



January 2021

MILITARY SPOUSE EMPLOYMENT

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

Accessible Version



A Century of Non-Partisan Fact-Based Work

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.

Contents

Letter	1
Background	4
DOD Survey Data Indicate that Military Spouses' Employment Outcomes Varied by Professional Credential Requirements and the Servicemembers' Rank	9
DOD Has Taken Steps to Assess Licensing Practices Across States, and Prioritizes Mission-Essential Needs Above Spousal Employment for Assignments	17
DOD Promotes Employment Resources for Military Spouses, but Inconsistent Information Sharing By Stakeholders May Hinder Awareness	25
Conclusions	32
Recommendations for Executive Action	32
Agency Comments	33
Appendix I: Overview of Analysis of Department of Defense Survey of Active Duty Spouses Data	36
Appendix II: Selected Demographics for Military Spouses	41
Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Defense	46
Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments	49
Appendix V: Accessible Data	50
Data Tables	50
Agency Comment Letter	56
Related GAO Products	59

Tables

Table 1: Examples of DOD Employment Assistance Resources for Military Spouses	7
Table 2: Selected 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (ADSS) Survey Questions and Response Options	38
Table 3: Military Spouse Gender by Professional Credential(s) and Rank ⁴¹	
Table 4: Military Spouse Racial Composition by Professional Credential(s) and Rank	42
Table 5: Military Spouse Educational Attainment by Professional Credential(s) and Rank	43
Table 6: Military Spouse Age by Professional Credential(s) and Rank ⁴⁴	
Table 7: Top Ten Military Spouse Career Fields	45

Figures

Figure 1: Military Spouse Estimated Unemployment Rates by Credential Requirement (2017)	11
Figure 2: Military Spouse Estimated Unemployment Rates by Servicemember Rank (2017)	13
Figure 3: Military Spouse Estimated Underemployment by Credential Requirement (2017)	15
Figure 4: Military Spouse Estimated Underemployment by Servicemember Rank (2017)	16
Figure 5: Examples of Defense State Liaison Office Criteria and Assessments of Licensure Portability in 50 States	20
Figure 6: Sample Department of Defense Spouse Education and Career Opportunities Electronic Newsletter	26
Figure 7: Sample Military Installation Promotional Materials on Employment Resources	27
Accessible Data for Assessment by the Defense State Liaison Office of Number of States Using Interstate Compacts to Improve Military Spouse Employment	50
Accessible Data for Figure 1: Military Spouse Estimated Unemployment Rates by Credential Requirement (2017)	51
Accessible Data for Figure 2: Military Spouse Estimated Unemployment Rates by Servicemember Rank (2017)	52
Accessible Data for Figure 3: Military Spouse Estimated Underemployment by Credential Requirement (2017)	53
Accessible Data for Figure 4: Military Spouse Estimated Underemployment by Servicemember Rank (2017)	54

Accessible Data for Figure 5: Examples of Defense State Liaison
Office Criteria and Assessments of Licensure Portability
in 50 States

55

Abbreviations

ADSS	Survey of Active Duty Spouses
DOD	Department of Defense
DOL	Department of Labor
DSLO	Defense State Liaison Office
MC&FP	Military Community and Family Policy
MSEP	Military Spouse Employment Partnership
MyCAA	My Career Advancement Account Scholarship
NDA	National Defense Authorization Act
OPA	Office of People Analytics
PCS	Permanent change of station
SECO	Spouse Education and Career Opportunities

This is a work of the U.S. government and is not subject to copyright protection in the United States. The published product may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without further permission from GAO. However, because this work may contain copyrighted images or other material, permission from the copyright holder may be necessary if you wish to reproduce this material separately.

January 27, 2021

The Honorable Adam Smith
Chairman
The Honorable Mike Rogers
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

There were over 605,000 spouses of active duty servicemembers in the U.S. military in 2018, and these spouses may face various challenges when seeking employment opportunities and supporting their partners' military careers.¹ Military spouses' employment challenges can affect their family's wellbeing, along with servicemember retention. For example, a recent study found that military-related moves may be connected to higher rates of unemployment, relative to similar civilian spouses.² Further, according to the Department of Defense's (DOD) 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses, an estimated 50 percent of active duty military spouses work in a field that requires a professional certification or occupational license, and transferring these credentials from one state to another may prove difficult. DOD has put several programs and resources in place to address the employment challenges faced by military spouses, including virtual career coaching, interview skills development, and initiatives to address professional licensing issues with state policy makers.

The U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services report (H. Rpt. 116-120) accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for fiscal year 2020 includes a provision for GAO to examine several matters related to military spouse employment.³ This report examines (1) what is known about rates of unemployment and

¹The cited number of spouses of active duty servicemembers is from DOD data for fiscal year 2018. Department of Defense, *2018 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community* (2018), 134.

²In this study, "similar" refers to female civilian spouses (spouses who are not married to active duty servicemembers) who are included in the study. Institute for Veterans and Military Families and Military Officers Association of America, *Military Spouse Employment Report* (February 2014), 26.

³H.R. Rep. No. 116-120, at 155 (2019).

underemployment among military spouses with professional credentials, and across different servicemember ranks; (2) the extent to which DOD evaluates states' licensing policies for military spouses, and how, if at all, spousal employment is considered in servicemember assignment decisions; and (3) how DOD promotes awareness of employment resources among military spouses.

To address the first objective, we reviewed and analyzed relevant data on unemployment and measures related to underemployment among military spouses from DOD's 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (ADSS).⁴ Specifically, from the relevant ADSS data, we generated weighted percentage estimates of spouses in fields that do and do not require a professional credential, and spouses married to servicemembers of different ranks. To assess the reliability of these data, we interviewed officials at DOD's Office of People Analytics (OPA), the office responsible for conducting the survey, to obtain information on the survey design and potential limitations. We also reviewed technical documentation on the survey and conducted electronic testing of the survey data to verify the data's accuracy and completeness. We found these data reliable for the estimates we present in our report. All percentage estimates in this report have a margin of error of plus or minus 10 percentage points or fewer. (See app. I for more information on our analysis of the ADSS data and the limitations we identified.) Additionally, we reviewed relevant literature and interviewed officials from the Department of Labor (DOL), DOD's OPA, the Department of Commerce's Census Bureau, and knowledgeable researchers to gather information about military spouses' employment outcomes, and assess the limitations, if any, of available information on this topic.

To address the second objective, we reviewed relevant DOD and military services' instructions, memoranda, directives, and published reports related to licensing options for military spouses and to personnel assignment decisions. We assessed DOD's efforts against its own

⁴ADSS is DOD's most comprehensive source of data on the military community, including military spouses. The survey is generally administered every 2 years, and is used to collect various types of information on the military spouse population, including employment, occupational areas, and unemployment rates. The 2017 ADSS was the most recent available for analysis during the course of our review. See appendix I for more information on our analysis of the ADSS. DOD released results from the 2019 ADSS in December 2020. For more information on the 2019 ADSS, see <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/data-research-and-statistics/survey-findings/2019-spouses-survey/>.

policies and stated initiatives, as well as leading practices for program evaluations and effective agency strategic reviews.⁵ Additionally, we interviewed an official from the Defense State Liaison Office (DSLO), which works with state policymakers on key quality-of-life issues affecting military families (including spouse licensure), as well as relevant officials from each service (Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marine Corps).⁶

To address the third objective, we reviewed DOD communication plans for its spouse employment programs, as well as outreach and marketing materials, websites, and other documentation related to promoting awareness of these programs from four services. We interviewed key officials involved in DOD's spouse employment programs from DOD headquarters and from each service's headquarters. We also interviewed employment readiness officials from a nongeneralizable sample of six military installations selected to reflect (1) a mix of locations with high to moderate numbers of active duty servicemembers stationed at the installation, (2) geographically dispersed locations within the continental U.S. (urban/suburban and rural), (3) single-service and joint bases, and (4) locations where the primary mission is operational versus support. We assessed the information we obtained from DOD on outreach approaches against federal standards for internal control related to obtaining and using quality information, and communicating information internally and externally.⁷ Additionally, we interviewed knowledgeable researchers, as well as representatives from five military family advocacy organizations that we selected on the basis of their involvement in DOD's Spouse Ambassador Network, which is comprised of a variety of groups that are active in the military spouse community.

To address all three objectives, we reviewed relevant literature and published studies examining employment among military spouses. Additionally, we reviewed relevant federal guidance as well as provisions in the fiscal year 2020 NDAA.

⁵See GAO, *Program Evaluation: Strategies to Facilitate Agencies' Use of Evaluation in Program Management and Policy Making*, [GAO-13-570](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2013), and *Managing for Results: Practices for Effective Agency Strategic Reviews*, [GAO-15-602](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 29, 2015).

⁶For the purposes of our report, we did not include the U.S. Coast Guard in our scope because it is a component of the Department of Homeland Security.

⁷See GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

We conducted this performance audit from October 2019 to January 2021 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Of the estimated 605,000 military spouses of active duty servicemembers in 2018, more than 75 percent were married to enlisted servicemembers rather than to officers, and more than 90 percent were women, according to DOD data.⁸ Studies suggest that military spouses may be unemployed at higher rates than the general civilian population, which had an average unemployment rate of 3.7 percent in 2019, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.⁹ Researchers have identified several factors that may affect military spouses' employment outcomes. For example, military families move frequently, on average once every 2 to 3 years.¹⁰ These transfers, often called permanent change of station (PCS), can make it difficult and costly for active duty military spouses to find jobs and develop

⁸Department of Defense, *2018 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community* (2018), 134-135.

⁹The civilian unemployment rate has likely increased due to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). For studies suggesting military spouses may be unemployed at higher rates than the non-military spouse civilian population, see Institute for Veterans and Military Families and Military Officers Association of America, *Military Spouse Employment Report* (February 2014), 26; and Executive Office of the President, The Council of Economic Advisers, *Military Spouses in the Labor Market* (Washington, D.C.: 2018), 4. While these studies show that the unemployment rate for military spouses is higher than the average civilian unemployment rate, there could be a variety of factors driving these differences, including different characteristics between military spouses and the general population. These studies may not have controlled for all relevant differing characteristics.

¹⁰Institute for Veterans and Military Families, *The Force Behind the Force: A Business Case for Leveraging Military Spouse Talent*, *Employing Military Spouses: Paper One* (July 2016), 4.

careers.¹¹ Military families also tend to have young children, making the balance of two careers and family responsibilities challenging.

Different requirements for occupational licensing across state lines can also make it difficult for military spouses to find and maintain employment with each PCS.¹² Occupational licenses are required by state governments to ensure that practitioners meet a minimum level of competency in specific occupations, such as cosmetology or medicine. Some professions are licensed across states through interstate compacts, while others are licensed on a state-by-state basis. In addition, licensing requirements are created independently by each state government, generally either by state agencies or state-sponsored independent boards. Since licensing requirements often vary by state, the lack of license portability—the ability to transfer an existing license to a new state with minimal application requirements—can make license transfers time consuming and costly for spouses. Unlike occupational licenses, occupational certifications are not generally a legal requirement for working in a certain occupation. However, in some instances certifications are required to maintain or transfer a license. For example, to transfer a massage therapy license from one state to another, individuals may need to be certified by the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork, among other requirements.¹³ Certified workers can use a title such as certified mechanic or certified financial planner, to indicate their status, and certifications are usually acquired through an exam or another demonstration of skills. Certifications are usually granted through organizations or professional associations.

DOD Employment Assistance Programs and Other Efforts to Help Military Spouses

DOD, the military services, and other federal and external entities offer a range of programs to assist military spouses in obtaining employment.

¹¹PCS orders direct where servicemembers move during their military career. These relocations are typically 2- to 4-year assignments, and may involve relocating to a new military duty station in the U.S. or overseas.

¹²Executive Office of the President, *The Fast Track to Civilian Employment: Streamlining Credentialing and Licensing for Service Members, Veterans, and Their Spouses* (Washington D.C.: 2013).

¹³University of Minnesota, *Military Spouse Licensure Portability Examination: Research Report* (2017), 16.

Since 2009, DOD has implemented multiple employment programs to address the career challenges faced by military spouses (see table 1).

Table 1: Examples of DOD Employment Assistance Resources for Military Spouses

DOD program	Resources offered to military spouses
My Career Advancement Account Scholarship (MyCAA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides up to \$4,000 in financial assistance for certifications, licenses, and associate's degrees to eligible military spouses
Military One Source Spouse Career Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides career coaching to help spouses pursue their educational and career goals, including help with the job search
Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connects spouses to over 450 partner employers who have committed to hiring military spouses Offers a website to help spouses find available jobs with partner employers
Military Spouse Preference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gives spouses priority in selection for certain DOD positions

Source: GAO review of Department of Defense (DOD) documentation. | GAO-21-193

DOD’s Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP) administers these resources and programs to help military spouses find employment, primarily through its Spouse Education and Career Opportunities (SECO) initiative. SECO connects spouses to employers committed to hiring military spouses, administers a scholarship program that provides financial assistance for licenses, certifications, and associate’s degrees to pursue an occupation or career field, and operates a call center and website through which spouses can obtain career counseling, among other services. DOD also funds the MySECO website, which contains information about the spouse employment resources available through the SECO initiative.¹⁴

In 2004, DOD created the Defense State Liaison Office (DSLO) within MC&FP to assist with spouse licensure issues, among other key quality-of-life issues affecting military families. DSLO’s efforts to this end included identifying best practices around military spouse licensure in certain states. Additionally, DSLO worked with state legislatures to encourage states to pass laws and enact policy changes that would help military spouses more easily transfer their licenses, including receiving temporary licenses and fast tracking their license applications.¹⁵ DSLO also tracks the progress states make toward adopting interstate license recognition

¹⁴The MySECO website also provides information on other DOD resources beyond SECO that are available to military spouses, such as DOD’s Transition Assistance Program (TAP). TAP provides education, employment, and self-employment services to servicemembers and their families to help them transition to civilian life.

¹⁵Department of Defense and Department of Homeland Security, *Report on Barriers to Portability of Occupational Licenses Between States*, C-FF91556 (March 2018), 1-2.

policies for military spouses and publishes this information on its Military State Policy Source website.

Military Services and Installations' Efforts

Since the 1980s, the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Navy have also independently administered employment assistance programs for military spouses, among other groups.¹⁶ These programs include: (1) the Air Force Employment Assistance Program, (2) the Army Employment Readiness Program, (3) the Marine Corps Family Member Employment Assistance Program, and (4) the Navy Family Employment Readiness Program. The services these programs offer are mostly in person, and are administered on nearly 200 military installations at military and family support centers (family centers) where different family readiness services are provided.¹⁷ These programs assist in a variety of ways, including providing job opening referrals, job fairs, one-on-one employment counseling, and workshops on resume writing, networking, and other topics.

Other Federal and External Entities' Programs

Military spouses can also access employment assistance through other federal and nonfederal programs and organizations. For example, the Department of Labor (DOL) publishes license recognition and reimbursement information on its veterans.gov website, along with reports that are designed for military spouses. DOL also administers the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, which allows eligible military

¹⁶While these programs serve spouses, they also serve many other populations in the military community, including dependent children, active duty servicemembers, and servicemembers transitioning to civilian life. GAO, *Military Spouse Employment Programs: DOD Can Improve Guidance and Performance Monitoring*, [GAO-13-60](#) (Washington DC: December 2012).

¹⁷Family readiness services are composed of both DOD-operated and community-based services delivered through a variety of access points, including family centers. The purpose of family readiness services is to help servicemembers and their families manage the challenges of daily living experienced in the unique context of military service. DOD Instruction 1342.22, *Military Family Readiness* (revised April 11, 2017). Other services provided by the family centers may include relocation assistance (e.g., providing information on housing, child care, and schooling options), financial education and counseling, services for family members with special needs, and transition assistance to help servicemembers and their families separating from the military to reenter the civilian workforce.

spouses to receive priority placement in DOL-funded job training programs in certain instances.¹⁸ Across the federal government, agencies may also hire eligible military spouses through a non-competitive hiring process.¹⁹ In addition, several nonprofit organizations provide employment assistance to military spouses, including those in the Spouse Ambassador Network, a group of organizations affiliated with DOD's Military Spouse Employment Partnership.²⁰

DOD Survey Data Indicate that Military Spouses' Employment Outcomes Varied by Professional Credential Requirements and the Servicemembers' Rank

Our analysis of DOD's 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (ADSS) shows some differences among selected military spouse employment outcomes based on whether spouses work in occupations that require credentials—professional licenses or certifications—and based on the servicemembers' rank. For example, we found that spouses of lower-ranking servicemembers had higher estimated unemployment rates than spouses of higher-ranking servicemembers. Additionally, we estimate that spouses in fields that do not require professional credentials worked outside their area of training, a potential indicator of underemployment, at a higher rate than spouses in fields that require professional credentials. Similarly, spouses of lower-ranking servicemembers worked outside their area of training at a higher rate than spouses of higher-ranking servicemembers. Many factors, such as educational attainment, may affect unemployment and underemployment. Our analysis did not account for these other factors because some data on factors were limited, and

¹⁸5 U.S.C. § 3330d(b).

¹⁹For additional information on federal programs that provide employment assistance to military spouses, see GAO, *Military and Veteran Support: Performance Goals Could Strengthen Programs that Help Servicemembers Obtain Civilian Employment*, [GAO-20-416](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 9, 2020).

²⁰Organizations in the Spouse Ambassador Network leverage their community networks to raise awareness of military spouse education and employment resources. Currently, the Spouse Ambassador Network includes more than 25 member organizations, including nonprofits and other federal agencies.

we determined that descriptive measures were sufficient for our purposes.

Unemployment Rates

Our analysis of ADSS data provides an unemployment rate estimate for all military spouses, but estimates vary across the literature we reviewed. We estimate that 24 percent of non-dual military spouses (dual is when both spouses serve in the military) in the labor force were unemployed during the survey reference period.²¹ Other studies we reviewed provided unemployment rate estimates ranging from 9.7 to 30.8 percent, in part due to different data sources, reference periods, and survey populations.²²

Unemployment Rates by Professional Credential Requirement

Our analysis of the ADSS estimates did not show a significant difference in military spouses' unemployment rates based on the professional credential requirements in spouses' chosen fields. We compared estimated unemployment rates for two subsets of military spouses: (1) spouses in fields that require professional credentials (referred to as "credentialed fields" in this report), and (2) spouses in fields that do not have credential requirements (referred to as "non-credentialed fields" in this report).²³ We estimate that the unemployment rate was about 25

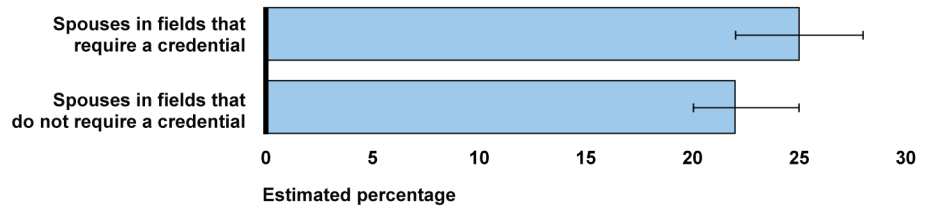
²¹The 2017 ADSS unemployment rate estimate, according to DOD's 2017 ADSS Tabulations of Responses, conforms to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' standards, which use Current Population Survey (CPS) labor force items. The unemployment rate estimate excludes those spouses not in the full labor market, meaning those spouses who were not currently looking for work or were not needing or not wanting to work. Additionally, the estimate excludes dual military spouses, meaning spouses who also serve in the military. The reference period for the 2017 ADSS is from June 22, 2017 to November 13, 2017.

²²Executive Office of the President, *The Fast Track to Civilian Employment: Streamlining Credentialing and Licensing for Service Members, Veterans, and Their Spouses* (Washington D.C.: 2013), 3. Institute for Veterans and Military Families and Military Officers Association of America, *Military Spouse Employment Report*, (February 2014), 50.

²³The ADSS asked if spouses were working in a field that did or did not require a credential, regardless of their current employment status. Thus, a spouse might have answered "in a career field that requires a state issued license," even if they were currently unemployed.

percent for spouses in credentialed fields and about 22 percent for those in non-credentialed fields (see fig. 1).²⁴

Figure 1: Military Spouse Estimated Unemployment Rates by Credential Requirement (2017)



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

Note: Percentages in this figure are based on estimates derived from the 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses, conducted from June 2017 to November 2017. Estimates have a margin of error, at the 95 percent confidence interval, of plus or minus 7 percentage points or fewer. The whiskers represent the 95 percent confidence interval for each estimate. The unemployment rate estimates in this figure exclude spouses not in the labor market, meaning spouses not currently looking for work, not in need of work, or not wanting to work. The estimates also exclude dual military spouses, (i.e., spouses who also serve in the military). The difference in the unemployment rate estimates in this figure is not statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level.

While these estimated unemployment rates were not significantly different based upon credential requirements, credentialing can still cause challenges for many military spouses, especially after a move. Estimates from the ADSS showed that about one-half of the military spouses worked in occupations with credential requirements, including licenses and certifications for specific occupations (see app. II for more information about military spouses’ occupations). In addition:

- About one in four spouses reported that, for their most recent military-related move (PCS), obtaining a credential necessary for employment was a problem. Among unemployed spouses, an even higher proportion (38 percent) reported that obtaining a credential was a problem during their most recent PCS move.
- Almost one in three spouses reported that they had to acquire a new occupational license or credential to work at their new location following their last PCS move. For almost one-half of

²⁴This difference is not statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level. All other numerical differences cited in our findings on unemployment and underemployment estimates are statistically significant unless otherwise stated, and estimates have a margin of error of plus or minus 7 percentage points or fewer. Margins of error are for the 95 percent confidence interval.

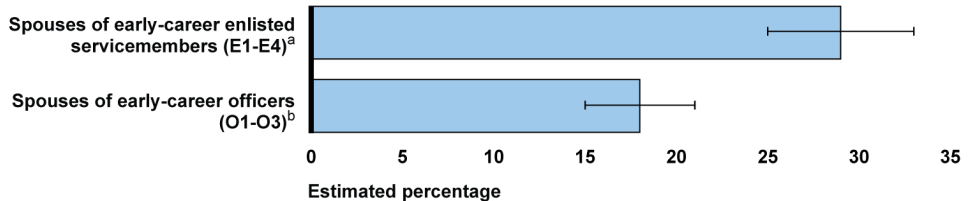
those spouses, it took 4 months or longer to acquire a new occupational license or credential.²⁵

²⁵All estimates cited have a margin of error, at the 95 percent confidence level, of plus or minus 7 percentage points or fewer. Additionally, these estimates include dual-military spouses.

Unemployment Rates by Rank

Our analysis of ADSS data showed that spouses of early-career enlisted servicemembers have higher estimated unemployment rates than spouses of early-career officers.²⁶ Specifically, the estimated unemployment rate for spouses of early-career enlisted servicemembers was about 29 percent, compared to 18 percent for spouses of early-career officers (see fig. 2).

Figure 2: Military Spouse Estimated Unemployment Rates by Servicemember Rank (2017)



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

Note: Percentages in this figure are based on estimates derived from the 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses, conducted from June 2017 to November 2017. Estimates have a margin of error, at the 95 percent confidence interval, of plus or minus 7 percentage points or fewer. The whiskers represent the 95 percent confidence interval for each estimate. The unemployment rate estimates in this figure exclude spouses not in the labor market, meaning spouses not currently looking for work, not in need of work, or not wanting to work. The estimates also exclude dual military spouses, i.e., spouses who also serve in the military. The difference in the unemployment rate estimates in this figure is statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level.

^aMilitary paygrades are represented by a letter (for example, E=enlisted, O=officer) and number (1-10) designation corresponding to their current military rank. In this report, early-career enlisted servicemembers refers to junior enlisted servicemembers and non-commissioned officers with paygrades from E-1 to E-4.

^bEarly-career officers refers to officers in paygrades from O-1 to O-3.

Studies also show that spouses of lower-ranking servicemembers may face additional challenges relative to spouses of higher-ranking servicemembers. For example, a recent survey of Army spouses found that spouses of junior enlisted soldiers more often report issues with navigating the system in place to assist them, among other concerns. A separate study we reviewed found that female spouses of enlisted

²⁶Military rank refers to a servicemember's responsibility and leadership level, while paygrade refers to the administrative designation identifying what a servicemember is paid. All paygrades are represented by a letter (E=enlisted, WO=warrant officer, or O=officer) and number (1-10) designation corresponding to their current military rank. In this report, early-career enlisted servicemembers refers to junior enlisted servicemembers and non-commissioned officers with paygrades from E-1 to E-4, while early-career officers refers to junior officers with paygrades from O-1 to O-3.

servicemembers have higher estimated rates of being involuntarily employed part-time or unemployed than female spouses of officers, on average.²⁷

Underemployment

Our analysis of ADSS estimates found that underemployment estimates among military spouses may vary by professional credential requirements and the servicemembers' rank. For the purposes of this report, we relied on two measures related to underemployment available through the ADSS: (1) spouses who are employed and working part-time (defined as fewer than 35 hours per week) due to a lack of full-time opportunities, and (2) spouses working in occupations outside their area of education or training. For instance, a spouse with a credential in nursing might be working as a receptionist, which is outside their area of training. Similarly, a spouse with formal education in a field that may not require a license or certification, such as journalism, might work in a field that does not align with their training, like retail.²⁸ Estimates from the ADSS indicate that about 40 percent of employed military spouses were working part-time and, of those part-time workers, about 14 percent were working part-time due to a lack of full-time opportunities. Additionally, about 44 percent of employed spouses were working outside their area of education or training.

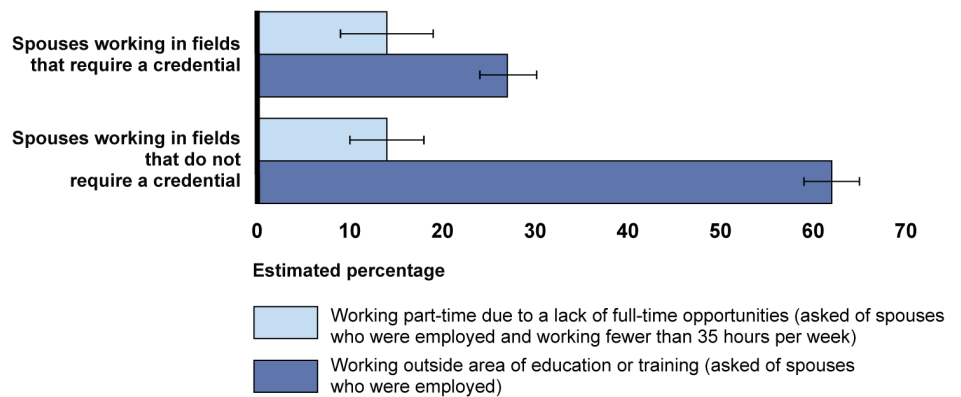
²⁷N. Lim and David Schulker. *Measuring Underemployment Among Military Spouses* (Santa Monica, Calif.: 2010), 20.

²⁸The measures we use in this report as potential indicators of underemployment are based on the measures that were available in the 2017 ADSS. Limitations associated with these measures of underemployment are discussed in appendix I. In addition, for the second measure related to underemployment—whether individuals work in their area of education or training—the ADSS does not distinguish between spouses who are willing and able to work in their area of training but cannot find employment in their area, and spouses who would rather not work in their area of education or training. In addition, definitions of underemployment vary. For example, one study uses factors such as having high levels of education for an occupation to measure underemployment, while another study uses other factors, including receiving pay lower than one's education level. Our definition was constrained by the available data in DOD's ADSS. Additionally, the underemployment estimates we present are not out of the total labor force, but rather out of specific subpopulations. As a result, our underemployment estimates are not directly comparable to other underemployment rates, which are often presented as a share of the total labor force.

Estimated Underemployment by Credential Requirement

Our analysis of the ADSS data indicates that employed spouses in non-credentialed fields had a higher estimated percentage of working outside their area of education or training than spouses in credentialed fields, 62 and 27 percent, respectively. Our analysis also found differences in the estimated rates at which these two groups of spouses worked part-time overall. Specifically, about 36 percent of employed spouses in credentialed fields worked part-time, while about 45 percent of employed spouses in non-credentialed fields worked part-time.²⁹ However, when looking at employed credentialed and non-credentialed spouses who worked part-time, we did not find significant differences between the two groups in the percentage who worked part-time due to a lack of full-time opportunities (14 percent for both groups). (See fig. 3.)

Figure 3: Military Spouse Estimated Underemployment by Credential Requirement (2017)



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

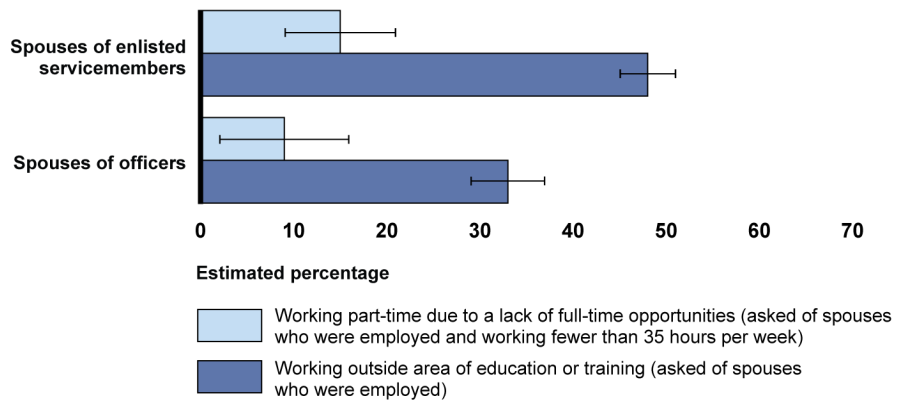
Note: Percentages in this figure are based on estimates derived from the 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses, conducted from June 2017 to November 2017. Estimates have a margin of error, at the 95 percent confidence interval, of plus or minus 7 percentage points or fewer. The whiskers represent the 95 percent confidence interval for each estimate. Additionally, the percentage estimates for those working part-time due to a lack of full-time opportunities represents the percentage of employed part-time spouses who met that criteria, while the percentage estimates for those working outside their area of education or training represents the percentage of employed spouses who met that criteria. The difference in the estimated rates at which spouses working outside their area of education or training is statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level; the difference in the estimated rates at which spouses work part-time due to a lack of full-time opportunities is not statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level.

²⁹The margin of error for the 36 percent figure is plus or minus 3 percentage points, while the margin of error for the 45 percent figure is plus or minus 4 percentage points. Both margins of error are for the 95 percent confidence interval.

Estimated Underemployment by Rank

When comparing military spouses by the servicemembers' rank, we found that employed spouses of enlisted servicemembers had a higher estimated rate of working outside their area of education or training than employed spouses of officers, 48 percent compared to 33 percent. Additionally, we found that a similar proportion of spouses of enlisted servicemembers and spouses of officers were working part-time due to a lack of full-time opportunities, 15 and 9 percent respectively (see fig. 4).³⁰

Figure 4: Military Spouse Estimated Underemployment by Servicemember Rank (2017)



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

Note: Percentages in this figure are based on estimates derived from the 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses, conducted from June 2017 to November 2017. Estimates have a margin of error, at the 95 percent confidence interval, of plus or minus 7 percentage points or fewer. The whiskers represent the 95 percent confidence interval for each estimate. Additionally, the percentage estimates for those working part-time due to a lack of full-time opportunities represents the percentage of employed part-time spouses who met that criteria, while the percentage estimates for those working outside their area of education or training represents the percentage of employed spouses who met that criteria. The difference in the estimated rates at which spouses work outside their area of education or training is statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level; the difference in the estimated rates at which spouses work part-time due to a lack of full-time opportunities is not statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level.

Our analysis did not control for other factors that may affect employment outcomes for military spouses. For example, military lifestyle characteristics such as frequent moves and deployments or servicemembers' day-to-day job demands, and demographic differences,

³⁰This difference is not statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level.

can play a role in employment outcomes.³¹ Available demographic comparisons between spouses in fields that do or do not require credentials, and between spouses married to servicemembers of different ranks, are presented in appendix II.

DOD Has Taken Steps to Assess Licensing Practices Across States, and Prioritizes Mission-Essential Needs Above Spousal Employment for Assignments

DOD Assessed State Licensing Practices, but Does Not Plan to Assess and Report on States' Future Efforts to Address Identified Gaps

DOD's Defense State Liaison Office (DSLO) has taken steps to assess states' implementation of best practices identified by DSLO for facilitating licensure portability for military spouses, but it does not plan to continue assessing and reporting on states' efforts. In 2017, DOD commissioned a study to assess states' implementation of best practices to facilitate military spouse licensure portability—the ability to transfer a license or related certification to a new state with minimal application requirements—for six selected professions.³² Researchers conducting the study found that 40 states implemented at least two of the best practices

³¹As noted above, military lifestyle characteristics might also influence the differences we observed. For instance, a 2019 survey found that, among unemployed military spouses without children, about four in 10 reported that recovering from a move was the top barrier to employment for them, while one in four stated that their servicemember's day-to-day job demands made it too difficult to balance home and work demands. This survey was conducted from May 6 to June 21, 2019, and it used a self-selected convenience sample. Blue Star Families, *2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey* (2019), 17.

³²Researchers interviewed staff at occupational licensing boards in all 50 states and Washington, D.C. for six professions—cosmetology, dental hygiene, massage therapy, mental health counseling, occupational therapy, and real estate. While the study focused on portability of spouse licensure in these professions, it also examined the process to transfer licenses and certifications for spouses in each state as some states' processes for transferring licenses require fulfilling certification requirements. See University of Minnesota, Center for Research and Outreach, *Military Spouse Licensure Portability Examination* (November 2017), a report prepared in collaboration with DOD's Office of Family Policy, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and the Department of Agriculture.

for licensure portability that DSLO encouraged states to use (see sidebar).³³

Examples of Best Practices for License Portability for Military Spouses

Licensure by endorsement. Eliminates the need to meet certain state requirements, such as passing state exams, when a license from the previous state of residence had comparable requirements.

Temporary licensure. Allows spouses to work in their occupation while fulfilling requirements for a permanent license. Temporary licenses are usually valid for 3 to 12 months.

Expedited license application. Uses flexibilities to speed the process, such as allowing regulatory agencies rather than licensing boards to approve a spouse's license transfer, or allowing licensing boards to approve a license transfer based on an affidavit that the information on the application is accurate.

Occupational interstate compacts. Provides common understanding of competency and measurement within an occupation, and allows licensed practitioners to work in states that approved the compact.

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

While the 2017 study found that most states had implemented some DSLO-identified best practices for licensure portability, the study also identified challenges that could limit the effectiveness of states' efforts. For example, the study found that most licensing boards' websites did not post specific information about military spouse license transfers, and licensing boards' customer service staff were often unaware of legislation specific to military spouses. Additionally, most licensing boards lacked license transfer applications that allowed applicants to identify themselves as military spouses, according to the study's findings.

In February 2020, DSLO released a report discussing ways for states to improve licensure portability for military spouses, including new DSLO

³³We did not conduct an independent analysis of state licensing requirements or the results of DOD's study. Rather, we reviewed DOD's study to assess steps taken by states and areas DOD identified for continued focus.

criteria to assess states' efforts in this area.³⁴ The criteria focused on three action areas:













1. **Policy effectiveness.** The extent to which state policy reflects best practices for licensure portability, such as licensure by exempting spouses from state requirements.
2. **Implementation.** The extent to which licensing boards have implemented staff training, revised license application forms, and posted information on their websites to make the licensure transfer process easily accessible to military spouses.
3. **Occupational interstate compacts.** The extent to which the state adopts occupational interstate compacts, which allow practitioners in certain fields, such as nursing, to work in multiple states without relicensing.³⁵

Using these three criteria, DSLO assessed states' efforts to facilitate licensure portability for military spouses. DSLO assigned states a specific rating in each action area, with red representing insufficient portability, yellow representing partial portability, and green representing full portability (see fig. 5).

³⁴Department of Defense, *Military Spouse Licensure: State Best Practices and Strategies for Achieving Reciprocity* (Washington, D.C.: November 2019).

³⁵The fiscal year 2020 NDAA also authorized DOD to enter into a cooperative agreement with the Council of State Governments to assist with funding and developing interstate compacts on licensed occupations, and required DOD to submit annual reports to the House and Senate Armed Services Committees on these efforts. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, Pub. Law No. 116-92, § 575, 133 Stat. 1198, 1405 (2019). According to a DSLO official, as of October 2020, the cooperative agreement was completed and DSLO is working with the Council of State Governments to select occupations for potential funding.

Figure 5: Examples of Defense State Liaison Office Criteria and Assessments of Licensure Portability in 50 States

Portability Rating	Implementation	Policy	Interstate Compacts ^a
	Little to no evidence that licensing boards have staff training; no information available for military spouses.	Language disqualifies or impedes military spouses from obtaining licenses.	No compacts approved.
	Licensing boards have staff training, but have not made information easily accessible to military spouses.	Minimizes time and paperwork required to obtain a license through measures like temporary licensing.	Approved one to two compacts.
	Licensing boards have staff training and post information on websites that is easily accessible to military spouses.	Provides licenses in 30 days with minimal paperwork or exemption from state requirements.	Approved three or more compacts.
State Ratings Summary	 8  24  18	 3  34  13	 12  22  16

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

Note: We did not conduct an independent analysis of state licensing requirements or the results of DOD’s study. Rather, we reviewed DOD’s study to assess steps taken by states and areas DOD identified for continued focus. Selected criteria discussed in this figure are illustrative. Additional criteria include whether license applications enable spouses to indicate their military status; and whether states use methods like endorsement, which eliminates the need to meet certain state requirements, like passing state exams, when a license from the previous state the spouse lived in had comparable requirements.

^aInterstate compacts establish common understandings of competency and measurement for specific occupations, like nurses and physical therapists. DOD reported that, generally, practitioners in states that approved the compact can practice in their profession in other member states and are exempt from additional licensing or registration requirements when they move across state lines.

According to the assessments, most states received a yellow rating in each of the three action areas, and some received red ratings. Specifically, 37 states received yellow or red ratings in policy effectiveness status, 32 states were yellow or red in implementation status, and 34 states were yellow or red in compact approval status. A DSLO official said that DSLO sent the assessments to each state and to Congressional Defense committees in February 2020. According to the official, the assessments help communicate to states where they can strengthen their licensing practices to assist military spouses, and states generally agreed with the assessments. Additionally, DSLO noted that

these areas reflect immediate, near-term, and long-term opportunities for improvement, demonstrating a need for continued attention on states' efforts.³⁶ DSLO's assessments also included policy recommendations for states to help improve states' efforts, such as recommending that states direct occupational licensing boards to issue temporary or permanent licenses within 30 days of receiving spouses' license applications, with military spouses initially providing minimal documentation.

However, DSLO does not plan to continue providing states with these assessments in the future. A DSLO official said that the assessments were a one-time project requested by the Secretary of Defense. The official said DSLO instead regularly communicates with states to provide targeted feedback about how to improve by using the DSLO-identified best practices. The official also noted that DSLO internally keeps track of states' efforts to improve licensure portability for military spouses, and posts information about states' legislation and policies on its Military State Policy Source website.³⁷ The official said that sending periodic assessments to states in the future could put emphasis on this issue and advance state implementation, but noted that DSLO's current communications with states also create opportunities for dialogue with state policymakers about making changes. While DSLO's ongoing communications with states are promising, without plans to continue providing states with the formal assessments, DSLO may miss opportunities to identify additional actions states could consider to help military spouses transfer their licenses and improve their employment opportunities. Additionally, in a 2019 letter to the Council of Governors, the Secretary of Defense stated that taking care of servicemembers and their families is a key DOD goal, and that states' assistance in supporting military spouse licensure portability and employment is key to achieving this goal. Without plans to provide states with periodic, formal assessments that document the areas in which states can improve licensure portability for spouses, DOD may face challenges meeting its goal of supporting military families.

Gaps in the state assessments may also limit DOD's ability to determine how, if at all, states' efforts are improving licensure portability for military

³⁶U.S. Department of Defense, *Military Spouse Licensure: State Best Practices and Strategies for Achieving Reciprocity* (Washington, D.C.: November 2019).

³⁷DSLO's Key Issue Status Tracker on its state policy website covers a range of issues important to servicemembers and military families beyond occupational licensing for military spouses, such as child abuse and neglect identification and reporting, and virtual schools. See <https://statepolicy.militaryonesource.mil/status-tracker/>.

spouses. For example, we found that the assessments did not address one aspect of the criteria for assessing state implementation—whether state licensing boards’ staff training reflects licensure policies for military spouses. According to a DSLO official, the agency requests that state officials review licensing boards’ staff training. The official said state-level review of training is particularly important in instances where DSLO’s assessments indicated that licensing boards did not make licensing information accessible to spouses on their websites, or did not provide application forms that allowed spouses to indicate their military status. However, the assessments did not provide recommendations to states about conducting state reviews of these areas. Additionally, increasing licensing board staff knowledge of legislation on military spouse licensure portability was recommended in DOD’s 2017 study, indicating that it is a longstanding issue requiring attention.

A DSLO official also said that DOD does not have plans to examine whether states’ actions are improving spouses’ experiences transferring licenses. The 2017 ADSS data indicate that about one-fourth of spouses that experienced a PCS found that obtaining a license or certification was a problem to a small, moderate, large, or very large extent during their relocation. DOD has reported some information on personal anecdotes of challenges spouses faced transferring licenses, but has no plans to assess the effects of states’ efforts more broadly.³⁸ One DSLO official told us that the office’s goal is to work with states to address policy shortfalls, as DSLO does not have the capacity to review the effect of states’ actions on military spouses. The official also noted that DSLO regularly receives inquiries from military spouses through the Military State Policy Source website, and many of the inquiries are sent to Spouse Education and Career Opportunities (SECO) counselors to explain licensing requirements, and to obtain anecdotal feedback on spouses’ experiences. However, there are a range of ways that DOD could assess how well states are addressing licensure portability for military spouses. We previously reported that considering a variety of useful evidence is critical to understanding the progress made on agency initiatives.³⁹ Without exploring its options for these assessments, DOD may be missing an opportunity to obtain up-to-date information on how states’ efforts are

³⁸For more information on spouses’ experiences transferring licenses, see Department of Defense and Department of Homeland Security, *Report on Barriers to Portability of Occupational Licenses Between States* (March 2018).

³⁹[GAO-13-570](#) and GAO, *Managing for Results: Data-Driven Performance Reviews Show Promise But Agencies Should Explore How to Involve Other Relevant Agencies*, [GAO-13-228](#) (Washington, D.C.: February 27, 2013).

helping to ease the licensure challenges faced by military spouses seeking employment.

DOD Prioritizes Mission Needs over Military Spouses' Employment Opportunities for Servicemember Assignment Decisions

Servicemember assignment decisions are prioritized based on the mission-essential needs of the military, though specific military family needs may be considered, according to officials from DOD and the military services with whom we spoke. DOD's policy on servicemember assignments specifies that these decisions will not be influenced by the employment of a family member, with few exceptions.⁴⁰ Officials said that ensuring that assignments support DOD's ability to achieve its mission—protecting national security—is generally the highest priority. However, DOD and services officials described a variety of other high priority factors for servicemember assignment decisions, ranging from servicemember qualifications and ensuring that equally-qualified servicemembers have similar assignment opportunities, to length of assignment and hardship conditions, such as those considered under the Exceptional Family Member Program.⁴¹

Some military services officials said that in accordance with DOD policy, servicemember assignment decisions should not be influenced by the employment of a family member. However, services officials also said that, in practice, they may indirectly consider factors such as spousal employment and state licensing for spouses on an as-needed and lower priority basis. Additionally, officials from two services said that some servicemembers may base their submitted preferences for assignments on locations that are best suited for their spouses to find jobs.

DOD and some services officials also acknowledged that a more systematic consideration of spousal employment and state licensing

⁴⁰Department of Defense, *Procedures for Military Personnel Assignments*, DOD Instruction 1315.18 (Washington, D.C.: October 28, 2015) (incorporating Change 3, June 24, 2019).

⁴¹EFMP provides support to family members of servicemembers with special medical or educational needs at their current and proposed locations. This includes case management, assignment coordination, and other support services as needed based on a military service's plan. GAO, *Military Personnel: DOD Should Improve Its Oversight of the Exceptional Family Member Program*, [GAO-18-348](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 8, 2018).

practices could provide certain benefits, such as increased retention of servicemembers. However, officials said it would be challenging to prioritize spouses' employment circumstances in assignment decisions, and doing so could undermine mission-essential needs. For example, if large numbers of servicemembers want to stay in locations where their spouses have professional licenses, it could be more difficult for DOD to ensure it has sufficient personnel in locations where they are most needed.

DOD and services officials highlighted other accommodations related to assignment decisions that consider military families' needs and support military spouse employment. For example, services officials highlighted the ability to reimburse military spouses for up to \$1,000 in state relicensing and recertification costs incurred when transferring duty stations.⁴² Officials from one service noted that this authorization is intended to help military families overcome the financial burden of fees to transfer spouses' professional licenses. Military services officials also noted a DOD policy that allows spouses to stay in military housing at their current official duty station for up to 180 days after the date of the servicemember's PCS, or leave their current location to move up to 180 days ahead of the PCS date into military housing at the new duty station. This policy applies to servicemembers with spouses who are gainfully employed or enrolled in a degree, certificate, or license-granting program.⁴³ The policy is intended to ease some of the challenges associated with relocations, according to DOD and services officials.

⁴²37 U.S.C. § 476(p) authorizes the services to reimburse a member of the uniformed services for qualified relicensing costs of the spouse of the member, up to \$1,000.

⁴³DOD Instruction 1315.18, *Procedures for Military Personnel Assignments* (June 24, 2019).

DOD Promotes Employment Resources for Military Spouses, but Inconsistent Information Sharing By Stakeholders May Hinder Awareness

DOD Uses Virtual and In-Person Outreach to Promote Awareness of Spouse Employment Resources

DOD and the military services use various virtual and in-person outreach approaches to promote awareness of employment resources among military spouses. These approaches range from posting on social media and distributing electronic newsletters, to sharing banners and flyers on military installations and discussing available resources at orientation briefings for servicemembers.

Approaches for Promoting DOD Resources

Promoting awareness of employment resources among military spouses is best done by using various types of communication tools across multiple platforms, according to DOD officials. To promote the resources offered through DOD's Spouse Education and Career Opportunities (SECO) initiative, DOD officials described a mix of virtual outreach approaches, such as social media posts, webinars, paid media, and content posted on the MySECO website. DOD officials noted that they use social media on a daily basis to promote these resources, and they increasingly use "live streaming" features to host virtual events and maintain spouse engagement. Spouses can also sign up for the SECO electronic newsletter, which provides quarterly updates on a variety of topics, such as upcoming employment webinars, how to use employment search websites, etc. (see fig. 6). Officials also said they planned to release a mobile application in October 2020 to make information on SECO more easily accessible to military spouses.

Figure 6: Sample Department of Defense Spouse Education and Career Opportunities Electronic Newsletter



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

Approaches for Promoting Military Services Resources

The military services also have outreach efforts in place on military installations to promote awareness of their employment resources. Services' headquarters and installation officials described a mix of in-person and virtual outreach approaches used to communicate with spouses. Examples include:

- Posting banners and electronic billboards that advertise trainings and other employment resources in places on installations where spouses are likely to visit, such as the commissary (supermarket).
- Distributing flyers and information about employment resources at events on base that spouses may attend, such as job fairs and town halls.
- Leveraging volunteers and networks in the military community that are responsible for sharing information about military resources,

such as the Air Force Key Spouse Program and Navy Family Ombudsman Program.⁴⁴

- Promoting employment resources on installation websites, social media platforms, mobile applications, and through email distribution lists (see fig. 7).

Figure 7: Sample Military Installation Promotional Materials on Employment Resources



Source: GAO review of military service branch documentation. | GAO-21-193

Officials at five of the six installations with whom we spoke emphasized that newcomers’ briefings are important venues for outreach as well. Newcomers’ briefings—regularly scheduled, required orientations for servicemembers—are typically the first event for new members of the installation community at which employment resources are discussed, according to installation officials. Spouses are welcome to attend the briefings, but are not required to do so. Some installation and services’ headquarters officials we spoke with also said that word-of-mouth marketing serves a critical role in promoting awareness of employment resources. For example, officials from one installation said that spouses

⁴⁴Through the Air Force Key Spouse Program, Air Force commanders appoint “Key Spouses,” who are trained as volunteers to help promote effective communication between unit leadership and Air Force families. Under the Navy Family Ombudsman program, volunteers serve as representatives of Navy Commanding Officers and help maintain communication between the command and Navy families.

seeking employment resources at the installation's family center often mention learning about these resources from other spouses.

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has likely affected the services' outreach to military spouses. For instance, officials at five of the six installations mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic has limited in-person resources. Officials at another installation said that the local job market has constricted, leaving fewer jobs available for spouses and other job seekers. Installation officials also noted that they are using more virtual outreach approaches to promote employment resources due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several Factors Hinder Military Spouses' Awareness of Available Employment Resources, Despite DOD's Efforts

DOD data and research by external groups show that there may be limited awareness of employment resources among military spouses, despite DOD's outreach efforts. For example, ADSS data from 2017 show that 49 percent of spouses reported they were unaware of the MyCAA Scholarship, a tuition assistance resource DOD offers spouses to improve spouses' employment opportunities.⁴⁵ Additionally, 23 percent of spouses reported they were unaware of employment assistance when transitioning from military to civilian life.⁴⁶ Similarly, a 2019 RAND study of Army

⁴⁵Thirty-five percent of spouses surveyed reported that they did not use MyCAA but they were aware of the resource; 16 percent of spouses surveyed reported that they have used MyCAA. We previously reported on declining participation in MyCAA due in part to a lack of program awareness, and found that inaccurate information on the MyCAA website and technical difficulties accessing the website may have deterred spouses from participating in the program. See GAO, *Military Spouse Employment: Participation in and Efforts to Promote the My Career Advancement Account Program*, [GAO-19-320R](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 9, 2019).

⁴⁶Military spouses who reported they were unaware of employment assistance also reported that they did not anticipate needing these resources when their family transitions from military to civilian life. In comparison, 33 percent of spouses surveyed reported that they were aware of employment assistance, but did not anticipate needing this assistance. Forty-three percent of spouses reported they would need employment assistance, but were not asked to identify whether they were aware of this resource.

spouses found about 36 percent of those surveyed reported they knew little to nothing about military employment resources.⁴⁷

DOD officials said that awareness may have increased recently in specific areas, citing engagement with online resources. According to DOD website user data, the number of individuals interacting with the SECO websites increased by about 64 percent (an additional 120,725 users) in fiscal year 2019 compared to fiscal year 2018. However, DOD officials we spoke with also said that awareness of employment resources among military spouses may still be limited. For instance, DOD officials said that in informal conversations, some spouses said they did not know about the employment resources available to them. In these instances, officials asked spouses to share their location and where they typically got information about military resources, so officials could improve their outreach. DOD officials also noted that word-of-mouth is a key way to increase awareness of employment resources. However, officials and representatives of two stakeholder groups noted that this approach has limitations, such as reaching spouses who do not live on installations and those who lack connections to other spouses, which could be factors in promoting awareness.

DOD, military services' headquarters and installation officials, and representatives of stakeholder groups in the Spouse Ambassador Network, said that inconsistent information sharing among key internal and external stakeholders is another factor that may limit resource awareness among spouses. For example, DOD officials said they look to the military services to promote SECO to spouses across installations. Officials said they meet bi-monthly with services' officials to discuss employment resources, and they host webinars with installation officials when requested to demonstrate new resources offered on the SECO website. However, DOD officials said that while military installations serve an important role in promoting employment resources to spouses, some installations may not inform spouses about certain SECO resources, such as the virtual career-coaching services. DOD officials said this may be due to installation officials perceiving these resources as competition for

⁴⁷A sample of spouses married to Army servicemembers stationed in the continental U.S. was selected from Army personnel files to complete the survey. The sample was selected to be representative of spouses across several dimensions, such as housing location (on versus off post), geographic location (urban, midsize city, and rural), and soldier's pay grade. Of the 74,509 spouses invited to participate in the survey, 8,275 spouses completed it for a response rate of about 11 percent. See RAND Corporation, C.S. Sims, M. Tankard, and T.E. Trail, *Today's Army Spouse Survey: How Army Families Address Life's Challenges* (Santa Monica, Calif.: 2019).

installation-based services. Officials from one installation questioned the value of promoting SECO's virtual career coaching services to spouses in their area when in-person coaching is available at the installation. Officials from another installation said that given the installation-based services, SECO, and other local community resources offered by stakeholder groups, spouses may be uncertain of where to go for assistance. DOD officials said SECO is a virtual extension of the face-to-face employment resources at the installations rather than a competing resource. Officials added that SECO supports spouses who are unable to easily access services at installations, such as those who live far away.

DOD officials also discussed working with external stakeholders to promote employment resources to military spouses. However, some of these stakeholders shared concerns that installations do not consistently do so, which can impact awareness among spouses. For example, DOD officials said they hold quarterly meetings with nonprofit partner organizations in the Spouse Ambassador Network to share the latest resources for spouses. Many of the Spouse Ambassador Network's nonprofit partners have local networks that conduct outreach to spouses at individual installations, according to DOD officials. However, representatives from three stakeholder groups in the Spouse Ambassador Network told us that some installations are hesitant to work with stakeholder groups that provide employment resources for spouses. Representatives from one stakeholder group said that despite having a memoranda of understanding with DOD to guide their working relationship with installations, some installations view them as competition, and do not support their efforts. The stakeholder group representatives said other installations are more collaborative. For example, some of the installations cohost workshops for spouses with stakeholders, and hold weekly meetings with stakeholders to discuss how to promote employment resources across the military community. Representatives from stakeholder groups also said that collaborative outreach can increase spouse participation in career workshops and other events, and ultimately helps the installation and stakeholders leverage each other's resources and expertise.

Federal internal control standards call for entities to use quality information, and internally and externally communicate quality information to achieve their objectives.⁴⁸ However, we found that DOD and the military services have not established information sharing strategies on

⁴⁸[GAO-14-704G](#).

their current outreach approaches. Officials we interviewed from DOD, installations, and stakeholder groups offered a range of areas where information sharing is inconsistent and could be improved to help enhance spouses' awareness of the various resources available to them. These include:

- **Sharing of good outreach practices across installations.** For instance, installation officials from two services said they do not have methods for regularly sharing outreach best practices or challenges. However, installation officials from another military service said their service facilitates quarterly conference calls for installation officials to share lessons learned on marketing resources to spouses.
- **Assessment of outreach efforts and feedback from spouses on these efforts.** For example, headquarters officials from two services said they have not collected feedback from spouses about their outreach approaches. In comparison, officials from another service said they collected feedback from spouses, and found that spouses did not know where to find information about available resources. Officials said they used this feedback to create a streamlined mobile application on a variety of military family-related resources, such as licensure reimbursement.
- **Information on spouses, such as educational needs and career fields.** Officials we spoke with at the six installations said they have limited or no information on the spouses in their area; officials from three installations agreed that this type of information would be helpful for their outreach efforts.
- **Communication with spouses prior to PCS moves.** Representatives of two stakeholder groups told us that communicating with spouses before they relocate can be helpful for supporting their employment needs, but there is no systematic approach for doing so. Installation officials also shared that they do not have access to spouses' contact information, which limits direct outreach to spouses, and they generally do not communicate with spouses prior to their arrival on the installation.

These gaps in information sharing on outreach efforts may make it difficult for DOD to effectively work with its partners to promote employment resources among military spouses. As a result, DOD may miss opportunities to increase spouses' awareness of and access to employment resources, and to potentially improve spouses' employment outcomes.

Conclusions

DOD has taken important steps over the years to help military spouses navigate employment challenges, including collecting survey data on spousal employment, assessing states' efforts to facilitate licensure portability for spouses, and reaching out to spouses to make them aware of employment resources. However, available data suggest that some military spouses continue to face employment challenges and may have limited awareness of the employment resources available to them. These challenges may also be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has limited access to in-person employment services and restricted employment opportunities in the broader economy.

DOD has the opportunity to help ensure that its efforts to improve military spouse employment outcomes continue to make progress. Specifically, DOD could continue to assess and report on the quality of states' licensing practices for military spouses, and explore how it could measure the effect of states' efforts for spouses transferring licenses. Without additional action, DOD may be at risk of having insufficient information to help facilitate licensure portability for military spouses.

DOD also has the opportunity to improve information-sharing strategies among key stakeholders regarding their outreach approaches to spouses about available employment resources. Improving such strategies would better position DOD to help raise awareness among spouses about where they can get assistance. Without better outreach, spouses may be unaware of the many resources available to help them obtain employment.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following two recommendations to the Department of Defense:

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy work with the Defense State Liaison Office to ensure continued assessment and reporting on each state's progress towards implementing best practices for facilitating licensure portability for military spouses, and explore options for assessing whether states' actions are improving spouses' experiences with transferring licenses. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, in coordination with the Secretaries of the military services and external stakeholders, establish strategies for sharing information on their outreach approaches to raise awareness of employment resources among military spouses. (Recommendation 2)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOD for review and comment. In its letter, which is reproduced in appendix III, DOD concurred with the report's recommendations and identified actions the agency is taking to implement them. DOD also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

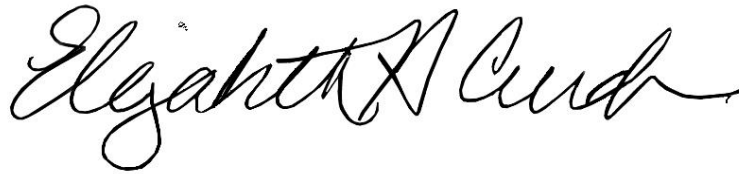
In response to our first recommendation, DOD highlighted several strategies it uses to support states progress towards implementing best practices for facilitating licensure portability for military spouses. Specifically, DOD stated that it relays best practices to policymakers, publicizes licensure improvement successes, and coordinates with the military services regarding standardized assessment and reporting processes. As stated in our report, it is also important that DOD continue to provide states with periodic formal assessments that document the areas in which states can improve licensure portability for spouses, and explore options for examining whether states' actions are improving spouses' experiences transferring licenses. Taking these steps would help DOD identify additional actions states could consider to help military spouses transfer their licenses and improve their employment opportunities.

In response to our second recommendation, DOD stated that it holds bi-monthly meetings with spouse employment personnel at military services headquarters, and that it has implemented a quarterly meeting with the services to share information on outreach approaches and raise awareness of employment resources for military spouses. As DOD implements our recommendation, we believe it is also important for the Department to ensure that its efforts include external stakeholders.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretaries of Defense and Labor, and other interested parties. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

Letter

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at 202-512-7215 or curdae@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of our report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elizabeth H. Curda". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "E".

Elizabeth H. Curda,
Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security

Appendix I: Overview of Analysis of Department of Defense Survey of Active Duty Spouses Data

The Department of Defense (DOD) administers a Survey of Active Duty Spouses (ADSS) that covers a range of topics on military spouses, including their demographics, educational attainment, and employment. According to DOD officials, DOD generally administers the ADSS every 2 years, and it is the agency's primary source of information on the military spouse experience. At the time of our review, DOD most recently administered the ADSS in 2017, fielding the survey from June 2017 to November 2017. We used the 2017 ADSS data to estimate unemployment rates and measures related to underemployment among military spouses in fields that do or do not require credentials, and military spouses married to servicemembers of different ranks.

The ADSS target population was designed to include spouses of active duty servicemembers of four military services—the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force—while excluding Reserve members and National Guard members. The sample for the ADSS used a single-stage, nonproportional stratified design. The sample was stratified by five variables: (1) military service, (2) servicemember paygrade, (3) gender, (4) servicemember deployment in the last 12 months, and (5) family status (i.e. married with children or married without children). The reported response rate for the ADSS in 2017 was 17.2 percent.¹ The ADSS data were weighted by DOD so that estimates of population totals, proportions, and means would be representative of their respective population and potential biases in survey estimates would be less likely. The process of weighting the data was conducted in three stages. The first stage of weighting—adjustments for selection probabilities—accounts for the unequal probabilities of selection induced by the nonproportional stratified sample design. The second stage—adjustments for

¹Completed surveys (meaning respondents answered at least one-half of the survey questions asked of all participants) were received from 6,827 eligible respondents, out of an initial sample of 45,077. The 45,077 spouses were drawn from the sample frame constructed from the Defense Manpower Data Center's January 2017 *Active Duty Master Edit File*, December 2016 *Family Database*, January 2017 *Contingency Tracking System File*, December 2016 *Basic Allowance for Housing Population File*, and March 2017 *Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System Medical Point-in-Time Extract*.

nonresponse—accounts for population characteristics correlated with the likelihood of response. The third and final stage of weighting adjusts the weights to reproduce population totals for important demographic groupings (e.g., gender) related to who responds to the survey and how they might answer the survey.

To assess the reliability of the ADSS, we interviewed officials at DOD's Office of People Analytics (OPA), the office responsible for conducting the survey. The interview addressed the applicability of ADSS to our objectives, potential limitations, the generalizability of the data, and the survey's sample design and precision considerations. OPA officials said that the DOD survey was the best, most detailed source of data on underemployment and unemployment among military spouses. We subsequently sent OPA technical questions to confirm the accuracy of our analytical methods. OPA provided guidance on how to conduct the estimation processes correctly, and we applied this guidance when conducting our analysis.

To further assess the reliability of the ADSS, we reviewed technical documentation on the survey, including the 2017 ADSS Tabulations of Responses and the 2017 ADSS Statistical Methodology Report. We also conducted electronic testing of the survey data to verify the data's accuracy and completeness. We determined that the data we present in this report were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our reporting objectives.

For the estimated rates of underemployment and unemployment among military spouses presented in our report, we selected a group of relevant questions from the 2017 ADSS. Table 2 shows the selected survey questions, and applicable respondents.

**Appendix I: Overview of Analysis of
Department of Defense Survey of Active Duty
Spouses Data**

Table 2: Selected 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (ADSS) Survey Questions and Response Options

Survey questions	Respondents
Survey questions/prompt: measuring unemployment: Question 22 (Employment Status: Constructed from Q22-Q25 to conform to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' standards using Current Population Survey (CPS) labor force items) ^a	Active duty spouses
Survey questions/prompt: measuring underemployment: Question 31 (What is your main reason for working part-time instead of full-time?) ^b	Employed active duty spouses who responded they were working fewer than 35 hours per week
Survey questions/prompt: measuring underemployment: Question 36 (Are you currently employed within the area of your education or training?) ^c	Employed active duty spouses
Additional selected survey questions/prompts used in the report: Question 30 (On average, how many hours a week do you spend working for pay?)	Employed active duty spouses
Additional selected survey questions/prompts used in the report: Question 38 (Regardless of your current employment status, does your occupation or career field require... a certification and/or license?)	Active duty spouses who responded that their occupation or field required either a certification provided by an organization that sets standards for their occupation, or a state issued license
Additional selected survey questions/prompts used in the report: Question 43 (For your most recent permanent change of station (PCS) move, to what extent were the following a problem for you... obtaining licenses/certifications necessary for employment?)	Active duty spouses who experienced a PCS move
Additional selected survey questions/prompts used in the report: Question 46 (After your last PCS move, did you have to acquire a new professional or occupational license or credential in order to work at the new duty location?)	Active duty spouses who experienced a PCS move and indicated the question was applicable
Additional selected survey questions/prompts used in the report: Question 47 (How long did it take you to acquire a new professional or occupational license or credential in order to work at the new duty location?)	Active duty spouses who experienced a PCS move and who had to acquire a new professional/ occupational license or credential to work at their new duty location

Source: GAO analysis of the Department of Defense's 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (ADSS). | GAO-21-193

Note: While these questions were the most appropriate measures related to unemployment and underemployment in the ADSS, other research may define or calculate these items differently.

^aQuestion 22 asks respondents to indicate their employment status, meaning if they are employed, unemployed, not in the labor force, or in the Armed Forces. It then uses that data to calculate the overall unemployment rate (calculated excluding spouses not in the labor market) and the civilian unemployment rate (calculated excluding spouses not in the labor market, along with spouses of warrant officers and dual military spouses). This spouse employment indicator is comparable to the employment measures used in the U.S. Census Bureau's Decennial Census and the Current Population Survey (CPS).

^bFor the purposes of this report, we considered the response "could only find part-time work" as an indicator related to underemployment.

^cFor the purposes of this report, we considered employment outside of one's area of education or training as an indicator related to underemployment.

Data Limitations

The 2017 ADSS contains information on spouses' demographics, family circumstances, employment circumstances, and other items. We assessed the data relevant to examining employment outcomes by rank and professional credential requirements and found them reliable for the estimates we present in our report. However, in analyzing the survey data on specific subsets of military spouses that we were interested in, we identified some limitations related to precision of estimates and small sample sizes. For example, after combining data from multiple survey questions, such as spouses in fields that require credentials who also experienced five or more military-related moves and could only find part-time work, the estimates were based on small sample sizes and were too imprecise to report for our purposes. Similarly, the ADSS sample was not designed to provide precise estimates on employment or underemployment among smaller subsets of military spouses, such as spouses with professional credentials in certain occupations, like nursing. As a result, we were unable to provide estimates of unemployment rates or measures related to underemployment based on professional credentials and occupation. In general, we did not report data that violated OPA's data suppression rules, and we disclosed margins of error in the report to indicate uncertainty. Specifically, all percentage estimates included in this report have a margin of error of plus or minus 10 percentage points or fewer. We also excluded estimates from our findings with any response categories based on fewer than five respondents, and estimates with an effective sample size less than 30.

Additionally, our analysis of the ADSS data does not reflect any correlation among spouses' credentials, ranks, and employment outcomes. Our analysis also does not account for factors that might influence the employment rate differences we observed by rank and credential requirements, such as number of permanent change of station (PCS) moves and demographic characteristics.² For demographic comparisons between spouses in fields that do or do not require

²As noted above, certain military spouse characteristics might influence the differences we observed. For instance, a 2019 survey found that, among unemployed military spouses without children, about four in 10 reported that recovering from a move was the top barrier to employment for them, while one in four stated that their servicemember's day-to-day job demands made it too difficult to balance home and work demands. Blue Star Families, *2019 Military Family Lifestyle Survey* (2019), 17.

**Appendix I: Overview of Analysis of
Department of Defense Survey of Active Duty
Spouses Data**

credentials, and between spouses married to servicemembers of different ranks, see appendix II.

Appendix II: Selected Demographics for Military Spouses

Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6 provide weighted estimates GAO generated from the Department of Defense's 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (ADSS) data. The selected demographics include military spouses' gender breakdown, racial composition, educational attainment, and age by professional credential(s) and rank.

Table 3: Military Spouse Gender by Professional Credential(s) and Rank

Military spouse subgroup	Estimated percentage
Spouses working in a field that requires a credential ^a	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Male: 13 percent• Female: 87 percent
Spouses working in a field that does not require a credential	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Male: 11 percent• Female: 89 percent
Spouses of enlisted servicemembers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Male: 11 percent• Female: 89 percent
Spouses of officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Male: 14 percent• Female: 86 percent

Source: GAO analysis of data from the Department of Defense's 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (ADSS). | GAO-21-193

Note: Percentages in this figure are based on estimates derived from the ADSS and have a margin of error, at the 95 percent confidence level, of equal to or less than 7 percentage points or fewer.

^aThe 2017 ADSS asked military spouses whether their occupation or career field requires (1) a certification provided by an organization that sets standards for their occupation, or (2) a state issued license. For the purposes of this report, the subgroup "spouses working in a field that requires a credential" includes spouses who indicated that their occupation or career field requires a certification, a license, or both.

Appendix II: Selected Demographics for Military Spouses

Table 4: Military Spouse Racial Composition by Professional Credential(s) and Rank

Military spouse subgroup	Estimated percentage
Spouses working in a field that requires a credential ^a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-Hispanic White: 63 percent • Non-Hispanic Black: 10 percent • Only Hispanic: 15 percent • Non-Hispanic Other: 12 percent
Spouses working in a field that does not require a credential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-Hispanic White: 61 percent • Non-Hispanic Black: 12 percent • Only Hispanic: 15 percent • Non-Hispanic Other: 12 percent
Spouses of enlisted servicemembers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-Hispanic White: 56 percent • Non-Hispanic Black: 13 percent • Only Hispanic: 17 percent • Non-Hispanic Other: 13 percent
Spouses of officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-Hispanic White: 80 percent • Non-Hispanic Black: 5 percent • Only Hispanic: 7 percent • Non-Hispanic Other: 8 percent

Source: GAO analysis of data from the Department of Defense's 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (ADSS). | GAO-21-193

Note: Figures in this table may not add to 100 due to rounding. Additionally, percentages in this figure are based on estimates derived from the ADSS and have a margin of error, at the 95 percent confidence level, of equal to or less than 7 percentage points or fewer.

^aThe 2017 ADSS asked military spouses whether their occupation or career field requires (1) a certification provided by an organization that sets standards for their occupation, or (2) a state issued license. For the purposes of this report, the subgroup "spouses working in a field that requires a credential" includes spouses who indicated that their occupation or career field requires a certification, a license, or both.

Appendix II: Selected Demographics for Military Spouses

Table 5: Military Spouse Educational Attainment by Professional Credential(s) and Rank

Military spouse subgroup	Estimated percentage
Spouses working in a field that requires a credential ^a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No college: 6 percent Some college: 44 percent 4-year degree: 30 percent Graduate/professional degree: 20 percent
Spouses working in a field that does not require a credential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No college: 14 percent Some college: 45 percent 4-year degree: 31 percent Graduate/professional degree: 10 percent
Spouses of enlisted servicemembers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No college: 13 percent Some college: 52 percent Four-year degree: 26 percent Graduate/professional degree: 9 percent
Spouses of officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No college: 2 percent Some college: 18 percent Four-year degree: 46 percent Graduate/professional degree: 34 percent

Source: GAO analysis of data from the Department of Defense's 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (ADSS). | GAO-21-193

Note: Percentages in this figure are based on estimates derived from the ADSS and have a margin of error, at the 95 percent confidence level, of equal to or less than 7 percentage points or fewer.

^aThe 2017 ADSS asked military spouses whether their occupation or career field requires (1) a certification provided by an organization that sets standards for their occupation, or (2) a state issued license. For the purposes of this report, the subgroup "spouses working in a field that requires a credential" includes spouses who indicated that their occupation or career field requires a certification, a license, or both.

Table 6: Military Spouse Age by Professional Credential(s) and Rank

Military spouse subgroup	Estimated percentage
Spouses working in a field that requires a credential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 26 years old: 21 percent • 26 to 30 years old: 27 percent • 31 to 35 years old: 22 percent • 36 to 40 years old: 16 percent • 41 years or older: 14 percent
Spouses working in a field that does not require a credential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 26 years old: 22 percent • 26 to 30 years old: 25 percent • 31 to 35 years old: 23 percent • 36 to 40 years old: 16 percent • 41 years or older: 13 percent
Spouses of enlisted servicemembers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 26 years old: 27 percent • 26 to 30 years old: 27 percent • 31 to 35 years old: 23 percent • 36 to 40 years old: 14 percent • 41 years or older: 10 percent
Spouses of officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 26 years old: 5 percent • 26 to 30 years old: 22 percent • 31 to 35 years old: 23 percent • 36 to 40 years old: 23 percent • 41 years or older: 27 percent

Source: GAO analysis of data from the Department of Defense's 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (ADSS). | GAO-21-193

Note: Percentages in this figure are based on estimates derived from the ADSS and have a margin of error, at the 95 percent confidence level, of equal to or less than 7 percentage points or fewer. Figures in this table may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Table 7 provides information on the most common career fields among all military spouse respondents. The top career fields include retail/customer service, occupations not requiring a state license, and health care. All data in this table are from the 2017 ADSS.

**Appendix II: Selected Demographics for
Military Spouses**

Table 7: Top Ten Military Spouse Career Fields

Career field	Estimated percentage
Retail/customer service	22 percent
Other occupations which do not require a state license ^a	17 percent
Health care/health services	14 percent
Education	11 percent
Administrative services	9 percent
Recreation and hospitality	6 percent
Child care/child development	6 percent
Financial services	5 percent
Skilled trades	3 percent
Other occupations which require a state license	3 percent

Source: GAO analysis of data from the Department of Defense's 2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (ADSS). | GAO-21-193

Note: Percentages in this figure are based on estimates derived from the ADSS and have a margin of error, at the 95 percent confidence level, of equal to or less than 7 percentage points or fewer.

^aQuestion 29 of the 2017 ADSS asks military spouses, "In what career field was your most recent employment?" Response options included 11 different career fields, such as health care/health services, financial services, administrative services, and education. The response options also included "Other occupations not listed above which require a state license" and "Other occupations not listed above which do NOT require a state license." These latter two categories are broad, catch-all responses if spouses did not identify with one of the 11 listed career fields.

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Defense

Appendix III: Comments from the Department
of Defense



MANPOWER AND
RESERVE AFFAIRS

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
1500 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-1500

12/22/2020

Ms. Elizabeth Curda
Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Curda:

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report, GAO-21-193, "MILITARY SPOUSE EMPLOYMENT: DOD Should Continue Assessing State Licensing Practices and Increase Awareness of Resources," dated November 17, 2020 (GAO Code 103839). The Office of the Secretary of Defense is committed to implementing GAO recommendations of continued assessment 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.

Supporting military spouse education and career opportunities is a top priority of my office. In addition to the committed work of the Defense-State Liaison Office, we are also diligently engaged across our communication platforms. We have developed a robust communication strategy for the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities program. We are proud of the growth in audience size we have seen among followers across social media channels between FY19 and FY20, to include on LinkedIn where followers increased by 53 percent. For spouse employment content on MilitaryOneSource.mil, there were 217,607 page views, a 49 percent increase from the previous fiscal year. We know we can do more, and we are committed to strengthening and growing our information sharing in support of military spouse employment. We appreciate the GAO's work to review the Department's support of military spouse employment and offer actionable recommendations.

Enclosed is DoD's proposed response to the subject report. My point of contact is Lee Kelley who can be reached at lee.a.kelley3.civ@mail.mil and 571-372-5317.

Sincerely,

PENROD.VIRGINIA.S
TRONG.1091403516
Digitally signed by
PENROD.VIRGINIA.S
403516
Date: 2020.12.22 11:47:24 -0500

Virginia S. Penrod
Acting

Enclosure:
As stated

GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED JANUARY 1, 2021
GAO-21-193 (GAO CODE 103839)

“MILITARY SPOUSE EMPLOYMENT: DOD SHOULD CONTINUE ASSESSING
STATE LICENSING PRACTICES AND INCREASE AWARENESS OF RESOURCES”

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense ensure the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy work with the Defense-State Liaison Office to ensure continued assessment and reporting on each state’s progress on implementing best practices for facilitating licensure portability of military spouses, and explore options assessing whether states’ actions are improving spouses’ experiences with transferring licenses.

DOD RESPONSE: Concur.

The Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense will continue to support military spouse licensure efforts across the United States. Communicating potential improvements, through the relaying of best practices, to policymakers interested in sponsoring change is a Defense-State Liaison Office (DSLO) best practice. Another effective strategy in highlighting best practices utilized by the DSLO is to focus on publicizing licensure improvement successes. Additionally, the DSLO continually coordinates with the Military Services regarding standardized assessment and reporting processes.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense ensure the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, in coordination with the Secretaries of the military departments and external stakeholders, establish strategies for sharing information on their outreach approaches to raise awareness of employment resources among military spouses.

DOD RESPONSE: Concur.

In addition to the currently scheduled bi-monthly meetings with Military Service headquarters spouse employment personnel, the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy has implemented a quarterly meeting with the Military Services, to specifically include communications personnel, exclusively for the sharing of outreach strategy approaches and to raise awareness of employment resources for military spouses.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Elizabeth H. Curda, (202) 512-7215 or curdae@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Nyree Ryder Tee (Assistant Director), Aimée Elivert (Analyst in Charge), Isabella Anderson, Susan Aschoff, James Ashley, Sandra Baxter, Lilia Chaidez, Justin Gordinas, Sarah Gilliland, Shelby Gullion, Serena Lo, Mimi Nguyen, Stacy Ouellette, James Rebbe, Paul Schearf, and Almata Spencer made key contributions to this report.

Appendix V: Accessible Data

Data Tables

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

Interstate Compacts (action)	Interstate Compacts (approved)	Number of states receiving rating
No action (red circle)	Approved no compacts	12
Some action (yellow circle)	Approved compacts in one to two fields	22
Significant action (green circle)	Approved compacts in three or more fields	16

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

Accessible Data for Figure 1: Military Spouse Estimated Unemployment Rates by Credential Requirement (2017)

Category	Estimated percentage
Spouses in fields that require a credential	25
Spouses in fields that do not require a credential	22

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

Accessible Data for Figure 2: Military Spouse Estimated Unemployment Rates by Servicemember Rank (2017)

Category	Estimated percentage
Spouses of early-career enlisted servicemembers (E1-E4) ^a	29
Spouses of early-career officers (O1-O3) ^b	18

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

Accessible Data for Figure 3: Military Spouse Estimated Underemployment by Credential Requirement (2017)

Category	Spouses working in fields that require a credential (estimated percentage)	Spouses working in fields that do not require a credential (estimated percentage)
Working part-time due to a lack of full-time opportunities (asked of spouses who were employed and working fewer than 35 hours per week)	14	14
Working outside area of education or training (asked of spouses who were employed)	27	62

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

Accessible Data for Figure 4: Military Spouse Estimated Underemployment by Servicemember Rank (2017)

Category	Spouses of enlisted servicemembers (estimated percentage)	Spouses of officers (estimated percentage)
Working part-time due to a lack of full-time opportunities (asked of spouses who were employed and working fewer than 35 hours per week)	15	9
Working outside area of education or training (asked of spouses who were employed)	48	33

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

Accessible Data for Figure 5: Examples of Defense State Liaison Office Criteria and Assessments of Licensure Portability in 50 States

Portability Rating	Implementation	Policy	Interstate Compacts ^a
Red dot	Little to no evidence that licensing boards have staff training; no information available for military spouses.	Language disqualifies or impedes military spouses from obtaining licenses.	No compacts approved.
Yellow dot	Licensing boards have staff training, but have not made information easily accessible to military spouses.	Minimizes time and paperwork required to obtain a license through measures like temporary licensing.	Approved one to two compacts.
Green dot	Licensing boards have staff training and post information on websites that is easily accessible to military spouses.	Provides licenses in 30 days with minimal paperwork or exemption from state requirements.	Approved three or more compacts.
State Ratings Summary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 red dots • 24 yellow dots • 18 green dots 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 red dots • 34 yellow dots • 13 green dots 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 red dots • 22 yellow dots • 16 green dots

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

Agency Comment Letter

Accessible Text for Appendix III Comments from the Department of Defense

Page 1

12/22/2020

Ms. Elizabeth Curda
Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Curda:

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report, GAO-21-193, "MILITARY SPOUSE EMPLOYMENT: DOD Should Continue Assessing State Licensing Practices and Increase Awareness of Resources," dated November 17, 2020 (GAO Code 103839). The Office of the Secretary of Defense is committed to implementing GAO recommendations of continued assessment 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.

Supporting military spouse education and career opportunities is a top priority of my office. In addition to the committed work of the Defense-State Liaison Office, we are also diligently engaged across our communication platforms. We have developed a robust communication strategy for the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities program. We are proud of the growth in audience size we have seen among followers across social media channels between FY19 and FY20, to include on LinkedIn where followers increased by 53 percent. For spouse employment content on MilitaryOneSource.mil, there were 217,607 page views, a 49 percent increase from the previous fiscal year. We know we can do more, and we are committed to strengthening and growing our information sharing in support of military spouse employment. We

appreciate the GAO's work to review the Department's support of military spouse employment and offer actionable recommendations.

Enclosed is DoD's proposed response to the subject report. My point of contact is Lee Kelley who can be reached at lee.a.kelley3.civ@mail.mil and 571-372-5317.

Sincerely,

Virginia S. Penrod
Acting

Enclosure:
As stated

Page 2

GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED JANUARY 1, 2021 GAO-21-193 (GAO CODE 103839)

"MILITARY SPOUSE EMPLOYMENT: DOD SHOULD CONTINUE ASSESSING STATE LICENSING PRACTICES AND INCREASE AWARENESS OF RESOURCES"

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense ensure the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy work with the Defense-State Liaison Office to ensure continued assessment and reporting on each state's progress on implementing best practices for facilitating licensure portability of military spouses, and explore options assessing whether states' actions are improving spouses' experiences with transferring licenses.

DOD RESPONSE: Concur.

The Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense will continue to support military spouse licensure efforts across the United States. Communicating potential improvements, through the relaying of best practices, to policymakers interested in sponsoring change is a Defense-State Liaison Office (DSLO) best practice. Another effective strategy in highlighting best practices utilized by the DSLO is to focus on publicizing

licensure improvement successes. Additionally, the DSLO continually coordinates with the Military Services regarding standardized assessment and reporting processes.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense ensure the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, in coordination with the Secretaries of the military departments and external stakeholders, establish strategies for sharing information on their outreach approaches to raise awareness of employment resources among military spouses.

DOD RESPONSE: Concur.

In addition to the currently scheduled bi-monthly meetings with Military Service headquarters spouse employment personnel, the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy has implemented a quarterly meeting with the Military Services, to specifically include communications personnel, exclusively for the sharing of outreach strategy approaches and to raise awareness of employment resources for military spouses.

Related GAO Products

Military and Veteran Support: Performance Goals Could Strengthen Programs that Help Servicemembers Obtain Civilian Employment. [GAO-20-416](#). Washington, D.C.: July 9, 2020.

Military Spouse Employment: Participation in and Efforts to Promote the My Career Advancement Account Program. [GAO-19-320R](#). Washington, D.C.: April 9, 2019.

Military and Veteran Support: Detailed Inventory of Federal Programs to Help Servicemembers Achieve Civilian Employment. [GAO-19-97R](#). Washington, D.C.: January 17, 2019.

Military Personnel: DOD Should Improve Its Oversight of the Exceptional Family Member Program. [GAO-18-348](#). Washington, D.C.: May 8, 2018.

Military Spouse Employment Programs: DOD Can Improve Guidance and Performance Monitoring. [GAO-13-60](#). Washington, D.C.: December 13, 2012.

GAO's Mission

The Government Accountability Office, the audit, evaluation, and investigative arm of Congress, exists to support Congress in meeting its constitutional responsibilities and to help improve the performance and accountability of the federal government for the American people. GAO examines the use of public funds; evaluates federal programs and policies; and provides analyses, recommendations, and other assistance to help Congress make informed oversight, policy, and funding decisions. GAO's commitment to good government is reflected in its core values of accountability, integrity, and reliability.

Obtaining Copies of GAO Reports and Testimony

The fastest and easiest way to obtain copies of GAO documents at no cost is through our website. Each weekday afternoon, GAO posts on its [website](#) newly released reports, testimony, and correspondence. You can also [subscribe](#) to GAO's email updates to receive notification of newly posted products.

Order by Phone

The price of each GAO publication reflects GAO's actual cost of production and distribution and depends on the number of pages in the publication and whether the publication is printed in color or black and white. Pricing and ordering information is posted on GAO's website, <https://www.gao.gov/ordering.htm>.

Place orders by calling (202) 512-6000, toll free (866) 801-7077, or TDD (202) 512-2537.

Orders may be paid for using American Express, Discover Card, MasterCard, Visa, check, or money order. Call for additional information.

Connect with GAO

Connect with GAO on [Facebook](#), [Flickr](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).
Subscribe to our [RSS Feeds](#) or [Email Updates](#). Listen to our [Podcasts](#).
Visit GAO on the web at <https://www.gao.gov>.

To Report Fraud, Waste, and Abuse in Federal Programs

Contact FraudNet:

Website: <https://www.gao.gov/fraudnet/fraudnet.htm>

Automated answering system: (800) 424-5454 or (202) 512-7700

Congressional Relations

Orice Williams Brown, Managing Director, WilliamsO@gao.gov, (202) 512-4400,
U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7125,
Washington, DC 20548

Public Affairs

Chuck Young, Managing Director, youngc1@gao.gov, (202) 512-4800
U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7149
Washington, DC 20548

Strategic Planning and External Liaison

Stephen J. Sanford, Acting Managing Director, spel@gao.gov, (202) 512-4707
U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7814,
Washington, DC 20548



Please Print on Recycled Paper.