Facing almost insurmountable circumstances, military spouse attorneys formed their own association, the Military Spouse JD Network (MSJDN). Together, thousands of attorneys are making a strong case for change in the legal profession and navigating the intricacies of legal licensing to help the families that serve the nation. MSJDN is also creating job opportunities for its members, encouraging both law firms and the Department of Defense to maintain the best and brightest.

Unlike other professionals, lawyers are required to become licensed or to waive in via a rule exception in each state where they practice. The rules governing bar admission, albeit created to protect the integrity of the profession, clients, and the rule of law, create high hurdles for military spouse attorneys. Due to frequent moves, military spouse attorneys often do not meet reciprocity requirements or the other conditions precedent to gain bar admission through an exception. Each state maintains different rules governing bar admission. Further complicating the matter, bar exams are only offered two times a year, which may or may not coincide with the relocation and can tack on months or possibly a year just to sit for the bar. The barriers to admission begin to snowball: thousands of dollars of bar preparation, a lengthy application, admission expenses, creatively explaining resume gaps, character and fitness examinations, days of testing, and months of waiting for bar results. Most attorneys tackle the bar admission process once, but military spouse attorneys face the grueling and expensive process every few years. These obstacles are daunting, complicated, and make it almost impossible for a military spouse attorney to maintain a legal career.

On average, military servicemembers receive orders to move, sometimes with little or no notice, every two to three years. Signing up to serve in the military curtails the right to decline a move; doing so can lead to federal prosecution. Military families understand all too well that frequent moves are non-negotiable. Civilian families have the luxury of contemplating the pros and cons of a relocation and making an informed, prudent decision. A military family’s only decision after receiving permanent change of station orders involves if they move together or live apart. While the Department of Defense cannot order the servicemember’s family to move, maintaining the immediate familial structure is important to morale and thus national security.

Military spouses are 10 times more likely to have moved over state lines in the past year than their civilian counterpart. For the military spouse attorney, frequent moves coupled with the barriers...
to bar admission equate to an indefinite tabling and, sometimes, the 
end of a legal career. Military spouses have a higher unemployment 
rate and make considerably less than their civilian counterparts. For 
military spouse attorneys this translates into an approximate loss of 
$33,745 in income per year. The loss of income is compounded by 
immense student loan debt. In a recent survey, 43 percent of military 
spouse attorneys reported student loan debt totaling $80,000 or 
more, on par with national law school debt statistics.

Ask almost any military spouse attorney and they will explain 
the toll on their career. Due to licensing barriers, Evelyn Guevara, a 
civilian Army contract and fiscal law attorney at Fort Carson, Colo., 
stopped practicing altogether for four years while her husband, 

Military families with an attorney spouse often begin to question 
the viability of both a legal career and a career in the armed 
forces. Successfully balancing the challenges of those career 
paths requires amazing sacrifices from the entire family.

Creating a Network for Change

Luckily, in the summer of 2011, two military spouses, Mary Reding 
and Hon. Erin Wirth, founded MSJDN. Reding left a prestigious legal 
career in California, lived overseas, and then moved to Ohio with 
her active-duty husband. Like thousands of other military spouse 
attorneys, Reding faced overwhelming obstacles in her effort to gain 
admission to practice in a new state. Wirth, an administrative law 
judge (ALJ) with the Federal Maritime Commission in Washington, 
D.C., has moved more than five times since graduating from law 
school in 1995, and, prior to becoming an ALJ, had never held the 
same job for more than three years. A Coast Guard wife, she passed 
three bar exams and was admitted on motion to work for legal aid in 
a fourth jurisdiction.

In 2009, Reding, with the support of the Ohio Women’s Bar 
Association, petitioned the Ohio Supreme Court to consider a rule 
accommodation for military spouse attorneys living in the state as a 
result of their active duty spouse’s orders. The Ohio Supreme Court 
tabled the rule, and shortly thereafter Reding’s husband received or 
ders that took them out of Ohio. But Reding continued with her push 
for licensing accommodations. MSJDN grew through the internet and 
social media. Little by little, spouses across the country connected 
and a network was formed. Idaho passed the first rule accommodation 
in 2011. Shortly thereafter, MSJDN established a model rule for 
military spouse bar admission. The model rule requests expedited 
bar admission and the reduction or elimination of licensing fees for 
military spouse attorneys seeking bar admission in a state due to the 
military orders of an active duty servicemember spouse. The rule 
is not a golden ticket to avoiding the bar examination. The military 
spouse attorney is required to have passed at least one bar exam, 
comply with all character and fitness requirements, and meet 
continuing legal education criteria.

On paper, the request appears simple; however, the implementa-
tion of a rule accommodation can be extremely complex. There 
are different sets of state regulations, governing bodies, and other 
state-specific intricacies impeding the passage of a rule accommo-
dation in each jurisdiction. Despite these complications, MSJDN has 

Richard, an Air Force JAG, was stationed in New Mexico and in 
Washington, D.C. Guevara graduated from Syracuse Law School in 
2006 where she met her future husband. After graduating, while 
Richard was stationed at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, 
Ariz., Guevara stayed in Manhattan, passed the New York bar, and 
started working at a firm. Within a year, Guevara moved to Arizona, 
married Richard, and passed yet another bar exam. Guevara clerked 
for U.S. Bankruptcy Court Judge Sarah Curley in Phoenix and was 
subsequently offered a job at a bankruptcy firm. Around the same 
time, her husband received orders to relocate to New Mexico. A third 
bar exam in as many years was too much. Guevara looked into pro 
bono work, but it, too, required a New Mexico license. She stayed 
active, took a paralegal job at a New Mexico legal aid firm and started 
a family. A few years later, Richard received a 10-month assignment 
in D.C. Due to the short duration of the assignment, Guevara stayed 
in New Mexico and continued working in the pro bono field. Gue-
vara’s story is replicated by thousands of educated, qualified military 
spouse attorneys across the country.

Military families with an attorney spouse often begin to question 
the viability of both a legal career and a career in the armed 
forces. Successfully balancing the challenges of those career 
paths requires amazing sacrifices from the entire family. Take the case of current 
MSJDN President and Catholic Law School Adjunct Professor Elean-
or Magers-Vuono. She attended Princeton undergrad on an Army 
ROTC scholarship and University of Virginia law school. Magers-
Vuono passed the Virginia bar and was able to waive into D.C. Upon 
graduation she clerked for a federal judge and then served as an ac-
tive duty Army lawyer. She met her husband, Col. Tim Vuono, in D.C. 
and, as she puts it, “became an Army wife.” Upon completing her mil-
itary service she moved to Fort Hood, Texas, to join her husband at 
his duty station. Upon moving to Texas she was barely able to waive 
in, having just completed five years of practice in Virginia. However, 
she was unable to avoid taking the Multi-State Ethics exam. As if 
that was not difficult enough, she had two small children, was serving 
as a battalion readiness commander, and her husband was getting 
ready to deploy. Magers-Vuono hit a career speed bump when her 

family moved to South Carolina in the summer of 2008. Her husband 
received orders too late for her to take the February bar exam, they 
moved during the July exam, and, in the end, she decided not to take 
the South Carolina bar exam because her family would be moving 
again in 16 short months. (At that time, South Carolina did not have 
a military spouse licensing accommodation.) Like many military 
spouse attorneys, Magers-Vuono continues to maintain multiple state 
licenses in the event that her family again relocates to one of the 
states where she maintains an active law license.

Guevara’s and Magers-Vuono’s stories, filled with frequent moves, 
multiple law licenses, and employment gaps, are the norm, not the 
exception in the military spouse attorney community.
 successfully implemented licensing accommodations in 19 jurisdictions throughout the country as of May 1, 2016. As of the same date, military spouse rule accommodations are pending in 14 other jurisdictions.

MSJDN's efforts have not gone unnoticed by the legal community. The Conference of Chief Justices, an organization composed of the highest judicial officers from each state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa, Guam, and the Virgin Islands, works to improve the administration of justice, procedure, court operations, and the judicial system as a whole. In July 2012, the Conference of Chief Justices took a public stance in support of MSJDN's efforts and passed a resolution supporting admission of military spouse attorneys without examination.4 In February 2012, the American Bar Association passed Resolution 108 urging states to “adopt rules, regulations, and procedures that accommodate the unique needs of military spouse attorneys who move frequently in support of the nation’s defense.”5 First Lady Michelle Obama, a successful attorney, and Dr. Jill Biden have specifically advocated for licensing accommodations for military spouse attorneys.6

The Ohio Women’s Bar Association, the Ohio Bar Association, and many local bar associations support MSJDN’s efforts to pass a military spouse rule accommodation. In May 2015, the Ohio Supreme Court’s Task Force on Access to Justice recommended that the Ohio Supreme Court consider adoption of the proposed MSJDN military spouse attorney licensing rule. However, the Ohio Supreme Court has yet to act upon the recommendation of its own task force and has not moved forward on implementing a military spouse licensing accommodation.

Not all jurisdictions have met MSJDN’s request with trepidation. Colorado adopted Rule 204.4 in 2014 and admitted two military spouse attorneys within less than 30 days of implementation. Guevara was one of the first two spouses admitted under the Colorado rule exception. “When I applied for the Military Spouse Certification (Rule 204.4) in the fall of 2014, the process overall was very simple. From the day I submitted my application to when I received my bar number in the mail, it took roughly two weeks,” Guevara recalled. “There is an application that has to be filled out and letters of good standing that have to be submitted from each jurisdiction you are barred in. The application itself is straightforward and not compli-
The beauty, and burden, of the process is the difference in each state's adaptation of MSJDN's model rule. In some states, such as Oklahoma and Illinois, the license is temporary and the military spouse is required to gain admission through another exception or take and pass the state bar exam if remaining in the state for reasons unrelated to military service. In other states, such as North Carolina, the license is permanent. Full-time practice of law for four out of the eight past years is a prerequisite to admission under the military spouse rule accommodation in North Carolina. New York took the unprecedented step of allowing military spouse attorneys to apply for admission on motion under Rule 520.14. Admission on motion in New York requires continuous practice for five of the last seven years, admission to practice in a reciprocal jurisdiction, and graduation from an ABA-accredited law school. The New York board of law examiners can waive the requirements under Rule 520.14 if those rules create an "undue hardship." The NY Board of Law Examiners encourage military spouse attorneys to apply for admission under Rule 520.14 and share their evidence of undue hardship, such as an explanation of frequent moves, number of previous bar exams, student loan debt, and license maintenance requirements in other jurisdictions.

**Career Assistance**

Easing barriers to bar admission is only one part of MSJDN’s quest to help its members; finding a job is the second. Frequent moves are almost suicidal to a successful legal career. Close to 80 percent of military families have moved across state lines or overseas in the past five years. To maintain a career, about half of MSJDN members report that they lived apart from their servicemember spouse. The legal job market continues to remain tight across the nation. Finding a well-paying, satisfying job in one’s area of legal expertise, in a state and town where one has no personal or professional connections, and while sporting a resume with numerous gaps in employment is nearly impossible. MSJDN members are all too well acquainted with these obstacles.

Recognizing the lack of employment opportunities for military spouse attorneys, MSJDN began offering programming designed to help its members overcome the hurdles involved in job-hunting and reentering the workforce. “Military spouse attorneys are dedicated servants, both to their country and in their communities,” Hanning-Smith said. “Moreover, military spouses often have perspectives, connections, and experiences unique to military service which make them special advocates within their communities.”

Annually, MSJDN presents a full-day professional development conference and networking event, called Making the Right Moves. According to Josie Beets, MSJDN president-elect and current state licensing coordinator, “The event covers topics specific to our very unique and mobile group of military spouse attorneys.”

Monthly professional webinars offer career advice specific to the needs of military spouses such as remote employment, pro bono opportunities, and resume tips. “MSJDN hosts a robust jobs board and hiring network,” according to Magers-Vuono. “We have created the only space of its kind for lawyers to share questions, ideas, opportunities, and friendship. Our website and private Facebook groups are

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Rule/Policy</th>
<th>Date Adopted</th>
<th>Application Fees</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Termination period</th>
<th>Number of Active Duty</th>
<th># admitted as of 11/2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>Rule 229</td>
<td>04/2012</td>
<td>$690</td>
<td>1 yr (renewable)</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>3,369</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>Rule 38(i)</td>
<td>12/2012</td>
<td>$300</td>
<td>1 yr (renewable)</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>19,792</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>Rule XLI</td>
<td>02/2013</td>
<td>$435</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>117,623</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>Rule .0503</td>
<td>03/2013</td>
<td>$1,500</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>100,867</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>Rule 719</td>
<td>07/2013</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>Conditional</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>19,797</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>Rule 16-16-12.3</td>
<td>09/2013</td>
<td>$450</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>3,233</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Rule 1A:8</td>
<td>05/2014</td>
<td>$400</td>
<td>1 yr (renewable)</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>122,884</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>No formal rule</td>
<td>03/2014</td>
<td>$1,015</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1,969</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>No formal rule</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>$400</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>22,263</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>Rule 1.27-4</td>
<td>07/2014</td>
<td>$575</td>
<td>2 yr (renewable)</td>
<td>Conditional</td>
<td>6,005</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>Rule 204.4</td>
<td>09/2014</td>
<td>$500</td>
<td>Conditional</td>
<td>28 days</td>
<td>37,731</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>Rule 2, § 7</td>
<td>01/2015</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>Conditional</td>
<td>Immediate</td>
<td>19,643</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virgin Islands</td>
<td>Rule 202.4</td>
<td>04/2015</td>
<td>$350</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Conditional</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>Rule 6, § 1.1</td>
<td>08/2015</td>
<td>Effective 01/2016</td>
<td>Conditional</td>
<td>Immediate</td>
<td>815</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>Rule 2.113</td>
<td>11/2015</td>
<td>Effective 01/2016</td>
<td>Conditional</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>35,901</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>Rule 7, § 10.06</td>
<td>12/2015</td>
<td>$375 ($100 to renew)</td>
<td>2 yr (renewable)</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>1,987</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Footnotes**

1. MSJDN number. Texas does not track applications
2. Information has not been provided at this time.
3. General fee for admission on motion (not specific to only military spouse applicants)
4. 31,940 when you include Fort Campbell
supportive and informative places to learn about new duty stations and employers, connect with local lawyers, compare advice on interviews and resumes, and discuss professional goals."

In addition, MSJDN started the Justice for Military Families (JMF) program in collaboration with the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), an organization serving families grieving the loss of a service member. MSJDN members are uniquely situated to provide legal assistance in such difficult circumstances because they too are part of a military family and can provide sensitivity and empathy on a different level than other attorneys. Additionally, TAPS requests for legal assistance are jurisdictionally varied and often complicated due to issues in multiple jurisdictions. MSJDN's network of spouses with varied legal skills across the nation make an amazing partner. According to Gabriela Nostro, MSJDN's JMF coordinator and pro bono committee chair, "Our volunteers' unique skills and qualifications contribute to the program's success. We are part of the same community helping military families during a difficult time and, in the same breath, assisting a military spouse attorney remain active in the practicing world."

Most requests for legal assistance involve probate, family law, or military benefit issues. To date, 55 families have received assistance.

Many of the JMF assistance requests involve grandparents seeking visitation rights with grandchildren after the death of a service member, divorce, or other extenuating circumstances. In 2015, MSJDN members, in conjunction with Squire Patton Boggs, published a visitation guide for Gold Star grandparents that provides state-by-state guidance regarding establishing visitation rights. This year, MSJDN members are building on the success of the grandparent's visitation guide by creating a compilation of legal informational sheets organized by subject matter and jurisdiction. The goal is to create a layperson's legal guide specifically designed to answer the questions posed by Gold Star families. Many times families facing such unexpected tragedies are unsure of where to start when faced with a legal issue. In the future, MSJDN hopes to expand the JMF program and establish an online legal clinic where Gold Star military families can seek legal assistance from military spouse attorneys in a virtual setting.

**Bright Future**

In five short years, MSJDN has accomplished some amazing feats. Rightfully so, there are many organizations that specifically assist military servicemembers; however, few exist to assist their spouses. "I am incredibly proud of what MSJDN members—working alongside our amazing ‘civilian’ supporters—have achieved in five years," boasts Magers-Vuono. "As military spouses, we are proud to serve alongside our servicemember, and we want to contribute our talents as legal professionals in our communities, too."

---

**Endnotes**


---

*Bridget Findley is an assistant city attorney for the City of Dayton, Ohio, and a military spouse attorney who has lived in three states over the past five years. She is an active member of the Military Spouse JD Network, helping to pass the North Carolina military spouse licensing accommodation, and the current co-chair of the Ohio state licensing effort. She is a board member of the Dayton Ohio Chapter of the Federal Bar Association.*