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Nonprofits Seeking Talent to Advance Your Missions - Consider Hiring Military Spouses

By: Allison Higgins and Tim Delaney

Here at the National Council of Nonprofits, we have a simple yet demanding operating mantra: “What’s the problem? What’re the solutions? Let’s get them done.”

We recently saw an overlapping set of problems: the low unemployment rate, which is making it difficult for many nonprofits to hire the talent they need, and the high unemployment rate among military spouses. We did so through our different lenses, as a nonprofit employee who is married to an officer in the United States Army and a nonprofit employer who tracks trends across the country, including workforce. This article illuminates the overlapping problems, identifies an overlapping solution, and shares our perspectives on action steps that nonprofits can take.

Overlapping Problems

At first blush, our nation’s low overall unemployment rate ([3.7 percent](#)) is good news. And it’s certainly better than the alternative of having a high rate.

But the low rate is creating new problems for employers – including nonprofits: “There aren’t enough workers available for jobs.” [In some parts of the U.S., ultra-low unemployment rate is a problem](#), CBS News (Nov. 11, 2019). Indeed, according to a [recent nationwide survey of small businesses](#), finding qualified workers is their top problem.

Now compare that problem with this one: in 2017, the unemployment rate for military spouses of active duty servicemembers was 24 percent – more than six times higher than the national rate, according to a [2017 Survey of Active Duty Spouses by the Department of Defense](#). What’s more staggering is 90 percent of military spouses are underemployed, meaning they can’t find a job that matches or makes full use of their skills or education.

Tim urges: Think about that for a moment. On Monday, our nation observed Veterans Day, a day set aside to honor all people who have served in the U.S. armed forces. But what about their spouses and families? These individuals sacrifice for their spouses and thereby our country during their servicemembers’ military careers, such as enduring multiple separations and deployments, frequent moves (on average every two to three years), and bleak opportunities for employment or career advancement. What do we do in return for them? We should not give them pity – but we should give them thanks and a fighting chance.

Overlapping Solutions

Allison observes: Military spouses are well-suited to work in the nonprofit sector because they bring to the table distinct competencies and experiences from living in diverse settings across the country and around the world. Military spouses can enhance and complement your nonprofit mission because they are:

- [Highly educated](#) – while about 30 percent of the U.S. working age population has a college degree, 40 percent of military spouses do.
- Leaders and teambuilders who understand the power of leveraging diverse talents of a team to build community and solve problems.
- Resilient and adaptable under pressure and during times of stress and change.
- Simply put, motivated to work.

Action Steps for Nonprofit Employers to Get It Done

From Tim's perspective as a nonprofit employer of a military spouse:

- Benefits to your nonprofit: Military spouses can bring many invisible yet extremely valuable skills beyond those listed on a job description, thanks to lessons learned through those roles. For example, military spouses endure a lot together, helping support each other when their spouses are deployed (and worse), which – from necessity of listening deeply to others and helping think through tough decisions – creates a special combination of empathy and practical problem-solving skills. The resulting “must do/will do” attitude and emotional toughness makes military spouses great teammates who pitch in to help others.
- Talent hidden in your own backyard: There are [more than 400 military installations in the U.S.](#), each with staff and, invariably, their spouses. Nonprofits looking to hire would be wise to reach out to military installations in your own backyard. Worried that because military spouses move frequently you might lose someone you trained and started to rely upon? Don't let that stop you from hiring a military spouse, because there's an easy solution ...
- Telecommuting/remote work: We've had as many as a third of our employees based from out of state – not because we designed it that way, but because we wanted the best talent. So, when Allison's husband was reassigned to West Point from the Pentagon more than a year ago, we already knew that in today's information/service economy and existing technology, remote work works. For more, see the resources in [Remote Workers and Telecommuting Practices for Nonprofits](#). Worried that someone will slouch and not work if they don't come into your office? Don't be. You will not find more reliable, trustworthy, and loyal employees than military spouses.
- Racial equity, diversity, and inclusion. Making extra efforts to consider hiring military spouses will not automatically dilute your commitments to promote racial equity, diversity, and inclusion. These priorities can overlap. Indeed, [almost half \(46.9 %\) of active duty military members are diverse in race/ethnicity](#), making it likely that a high percentage of military spouses are diverse.

From Allison's perspective as a military spouse:

- Avenues for nonprofit employers to reach military spouses: Here are a couple of resources to help you connect to the military spouse community. The [Military Spouse Employment Partnership](#) (MSEP) connects nonprofits (and for profits) with military spouses representing all military services and provides employers with recruitment solutions and strategies for reaching out to military spouses. Hiring Our Heroes ([HOH](#)) is a program of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation that connects veterans, transitioning servicemembers, and military spouses with meaningful employment opportunities. Learn more about [how to connect with military spouses](#) through HOH.
- What nonprofits can say in job postings to attract military spouses: Include key phrases in your job announcements, such as “work from home,” “remote work,” “portable,” and “military spouse-friendly employer.”
- Where nonprofits can post nonprofit jobs that can attract military spouses:
 - the job boards of their [state association of nonprofits](#)
 - the [nationwide Nonprofit Career Center](#)

Additional Resources

- [Association of the United States Army](#), see Military Spouse Career & Employment
- [Grow with Google](#), for veterans and military families
- [Hiring Our Heroes](#), a program of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation
- [Military Spouse Employment Partnership](#), a program of the Department of Defense
- [National Military Family Association](#)