

Tyndall AFB Preventive Law Program Series

Legal Assistance Series

DIVISION OF MILITARY RETIRED PAY

This handout contains basic information. If you have specific questions, come in to see a Judge Advocate for legal assistance.



**OFFICE OF
THE STAFF JUDGE ADVOCATE 325 FW/JA
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DIVISION OF MILITARY RETIRED PAY AFTER DIVORCE

The Uniformed Services Former Spouses Protection Act (USFSPA) gives state courts the option to treat disposable military retired pay payable after June 25, 1981 as the member's separate property, or to treat it as marital property subject to equitable distribution or community property distribution (this depends on which type of property division is used in your state), in proceedings for divorce, dissolution of marriage, annulment, or legal separation. Most states, including Florida, have either statutorily or through precedent authorized the division of military retired pay as a type of marital property. The USFSPA also allows military retirement pay to be divided to satisfy a court order for child support or alimony.

Florida divides property through a system of equitable distribution, which means that it will divide property equally unless the totality of the circumstances indicate that a greater award to one spouse is warranted. Florida statute § 61.076 states that "all vested and nonvested benefits, rights, and funds accrued during the marriage in retirement, pension, profit-sharing, annuity, and insurance plans and programs are marital assets subject to equitable distribution." This includes military retirement pay, to the extent authorized by law.

A court can only order the division of retirement pay if it has the authority to do so, which means it must have jurisdiction over both the subject matter of the case and over the parties. A court has subject matter jurisdiction over a case if it has the constitutional or legislative authority to grant the relief that a party is seeking. Subject matter jurisdiction may never be waived, and a court's lack of subject matter jurisdiction may be raised by either party at any time, including on appeal. An order issued by a court without subject matter jurisdiction is not a valid order. (Note that subject matter jurisdiction should not be confused with venue, which is a jurisdiction's method of deciding which of many courts with subject matter jurisdiction should hear a particular case. Objections to improper venue are waived if not timely raised at trial.) A court has personal jurisdiction if it has jurisdiction over the parties to a specific case. Constitutionally, a court may only exercise personal jurisdiction over people who have at least some type of minimum contacts with the forum state. Traditionally, a court has proper jurisdiction over a party if they are availing themselves of the court system in the forum by bringing the proposed action, if the party is personally served within the forum state, if the party is a legal resident of the forum state, or if the party either expressly or impliedly consents to jurisdiction. However, these are not the only methods to obtain personal jurisdiction over parties to a case. For instance, most states employ a matrimonial long arm statute to obtain jurisdiction over nonresident defendants in divorce cases whenever possible. Additionally, personal jurisdiction may be waived. Jurisdiction and venue are complicated issues, so if you have a question about whether a court had appropriate jurisdiction in a matter then you should make an appointment to speak to a judge advocate.

The USFSPA limits the methods of obtaining jurisdiction to divide the military member's retirement pay to those based upon the member's legal residence in the state, his or her actual residence in the state for a reason other than military service, or his consent to the jurisdiction of the court. Therefore, if the court bases its jurisdiction over the defendant on some other method, such as personal service within the state, it will **NOT** have the power to divide military retired pay, even though it may have the authority to divide other assets between the spouses.

When a court does have proper jurisdiction under the laws of the forum state and under the USFSPA, it may order the division only of *disposable* retired pay, not all retired pay. Disposable retired pay is all the monthly retired pay that the military member, or former member, is entitled to, including retainer pay, less the following deductions:

(1) Amounts owed by the member to the government for previous overpayments of retired pay and for recouplements required by law resulting from entitlement to retired pay;

(2) Amounts deducted from retirement pay due to forfeitures ordered by a court-martial or as a result of a waiver of retired pay required by law to receive certain types of other compensation (authorized by title 5 or title 38 of the U.S. Code). Note that a member may not voluntarily waive retirement pay for other reasons in order to avoid paying a percentage to the former spouse;

(3) Amounts that are identified as compensation for a service-related disability; or

(4) Amounts which are deducted because of an election to provide an annuity to a spouse or former spouse to whom payment of some portion of the member's retired pay is being made under this law.

The total amount awarded to a former spouse cannot exceed 50% of the member's disposable retired pay. Additionally, if the member has more than one former spouse with claims upon his retirement, the total amounts deducted from his retired pay each month because of equitable property distribution decrees may not exceed 50%. If multiple court orders would result in a deduction of over 50% if followed, they are satisfied in a first-come, first-served manner, and the more recent decrees may not be fully satisfied. If several former spouses have claims upon the member's retirement because of child support or alimony orders, the total amount deducted to satisfy these orders cannot exceed 65% of the member's retired pay, even if this causes more recent decrees to go unsatisfied. (However, if the alimony or child support payments are based on total income and the retired member has other sources of income, he or she may be required to use those sources to satisfy the support orders).

Although the manner in which retired pay is divided is up to the discretion of the court, most courts employ a standard formula to determine what percentage of the military member's retired pay it will award to the former spouse. That formula states:

Overlap of the number of years couple was married, and not separated, while military member in service (expressed in months) divided by number of years the military member was in service (also expressed in months) The resulting fraction is multiplied by 1/2 to give the percentage of military retired pay to which the former, non-military spouse is entitled as a division of marital property.

Or:
$$\frac{\text{Years Married and Not Separated While Member Was in Service (in months)}}{\text{Total Years Member Was in the Service (in months)}} \times \frac{1}{2}$$

An example illustrates how this works in practice: Let's assume that MSgt John Doe has served in the Air Force for 20 years. He has been married to Jane Doe for 10 of those years. Aside from TDYs and unaccompanied overseas tours, which do not count as being separated, they have lived together for the entire 10 years. If they divorce, then pursuant to the above formula, Mrs. Doe may receive 25% of her husband's disposable military retired pay. She would not get this share if MSgt Doe leaves the military before retirement. $120(10 \text{ years} \times 12 \text{ months})$ divided by $240(20 \text{ years} \times 12 \text{ months})$ equals $\frac{1}{2}$, or .50, which when multiplied by .50 equals .250, or 25%.

Note that the formula includes only the years that the couple was married *and not separated* while the military member was in service. Times that the couple was separated do not include separations due to TDY or remote assignments.

Again, note that the above formula is only a guideline, so it is not binding on the court.

A court **CAN** order the division of future retired pay, even if the right to receive that pay has not yet vested. That means that the spouse will receive the specified percentage or specified dollar amount awarded to him or her by the court *when and if* the member becomes eligible for, and starts to collect, retired pay. The court **CANNOT** order a military member to retire. Nor can a court order a military member to stay in the military long enough to become retirement eligible. If the member leaves military service before becoming retirement eligible, the provision of the court order awarding part of his or her retirement awarded to the former spouse will be ineffective, since there is no retired pay to divide.

The share of the member's retired pay that is awarded to the former spouse is personal to the spouse, and may not be sold, transferred, or otherwise assigned. Likewise, the member's right to receive retired pay is also personal, and cannot be sold, transferred, or assigned to defeat the claims of the former spouse or for any other reason.

As part of a divorce decree or court order directing the division of military retired pay, a court may order the military member to maintain, and to designate the former spouse as beneficiary, of the military Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP). The SBP is essentially a government-subsidized annuity that provides continued financial security for eligible dependents after payments of military retired pay cease because of the death of the retired member. This will ensure that the former spouse will continue to receive payments after the retired member dies, though the amount of those payments will not necessarily be the same. More detailed information on the SBP may be obtained from the base Military Personnel Flight.

However, if the former spouse knowingly and voluntarily waives his or her right to claim a portion of the retirement pay in either a prenuptial or antenuptial agreement recognized by the court to be valid, or in the divorce decree itself, he or she may not later seek a division of the military retired pay in any form.

In some cases, the former spouse may receive payment of the share of the member's retirement pay that he or she was awarded directly from the Finance Center in Cleveland. This option is

available if (a) he or she were married to the military member for 10 years while the member was performing retirement-creditable military service, and (b) the divorce decree or court order expresses payment of the retired pay to the former spouse in a dollar figure or as a percentage of the member's disposable military retired pay. Direct payment is also possible if the court divides the member's retired pay as alimony or child support.

If a former spouse is receiving direct payments from the Finance Center, those payments will terminate upon the earliest of (a) satisfaction of the court's order (if some time limit were placed on the duration of the division of the retired pay); (b) the death of the retired member; or (c) the death of the former spouse. Payments will begin to the former spouse within 90 days of the date of effective service upon the military service in which the retired member served. Effective service is accomplished on the Air Force by completing the DD Form 2293, attaching a certified copy of the divorce decree or court order, and sending the entire package by certified or registered mail, return receipt requested, to:

Director, Defense Finance and Accounting Service
Cleveland Center
P.O. Box 998002
Cleveland, Ohio 44199-8002

Information may be obtained by calling 1-800-321-1080. The Tyndall AFB Legal Office maintains the DD Form 2293.

If you need to find out whether a former spouse had retired, you can call The Finance Center in Cleveland, which may be reached at 1-800-321-1080. They can advise whether a military member has retired.