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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB0496

Labor and Employment - Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program - Establishment

TO: Chair Wilson, Vice Chair Crosby, and members of the House Economic Matters 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 HB0496, Labor and Employment - Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program - Establishment.

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 is, 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. I know from experience that "Thank you for your service" is an oft-repeated phrase to service members and their families. Those "thank yous" are meaningless when we don't actually show our thanks by treating military families with the kind of dignity and empathy any one would expect from their neighbors, friends, and loved ones. HB 496 would ensure Maryland and Marylanders give more than empty words to the military families who sacrifice so much for our country.

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.

If they *are* near extended families, it may mean that in addition to the childcare, services, and transportation arrangements I faced, my fellow military spouses are also forced to figure out how to manage all of the care for their service member's aging parent. If we're working retail, customer service, on a factory floor, or as an ER nurse, how are we supposed to find the time to address these realities?

And please don't forget the emotional toll. Imagine your partner was suddenly going to be away for six to twelve months, with a risk of not coming home at all. Imagine having young children who are scared and don't understand what is happening.

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 needs this Time to Care.

HB496 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 so does this bill.

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 urge this committee to issue a favorable report on HB0496 to pass the establishment of Family Medical Leave Insurance.