

# Expanding Employment Opportunities for Military Spouses in Washington

## Reducing Barriers and Enhancing Supports for Spouses of Active-Duty Service Members

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Military spouse employment has long been a significant issue for military families, as evidenced by substantial national research. In 2023, 48% of active-duty families reported spousal employment challenges as a major family stressor and in 2021, 18% reported it as a potential reason for separating from the military.<sup>1</sup> Military spouse employment issues also impact the military's recruitment, as military families' quality of life—of which spouse employment is a top concern—impacts their likelihood to recommend military service to others.<sup>2</sup> With recruitment and retention at a 50-year low,<sup>3</sup> it is essential to the military's mission-readiness to improve the state of military spouse employment.

While military spouse employment challenges are well-studied at the national level, there has been limited Washington-focused research into this issue. Given this gap, this study aimed to identify Washington-specific barriers to military spouse employment through direct engagement of military spouses and representatives from groups in the public, private, nonprofit, and military sectors and recommend actions to address these barriers.

For more information on the study and the full report, visit [www.ssmcp.org](http://www.ssmcp.org).



### // Sources

- 1 Blue Star Families. Military Families Lifestyle Survey. 2023. [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/BSF\\_MFLS\\_Spring23\\_Comp\\_Infographic.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/BSF_MFLS_Spring23_Comp_Infographic.pdf); Blue Star Families. 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report. 2020. [https://www.bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF\\_MFLS\\_CompReport\\_FULL.pdf](https://www.bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BSF_MFLS_CompReport_FULL.pdf).
- 2 Blue Star Families. 2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report. 2021. [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/BSF\\_MFLS\\_Results2021\\_ComprehensiveReport\\_3\\_22.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/BSF_MFLS_Results2021_ComprehensiveReport_3_22.pdf).
- 3 U.S. Department of Defense. Department of Defense Announces Recruitment and Retention Numbers for Fiscal Year 2023. 2023. [prhome.defense.gov/Portals/52/Press%20Release%20May%2023%20-%20Recruiting%20and%20Retention%20Report.pdf](https://prhome.defense.gov/Portals/52/Press%20Release%20May%2023%20-%20Recruiting%20and%20Retention%20Report.pdf).

# Key Findings

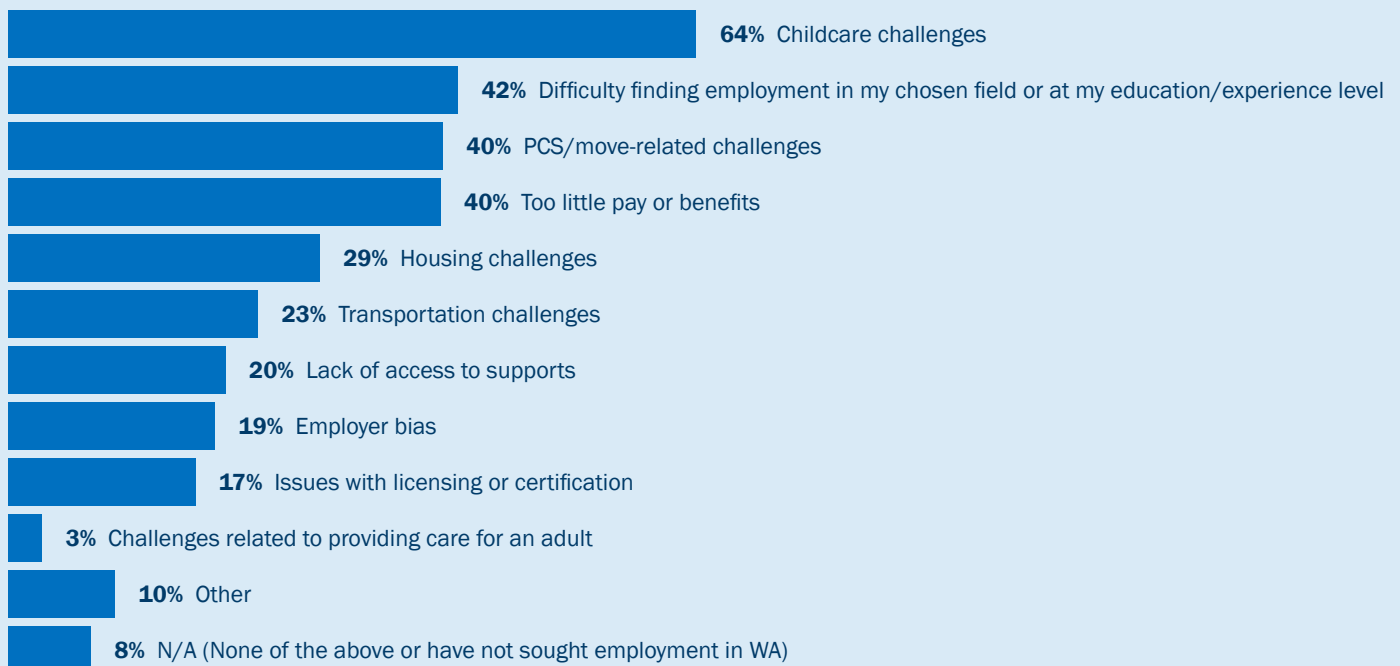
- ▶ **Employment barriers that military spouses experience in Washington closely match national barriers.** See the chart for employment challenges experienced by survey respondents in Washington.
- ▶ **Most working spouses' incomes are essential to meeting their families' basic needs.** More than half of surveyed, employed spouses report they could not meet their family's basic needs without their income.
- ▶ **A top barrier to military spouse employment is childcare, with two-thirds of military spouses surveyed reporting this as a challenge.** Cost is the primary barrier to childcare access, with four in five surveyed spouses reporting difficulties with the high cost of childcare. Other common childcare-related challenges include issues with service members' unpredictable schedules and limited availability of childcare providers, both of which impact about two-thirds of surveyed spouses.
- ▶ **Other top barriers include difficulty finding suitable employment, financial challenges, and issues related to moving between installations.** Approximately two in five surveyed spouses reported each of these challenges.
- ▶ **There are significant existing efforts to support military spouse employment, but many military spouses are unaware of the resources available to them.** A diverse network of organizations, governments, and the military offer resources for military spouses, including for employment, childcare, and family financial readiness. However, engagement with military spouses revealed limited awareness of many of these resources, and one-third of surveyed spouses want to receive more employment-related information.

## // Methodology

The recommendations in this report were developed through in-depth engagement with both military spouses and key groups that work or volunteer to support military spouses, including:

- ▶ **Statewide survey.** A statewide survey of 646 military spouses was conducted to understand the challenges they experience with respect to employment in Washington.
- ▶ **Discussion groups.** Three discussion groups with military spouses were held to gather feedback on draft recommendations.
- ▶ **Project Steering Committee.** A committee of representatives from installations and organizations that work and volunteer to support military spouses met four times to guide the project.
- ▶ **One-on-one interviews** with representatives from installations and organizations that support military spouse employment.
- ▶ **Meetings with WDVA Work Groups** to gather feedback on draft recommendations.

**Employment Challenges Experienced by 616 Military Spouse Survey Respondents in Washington**





# Recommendations

This report includes 19 recommendations across six focus areas to strengthen military spouse employment. Recommendations are listed in no particular order.



## A. Outreach.

**Opportunities to share information and increase awareness of resources.** While the military, public sector, and private sector have substantial programs available to military spouses, these programs can only be effective if military spouses are aware of them.

1. Improve outreach about resources to military spouses.
2. Provide additional information to service members and spouses before and during PCS to ensure they have information and access to resources during their family's move.

## B. Childcare for military families.

**Opportunities to increase military families' access to affordable childcare.** The statewide survey of military spouses identified childcare as the greatest employment challenge for military spouses, affecting nearly two in three spouses in Washington

1. Increase direct DoD provision of high-quality childcare.
2. Expand childcare provider participation in Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN/MCCYN-PLUS).
3. Improve the affordability of off-base childcare for military families.
4. Improve family access to off-base childcare.
5. Refine the Family Child Care program (FCC) to make it a more viable employment opportunity for military spouses and to create childcare slots.
6. Build awareness of other financial supports for childcare.

## C. Employment resources.

**Ways to strengthen existing employment-related resources for military spouses, build new supports, and better connect spouses to the available opportunities.**

Engagement with spouses and organizations throughout this study revealed opportunities to strengthen existing resources and introduce new resources to support military spouse employment.

1. Enhance direct employment support for military spouses.
2. Continue to streamline licensing and certification for military spouses moving to Washington.
3. Support skill-building for military spouses who seek additional education.

## D. Employment opportunity.

**Methods to increase the employment opportunities available to military spouses.** Some employers are not well-prepared to hire and retain military spouses. Work is needed to educate and incentivize employers to hire military spouses, as are stronger protections from bias for military spouses.

1. Encourage employers to hire military spouses.
2. Facilitate employers' abilities to hire and retain military spouses.
3. Protect military spouses from employer bias.

## E. Financial resources and basic needs.

**Ways to help military families better meet their basic needs to free up military spouses to seek and maintain employment.** Strengthening military families' overall financial resources can alleviate some pressures that can inhibit military spouse employment.

1. Strengthen programs and supports specific to military families' basic needs.
2. Expand military families' access to financial support and basic needs assistance available outside the military community.
3. Increase financial resources for service members and spouses who work on-base.

## F. Data, research, and advocacy.

**How key groups can broadly continue to advance support for military spouse employment.** To meaningfully advance military spouse employment opportunity, there must be deep collaboration and ongoing evaluation of progress.

1. Cultivate a strong, cross-sector network of groups that support military spouse employment.
2. Conduct research to ensure efforts are data-informed and relevant.



## Effecting Change in Washington and Beyond

A broad landscape of organizations influences military spouse employment, including key groups in the military, public, nonprofit, and private sectors. Each strategy supporting the recommendations in this study is linked to one or more of these key groups. Many key groups have already been involved in this work to date, and others will need to be more deeply engaged moving forward. As Washington's key groups work to implement these recommendations, cross-sector involvement and robust collaboration will be essential to success.

Washington's five major installations are diverse, representing different service branches and community sizes, demographics, and attributes. Despite these differences, this study finds that there are common patterns in military spouses' employment challenges across installations. Further, this study finds that the employment challenges that military spouses experience across Washington align with national challenges. Given these parallels, the recommendations in this report likely have broad applicability to communities across the country, offering a potential pathway to improve military spouse employment nationwide.

### // Key Groups

Advancing the state of military spouse employment will require collaboration from key groups in the military, government, and private sectors, including:

#### Military

DoD

Service branches

Installations

#### Government

Federal government

State government

Local government

#### Private and nonprofit

Employers

Community organizations

Off-base childcare providers

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