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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB828
Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program - Modifications

TO: Chair Griffith, Vice Chair Klausmeier, and members of the Senate Finance Committee
FROM: Tracie Guy-Decker

I am a resident of Baltimore City in the 41st District. I'm a mom, a sister, a daughter, and a wife. In fact, I am the wife of a recently-retired Navy Chief. It is from this perspective—of military spouse—that I am providing testimony in support of SB828, Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program - Modifications, with the sponsor amendments.

My husband retired from the U.S. Navy in May 2021 as a Chief Petty Officer. For all of 2020 and part of 2021, he was stationed in Manama, Bahrain. When he received orders to Bahrain, we had about 90 days to make arrangements and say goodbyes. At the time, I was lucky enough to work at a job that provided leave, so I didn't face lost wages or lose my job when I took the time to deal with the many logistical tasks one faces when one's partner will be gone for over a year. Cancel the cellphone. Sell one of the cars. Arrange transportation for the days he was on drop-off or pick-up duty for our second-grade daughter. Figure out who or how to do the household chores he managed: mow the lawn and shovel the snow and clean the gutters. Even more important than those arrangements, I was able to take time to spend time with him before our forced separation.

As hard as our separation was (magnified as it was by the pandemic), we were privileged compared to some military families. Service members who are on deployment, rather than a tour of duty as my husband was, don't have the chance to communicate as frequently as we did. My counterparts in the Reserve or the National Guard can face the logistical and emotional upheaval I went through with as little as 30-days' notice.

Fewer than 1% of U.S. adults are active duty service members, and their families bear burdens that I never imagined before I became a military family-member. When service members are called up for deployment, their partners are faced not just with the emotional toll of impending separation, but with the logistical challenges of re-arranging the rhythms of their household. Those challenges are amplified by the fact that very often the military families live on or near military bases, not near their extended families and support systems.

It is likely that I will be the only military member or dependent providing testimony on this bill. This is not because my siblings in the armed services and their families don't need or care about the benefits this bill helps implement. It's because they're too busy managing all of the things I named above to get deeply invested in state politics. In fact, with military tours and the legislative process what they are, many families don't know if they'll even be Maryland residents by the time a given piece of legislation crosses the finish line.

That reality shouldn't further penalize our service members and their families who already give so much. The 50/50 shared cost between employee and employer is an important component of this bill for military dependents. Most military tours are between two and four years, which means that for them, for paid leave insurance to help, it cannot rely on employee longevity for the assistance to be meaningful.

Families should have time to be together in the days and weeks leading up to deployment, without risking financial ruin. When deployed soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines get "rest and recuperation" (R&R) leave with an opportunity to visit home, their working spouses should be able to take time off to be with them. Period. And when a service member comes home from deployment injured or unwell, their working loved one shouldn't have to choose between keeping a job or caring for their spouse.

The Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program includes specific provisions that address the unique challenges, burdens, and realities faced by military families. In Judaism, the Torah commands that "When people get married, they shall not go out with the army or be assigned to it for any purpose; they shall be exempt for one year for the sake of their household." My Jewish tradition values military families, and I know the state of Maryland does, too. Let's make sure we show it.

Our public policies should be shaped to protect us all. All the more so, those whose loved ones protect the country. Every military family should have the benefit of paid leave that I was able to access. Military service always takes a toll on service members' families but we don't have to allow a lack of paid leave to compound those sacrifices.

I respectfully urge this committee to issue a favorable report on SB828 with the sponsor amendments.