

Battling 'PCS Penalty'



Colette Stein attended a DAV virtual career fair and landed a job as a multimedia journalist in North Carolina, where her husband is stationed.

Permanent changes of station make unemployment among military spouses too common

Today, more than 605,000 active-duty military spouses face unique challenges while trying to find and build their own careers. The frequency of military moves can create significant gaps in their resume, limit their professional networks and limit the geography of their job search.

A 2019 Defense Department study found that 22% of military spouses were unemployed. In contrast, this past March, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported an unemployment rate of 6% for all other Americans. This challenging professional

environment for military spouses requires flexible thinking and unique solutions.

“When someone on active duty is relocated to a new duty station, it is often for career advancement,” said National Employment Director Jeff Hall. “For their spouse, that means uprooting their career and possibly needing to go through a new state’s license or certification requirements. They need all the help they can get.”

Colette Stein, an active-duty spouse, knows all too well the impact a change in her husband’s career plan can ultimately have on her own. She met her husband while attending the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University, but before she could graduate, he joined the Army. He would soon be stationed across the country in North Carolina.

“We did the long distance thing for a while,” Stein said. “But when I graduated in 2018, I decided to make the move to North Carolina.”

While fending off her own feelings of frustration during her career search, Stein worked as a server for a period of time before doing some freelance work to keep her professional skills sharp. Then, she attended a virtual DAV career fair in November 2020.

“I saw an opportunity in Winston-Salem for a journalist and I went for it,” said Stein.

She was hired in February by NBC affiliate WXII Channel 12 as a multimedia journalist and hasn’t looked back.

“There are opportunities out there,” Stein said. “Don’t be afraid to attend these events. We should be aggressive and put ourselves out there. I was impressed that it was offering career jobs. We have to use all of the resources available to us, and these career fairs are one of them. It got me a job in

television.”

According to a 2017 report from Hiring Our Heroes, “Military Spouses in the Workplace,” nearly every military move forces an average of four to six months of unemployment for the spouse. Military spouses have started using the term “PCS penalty” to describe their lost wages. Taking just a month off work can result in the forfeiture of over four times the amount of lost salary, factoring in the value of employee benefits, savings or investments, and decreased future earning power.

“Like many American families, military families want or need two incomes,” said Hall. “It can impact the quality of life for children, complicate a service member’s transition out of the military, and can impact a spouse’s overall feelings of fulfillment and satisfaction with their personal ambitions and accomplishments.”

Abbey Ehn has been an active-duty military spouse for more than a decade. Eight moves in nine years resulted in the pursuit of five different career paths before she found her calling. She is a co-founder of MilSpo Academy, an eight-week program designed to train military spouses in recruiting, business development, digital marketing and customer success.

“Work needs to be portable,” Ehn said. “Spouses want flexible, remote positions. We need to make sure that our training gives them what they need to find an entry-level position where advancement is possible so they don’t have to keep finding new jobs every time they move. Just like anyone else, they want something they can maintain.”

Jen Pilcher, a military spouse, has a master’s degree in speech-language pathology. It’s one of many areas of expertise that require a state license in order to practice legally and earn a living.

“I moved three times in five years and needed a new license

each time,” said Pilcher. “It becomes expensive and time-consuming to pursue. It would take three to six months to even get the license to start looking for work. By the time I would get the state license, it was time to move again.”

Pilcher ultimately decided that entrepreneurship was her path forward. She is now the CEO of Patriot Boot Camp (PBC), whose mission is to amass an inclusive community that advances military members, veterans and military spouses toward becoming creators, innovators and entrepreneurs. DAV has partnered with PBC on events to support business owners.

“I think most military spouses get to the point that I call ‘the intersection,’” Pilcher said. “It’s when they realize many jobs just aren’t conducive to their lifestyle and they are staring down different roads while trying to decide their next move. I think this is when many decide to try something different.”

Pilcher and the military spouse community also see an opportunity where many businesses struggled to adapt over the last 18 months: working remotely.

“What we have seen at PBC is a lot of the spouses who had started their own business out of their home were the best prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic,” Pilcher said. “They were used to not being able to plan too far out, and most were already working in remote settings with remote employees.”

While the coronavirus may have inadvertently helped military spouses by forcing companies to think differently about how they staff their teams, one thing that remains true is the continued need to study, track and promote employment resources for the military spouse.

To learn more about the resources available through Patriot Boot Camp and MilSpo Academy, visit patriotbootcamp.org and careerdash.com/milspoacademy. A complete listing of DAV career fairs is available at jobs.dav.org.