



**OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE**  
1500 DEFENSE PENTAGON  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-1500

**February 6, 2024**

**Delegate Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk**  
**Chair, House Committee on Health & Government Operations**  
**Room 241**  
**House Office Building**  
**Annapolis, Maryland 21401**

**Remarks of**  
**Christopher R. Arnold**  
**Mid-Atlantic Region Liaison**  
**United States Department of Defense-State Liaison Office**

**Support of: HB 431 – AN ACT concerning Department of Veterans Affairs – Renaming and Deputy Secretary of Military Family Policy and Programs**

**Testimony**

Madame chair and honorable committee members, the Department of Defense is grateful for the opportunity to support the policies reflected in House Bill 431, for the purpose of establishing the Maryland Department of Veterans and Military Families. The policies reflected in Maryland House Bill 431 uniquely address the needs and challenges faced specifically by military families, and compliment several other legislative initiatives proposed as part of making 2024 the year for military families in Maryland, including adding a military family perspective to the Maryland Military Installation Council, and creating a Commission on Veterans and Military Families.<sup>1</sup>

My name is Christopher Arnold. I am the Mid-Atlantic Region Liaison at the United States Department of Defense-State Liaison Office, operating under the direction of Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.

We represent the Department and establish relationships with state leaders across the country who are concerned for troops and their families' welfare by harmonizing state and federal law and regulation on policy problems of national significance. These are identified by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Military Departments, and the National Guard Bureau as areas where states can play a crucial role.

The policies reflected in House Bill 431 specifically align with the Department of Defense's goal of military community representation within the instrumentalities of state governments by expanding the state's Department of Veterans Affairs into a Department of Veterans and Military Families. The secretariat would be charged with appointing a Deputy Secretary dedicated to military family policy and programming, formalizing needed focus on the whole military community. This policy reinforces Maryland's existing strong interagency coordination

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://governor.maryland.gov/news/press/pages/governor-moore-announces-first-items-in-2024-legislative-agenda-to-support-and-empower-maryland-military-families.aspx>

framework to smooth transitions for mobile military families and the integration of the reserve and guard components within the state.

Military careers are not individual pursuits but family endeavors. The stresses and challenges faced by military families are unique and often unnoticed. The unique demands of military life, such as frequent relocations, deployments, and the resultant family separations, create a distinct set of challenges that require specialized attention and support.<sup>2</sup> The presence of a department dedicated to military families acknowledges the interconnectedness of service members' readiness and their familial support systems.<sup>3</sup>

Maryland is home to 77,000 service members and their families.<sup>4</sup> The Department of Defense's state policy priority of Building Healthier Military Communities seeks to ensure that with military voices at the table, states can better consider unique military lifestyle factors, operational requirements, and priorities when shaping policy.<sup>5</sup> People are at the center of the National Defense Strategy.<sup>6</sup>

The permanent leadership and infrastructure created by the policies articulated in House Bill 431 will be able to take research findings of the newly established Commission, and in coordination with the Maryland Office of Military and Federal Affairs, the Maryland Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission, and the Maryland Military Installation Council, become a conduit and champion to break down stovepipes between federal-state relations over the long-term, leveraging the combined resources and expertise of the military community.<sup>7</sup>

Specifically, having a Deputy Secretary devoted to understanding and addressing obstacles to military family readiness allows targeted policies in areas such as spousal employment, dependent education, nutrition and food security, housing policy, mental health access and suicide prevention, and child care, which can strengthen Maryland's military ecosystem and positively impact retention, resilience, recruiting and overall mission readiness for Maryland's critical military installations.<sup>8</sup>

By becoming the first state to formalize a department for Military Families, Maryland sets a precedent for other state directors of veterans' affairs to follow. On behalf of the Department of Defense, we are extraordinarily grateful to you as Chair for all of your past leadership and

---

<sup>2</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. "Strengthening the military family readiness system for a changing American society." (2019). <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/25380/chapter/4>

<sup>3</sup> <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/StatePolicy/pdfs/2024/discussionpoints-militarycommunityrepresentationonstateboardsandcouncils.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Defense Manpower Data Center, December 31, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/StatePolicy/pdfs/2024/bestpractices-militarycommunityrepresentationonstateboardsandcouncils.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> On July 20, 2023, Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks said "When we take care of our people—our service members and their families—they can focus on their mission to defend the nation. Taking care of our people's basic needs and improving the quality of life of our service members have a direct impact on military readiness."

<sup>7</sup> <https://commerce.maryland.gov/commerce/boards-and-commissions/military-installation-council>

<sup>8</sup> <https://statepolicy.militaryonesource.mil/priorities/military-community-representation-on-state-boards-and-councils>

support on behalf of our service members and their families, as well as to Delegate Pruski for sponsoring this important initiative.

Yours etc.,

**CHRISTOPHER R. ARNOLD**  
Mid-Atlantic Region Liaison  
Defense-State Liaison Office