

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-135](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Thousands of Coast Guard servicemembers have left the military and transitioned into civilian life, and some of these new veterans may face significant challenges, such as finding and maintaining employment. To help them prepare, federal law mandated that DHS provide separating Coast Guard servicemembers with counseling, employment assistance, and information on veterans' benefits through TAP. GAO was asked to examine TAP implementation.

This review analyzes (1) the reliability of TAP data on participation levels for Coast Guard servicemembers and the factors that affect participation, and (2) the Coast Guard's performance measures and monitoring efforts related to TAP. GAO interviewed Coast Guard headquarters staff; surveyed 12 Coast Guard installations that conduct TAP (100 percent response rate); collected and reviewed participation data for reliability; and interviewed TAP managers from three installations selected for size and location, and 25 Coast Guard servicemembers at one location. (For a companion report on TAP implementation for separating and retiring servicemembers in other military services, see [GAO-18-23](#).)

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations, including that the Coast Guard issue a new Commandant Instruction establishing data collection policies, set TAP performance goals, monitor timeliness and access, and define roles and responsibilities. DHS agreed with all of GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-18-135](#). For more information, contact Cindy Brown Barnes at (202) 512-7215 or brownbarnesc@gao.gov.

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TRANSITIONING VETERANS

Coast Guard Needs to Improve Data Quality and Monitoring of Its Transition Assistance Program

What GAO Found

The United States Coast Guard (Coast Guard), which is overseen by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), lacks complete or reliable data on participation in the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), designed to assist servicemembers returning to civilian life. According to senior Coast Guard officials, a major reason why data are not reliable is the lack of an up-to-date Commandant Instruction that specifies when to record TAP participation data. Consequently, the data are updated on an ad-hoc basis and may not be timely or complete, according to officials. Federal internal control standards call for management to use quality information to achieve the entity's objectives. Until the Coast Guard issues an up-to-date Commandant Instruction that establishes policies and procedures to improve the reliability and completeness of TAP data, it will lack quality information to gauge the extent to which it is meeting TAP participation requirements in the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011.

According to GAO's survey of Coast Guard installations, various factors affected participation, such as servicemembers serving at geographically remote locations or separating from the Coast Guard rapidly. TAP officials and Coast Guard servicemembers GAO interviewed said commanders and direct supervisors sometimes pulled servicemembers out of TAP class or postponed participation because of mission priorities. TAP managers also said they rely on delivering TAP online because many Coast Guard servicemembers are stationed remotely.

The Coast Guard cannot effectively measure performance to ensure key TAP requirements are met because it lacks reliable data and does not monitor compliance with several TAP requirements. Further, the Coast Guard has not established a formal performance goal against which it can measure progress, although federal internal control standards stipulate that management should consider external requirements—such as the laws with which the entity is required to comply—to clearly define objectives in specific and measurable terms. Establishing a goal could help the Coast Guard define expected performance. In addition, the Coast Guard does not monitor TAP requirements regarding the timeliness of servicemembers' TAP participation or their access to additional 2-day classes. Consequently, it cannot know whether servicemembers are starting TAP early enough to complete the program or those who elected to attend additional 2-day classes were able to do so before separation or retirement, as required by the Act. Finally, the Coast Guard lacks an up-to-date Commandant Instruction that establishes the roles and responsibilities of Coast Guard staff in implementing TAP. Federal internal control standards stipulate that management should assign responsibility and delegate authority to key roles throughout the entity. Issuing an up-to-date Commandant Instruction that defines roles and responsibilities would clarify who is ultimately responsible for ensuring Coast Guard servicemembers attend TAP, thereby facilitating accountability.