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OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

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January 23, 2024

**Rhode Island General Assembly
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903**

Representative Samuel A. Azzinaro, Chair

**Remarks of
Melissa J. Willette
New England Region Liaison
United States Department of Defense-State Liaison Office**

Support: H.7184, An Act Relating To Military Affairs And Defense – Veterans' Affairs – Military Spouse Liaison

Mr. Chairman and honorable members of the committee, on behalf of the Department of Defense, I am writing to submit written testimony in support of the policies reflected in H.7184, for the purpose of establishing the position of Military Spouse Liaison in the Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services, to conduct outreach and advocacy on behalf of military spouses in Rhode Island. By including the military community's perspective in state planning, states help ensure that unique operational requirements and military family priorities are considered across pertinent policy areas.

My name is Melissa Willette. I am the New England Region Liaison for the United States Department of Defense-State Liaison Office, operating under the direction of Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. We represent the Department and establish relationships with state leaders across the country who are concerned for troops and their families' welfare by harmonizing state and federal law and regulation on policy problems of national significance. These are identified by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Military Departments, and the National Guard Bureau as areas where states can play a crucial role.

Across the nation, we have seen states recognize the value of having military voices at the table, including military families.¹ The policies in H.7184 take this vital step by establishing the position of Military Spouse Liaison, which will provide assistance for military spouses in Rhode Island regarding professional licensing and credentialing, child care assistance, enhanced coordination with family support services within the Rhode Island National Guard Family Assistance Center and the US Navy Local Fleet and Family Support Program, as well as coordination with the Rhode Island Department of Labor.

¹ <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/StatePolicy/pdfs/2024/bestpractices-militarycommunityrepresentationonstateboardsandcouncils.pdf>

When military families are supported in their communities through improved education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, it reduces stress and distractions for service members, allowing them to focus more effectively on their mission.² Livable communities with robust support systems for military families can be a key factor in the decision of service members to continue their military career.³ Additionally, such communities are attractive to potential recruits who consider the quality of life for their families when deciding to join the military.

In closing, let me say that we are grateful for the tremendous efforts Rhode Island has historically made to support our military members and their families. We appreciate the opportunity to support the policies reflected in H.7184, and especially thank Representatives Vella-Wilkinson, Batista, Hull, Kazarian, Azzinaro, Noret, Ackerman, Morales, and Shanley for bringing this important policy forward.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. I can be reached at melissa.j.willette3.civ@mail.mil or 703-623-2035.

Sincerely,

MELISSA WILLETTE
New England Region Liaison
(CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT)
Defense-State Liaison Office

² National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. "Strengthening the military family readiness system for a changing American society." (2019). <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/25380/chapter/4>

³ On July 20, 2023, Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks said "When we take care of our people—our service members and their families—they can focus on their mission to defend the nation. Taking care of our people's basic needs and improving the quality of life of our service members have a direct impact on military readiness."