



**Statement of CAPTAIN (R) Lynn A. Nash
HB 604 Families Serve Act
February 21, 2024
FAVORABLE with Amendment**

Dear Chair Wilson and Members of the House Economic Matters Committee

Good Afternoon.

I stand before you on behalf of the 1,700 active-duty U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) Officers, our 7,000 retired PHS service members, and their family members who live in Maryland. I am providing testimony on the Families Serve Act. My name is CAPT (R) Lynn Nash, and I am the Director representing PHS officers on the Maryland Military Coalition. I have lived in Montgomery County since 1995 and I made a conscious choice to remain in Maryland when I retired after 30 years of service in both the U.S. Army and the (PHS).

In December, the Governor and Lt. Governor declared 2024 as the Year of the Military Family. In late January, the Speaker offered HB 604 on behalf of the administration, which included fifty-two co-sponsors. When I read the bill, I was dismayed. While the intention of the bill was to offer a spousal hiring preference in state government positions to service spouses, something that the Coalition had offered as one of its legislative priorities at our listening session in November, what I read was a tangling of terms.

As you well know, legislation is all about the definition of terms. HB 604 is frankly a mess. I would like to point out why I am concerned as well as the needed technical changes to bring this bill into compliance with **existing state law**.

In 1984, then Governor Hughes promulgated §1-117, Article 1 of Section 28 of the Annotated Code of Maryland. Article 1 states:

WITH RESPECT TO ANY STATE PROGRAM OF BENEFITS, RIGHTS, OR PRIVILEGES APPLICABLE TO A VETERAN UNDER THIS CODE, THE TERM "VETERAN" INCLUDES MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSIONED CORPS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE AND THE COMMISSIONED CORPS OF THE NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION (OR ITS PREDECESSOR, THE COAST AND GEODETIC SURVEY) IF ELIGIBLE UNDER §101, TITLE 38 OF THE U.S. CODE.

As currently written, HB 604 breaks faith with USPHS and NOAA officers who have devoted years to protect and defend the constitution, as well as protect the health of our Nation. It does exactly opposite of the Governor's manta—as currently written, HB 604 leaves Public Health Service and NOAA spouses behind.

HB 604—Families Serve Act - **Favorable with Amendments**

The Coalition has spent a great of time trying to educate members and their staffs about the distinct difference in the terms: military, armed services, armed forces and uniformed services. We know that from your end, many think that they are interchangeable, but they are NOT. Although we actually reached out to point out the problems with this piece of legislation, we were met with resistance. I am here to ask you make the needed technical changes to bring this legislation into compliance with existing Maryland code.

This bill is necessary because spouses have over time experienced high levels of unemployment. I have personally taken a great deal of time to raise the issue of spousal unemployment, because especially here in high-cost Maryland, most service spouses need to work. Spousal unemployment is one of the top issues that influences service members staying on active duty. Over the last 10 years, most service branches have suffered huge losses in both recruiting and retention. Improving spousal employment is focus area 1 in **Maryland Joins Forces** and the White House's **Joining Forces** initiatives.

As the Maryland Military Coalition points out, there are more than 15,000 active-duty spouses. Maryland state government has over 9,000 vacancies remaining, even after the Administration's actions to reduce that number. Correcting HB 604 and passing this bill will do much to help both service spouses as well as fill existing government vacancies with much needed talent.

I ask that you make the very needed technical amendments to HB 604, which the Maryland Military Coalition has provided, to bring the legislation into compliance with existing Maryland code. Then, once amended, that you give this bill a **favorable report with amendments**.

Please don't leave us behind.