

STATEMENT

BY

DINAH F. B. COHEN

DIRECTOR, COMPUTER/ELECTRONIC ACCOMMODATIONS PROGRAM  
OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR HEALTH AFFAIRS

REGARDING

UTILIZING ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE FEDERAL EMPLOYMENT  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

BEFORE THE

HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT, THE  
FEDERAL WORKFORCE, AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

FEBRUARY 16, 2011

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Members of the Committee, it is an honor to submit this testimony regarding the Department of Defense (DoD) Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program (CAP) and the program's efforts to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities with the Federal Government.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requires DoD and all other Federal agencies to accommodate the disabilities of employees and applicants for employment and make programs and activities accessible not only to employees, but also to other people with disabilities, including members of the public. In response to the Rehabilitation Act, DoD, in Fiscal Year 1990, established CAP, an innovative program to fund the purchase of accommodations for DoD employees who needed assistive technology to access computer or telecommunications systems. Based on the success of the program over the years, CAP has expanded to serve other Federal agencies and to provide rehabilitation and recovery-support services to wounded Service members.

CAP's mission is to provide assistive technology and services to Federal employees with disabilities and wounded Service members to increase their access to information and employment opportunities. CAP is a program in the TRICARE Management Activity, under the direction of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs. The goals of the CAP office to support its mission were clearly established from the start. Today, these goals have been augmented with the broader program scope, to include the following goals:

- ensure that Federal employees with disabilities have the assistive technology they need to do their jobs in today's information environment;

- support Federal organizations and programs to ensure equal access to DoD information and services;
- support Executive Order 13548, to Increase Federal Employment of Individuals with Disabilities, so as to achieve Federal agency goals of increasing the employment of people with disabilities;
- support managers to address the issues of a changing and aging workforce and help them retain employees when they acquire disabilities;
- support the Military Health System by providing assistive technology, and the ability to retain the technology, to wounded Service members during their recovery and rehabilitation;
- support Executive Order 13518, Employment of Veterans in the Federal Government, by working closely with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the Veterans Employment Program Offices to increase employment of disabled Veterans; and
- ensure that Federal agencies comply with Federal laws and regulations that require computer and telecommunication systems to be accessible to people with disabilities.

### **Pilot Program**

The CAP began as a pilot program with a \$10.7 million budget for five years, from 1990-1994. One of its original goals was to increase the employment of people

with disabilities in DoD's workforce. During this timeframe, CAP filled over 6,000 requests for computer and electronic accommodations for DoD employees with disabilities, helping with recruitment, placement, and retention of a more diverse workforce.

Due to the success of the pilot, DoD continued to support the centrally funded model with a budget of two million dollars per year. By centralizing the funding for accommodations, no manager in an individual DoD organization needed to worry about the cost of accommodations when hiring or retaining a person with a disability. Furthermore, by centralizing the expertise and knowledge, CAP staff was able to increase organizational impact versus the prior decentralized DoD model. These two factors have served the disability community extremely well by removing two significant impediments to employment.

The program has since provided over 98,000 accommodations for DoD and non-DoD employees with disabilities and wounded Service members who are recovering at Military Treatment Facilities. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 alone, CAP provided 2,482 accommodations for DoD employees with disabilities, 3,404 accommodations for non-DoD agency employees, and 6,138 accommodations for wounded Service members.

### **CAP Expansion**

On October 30, 2000, the President signed into law Public Law 106-398, the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2001, including 10 U.S.C. 1582 Section 1102, Assistive Technology Accommodations Program. This provision grants CAP the

authority to “provide assistive technology, assistive technology devices, and assistive technology services to any department or agency in the Federal Government upon the request of the head of the agency.” Today, CAP has partnership agreements with 68 Federal agencies, including the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, the Interior, Justice, Labor, State, Transportation, the Treasury, and Veterans Affairs.

### **Wounded Service Members Initiative**

Recognizing a successful model for centrally providing assistive technology to employees with disabilities, DoD expanded the scope of CAP again in 2004 to ensure that wounded Service members could access the real solutions they needed during rehabilitation to access computer and telecommunication systems. Furthermore, it was recognized by CAP and the medical providers that the ability to use assistive technology during the early phases of recovery can greatly improve rehabilitation outcomes and future employment opportunities.

CAP’s Wounded Service Members Initiative is designed to cover Active Duty Service members, to include Guard or Reserve who are on active duty orders, to include Title 10 orders. The initiative operated exactly as others in the past, until Public Law 109-364 was enacted on October 17, 2006. This statute allows Service members to keep the assistive technology that CAP provides them upon separation. On September 9, 2008, DoD Instruction (DoDI) 6025.22, “Assistive Technology for Wounded Service Members,” was signed, establishing policy for assistive technology programs in the

Military Health System. The DoDI secures CAP's eligibility to provide assistive technology to Service members and allows Service members to retain the equipment after separation from service, enabling them to pursue education and employment opportunities. CAP works closely with medical providers, therapists, case managers, family members, and wounded Service members to ensure that they receive appropriate assistive technology for their needs.

### **Needs Assessment Services**

In order to best determine what assistive technology may increase productivity for an employee, CAP provides individual needs assessments and evaluations. This process is conducted in a variety of manners to ensure that the customer's functional limitations are reviewed while considering the required job duties. In comparing the two, CAP staff members recommend assistive technologies that will bridge the gap between functional limitations and job requirements. The needs assessment can be part of a larger iterative process and may include a team of individuals, including a supervisor, reasonable accommodations coordinator, information technology support staff, and other key individuals. The CAP accommodations experts work closely with the employee or Service member to assist him or her in selecting the technology that best suits his or her needs. To do so, CAP has designed several avenues to ensure successful assessment experiences.

### *CAP Technology Evaluation Center (CAPTEC)*

CAPTEC, located in the Pentagon, is a state-of-the art demonstration and assessment facility. Since its inception in 1995, CAPTEC has provided services to approximately 27,000 customers. People seeking solutions to accessibility issues can see a variety of equipment and software, compare solutions, and ensure that the assistive technology will be compatible with their current information environment. This facility also enables managers to see how assistive technology removes barriers for people with disabilities, and is key for helping agency leaders develop new strategies for improving disability employment outcomes. These services are also available to Pentagon visitors and via video teleconference. In FY 2010, services were provided to 856 DoD employees, 896 non-DoD Federal employees, and 129 employees from non-governmental organizations.

### *Remote Assessment Services*

Because many employees do not have access to CAPTEC, CAP provides needs assessments via telephone and the online accommodation process. These alternate assessment options are tapped by thousands of employees each year and help them select the most appropriate accommodation(s) for their disabling condition(s). The online process was recognized in December 2008, when CAP was honored with the 2008 President's Quality Award for Management Excellence. This award, given to Executive Branch agencies, was given to CAP for expanding electronic government and using online tools to assess and accommodate Federal employees with disabilities and wounded

Service members. In FY 2010, 2,364 requests for accommodations were submitted via CAP's online needs assessment.

In many cases, CAP recommends individuals to visit a local independent living center or assistive technology center to ensure full awareness of the assistive technologies available to meet their work needs. At times, CAP also purchases needs-assessment services from vendors to ensure that a professional recommendation is available and supports an agency's reasonable accommodation procedures that need documentation.

### **Assistive Technology Services**

Once the needs assessment is conducted, employees and Service members are prepared to select the most reasonable and appropriate accommodation. The types of assistive technology and accommodations supplied by the CAP office are generally grouped into five categories:

- equipment for people with dexterity disabilities, including alternative keyboards, input devices, and voice-recognition software;
- equipment for people with hearing loss, including assistive listening devices, personal amplification systems, text telephones, videophones, and captioning services;
- equipment for people with vision loss, including screen readers, Braille terminals, magnification software, and closed circuit televisions (CCTVs);
- equipment for people with communication disabilities, including augmentative communication boards and other text-to-speech devices; and,



- equipment for people with cognitive impairments, including cueing and memory aids, literacy software, and screen readers.

CAP also provides installation, integration, and training support services to ensure that customers are able to fully use the potential of the devices. At times, this includes providing sign language interpreting services, personal assistant services, and other accommodations to ensure full access to training.

### **Barriers to Improving Employment Outcomes**

Since its establishment in 1990, CAP has worked with several Administrations and leaders on initiatives to improve employment outcomes for Federal employees with disabilities and disabled veterans. It is clear that a holistic strategy must be implemented in order to remove the remaining barriers to positive outcomes. CAP, as a centrally funded and staffed model, removes the cost of accommodations as a barrier for many employees with disabilities. CAP's approach to providing accommodations throughout the employment lifecycle has helped in removing more barriers, from recruitment and placement, through training, promotion, and retention. CAP is able to support employees and other agencies' initiatives to help increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities with the following programs:

- *Workforce Recruitment Program for College Students with Disabilities*: Co-sponsored by DoD and the Department of Labor (DOL), this program provides summer internships for post-secondary students with disabilities at a variety of

Federal agencies. CAP provides assistive technology for summer interns at no cost to the employing agency, to increase accessibility and productivity.

- *Telework*: CAP provides assistive technology, computers, and all-in-one printing devices for employees with disabilities who use Telework as a form of reasonable accommodation. Telework allows employers to retain valuable employees while decreasing the costs associated with disability leave. CAP works closely with the Administration and the General Services Administration on implementing Telework solutions for employees with disabilities. In FY 2010, CAP provided 173 Telework accommodations.
- *Workers' Compensation*: CAP assists employees with disabilities who have filed a Workers' Compensation claim in their return to work. To assist in lowering the cost, CAP examines case reviews and introduces the needs-assessment process to assist employees in finding unique methods of working in a modified, improved, and more productive environment. CAP provides the assistive technology that will replicate an individual's work environment in an alternative location while in recovery. In FY 2010 alone, CAP provided 265 Workers' Compensation accommodations.
- *Work-Life Wellness*: CAP is also committed to preventing injuries that occur within the workplace through preventative techniques and accommodating injuries when they do occur. In FY 2010, CAP conducted over 32 onsite ergonomic evaluations for employees to help them avoid musculo-skeletal disorders and to identify potential accommodations when necessary. CAP has taken a proactive

approach by educating Federal employees on the prevention of repetitive stress injuries that can result from work areas that lack proper ergonomic configuration. The information and resources that CAP provides can ultimately increase employee productivity and minimize the potential of work-related injury.

As employment barriers are removed via reasonable accommodations, it is important to note that two significant barriers remain: *attitudinal barriers* and *information technology systems barriers*. The opportunity to address these barriers across the Federal sector is available through two initiatives: Executive Order 13548, to increase employment of individuals with disabilities, and through a proposed refresh of the accessibility standards of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. In addition, with respect to information technology systems barriers, each Federal employer has an opportunity to ensure that any reasonable accommodation(s) that it provides to an employee with a disability is fully compliant with the requirements of section 501 and section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, as applied to each individual employee with a disability.

Another critical area to removing employment barriers is a need to improve access to information and services. CAP addresses this challenge by providing online information and services and providing communications to stakeholders in a variety of accessible and user-friendly formats. CAP's website, <http://cap.tricare.mil>, centralizes information on assistive technology, assessments, employment resources, and more. The website also contains video testimonials of Federal employees and wounded Service members, highlighting how assistive technology empowers their employment and

productivity. CAP also provides assistive technology and disability employment information through a monthly newsletter; a national electronic mailing list; FaceBook, Twitter, and YouTube social media accounts; and partnerships with Federal and non-governmental agencies that distribute CAP content, including Disability.Gov.

### **CAP's Way Ahead**

CAP's vision is to increase the employment of people with disabilities and disabled Veterans by ensuring that they have access to accommodations throughout DoD and the rest of the Federal Government. As the nation faces challenges with economic recovery, homeland security, and wars in multiple theaters, CAP provides a vital resource to ensure that Federal employees with disabilities and disabled veterans have the tools they need to do their demanding jobs. Furthermore, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau, the aging population will have a dramatic impact on disability in America. By 2050, 25 to 30 percent of the U.S. population will be over the age of 60 and household disability will become part of everyday experience for Americans. CAP will be a partner in the Federal effort to improve workplace conditions for both employees who are aging and employees with disabilities. In this regard, CAP will continue to be a resource for agencies in their assistive technology accommodation needs and help ensure the Federal Government is a model employer of people with disabilities.

In March 2010, CAP partnered with OPM, DOL, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to provide training for over 500 individuals in Washington, DC. This event, "Call to Action: Hiring People with Disabilities," targeted both disability employment specialists and human resource specialists. Building on the

success of this event, OPM, EEOC, and CAP continue to partner today, including recent training for 400 individuals regarding Executive Order 13548. CAP's role in support of the Executive Order is clear as OPM's guidance, published on November 8, 2010, described CAP as an innovative approach to provide reasonable accommodation and charged agencies to establish and/or continue their partnerships with CAP. These training sessions are being modified by OPM, EEOC, and CAP and will be delivered at Federal Executive Boards across the country. CAP is also working to ensure that the training sessions are available via webinars to allow Federal personnel to access the information from anywhere in the world.

Recognizing the federal human resource and information technology processes and systems need to change, CAP will continue to break down employment barriers by providing needs assessments and assistive technologies while working to educate other sectors on the reasons and changes needed in their work to truly create a model employment environment for people with disabilities.

## **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman, DoD continues to perform exceptional assistive technology accommodation support services for Federal employees with disabilities and wounded Service members. Our efforts demonstrate DoD's obligation and dedication to improve the employment opportunities for employees with disabilities and disabled veterans. I am proud of the work CAP has done over our 20 years of disability accommodation service. We need to continue to work together to truly become a model employer so that employees with disabilities can access employment, information, and opportunities at the

same level of their non-disabled peers. I look forward to working with my Federal partners and you to help achieve the goal of becoming an employer of choice.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today.

[END]