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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of SB0413 - Discrimination - Military Status - Prohibition

Madame Chair, Madame Vice Chair, and Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee:

SB0413 would add military and military dependent status as a protected class from discrimination with respect to public accommodation, housing, employment, financial transactions, education, insurance, the provision of public utility services, and State personnel actions.

Background

While it may come as a surprise to some, service members, veterans, and their families face discrimination across various aspects of our society. As a military family advocate and proud military spouse, I can say with personal experience that such discrimination is real, pervasive, and has profoundly negative consequences for military families and the communities in which they call home. Below is a small sampling of real quotes from military spouses who have encountered discrimination in hiring.

- “I’ve spent years building my career, only to have it repeatedly derailed each time we move due to my husband’s deployments. Employers seem hesitant to hire me, assuming I’ll be transient or unreliable. It’s frustrating and unfair.”
- “I’ve applied for countless jobs, only to be met with skepticism and reluctance from employers who view military spouses as liabilities rather than assets. It’s demoralizing to constantly battle discrimination just because I’m married to someone who serves our country.”
- “When I go to apply for a job, I’m not sure how I should respond to questions as to what brought me to a state because I know they won’t want to hire me. I’m well qualified and eager to work but I have to hide that I’m married to the military.”

In addition to hiring discrimination, housing can be harder to secure for military families. One veteran described to me, “As a servicemember, I never expected to encounter housing

discrimination. Landlords hesitated to lease to me because they assumed my military status meant I'd move often.”

As the above accounts describe, service members, veterans, and their families often face discrimination based on their military affiliation. This discrimination can manifest in hiring decisions, access to housing, educational opportunities, and even basic services such as utilities.

Solution

The firsthand accounts shared underscore the pressing need for legislative action to combat these unjust practices and ensure equal treatment for those who have served our country. By adding “military status” to Maryland's list of protected classes and safeguarding the rights and privileges of individuals within this category, this bill represents a significant stride towards fostering inclusivity and fairness.

To combat this discrimination, SB0413 would:

- Add “military status” to identified protected classes in the Maryland Code; and,
- Clarify that creating such a protected class would not impair any benefit, privilege or right afforded to individuals with military status on such basis.

By legally designating military status as a protected class, it becomes unlawful to discriminate against individuals on the basis of their military service or affiliation, providing them with legal recourse in cases of discrimination. Additionally, supporting military families is essential for maintaining military readiness and morale. Discrimination against military spouses and dependents can negatively impact the well-being and stability of military families, ultimately affecting the readiness and effectiveness of service members. By protecting their rights and ensuring equal treatment, policymakers contribute to the overall readiness and resilience of the military community.

In summary, SB0413 stands as a vital initiative aimed at addressing the systemic discrimination faced by service members, veterans, and their families in various aspects of daily life. Maryland would join other states, including Virginia and California, that have already enacted military status as a protected class for discrimination. With the potential to mitigate discriminatory barriers in employment, housing, and public services, SB0413 holds immense promise for enhancing the quality of life for military families.

SB0413 is in a different posture as its cross-file, HB598. The House bill limits the anti-discrimination protections to housing and employment. I have submitted an amendment to the Senate bill to conform it to the House bill.

For these reasons, I respectfully request a favorable report on SB0413.