



TRACKING THE Transition

Because data is lacking on how well government programs help veterans after they leave the military, The Heinz Endowments is investing \$2 million in research to analyze the impact.

By Mark Kramer

Each year, about 200,000 U.S. military members leave the service, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office. For many, the unique challenges of transitioning to civilian life can lead to real problems, from being unable to translate military experience into later professional success and adequate income to suffering from emotional or mental health problems as veterans and their families seek out new community, housing and other resources.

Particularly acute difficulties can lead to real tragedy: Veterans account for nearly one in every seven adult suicides in America, with an average of 17 veterans dying by suicide every day in 2019, according to a 2021 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs report on veteran suicide prevention.

The U.S. Department of Defense's primary means of preparing service members for civilian life is its Transition Assistance Program (TAP), which provides training on how to transition, including instruction on

accessing Veterans Affairs benefits and other resources. Various federal agencies jointly operate TAP. A 2018 Congressional report with the most readily available cost totals found that the Department of Defense was spending \$100 million on the program, the VA approximately \$60 million, and the Department of Labor \$14 million.

In fact, a July 2020 Government Accountability Office report found that 45 federal programs exist across 11 separate agencies to provide workforce assistance to service members returning the country, and in some instances their family members also, at a cost of more than \$14.3 billion annually.

But is the military adequately preparing service members to transition into the next phase of life? Answering that question is difficult, if not impossible, due to a lack of research, several experts in the field said.

"There's not one system that all veterans are going to show up in after they separate the same way their whole existence is pretty well tracked by the Department of Defense during service," said Gilly Cantor, director of evaluation and capacity-building at the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University in upstate New York.

Some federal agencies do track outcomes for programs serving veterans, Ms. Cantor said, though inconsistently from one program to the next or not at all.

Neither is the TAP program itself evaluated robustly, according to Jeffrey Wenger, a senior policy researcher at the RAND Corp. In fact, the Government Accountability Office has released multiple reports in recent years recommending greater reporting and monitoring of TAP.

"The fact that [the government] rolled out a big program like this without doing much in the way of evaluation work prior to it kind of boggles the mind," Dr. Wenger said.

In light of this dearth of data, The Heinz Endowments has supported research at the Institute that examines federal programs serving veterans. A recent \$2 million grant to RAND supports a study by the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute. The analysis, for which Dr. Wenger is the lead researcher, will enable RAND to examine federal policies and programs serving veterans, especially in their transition experiences. The study also will



EVALUATION OR HAVING DEMONSTRATED EFFECTIVENESS IS A WAY OF HOLDING THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE ULTIMATE GOALS OF IMPROVING VETERAN WELL-BEING."



Eian Mitzrahi

Carrie Farmer, codirector of the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute

bring together researchers to identify policy priorities and develop a targeted research agenda and strategies that can support those priorities.

“Accountability through research” is how Carrie Farmer, codirector of RAND’s Epstein Institute and a senior policy researcher at RAND, described this work. “Evaluation or having demonstrated effectiveness is a way of holding the federal government accountable for the ultimate goals of improving veteran well-being and being good stewards of our tax dollars.”

Dr. Farmer viewed the gathering of both qualitative research and numerical data as critical for starting “this conversation about how we can better ensure a good return on federal investment in transition programs to ensure optimal outcomes for veterans.”

This research also could lead to the creation of an ongoing advisory panel of veterans that would guide policy decision-makers, Dr. Wenger said. RAND aims to share findings and targeted recommendations with leaders in federal government agencies, Congress, veteran service organizations, and the public by summer 2023, Dr. Farmer explained.

As a nonprofit, RAND does not lobby for specific policies, but the organization can make recommendations, and its researchers are frequently called upon to testify before Congress.

Rajeev Ramchand, a senior behavioral scientist at RAND and codirector of RAND’s Epstein Institute, emphasized the importance of not only having good data but also being able to differentiate data according to varied experiences, given the diversity of backgrounds among veterans.

“I hope what this research does is really show how we can support all veterans, that it takes into consideration the heterogeneity of the veteran population,” he said.

He noted that robust data sets can be refined and analyzed in order to help programs effectively deliver services for veterans. For example, RAND has found that service members that separate with an “other than honorable” discharge are at greater risk of suicide, especially within the first five years of leaving the service, than those who are honorably discharged. With this knowledge,



THERE IS BETTER DATA WITHIN THE WALLS OF GOVERNMENT. WE JUST CAN’T SEEM TO JAILBREAK IT.”



Sam Diephuis, GoodHuman Photography

Dan Goldenberg, executive director, Call of Duty Endowment

Dr. Ramchand said, suicide prevention programs can better target their efforts.

The Call of Duty Endowment has helped more than 100,000 veterans transition into “high-quality careers” since 2009 and has carefully tracked their outcomes, according to the Santa Monica, Calif.-based nonprofit. In 2021, Call of Duty-supported programs spent an average \$547 for each job placement, compared to \$3,083 spent by the federal government.

Executive Director Dan Goldenberg noted that research has revealed that success in job security can have a multiplier effect by easing burdens in other areas of life, such as health care, in turn lessening costs incurred by other programs or government offices.

An August Washington Post report found that one \$386 million Department of Veteran Affairs education program had helped only 397 veterans secure jobs. Mr. Goldenberg suggested that all veterans could be tracked through a single “dashboard.”

“There is better data within the walls of government,” he explained, “We just can’t seem to jailbreak it.”

The Social Security Administration, for example, could determine how much income every veteran is earning by correlating company payrolls with Social Security numbers. Mr. Goldenberg believes this information could be more reliable than voluntarily provided survey data collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“We need to move from unreliable opinion-based information to actual behavioral data that currently resides in government but hasn’t been published,” Mr. Goldenberg added.

Ms. Cantor said her program is piloting a model that uses the government data that is already available, even if it comes in different forms from different departments or agencies. The information is collected, combined and placed in broad topical categories in order to at least draw general conclusions about what the data reveals.

“While there’s interoperability challenges on the front end,” she said, “there are ways in the reporting side, on the back end, that you can kind of make up for it.”

Dr. Ramchand posed possible questions he would consider in order to collect the data he wants to have on how family needs affect veterans’ choices as they transition and what those choices mean for accessing services, which can vary by region.

“Are they really taking those things into consideration when they decide where they want to move? What does the job market look like in this community? What are the tax breaks [for educational benefits]? Are they being taught that at the TAP class? ... Supporting the families of veterans who are transitioning can really influence the outcomes we of the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute see for the veterans themselves.” **h**