Air Force assistance officers are still swamped with troops seeking help on their way to civilian life.

The Transition
After the Transition

By Bruce D. Callander

In July 1993, Air Force Sgt. Anita Smith left McChord AFB, Wash., with a medical discharge and a few butterflies in her stomach. Friends warned that her training and experience would count for little in civilian life, applying for a government job would be futile, and she would have to leave the Northwest to find any real opportunities.

Ms. Smith ignored the warnings. She stayed in the Puget Sound area, blended her military training with a master's degree, and landed a job with the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. She has since moved to another government agency—the Washington State Human Rights Commission—and plans to pursue another graduate degree from a university in the region.

The ex-USAF Sergeant credits her success to her own long-range planning and to the Air Force's Transition Assistance Program (TAP), a broad-gauged effort developed during the drawdown to help exiting servicemen and -women make the switch from military to civilian employment. Ms. Smith recalled that the system "helped tremendously," teaching her vital résumé-writing skills and interviewing techniques, as well as how to describe military experience in civilian terms. "That helped me get the job with HUD," she said. "My experience there and my master's led to the job with the state."

Ms. Smith's discharge stemmed from a back injury—not the kind of separation the transition program was created to address. TAP was designed to help the tens of thousands of active-duty members being moved out during USAF's long period of strength cuts. A blend of separation incentives and job-hunting assistance, the program was seen as a way of easing the anxiety of those whose careers were cut short by the drawdown.

Drawdown Nears an End

However, that specific need has greatly diminished; USAF states that the drawdown is about ninety percent complete. Force-outs are increasingly rare. In 1995, the Air Force held only one Selective Early Retirement Board, which forced out fewer than fifty officers. No SERBs are planned for 1996. USAF does plan to roll back separation dates for 300 first-term airmen and give early retirement to 650 officers and 1,000 enlisted troops. That is a far cry from the years when USAF moved out as many as 7,500 officers and 24,000 enlisted troops per year.

Even so, the transition assistance effort is programmed to continue through the turn of the century. Today, most TAP clients are members who, like Ms. Smith in 1993, leave the service for fairly traditional rea-

sons. Not surprisingly, critics in Congress have raised questions about the need to continue a program specifically adopted to take the sting out of the force cuts. Also not surprisingly, those Air Force officials close to the program maintain it still serves a vital purpose.

"We now see it as part of the personnel life cycle," said Judy Warner, head of transition assistance at the Air Force Personnel Center, Randolph AFB, Tex. "Unlike earlier programs, this one has its basis in law and has been included in [Pentagon] directives. . . . It has been pretty much institutionalized."

Why continue the program? One answer, said Ms. Warner, is that even with personnel reductions waning, many service members are separating earlier than they had planned. For example, both officers and NCOs still are required to retire when they reach the high year of tenure for their grades, which is coming earlier than expected for many. During the big drawdown years, Air Force leaders lowered the high-year-of-tenure points for airmen to stimulate more losses. Though the drawdown has pretty much run its course, the Air Force has not yet raised the HYT points to their former levels.

Other members also continue to leave under the Temporary Early Retirement Act (TERA), a Congressionally approved program that allows a uniformed member to retire with service ranging from fifteen to nineteen years. These retirees receive reduced annuities but can claim other retirement benefits. The Air Force will continue to use TERA to help carry out the last phase of the drawdown. Though such retirements are considered voluntary, they bring abrupt change for members. Many are still relying on Air Force transition assistance to help them find second careers to supplement their reduced retired pay.

Thus, say officials, the drawdown goes on, albeit at a greatly reduced pace. For that reason, they say, the TAP effort continues to serve its original purpose. Some argue that it can be justified for other reasons. For example, said Ms. Warner, some young men and women considering enlistment apparently view the assistance program as a valuable benefit. "It's a good recruiting incentive," said Ms. Warner.

Business Still Brisk

More to the point, transition assistance officers report that they continue to do a brisk business despite the drop in the pace of involuntary separations.

Arnie Chavez, the transition assistance manager at Kirtland AFB, N. M., estimates that attendance at his base's separation-related events in 1995 increased by more than forty percent over attendance in 1994, though involuntary separations were down. "As time goes by," Mr. Chavez said, "it seems as though the acceptance of the program and the need for it grow."

Transition assistance officers continue to do brisk business despite the drop in involuntary separations.

The transition assistance center at Kirtland is one of more than 100 such centers that have been operating at Air Force bases for several years. Cheryl Vollmer, who manages a similar center at McChord AFB, also reports a heavier-than-expected work load. "We aren't getting VSI [Voluntary Separation Incentive] and SSB [Special Separation Benefit] people now," she said, "but we have not seen a decline in our clientele. We are getting about 2,400 a quarter through the Employment Security and Resource Center and about 1,500 a quarter in counseling-type work."

The basic structure of today's assistance program remains much as it was during the heavy drawdown years, despite changes in types of separations. Its mainstay is a three-day seminar that all members must attend during the 180 days immediately preceding separation. After receiving this overview, Air Force clients can tap into a variety of resources, including individual counseling.

At Kirtland, Mr. Chavez said, much of the emphasis is on preparation for the move into civilian life. The seemingly simple task of writing an effective résumé, for example, has been refined to something close to an art form. "Nowadays," he said, "you have to think of the type of résumé you need to apply for a specific job. A generic listing of experiences in chronological order may not work. You need a functional résumé designed to appeal to the specific firm."

Kirtland transition officials attempt to review service members' résumés with the eyes of potential employers. In other sessions, clients participate in mock interviews. Afterward, the sessions are critiqued and clients refine their job-hunting performances.

Mr. Chavez said that the troops have to be taught how to put their military training and experience into terms comprehensible to a civilian employer. "We have to make them aware of how much they do have," he said. "Most service members have had some kind of leadership or supervisory position, but they tend to overlook that. That's an area where they need to realize they do have abilities that will help them in the private sector."

It was that sort of preparation that Ms. Smith said helped her overcome her separation jitters and concentrate on converting her service experience into assets marketable in the civilian community.

Equally important, say Air Force managers, is the recognition that military specialties are not always broad enough to satisfy the civilian world. Many separatees need additional training to bring them up to speed. "Some are willing to do whatever they have to as far as education is concerned," said Mr. Chavez, "from attending a vocational school to going to a university to get themselves into a whole new occupation. Others will take formal education to advance themselves in the areas where they have been working."

Starting Early

Either way, officials agree, early preparation is vital. At McChord, Ms. Vollmer said, "it has been rewarding to see that people are starting to listen and starting earlier. More people are going back to get more education. The earlier they realize the need for it, the better."

Ms. Vollmer puts a premium on long-range planning. While mem-

bers are not required to attend transition sessions until they are within 180 days of separation, she said, they can begin on their own even earlier. "If they can start doing some creative things even up to two years ahead of time, they are much better prepared."

Even those who did not invest in the GI Bill while in service still can get in on it when they separate. A late "buy-in" feature allows them to put up their required $1,200 contribution, and the government will add its share. For those who can come up with the cash, it might be a shrewd investment.

The Air Force program can provide impressive assistance to those looking for immediate employment. Under a program overseen by the Department of Labor, state agencies provide a number of counseling and job-hunting services.

At Kirtland, New Mexico's Department of Labor brings in people from the local community to make presentations about the job outlook. A representative of the Department of Veterans Affairs also comes in to explain veterans' entitlements and help members fill out applications for compensation or pensions. At McChord, the state of Washington maintains an on-site employment office. A Veterans Affairs representative comes in once a week.

USAF transition clients also are given access to an array of automated systems to help them review the job market. These have expanded in recent years. "We are doing a lot of hookups with different job nets and job information lines," Ms. Vollmer said, "so that we can get direct access to customers in resource centers. When clients find possible employers, we help them fax their résumés and applications so they can get a quick response."

Despite the availability of such automated aids, job-hunting remains a daunting task. Transition managers cite a number of factors inhibiting success, including government cutbacks, base closings, and smaller defense contracts. The national economy has yet to produce a real surge in hiring.

At Kirtland, Mr. Chavez said, "I believe things have opened up a little, but . . . it still is not that easy to find . . . [well-paying] jobs. . . . Those kinds of jobs are scarce."

At McChord, Ms. Vollmer said, finding work is "somewhat a matter of being in the right place at the right time." She added, "We see some people unemployed for up to a year and a half, and we see others who have jobs before they even separate from the military. It's a matter of a lot of networking, making sure you have current skills, and aligning yourself on the career path that you want to take."

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Public Service Pipeline

By taking specific types of jobs, early retirees who leave with at least fifteen years of service can earn their way to the full retired pay they would have received had they stayed in uniform for a full twenty years.

This is how it works: All early retirees must sign up with the Public and Community Service (PCS) Registry, a pipeline toward jobs in such fields as teaching, law enforcement, social services, public housing, and conservation. Early retirees are not required to work in these areas. For those who do, however, the program amounts to serving out the balance of a service career in another form of public service.

Some limitations apply. One is that the retiree must enter public service immediately after retirement or lose whatever time elapses between then and when he does enter. Another is that retired pay is not raised until the member reaches age sixty-two.

Being on the PCS Registry is no guarantee of a job, and government jobs in general are scarce. When openings occur, they are often filled by recently laid-off civil service employees who have hiring priority. Federal or state employment is not deemed one of the best bets for early success.

Most clients also are advised to be prepared to move to where the jobs are. Whether they want to do so depends on how much they value location. Mr. Chavez said that at Kirtland, located near Albuquerque, only about ten percent of separatees stay. The job market is not attractive.

At McChord, however, about half the transition clients over the past five years have chosen to remain in the Puget Sound area. Despite some difficult times during the defense cutbacks, the region still has a strong industrial base and several massive military installations, all of which have escaped base closing actions. In addition to those who separate at McChord and stay on, many people who retire elsewhere settle in the Northwest.

For most nonretirees, separation benefits are limited and finding jobs quickly is the imperative. Transition officials say that the anxiety levels of their clients seem lower than they were a few years ago, but some stress is still evident.

"I still have people say they are nervous, even those members who are retiring," said Mr. Chavez. "The transition program does have some avenues they can use to prevent them from getting too anxious and losing opportunities because of it."

Mr. Chavez said that the private sector is looking to the military for potential employees. "I'm finding that civilian employers realize that the experience and the discipline service members acquire are what the private sector is looking for," he noted. "For one thing, they realize that service members have security clearances, so [employers] don't have to spend as much time and money getting somebody cleared from scratch. We have gotten a number of calls from companies in the state that want to be listed among those looking for separating members." ■

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