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

Representative Samuel Azzinaro, Chair

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

Support of: HB 5278 – An Act Relating To Military Affairs and Defense – Military Child Act

Representative Azzinaro and honorable committee members of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee; the Department of Defense is grateful for the opportunity to provide comment on the policies reflected in HB 5278, which aims to increase access to flexible enrollment options for military families with school-age children.

My name is Melissa Willette. I am the New England Region Liaison at 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 and local leaders on issues currently impacting our service members and their families.

Approximately 185,000 U.S. military children move between schools annually. Military service members are routinely reassigned to new duty stations in the summer, due to mission and training requirements. As a result of these summer moves, they may potentially miss their child's school registration and other important application dates that occur in the spring. Long-term negative impacts include having to shift their planned courses of study, which may require them to take courses in summer school, or even force them to graduate later than their peers.

Similarly, many of these families experience subsequent relocations from temporary to permanent housing due to limited availability of military or community housing at the time of their arrival, which forces the military-connected child to change school districts mid-year.

Allowing military families to enroll their children, including children eligible to receive special education services, register for classes, and apply for specialized programs at the same time as their peers, prior to physically arriving to their location, and in the school district they know they'll permanently reside in, will help to facilitate their uninterrupted educational progress and smooth integration into their new communities, and relieve unneeded stress during their transition between locations.

With 1900 active-duty military children in this state, Rhode Island is in a unique position to have a positive effect on the educational experiences of military children and families. While Guard and Reserve service members do not typically move as often, this policy will also positively impact these families when they do. The intent of this policy is not to offer an advantage or priority over other students, but simply to provide military families access to educational programs and courses at the same time as their in-state peers.

Important and related to this policy, studies have shown that military families and schools alike regularly do not assume that advance enrollment includes those with special education needs. A Partners in Promise study found that only 16% of respondents with special education needs have ever been able to advance enroll their student, despite their state having advance enrollment policies. Of those who have never used advance enrollment, 78% were told because it was “not an option”. As such we would like to suggest an amendment to the current bill, which will not change the policy, but clarify that students with special education needs are included. In fact, if a school is able to get a student’s special education plan prior to arrival then they will be better situated to provide immediate comparable services.

Proposed Amendment:

Such advance enrollment policies related to a child of a military family member shall also apply if the enrolling student is transferring with a Section 504 plan, an individualized family service plan, or an individualized education plan. When applicable, the school district shall take the necessary steps to ensure that comparable services are in place when the child arrives in the state.

In closing, 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 HB 5278, and thank Chairman Azzinaro for his sponsorship. Thank you for taking the time to consider this issue. At this time, I stand ready to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully Submitted,

Melissa J. Willette
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(CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT)
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