

# Network Strives to Help Military Spouse Lawyers Pursue Legal Careers

By Lt. Cmdr. Heather Henderson, Region Legal Service Office Southwest

Obtaining a license to practice law is challenging and often stressful. The process typically involves lengthy applications and intensive studying, culminating in a demanding examination and an anxious wait for results. The process takes almost a year and costs thousands of dollars. Military spouses who practice law must endure this evolution each time they move to a new jurisdiction. After licensure, military spouses have the additional task of finding a new employer to hire them.

Silvia Schaffer, an attorney and spouse of a Navy JAG Corps officer, knew that by marrying a military service member she would face challenges in advancing her legal career. Describing the licensing process as “daunting, time consuming, difficult, and expensive,” Schaffer acknowledged that it would be a “much appreciated break and assist in career support” if jurisdictions moved to modify licensing requirements to accommodate military spouse attorneys.

Licensing requirements and geographic instability lead many military spouses to give up on their pursuit of a legal profession to support their service member spouse. The Military Spouse JD Network (MSJDN), founded in June 2011, is striving to change this paradigm. The MSJDN was founded by two military spouse attorneys, Mary Reding, Esq., and the Hon. Erin Masson Wirth, who were inspired to make a change in their profession to improve the lives of military families. MSJDN is an international network of legal professionals who support military spouses by advocating for reforms including licensure without additional state-by-state

bar examination. The Network also works to educate state bar associations and employers on the challenges faced by military families and to encourage the hiring of military spouses. Additionally, they provide military spouses with a professional and personal network of practitioners in similar circumstances who can offer advice, job postings, and mentoring.

Since its founding less than two years ago, the MSJDN has garnered attention and support from the American Bar Association (ABA), the National Conference of Women’s Bar Associations, the National Conference of Chief Justices, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Military Family Association, and the Military Officers Association of America. MSJDN has also been recognized by “Joining Forces,” the program First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden started to support military families.

The successes of MSJDN are noteworthy. In February 2012, the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession passed a resolution urging bar admission authorities 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.” In June 2012, the State of Idaho adopted specific admission rules for qualified military spouse attorneys, and in December 2012, the State of Arizona followed suit. Rule changes in additional states are expected to follow. In 2013, the MSJDN plans to host a career summit and luncheon in Washington D.C. in partnership with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Women’s Bar Association of the District of Columbia.

More information about ongoing initiatives and membership can be found at [www.msjdn.org](http://www.msjdn.org).

