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## GEORGIA SHOULD HELP MILITARY SPOUSES ENTER THE WORKFORCE

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### INTRODUCTION

**N**early 30 percent of Americans must have an occupational license in order to work. Each license has a unique set of requirements, which makes it more difficult to get a job. Indeed, Georgia has the nation's 14<sup>th</sup> most burdensome professional licensing regime, mandating—on average—the passage of two exams, over 460 days of costly education and experience, and \$185 in fees<sup>1</sup>

While these stipulations are taxing, they are especially onerous to individuals like military spouses who frequently relocate—usually through no choice of their own—and must acquire a new license after every move. Thankfully, there are ways to ease their burdens and make it easier for them to get to work by creating a system in which their licenses are more readily transferable from state to state.

### BACKGROUND

At any given time, around 61,322 active military members are stationed in Georgia, which makes the Peach State home

to one of the nation's largest populations of servicemen and women.<sup>2</sup> While this helps boost Georgia's economy, it also creates challenges. Military members relocate 10 times as frequently as civilians,<sup>3</sup> and their moves often come with little or no notice.<sup>4</sup> This can create constant uncertainty for them, but it especially strains their families. 53.5 percent of active servicemen and women are married,<sup>5</sup> 41 percent of whom have children.<sup>6</sup> With each last-minute transfer, military spouses must also relocate with their dependents. Upon doing so, they frequently struggle to obtain gainful employment and provide for their families.

In fact, 44 percent of military spouses are living “paycheck to paycheck or struggling financially,” 35-40 percent are underemployed<sup>7</sup> and 16 percent are unemployed,<sup>8</sup> which dwarfs the national unemployment rate of 3.6 percent.<sup>9</sup> There are readily identifiable reasons for their plight, too. Indeed, 22 percent believe the greatest barrier to employment is professional licensing regimes, and they have a point,<sup>10</sup> as 35 to 50 percent of military spouses have jobs that require an occupational license.<sup>11</sup> Since these licenses are mostly state-specific, each transfer means that military spouses must regularly navigate the process of acquiring a new license before they can get to work. This means paying licensing fees, going through the application process, passing duplicative criminal background checks, taking additional exams and possibly even furthering their own education—even though another state has already deemed them capable of fulfilling their jobs' duties.

### GEORGIA'S EFFORTS

This issue is not new to Georgia legislators who have attempted to address it in the past, and thanks to these efforts, under current Georgia law, “each professional licensing board and other board shall adopt rules and regulations implementing a process by which military spouses and transitioning service members may qualify for temporary licenses, licenses by endorsement, expedited licenses, or a combination thereof for each profession.” This stems from HB 821 (2015-2016 session),<sup>12</sup> which was intended to improve the system for military spouses. However, the problem now is that the law permits licensing boards a great deal of discretion, which means that the existing law is—at best—inconsistently applied.

### FOLLOWING UTAH'S LEAD

While Georgia and several other states, including Arizona and Oklahoma, have attempted to provide military spouses relief from licensing hurdles, Utah has enacted the most expansive and meaningful legislation.<sup>13</sup> Rather than simply encouraging licensing boards to expedite military spouse license applications or permitting licensing reciprocity if the requirements are roughly analogous to the state from which they moved, Utah has gone a step further. Their code permits

blanket licensure reciprocity for military spouses, as long as they meet the following simple requirements:

1. That they are, in fact, a spouse of active military personnel stationed within the state wherein they wish to work;
2. That they hold a valid professional license to work in said profession; and
3. That their license is in good standing in the state from which they are transferring.

Under the Utah system, if military spouses meet these three requirements, they can simply begin working, even without paying any licensing fees. This greatly reduces unnecessary barriers to work and allows them to more easily and quickly re-integrate in the labor force following frequent moves.

The benefits of such a system, which would have positive familial, state and national implications, are clear. Members of the armed forces are not paid especially well. Entry level army privates make only around \$20,000 a year and newly commissioned officers earn \$38,000.<sup>14</sup> Of course, military men and women enjoy other benefits, but their salary is often not enough to comfortably support a spouse and children and thus a second income is usually desperately needed. Yet, military spouses struggle to contribute financially because of licensing restrictions, which is evident by their shocking unemployment rates. This, in turn, makes it more likely that they will seek taxpayer-funded financial assistance, which subsequently increases the taxpayer burden.

Further, the United States military's strength depends, in part, on high reenlistment rates to retain talent and institutional knowledge, but the decision to remain in the military is also driven by military spouses. Indeed, 43 percent of military couples consider the accessibility of careers and 39 percent weigh inadequate income as very important factors when deciding whether or not to reenlist.<sup>15</sup> In light of this, it is imperative that states make it easier for military spouses to enter the workforce, so that they can help provide for their families, lower their unemployment rates, support the local economy and buttress the military's composition.

## CONCLUSION

Like Utah, Georgia could implement a similar system to help military spouses get back to work. If they are, in fact, married to a servicemember who has been transferred and have a current occupational license in good standing, then Georgia ought not prevent them from working. Rather, the state should remove licensing boards' discretion over whether to recognize out-of-state licenses and allow military spouse licensure portability across state lines. Doing so would great-

ly benefit an untold number of Georgians and the operability of the United States military.

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## ENDNOTES

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