

The Needs of Military Families: How are States and the Pentagon Responding, especially for Guard and Reservists?

Bill Number:

Hearing Date: July 21, 2004, 2:00 pm

Location: SD-430

Witness:

The Honorable Jeb Bush
State of Florida
Governor

Testimony

Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Committee, good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about the many ways state governments and communities can support the men and women in our armed forces and their families.

Military Presence in Florida

Florida is the proud home of 21 military installations and three unified commands, including Southern Command, Special Operations Command, and Central Command, currently directing US military action in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Each of Florida's 67 counties is directly impacted by the defense industry, and military families are an integral part of the social fabric of our state. Military men and women not only serve their country, they serve their communities as volunteers and role models. Florida is proud of the men and women who serve courageously and honorably from our state. We have made serving them, and supporting their families, one of our top priorities.

Florida's Military Outreach

We can only meet needs that are identified. That is the rationale behind Florida's strong outreach to our military community. Our state actively partners with Florida military installations to discuss concerns and the unique needs of military families.

Base Commander Meetings

Since 1999, I have held semi-annual meetings with the base commanders of all Florida installations to discuss issues impacting their troops, installations, and communities. We have met nine times to date. The information provided by the commanders gives us insight into ways to ease the transition of military personnel and families into and out of our state and guides us toward solutions that improve the quality of life for military families while they're in our state. The commanders have raised several issues that have since been addressed by new state initiatives.

Agency Liaisons

At my direction, every state agency now has an internal military affairs liaison. In place since 1999, these representatives reach out to the military community to open communication and identify needs. Their purpose is to ensure our military community is well served and has access to all available state resources.

Florida Defense Alliance

We created the Florida Defense Alliance to help us better integrate the military into local

communities. Also formed in 1999, the Alliance is comprised of community, state, and military leaders. The group focuses on identifying and implementing community outreach activities to support the men and women of the armed forces in Florida. Within the Alliance are five working groups, targeting specific issues related to the military in Florida, and two of these groups focus on the wellbeing and needs of military families.

The first, the Military Family Working Group, examines issues that affect military families moving into our state, as well as their transition to civilian life. The challenges military children face as they transfer into Florida schools is an area of particular interest to this group. The group makes recommendations regarding legislation to ease the transition of military families in Florida.

The other family focused working group, the Military Spouse Career Opportunities Working Group, targets the unique needs of military spouses who transfer into Florida. This group addresses job search support, unemployment compensation, licensing requirements, and other issues important to spouses making a move to follow a service member.

These outreach efforts have provided a wealth of information and insight. As a result, Florida is working to make it easier for military men and women to serve from our state, and give them peace of mind that their families are supported by their community and state government.

Supportive Action

The State of Florida has used the insights gained from these outreach efforts to create initiatives and pass legislation to address the unique needs of military personnel and their families. Our state has emerged as a leader in this regard, and will we continue to push forward to create the most military friendly environment in the nation.

I would like to summarize the actions we've taken to support military families in Florida. This summary will underscore our commitment to service men and women, and hopefully serve as a model for other states.

Education

Education is a priority for Florida, and this is reflected in our support of military families. Children in military families may change schools as many as nine times before graduation. Florida has taken steps to ensure students transitioning into our system may do so with a minimum of disruption. We are also committed to providing opportunities for these students to pursue higher education in our state.

- Florida requires our state Department of Education to work with the military to identify and address the unique needs of military families.
- This year, I signed legislation to ensure children of military families in our state are given first preference in special academic programs like charter and magnet schools and Advance Placement courses. Many of these programs have arbitrary enrollment dates that put them out of reach for children transferring in mid-year. Children who transfer into a Florida public school because of military orders will now have access to all programs regardless of enrollment date.
- Florida has long been an advocate and proving ground for school choice, offering three voucher programs, including the McKay Scholarship program for children with special needs. Children of military families are now exempt from the one-year public school residency requirement for the McKay Scholarship, ensuring their parents can make the

right educational choice to meet their special needs.

- Military children who transfer into Florida's public school system as high school seniors may substitute a standardized assessment such as the ACT or SAT for Florida's exit exam requirement for graduation.
- Florida's Prepaid Scholarship program provides a four-year college scholarship to sons and daughters of Florida service men and women who have given their lives in the war on terror. These scholarships are honored at all Florida public universities and community colleges.
- A few years ago, we passed legislation allowing all active duty service members and their dependents stationed in Florida to receive in-state tuition at any of Florida's state universities and community colleges. In 2002, we expanded this benefit to include all National Guards stationed in our state. This year, we expanded this benefit to include children whose military families are stationed outside Florida, but within 50 miles of a Florida university or community college.

Spouses

We often speak of the sacrifice our service men and women make for this country. We must also consider the sacrifice made by their spouses. Working military husbands and wives change jobs with every transfer. Florida has developed several ways to support them through the transition.

- Two years ago, we launched a pilot program to make it easier for nurses to move to Florida. Under this pilot, Florida grants licensure by endorsement for nurses who are currently licensed in one of the 17 states participating in the "Nursing Licensure Compact." We've licensed approximately 2,000 nurses under the program to date. This year we made the program a permanent part of Florida statute, and added an additional benefit for military spouses. Nurses not part of this compact, who transfer to Florida with a military spouse, are now allowed to work as a nurse for 120 days while awaiting licensure, twice the period given to other nurses.
- Florida is one of the few states to offer unemployment benefits to military spouses who quit their jobs to keep their families together after deployment or transfer.
- This year, Florida also passed legislation to create an employment advocacy and assistance program for military spouses and dependents. The goal is to strengthen the link between military families and Florida's workforce and employment market. Military spouses have access to a variety of resources through "one stop career centers." The centers will help connect them to employers and set up interviews, provide job training, and provide counseling and online resources required to find the kind of work they want to do.

Finance

In addition to job and school changes, military families can be stressed by separation and cash flow issues related to transfers or deployment. Florida has taken several steps to ease this burden and protect service men and women from predatory practices that unfairly penalize them for service.

- Landlords in Florida are specifically prohibited from discriminating against any member of the United States Armed Services in offering a place to rent or through any item in the rental agreement.
- We have regulated activities of payday loan and check cashing businesses that traditionally target military personnel.

- We have capped the interest and fees that title loan companies can charge service men and women.
- We have passed legislation to close the gaps in the Federal Uniform Soldier Sailor Relief Act. The act was originally passed in 1940 to protect servicemen from penalties for breaking financial agreements when deployed. The federal law doesn't protect military personnel from penalties for early termination of auto leases, cell phone agreements and other items that are commonly leased or contracted. Florida's law does.
- Any state employee called to active duty as a reservist or National Guard receives 30 days of pay upon deployment. The state also continues to pay the difference between their military compensation and their state salary for the duration of their deployment. We have encouraged private employers to follow our lead, and many have joined us. We're exploring tax incentives that might inspire more to companies to participate.
- The state has extended health insurance coverage to state employees deployed as a reservist or Guard, and we offer Workman's Compensation coverage to members of the Florida National Guards called to active duty within the state.
- Five Florida counties now forgive property taxes for every month a service member is deployed away from home, and they offer a one-time grant of \$600 for renters who are deployed. We are encouraging more communities to join this initiative and are working to expand this benefit county-by-county.
- We have made it easier to recognize and provide benefits to wartime veterans by legally defining "wartime veteran" as anyone who served in a campaign or expedition for which a campaign badge was issued. Veterans who return from the war on terror and others who serve in conflicts around the world are now assured of receiving the benefits they're entitled to.
- We have also increased the homestead exemption for disabled veterans in Florida, from \$500 to \$5,000. This is in addition to the standard \$25,000 exemption.

Florida is a Model

The State of Florida recognizes the importance of maintaining a strong military, and the role states play in support of that objective. By taking steps I've outlined today to ease the stress of military life and mitigate its impact on military families, Florida is doing our part to ensure the men and women in our armed forces are able to serve to the best of their ability. I am proud of Florida's position on issues related to military support. Our experience reflects the active role state government can play in support of a national cause. Florida will continue to seek new ways to meet the emerging needs of military families.

There need not be a division between local communities and military installations.

Florida's active partnership with the military is a model for effective collaboration that reduces conflict and promotes a supportive environment for the men and women who serve this country.

Each state has its own dynamics that define how it can best support the military within its own borders. However, it is incumbent upon us all to leverage all resources to meet the unique needs of our men and women in uniform. Florida is eager to share our experience and best practices with other states, and to learn from them as well.

Together, we can ensure America's service men and women have the support they deserve, wherever they are based.

