

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-193](#), a report to the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

There were over 605,000 spouses of active duty servicemembers in the U.S. military as of 2018. These spouses may face conditions associated with the military lifestyle that make it challenging to start or maintain a career, including frequent moves and difficulties transferring occupational licenses.

House Armed Services Committee Report 116-120 accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 included a provision for GAO to review several matters related to military spouse employment. This report examines (1) selected employment outcomes for military spouses, (2) DOD's efforts to evaluate states' licensing policies for spouses, and (3) DOD's outreach efforts to promote awareness of employment resources. GAO reviewed DOD documentation and 2017 survey data (most recent available), relevant literature, and federal laws; interviewed DOD and military services officials and relevant stakeholders; and spoke with staff at six military installations selected based on the numbers of servicemembers, among other factors.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations to DOD to continue assessing and reporting on states' efforts to help military spouses transfer occupational licenses, and to establish information sharing strategies on outreach to military spouses about employment resources. DOD concurred with both recommendations.

View [GAO-21-193](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth Curda at (202) 512-7215 or curdae@gao.gov.

January 2021

MILITARY SPOUSE EMPLOYMENT

DOD Should Continue Assessing State Licensing Practices and Increase Awareness of Resources

What GAO Found

According to estimates from Department of Defense (DOD) survey data, roughly one-quarter of military spouses who were in the workforce and in career fields that required credentials (state licenses or certifications) were unemployed in 2017. In that same year, about one-quarter of spouses who were employed in credentialed career fields were working outside their area of expertise, and about one in seven were working part-time due to a lack of full-time opportunities—two potential indicators of underemployment. Employment outcomes for military spouses may also vary due to other factors, including their partner's rank and frequent moves, according to DOD survey data and GAO's literature review.

In February 2020, the Defense State Liaison Office, which works on key issues affecting military families, assessed states' use of best practices that help military spouses transfer occupational licenses. For example, the Liaison Office found that 34 states could increase their use of interstate compacts, which allow spouses in certain career fields, such as nursing, to work in multiple states without relicensing (see figure). However, the Liaison Office does not plan to continue these assessments, or assess whether states' efforts are improving spouses' experiences with transferring licenses. As a result, DOD may not have up-to-date information on states' actions that help spouses transfer their licenses and maintain employment.

Assessment by the Defense State Liaison Office of Number of States Using Interstate Compacts to Improve Military Spouse Employment

Interstate Compacts		Number of states receiving rating
No action 	Approved no compacts	12 
Some action 	Approved compacts in one to two fields	22 
Significant action 	Approved compacts in three or more fields	16 

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense documentation. | GAO-21-193

DOD and the military services use a range of virtual and in-person outreach to promote awareness of employment resources among military spouses. For example, officials GAO interviewed at installations said they promoted resources through social media and at orientation briefings. Nonetheless, GAO found that inconsistent information sharing across DOD and with external stakeholders who help spouses with employment hindered the effectiveness of outreach. For instance, officials from two services said they do not have methods to regularly exchange outreach best practices or challenges, while officials from another service said they have quarterly staff calls to share lessons learned. Without strategies for sharing information among internal and external stakeholders, DOD may miss opportunities to increase spouses' awareness of available resources, and improve their employment opportunities.