



Licensure on the home front

Several state legislatures are requiring licensure by endorsement for spouses of military personnel. It could make life easier for some, but what about public protection?

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For any licensed professional, moving from state to state in the US can be a headache. With very few exceptions, most professions require the licensee to apply for a license in their new state. The applicant submits documentation, transcripts, and exam scores to the new regulatory board and waits for the wheels of regulation to crank out a new license. It's a hassle for professionals who relocate voluntarily, but it can be career-ending for spouses of military personnel, who may be expected to complete the same process every two or three years. Often, less than a year after the process is completed, new orders come down and the licensee has to start over again in a new state.

As active duty personnel are transferred from one military installation to another, the "trailing spouse" who is in a licensed profession is required to meet requirements in the new jurisdiction. Often, the trailing spouse is unable to find professional employment for weeks or months as the paperwork is processed.

*from the
staff*

With 33 percent of military spouses holding some sort of professional licensure, there has been growing support for laws and policies to ease those transitions. This spring, 15 state legislatures passed laws aimed specifically at making professional licensure easier for military spouses.

Seven states—Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Montana, North Carolina, New York, and Texas—have passed laws that require boards to give military spouses licensure by endorsement (some of these are still awaiting governors' signatures), barring some compelling reason against it. Eight others have created special temporary licenses that will allow spouses of active duty military personnel to continue their careers while they complete the licensing application process. These laws were passed in Alaska, Florida, Kentucky, Missouri, Ohio, South Carolina and Tennessee. Utah allows military spouses to use out-of-state licenses, and Virginia will reinstate licenses for military spouses who return to the state after moving elsewhere.

From the perspective of US military personnel and their families, these efforts seem like a no-brainer. After all, most states waive in-state licensure for federal employees, in and out of uniform. And support for such measures is coming straight from the top: President Obama released a directive earlier this year to make a government-wide effort to support military families, and First Lady Michelle Obama is mounting a parallel public awareness campaign.

Social work regulatory boards, however, have another constituency to be concerned about: the public. The board's primary responsibility, as always, is to ensure that licenses are issued only to social workers who can practice competently and safely. That responsibility does not disappear when the applicant is married to a member of the military.

While social work licensure by endorsement—or some substantially similar variation—does take place under certain circumstances, it can become difficult when boards have different standards. A licensed clinical social worker in Mississippi, for example, is required to have 1,000 hours of supervised practice. If that same social worker is relocated to Maryland, the comparable license requires 3,000 hours of supervised practice. In this situation, the easiest path might be for the MS social worker to apply for MD licensure as a Licensed Graduate Social Worker (a masters-level license) instead—provided the social worker has passed the required examination. The additional supervision requirements would not be an issue, but the social worker would be required to practice under a different, less clinical scope, potentially missing out on professional advancement and increased income that often comes with the clinical license. At best, this kind of choice can cause a social worker's career to stall; at worst, it can derail the career long-term.

The State Liaison and Educational Opportunity Office is an arm of the Department of Defense that focuses on military community and family policy. In a statement this spring about the new legislation, the State Liaison Office expressed a clear preference for the endorsement option, and it's easy to see why licensed professionals would agree.

From a regulatory perspective, though, there is a stronger case to be made for the temporary or provisional license, which allows a licensed professional from another state to find employment and practice professionally for a period of six months or a year, while completing the application process and meeting any additional requirements for in-state licensure. The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) Model Act contains temporary practice language that allows for a 30-day practice period, provided the social worker's "home" license has requirements that are "substantially similar" to those in the state allowing the temporary practice. The provision was designed primarily as model language to address internet-based practice or practice in response to a disaster or other emergency.

With three ongoing military conflicts on top of the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process, U.S. service members and their families have a lot to worry about. Efforts to make professional licenses easier to transfer would mean one less thing to focus on when faced with a new assignment. For regulators, the issue is a more complicated. Add this to an already-lengthy list of balancing acts faced by social work boards—supporting military families when they need it most while simultaneously ensuring that those receiving social work services are getting competent, safe care.