By Elaine Sanchez
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WASHINGTON, Feb. 15, 2012 - Officials are hoping efforts to address military spouses' ongoing issues with obtaining occupational licenses after a move will help to remove career barriers and reduce an unemployment rate that's consistently higher than that of their civilian-life counterparts.

Military spouses' employment challenges and suggestions for how states can streamline their processes to better support them are outlined in a new report authored by the Defense and Treasury departments. Alongside Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden, will unveil the report later today at the Pentagon.

Obtaining a license in a new state is a "huge headache" and one of the most significant employment barriers for spouses seeking to maintain their careers, Navy Capt. Brad Cooper, executive director of the White House's "Joining Forces" military-support campaign, told reporters yesterday on a conference call.

Since each state sets its own licensing requirements, the report explains, these requirements often vary across state lines. A lack of license portability -- the ability to transfer an existing license to a new state with minimal application requirements -- can cause spouses to bear high administrative and financial burdens as they attempt to obtain a license, the report says.

"Because military spouses hold occupational licenses and often move across state lines, the patchwork set of variable and frequently time-consuming licensing requirements across states disproportionately affect these families," the report says. "The result is that too many military spouses looking for jobs that require licenses are stymied in their efforts."

The unemployment rate among military spouses is double that of their civilian-life counterparts, Deputy Treasury Secretary Neal Wolin noted on the call, and licensing and certification requirements are part of the reason for that discrepancy. "It places extreme financial and

emotional pressure that's completely unnecessary," he said.

The report highlights the magnitude of this challenge. More than 100,000 spouses -- or 35 percent of military spouses in the workforce -- are in nearly 50 occupations and professions that require a license or certification, the report said.

"Military families are asked to move again and again," Cooper said. The report indicates that military spouses are 10 times more likely to have moved across state lines in the past year than their counterparts in civilian life.

This report, the captain said, offers a roadmap for states to begin to address these employment challenges.

Cooper lauded the 11 states that already have adopted laws to aid spouse license portability, and the 13 that have legislation pending or waiting to be introduced. Officials would like to see every state pass legislation streamlining licensing processes by 2014, he added.

States can help to break down these employment barriers, the report suggests, by:

-- Facilitating endorsement of a current license from another state as long as the requirements for licensure in that jurisdiction are substantially equivalent to the licensing state;

-- Providing a temporary or provisional license allowing the military spouse to practice while fulfilling requirements needed to qualify for endorsement in the licensing state or awaiting verification of documentation supporting an endorsement; and

-- Expediting application procedures so the state official overseeing licensing has the authority to approve license applications for the boards or the licensing boards have authority to approve a license based simply on an affidavit from applicants that the application information is accurate and they've requested verifying documentation.

Marcus Beauregard, chief of the Defense Department's state liaison office, told reporters this issue has been a long-standing concern for DOD officials. Each year, the department chooses 10 issues of importance to present to state policy makers, he noted, and this issue has been making the cut for many years.

"Our focus has been to find ways to get spouses to work more quickly," he said.

If it takes six months to obtain a license and perhaps another six months to find a job, spouses have very little time to work and progress in a specialty, Beauregard said, particularly since they're asked, on average, to move every two to three years.

In 2011, he explained, DOD officials proposed the initiatives outlined in the report being released today: current license endorsement and temporary licenses.

Regarding endorsement, many occupations require recent work in the field as a test of competency, Beauregard said, which is difficult for military spouses who may not have been able to work in their specialty recently due to assignments overseas or in locations without employment opportunities.

Colorado officials suggested continuing education units as a possible substitute for recent experience, he said. "We've taken that issue in terms of endorsement to the states," he added.

Temporary licenses while spouses seek jobs and fulfill licensing requirements also can help to streamline the process, Beauregard said.

The response from states is promising, he noted.

"We've been very excited to see how willing policy makers are to consider these new concepts

and to approach their licensing boards to make accommodations in their states," he said.

Aiding spouses with employment can have a resounding impact, both on a families' well-being and on military readiness, the report noted. A spouse's employment plays a vital role in the financial and personal well-being of military families, the report continued, and their job satisfaction is an important component of service members' retention.

"Without adequate support for military spouses and their career objectives, the military could have trouble retaining service members," the report said.

Officials hope this spotlight on spouse employment will spur positive changes. "Our military spouses support the well-being and safety of our nation, and we can best appreciate their sacrifices and unique challenges by adopting practices that lessen the burdens of their frequent moves," officials wrote in the report. "They have a compelling need, and we are suggesting tangible solutions. All that is needed is the willingness to take action."

While the report marks progress on the spouse employment front, much work remains to be done, Cooper noted.

The first lady and Biden will present this issue to all 50 state governors and their spouses later this month at the National Governors Association Conference here, he said. They'll also rally professional organizations and advocacy groups to engage on this issue at a state level, he added.

Meanwhile, today marks another milestone in honoring military spouses "who have given us so much," Cooper said.

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