

Statement of K. Robert Lewis
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In Support of HB 6680
An Act Providing Unemployment Benefits for Certain Military
Spouses
Before the Committee on Labor and Public Employees

February 20, 2007

Madame Chairwoman Prague, Mister co-Chairman Ryan, ranking members Guglielmo and Aman and the entire membership of the Committee on Labor and Public Employees; my name is K. Robert Lewis from New London Connecticut. Currently, I Chair the National Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission of The American Legion and formerly was employed as the Military and Veterans Affairs Constituent Services Representative for the office of 2nd District Congressman Rob Simmons. My experiences in each of the aforementioned capacities lead me to wholeheartedly support HB 6680, introduced by Representative Ted Graziani.

Ladies and gentlemen, the issue which HB 6680 tackles for the State of Connecticut is likewise being addressed in numerous statehouses across the country, that of finding a common ground in each state to provide Unemployment Insurance coverage for spouses of military personnel who receive Permanent Change of Station (PCS) orders requiring the family unit to relocate to another labor market area. As a result of this relocation, spouses who are employed are forced to leave that employment, and seek employment in the new labor market area without the benefit of Unemployment Insurance to lessen the economic impact on the family, often a young family. Relocation as a result of military PCS orders are not regulated to moving to a new duty station, it is also necessitated when the service member retires and is in effect, transferred back to his or her home of record. Additionally, National Guard and Reserve component personnel and their families may be affected similarly by activation or deployment orders.

I was privileged to serve on a Veterans Advisory Committee for Congressman Rob Simmons along with a number of distinguished veterans advocates. Many of those advocates were and continue to be employed in occupations directly attuned to the needs and issues of our military and veteran population. Several members of the VAC raised the issue in the context of military readiness and retention as well as one of fairness. Congressman Simmons was and continues to be extremely supportive of measures that enhance the quality of life of America's active duty military and their families.

The following information comes from the Senate Staff Analysis and Economic Impact Statement for the Florida Legislature on this issue and I would like to include it in my statement as it concerns this issue on a national scale and serves to illustrate the importance of the Connecticut General Assembly finding an equitable solution to this perceived inequity.

“Research indicates that a military spouse’s ability to gain job skills and maintain a career contributes to the financial well-being of the family, spouse satisfaction with military life, and military retention and readiness. According to the Department of Defense, more than 70 percent of military spouses are in the labor force, including 87 percent of junior enlisted spouses. Unfortunately, the unemployment rate for military spouses is approximately **24 percent**, four times higher than the civilian unemployment rate, and military spouse earnings are significantly lower than comparably educated civilian spouses.(2) A major factor in the high unemployment rate experienced by military spouses

is the highly-mobile nature of military service. According the Department of Defense, the average military family relocates every 2.9 years, three times more frequently than their civilian counterparts.

Research indicates the following are additional factors underlying the unemployment and underemployment of military spouses: the lack of unemployment compensation; the lack of appropriate job placement assistance; bias among employers; and the geographical impact of military installations on employment opportunities. Eligibility for unemployment benefits is an issue that resonates strongly with military spouses.

Military family advocates maintain that spouse's ineligibility for unemployment compensation often forces them to take any available job in order to avert financial hardship. Additionally, recent Department of Defense analyses found that junior enlisted personnel are reimbursed for relocation costs at an average rate that amounts to roughly one-third of their actual costs. This economic burden routinely results in their spouses favoring *immediate* earnings in the short-term, rather than a properly executed job search that yields more appropriate employment and higher earnings over the long-term. In addition to the obvious disadvantage to the military family's finances, the reduced earnings of military spouses translate to reduced income tax revenues for the state, and where applicable, local governments."

Madame Chairwoman, members of the Committee, I support HB 6608 with the understanding that the employers in the State of Connecticut are disadvantaged unless the legislation excludes said employers from being negatively impacted regarding the UI pool ratings. Benefits paid to those eligible claimants under this legislation shall be charged to the pool rather than against the claimant's employer. I encourage the Committee in its deliberations to review the proposals being considered and enacted in the State of Georgia as a template to meet the needs of all concerned; the DoD, military families, employers, and state tax receipts.

(2) James Hosek, Rand Corporation, *Married to the Military – The Employment and Earnings of Military Wives Compared to Those of Civilian Wives (2002)*

Once again, I applaud Representative Graziani for his foresight in introducing this measure and I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

