

## Military Spouse Employment

*Military spouses must sacrifice their careers to accommodate the rigid demands of their service member's profession. Though confronted by different issues than veterans, their concerns are no less significant to our communities. Frequent relocation makes it difficult to progress in a career, and deployment leaves many spouses to balance their jobs and families with little or no aid. Misunderstanding on the part of employers, who often fear that the exigencies of military life will impact the work environment, further compounds their difficulties. In order to provide for our military spouses and strengthen our communities, we must resolve these employment problems.*

### Overview

Spouses represent a significant population within the military and veteran community. Many are well-educated and desirous of work, but unable to find it. Unemployment and under-employment rates are significantly higher when compared to their civilian counterparts. Employers may be wary of hiring military spouses due to common misconceptions about their reliability and frequent relocations. Complicating matters further, many of the most common spousal careers, such as those in education and nursing, require spouses to navigate a cumbersome web of state licensing requirements whenever they move.

- There are approximately 710,000 active duty spouses, 93 percent of whom are female; an additional 500,000 spouses are married to a Reservist or National Guardsman
  - 84 percent have some college education; 25 percent hold an undergraduate degree; and 10 percent hold a postgraduate degree
  - 77 percent of spouses report that they want or need to work<sup>i</sup>
  - 38 percent of military spouses are under-employed, compared to approximately 6 percent rate for civilian spouses
  - Only 19 percent of military spouses have adequate full-time employment<sup>ii</sup>

### *The Salary Gap*

Military spouses tend to earn significantly less than their equally qualified civilian counterparts.

- Military spouses face an average wage deficit of 42 percent compared to equally experienced non-military workers
  - Among those who had relocated within a year of the study, the wage gap rose to 47 percent
  - The wage differential varies with education, from a low of 23.6 percent for those with a postgraduate degree to a high of 30.6 percent for those with some college, but no degree
- The overall gap between civilian and military spouses employed full-time was 25 percent<sup>iii</sup>

### *Benefits to Employers*

Military spouses are among the most educated, adaptable and dedicated workers in the nation. Yet, despite their eminent qualifications, many employers are skeptical, fearing that the exigencies of military life will impose on the work environment or that spouses will leave within months.

- Despite common misconceptions, military spouses tend to hold the same job for the duration of their service member's assignment, usually two to four years – a significant step beyond the average turnover in the private sector, which hovers around 15 months
- Military spouses are exceptionally resilient due to their frequent transitions and are excellent workers in high-stress environments
- The vast majority of spouses utilize military health and dental care, saving their employers the cost of some benefits<sup>iv</sup>
- Military spouses have access to education benefits, such as the Military Spouses Career Advancement Account (MyCAA), that help offset fees usually paid by employers for retraining or education
- The Military Spouse Employment Partnership provides an extensive listing of employment opportunities for the husbands and wives of service members across the country

#### Existing Services

The difficulties facing military families, and particularly spouses, have gained increasing national attention in recent years. A bevy of governmental and nonprofit organizations aim to support the family and enact favorable policies.

- Joining Forces, a national initiative led by first lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden, has galvanized communities across the country
- Federal hiring initiatives such as the Noncompetitive Appointing Authority of Certain Military Spouses, Overseas Family Member Appointment, Noncompetitive Appointment for Family Members and the Derived Veterans Preference provide specific avenues for spouses to find federal jobs
- In order to address the lack of career portability symptomatic of state-specific licensing requirements, some states have begun to adopt alternative licensing arrangements or have instituted license reciprocity agreements<sup>v</sup>
- The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) has been expanded in recent years to provide up to 26 weeks of leave to the family of wounded service members, as well as up to 12 weeks of leave for employees whose spouses, children or parents are deploying due to a “qualifying emergency” as defined by the Department of Labor<sup>vi</sup>
- The Department of Defense sponsored Career Advancement Accounts (MyCAA) program will provide up to \$4,000 of financial assistance for military spouses who are pursuing degree programs, licenses or credentials leading to employment in portable career fields<sup>vii</sup>

#### How You Can Help

Military spouses bring immense value to their communities. They are hard-working, well-educated and devoted employees. That they face difficulty finding work is a disservice not just to thousands of military spouses, but also to the communities in which they live and serve. Employing military spouses is not mere charity. By improving their ability to find employment, communities gain diligent, hard-working employees, broaden the tax base and contribute to the strengthening of our military families.

Military spouses often sacrifice their careers in service of our nation. While the employment challenges they face differ from veterans, the import of their struggle is no less. Too often

employers fundamentally misunderstand the demands of military life. As a result, many military spouses are unemployed or under-employed, unable to find a career commensurate with their education and talents. Arcane, state-specific licensing requirements for careers in many popular industries further complicate the issue of military spouse employment.

The Promising Practices in the following section have been designed to fill the gaps in communities across the country. Each targets an area of the employment problem that is both sweeping and easily remediable, such as hosting job fairs, identifying military-friendly practices for employers, and conducting an annual media campaign geared towards employers and the military community. By undertaking these practices, communities will be able to simultaneously support their service members, veterans and families; increase their taxable workforce; and provide a new hope to some of the most valuable members of modern society.

### Quotes

“[Military spouses] face employment challenges of their own, because it’s hard to build seniority at a job when you have to move every couple of years. It’s hard to sustain a career when you have to keep meeting new state licensing and certification requirements. It’s hard to impress employers who often view a resume with multiple jobs as a red flag rather than as a reality of military life.”

– First lady Michelle Obama at the Clinton Global Initiative Annual Meeting, Sept. 23, 2010

### References:

<sup>i</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. (2011). *Strengthening our military families: Meeting America’s commitment*. Retrieved from

[http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2011/0111\\_initiative/strengthening\\_our\\_military\\_january\\_2011.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2011/0111_initiative/strengthening_our_military_january_2011.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Lim, N. & Schulker, D. (2010). *Measuring underemployment among military spouses*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation.

<sup>iii</sup> Kniskern, M.K., & Segal, D.R. (2010). *Mean wage differences between civilian and military wives*. College Park, MD: RAND Corporation.

<sup>iv</sup> Military Spouse Corporate Career Network. (2011). *Six reasons why companies should hire military spouses*. Blue Star Families. Retrieved from <http://www.bluestarfam.org/blog/view/six-reasons-to-hire-milspouse>

<sup>v</sup> National Military Family Association. (2011). *Spouse unemployment*. Retrieved from <http://www.militaryfamily.org/get-info/support-family/spouse-employment/>

<sup>vi</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, (2011). *Military family leave provisions of the FMLA*. Washington, DC: Retrieved from <http://www.dol.gov/whd/fmla/finalrule/MilitaryFAQs.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> Military.com. (2010). *Military spouse career advancement accounts*. Retrieved from <http://www.military.com/education/content/money-for-school/military-spouse-career-advancement-accounts-financial-aid.html>