
Hiring Our Heroes

U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

Statement of Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

ON: "The Impact of Military Spouse Employment and Economic Opportunity"

TO: Maryland Senate Finance Committee

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BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON FINANCE OF THE MARYLAND SENATE

“The Impact of Military Spouse Employment and Economic Opportunity.”

Testimony of Elizabeth O’Brien Executive Director, Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

Good afternoon, Chairman Beidle, Vice Chairman Klausmeier, and members of the Committee. My name is Elizabeth O’Brien, and I am the executive director of Hiring Our Heroes. I am an active-duty Army military spouse of nearly two decades during our nation’s most prolonged conflicts and a proud mother of three military children.

Hiring Our Heroes (HOH) is a national, grassroots organization committed to serving veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses. Founded in 2011 as part of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, we provide a full range of tools and resources to connect the military-connected community with meaningful careers.

Since 2011, we have served more than one million members of the military community. There is no “one size fits all” approach to meeting the unique needs of the military-connected community; we work to understand the unique needs and deliver best-in-class programs.

Employment Landscape for Veterans and Military Spouses

Veteran Employment Landscape

In 2011, the United States faced a crisis in veteran unemployment. As the nation started to wind down military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, there were hundreds of thousands of transitioning service members—most of whom were under the age of 25—returning home from war zones and finding a difficult job market. Young veterans especially struggled as their unemployment rate soared to 30%.

Hiring Our Heroes and the broader business community leapt into action. Leveraging our state and local chambers and the broad support of the business community. Other companies and organizations, such as Lockheed Martin, followed suit by creating veteran-focused hiring and training programs. Led by the White House and its Joining Forces campaign, federal agencies made veteran employment a top priority.

This joint private/public sector effort yielded significant dividends. Within a few short years, post-9/11 veteran unemployment was cut in half from 12.1% in 2011¹ to 5.8% by the end of 2015.² Veterans under the age of 25 saw a more dramatic decrease. Their

¹ U.S. Department of Labor (2012, March 20). Employment Situation of Veteran—2011. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved November 1, 2023, from https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/vet_03202012.pdf

² U.S. Department of Labor (2016, March 22). Employment Situation of Veteran—2015. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved November 1, 2023, from https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/vet_03222016.pdf

unemployment rate dropped from 30.2% in 2011¹ to 13.0% by the end of 2015.² These trends have continued as veteran unemployment remains at historic lows at 3.0% or below.

Military Spouse Employment Landscape

Unfortunately, our country has not witnessed the same improvement for military spouses. For too long, military spouses have faced double-digit unemployment rates. That trend continues today as military spouses face an unemployment rate of 21%, leaving too many military families with the economic realities caused by a single income. For many, it forces them to decide between continued military service or leaving service for two incomes.

This latter fact was evidenced by the recent Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey.³ That survey indicated that military spouse employment was a top concern for military families at 48%. This point was further made by the 2023 Army engagement survey indicating that 27.4% of soldiers intend to leave because of the impact of Army life on their significant other's career plans and goals.⁴ That fact was also highlighted by a White House Executive Order in early 2023 that noted one in five military families cite challenges with spousal employment as a reason for considering leaving active-duty service.⁵

Evolution of HOH and Overview of Programs

HOH focused its early efforts on connecting unemployed veterans to employers in local communities. Leveraging our broad network of state and local chambers, as well as our network of employers, we hosted nearly 800 hiring events in three years. Our mission, at least in those early years, was focused on solving the widespread unemployment and underemployment.

As veteran unemployment eased, HOH shifted its strategic and programmatic focus in three important ways. First, we moved "left of transition" by providing more services to on-base military populations. That included both transitioning service members and military spouses. Second, we transformed our hiring events to provide much needed career advice and job search training from industry experts. Finally, we invested heavily in providing internships for both transitioning service members and military spouses.

While all our programs, events, and resources are open to military spouses, we know that military spouses face unique challenges and thus we offer unique programs to meet their needs. The transitory nature of military life often creates long periods of unemployment and/or underemployment. Work opportunities are further limited by issues associated with childcare, remote duty locations, state licensing requirements, and status of force agreements (SOFAs).

³ Blue Star Families (2023). *Military Family Lifestyle Survey 2023*. Retrieved November 1, 2023, from <https://bluestarfam.org/research/mfls-survey-release-2023/>

⁴ U.S. Department of the Army (2023). *Career Engagement Survey Third Annual Report*. Retrieved November 1, 2023, from https://talent.army.mil/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/DACES-Third-Annual-Report_Final.pdf

⁵ The White House (2023). Executive Order on Advancing Economic Security for Military and Veteran Spouses, Military Caregivers, and Survivors. Retrieved February 19, 2024, from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2023/06/09/executive-order-on-advancing-economic-security-for-military-and-veteran-spouses-military-caregivers-and-survivors>

Solving Military Spouse Unemployment and Underemployment

The challenges faced by military spouses as they search for meaningful careers must not only remain a national priority, but solutions must also be created at the state and local level. For too long, military spouses have faced high unemployment and underemployment rates. Not only does this create near-term economic challenges for military spouses and their families, but the impacts of unemployment are often cumulative, resulting in their inability to plan for, save for, and be ready for retirement.

To meet these challenges, HOH has created a suite of programs and training geared toward military spouses. In 2017, we launched Amplify—a career-intensive workshop for military spouses who are re-entering the workforce or looking for a career change. Amplify attendees spend two full days in career development workshops and interactive sessions. Amplify has become an incredibly important tool as more and more women, who make up 92% of the military spouse population, return to work after the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2023, Amplify served 2,283 participants, with 79% of attendees reporting favorable job outcomes within 90 days of the event.

HOH also hosts dedicated virtual and in-person hiring events focused solely on connecting military spouses to American businesses. In 2023, we hosted over a dozen of these hiring events for nearly 2,000 military spouse job seekers, resulting in 83% being hired or referred to next steps—i.e., interviews, placement in a talent pipeline, or next-level candidate screening.

HOH also manages the nation's largest network of career-focused military spouses as part of our Military Spouse Professional Network. That network—tens of thousands strong—provides vital peer-to-peer support to military spouses in more than 60 locations. It not only provides professional connections around the world but also brings employment leads and ongoing professional development at the installation level to these communities.

In early 2017, Maryland proved itself a solution-oriented innovator by collaborating with HOH through Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corporation (AAWDC) to launch a pilot program to facilitate fellowships for military spouses and veterans. With tremendous success in just over two years, more than 175 fellows—147 military spouses—matched with more than 50 Maryland host companies to participate in fellowship opportunities. That program, unfortunately, ended in early 2020.

Recently the Department of Defense (DoD) created an internship pilot for active-duty military spouses. Launched in December 2022 with support from Hiring Our Heroes and Deloitte, the program, known as the Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot (MSCAP), provides military spouses with a 12-week internship to gain current work experience and grow their local professional network. While the national program is still a pilot, nearly 500 active-duty spouses have been placed into internships to date. While MSCAP has made tremendous strides in supporting active-duty military spouses, it's important to recognize that it doesn't address the needs of those who have transitioned into 'veteran' status. There's an urgent need for our local communities to step up and create economic opportunities for non-active-duty military spouses who no longer fall under the DoD.

Today, Maryland is poised to once again model that leadership and innovation, bolstering collaboration between the public and private sectors to improve the employment landscape for military spouses and, ultimately, improving the socioeconomic realities of Maryland's military families. By rectifying disparities in access to economic opportunities for active-duty military spouses, Maryland can advance principles of fairness and harness the potential of an underutilized pool of talent. Through proactive steps to support military families, Maryland can continue to distinguish itself as a state of support and innovation, committed to upholding national security imperatives and mitigating the pervasive national crisis stemming from economic inequities among military spouses.

Conclusion

Over the last twelve years, Hiring Our Heroes has been proud to serve our veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses in local communities throughout the United States and abroad and to do so with a wide array of private and public sector partners. And with more than 200,000 service members making the transition off active duty annually and 700,000 active-duty military spouses, more work always needs to be done. Hiring Our Heroes remains wholly committed to the mission of connecting veterans and military spouses with meaningful career opportunities and is honored to serve on the front line of this movement.

Chairman Beidle, Vice Chairman Klausmeier, and members of the Committee, I thank you again for the opportunity to testify and look forward to answering your questions.