

February 19, 2024

Mr. Chairman and Members of the House Commerce, Labor, and Economic Development Committee,

On behalf of the Greater Wichita Area Veterans Advocacy Board (VAB), thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony in support of H.B. 2745, AN ACT concerning occupational licensing; relating to occupational licensing, certification, and registration fees; providing that military spouses of active military service members shall be exempted from all such fees.

This legislation would exempt the spouses of active-duty military members from all application, licensing, registration, certification or permit fees associated with an occupational license. Adoption of this policy will have a positive economic impact and attract active-duty military families to KANSAS duty stations. It is not a stretch to conclude that this relatively inexpensive legislation will also benefit KANSAS' workforce, small businesses, as well as National Security.

As a veteran, and as the founder and current co-chair of Wichita's VAB, on my free time I work throughout the community to address military community issues. I leverage my 33 years of service to our country as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Army, and my 10 years in the civilian workforce enhancing recruiting and retention of our military community members in the local labor force.

During my 33 years of military service (which included three years in the Kansas Army National Guard and five different active-duty assignments to Kansas Army posts) I had the honor of leading our young men and women into battle and during peacekeeping operations. During those experiences, you should realize that I put in twice the effort retaining our nation's treasure as I did training them.

When a competent Soldier decided to conclude their military service, I discovered that it was frequently for family reasons. Often the motivation was the discontentment of the spouse or significant other. The military spouse was not happy because they could not find suitable, or at least, meaningful employment. That trend continues today. And with today's economy, a second income for military families is essential.

Not only did I have these difficult conversations about terminating their military service with my Soldiers and their families, but also with my wife – I referred to her as Household 6! When in uniform, I was a leader of Soldiers. But when at home, she was the boss. And I am sure that balance of power exists within many current active-duty families. From my own personal relationship and experiences, I learned two important lessons: 1) when "mama" ain't happy; no one in the family is happy. 2) all military spouses are profoundly important to the readiness and well-being of military members. They make significant contributions to U.S. Armed Forces.

As a kindergarten teacher in Junction City, Lorraine, my wife, had to quit doing what she loved because we moved to a different state. Her certification was not accepted. Even with a degree,

it took her years to find an employer who hired and retained her despite our need to relocate frequently. But the years in between were frustrating and challenging, almost unbearable. This complication absolutely impacted our decision for future assignments.

All service men and women have some say in their assignments. In the Army, we called them dream sheets, because we dreamed about living in a specific location that would be the best for everyone in the family – professionally and personally. Once military spouses learn that Kansas is supportive of their career pursuits and have eliminated occupational licensing, certification, and registration fees, KANSAS installations will be number one on many dream sheets.

Today, military spouses have nationwide associations and groups, as well as social media enhanced networks. They talk! Those married to active-duty service members assigned to a KANSAS military installation will certainly post or comment how this legislation helped them save their precious resources and simplified and expedited their entry into the KANSAS workforce. Ultimately our employers will benefit, and our local economies will flourish.

National security implications are at hand as well. Our armed forces have not met its recruiting goals for the last two years. While many pundits present a myriad of reasons for this tragic situation, I can report that one, not emphasized enough, is the military family financial situation. Today, especially, surviving on one income creates family hardship.

According to the latest survey from Blue Star Families, which supports service members, veterans, and their families, the most prevalent concern is military spouse employment. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the military spouse unemployment rate is 13%, and underemployment rate is a whopping 31.6%. And out of the population of employed military spouses, 34% work in occupations that require licenses.

Since retiring in 2014, I have worked for two of KANSAS' largest employers. My responsibilities have been to recruit and retain military service men and women into our workforce. My programs have been nationally recognized. My successful techniques include a sincere focus on the military family. By attracting the family to the region for all the wonderful things KANSAS has to offer, a decision to accept employment here is nearly assured. Moreover, when a military spouse is enjoying suitable employment with sustainable wages in a welcoming KANSAS community, while still on active duty, the military member will most likely remain here when they conclude their service obligations and transition into a civilian career.

The Chamber introduced this legislation at the request of the Chamber's Military Affairs Council. As the Chairman of the VAB, I participate on this Council. Our VAB advocates for several critical veteran issues in our community. Attracting military families to our community oriented on employment opportunities for both the military member and military spouse is at the top of our list. We have established a great rapport with all KANSAS military installations, and Guard and Reserve agencies throughout the state, as we enhance the reality that Wichita, and KANSAS in general, is a great place to call home for military families.

While the state of KANSAS has taken several steps to simplify the process for military spouses to enter the workforce, there is more that could and should be done. Eliminating licensure and application fees, will preserve family resources, stimulate them to enter the KANSAS workforce, and encourage them to remain in KANSAS after their active-duty service member completes their military obligations. While this bill is aimed at providing benefit and support for our military families, it will also benefit all KANSAS employers in their search for talented and experienced workers, our economy, and national security.

H.B. 2745 is a commonsense bill and is good public policy. With that in mind, I highly recommend approving this bill.

Thank you and I am happy to stand for questions at the appropriate time.

Respectfully,

John C. Buckley, II
Colonel, U.S. Army Retired)