Law Students Married to Military Face Challenges, but Resources Make the Struggle Easier

By Josie Beets

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Law school is not for the faint of heart, and for a growing subset of law students who are married to active duty servicemembers, the traditional trials of law school include additional challenges. These students require unique resources from career services and a specialized understanding from potential employers to help them navigate military family life and a successful legal career.

Garrett and her Navy husband were married March of her 1L year — they spent only 24 days together during their first year of marriage, scheduling visits between his military trainings in California and Washington State and her law school exams in Louisiana. Once she graduated, she moved to the West Coast to be with him only to discover he would be almost immediately deployed.

In order to pursue the legal profession, many law students married to active duty servicemembers spend time apart from their spouses to finish law school, adding to frequent separations due to military service. Nancy and her Army husband also lived apart during her first year of law school. When he was reassigned to a tour overseas, she took a one year leave of absence to join him rather than be separated for a second year. "I really appreciated that my law school made that leave of absence so easy," she said.

Even though the separations are difficult, they come hand in hand with the territory — separations are a part of being a military family. It’s the other challenges that seem most daunting.

"The hardest thing for me has been trying to find a job at this duty station," said Garrett. “Even though I did everything ‘right’ in law school — law review editorial board, top 10% of my class, great references — it doesn’t matter because we’re in such a small town, so far away from cities with more employment opportunities, and so far away from any professional network I was able to create during law school.”

Amber’s law school allowed her to remain a student when her Marine spouse was transferred on military orders to a new duty station. “I ‘visited’ at three different schools, and even had internships in two different states at the same time,” she said.

Military spouse attorneys join the Tennessee Supreme Court at a special session on June 1, 2017, to honor the service of servicemembers in Tennessee and celebrate the military spouse attorney licensing accommodation in that state.
As the demographics of the all-volunteer force change, more military spouses are pursuing advanced degrees, including law school. According to the US Department of Defense, there are more than 600,000 spouses of active duty servicemembers and 92 percent are female. Military spouses tend to be more highly educated than their civilian peers: according to a 2017 report from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 34 percent of military spouses have a college degree and 15 percent have a post graduate degree, slightly higher than the civilian average.

Despite a higher level of education, military spouses suffer from rates of unemployment from 20 to 25 percent, with underemployment rates trending even higher. The largest driver of higher military spouse unemployment is the mobility of military family life. Military families can expect to move across state lines every two to three years. According to a 2014 report on military spouse employment from the Military Officers Association of America, 79 percent of military families have moved in the past five years, while 50 percent have moved twice in the same time span.

These mobility issues are amplified for military spouse law students and attorneys. Transfers can be complicated and are frequently impossible. Licensing restrictions make bar exam applications a mess. But still, military spouses who want to be a part of the legal profession go to great lengths to complete their legal education.

Kate’s Army husband took back to back combat deployments while she focused on law school. Separated a total of 32 months, Kate said that in addition to avoiding news coverage and dodging inappropriate (though well-intentioned) questions, the hardest part was the unpredictability of which bar exam she would be taking, since her husband’s location and assignment were unknown at the application deadline.

Once they complete law school, many military spouse attorneys have trouble deciding where to take the bar exam and where to look for a job because of delays in military moves and orders. These decisions are complicated by high student loan debt and decreased earning potential for military spouses. The Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University estimates that military spouses lose out on $33,000 per year in income due to frequent unemployment and changes in jobs.

Dominica hid the fact that she was married to an Air Force servicemember because she felt it would hurt her chances of finding a job. “It is already difficult for women attorneys to be taken seriously in my conservative jurisdiction,” she said. “I couldn’t add also being a military spouse into the mix.”

MSJDN also provides military spouse law students and attorneys professional development opportunities. As of March 2018, 27 states and the U.S. Virgin Islands have enacted policies or rules allowing a military spouse to practice in the state when joining their servicemember spouse on military orders. States in green have a licensing accommodation for military spouse attorneys; states in yellow are in progress; states in red have no military spouse attorney licensing efforts underway.

Because of the frequency of military moves, most military spouses are unable to qualify for admission via traditional reciprocity rules, making it near impossible to maintain legal employment.

However, resources exist to help these spouses. The Military Spouse J.D. Network (MSJDN), founded in 2011, has worked to support military spouse law students and attorneys so they can maintain their legal career. MSJDN has led efforts to secure law licensing accommodations for military spouse attorneys following their active duty service members.

“Through our model rule, MSJDN asks that bar licensing authorities grant military spouses a temporary license to practice law while they are in the jurisdiction due to their servicemember spouse’s military orders,” said MSJDN State Licensing Director Karen Scanlan. There are currently 26 states with some type of law licensing accommodation for military spouse attorneys, with another dozen states considering such a rule.

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training, job opportunities, and networking resources to support their military family and legal career journey. “It’s not just about getting the bar license,” said Libby Jamison, President of MSJDN. “We also help military spouses get jobs by connecting them to the local legal community through our network of spouses and supporters. Fifteen percent of MSJDN members have found a job through the organization, and that number grows every year.”

Even though mobility is one of the key obstacles to maintaining a legal career, many employers are recognizing the unique skillset military spouse attorneys bring to the table and actively recruiting them for their organizations. The U.S. Army Office of the Judge Advocate General runs a Military Spouse Attorney Placement Program (v) that places the spouse of active duty servicemembers in attorney positions at installations worldwide using the DoD military spouse hiring preference. Prudential (vi), Squire Patton Boggs (vii), O’Melveny & Myers (viii), and Vinson & Elkins (ix) have not only hired military spouse attorneys but have also supported those attorneys to ensure that their spouse’s military service does not impede their legal career.

“Military life can feel overwhelming, especially when our peers in the legal profession don’t always understand the challenges we face supporting our servicemembers,” said MSJDN Past President Eleanor Vuono. “But we’ve found that once we explain the need for support, the legal community has embraced the call to action to lessen the burdens on military spouse attorneys.”

ENDNOTES

1 Hiring Our Heroes, a program of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. Military Spouses in the Workplace: Understanding the Impacts of Spouse Unemployment on Military

Resources for Military Spouse Law Students and Attorneys:

- **Military Spouse JD Network** (http://msjdn.org/) A bar association for military spouse law students and attorneys, offering help with job placement, networking, and licensing.

- **National Military Family Association** Spouse Scholarships (http://www.militaryfamily.org/spouses-scholarships/scholarships.html) Available for bar study or application fees.

- **My Career Advancement Account (MyCAA) Scholarship** (https://www.mycareerworks.org/mycaa-funding/) A Department of Defense workforce development program providing tuition assistance to E1-E5, O1-O2, and W1-W2 military spouses pursuing a license, certification, or Associate’s degree.

- **Department of Defense Spouse Education and Career Opportunities** (http://www.militaryonesource.mil/web/mos/career-connections) Provides education and career guidance to military spouses worldwide and offers comprehensive resources and tools for all stages of your career progression.


- Military Spouse JD Network. https://www.msjdn.org


