lead agency or individual been identified?</p> <p>If leadership will be shared between one or more agencies, have roles and responsibilities been clearly identified and agreed upon?</p> <p>How will leadership be sustained over the long-term?</p>	<p>DOD identified a lead agency and person for its pilot. VA's pilot plan spells out agency roles and responsibilities for its pilot. VA officials identified leaders for the pilot from DOD and VA and said that the Transition Assistance Interagency Working Group also helps to sustain leadership through its oversight activities.</p> <p>For the joint effort between the DOD and VA pilots, the VA's pilot plan describes the tasks assigned to each agency. For example, VA has overall responsibility for managing the VA pilot, while the DOD/Military-Civilian Transition Office has an active role in pilot meetings.</p> <p>The TAP MOU specifies leadership roles by agency. In addition, DOL officials said that the Transition Executive Committee is their governing mechanism for sustaining leadership of their pilot during the implementation phase. The committee includes officials from DOD, VA, and DOL and leadership rotates between the three agencies.</p>	Generally followed
 Clarify roles and responsibilities	<p>Have the roles and responsibilities of the participants been clarified?</p> <p>Has a process for making decisions been agreed upon?</p>	<p>The Performance Management Work Group, which is part of the TAP governing structure, is responsible for oversight of the DOD, VA, and DOL pilots, according to DOD officials. DOD officials said that the working group's roles are defined in the TAP memorandum of understanding. DOD policy and guidance further defines roles and responsibilities. In addition, for DOL, guidance spells out state workforce agency roles.</p> <p>The Performance Management Work Group provides oversight of the pilots, according to DOD officials.</p>	Generally followed

Leading collaboration practices	Key considerations	Examples of actions	Extent to which agency actions follow leading collaboration practices ^a
 <p>Include relevant participants</p>	<p>Have all relevant participants been included?</p> <p>Do the participants have the appropriate knowledge, skills, and abilities to contribute?</p> <p>Do participants represent diverse perspectives and expertise?</p>	<p>According to DOD officials, participants in DOD's EISA implementation efforts include representatives from the military service branches, Military OneSource (a DOD program with a call center and website for military families), VA, DOL, the Performance Management Work Group and selected installations participating in the pilot. Participants in VA's pilot efforts include VA and DOD offices with relevant skills and knowledge, and DOL's pilot participants include representatives from the federal government and states, veterans service organizations, and the Transition Executive Committee, which has the authority to commit resources for the pilot, according to officials.</p> <p>DOD, VA, and DOL officials reported they included qualified participants and stakeholders in their pilots, such as operational managers and technical experts.</p> <p>DOD, VA, and DOL reported including representatives from their own agency as participants in their pilot efforts as well as representatives of other agencies. For example, DOL officials said they included TAP counselors and state workforce agency staff and also veterans service organization staff in their pilot.</p>	<p>Generally followed</p>
 <p>Leverage resources and information</p>	<p>How will the collaboration be resourced through staffing?</p> <p>How will the collaboration be resourced through funding? If interagency funding is needed, is it permitted?</p> <p>Are methods, tools, or technologies to share relevant data and information being used?</p>	<p>The DOD pilot mostly involves transferring and analyzing data, and does not require collaborative staffing, according to DOD officials. DOL's collaborative mechanism is staffed with the associated personnel who are a part of the TAP and American Job Centers, and VA relies on the TAP interagency structure for staffing, according to officials.</p> <p>There is no central funding, according to DOD officials. Each agency has to provide its own funding. For example, they said that DOD funded the data system used by its pilot through a reimbursable agreement with the Army. According to officials, DOL's pilot was funded solely through annual appropriations.</p> <p>DOD officials also said that they rely on interagency support agreements to ensure technological capability with their partners and to authorize the release of service member warm handover data to VA and DOL. VA officials said that they rely on existing agreements, such as the Veterans Affairs/Defense Manpower Data Center overarching MOU, with DOD that allows VA to analyze pilot information and develop recommendations for its pilot. DOL also has a data sharing agreement with DOD.</p>	<p>Generally followed</p>

Leading collaboration practices

Key considerations

Examples of actions

Extent to which agency actions follow leading collaboration practices^a



Develop and update written guidance and agreements

If appropriate, have agreements regarding the collaboration been documented? A written document can incorporate agreements reached for any or all of the practices.

Have ways to continually update or monitor written agreements been developed?

DOD officials said that written agreements for their pilot collaboration are included in its pilot plan and in Transition Executive Committee meeting minutes. VA officials said they rely on their own agency's pilot plan. Existing agreements are also cited in the TAP MOU, which applies to all three agencies.

According to officials, the TAP MOU is updated every two years.

Generally followed

Source: GAO Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges, [GAO-23-105520](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023) and GAO analysis of information from DOD, VA, and DOL officials. | GAO-24-106248

^aWe determined that agencies generally followed the practice when we saw evidence that all or most of the key considerations we assessed of the leading practice were being followed. We would have determined that agencies partially followed the practice when we saw evidence that some but not most of the key considerations we assessed of the leading practice were being followed. If we saw minimal or no evidence of a leading practice being followed, we would have determined that the practice was not followed.

^bDOD's Enterprise Individualized Self-Assessment (EISA) pilot is a self-administered web-based tool that measures service members' transition-related readiness factors across nine multiple-life domains including: social and relational, sense of belonging, employment, housing, hope, financial, resilience, physical health resource knowledge, and mental health resource knowledge. The VA Transitioning Service Member Resource Connection (TSMRC) pilot is a program between VA and DOD to improve support to transitioning service members and allow VA to track and report when a warm handover occurs to VA.

^cDOL's Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot provides one-on-one career assistance to interested transitioning service members and their spouses at select military installations worldwide.



Agencies Generally Followed Leading Practices for Designing Pilot Projects but Did Not Identify Criteria to Determine Whether and How to Expand Two of the Three Projects



DOD, VA, and DOL generally followed leading practices for designing well-developed pilot projects.⁴³ While DOD generally followed all the leading practices, VA and DOL have not identified criteria to determine whether and how to expand their pilot projects to full implementation. A well-developed and documented pilot project can help ensure that agency assessments produce information needed to make effective program and policy decisions, such as whether the pilot should be considered a success. Such a process enhances the quality, credibility, and usefulness of evaluations in addition to helping to ensure that time and resources are used effectively. The five leading practices for pilot projects are

⁴³[GAO-16-438](#). To identify leading practices, we reviewed our prior work, which included a review of academic literature related to the design of pilot and evaluation programs.

establishing well-defined, appropriate, clear, and measurable objectives; articulating assessment methodology; maintaining stakeholder communication; developing plans to evaluate the results; and assessing scalability. Table 3 summarizes the practices and actions the agencies have taken to design their pilot projects.

Table 3: Assessment of Departments of Defense (DOD), Veterans Affairs (VA), and Labor (DOL) Pilot Projects to Refine Warm Handovers against Leading Practices for Designing Pilot Projects

Pilot project	Examples of actions	Extent to which agency actions follow leading practices for designing pilot projects ^a
	<p>Leading practice: Establish well-defined, appropriate, clear, and measurable objectives. Establishing clear and measurable objectives and researchable questions can help ensure that appropriate evaluation data are collected from the outset of pilot implementation so that data will subsequently be available to measure performance against the objectives.</p>	
EISA pilot	According to DOD officials, they established four researchable questions for the Enterprise Individualized Self-Assessment (EISA) pilot, including “What is the relation between the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) curriculum and the ability to mitigate life domain risks?”	Generally followed
TSMRC pilot	The goal of the Transitioning Service Member Resource Connection (TSMRC) is to confirm service member connection to VA. It will allow VA to track and report when a warm handover occurs. The VA pilot also has short and long-term outcomes, such as confirming and validating transitioning service member connections during the warm handover process.	Generally followed
ENPP	DOL established objectives and researchable questions for the Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot (ENPP) as part of its TAP Evaluation and Employee Navigation (TEEN) study. One question is “What is the employment placement rate for service members who see one of the pilot employment counselors, known as Employment Navigators, versus those who do not?” The data obtained to answer these questions will be used for the TEEN study. ^b	Generally followed
	<p>Leading practice: Articulate an assessment methodology. Articulating a methodology that can be used to evaluate a specific pilot includes developing a plan that details the types and sources of the data needed as well as specifying methods for data collection, including the timing and frequency of data collection.</p>	
EISA pilot	According to DOD officials, the methodology for DOD’s EISA pilot includes collecting data on service member demographics and scores by transition readiness factors, both at the beginning and end of the TAP. Data is also collected during tier assignment and warm handover activities. These officials stated that data are used for reliability and validity testing and analyses, such as correlational analysis.	Generally followed
TSMRC pilot	VA’s pilot plan describes the types of data VA is collecting for its pilot, such as TAP data on transitioning service members at VA pilot locations. For the longer-term outcomes, the agency plans to compare the results of the analyses to non-pilot locations.	Generally followed

Pilot project	Examples of actions	Extent to which agency actions follow leading practices for designing pilot projects ^a
ENPP	To measure the success of its pilot, DOL will collect employment outcome metrics from participants and match those data against data from non-participants. In addition, DOL officials said that they would analyze survey responses from the DOL pilot's clients.	Generally followed
	Leading practice: Maintain two-way stakeholder communication. Maintaining appropriate two-way stakeholder communication and input should occur at all stages of the pilot, including design, implementation, data gathering, and assessment.	
	EISA pilot	DOD established a military service-specific group to meet monthly to discuss service-specific IT and data concerns for its pilot, according to officials.
TSMRC pilot	VA officials reported providing weekly communications to all stakeholders on pilot results and activities.	Generally followed
ENPP	DOL officials said that they have multiple ways to facilitate communication for ENPP, including using the TAP interagency governance structure. For example, they said that employment counselors meet with installation TAP personnel to share information and resolve any conflicts.	Generally followed
	Leading practice: Develop a plan to evaluate the results. Developing a detailed data analysis plan involves identifying who will do the analysis as well as when and how they will analyze the data to assess the pilot program's implementation and performance.	
	EISA pilot	DOD reported using a mixed-methods data collection approach that enables the agency to monitor the EISA pilot's implementation and performance. Data are collected and analyzed by military service and installation. The analysis will include IT bandwidth concerns for users and stakeholders.
TSMRC pilot	The plan for VA's TSMRC pilot describes how the data analysis will be conducted. For example, VA will use call center data to determine monthly throughput and warm handover connections from pilot locations.	Generally followed
ENPP	DOL officials plan to use the TEEN study to analyze data from ENPP, including how warm handovers impact employment outcomes. In addition, DOL officials said they will consider the endorsements of interagency partners such as the military service branches, and that they are currently working with the service branches to develop an implementation plan.	Generally followed



Pilot project	Examples of actions	Extent to which agency actions follow leading practices for designing pilot projects ^a
Leading practice: Assess scalability. Developing criteria or standards to identify lessons about pilots helps to inform decisions on whether and how to implement a new approach in a broader context (i.e., to scale the approach).		
EISA pilot	DOD officials provided criteria for analyzing lessons learned including reliability, validity, and user experience. They also have metrics for determining the success of the pilot and whether it can be scaled to full implementation.	Generally followed
TSMRC pilot	VA officials stated that they will look at the military installations where implementation occurred and what resources, such as staff, might be necessary if they decided to scale up their pilot to full implementation. VA identified some metrics for determining success, such as the percentage of service members who are connected to VA and apply to use a benefit or service. However, they did not identify how they would use these metrics to determine whether and how to scale the approach.	Not followed
ENPP	According to DOL officials, they used service member satisfaction scores, endorsement from the TAP interagency group, and requests from the military services to determine whether to implement the piloted approach. They said they are now in the program implementation phase, but it is unclear how they used these metrics to determine the pilot was successful. They also said that the determination of how much to expand the pilot will be based in part on the outcome of the TEEN study, which is ongoing.	Not followed

Sources: GAO, Data Act: Section 5 Pilot Design Issues Need to Be Addressed to Meet Goal of Reducing Recipient Reporting Burden, [GAO-16-438](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 19, 2016) and GAO analysis of information from DOD, VA, and DOL officials. | GAO-24-106248

^aWe determined that a pilot generally followed the practice when we saw evidence that all or most aspects of the leading practice were being followed. We determined that a pilot partially followed the practice when some but not most aspects of the leading practice were being followed. When we saw no or minimal evidence of a leading practice being followed, we determined that the practice was not followed.

^bThe TEEN study will compare the employment outcomes of transitioning service members who have used employment services provided through ENPP to those service members who have not.

VA and DOL did not identify criteria that will enable them to determine whether or how to fully scale their pilot projects to the broader context of TAP and the warm handover process. Although VA officials said that they have some plans to determine what and how many resources might be needed to scale their pilot project, they said they will not execute these plans until the project is completed. DOL said that they are now planning the program implementation phase of their pilot project but it is unclear how they determined it was successful.

VA. VA officials identified some metrics for determining success, but they did not identify how they would use these metrics to determine whether and how to scale the approach. Further, they did not identify criteria to help determine how much staffing or funding might be needed if they chose to fully implement the pilot's approach. VA officials said they will collect some data on staffing, such as the number of full-time employees who are needed to field calls. They have also worked with DOD to increase the number of pilot sites to obtain more data on connections between transitioning service members and the VA call center. However, they did not base the decision to increase the number of pilot sites on criteria they should have established for expanding the pilot, rather they did it to increase the amount of data they were collecting for analysis. Gathering sufficient data is important, but gathering appropriate data is equally so. For example, data that can help evaluate outcomes may be different from data that documents what resources were used during the pilot, what resources are available agency-wide, and what data officials need to assess the costs and benefits of implementing the pilot's approach agency-wide.

VA officials also said that they plan to use the results from an analysis they are undertaking with DOD to determine future plans for the TSMRC pilot, but they did not provide specific criteria to determine how to scale this pilot up. VA officials said that a focus this coming year for the Performance Management Work Group will be to work on identifying criteria for the TSMRC pilot. By planning for future funding and staffing needs during a pilot, agencies can better determine their contribution and what might be needed to scale the piloted approach.

DOL. DOL officials said that they are now planning the program implementation phase of ENPP and that they are waiting on data that will help them determine what resources they might need to fully implement their pilot. They said they await the outcome of a related DOL study.⁴⁴ Although DOL officials said that they are planning the program implementation phase, they based their selection of additional military installations only on requests from the military service branches to participate in the pilot, rather than on specific criteria to obtain a broad

⁴⁴The TAP Evaluation and Employee Navigation study is a long-term outcome study that will analyze TAP participants' employment outcomes. It will compare the employment outcomes of transitioning service members who have used employment services provided through the Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot to those who have not. It will also enable them to measure the extent to which service members receive warm handover referrals to American Job Centers. DOL plans to match these data to National Directory of New Hires data on employment and wages.

cross-section of installations to help them decide on how to expand the pilot.

DOL officials said that they were waiting to obtain further data before considering scalability. However, they have not identified specific criteria for gauging success, such as what percentage wage increase for service members using Employment Navigators would be considered a success. To assess scalability, gains in service members' employment outcomes will need to be weighed against the resource demands of expanding the pilot and fully implementing it as a program. However, DOL has not identified resource needs, such as how many Employment Navigators it might need to fully scale the piloted approach.

We previously found that as part of their pilot design, agencies should include criteria for identifying lessons about the pilot to inform decisions about scalability and whether, how, or when to integrate pilot activities into overall efforts.⁴⁵ In addition, the TAP MOU calls for agency partners to coordinate on initiatives through the TAP interagency structure. As a partner with VA and DOL on the design of their pilots and lead agency for the TAP policy, DOD could have valuable insights about criteria for scaling the approach of the VA and DOL pilots.

Without identifying specific criteria to make decisions about expanding these pilots in order to fully implement them as programs, these agencies risk not collecting needed data to help them to decide whether and how to fully integrate the pilots. Without further coordinating with VA and DOL to determine criteria for expansion of their pilots, DOD could have difficulty overseeing scaling the approach of these pilots for the broader TAP program.

Conclusions

When service members leave the military, they may lose access to its housing, pay, health care, and camaraderie with peers who can support them. Without a plan for their future, transitioning service members risk experiencing homelessness, unemployment, food insecurities, or other difficulties. The warm handover process could help bridge the gap between military and civilian life for those service members who are least prepared for this transition. However, the process does not ensure that all those service members who should receive warm handovers are provided them. For those who do get them, the process does not ensure that person-to-person connections are occurring. Thus, some service

⁴⁵[GAO-16-438](#).

members may not receive the help they need and deserve. Moreover, without information on the helpfulness of warm handovers, TAP officials could miss opportunities to improve their services and to ensure they are referring service members to relevant resources. DOD, VA, and DOL have effectively collaborated and are implementing pilot projects that provide opportunities to refine the warm handover process and fill some of the information gaps. However, without criteria to determine whether a pilot project can be considered scalable, the agencies risk not having the data they need to determine whether and how to more broadly implement two of the piloted approaches.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making a total of eight recommendations—six to DOD, one to VA, and one to DOL. Specifically:

The Secretary of Defense should develop a written plan to analyze its available Transition Assistance Program data to identify reasons why transitioning service members who should receive a warm handover are not receiving one, and take appropriate action to collect additional warm handover data. Actions could include requiring Transition Assistance Program officials to provide an explanation when not providing a warm handover. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Defense should develop a process to regularly request updated online contact information from receiving agencies, including VA and DOL, to help ensure that Transition Assistance Program officials can connect service members with agency programs through warm handovers. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of Defense should develop additional guidance to commanders and their designees on verifying warm handovers and on recording the verifications in the Transition Assistance Program database. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with interagency partners, such as DOL and VA, should develop a plan to assess the helpfulness of warm handovers as a part of its overall assessment of the Transition Assistance Program. (Recommendation 4)

The Secretary of Defense should develop and implement a process to share information and findings on the helpfulness of warm handover from partner agencies with military service branches, including Transition Assistance Program counselors and other stakeholders. (Recommendation 5)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs coordinates with DOL and VA through the Transition Assistance Program interagency partnership to identify criteria and standards for the ENPP and TSMRC pilot projects to determine whether and how to scale the piloted approaches into the overall warm handover process. (Recommendation 6)

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs should ensure the Undersecretary for Benefits, Veterans Benefits Administration coordinates with DOD through the Transition Assistance Program interagency partnership to identify criteria and standards for the TSMRC pilot, to determine whether and how to scale the piloted approach into the overall warm handover process. (Recommendation 7)

The Secretary of Labor should ensure that the Assistant Secretary for Veterans' Employment and Training Service coordinates with DOD through the Transition Assistance Program interagency partnership to identify criteria and standards for ENPP to determine whether and how to scale the piloted approach into the overall warm handover process. (Recommendation 8)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOD, DOL, and VA for review and comment. We received written responses from each agency. In their written comments, reproduced in appendixes III, IV, and V, respectively, each of the agencies agreed with our recommendations and described actions they are currently taking or plan to take to implement them. For example, DOD plans to use TAP data to better understand when a warm handover is not provided by TAP officials. Additionally, VA plans to use a DOD assessment to identify budget requirements and resources to fund its pilot at all military installations. DOL also provided technical comments, which we incorporated, as appropriate.

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

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7215 or locked@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix VI.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dawn Locke", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dawn G. Locke
Director, Strategic Issues

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Objectives

The objectives of this report were to examine (1) the extent to which DOD ensures that service members receive a warm handover for additional transition assistance, as appropriate; (2) the views of stakeholders regarding the helpfulness of warm handovers in connecting service members with needed transition assistance, and the extent to which DOD assesses information on the helpfulness of warm handovers; and (3) the extent to which DOD and its partner agencies—VA and DOL—collaborate in their efforts to refine the warm handover process and design effective pilot projects.

Data Analysis

To examine the extent to which DOD ensures that service members receive a warm handover as appropriate, we obtained and analyzed DOD administrative data. Specifically, we analyzed available participant-level TAP data from the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) on active duty service members who separated from the military from April 2021 to March 2023, the most recent data available at the time of our analysis.¹ We did not include the Space Force given its status as a new organization.² We also did not include the Reserves, National Guard, or Coast Guard. Army data from November 2022 to June 2023 were unavailable due to data migration and not included in our analysis. We compared the available data to TAP requirements described in DOD policy.³ We assessed DOD's efforts to provide warm handovers using DOD policy and the federal standard for internal control that agencies use quality information to achieve their objectives.⁴

To determine the reliability of these data, we spoke with DMDC officials knowledgeable about the data and the system where they are housed, reviewed data dictionaries and other documentation, and tested the data for missing data and inconsistencies. We found the data sufficiently reliable for the purposes of describing service members who separated from the military during our selected timeframe. We did not independently

¹DMDC serves under the Office of the Secretary of Defense to collate personnel, manpower, training, financial, and other data for DOD.

²The United States Space Force Act established the United States Space Force as a military service branch within the Department of the Air Force, which is under DOD. Pub. L. No. 116-92, tit. IX, §§ 951-961, 133 Stat. 1198, 1561-68 (2019).

³Department of Defense Instruction 1332.35, *Transition Assistance Program (TAP) For Military Personnel* (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 26, 2019).

⁴GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#). (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

verify this information. Our analysis should not be used to draw conclusions about the service branches' legal compliance.

Site Visits

To obtain stakeholder views about the helpfulness of warm handovers in connecting service members with needed transition assistance and to evaluate the extent to which DOD analyzes information on the helpfulness of warm handovers, we conducted five site visits. We selected a non-generalizable sample of installations based on variation in geographic location, service branch, and the number of transitioning service members from April 2021 to March 2022. We visited five installations either virtually or in-person at the following locations:

1. U.S. Army Fort Riley (Kansas; Virtual)
2. Marine Corps Base Hawaii (Hawaii; Virtual)
3. Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton (California; In-person)
4. Nellis Air Force Base (Nevada; Virtual)
5. U.S. Navy's Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story (Virginia; In-person)

At these installations, we conducted interviews or held discussion groups with TAP managers, TAP counselors, commanders, commander designees, representatives from veterans service organizations, and representatives of American Job Centers near the installation. We held six discussion groups with TAP counselors. Each group had between two and five participants. We held five discussion groups with commanders or commander designees. Each group had between two and 14 participants. Participants in both types of discussion groups were based on availability and arranged by a military service branch official or the TAP manager for each installation. We used standard sets of questions for each type of discussion group, and we analyzed results to identify themes. Results from these groups are not generalizable to anyone outside the groups. At three out of the five installations, we also observed service members at their capstone meeting with a TAP counselor.⁵

Literature Search

For additional information on the helpfulness of warm handovers, we conducted a literature search. We searched several databases, including

⁵Capstone is the final phase of the TAP process. We observed service member's capstone meetings at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Nellis Air Force Base, and the U.S. Navy's Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story. We scheduled observations based on the TAP counselor's schedule and availability.

ProQuest, EBSCO, and Scopus, for academic material, government reports, work papers, and think tank and nonprofit studies that met our search criteria and that were published from 2013 through 2023, the most recent decade at the time of our analysis. We found no prior research on the helpfulness of warm handovers.

Assessment of Interagency Pilots

To examine the extent to which DOD, VA, and DOL collaborate in their efforts to refine the warm handover process and design effective pilot projects,⁶ we sent a request for information to each of the agencies with questions based on our prior work about leading practices for interagency collaboration and for designing pilot projects.⁷ We then conducted follow-up interviews based on their answers. We analyzed this information as well as information from other interviews with officials from each of the three agencies, site visit interviews, and documentation obtained from these agencies in order to determine the extent to which these leading practices were being followed for each of the pilots.⁸ We determined that agencies generally followed the leading practice when we saw evidence that all or most of the key considerations we assessed related to that practice were followed. We determined that agencies partially followed the practice when some but not most of the key considerations we assessed related to that practice were being followed. We determined that agencies did not follow the practice when we saw minimal or no evidence of a practice being followed.

⁶These pilots include the VA Transitioning Service Member Resource Connection pilot, the DOD Enterprise Individualized Self-Assessment and the DOL Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot.

⁷In September 2012, we reported that federal agencies have used a variety of mechanisms to implement interagency collaborative efforts, which can be used to address a range of purposes including policy development; program implementation; oversight and monitoring; information sharing and communication; and building organizational capacity, such as staffing and training. We noted that although collaborative mechanisms differ in complexity and scope, they all benefit from certain leading practices, which raises issues to consider when implementing these mechanisms. These leading collaboration practices were validated and updated in 2023. To validate and update these practices, we reviewed relevant prior reports and conducted reviews of scholarly and peer reviewed literature related to collaboration as well as interviewed senior agency officials and subject matter specialists. GAO, *Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges*, [GAO-23-105520](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023); and *Data Act: Section 5 Pilot Design Issues Need to Be Addressed to Meet Goal of Reducing Recipient Reporting Burden*, [GAO-16-438](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 19, 2016).

⁸For the leading collaboration practice of ensuring accountability, we did not include the key aspect of recognizing and rewarding accomplishments since this was not addressed by the agencies.

**Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and
Methodology**

We conducted this performance audit from September 2022 to March 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: Additional Data on Warm Handovers

Table 4: Warm Handover Receiving Agencies for DOD Active-Duty Service Members Who Left the Military from April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2023

Receiving agency	Number	Percentage of warm handovers provided
Department of Veterans Affairs	27,203	40%
Department of Labor	23,253	34%
Other	8,955	13%
Military OneSource	8,082	12%
Total	67,493	100%

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-24-106248

Notes: Percentage do not total to 100 percent because of rounding. Service members may receive more than one warm handover to more than one agency. These data do not include the Reserves, National Guard, Coast Guard, or the Space Force. Army data from November 2022 to June 2023 were unavailable due to data migration and not included in our analysis.

Table 5: Comparison of Service Members Who Did and Did Not Receive Warm Handovers for DOD Active-Duty Service Members Who Left the Military from April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2023

	Received warm handover		Did not receive warm handover		Unknown ^a		Total num	Total perc
	Num	Perc	Num	Perc	Num			
Gender								
Male	34,081	83%	186,932	83%	549	221,562	83%	
Female	6,917	17%	39,152	17%	114	46,183	17%	
Age								
16-24	22,647	55%	93,166	41%	113	115,926	43%	
25-34	13,150	32%	78,655	35%	197	92,002	34%	
35-44	4,334	11%	39,154	17%	71	43,559	16%	
45-54	789	2%	11,757	5%	21	12,567	5%	
55 or older	51	<1%	1,006	<1%	2	1,059	<1%	
Blank	27	<1%	2,346	1%	259	2,632	<1%	
Race								
White	28,311	69%	158,832	70%	411	187,554	70%	
Black/AA	7,986	19%	38,307	17%	157	46,450	17%	
Asian	1,422	3%	9,406	4%	42	10,870	4%	
Unknown/not applicable	1,188	3%	9,187	4%	28	10,403	4%	
Multiracial	1,279	<1%	5,896	3%	6	7,181	3%	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	432	1%	2,501	1%	13	2,946	1%	
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	379	<1%	1,949	<1%	6	2,334	<1%	

Appendix II: Additional Data on Warm Handovers

	Received warm handover		Did not receive warm handover		Unknown ^a		
	Num	Perc	Num	Perc	Num	Total num	Total perc
Blank	1	<1%	6	<1%	0	7	<1%
Years of service							
0-4	24,603	60%	103,652	46%	192	128,447	48%
5-9	9,721	24%	61,297	27%	330	71,348	27%
10-14	2,350	6%	15,202	7%	47	17,599	7%
15-19	551	1%	3,578	2%	10	4,139	2%
20-29	3,631	9%	39,608	18%	78	43,317	16%
30 or more	142	<1%	2,747	1%	6	2,895	1%
Paygrade							
E1-E5	33,783	82%	152,669	68%	493	186,945	70%
E6-E9	4,793	12%	46,578	21%	122	51,493	19%
O1-O5	2,204	5%	21,832	10%	35	24,071	9%
O6-O10	124	<1%	2,811	1%	5	2,940	1%
W1-W5	94	<1%	2,189	1%	8	2,291	1%
Unknown	-	-	5	<1%	-	5	<1%
Totals	40,998	15%	226,084	84%	663	267,745	100%

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-24-106248

Note: Percentages may not total to 100 percent because of rounding. These data do not include the Reserves, National Guard, Coast Guard, or the Space Force. Army data from November 2022 to June 2023 were unavailable due to data migration and not included in our analysis.

^aDOD data do not indicate whether a warm handover was received or not.

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Defense



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

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

Dear Ms. Locke,

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report, GAO-24-106248, "Service Members Transitioning to Civilian Life: Agencies Can Improve Warm Handovers to Connect Service Members to Additional Assistance", dated January 24, 2024. DoD concurs with the overall position of the draft report.

Enclosed is DoD's response to the report recommendations. My point of contact is Mr. Michael C. Miller who can be reached at (571) 481-7132 or via email at michael.c.miller.civ@mail.mil.

Sincerely,

REGISTER.JEFFR
EY.RAYMOND.104
6072339

Digitally signed by
REGISTER.JEFFREY.RAYMON
D:1046072339
Date: 2024.02.15 14:35:48 -05'00'

Jeffrey R. Register
Director

Enclosures:
As stated

GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED JANUARY 24, 2024
GAO-24-106248 (GAO CODE 106248)

“SERVICE MEMBERS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE: AGENCIES CAN
IMPROVE WARM HANDOVERS TO CONNECT SERVICE MEMBERS TO
ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE”

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATION

RECOMMENDATION 1: The Secretary of Defense should develop a written plan to analyze its available TAP data to identify reasons why transitioning Service members who should receive a warm handover are not receiving one, and take appropriate action to collect additional warm handover data. Actions could include requiring TAP officials to provide an explanation when not providing a warm handover.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department collects and analyzes TAP data to better understand warm handovers and will take appropriate actions to leverage data collections from interagency partners and across the Federal government to provide logic and understanding when a warm handover is not provided by TAP officials.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Secretary of Defense should develop a process to regularly request updated online contact information from receiving agencies, including VA and DOL, to help ensure that TAP officials can connect service members with agency programs through warm handovers.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department has instituted support and data sharing agreements with receiving agencies including VA and DOL. These agreements will be leveraged to facilitate regular updates to online contact information from warm handover partnering agencies.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Secretary of Defense should develop additional guidance to commanders and their designees on verifying warm handovers and recording the verifications in the TAP database.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The TAP Interagency Governance structure is developing a Military Lifecycle Course, along with a written Commander’s guide, to better educate commanders on the importance of verifying warm handovers and recording the verifications in the TAP database. These resources are designed to enhance the support provided to Service members transitioning to civilian life, ensuring a seamless connection to additional resources and assistance.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with interagency partners, such as DOL and VA, should develop a plan to assess the helpfulness of warm handovers as a part of its overall assessment of TAP.

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Defense

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Department leads the Transition Executive Committee, which has oversight of the governance for transition and reintegration interagency coordination. This includes the interagency Performance Management Work Group that leads holistic assessments of the efficiency and effectiveness of TAP aspects, including warm handovers. This commitment aligns with our ongoing efforts to refine and enhance TAP, supported by insights from recent studies and reports interagency partners aimed at improving the program.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The Secretary of Defense should develop and implement a process to share information and findings on the helpfulness of warm handover from partner agencies with military service branches, including TAP counselors and other TAP stakeholders.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The established TAP Interagency Governance structure ensures continuous coordination and information sharing amongst interagency work groups and the Military Departments. This structured approach facilitates a seamless exchange of best practices, findings, and updates on warm handovers, thereby enhancing the support provided to transitioning service members across all branches of service.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs coordinates with DOL and VA through the TAP interagency partnership to identify criteria and standards for the ENPP and TSMRC pilot projects to determine whether and how to scale the piloted approaches into the overall warm handover process.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Transition Executive Committee (TEC) operates under the Joint Executive Committee as outlined in the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (Public Law 118-58) Section 1805 amendment to United States Code Title 38, Section 320. The TEC is responsible to coordinate interagency efforts to identify criteria and standards for the Employment Navigator Partnership Pilot (ENPP) and Transitioning Service Member Resource Connection (TSMRC) pilot projects to determine whether and how to scale the piloted approaches into the overall warm handover process. The TEC will coordinate interagency assessment of criteria and standards for ENPP and TSMRC pilots.

Appendix IV: Comments from the Department of Labor

U.S. Department of Labor

Office of the Assistant Secretary for
Veterans' Employment & Training Service
200 Constitution Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20210
202-693-4700



February 12, 2024

Dawn G. Locke
Director
Strategic Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Locke:

On behalf of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) Report entitled *Service Members Transitioning to Civilian Life: Agencies Can Improve Warm Handovers to Connect Service Members to Additional Assistance* (GAO-24-106248). DOL has assigned the Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) the responsibility to respond to GAO's recommendations in this Report. The GAO Report contained one recommendation for DOL:

The Secretary of Labor should ensure that the Assistant Secretary for the Veterans' Employment and Training Service coordinates with the Department of Defense (DoD) through the Transition Assistance Program interagency partnership to identify criteria and standards for the ENPP to determine whether and how to scale the piloted approach into the overall warm handover process.

In preparing America's veterans, service members, and military spouses for meaningful careers, the ENPP continues to strive to help transitioning service members and their spouses outside of the traditional Transition Assistance Program workshops with the assistance needed to be successful in the civilian workforce. DOL concurs with this recommendation. Furthermore, DOL is committed to leveraging its resources and services along with its interagency partners including DoD that are available for transitioning service members, their spouses, and veterans.

Thank you for providing us with an opportunity to respond. Should you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact Brian Smith at dol.gao.liaison@dol.gov.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "James D. Rodriguez".

James D. Rodriguez, MA
Assistant Secretary

Appendix V: Comments from the Department of Veterans Affairs



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

February 29, 2024

Ms. Dawn G. Locke
Director
Security Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Locke:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has reviewed the Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report: ***Service Members Transitioning to Civilian Life: Agencies Can Improve Warm Handovers to Connect Service Members to Additional Assistance*** (GAO-24-106248).

The enclosure contains the action plan to implement the draft report recommendation. VA appreciates the opportunity to comment on your draft report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kimberly Jackson".

Kimberly Jackson
Chief of Staff

Enclosure

Enclosure

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Response to the
Government Accountability Office (GAO) Draft Report
***Service Members Transitioning to Civilian Life: Agencies Can Improve
Warm Handovers to Connect Service Members to Additional Assistance***
(GAO-24-106248)

Recommendation 7: The Secretary of Veterans Affairs should ensure the Undersecretary for Benefits, Veterans Benefits Administration coordinates with DOD through the Transition Assistance Program interagency partnership to identify criteria and standards for the TSMRC pilot to determine whether and how to scale the piloted approach into the overall warm handover process.

VA Response: Concur. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is currently piloting the Transitioning Service Member Resource Connection (TSMRC) at 30 installations. Of the 30 installations participating, the Department of Defense (DoD) is piloting the Enterprise Individual Self-Assessment (EISA) at 17 installations. DoD began piloting EISA in March 2023. The initial pilot phase will be completed in Quarter 2 of fiscal year 2024.

The pilot, in coordination with DoD, has provided VA with data to establish a baseline for cost and resource requirements based on throughput levels of warm handovers for scalability. The final report assessment (to determine requirements to scale) will be completed at the conclusion of the EISA pilot. DoD will share their findings with the Transition Assistance Program interagency partners, which will allow VA to identify resources and budget requirements to fund TSMRC implementation at all military installations. The implementation timelines are dependent on DoD findings of the EISA pilot and the level of funding required.

Target Completion Date: TBD

**Department of Veterans Affairs
February 2024**

Appendix VI: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

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

Staff Acknowledgements

In addition to the contact named above, Kristen Jones (Assistant Director), Paul Schearf (Analyst in Charge), Ulysses Altamirano, Yasmine Evans, and Linda Keefer made key contributions to this report. Additional assistance was provided by Bonnie Anderson, Vincent Balloon, Nicholas Bartine, Peter Beck, Charlotte Cable, Peter Del Toro, Meeta Engle, James Krustapentus, Amy MacDonald, Mimi Nguyen, Aaron Olszewski, John Sawyer, Paras Sharma, Michael Silver, Almeta Spencer, Rebecca Kuhlmann Taylor, Sarah Veale, and Adam Wendel.

Related GAO Products

Veterans Benefits: VA Could Enhance Outreach for Its Solid Start Program by Increasing Collaboration with Veterans Organizations. [GAO-23-105699](#). Washington, D.C.: January 5, 2023.

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

Military and Veteran Support: DOD Has Taken Steps to Help Servicemembers Transfer Skills to Civilian Employment but Has Limited Evidence to Determine Program Effectiveness. [GAO-22-105261](#). Washington, D.C.: February 17, 2022.

Military Personnel: DOD's Transition Assistance Program at Small or Remote Installations. [GAO-21-104608](#). Washington, D.C.: July 21, 2021.

Military and Veteran Support: Performance Goals Could Strengthen Programs that Help Servicemembers Obtain Civilian Employment. [GAO-20-416](#). Washington, D.C.: July 9, 2020.

Military and Veteran Support: Detailed Inventory of Federal Program to Help Servicemembers Achieve Civilian Employment. [GAO-19-97R](#). Washington, D.C.: January 17, 2019.

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