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U.S. partially bases choice of sites for military bases on states' success in improving reciprocity

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The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) confirms that decisions on where to site military bases and allocate other defense spending are being affected by the relative strictness of state policies for reciprocal licensing. The message came through clearly in a report the DOD delivered to Congress February 18 on state best practices and strategies for improving reciprocity for military spouses.



The military wants immediate action by states to assure that military spouses who relocate with occupational licenses from elsewhere get reciprocal licensing in 30 days with minimum hassle. Over the long term, DOD wants states to approve more licensure-specific compacts as well. "The department intends to track an assessment of states based on commitment to these approaches for all occupations," said Marcus Beauregard,

director of DOD's defense-state liaison office, in releasing the report.

Over the last decade, the DOD has been emphasizing that it would like states to adopt more lenient policies for reciprocal licensing of military spouses, who often move to different states and have historically had a high rate of unemployment.

The overall goal is to make reciprocal licenses available to military spouses within 30 days based on minimal documentation and to increase the adoption of state compacts for reciprocal licensing. This agenda has become part of the package of changes that many states, with backing from the National Conference of State Legislatures and the American Legislative Exchange Council, have long been advocating for reducing occupational regulation.

Military spouses, who often need to make interstate moves, generally face a much higher unemployment rate than the general population, about a 24% rate.

The current Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper, has designated taking care of military families as a fourth line of effort to the National Defense Strategy. He identified spouse licensure portability as critical for supporting families and made it a key focus area. About 34% of military spouses need



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licensure for their work, the DOD says.

After some six years of nudging states to make it easier for military spouses to obtain licenses quickly when they move to a new state, in 2017 the DOD commissioned a study by the University of Minnesota on what the military's campaign for broad change in state laws had produced. The study concluded results were significantly mixed.

The agency stepped up the pressure in 2018 when it sent a memorandum signed by the Air Force, the Army, and the Navy to the National Governors Association stating that military spouse licensure would be considered as part of mission basing in the future, said Beauregard.

Translation: Get the laws on occupational licensing changed and we'll talk about how much defense spending does or will contribute to your state's gross domestic product. "That got the attention of the states, and we saw a lot more activity happen in 2018 and 2019," he added.

So "best practices" on the reciprocity issue took on some financial implications for states, framed by DOD in "stoplight" fashion, with some states' policies such as agreement to compacts conveyed as "green" and no portability conveyed as "red." In the middle are laws or policies that aren't quite changing military spouses' success rates in obtaining licenses.

These might feature in states where it is difficult for a military spouse to find the appropriate form, find the appropriate location to put that form, and obtain the guidance necessary to get through the licensing process as easily as possible.

Extrapolating from a 2017 survey of military spouses on whether their occupation or field requires certification by a standard-setting organization or a state-issued license (34% said yes), the military estimates that out of 30,865,817 people in the national workforce who are licensed, 132,140 or 0.43 percent of them are active military spouses.

According to the DOD, about 53 percent of the licensed occupations it has identified as relevant to military spouses are health-related, 28 percent are in education, 4 percent in crafts and trades, and 15 percent in other fields.

In practical terms, the DOD communicated that if a military spouse can apply for a license with a minimum amount of documentation and get the license within 30 days, "then that's a good process," said Beauregard.

He singled out five states for special praise:

- Florida and Arizona, for the universal licensing for military spouses (which Arizona then extended to everyone who becomes a resident of the state). Under universal licensing, the state will accept another state's license as long as it is current and in good standing.
- Utah which waives Utah licensing for military spouses with a license from other state.
- Texas, which will give a Texas license for anyone quickly and efficiently who has another state license that is equivalent to the Texas one.
- Ohio, which grants a temporary license to military spouses for six years.

Value of defense spending to each state

Included as Appendix B in the Defense Department's "Military Spouse Licensure: State Best Practices and Strategies for Achieving Reciprocity" report is a state-by- state list of the value of defense spending compared to state gross domestic product (GDP).

Defense spending is the largest as a proportion of GDP in Virginia (11.2%), Hawaii (9.8%), Alaska (6.1%), Alabama (5.9%), District of Columbia (5.7%), Maryland (5.7%), Mississippi

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(4.9%), Maine (4.7%), and Kentucky (4.7%).

States with 1% or less of their GDP based on defense spending are West Virginia (0.7%), Wisconsin (0.8%), Wyoming (0.9%), Illinois (0.9%), Iowa (0.85%), Tennessee (0.8%), Michigan (0.6%), New York (0.6%), Oregon (0.6%), Delaware (1.0%), Vermont (1%), Idaho (1.0%), and South Dakota (1.0%).

The states with the highest numbers of licensed military spouses, based on estimates derived from a survey of military spouses, are:

- California (15,724)
- Virginia (14,454)
- Texas (13,260)
- North Carolina (10,988)
- Florida (8,380)
- Washington (6,870)
- Georgia (6,613)
- Hawaii (5,215)
- Colorado (4,575)
- Maryland (3,946)
- South Carolina (3,017)
- Tennessee (2,669)
- Kansas (2,421)
- Arizona (2,374)
- Alaska (2,313)

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