STATEMENT

OF

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(MILITARY COMMUNITY AND FAMILY POLICY)

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
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OVERSIGHT HEARING

ON

COMMISSION ON SERVICEMEMBERS AND VETERANS
TRANSITION ASSISTANCE RECOMMENDATIONS

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Leslye A. Arsht has served as the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy since February 2006. In this role, she is responsible for policy, advocacy and oversight for all community support to service members and their families, including: quality of life issues; state liaison initiatives; child development and youth programs; military spouse career advancement; the off-duty education program for military personnel; tuition assistance; the Morale, Welfare and Recreation program; defense resale for commissaries and exchanges; transition assistance for separating service members; and family violence prevention and intervention. Her oversight also includes casualty and mortuary affairs and military funeral honors.

Arsht has been part of the under secretary of defense for personnel and readiness team since June 2004. Her focus since that time has been on education, military spouse career opportunities and employment for severely injured service members.

Prior to this appointment, Arsht was a senior advisor to Iraq's Ministry of Education. For nine months, she aided in the re-establishment of Iraq's primary and secondary schools, developing a four-year strategic plan and advising the new ministry as it began a national dialogue on curriculum reform. She was presented the Joint Civilian Service Commendation award by Ambassador L. Paul Bremer for her service. In June 2005, Arsht was chosen as the grand prize winner of the Good Housekeeping Award for Women in the Government.

Arsht's career in communications and education policy spans over 30 years. She has been counselor to now U.S. Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee during his term as the U.S. secretary of education; co-founder of a non-profit education consulting firm; and associate vice chancellor for news and public affairs at Vanderbilt University. She also served as a deputy press secretary and deputy assistant to President Ronald Reagan from 1987-1989.

A native of Houston, Arsht is a graduate of the University of Houston.

Executive Summary

The Department of Defense has made significant strides in implementing the recommendations made in the 1999 Congressional Commission on Service members and Veterans Transition Assistance report. In addition, DoD has implemented a variety of innovative new programs and initiatives to improve transition assistance for the total force.

DoD is working closely with the Departments of Labor and Veterans Affairs to assist separating Service members. A number of working groups and committees have been established to ensure that no separating Service member falls through the cracks. Together we have improved processes for delivering information to separating Service members, and for validating military credentials for use in obtaining civilian employment. All three departments have also worked to provide vital assistance to severely injured Service members.

Improvements have also been made to education benefits available to veterans. The maximum monthly allotment for Montgomery GI Bill benefits has been increased significantly, and new programs have been implemented by the Army to allow members to transfer benefits to their spouses if they choose.

We are making dramatic improvements to the Transition Assistance Program to meet the needs of our Reserve Components. DoD, with the assistance of DoL and DVA, is designing a dynamic automated web-based system for delivery of transition assistance and related information.

DoD remains committed to ensuring the best possible support for all of our separating veterans.

Chairman Boozman, Congresswoman Herseth, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the Department of Defense (DoD) Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

I feel it is particularly noteworthy that we come together today, sixty-five years to the day after President Franklin Delano Roosevelt proclaimed in a speech to Congress that December 7, 1941 was "a date which will live in infamy." As we all know, servicemembers of that generation measured up to the challenges then and it is quite apparent that their descendants continue to do the same today as they safeguard our nation's freedom. Today, as then, we require a great deal from our Armed Forces and I want to reaffirm the Departments' commitment to our separating servicemembers.

Returning to private life after serving in the military is a very complex undertaking. To assist them in doing so, we must empower servicemembers with the tools and information they need to fashion individual solutions to the challenges they will face as they return to civilian life. The Department of Defense, along with the Departments of Labor and Veterans Affairs, has worked to provide them a wide variety of tools, including the Transition Assistance Program, itself.

I am impressed by the dedication and willingness of our Federal partners to assist us in providing an assortment of highly desirable transition services. The cooperation and support we receive from the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Labor are better than they have ever been. I do not want to steal their thunder by discussing the specifics of their efforts, but just let me say that you can be truly proud of the manner in which the Departments of Labor and Veterans Affairs, the Military Services, as well as private Veterans' Service

Organizations (VSOs) have continued to enthusiastically support our veterans. Obviously, the sustained interest and support of this Subcommittee is also vital to our efforts.

I would like, at this time, to provide an update on the Department's implementation of the recommendations that were submitted in response to the 1999 "Report of the Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance." However, since the Commission recommendations were made seven years ago, and the world has changed considerably in the interim, I would like to address additional TAP and other Departmental initiatives that we have implemented, or are in the process of implementing, beyond the Commission's recommendations.

EDUCATION BENEFITS

Since the Report, several initiatives and new laws have strengthened the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB).

The GI Bill is vital to our recruiting efforts. Money for college ranks among the major reasons young men and women enlist. As of October 1, 2006, the maximum monthly allotment under the Montgomery GI Bill has increased from $528 per month to $1,075 per month. GI Bill enrollments increased from only 50% in its first year (in 1985) to nearly 97 % starting in the early 1990s and continuing at that level to this day. A total of 2.8 million men and women, from an eligible pool of 3.8 million, have opted to participate in the Montgomery GI Bill program.

Eligibility requires the Active, Guard, or Reserve member to serve at least two consecutive years on active duty. While a Service member who has met the requirement may use the GI Bill while still serving on active duty, it is primarily a veteran's benefit, thus, the program is administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

One very promising opportunity for military spouses was included in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000. This authorized the Service Secretaries to offer MGIB transferability to spouses of career servicemembers who reenlist or extend enlistment in critical skills areas. In July 2006, the Army announced the implementation of a pilot program that allows Regular Army enlisted Soldiers to transfer MGIB benefits to their spouses, if they reenlist to work in a critical skill area. The spouses' ability to pursue career goals benefits the families' financial stability while in the service and contributes to positive reenlistment decisions. Reenlistment is often a family decision made around the kitchen table.

The Department of Labor is also looking at ways to promote spouse employment, training and education as a significant contribution to the military families' stability. DOL has drafted a comprehensive strategic plan for military spouses that will begin to be implemented in the coming year.

As we move into the 21st Century, we must continue to build on the remarkable legacy of the visionaries who crafted preceding versions and improvements to the GI Bill.

TRANSITIONAL HEALTH CARE

The Transitional Assistance Management Program (TAMP) offers transitional TRICARE coverage to certain separating active duty members and their eligible family members. Under the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005, TRICARE eligibility under the TAMP was permanently extended from 60 or 120 days to 180 days. After the TAMP eligibility expires, members and eligible family members may choose to enroll in the Continued Health Care Benefit Program (CHCBP). CHCPB provides a conversion health plan similar to TRICARE Standard for a specific time (18 months) to all former servicemembers and their families who pay quarterly premiums.

VERIFICATION OF MILITARY EXPERIENCE AND TRAINING

Another Commission recommendation the Department has supported is to improve access to the Verification of Military Experience and Training (VMET) document (DD Form 2586) by making it available to eligible members through a VMET internet site. This document provides descriptive summaries of the servicemembers' military work experience, training history, and language proficiencies. The VMET document also includes recommended college credits to be awarded based on an individual's military experience and training, as determined by the American Council on Education (ACE), and related civilian equivalent job titles, when such information is available. The VMET Web site, www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/vmet/index.jsp, is available 365 days a year, and provides VMET documents on-demand. Since January 2003, over 1 million documents have been provided to current and former servicemembers.

The Department implemented the Commission's recommendation to use the Department of Labor platform to provide employment-related information for servicemembers and veterans. In September 1999, DoD transferred this responsibility to the Department of Labor. DOL established the DoD Job Search Web site (www.dod.jobsearch.org). This Web site provides employers with a link to transitioning servicemembers' resumes and access to job opportunity listings with military friendly employers for transitioning servicemembers.

CREDENTIALING

During the Preseparation Counseling phase of TAP, servicemembers learn where and how to access information relating to licensure, certification and apprenticeship. The Commission report raised concerns about credentialing as it relates to military occupational specialties and ratings. The Army, after doing extensive research, conducting gap analysis, and following a comprehensive review of the credentialing process, created "Credentialing

Opportunities On-Line "or Army COOL. This robust web site helps soldiers find civilian credentialing programs related to their military occupational specialty. It also helps them understand what it takes to obtain a credential and it helps them identify resources available to pay credentialing fees. This year, the Navy followed with Navy COOL.

The Preseparation counseling phase also includes a discussion of the Department of Labor's Web site, "CareerOneStop." One of the tools on this web site is the Credentials Center, which a Service member can use to locate State-specific occupational licensing requirements and agency contact information, information on industry-recognized certifications as well as the associated workforce education and examinations that test or enhance knowledge, experience or skills in an occupation or profession. These sites have been developed and improved through close partnerships between the Departments.

DoD and DOL have established a "Credentialing Working Group" to develop appropriate goals, objectives, and outcomes that will help remove credentialing barriers that some veterans and transitioning servicemembers face today.

THE FUTURE OF TAP

It is appropriate at this point to provide the Subcommittee with an overview of where we are with respect to TAP today and where we are headed in the future. Approximately 300,000 servicemembers have returned to the private sector every year since 2001. Of this number, approximately 90,000 per year are from the Guard and Reserve.

When TAP was initially developed in 1990, we did not design it with the needs of our National Guard and Reserve Components in mind. Their mission has changed dramatically since 9-11 and the requirements, with respect to TAP, warrant a fresh look.

To better meet the needs of the Guard and Reserve, DoD, with the assistance of DOL and DVA, has designed and will continue to enhance a dynamic automated web-based system for delivery of transition assistance and related information . This portal architecture will become the backbone of the updated DoD TAP process. It will enhance the current TAP. Usability, flexibility, adaptability, and individual customization are the keys to successful implementation of this new technology-enabled process. The goals for this system are to increase Service member participation and satisfaction. This portal will emphasize the important role of our transition counselors, while enabling servicemembers to access crucial information anytime, anywhere after they have completed the Preseparation Counseling Checklist (DD Form 2648 or DD Form 2648-1).

We are excited by the possibilities of this new Portal, which will complement and improve existing TAP services. Specifically, we will automate many TAP services, standardize TAP information, create an external communication link between TAP customers and service providers, as well as enhance the military-to- civilian experience.

We are updating our current preseparation guide for active duty personnel, and creating a new transition assistance guide specifically for the Guard and Reserve. This effort should be completed by the end of February, 2007. Both Guides will include traditional subject matter, but will also provide links to a wide variety of other transition-related Web Sites.

SUPPORT FOR THE SEVERELY INJURED AND WOUNDED

The Department is committed to providing the services and support required to meet the challenges that confront our severely injured and wounded servicemembers and their families. Since the start of the Global War on Terroism, there have been over 21,000 men and women wounded and injured in theater. Of those, just over 9,700 have not been able to return to duty

within 72 hours of the injury, and it's within this group that our severely injured – roughly half of this number (~4000) – reside. The fact that 11,000 do return to duty within 72 hours is a testament to the tremendous medical machine that we have in theater to tend to our wounded. Each Military Service has programs to serve their severely wounded from the war: The Army Wounded Warrior Program, or AW2; the Marine for Life Injured Support Program; the Air Force Palace HART Program; and the Navy SAFE HARBOR Program. DoD's Military Severely Injured Center (MSIC) is part of this effort to augment the support provided by the Services. The Center was established to make a long-term commitment and to fill the gaps and seams that may exist in individual Service programs. It reaches beyond the Department of Defense to other agencies, the nonprofit world and corporate America. What makes the Center unique is that it serves as a fusion point of four federal agencies – DoD, the VA, the Department of Homeland Security's Transportation Security Administration, and the Department of Labor – all serving under one roof united in a single cause.

For many, our role is seen as easing the rehabilitation and return to active service. For those whose service in uniform was curtailed by the injuries they sustained, we want their transition to civilian life to be as free of complications as possible. Additionally, we will help those communities across America that are prepared to embrace one of these returning heroes, with the hope that he or she will never spend a holiday alone, will never want for meaningful employment, and will never be left to wonder whether America has forgotten.

How will we accomplish these things? Let me cite just a couple of examples of how DoD with its partners at DOL and VA is making this happen. Under the Secretary of Labor's vision and leadership, DOL established the Recovery and Employment Assistance Lifelines (REALifelines) as a joint initiative among the Department of Labor, the Bethesda Naval Medical

Center and the Walter Reed Army Medical Center. REALifelines was designed to create a seamless, personalized assistance network to ensure that seriously wounded and injured servicemembers who cannot return to active duty are trained for rewarding new careers in the private sector. Today, REALifelines has been expanded from its initial two locations at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Bethesda National Naval Medical Center to four additional military medical treatment facilities (Fort Carson, Brook Army Medical Center, San Diego, and Madigan). REALifelines staff provides employment assistance to severely injured and wounded servicemembers as they transition back into the civilian community to fulfill their employment potential and dreams.

Similarly, the VA Seamless Transition Office provides benefits and services to those who are returning home from the war with some of the most difficult physical, mental, and emotional challenges. Through VA Seamless Transition, professional VA Benefits Counselors and Social Workers have been placed at seven military treatment facilities and the VA Vet Centers also provide readjustment counseling to those in need.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Chairman, as I stated early in my remarks, the collaboration and partnership between DoD, DOL and VA are at an all time high. Before closing, I want to mention just a few other examples of how we are working together to solve some of the problems for which this Committee has expressed an interest.

The Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs have undertaken efforts to assert and support collaboration and sharing opportunities by establishing three interagency councils: the Joint Executive Council (JEC), Health Executive Council (HEC) and Benefits Executive Council (BEC). The JEC provides guidance and establishes policy for the

full spectrum of collaborative activities and initiatives between the two Departments. The HEC works directly for the JEC and is responsible for implementing a coordinated health care resource sharing program. The BEC also works directly for the JEC and it is responsible for examining ways to expand and improve benefit information sharing, refining the process for records retrieval, and identifying procedures to improve the benefits claims process.

We also have the TAP Steering Committee, with representatives from DoD, the Military Services, VA and DOL. This committee, chaired by DOL, meets quarterly to discuss and address issues and challenges that fall under the transition umbrella. They work to find solutions, conduct pilots, and look for new initiatives that will enhance and improve our current transition program and the overall quality of life of all members of our Armed Forces. DoD also serves as an ex-officio non-voting member on the Department of Labor's Advisory Committee on Veterans Employment, Training, and Employer Outreach.

In conclusion Mr. Chairman, on behalf of the men and women in the military today and their families, thank you and the members of this Subcommittee for your steadfast support during these demanding times.