

Rebecca Noah Poynter, Director, Military Spouse Business Organization

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Witness Testimony

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to be here today to testify in support of the Military Spouses Residency Relief Act. We are here to speak on behalf of all military spouses who support this act and to ask the committee for its recognition and fair treatment of military spouses by supporting this provision.

My name is Rebecca Poynter. I am a proud Army wife. My husband served as an Apache Pilot warrant officer in the 82nd Airborne and is currently a major in the Army Medical Service Corps. I am here with my close friend and proud Navy spouse, Joanna Williamson. Joanna's husband is a former Marine and now serves as a Navy Lieutenant Commander.

Just as is the case for thousands of military spouses, in less than 45 days, Joanna's family will make their 6th military move in 8 years as they relocate from Virginia to California. Her husband will deploy to Afghanistan in June. Likewise, we will move from Maryland to Oklahoma; both of us in support of our husband's career and in dedication to the U.S. Armed Forces.

Joanna and I represent the thousands of military spouses across the country who support the Military Spouses Residency Relief Act. Our coalition also has the support from a number of veteran and active duty service support organizations including; MOAA, AUSA, NMFA, the Air Force Association, and the Air Force Sergeants Association.

Throughout our nation's history, the Federal government has recognized that military service carries with it multiple relocations and as result, profound complications to state residency. In 1940, the Soldiers' and Sailors' Relief Act was enacted to protect service members in those civil matters which are impacted by state residency.

Under the protection of the SCRA, military members are allowed to declare a single "home state", that is a permanent state of residency, while on active duty for the duration their service. The spouse, who is not covered under this law is equally subject to the federal relocation orders, yet is not similarly protected. Spouses must change their state residency with each move and it is the military spouse who bears the burden of constant relocation.

In our all volunteer military, 54% of service members are married. There are approximately 750,000 active duty spouses, 92% of whom are women.

An important point for your consideration is that this Act allows for a single choice by providing to the military spouse the option of aligning with their service member spouse in having the same home state.

By passing the Military Spouses Residency Relief Act, Congress has the opportunity to significantly improve the quality of life issues of voting, personal property, and employment and education access. These are currently complicated, suppressed and deterred by military moves.

Military Spouses are disenfranchised from voting; often times not arriving to a new state in time to vote in primaries and do not have ample opportunity to get to know the federal, state or local candidates or adequate time to learn their policies and legislative agendas. It is confusing when one state allows a military spouse to vote via absentee ballot, yet the state where the spouse is physically located does not. Where is she supposed to vote? Furthermore, military spouses who purchase a home or property, have a vested interest in that community. The ability to vote locally is in the best interest of not only the voter but of the candidate and political system as well.

For personal property; current, and often conflicting, state laws create financial and administrative burdens for the military spouse resulting in the suppression of assets. While an active duty service member may title, register, and maintain, a car in their home state, their spouse may not. With each move, if a spouse chooses to keep his/her joint tenancy of personal property, they must change the registration and/or titling to the new state; requiring the spouse to pay several hundred dollars each time they relocate. To alleviate these types of fees, many spouses are forced to put all property in the name of the service member. The relocation process ends up suppressing the ability of all military spouses to own personal property which in itself has a number of negative long lasting effects including the ability to develop and to maintain solid credit histories.

Regarding employment, the Department of Defense acknowledges military spouses as major contributors to their families' financial well being. Approximately 50% of military spouses work yet we are under-employed. Military spouses make \$3.00 less per hour than our civilian counterparts. The Department of Defense recognizes our frequent relocations as the cause and states the primary challenge for military spouses is sustaining a career.

We are deeply encouraged by the Department of Defense's and the Department of Labor's outreach and funding of portable career training through the Military Spouse Career Advancement Initiative. However, in pursuing a portable career the complications of multiple state residencies causes state tax confusion, educational costs and administrative tax burdens which negatively impact the quality of life for our military families.

Please allow me to briefly share a few of the disturbing stories from spouses who support this bill. In one particular case a female military spouse who had resided in multiple states suffered professional damage as three states fought over her residency. She reports that this tax issue almost cost her security clearance and ultimately her job. Other working spouses express concern over the expense of filing tax returns in multiple states, none of which are the same state as their service member spouse.

Regarding education, spouses report being deterred from educational opportunities. For example, one spouse was deterred from an online masters program because after a military move, out-of-state tuition was simply too costly.

For those seeking education or retraining or to maintain a portable profession, all growing and positive trends among military spouses, a single home state can lessen administrative, educational and tax burdens and help the spouse spend less time clarifying residency and more time earning an income or completing an education.

With multiple military moves and without a consistent home state, the financial burdens of personal property, impediments to voting, deterrents to employment and education will continue to fall squarely on the shoulders of us, the military spouse.

On the eve of May 8th, Military Spouse Appreciation Day, a day which, since 1984 has acknowledged the unique role of our nation's military spouses, Joanna and I along with the hundreds of thousands of military families look forward to Congress' continued recognition of military spouses with the hopeful passage of the Military Spouses Residency Relief Act.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, military spouses are a federal population; we are moved, along with our service members, on federal orders. Military spouses do not have a choice as to when or where they are relocated. Therefore, it is incumbent upon our federal representatives in Congress to protect military spouses as they have already done so with our military members.

In the words of the Secretary of the Army, the honorable Pete Geren, who tells military families in installations around the world, "We recruit the soldier but we retain the family." To fulfill our nation's promise to military families we ask this panel to favorably report the Military Spouses Residency Relief Act out of committee so this bill can go to the floor and all of your colleagues can vote to pass this vital piece of military family legislation.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony.