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Statement of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

ON: "Veteran and Military Spouse Employment: A National Security Conversation"

**TO: U.S. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity**

**BY: Elizabeth O'Brien, Hiring Our Heroes, U.S. Chamber of
Commerce Foundation**

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The Foundation's mission is to strengthen America's long-term competitiveness by addressing developments that affect our nation, our economy, and the global business environment. USCCF presents a broad range of programs that promote a greater understanding of economic and public affairs issues.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation (USCCF) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce dedicated to strengthening America's long-term competitiveness by addressing developments that affect our nation, our economy, and the global business environment. USCCF presents a broad range of programs that promote a greater understanding of economic and public affairs issues.

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**BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS OF THE U.S.
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

“Veteran and Military Spouse Employment: A National Security Conversation”

**Testimony of Elizabeth O'Brien
Senior Director of Military Spouse Programs, Hiring Our Heroes,
U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation**

Good afternoon, Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. My name is Elizabeth O'Brien and I am the senior director of military spouse programs for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes.

Founded in 2011, Hiring Our Heroes is a nationwide initiative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, which assists military veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses in finding meaningful employment opportunities in a 21st century workforce. The program accomplishes this goal in myriad ways, including hiring fairs, on-installation transition summits, career development and networking events, focused research, best practice development and communication, campaigns in partnership with sponsor companies and nonprofit groups, and a robust suite of online digital resources.

Since 2011, there has been an incredible transformation in the military hiring community as private sector companies have admirably stepped up their hiring efforts for veterans and military spouses. When Hiring Our Heroes first launched, the employment outlook for veterans and military families was bleak. In many ways, the nation was in a crisis situation with regards to the employment struggles faced by so many individuals who had sacrificed so much for our country. However, with the business community meeting the challenge of finding career opportunities for this population, the unemployment rate for veterans has continued to drop precipitously.

In fact, the overall veteran unemployment rate continued its downward trend in 2017, decreasing to just 3.7 percent.¹ However, while the overall veteran employment news is good, we also know there are segments of the military community that continue to struggle. In 2017, for example, post-9/11 veterans under the age of 25 faced an unemployment rate of 7.9 percent. And our most recent

¹ "Employment Situation of Veterans Summary." *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 22 Mar. 2018, www.bls.gov/news.release/vet.nr0.htm.

veteran employment study, *Veterans in the Workplace*, showed a significant gender disparity in employment outcomes for veterans as well: female veterans were less likely to find their first post-military job within three months of leaving service and were more likely than male veterans to report being financially worse off after leaving military service.

The employment landscape for military and veteran spouses is another important piece of the economic puzzle for our veteran families. Our 2017 study, *Military Spouses in the Workplace*, revealed a 16 percent unemployment rate for military spouses. Among employed military spouses, underemployment is widespread, with roughly 70 percent reporting that their education and experience is underutilized in their current position. And although military spouses are more highly educated than most working Americans, military spouses with degrees face the greatest challenges in nearly every measurable military spouse employment category, including the highest rates of unemployment and the most difficulty finding meaningful work.

In the 21st century economy, dual income households have become the norm - and in many cases, a necessity -- for American families, with 60 percent of married civilian couples with children now bringing home two incomes.² Military and veteran families are no exception, so as we consider economic opportunity and long-term success for our veteran families, it is imperative that we address the parallel importance of veteran and military spouse employment. A dual income family structure provides financial stability for our military families during their service and through their transition to veteran status and beyond.

We know that hiring veterans and military spouses is not just the right thing to do for the country; it also makes good business sense. Veterans bring incredible value in both tangible and intangible skills to companies who hire them, from extensive training backgrounds in their military occupational specialties to the less concrete characteristics such as loyalty, discipline, and a work ethic that is unrivaled elsewhere in the economy – all skills crucial to a productive work environment. Similarly, military spouses bring to their career a diverse body of educational, professional, and volunteer experience as well as traits honed through their military community experience, such as resilience, perseverance, and grit.

We also recognize that these employment challenges for veterans and military spouses are not solely an economic issue for our country, but a national security concern. The success of our present-day veterans serves as a beacon for young

² Kent, Lauren. "The Rise in Dual Income Households." *Pew Research Center*, 18 June 2015, www.pewresearch.org/ft_dual-income-households-1960-2012-2/.

Americans, enabling the recruitment of high-quality candidates into the next generation of the all-volunteer force. In the same way, the availability of meaningful career paths for military spouses impacts the stability and well-being of military families and thus also impacts the military's ability to both recruit and retain top military talent.

Background on Hiring Our Heroes

When Hiring Our Heroes was first created, we had a very simple mission – to carry out traditional hiring events and connect with state and local chambers to find opportunities for military job seekers across the country.

As the employment landscape for veterans and military spouses has changed, we have evolved our operations to maintain our relevance and effectiveness in what we do. Through our experience and ongoing research, we have become more strategic in our approach and programs, and more focused on not only connecting the military community with job opportunities, but ensuring that they are finding the right jobs.

In 2014, Hiring Our Heroes pioneered a series of hiring events aimed particularly at connecting veteran, Guard, and Reserve candidates with employment opportunities in major metropolitan areas. Hosted at professional sports venues, these hiring expos have been conducted in dozens of cities around the country in conjunction with Major League baseball, NBA basketball, NFL football, and NHL hockey teams. The high-profile nature of these events has attracted a particularly high volume of veteran job seekers and veteran-seeking employers while simultaneously providing an opportunity for communities to come together and show their support and appreciation for the veterans in their hometown. Community demand for these events is strong, and in 2018 we anticipate holding around 20 of these hiring expos and expanding into new cities and additional sports.

In recognition of the role that early preparation plays in post-military career success, beginning in 2014 Hiring Our Heroes also worked with our public, private, and nonprofit partners to launch a series of on-installation transition summits aimed at reaching and empowering service members long before their last day on active duty. Created as a complement to existing transition education provided by the Department of Defense, these summits provide an intensive opportunity for service members and their spouses to learn what economic opportunity looks like for them in today's workforce through industry-specific workshops presented by leading employers, interactive panel discussions with employment and human resources experts, breakout workshops, networking opportunities, and finally, a large-scale hiring fair featuring both regional and national employers.

In the seven years since our program's launch, we have held more than 1,100 hiring events in the United States and on U.S. military installations around the world, and from those hiring events alone we have confirmed more than 31,000 veteran and military spouse hires into the civilian workforce. Beyond those hires, our program has facilitated thousands of additional meaningful connections between job seekers and employers through our networking opportunities, workshops, and training programs.

Beyond hiring events, we have introduced a number of initiatives aimed at improving employment opportunities for veterans. In early 2015, we launched the inaugural cohort of the Hiring Our Heroes Corporate Fellowship Program at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, outside of Tacoma. The program, which aims to connect experienced leaders from the military with management-level corporate positions, was developed under the guidelines of the Department of Defense's SkillBridge job training initiative to provide civilian management training in a classroom setting followed by hands-on experience in the civilian workforce. The program's goal: easing the transition to civilian employment for service members who had both the technical and interpersonal skills employers seek but whose past job titles did not explicitly correlate with their civilian equivalent while simultaneously providing a high-quality talent pipeline for employers seeking experienced management candidates.

Hiring Our Heroes also developed and continues to improve our robust array of digital tools and online resources for both job seekers and employers. With support from our generous sponsors, including Toyota and USAA, we provide tools such as the Resume Engine for veterans and Career Spark for military spouses, VET Roadmap, the Employer Roadmap, Fast Track, and others, free of charge for all users, whether job seekers or employers. These online tools are designed to ensure that our target audiences are equipped with best-in-class tools and resources and best practices as they enter into this unique and often challenging environment.

Moving “Left of Transition”

One of the key lessons we have learned over the last seven years is that many of the challenges that military veterans face when transitioning off active duty are tied to a lack of preparation. Far too many service members have traditionally viewed transition not as a continuing process but as a single point in time when they simply pick up their DD-214 papers and leave the military. Unsurprisingly, this has left too many veterans without a clear pathway to economic success.

Our 2016 *Veterans in the Workplace* study showed that 44 percent of veterans left their first post-military job within the first year. The reasons for departure varied, but the most common reason cited was that those veterans accepted that first job in order

to make ends meet following their transition from the military and not because it was their career path of choice.

In response, we have renewed our focus on transition education for service members, introducing a modified, scalable transition summit model to provide right-sized, targeted transition education opportunities on installations of all sizes and with a wide range of transitioning populations. As a result, we have doubled the number of transition summits we will host this year over the previous two years, and have expanded summit programming to more than a dozen new installations, including hosting our first transition summits on Coast Guard bases. We have continued to hone our educational and career development offerings, providing in-depth workshops on concrete, in-demand transition topics, such as professional networking in the civilian business world and evaluating civilian pay, benefits, and total compensation.

Since the highly successful launch of the Corporate Fellowship Program in 2015, the program has grown exponentially. Service members report that they value the introduction to the corporate world, hands-on civilian work experience, and networking opportunities the program has provided. Employers benefit from this access to a larger, highly skilled veteran talent pool and appreciate the unique perspective and insight that the fellows brought to their companies, whether they are a small business who hosts a single fellow or an multinational corporation like Amazon, who has hosted more than 145 fellows via the program. Today, the program operates in 15 locations around the country. More than 1,000 fellows have graduated from the program, with an 80 percent job offer rate for graduating fellows. Nationwide, more than 150 companies have hosted fellows.

The resounding success of the Corporate Fellowship Program for transitioning service members has also led to the development of a similarly-structured pilot program for veterans and military spouses. In partnership with Military Corps Career Connect and with the support of a national Dislocated Worker Grant from the Department of Labor, the pilot program offers 6-week paid fellowships with businesses of all sizes, from a host of industries, to recently separated, honorably discharged veterans as well as current active duty military spouses.

Military Spouse Employment: A Unique Landscape

Early on, we realized that while the military spouse population faces its own unique set of challenges when searching for employment, these challenges have an important impact on both the long-term economic stability of our veteran and military families and on our military's recruitment and retention efforts. While a service member will typically only transition off of active duty once in his or her

career, military spouses make multiple transitions while serving alongside their service member, making it all the more challenging to maintain meaningful employment.

Our Military Spouse Program, which has been in place since 2012, provides programming for active duty, veteran, Guard, Reserve, and Gold Star spouses and has long been a bastion of impact in the military spouse employment space through spouse-specific hiring fairs, networking receptions, roundtable discussions, and professional development opportunities. We convene regularly with employers from around the country to collaborate on and highlight best practices for military spouse recruitment and retention, leading to innovative strategies for hiring military spouses and veterans, such as Comcast NBCUniversal's installation-specific virtual employee training.

Over the past two years, our military spouse program has launched a fresh wave of grassroots programming and initiatives. In 2016, we acquired an established military-spouse focused, chapter-based professional development and networking nonprofit with a standing footprint in more than two dozen military communities around the world -- a footprint that, with the support of military spouse-friendly employers like Prudential Financial, has more than doubled in size to 50 locations and which now provides programming in twenty states as well as eleven overseas installations in nine countries. Later that year, we joined the Military Officers Association of America to bring a new series of employment symposiums to installations around the country, providing a forum for spouses to engage with local and national career resources. Additionally, multi-day, personalized career development programming for military spouses was added to the Hiring Our Heroes lineup in 2017 with the introduction of AMPLIFY career intensives.

As we have worked to further build our robust array of programming for military spouses, we recognize that to permanently move the needle on military spouse employment and underemployment, a collaborative effort is an imperative. To that end, we have simultaneously endeavored to elevate the national conversation around what it means to be a dual-income military family in the 21st century. Last June, we hosted the inaugural Military Spouse Employment Summit to engage the public, private, and nonprofit communities on the topic, identifying best practices in talent management for recruiting and retaining military spouses, highlighting standout military spouse professionals and entrepreneurs, and promoting avenues to remove barriers to military spouse employment. Later this week, we will once again host the 2018 Military Spouse Employment, where we will focus on empowering change through innovation in the military spouse employment space.

Key Partnerships: Working with the Public, Private, and Nonprofit Sectors

A central tenet of our strategic approach to veteran and military spouse employment centers on private sector engagement. From our inception, we have been committed to providing the highest quality events, tools, and resources to employers seeking to hire veterans and military spouses -- all at no cost to the employer or job seeker. Through our hiring events, digital tools such as the Employer Roadmap, the Corporate Fellowship Program, and more, Hiring Our Heroes has continued to provide touchpoints and opportunities to engage with military community job seekers for businesses of all sizes.

In February, we launched the first Military Spouse Economic Empowerment Zone (MSEEZ), a grassroots effort to combat the economic impact that military spouse unemployment and underemployment have on the 21st century military family. These MSEEZ will bring a localized focus to building connections and collaboration between regional and national employers, educational institutions, and community resources, resulting in a robust employment network for military spouses across the United States. Steered locally by a working group of employers from a diverse cross section of locally significant industries (such as the defense industry's Booz Allen Hamilton) as well as a wide swath of community resource groups (like the USO Pathfinder), MSEEZ are designed to be responsive to the locality's unique employment outlook.

These localized efforts are balanced by large-scale national campaigns. In 2012, together with Capital One, we launched the *Hiring 500,000 Heroes* campaign to secure half a million commitments by various employers to hire veterans and military spouses. Once businesses who joined this program committed, we worked with them to translate those commitments into hires. And in June of 2015, we surpassed the 500,000-hire mark for veterans and military spouses who were hired as a result of this initiative.

Building on that highly successful model, on Thursday, Hiring Our Heroes, in collaboration with a coalition of private sector partners led by Starbucks, will announce the launch of a similar campaign to serve as a national call to action for companies of all sizes to make a collective commitment to hire military spouses. For businesses, the campaign will present scalable, actionable pathways for connecting with military spouse talent; at the same time, the campaign will provide real solutions for military spouses seeking meaningful 21st century career opportunities.

In addition to working closely with American employers of all sizes, cultivating strategic partnerships with organizations in the public and nonprofit sectors has been crucial to our success. As an initiative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, Hiring Our Heroes is in a unique position to leverage influential connections to thousands of state and local chambers, providing us with tremendously effective

grassroots teams across the country poised to engage with military job seekers in their communities. The enormous impact that we have seen at every level has been extremely beneficial to our mission.

Our program has also been able to develop key partnerships with the Department of Defense and its many services, the Department of Labor, and the Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as the Small Business Administration. Working with these federal agencies, we have leveraged our events and programs to raise awareness of their employment and transition resources for the military community and foster collaboration between the public and private sectors.

The relationships that we maintain with other nonprofit organizations within the military hiring community have been integral to our success as well. Our work with groups such as the USO, Paralyzed Veterans of America, the George W. Bush Institute's Military Service Initiative, and many others have furthered our reach and strengthened our ability to provide networking and training opportunities for job seekers, and make valuable connections for them with employers who are hiring.

Our combined effort to focus on developing resources to educate job seekers and employers will continue as our program evolves in the months and years ahead.

Conclusion

Over the last seven years, Hiring Our Heroes has been proud to serve our veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses in local communities throughout the United States and to do so with a wide array of private and public sector partners. And with more than 200,000 service members making the transition off of active duty annually, there is always more work that needs to be done.

Hiring Our Heroes remains wholly committed to the mission of connecting veterans and military spouses with meaningful career opportunities, and is honored to serve on the front line of this movement. We will continue to unite our partners in our common mission as we work together to continue to achieve fundamental change in the veteran and military spouse employment landscape.

Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke, and members of the Subcommittee, I thank you again for the opportunity to testify and look forward to answering your questions.