



**National Military Family Association, Inc.**

2500 North Van Dorn St., Suite 102 • Alexandria, VA 22302-1601 • (703) 931-6632 • Fax (703) 931-4600 • [www.nmfa.org](http://www.nmfa.org)



Statement of

**Jessica Perdeu**  
**Deputy Director of Government Relations**

**THE NATIONAL MILITARY FAMILY ASSOCIATION**

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of the

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR**

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The National Military Family Association (NMFA) is the only national organization whose sole focus is the military family. The Association's goal is to influence the development and implementation of policies that will improve the lives of those family members. Its mission is to serve the families of the seven uniformed services through education, information, and advocacy.

Founded in 1969 as the National Military Wives Association, NMFA is a non-profit 501(c)(3) primarily volunteer organization. NMFA represents the interests of family members and survivors of active duty, reserve component, and retired personnel of the seven uniformed services: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, Public Health Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

NMFA Representatives in military communities worldwide provide a direct link between military families and NMFA staff in the nation's capital. Representatives are the "eyes and ears" of NMFA, bringing shared local concerns to national attention.

NMFA does not have or receive federal grants or contracts.

NMFA's website is: <http://www.nmfa.org>.

Jessica Perdeu joined the National Military Family Association Government Relations staff in 2005 as Legislative Administrative Assistant. In January 2007 she was selected to serve as Deputy Director in the Government Relations Department. In this position, she follows issues such as pay and compensation, housing, taxes, family member employment, financial literacy, commissary, and exchange as well as other issues relevant to the quality of life of the families of the seven uniformed services. She is a regular contributor to several publications including Military Money and Military Spouse magazines. Mrs. Perdeu serves on the Military Construction/ MWR/ Exchanges Committee, the Taxes/ Social Security Committee and the Committee on Military Personnel, Compensation and Commissaries of The Military Coalition. In addition she represents military families on the Military Saves National Partners Committee.

A former Marine and a Marine spouse of 14 years, Mrs. Perdeu has served in various volunteer leadership positions in civilian and military community organizations including Key Volunteers, Navy and Marine Corps Relief Society, Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA), and Marine Spouse Clubs. She is a graduate of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor with a Bachelor of Science in Physics and is currently pursuing a second Bachelors degree in Accounting through the University of Maryland.

In addition to her work at NMFA, Mrs. Perdeu is a past President of the Marine Officers' Spouses' Club of Washington D.C. and is currently serving as the Coordinator of the Joint Armed Forces Officers Wives Luncheon Committee. She is also a volunteer in the youth office at St. Mark Church in Vienna, Virginia. Mrs. Perdeu and her husband, Lieutenant Colonel Jason Perdeu, reside in Vienna, Virginia with their four children.

Madame Chairman and Distinguished Members of this Subcommittee, the National Military Family Association (NMFA) would like to thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today workplace challenges facing military family members.

Today's military is comprised of predominantly young adults under the age of 35. Sixty-six percent of military spouses are in the labor force, including 87 percent of junior enlisted spouses (E-1 to E-5). For many, working to pay bills and cover basic expenses is the primary reason for working. Studies show the gap between the financial well-being of military families and their civilian peers is largely due to the frequent moves required of the military family and the resulting disruptions to the career progression of the military spouse. In a 2005 report by the RAND Corporation, *Working Around the Military: Challenges to Military Spouse Employment and Education*, researchers found that military spouses, when compared to their civilian counterparts, were more likely to live in metropolitan areas and are more likely to have graduated from high school and have some college.

Yet the RAND study found that, all things being equal, military spouses' civilian counterparts tended to have better employment outcomes and higher wages. Surveys show a military spouse's income is a major contributor to the family's financial well-being and the military spouse unemployment rate is much higher (10 percent) than the national rate. The loss of the spouse's income at exactly the time when the family is facing the cost of a government ordered move is further exacerbated when the spouse is unable to collect unemployment compensation in most states. Lacking the financial cushion provided by the receipt of unemployment compensation, the military spouse must often settle for "any job that pays the bills" rather than being able to search for a job that is commensurate with his or her skills or career aspirations. This in turn hurts morale and affects recruitment and retention of the service member.

Compounding these issues is the current operational tempo. Now six years into the Global War on Terror military families are tired. Repeated long deployments are taking their toll and stressing personal support systems to their breaking point. This fact is very evident among working spouses who are finding it more and more difficult to maintain their professional schedules while also meeting family obligations. National Military Family Association (NMFA) has not tracked the exact number of calls received from family members with

workplace challenges, but there has been a considerable increase in the number of these calls in recent months.

We believe the increase is a result of what NMFA refers to as the deployment spiral. Until recently, deployment was discussed in terms of a cycle that began with predeployment and ended with reintegration. Based upon an NMFA survey of military spouses in 2003 and a follow on survey in 2005, NMFA now believes that deployment more closely resembles a spiral than a cycle. Families do not return to their original status at the end of a deployment. As a result, subsequent deployments begin from a different place. Families who had no children may now have toddlers. Other families may have experienced a divorce since the last deployment leaving the service member in a single parent role. Increasingly parents and siblings of service members are stepping into guardian roles while the service member deploys. In addition, the increase in end strength for the Army and Marine Corps is bringing many new families to the military. These families are struggling to adapt to a military lifestyle while coping with deployments.

At the same time employers seem to be growing weary of the special demands military service is placing upon their employees. In some cases it appears employer goodwill with respect to flexibility and time off for military commitments has run out. Even Reserve component personnel called to active duty are finding many employers less willing to support military commitments. For service members there is employment protection under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA). For military family members there is no such protection. Many times the non-military spouse is forced to choose between attending an important school event for a child who is missing a deployed parent, or losing a job that is keeping the family financially solvent. This is a stressful juggling act at best.

This situation may be further exacerbated in National Guard and Reserve families where parents may work shifts to trade off child care responsibilities. When the service member is activated the spouse is forced to find child care and to make budget adjustments to cover this new and significant expense, along with adjusting to all of the other stresses a deployment brings. One spouse described her experience:

*"As a National Guard spouse, I had to quit my high paying position (primary source of income and benefits) during my husband's deployment because of a combination of a long commute and daycare*

*hours. My husband had drop off responsibilities so that I could commute before peak traffic hours. There is no protection or advocacy for guard and reserve spouse jobs. My family went from a comfortable standard of living to qualifying for food stamps in the year and a half after my husband's return because of the difficulty in finding a job that I could stick with through another potential deployment."*

Military families, like all other families, need to spend time actively involved in their children's schools and activities. This becomes particularly important when a parent is deployed. It is imperative that the child experiencing a deployment be able to find comfort in normal family routines and activities. Imagine the stress and guilt that builds each time a parent or custodial grandparent must explain to his or her child why they won't be able to attend a school function. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) could be modified to permit these parents and guardians the opportunity to attend these important events. Providing military parents and guardians up to four hours per month to attend school functions could have a tremendously positive impact on military children missing a deployed parent and dealing with deployment issues. NMFA is thankful that Chairman Woolsey recognizes and has championed the improvement of the lives of working families and the need for family friendly workplaces through the sponsorship of H.R. 2392.

**NMFA recommends FMLA be modified to include up four hours per month for military family members to attend school sponsored functions or military sponsored deployment related functions.**

As if the normal stresses of military life were not enough, many military families are now finding themselves in the role of caretaker for a wounded service member. In an instant a family's entire life can change. Regardless of a service member's marital status their families will be affected in some way by the injury. Family members are an integral part of the health care team. Their presence has been shown to improve the wounded service member's quality of life and aid in a speedy recovery.

Congress must be cognizant of the caregiver. Family members have made the commitment to care for their loved one. We must acknowledge they are a part of the health care recovery team. The responsibilities shouldered by the family member caregiver provide relief to both the medical staff and health care system. Family member caregivers also help to reduce the total cost of care for the wounded

service member by performing duties that would require paid staff in the absence of a family member. They advocate, transport, and move, along with their wounded loved one from Walter Reed Army Medical Center or the National Naval Medical Center at Bethesda, to a Poly-trauma center and follow on to other military treatment facilities or Veterans Administration health care facilities throughout the United States, often leaving their own lives and jobs behind. Congress must take into consideration the economic impact on families who decide to remain by the bedside to provide care for their injured loved one. Families may voluntarily choose to leave their jobs for a variety of reasons. They may desire to spend as much time as possible with the wounded service member. The overwhelming challenges of trying to care for and navigate the Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs complex health care systems may make it impossible to meet professional and increasing family demands. Or, they may need to relocate for an extended period of time to be with the injured service member or veteran to a location that can provide the optimum quality of care.

Certainly FMLA provides some protection for the families of wounded service members. But, the reality is the time permitted under FMLA is not sufficient for the severely wounded. Chairman Woolsey's "Support for Injured Servicemembers Act", H.R. 3481, would provide a much needed extension to FMLA leave. NMFA is thankful that Congress recognizes the limitations in the current FMLA program and is working to overcome those limitations. In addition, many military spouses do not qualify for FMLA leave due to the mobile nature of the military lifestyle. For a spouse who moves every two or three years, accruing 12 months of tenure with an employer may be a challenge. Even for family members who qualified for FMLA leave, financial circumstances may make leave without pay an impossible option. In the case of single service members who are wounded, it is often a parent, step-parent, or sibling who becomes the primary caregiver. Often the caregiver must terminate a position in order to care for their wounded loved one during their rehabilitation and recovery phase. Not only are these caregivers losing income, many times they lose their health care coverage, too. If the caregiver is a sibling, he or she is not currently eligible for any leave under FMLA. According to the National Naval Medical Center at Bethesda, the average age of an active duty Traumatic Brain Injury patient arriving at their health care facility is between 21 and 23. Many of these young service members are unmarried, placing parents and siblings in the caregiver role.

State initiatives, such as California's Paid Family Leave (PFL) and the California Family Rights Act (CFRA) are providing much needed paid family leave. Providing a federal version of these programs would enable families caring for a wounded service member to concentrate on the service member's recovery, rather than worrying about the possibility of lost income. While some states are already providing these benefits, the time required to push these programs through the legislative process in every state would mean the families of many wounded service members might never benefit by their passage. These programs are needed on a consistent basis nationwide to ensure all military families are covered regardless of the duty station's location. Certainly, states could provide a more generous benefit if they desired but, the basic benefit would exist nationwide with the passage of national legislation.

**Primary Caregivers of wounded service members require increased protection. NMFA recommends:**

- **Extending FMLA leave periods to at least 26 weeks per year**
- **Exempting military family caregivers from the 12 month employment threshold**
- **Providing a limited amount of paid family leave**
- **Broadening the definition of eligibility by including those who are considered the primary caregiver**
- **Providing some level of protection to employees in small businesses**

Military families serve along with their service members. The military lifestyle is not without sacrifice and families willingly accept the challenges inherent in military service. There is, however, a limit to the sacrifices that can be reasonably expected. No family should have to choose between paying the bills and caring for a seriously ill or wounded service member. No parent or guardian should be denied the opportunity to visit their child's school or attend an important event while a service member is forward deployed. Military families support the Nation's military missions. Modification of the FMLA not only provides important benefits to military families, it also validates their service to their country and recognizes their sacrifice.