

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

MILITARY SPOUSE EMPLOYMENT
WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

by

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ABSTRACT

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Review the employment opportunities of military spouses. Evaluate the possible affects military spouse employment may have on quality of life and retention, including the potential impact of the redeployment of troops to the Continental United States.

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MILITARY SPOUSE EMPLOYMENT WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Military spouses' employment is an area that has far reaching affects. Their employment opportunities and career success are adversely affected by the relocations necessitated by their spouse's reassignments, which in turn, affects the quality of life for military families. The redeployment of forces to the U.S. from Europe and Korea should have positive second and third order affects. Specifically, military spouses will have more stability in their jobs and careers since they will remain at the U.S. location when their active duty service member is deployed overseas. As a result of this stability, the quality of life will improve which usually has a positive affect on retention.

"The military recognizes that service member retention is heavily influenced by their family's satisfaction with their quality of life, which is in part determined by their spouse being able to fulfill their own career aspirations and contribute to the financial stability of the family."¹ The U.S. Army Posture Statement for 2005 indicates that "providing for the well-being of Soldiers' families is a fundamental leadership imperative that requires adequate support and resources. We [the Army] are pursuing numerous programs designed to improve spouse employment."² It is an accepted belief that military spouse employment directly affects the ability of the Department of Defense (DoD) to retain service members. The National Defense Research Institute indicates that successful recruiting and retention of the active duty force depends on service members and their spouses' satisfaction with the military lifestyle.³ They further indicated that "prior research suggests that the most satisfied military families are those with an employed spouse and that the influence of the military spouses on service member retention decision has increased with the proportion of military spouses working outside the home."⁴ The Navy Fleet and Support Program also acknowledges that "changes in economic and labor market conditions, and research conducted in the early 1980s, indicated that spouse employment issues could have an effect on retention and readiness of military members."⁵

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

MILITARY ENVIRONMENT

According to information from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, in 2003, 53.4% of active duty enlisted personnel have families, 69.4% of the active duty officers have families and 56.2% of warrant officers have families. This represents a total of 1,556,489 military families or 58.5% of the active duty military.⁶ The Rand Corporation likewise indicated that today's military is increasingly a military of families. Their research shows that one in seven active-duty service

members enters the military married; for those with eight years of service, three in four are married. The research shows that military families, like their civilian counterparts, may rely on a second income.

While military spouse employment may be a necessity, spouses face unique obstacles to pursuing employment, especially since military spouses are more apt to experience frequent reassignments and changes of residence. As a direct result of the military environment, military spouses report that finding jobs is difficult and finding well-paying jobs is even more difficult.⁷ The Rand research indicated that the frequent moves of military families results in a reduction in the weeks that the military spouse can work. The lower wages earned by military spouses, compared to their civilian counterpart may also be a result of the frequent moves.⁸ The National Defense Research Institute acknowledges that “military spouses are more likely to experience frequent long-distance relocations.”⁹ The quantitative data available to the National Defense Research Institute “confirms the perceptions and experiences of many of the military spouses interviewed and demonstrate that many military spouses make personal employment or academic sacrifices to support their service member spouse’s career demands.”¹⁰ Another report, on the results of the 1997 survey of spouses of junior enlisted personnel, indicated that almost half [of the spouses] either ‘agreed’ (15%) or ‘agreed strongly’ (30%) that the relocation to a new area with their military spouses had interfered with their job advancement.¹¹

As indicated in an article by Jenny Sokol, “Finding a rewarding and enjoyable job is not easy. For military spouses, hanging onto a great job is even more difficult because of frequent moves.”¹² DoD recognizes that more and more the military family depends on dual incomes ,which is reflective of contemporary families.¹³ “Although the demographics of military spouses suggest that they should have better employment outcomes and higher wages than the average civilian spouse, military wives are employed at lower rates and earn less than civilian wives, on average.”¹⁴ “Two-thirds of those interviewed felt that being a military spouse had a negative impact on their work opportunities. One of the most frequently cited causes was frequent and disruptive moves.”¹⁵ A report from the 1997 survey of the spouses of junior enlisted service members indicated that the majority of spouses in the employment market did not find a job that made much use of their skills and training. The survey indicated that 31% of the spouses held clerical positions, 15% of the spouses held professional, management or administration positions, and 14% held positions in the service category. ¹⁶ The same survey indicated that 91% of the spouses desired to work or worked within the past year. The need to work to provide money for basic living expenses was listed by 81% of the spouses as the reason for working.¹⁷

"The Army knows that employment is one of the most significant issues for military families"⁸ and supports the proposition that "every Army spouse should have a choice and be afforded the opportunity to develop a career and/or become employed."¹⁹

EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE

As a result of the Military Family Act of 1985 (Public Law 99-145) the Spouse Employment Assistance Program (SEAP) was established by DoD, on 8 November 1985.²⁰ Such programs aim to enhance retention of married military personnel by lessening some of the difficulties caused by frequent moves between duty stations. Employment Assistance Programs (EAP) were specifically designed to help spouses overcome employment problems due to frequent transfers because transfers routinely result in breaks in employment, education, and training resulting in the need for spouses to restart job searches and disruptions to career development efforts.²¹ Although this initiative was implemented in 1985, a 1997 survey of spouses of junior enlisted personnel indicated that 60% of the spouses did not know about EAP services and only 10% had used an EAP service in the previous year. Further, of the jobs spouses held when they filled out the survey, only 7% were found through the EAP.²² The Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force each offer separate, yet similar, spouse employment programs.

The Department of the Navy (DON) recognized that frequent relocations associated with military lifestyle created career challenges for military spouses. DON uses SEAP to address those challenges by providing workshops, such as launching a job search, career planning, resume writing, interview techniques; providing Federal employment information; conducting self-assessments and vocational tests and assisting with goal setting.²³

Air Force surveys indicate that the disruption of family member's careers due to PCS, deployment and general military life causes stress on Air Force Families. In response to this input, the Family Support Center offers Career Focus (CF) which assists spouses with career planning, improving job search skills, and identifying vocational interests. Individual career counseling and assessment, skills development and decision making are key elements of CF. In order to make this program effective, staff consultants work closely with employers and organizations in the local community to assist with placement, skills training and labor market analysis. Classes, workshops, employment resources rooms with computers, and one-on-one assistance are also available.²⁴

The Marine Corps Family Member Employment Assistance Program (FMEAP) assists active duty family members, to achieve their goals through employment, education or volunteerism. It serves as a liaison/referral service to local and national employers, a resource

for education and skill set training, and provides information concerning employment, skills-based education, training and volunteer opportunities.”²⁵

SURVEYS

A DoD survey in 2004 of 33,000 active duty service members indicates that spouses relocating within the U.S. spent 5 months searching for a job after relocating and those at overseas locations spent 6 months looking for a job after relocating. It further shows that 55% (53% in U.S. and 67% overseas) of the spouses wanted to work full time, but worked less than 35 hours a week in a civilian job or an armed forces related position. The responses indicated that for 28% of the spouses the reason they were working part-time was that they could only find part-time work. The survey further identified the reasons for spouse employment in general as; 73% desire a career, 68% to gain experience for future career, 66% because they need the money.²⁶ According to the National Defense Research Institute, which interviewed spouses during their research, financial reasons were mentioned by about three-quarters of those spouses who were either employed or seeking work.²⁷

Another survey, conducted in conjunction with the Military Spouse Preference (MSP) Choice pilot in Europe, revealed that 78% of the spouses responding indicated they are interested in working on a military installation during their military sponsor’s current overseas tour.²⁸ Since the availability for employment in most countries in Europe is restricted by the Status of Forces Agreement or other agreements between the U.S. and the host country, this level of response would be expected.

MILITARY SPOUSE PREFERENCE (MSP)

The MSP program was developed and implemented in 1989 to help reduce the interruption of the military spouse’s career when they have to move due to the service member relocating.²⁹ The underlying premise, which served as the impetus for the program, is that spouse employment would improve the quality of life for military families thereby resulting in improved retention. MSP provides worldwide employment preference for spouses of active duty military members of the U.S. Armed Forces.³⁰ It provides for the appointment of a spouse, under a special appointing authority, to positions at their sponsor’s duty station or within commuting distance of the duty station. It is important to note that the MSP Program does not give a military spouse competitive status as an applicant, which is a “person’s basic eligibility for assignment to a position in the competitive service, without having to compete with members of the general public in an open competitive examination. (Once competitive status is acquired,

that status belongs to the individual, not to the position.)”³¹ Since MSP is a DoD program, however, it only applies to DOD vacancies.

Since the initial implementation of the MSP program there have been two changes to improve the program. In 1990, E.O. 12721 provided eligibility for military spouses to be employed under a career conditional appointment upon return from overseas if they were employed in a Federal position while overseas.³² In October 2004, as a result of the MSP Choice pilot conducted by the European Command, the MSP policy was changed to permit military spouses to take temporary positions without loss of their MSP. This change allows spouses to retain their eligibility for MSP for continuing positions.³³ This is beneficial to the military family since it allows the spouse to take a temporary position to meet immediate financial need while allowing the spouse to continue applying for positions that better utilizes skills and provides career enhancement. “For many, finding a government job can be advantageous to a military spouse. Once they are employed at the Federal level, they may be eligible for preference with other Federal agencies or within different branches of their current agency when they transfer. Additionally once the spouse is designated a ‘career employee’ they will be eligible to apply for other opportunities not open to the general public.”³⁴ Practically speaking, MSP may not be having much affect. The downsizing of the DoD workforce has resulted in fewer positions available for military spouses, because employees currently employed are either moved to the vacant positions that might have been used for MSP appointments or positions are eliminated when an employee transfers or separates.³⁵ Data obtained from the Defense Civilian Personnel Data System indicated that for the period 1 January 2003 through 31 December 2003 there were 4923 appointments of military spouses under the MSP authority. This represented less than 1% (specifically 0.7%) of the total employee population for DoD. During the same period 1.76% of the employee population left their positions (either going on leave without pay or resigning) due to their military sponsor relocating. For the period 1 January 2004 through 31 December 2004, the loss rate for employees leaving their positions due to their military sponsor relocating was 1.8%.³⁶

RETENTION

As indicated previously, it is a widely accepted belief that spousal employment affects retention. There is some data to support that belief. “Research conducted in the early 1980s indicated that spouse employment had an effect on retention and readiness of military members.”³⁷ Survey results, however, have not been consistent over time. A 1992 survey of active duty service members indicated that the most important influence on retention of military

personnel (i.e., reenlistment intentions for enlisted personnel and total expected years of service for officers) is satisfaction with military life.³⁸ The strains posed by the military lifestyle play a role in service members' leaving the military to pursue what they perceive to be more family-friendly professions.³⁹ The satisfaction of military families' increases when spouses are employed and that satisfaction influences the decision to remain in the service.⁴⁰ The Rand Research Brief on the survey of junior enlisted wives observes that many service members marry early in their military career and a significant percentage of these leave in their mid-career years. The presumption is that the decision to stay in the military or to leave, is influenced by the service member's spouse's career prospects and career aspirations as well as their own. The brief reinforces the presumption by acknowledging that it is widely assumed that the job and career opportunities available to a military spouse affect retention. Specifically, the influence on the service member to leave the service will be greater if the military spouse believes their career opportunities to be greater outside the military, if the playing field is level.⁴¹

The 1992 survey analysis presents a seeming counter indicator to the presumption that spousal employment translates to higher retention. It indicates that a higher satisfaction with family income was associated with a lower likelihood of reenlistment (enlisted personnel) and fewer expected years of service (officers). These results suggest that as the financial stability of a service member's family increases, they may be more likely to indicate an intention to leave the military sooner.⁴²

Most recently, a 2004 survey of active duty service members indicates that 46% of spouses or significant others are in favor of the service member staying on active duty. (The results reflect that there is slightly higher support for staying on active duty for those located overseas (49%) versus for those located in the U.S. (45%)) The survey also indicates that 36% of the spouses or significant others support leaving active duty. The breakdown for location influence indicates that 31% of the spouses/significant others for overseas locations support leaving the service while 36% of those located in the U.S. support leaving active duty.⁴³

The 2004 survey of active duty service members shows that 35% are 'satisfied', 30% are 'dissatisfied' and 35% 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied' with their spouses' employment and career opportunities. The results seem to indicate that location affects the satisfaction level. For those located in the U.S., 36% were 'satisfied' and 39% were 'dissatisfied' with their spouses' employment and career opportunities. For those located overseas, 29% were 'satisfied' and 33% were 'unsatisfied'.⁴⁴

A similar 1997 survey of spouses of enlisted personnel indicated that more than one-fourth of the spouses stated that the military member would be somewhat unlikely (7%) or very

unlikely (20%) to reenlist, while approximately 19% reported a 50-50 likelihood that the member would reenlist.⁴⁵

In the report on the MSP Choice Survey the expected result was that military recruitment and retention rates would either hold steady or improve, as more spouses are accepted for temporary positions without losing their MSP. Unexpectedly, the results of the survey indicated that, during the pilot, there was no real nexus between military spouse employment and military recruitment and retention rates. The report further states that it should be expected that more opportunities for spouses to be employed would translate to more satisfied employees, resulting in better retention.⁴⁶ The manager/supervisor survey for the MSP Choice pilot supports that assumption with 81% of the respondents indicating that MSP Choice could have a positive affect on decision to remain in the military.⁴⁷

Regardless of any other considerations, "It is hoped that stabilizing service members for a number of years at a particular location will ease the burden for their spouses to find satisfying employment opportunities and should also increase other quality-of-life factors that affect retention. This is highly significant in an all volunteer force."⁴⁸

REDEPLOYMENT

During a speech at a Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention on August 16, 2004, President George W. Bush confirmed that approximately 50,000 to 55,000 personnel in Europe and 10,000, to 15, 000 personnel in Asia will be transferred back to the continental U.S., confirming rumors regarding the military force.⁴⁹ It is believed that the largest reductions would occur in Germany and South Korea.⁵⁰ The proposal is that large bases and training facilities in the U.S. would be used as 'boathouses', that is, a home station from which service members would deploy to overseas locations, while their families remained at the 'boathouse'. The redeployment of troops, and establishment of centralized units at 'boathouses', would provide for more stability for the service members and their families.⁵¹ Some bases that could serve as boathouses are Camp Lejeune and Ft. Bragg, North Carolina; Camp Pendleton, California and Ft. Lewis, Washington.⁵² Based on the redeployment of service members to the 'boathouses' in the U.S. the typical three-year overseas tours would be decreased and administration officials hope this would ease the pressures placed on military families by the need for frequent moves.⁵³

The president said the move [to return troops stateside] would improve life for military families and save money. The stress on service members and their families would be reduced, in part, because the military spouses will have fewer job changes and greater stability.⁵⁴

Although it is anticipated that there would be some cost savings from the redeployment, the amounts are difficult to project. Nevertheless, there would be less money spent moving the military families.⁵⁵ A benefit of the redeployment is that once a family is in place (assigned to the 'boathouse') families should move less often during a military career.⁵⁶ Also, once in place, deployments should be shorter and less frequent which would potentially make life easier thanks to increased predictability.⁵⁷

The Rand Corporation conducted research on how deployments influence reenlistments between 1993-1995. The analysis indicated that "deployment did not decrease retention and in many cases increased it."⁵⁸ The study did indicate that reenlistments of first-term personnel were lower if there were hostile deployments with long separations from family and friends.⁵⁹ In summary, the research indicated that service members may prefer some deployment to none, but they also prefer shorter and infrequent deployments.⁶⁰

DISCUSSION

According to Ginger Groeber, Deputy Under Secretary for Civilian Personnel Policy, Office of the Undersecretary of Defense, "The mobility requirements of the military family limit the possibility of career advancement for military spouses who accompany the member from one duty station to another. In order to provide greater career opportunities for military spouses, we must do all we can to maximize available employment opportunities."⁶¹

The Army announced recently that three corporations joined the military effort to boost job opportunities, which in turn is expected to improve retention.⁶² Fifteen corporations and 3 military partners have agreements with the Army, to help increase job opportunities for Army spouses.⁶³ The Army Spouse Employment Partnership "...is a centerpiece in the Army's effort to improve retention among our fine soldiers by providing opportunities for spouses to better meet their employment goals." said Reginald Brown, Assistant Secretary of the Army (Manpower and Reserve Affairs).⁶⁴ According to Terry Rivera, manager of the Army Employment Readiness Program, Army Community and Family Support Center, "The expansion of the partnership gives Army spouses a better chance to meet their career and employment goals and increase their family's financial security."⁶⁵ Program objectives are mutually supporting for both the Army and corporate America. In return for corporation pledges of spouse employment opportunities, the Army expects to improve retention of quality Soldiers. Corporate America gains with better access to Army spouses as an employee resource pool. Specifically, each partner will identify contact points at each Army Community and Family

Support Center. Participating companies will be identified, information on recruiting and vacancies will be provided, and qualified spouses for potential employment will be identified.⁶⁶

In 2002, the DON announced it had established a written agreement with Adecco, the world's largest staffing agency to provide military spouses with customized recruiting, training and placement needs. As a result of the agreement, Navy spouses had increased opportunities to obtain employment in the private sector, improved their ability to continue employment with the same company, and increased ability to accrue transferable retirement benefits while maintaining a portable career.⁶⁷ Adecco's Career Accelerator Program is the primary tool to assist military spouses in finding temporary and direct hire employment. A big benefit is that there is no cost to either the military service or the military spouses. Adecco's participation supports the military by helping to reduce the stress of deployed military personnel because service members can be confident that their families are being cared for. The partnership program is a big step forward in employment assistance for military spouses allowing them to be more in control of their careers.⁶⁸

Another effort, initiated by the DON, is a pilot with Ajilon, the global leader in specialized recruiting and consulting solutions.⁶⁹ Ajilon recruits top executive level, middle management degreed professionals, certified specialists and office staff personnel at all levels.⁷⁰ A six month pilot was launched on 1 October 2003 at six centers. Ed Roscoe, head of the DON Family Readiness Programs, indicated that the pilot was not very successful in Annapolis, Maryland, or San Diego, California (the locations of four of the pilot centers) due to the local labor market conditions. He did indicate that the pilot did well in the Camp Pendleton, California area. He also indicated that the Navy Fleet and Family Support Program is developing a similar new partnership with Concentra, Inc., a healthcare solutions company, with locations in 34 states.⁷¹

DoD efforts to develop partnerships with businesses, especially those undertaken by the Navy, appear to offer good potential for military spouses to be employed and develop careers, especially if they are remaining in locations longer.

SPOUSES TO TEACHERS

Another DOD initiative to assist spouse employment is the Spouses to Teachers program which is geared to assist military spouses interested in teaching.⁷² The purpose is to help relocating spouses by providing information regarding any additional credits they may need to meet the certification requirements of the specific state.⁷³ This program benefits spouses interested in teaching and helps reduce the national teacher shortage.⁷⁴ The Spouses to Teachers program also provides an opportunity for a spouse to pursue a degree and a career

that will provide the family a better income over time so military families can come out ahead, too.⁷⁵ “One of the things that we’re primarily interested in right now is providing access to careers for spouses that will enhance the family bottom line,” Gary Woods, acting director of DoD Educational Opportunities, said.⁷⁶

MILITARY SPOUSE PREFERENCE (MSP)

In 2003, there were 4923 spouses employed under the MSP authority according to the Civilian Personnel Management Service (CPMS). That represents 0.7% of the DoD workforce. (The same report does not indicate any appointments in 2004 using the MSP authority. The reason for no reported appointments has not yet been explained.)⁷⁷ The Army reports that, between June 2004 and June 2005, they hired 2519 spouses. This represents approximately 1.2% of their total workforce.⁷⁸

Although the MSP Choice survey reflected that a majority of military spouses stated that MSP Choice increased their employment opportunities for positions in the Federal service, there does not seem to be evidence of that fact.⁷⁹ In fact, the information received from CPMS indicates that for calendar year 2003 there were 11,092 employees who left their DoD jobs due to relocating with their spouses. This represents 1.7% leaving versus 0.7% being hired during the same timeframe. These statistics indicate a net loss of 1% of the workforce. In 2004, 11,238 employees left their positions (1.8%).⁸⁰ Unfortunately, there is no data reported on the number of appointments under MSP authority for 2004, so the net effect on the workforce cannot be identified.

The reduction in the Federal workforce that began in the early 90’s is continuing and this will result in even fewer positions available for appointments under the MSP authority. Factors influencing the drawdown are the A-76 studies (where a most efficient organization is designed to perform the tasks with less personnel or the tasks are contracted out to private sector contractors), the return of Federal employees to the U.S. as a result of the redeployment of troops and the closing of overseas bases, and the consolidation/closure of bases that may occur due to the upcoming Base Realignment and Closure decisions. This reduces the number of positions available since many of the current Federal employees must be placed into those vacant positions.

QUALITY OF LIFE

We are fighting our biggest war in decades with the most-married military in its modern history.⁸¹ Over half of today’s forces (active and reserve) are married. According to one of the speakers to the Army War College students, in September 2004, 63% of the active duty force is

married with both spouses working, but spouses can not capitalize on their careers due to relocating. If the troops are stationed in the U.S. they can improve their economic condition as well as spend money in the U.S.

The shift in demographics described above could be further reflected in overall satisfaction with service life. The results of the 2004 survey of active duty military indicated that overall satisfaction with the military way of life was 62%, down 5 percentage points from March 2003. It further indicated that the likelihood to stay on active duty was 57%, down 4 percentage points. There was no change in spouse/significant other support to stay in the service, it remained at 46%. Assuming that we can believe the decrease in overall satisfaction, then it is necessary to determine at least some of the root causes for dissatisfaction.

In the 1999 survey of spouses, 55.4% of the respondents indicated that loss or decrease of income was a problem. (For spouses relocating in the U.S., 56.2% responded that loss or decrease of income was a problem. For spouses relocating overseas, 50.5% indicated it was a problem.)⁸² On a related note, a report by Rand indicates that fewer military families own their own homes when compared to similar civilian families.⁸³ Service members choose to live on-base primarily for economic reasons. The allowances given to service members for off-base housing typically do not cover all the costs associated with living off-base so those families who do must pay the additional costs out of their own pockets.⁸⁴ Although not conclusive, it would appear that personal financial conditions play a major role in individual and family general satisfaction.

Organizations outside of DOD are looking at how to improve the quality of life for military families. For example, the National Military Family Association promotes DoD, other Federal Agency, state, and private sector initiatives to enhance opportunities for military spouses in the areas of education, employment, career progression and retirement plan portability. This includes seeking legislation to protect the employment flexibility of spouses.⁸⁵ It may be time to shift the paradigm. Perhaps relocating doesn't necessarily mean that military spouses need to abandon a position to begin a new job search. With cyber-communication capabilities worldwide, spouses may be able to keep their job or business, regardless of their location.⁸⁶ RAND recommendations for DOD consideration in addressing and improving military spouse employment include:

- Design employment programs or policies that recognize that different groups of spouses work for different reasons...
- Pursue relationships with local employers and large, nationally prevalent employers to improve hiring conditions for military spouses.

- Consider incentives or requirements for military contractors to prioritize hiring military spouses.
- Reexamine the priority system for civil service jobs, including whether military spouses should receive higher priority than non-retiree veterans.
- Address licensing and certification hurdles to help relocating spouses continue their careers.
- Raise awareness about existing spouse employment programs...⁸⁷

CONCLUSION

The information reviewed in this research and presentation indicates that quality of life is a high influencer of personal and family decisions by service members on whether to continue their careers in the military. A factor affecting the quality of life is the opportunities for military spouses to secure employment and to advance their careers. This is important in many cases for financial stability but also contributes to personal satisfaction. The DoD is pursuing multiple avenues to expand the opportunities for military spouse employment which, in turn, should improve the quality of life. Additionally, the planned redeployment of troops to the U.S. should positively affect the quality of life for the families since remaining in a location for an extended period provides more opportunities for career development.

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ENDNOTES

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