

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC
20510

January 10, 2023

Honorable Ashish S. Vazirani
Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness
U.S. Department of Defense
4000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-4000

Dear Under Secretary Vazirani:

We write to you regarding the unique challenges faced by the Department's many civilian employees who are married to service members. As you know, military spouses bear the responsibilities and challenges associated with their spouse's service to the nation. Given the unique challenges that military spouses face, we urge the Department to create a standardized "leave without pay" (LWOP) policy in order to provide equitable and robust consideration for military families as they often manage frequent relocations to new regions.

As you know, service members are generally relocated to new duty assignments every two to three years, and these moves create challenges for working military spouses who are forced to seek new employment. Specifically, for federally employed military spouses, changes of assignment often result in a break in federal service. The negative effects of this break include fewer available jobs because some positions are only available to current federal employees, the loss of certain accrued leave, and potentially losing agency-matched contributions to Thrift Savings Plan accounts that have not yet vested.

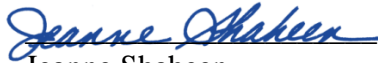
An effective solution for this problem is a Department-wide LWOP policy that allows employees to remain in the competitive service when their service member spouses change assignment. While some of the military departments and defense agencies have created their own policies for LWOP to address this matter, many have not, and there is significant variation in the policies. For example, the Air Force and the Army grant one year and 90 days of LWOP, respectively, though both can be extended up to two years, while the Navy does not have a specific LWOP policy for the spouses of service members who are reassigned. Additionally, the defense agencies may have their own separate policies, and as an example, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency potentially grants up to five years of LWOP. These various policies, and the fact that many employees are not afforded any such option creates a confusing and unfair system.

Therefore, we urge the Department to establish a standardized policy for the military departments and agencies directing a baseline amount of leave without pay for federal civilians when their service member spouses change duty locations. Spouses who are able to access an equitable, robust, and Department of Defense-standardized LWOP will be able to apply for more federal jobs that are only open to existing federal employees, can onboard to their new jobs faster, and avoid disruptions to vesting their Thrift Savings Plan investments. Additionally, the policy would avoid harm to the employer, who would not be obligated to pay salary to the employee during the leave period and would be allowed to hire a replacement for the vacating position. Finally, we will follow-up with you to schedule a briefing on the recommendations and

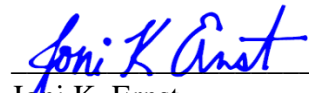
considerations of a standardized LWOP policy for military spouses when their service member spouse is re-assigned.

Thank you for your attention to this request and your continued service in support of the well-being of our service members and their families.

Sincerely,



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator