



MANPOWER AND
RESERVE AFFAIRS

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

1500 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-1500

February 13, 2024

**Vermont General Assembly
House Committee on Human Services
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301**

**Representative Theresa Wood, Chair
Representative Jessica Brumsted, Vice-Chair**

**Remarks of
Melissa J. Willette
New England Region Liaison
United States Department of Defense-State Liaison Office**

Support of: H. 689, An Act Relating to Child Abuse and Neglect Allegations Involving Military Personnel

Representative Wood, Representative Brumsted and honorable members of the House Committee on Human Services; the Department of Defense is grateful for the opportunity to support the policies reflected in H. 689, An Act Relating to Child Abuse and Neglect Allegations Involving Military Personnel, and hopes Vermont will join the 34 other states that have passed similar legislation on this issue. Even one child's life is worth this effort.

My name is Melissa Willette. I am the New England Region Liaison at the Defense-State Liaison Office, operating under the direction of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.

We represent the Department and establish relationships with state leaders across the country who are concerned for troops and their families' welfare by harmonizing state and federal law and regulation on policy problems of national significance. These are identified by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Military Departments, and the National Guard Bureau as areas where states can play a crucial role.

H. 689 allows the reporting of child abuse to the appropriate military authority when the child is a military family member and ensures efforts to determine the military status of parents subject to abuse or neglect allegations.

DoD respectfully submits the State of Vermont can assist the DoD mission to protect military children and other youth from abuse and neglect by enacting the policies set forth in H. 689, which will require (1) child welfare case workers to ask clients if they are associated with the military, and (2) provide them the authority to share this information with the appropriate military authorities, which facilitates a more consistent and authoritative approach to collaborative oversight.

The enactment of H. 689 would amend current reporting criteria outlined in Title 33, Chapter 49 of Vermont Statute, and would state that if a report of child abuse and neglect is accepted as valid, the Department for Children and Families shall collect the military status of the parent or guardian of the

child who is the subject of the report, and shall share that information with the appropriate military authorities.

Such memorandums of understanding shall establish procedures and protocols for matters including, but not limited to, identifying an individual credibly alleged to have committed abuse or neglect as military personnel; identifying appropriate circumstances for reporting to military authorities without reducing likelihood of reporting or creating undue risk to the health or wellbeing of the spouse, intimate partner, or child; reporting to military authorities when an investigation implicating military personnel has been initiated; and maintaining confidentiality requirements under state and federal law.

In Vermont, all military families live off military installations and in our communities, and so fall under the jurisdiction of state and local agencies. The military services have investigative, intervention, and rehabilitative support resources that can assist the child welfare system in addressing allegations and provide follow-up family counseling when they have knowledge of an allegation. The Department for Children and Families will require the full cooperation of military personnel to enable it to effectively perform its professional and statutory responsibilities.

An issue specifically relating to military families is frequent moves. Military units may have information regarding incidents of allegations that occurred in other states where the service member was stationed that the Department for Children and Families would not otherwise have access to during their investigation. Because military families move frequently across state lines, not sharing information could result in a family falling through the cracks.

Military commanders, commanding officers and other military department leaders have an official need to know regarding data germane to incidents of suspected child abuse or neglect in order to fulfill their respective duties and responsibilities to take actions regarding military personnel and their dependents on such matters.

Madam Chair, the DoD appreciates your recognition of the important relationship between the Department for Children and Families and the military authorities in Vermont in responding and providing support and services to address child abuse in military families. This is not a military law enforcement matter. This is a victim advocacy measure to protect our most vulnerable.

In closing, let me say that we are grateful for the tremendous effort that Vermont has historically given in supporting our service members and their families; and want to particularly thank the bill sponsor, Rep. Lisa Hango for bringing forth the legislation. On behalf of the Department of Defense, I thank you for your time and stand ready to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully,

Melissa J. Willette
New England Region Liaison
(CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT)
Defense-State Liaison Office