

INTERIM JOINT COMMITTEE ON VETERANS, MILITARY AFFAIRS, AND PUBLIC PROTECTION

Minutes of the 1st Meeting of the 2021 Interim

June 16, 2021

Call to Order and Roll Call

The 1st meeting of the Interim Joint Committee on Veterans, Military Affairs, and Public Protection was held on Wednesday, June 16, 2021, at 10:00 AM, in Room 154 of the Capitol Annex. Representative Walker Thomas, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were:

Members: Representative Walker Thomas, Co-Chair; Senators Jimmy Higdon, Alice Forgy Kerr, Stephen Meredith, Robby Mills, Dennis Parrett, Brandon Smith, Whitney Westerfield, Mike Wilson, and David Yates; Representatives John Blanton, Kevin D. Bratcher, Myron Dossett, Jim DuPlessis, Chris Freeland, Chris Fugate, Al Gentry, Jim Gooch Jr., Mark Hart, Matthew Koch, Scott Lewis, Savannah Maddox, Bobby McCool, Patti Minter, Scott Sharp, Pamela Stevenson, Ashley Tackett Laferty, Bill Wesley, and Buddy Wheatley.

Guests: Kristen Jones, President, Military Spouse JD Network; Erin Ramey, Military Spouse, Military JD Network; Eric Sherman, Southeast Regional Liaison, Defense – State Liaison Office, Department of Defense; Brigadier General (USAF Ret.) Steven Bullard, Executive Director, Kentucky Commission on Military Affairs; Dr. Dallas Kratzer, Lieutenant Colonel (USAF Ret.), Grant Program Manager, Kentucky Commission on Military Affairs; Colonel (Ret.) M. Blaine Hedges, President and CEO, Government Solutions and Services; Thomas Ferree, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Connected Nation; and Chris Pederson, Executive Vice President for Developing and Planning, Connected Nation.

LRC Staff: Jessica Zeh, Andrew Salman, and Kelsey Lockhart.

Military Spouse JD Network

Erin Ramey, a member of the Military Spouse JD Network (MSJDN), testified that she advocates for streamlined bar licensing processes for military spouses because military spouses must move significantly more frequently than the average American, which creates financial and administrative pressure on spouses who have to maintain occupational licenses.

Ms. Ramey stated that she has moved to follow her spouse in the military every two to three years for thirteen years. She has had a different job at each station, and only the most recent job utilized her law degree.

MSJDN President Kristen Jones testified that she has practiced law in four different states as a result of moving with her spouse in the military. MSJDN is a ten-year old organization which confers with state supreme courts and legislative bodies to advocate for changes to bar licensing rules. One such proposed change was House Bill 251 from the 2021 legislative session.

Ms. Ramey provided demographic information for military spouses, including that there are approximately 7,000 military spouses living in Kentucky, that military spouses are on average more highly educated than the general population, that military spouses experience unemployment at seven times the national average and are also regularly underemployed, and that military spouses make less money than members of the general population with the same level of education. Ms. Ramey added that military members consider their spouse's employment as a top issue when considering when to reenlist or retire.

Ms. Jones stated that HB 251 is a step towards MSJDN's goal of alleviating pressures on military spouses. The bill would remove the expense of maintaining occupational licenses in Kentucky on military spouses, which would allow servicemembers to stay in active duty for longer and also build goodwill towards Kentucky when the member decides to retire.

Responding to a question from Representative Minter, Ms. Ramey stated that Kentucky is the first state to consider waiving occupational license fees for military spouses.

Responding to a question from Representative Bratcher, Ms. Ramey stated that their data about military spouses is not broken up by the servicemember's branch of the military.

Responding to a question from Representative Pamela Stevenson, Ms. Jones stated that men make up about eight percent of military spouses and between five and ten percent of MSJDN's membership. Ms. Ramey added that social media has strengthened participation by military spouses in advocacy organizations like MSJDN because it lessens the challenge of communicating within the group while also frequently relocating.

Department of Defense

The Department of Defense State Liaison Office (DSLO) Southeast Regional Liaison Eric Sherman testified that DSLO was established in 2004 to provide continuity in communications on military readiness and quality of life for servicemembers between the Department of Defense and state governments. DSLO researches quality of life issues and

works with states to fix them. DSLO creates a list of ten priorities each year and tracks legislation and policies aimed at those priorities.

Mr. Sherman stated that spouse employment is a top priority for 2021. Kentucky has consistently been a leader in this area, as evidenced by passing HB 323 in 2019, which improved license portability by granting expedited temporary licenses to applicants who hold active licenses in other states. Despite this, applicants still have trouble accessing all relevant information on the reciprocity process and keeping up with multiple states' licensing standards simultaneously.

Interstate compacts regarding licensing reciprocity provide both short- and long-term solutions to the problems faced by military spouses. Short-term solutions include those like the expedited temporary licenses discussed previously, which could be enacted by Kentucky without input from other states. These short-term solutions require an active license in another state to be maintained, and requires the applicant to pay fees to multiple states at once. Interstate compacts provide superior long-term portability but require multiple states to agree. Compacts create uniform standards and qualifications, so that spouses don't have to keep track of multiple sets of standards.

Kentucky has one of the highest rates of interstate compact participation, but still does not participate in the Emergency Medical Service Officials Licensure Compact, the Occupational Therapy Interstate Licensure Compact, or the Counseling Interstate Licensure Compact.

The compacts of which Kentucky is already a member typically allow an applicant to designate a home state for the purpose of qualifications and standards, and then use that license in all member states, therefore only having to pay dues to maintain a single license. DSLO considers the EMS Compact to be particularly important because so many of Kentucky's neighbor states are already members.

DSLO is working to develop compacts for cosmetologists and barbers, massage therapists, teachers, social workers, and dentists and dental hygienists.

Responding to a question from Representative Wheatley, Mr. Sherman stated that it is typically recommended to use individual bills to enter into compacts as opposed to an omnibus bill.

Responding to a question from Representative Hart, Mr. Sherman clarified that because the EMS Compact was one of the first drafted, its language is not as standardized as later compacts.

Kentucky Commission on Military Affairs

Executive Director of the Kentucky Commission on Military Affairs (KCMA) General Bullard testified that while KCMA supported HB 251, the bill was secondary in importance to the interstate compacts. The average number of interstate compacts joined by states is 34, while Kentucky has joined 38. Kentucky is not a member of the EMS Compact, but the Kentucky's standards for EMS licensure already align with those in the EMS Compact, so the only substantive change required for Kentucky to join is to accept reciprocity from other states. KCMA also wants to see Kentucky join the Military Interstate Children's Compact to support students in military families transferring schools between states.

General Bullard stated that the real challenge with interstate compacts is not changing the law or regulations to join, but to ensure that affected organizations are fully educated on how to implement the privileges and responsibilities of the compact. KCMA's priorities this year include reaching out to administrative bodies to educate them on how to comply with compacts, what needs to be on their website, and best practices for publicizing information about the portability of occupational licenses.

General Bullard then segued to discuss Fort Campbell and Fort Knox's websites and spouse employment centers and how they assist military families in finding stable employment. Fort Knox has cooperated with the Knox Regional Development Alliance to create their website, which has been recognized by the Association of Defense Communities as a best practice website.

Dr. Dallas Kratzer, Lieutenant Colonel (USAF Ret.), Grant Program Manager, KCMA, discussed the Cybersecurity, Certification, Career and Communities Training Program (C4 Program) and the Department of Defense grant that funds it. The program has two goals: to educate students on cybersecurity and to develop the workforce. KCMA is working with the Society for Human Resources Management to advertise the program and its goals. One of the goals is to educate employers on the strengths of recently separated veterans and how best to recruit them. The C4 Program is also working on policies which will encourage recently separated veterans to choose to move to Kentucky, particularly by making the transition to civilian life easier for the veteran's family. One promising area is teacher education: Kentucky has programs that allow veterans into teaching environments to get their high school teaching certification.

Dr. Kratzer stated that the C4 Program wants to work with the Education and Workforce Development Cabinet in its next phase of development to train and equip military spouses with occupational opportunities while their family is stationed in Kentucky, so that the transition back to Kentucky as a veteran is easier. Dr. Kratzer stated that of the more than 200,000 veterans who leave service every year, only 3,000-4,000 return to Kentucky. In order to increase this number, Kentucky needs resources which get veterans and their families connected with jobs quickly once they return. Dr. Kratzer stated that improved communication between government agencies is needed to meet this goal,

and that KCMA is positioning itself as the hub for occupational information for agencies and veterans to meet this goal.

Government Solutions and Services & Connected Nation

Connected Nation Chairman and CEO Thomas Ferree testified that the mission of Connected Nation is to help families get jobs by leveraging widespread broadband internet access. The COVID-19 pandemic made the need for developed internet infrastructure readily apparent.

Government Solutions and Services President Colonel M. Blaine Hedges testified that military spouse unemployment is a national security issue, as it increases the turnover of servicemembers. Kentucky partnered with Connected Nation in 2018 for a pilot Digital Works Program funded by the Kentucky Veterans Trust Board. The Digital Works Program placed over 1,000 information technology telework employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, Kentucky's funding for the Digital Works Program is running out.

Mr. Ferree stated that the Digital Works Program is training and placing people in telework jobs despite the geographic or personal restraints that person has. Telework is very convenient for military spouses specifically since relocating frequently does not prevent the spouses from doing their telework. Connected Nation encourages governments to use funds from the American Rescue Plan Act to expand broadband.

Connected Nation Executive Vice President Chris Pederson described the format of the Digital Works Program as a community-based job creation program which trains military spouses for long-term remote work positions. Connected Nation has a network of over 70 employers looking for remote workers. The program has placed over 1,000 employees. The program is two to four weeks long, depending on the proficiency of the cohort. Once the program is completed, job placement begins one to three weeks later. Graduates have access to a co-working facility upon graduation if they want camaraderie or to speak with program instructors.

Mr. Pederson stated that the goal of the Fort Campbell iteration of the Digital Works Program specifically is to create an on-ramp for spouses to enter telework. He stated that while office workers can typically transition to telework easily, spouses coming from schools or from service industry jobs generally have difficulty securing telework positions without the training provided by the Digital Works Program. The Digital Works Program secures its funding from KDVA, the Education and Workforce Development Cabinet, and the United States Department of Agriculture's Rural Business Development Grant.

The next meeting will be Wednesday, July 21, 2021 at 10:00 AM in Room 154. With no further business, the meeting adjourned at 11:46 AM.