



## OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF WAR

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

MANPOWER AND  
RESERVE AFFAIRS

January 8, 2026

**Vermont General Assembly  
House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs  
115 State Street  
Montpelier, VT 05633**

**Representative Matthew Birong, Chair  
Representative Lisa Hango, Vice-Chair**

**Remarks of  
Melissa J. Willette  
New England Regional Liaison  
DOW/Defense-State Liaison Office**

Chairman Birong, Vice Chair Hango and honorable members of the Committee, the Department of War is grateful for the opportunity to support the policies reflected in H.531, An act relating to creating a preference for military spouses in hiring into State employment. It is our hope Vermont will consider implementation of this policy and in turn further enhance the support for military families in The Green Mountain State. Our service members hold a crucial role in protecting the interests of the United States both at home and abroad and ensuring our overall national security. Through the implementation of these changes, states can ensure service members are ready to support the military mission because Vermont is supporting their family, creating an environment for military families that enhances recruiting, resilience, readiness, and retention.

My name is Melissa Willette, and I am the New England Regional Liaison at the Defense-State Liaison Office, operating under the direction of the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness. We represent the Department and establish relationships with state leaders across the country who are concerned for service members and their families' welfare by enhancing state laws and regulations that improve the overall quality of life for this population.

These policies are identified by the Military Departments and the National Guard Bureau as areas where states can play a crucial role in our nation's support for military families and subsequently our national security.

Military spouses bring distinct talents to the workforce. H.531 has the opportunity to create stronger pathways to employment for military spouses and help address a unique challenge faced by our military families. Due to the high demands of military service, a majority of our families relocate to a new duty station every two to three years. These rapid rates of relocation often hinder the employment and career potential of military spouses, which in turn have long term consequences for both the spouse and family. According to a 2021 Department of Defense survey of Active Duty spouses, 48% of respondents stated that finding employment was one of the most critical problems

they experienced during permanent change of station (PCS) moves.<sup>1</sup>

Undue stress, whether financial or other, has potential to disrupt the overall readiness of our military units at the local level.

Military spouses and family members play critical roles behind the scenes in supporting our service members. The result of that commitment affects their own ability to pursue employment and establish their own careers, which is highlighted by the unemployment rate of this demographic. Military spouses are unemployed at a rate of 21%; a rate that is significantly higher than their civilian counterparts. But like their civilian counterparts, our military families rely on two incomes to meet their basic needs. Offering employment preference may be the difference maker when looking at ways to reduce this stubbornly high unemployment rate.

This policy also has the opportunity to not only benefit our military families, but also the employers actively looking to recruit talent. For some employers, providing a military spouse preference will assist with hiring goals, create a diverse workforce, and support the local military community.

According to a 2022 DoD Demographic report, the average age of active duty military spouses is 32 years old, and 49% of those individuals have bachelors degrees.<sup>2</sup> Military spouse hiring preference would also have a positive impact on our state's economy. H.531 is a proactive step to support the economic stability and career advancement of these highly skilled and dedicated individuals. Hiring preference would not only be a well-deserved recognition of the sacrifices made by military families, but it would also be a sound economic investment in Vermont's workforce. When military spouses are able to secure stable and fulfilling employment, they are more likely to contribute to their communities. This, in turn, can lead to increased economic growth, reduced poverty rates, and a more diverse and resilient workforce.

Simply put, H.531 offers a framework to serve our military families.

We thank the Committee for considering this important legislation and are especially grateful for the tremendous efforts Chairman Birong, Vice-Chair Hango, and the National Guard Caucus have historically made in supporting our service members and their families. We also thank the bill sponsor, Rep. Mary-Katherine Stone, Co-Chair of the National Guard Caucus, for her continued advocacy and support.

Sincerely,

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

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/data-research-and-statistics/survey-findings/spouses-survey/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/data-research-and-statistics/military-community-demographics/>