



The 82nd Airborne Division hosts a retirement ceremony for Sgt 1st Class Jason R. Cound and other retirees who all served over 20 years in the U.S. Army and served with the 82nd Abn. Div. during their career. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Vincent Levelev, modified by NCO Journal Staff)

# The Army's Transition Assistance Program Needs Assistance

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**R**etired Army Soldiers have a change of mission when they leave active duty. Their mission becomes to hire and inspire by helping veterans get jobs, inspiring youth to follow in their military footsteps and helping Americans better understand and support Soldiers and the U.S. Army (Department of the Army, 2021). However, the transition process to this next phase is challenging, forced and hurried. Daily duties and responsibilities sometimes must be placed on the proverbial back burner.

The Army's Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

currently manages this process. When enrolled, Soldiers continue to perform full-time duties while preparing themselves and their families to transition into civilian life. It is one of the most stressful times in one's career (Robert, 2018). Preparing for the future while balancing a full-time job is mentally challenging after 20 years of service. The warrior ethos applies not only to the battlefield but to how the Army transitions its Soldiers. Considering a Soldier's mental shift toward their new mission and the various requirements, medical and employment processes they must undergo, the Army can improve its current



retirement process by restructuring TAP into transition units that provide better support for Soldiers and their families as they transition to civilian life.

### Change of Mission

The Army says retirement is a process and not an event. The current process requires time, focus and effort to prepare for such a significant life change while fulfilling the present-day job at the unit. When retirement becomes an actionable idea for the Soldier, a psychological change of mission occurs. Without a plan and guide for the maze of policies and procedures, a Soldier is likely to overlook significant decision points, rush critical decisions and increase stress on themselves and their family. According to the Army's retirement planning guide, Soldiers should start reading and gathering resources and outlining a tentative plan at least 36 months before their last official duty day in the Army (Department of the Army, 2021). Retiring soldiers should mentally prepare themselves for the possibility of a new life outside the Army even before then.

### Current Retirement Process and Application

At 36-to-24 months before retiring, a Soldier should gather and read the retirement services handbook, pertinent Army regulations and specific installation

tend the actual retirement ceremony and hand off job responsibilities to their identified replacement. Specific retirement resources are available to the Soldiers and their family members at each benchmark.

### Retirement Planning Resources

The Army has invested a wealth of resources into TAP to assist Soldiers in the transition process. One such investment is the trained and certified Retirement Service Officers or RSOs. RSOs navigate these resources with Soldiers and are well-informed about the laws, policies and procedures governing military retirements, which can be confusing. RSOs are available as early as 36 months before retirement. Despite these resources, retirement still demands time away from the job and family to maximize success. Another resource is the Department of the Army's retirement planning seminar. This is a one-day seminar with retirement and other service providers who brief the next steps in the retirement process. Installations conduct these seminars monthly.

There are more than fifty TAP locations worldwide and a full-time virtual center. Transition counselors provide extensive transition support tailored to each Soldier's unique needs. Retiring and transitioning Soldiers work toward attaining identified

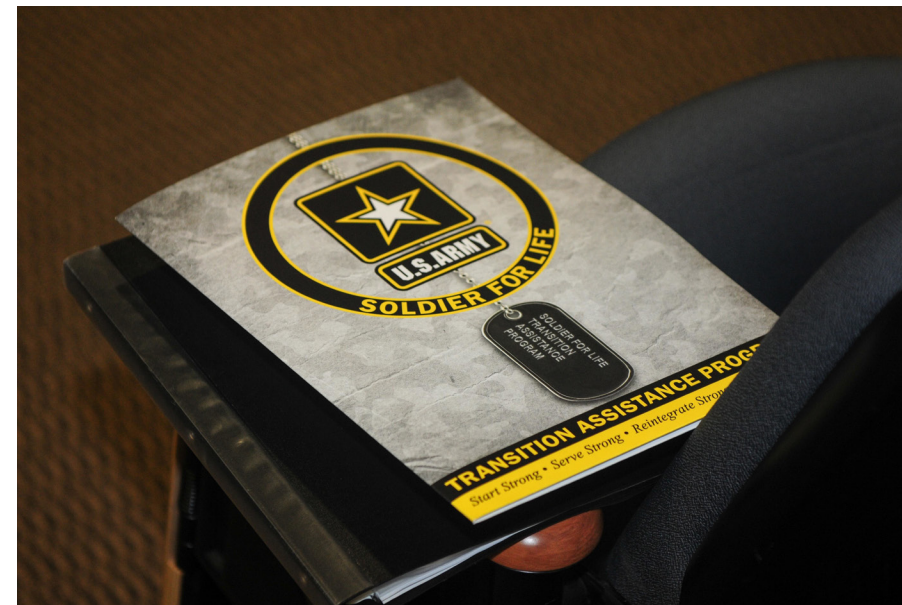
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procedures (Department of the Army, 2021). The retirement services handbook recommends Soldiers estimate a monthly living expense and build three-to-six months of savings to support their families upon retirement. Soldiers should establish a personalized timeline for retirement, highlighting major decision points. At 24-to-18 months before retirement, Soldiers and family members attend a local retirement planning seminar and schedule attendance in the local TAP brief (Department of the Army, 2016). Retiring Soldiers must identify decision points and action dates 18-to-12 months out. Doing so helps Soldiers actively seek new employment by building a resume and attending job fairs. Soldiers submit the retirement request, final leave plans and the pre-separation transition checklist twelve months before retirement. (Department of the Army, 2021). Six-to-one months before retirement, Soldiers at-

Career Readiness Standards (CRS) as they go through the program (Department of the Army, 2016). Various online tools and services exist, such as the Department of Defense Actuary Office and the Soldier for Life websites. Of all the retirement benchmarks, the medical process can be the most challenging and time consuming.

### Medical Process

Retiring active-duty Soldiers must complete a retirement physical at most six months and at least one month before the retirement date or the start of terminal leave. Retiring reserve component Soldiers only complete a retirement physical if they are on active duty (Department of the Army, 2016). A physical requires coordination with a local Military Treatment Facility (MTF) for appointments and referrals. Soldiers may have to seek medical and dental care for unresolved issues. Sometimes, Soldiers must hunt down



The Soldier for Life - Transition Assistance Program (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Latonya Kelly)

medical records of prior treatment received, as some may be missing for various reasons. Retired Army Sgt. Rob Patton states, "it is very important for Soldiers to document their medical stuff because when you retire, and you go through your retirement physical, if you can't prove something, you won't get compensated for it" (Knueven, 2021). Updating medical records and attending appointments and referrals to specialty care providers takes time, and the Soldier's job performance may suffer. Preparation for the employment process affects job attendance and performance.

### Employment Process

Even with thorough planning and preparation, most Soldiers cannot maintain their current financial lifestyle on a fixed income after retirement (Department of the Army, 2021). Soldiers should look for employment opportunities to supplement their income after retiring. TAP offers a variety of workshops. The Department of Labor Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition workshop is a one-day event that provides the basic knowledge and skills required to execute a successful job search. The Military Occupational Specialty Crosswalk is a course where counselors explain how Soldiers can examine military experience, skills, education and credentials. During the course, a gap analysis accounts for deficiencies between a Soldier's current skill set and the desired civilian occupation or goal (Department of the Army, 2021). This analysis and a vocational workshop must occur before retirement.

### Vocational Workshop

The vocational workshop is a two-day training opportunity offering a personalized assessment of occupational

interests and abilities to help with career development. This industry-standard assessment presents Soldiers and their families with tailored job recommendations (classified as either high-demand or high-growth occupations) that align with their interests and aptitude (Department of the Army, 2021). This thought-provoking workshop can be an eye-opening experience for Soldiers. Through various career considerations, Soldiers explore labor market projections, education, apprenticeships, certifications and licensure requirements (Department of the Army, 2021). These

tools demand a certain mental focus that is challenging to balance while serving in a full-time leadership or staff role.

### Unit Roles and Responsibilities

Transitioning brings on natural fears and anxiety about what the future may hold. Soldiers must perform within all their identified roles and responsibilities while balancing their emotions during retirement. According to the Army's retirement planning guide, Soldiers must prepare to hand over responsibilities to their replacement within six-to-one months of retiring (Department of the Army, 2021). Given the outline of the current retirement timeline and decision milestones, the Army asks Soldiers to choose what aspect of their life will suffer. Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 states, "Army professionals perform their duty, leading and following with discipline, striving for excellence, putting the needs of others above their own, and accomplishing the mission as a team" (Department of the Army, 2019a, p.25). Soldiers will continue to place unit and Soldier needs above their own, even with an established retirement timeline. As a result, the Army must refine the current transition process to better provide time and resources for the benefit and success of both the potential retiree and the Army.

### TAP Refined

TAP for eligible active and reserve component Soldiers is a commander's program managed through performance metrics (Department of the Army, 2016). Soldiers who have decided to retire should do a local Permanent Change in Station at 18-to-12 months before retirement to a unit that solely manages transition and

retirement services, like services provided at a reception battalion. The reception battalion is the Army personnel service support activity and major subordinate unit of an Army Training Center with the functional responsibility to process qualified accessions for assignment into the Initial Entry Training (IET) and One Station Unit Training (OSUT) (Department of the Army, 2017). Reception units establish processing schedules and orient the recruited civilian to Army life and policies.

A similar concept can fulfill the functional responsibility to out-process Soldiers through retirement, medical separation and even through the chapter process to prepare those leaving the Army for a successful transition to civilian life. Each large installation could establish one transition battalion to provide services and resources, starting at the 36-month benchmark and ending six months after the Soldier retires. Apart from resolute and personalized transition services, the transition battalion assumes command and control of assigned Soldiers until their last official duty day in the Army. The unit would include Soldiers approaching their Expiration Term of Service and those identified for medical disability retirement from the Army. The Army, the unit and the Soldier can benefit from this concept.

### Benefits All Around

This strategy reduces the risk of counterproductive leadership in an organization. Often, Soldiers have worked beside a leader with a pending retirement and how these competing priorities affected their ability to lead the organization effectively. A dedicated program/process would alleviate the stress on the potential retiree, removing expectations to balance transition and operational tempos while fulfilling expectations to lead and develop subordinates to achieve mission success. It would also allow units to focus on their operational mission and challenges without competing with the Soldier's transition timeline. This concept is in line with the 2020 Army People Strategy.

### Army People Strategy

People are the Army's most important asset. The 2020 Army People Strategy states, "Among those choosing to depart, transition them in a way that reinforces a powerful and enduring identity as lifelong members of the Army team, whether as civilian alumni of Army service or as Soldiers for Life" (U.S. Army, 2019, p. 8). A transition battalion is an excellent way to achieve this, as it fences the Soldier into a protected timeline with resolute resources and personnel for support. Relocating Soldiers creates a unit vacancy much earlier in the process, a vacancy the Army Human Resource Command can backfill through talent management, thus reducing gaps in filling vacancies. These new civilian

alumni of Army service, or Soldiers for Life, can transition to a new Army mission.

### Hire and Inspire

The mission for the retired Soldier is to hire and inspire potential recruits, as 50 percent of the U.S. population knows little about the Army (Department of the Army, 2021). With this dedication to transition services, the Army would gain lifelong recruitment assets in various retiree communities. As of September 2020, more than 780 thousand Army retirees live in the U.S. (Department of Defense, 2021, p. 39). There is an opportunity to make the transition process one of a Soldier's most positive and memorable experiences in their Army careers. The transition battalion would also be responsible for all aspects of retirement recognition.

### Retirement Recognition

Retirement recognition includes the Soldier's final award, evaluation reports and the retirement ceremony. Most installations plan, coordinate and execute quarterly retirement ceremonies. The transition battalion can assume this function and provide a more personal, memorable and intimate ceremony. The transition battalion leadership could also establish the rating chain and scheme for each Soldier as required. The evaluation reporting system publication states, "All Soldiers will receive an Officer Evaluation Report (OER) or Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Report (NCOER) within twelve months before the first day of transition leave. Retirement OERs or NCOERs of less than one calendar year are optional at the request of the rater, senior rater, or when requested by the rated Soldier" (Department of the Army, 2019b). This guidance alleviates the stress of duty performance and talent management in the final year of transition when it has a negligible impact on the career progression of the transitioning Soldier. These systems facilitate an easier physical and mental transition for Soldiers and their families.

### Mental Transition

Retirement is a stage of life with an avalanche of activity, emotions and change, which causes massive stress, worry and anxiety (Robert, 2018). A mental transformation is required to transition from training, deploying, fighting, and winning our nation's wars to permanently leaving that career and uniform behind. Whether it is medical or routine retirement upon completion of mandatory service, Soldiers can often suffer in silence as they attempt to navigate their quickly changing future and the next steps required to move forward. Veteran Administration statistics confirm that every day, 22 veterans succumb to suicide on American soil (Military Veteran Project, 2021). The transition battalion concept is much more than a

checklist of tasks and scheduling appointments. It can be a tool for mentally and emotionally preparing Soldiers for relocation and civilian employment preparedness. If a Soldier is mentally prepared or on a path for mental preparation, this will most likely extend to their family members.

### Conclusion

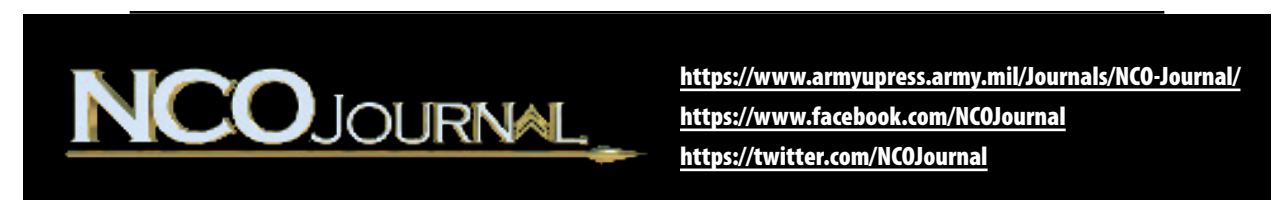
Retiring Soldiers deserve a successful introduction to civilian life, and the Army's TAP could benefit from improved structure, staffing and design to successfully transition Soldiers. Once a Soldier decides on a change of mission, many retirement planning resources are available to aid in the medical and

post-Army employment process, but not any extra time to use them. Full utilization of these resources and services suffers, as Soldiers try to balance the requirements of a full-time job with their transition into civilian life. By rallying TAP under the umbrella of a transition battalion on each Army installation, potential retirees would have protected and uninterrupted access to retirement services and resources. The Army, the unit, and the Soldier would benefit from this concept as it also supports the 2020 Army People Strategy. The Army must provide a more efficient way to manage transitions and motivate veterans to hire and inspire within their communities. ■

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