

Military spouses face high unemployment rate; new Maryland policy aims to help



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Military spouses face an unemployment rate five times higher than the rest of the country, but a new [Maryland law](#) may offer some relief. The legislation taking effect later this year aims to make it easier for military spouses, active-duty members and veterans to get jobs requiring occupational licenses.

“They have tremendous pressures on their family, and then if the spouse can’t work in a profession that they’re trained to, that puts more financial burden on their family,” said state Sen. [Bryan Simonaire](#), bill sponsor and a Republican representing Anne Arundel County. “This has been a national issue with military families.”

The legislation aims to break down one barrier to employment, but military spouses and advocates said there are other problems spouses run into when looking for a job. These issues include the frequent moves making job searches common and military spouses less-attractive candidates to some companies. Some military spouses, advocates said, also choose to not return to work due to high costs of childcare where their spouse is based.

“That constant challenge of having to prove yourself ... oh, my goodness, it’s a lot. ... Every three or four years restarting,” said Yolanda Rayford, president of Blue Star Families Maryland and a former military spouse. “You have to restart economically, you have to restart your career. So this bill, when I was a military spouse, would have been invaluable.”

The legislation

The [Maryland General Assembly](#) unanimously passed legislation earlier this year to make more than 100 professional licenses easier to obtain in Maryland for members of the military and their spouses transferred to the state who have these licenses in other states.

The bill, effective in October, will allow military members transferred to Maryland and their spouses to work under their professional license from another state to the same extent as Maryland license holders. A person allowed to work under this change would be subject to the same Maryland disciplinary authority as people who have Maryland licenses.

“It is a win, because it brings very qualified people into Maryland’s workforce, brings them in quickly, and it’s a win for our military families because it provides them quicker access to appropriate employment,” said Bob Smith, program manager for Blue Star Families Maryland, a nonprofit serving the military community. “They feel respected by the state. They feel more welcomed by the state.”

Currently, service members and their spouses have to reapply for occupational licenses if transferred to Maryland. Advocates said this delays finding work, which is already time-consuming between sending in job applications and interviewing.

The bill, signed by Gov. Wes Moore, a Democrat, aligns Maryland with national standards passed during the Biden administration in the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act that most states have been slow to adopt into their own policies.

To use their professional license from another state, military spouses and members of the military will have to send in an application including proof of the orders and be in good standing with the board that licensed them.

The bill also goes beyond the federal law by expanding the number of occupational licenses that are expedited for all veterans, active-duty members and their spouses. Once the bill takes effect, Simonaire said, veterans and their families will be able to expedite their applications for about 95% of licenses, with applications taking about a week to 10 days to get back.

The legislation is expected to increase costs for some state agencies that disburse occupational licenses, due to the need to create a new licensing process for military families. Simonaire said the bill, in addition to helping these families, could also protect the state from lawsuits from not adhering to the federal standards as other states have faced.

Frانيا Paugh, a Joint Base Andrews resident whose husband is on active duty, was a teacher in Texas before her family moved to the area.

Paugh said she looked at the process for getting a teacher certification again. When she saw there was no reciprocity between states and she would have to go through the time-consuming process to get a teaching license in Maryland, she decided to homeschool her children instead. Also weighing into her decision-making was the cost of childcare and private schools she would face if she did return to work, she said.

“I don’t want to do this again,” Paugh said about the licensing process.

Nationwide, civilian military spouses have a **20% unemployment rate** according to a 2024 survey from the U.S. Department of Defense's Office of People Analytics. The nationwide unemployment rate in May was about 4.3%, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Problems beyond licenses

Even with professional licenses being easier to obtain, military spouses say there are other fundamental challenges to finding employment while their spouse is on active duty.



Lauren Peyton, a military spouse who works at Fort Meade, is photographed at Baltimore Coffee & Tea Co. in Odenton. (Jeffrey F. Bill/Staff)

Lauren Peyton, who does not have an occupational license, said the frequent moves made it difficult for her to find employment.

“An employer talked to me for about 30 minutes about my spouse’s position ... and they ended with, ‘Well, we’re really looking for someone long term, but thank your husband for his service,’” Peyton said.

Peyton now works on base at Fort Meade, but she is concerned that the ongoing federal hiring freeze could mean a loss of income the next time her spouse is transferred.

“Military families aren’t in it for the money, and a lot of times they’re going paycheck to paycheck,” Simonaire said in support of his bill. “This makes Maryland much more friendly to the military and their families.”

Have a news tip? Contact Katharine Wilson at kwilson@baltsun.com.