



MANPOWER AND
RESERVE AFFAIRS

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

1500 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-1500

January 23, 2024

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

Remarks of
Christopher R. Arnold
Northeast Region Liaison
United States Department of Defense-State Liaison Office

Support of: HB 55 – AN ACT concerning Maryland Commission on Veterans and Military Families.

Testimony

Madame chair and honorable committee members, the Department of Defense is grateful for the opportunity to support the policies reflected in House Bill 55, for the purpose of establishing the Maryland Commission of Veterans and Military Families, to study developing and implementing a strategic plan to make Maryland the best state for military families. By including the military community's perspective in state planning documents and adding military community representation to state boards and councils, states help ensure that unique operational requirements and military family priorities are considered across pertinent policy areas.

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.

Across the nation, we have seen states recognize the value of having military voices at the table, including military families.¹ This inclusion strengthens mission readiness, addresses family concerns, and fosters deeper collaboration between communities and state leaders.² The policies in Maryland House Bill 55 take this vital step by establishing the Maryland Commission on

¹ <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/StatePolicy/pdfs/2024/bestpractices-militarycommunityrepresentationonstateboardsandcouncils.pdf>

² On December 13, 2023, the Adjutant General of the Maryland National Guard, Major General Janeen L. Birckhead said "Strong military families will contribute directly to our national security. Maryland is committed to being a national leader in addressing the needs of military families."

Veterans and Military Families, offering a platform for diverse voices within the military community to actively contribute toward shaping a statewide strategic plan which prioritizes the well-being of veterans and military families.

With nearly 77,000 service members and their families in Maryland, including the viewpoint of military families on this commission helps ensure unique operational requirements and military family priorities are considered.³ House Bill 55 helps achieve the ambitious goal to make 2024 the ‘Year for Military Families’ in the Old Line State.⁴

Military community representation on state boards and councils can have a profound impact on creating livable communities, enhancing military mission readiness, and influencing the quality-of-life factors that are critical in strategic basing decisions.⁵ The policies proposed in House Bill 55 include appointing representatives of military family advocacy organizations, who would bring a wealth of experience and diverse perspectives that can lead to more innovative solutions to community challenges. Understanding the specific needs of military families, such as accessible healthcare, quality education, and employment opportunities for spouses, military community representatives can advocate for improvements in these areas.⁶

When military families are supported in their communities through improved education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, it reduces stress and distractions for service members, allowing them to focus more effectively on their mission.⁷ Livable communities with robust support systems for military families can be a key factor in the decision of service members to continue their military career.⁸ Additionally, such communities are attractive to potential recruits who consider the quality of life for their families when deciding to join the military.

The quality of life in surrounding communities is also a critical factor in basing decisions.⁹ Bases located in areas with strong support for military families, good schools, and accessible child care and healthcare are more desirable and can influence the Military Departments’ strategic basing

³ Defense Manpower Data Center, December 31, 2022.

⁴ <https://governor.maryland.gov/news/press/pages/governor-moore-announces-first-items-in-2024-legislative-agenda-to-support-and-empower-maryland-military-families.aspx>

⁵ See *supra* at 1.

⁶ <https://statepolicy.militaryonesource.mil/priorities/military-community-representation-on-state-boards-and-councils>

⁷ 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>

⁸ 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.”

⁹ The Secretaries of the Military Departments have made the importance of military spouse licensure explicitly clear as they consider the availability of license reciprocity when evaluating future basing or mission alternatives. This consideration was codified by Congress as a requirement in the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act. Notably, 10 U.S.C. § 1781(b) note requires the military services to produce annual basing decision scorecards at the state and installation level considering military family readiness issues and quality-of-life factors including, but not limited to, the availability of license reciprocity, housing, healthcare, and other factors which the Military Department Secretaries shall designate.

decisions.¹⁰ Bases benefit from being in communities that understand and are responsive to the unique needs of military families. The result is a mutually beneficial relationship between military installations and their surrounding communities, enhancing the quality of life for all residents.

While the military has its internal support structures, these often focus on the immediate and internal aspects of military life. State boards and commissions such as the proposed Maryland Commission of Veterans and Military Families, on the other hand, address broader issues that intersect with civilian sectors, such as education, healthcare, and employment. The role of the Maryland Commission is to bridge the gap between military and civilian spheres, ensuring that the needs of military families are understood and met in the wider community context.

Such bodies often lead to long-term cost savings and efficiency improvements, providing a focused platform for addressing specific needs of the military community, which can streamline services and prevent the misallocation of resources, complementing existing structures by filling gaps in services and offering specialized insights that might otherwise be overlooked.¹¹ The inclusion of the military community onto the Commission is a strategic decision to leverage their unique skills, perspectives, and experiences.

We perceive the policies reflected in the bill could be further strengthened by specifying one or more of the appointees shall be a military spouse or member of a military spouse advocacy organization.¹² The Commission should further be authorized and directed to coordinate with the Maryland Office of Military and Federal Affairs and the Maryland Military Installation Council to provide better coordination with the defense community in areas of military family readiness.¹³

In closing, let me say that we are grateful for the tremendous effort that the Maryland has historically given in supporting our Service members and their families. On behalf of the Department of Defense, we appreciate your consideration of the policy changes expressed in House Bill 55 and thank Delegate Pruski for his sponsorship and leadership.

Yours etc.,

CHRISTOPHER R. ARNOLD

Mid-Atlantic Region Liaison

Defense-State Liaison Office

¹⁰ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/1449706/service-secretaries-say-quality-of-schools-reciprocity-of-licenses-should-be-co/>

¹¹ <https://statepolicy.militaryonesource.mil/priorities/facilitate-military-representation-on-certain-state-boards-and-councils/2017>

¹² <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/StatePolicy/pdfs/2024/discussionpoints-militarycommunityrepresentationonstateboardsandcouncils.pdf>

¹³ <https://commerce.maryland.gov/commerce/boards-and-commissions/military-installation-council>