
Defense Report

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Soldiers on Food Stamps—A Symptom of a Serious Problem

When junior enlisted personnel arrive at Fort Carson, Colorado they are screened by Army Community Services volunteers to determine whether or not they need financial help in the form of low-cost food stamps. Those most frequently needing assistance are young married soldiers with less than four-years' service who, by law, are not eligible for reimbursement for the expense of moving their families to a new duty station. During the first eight months of 1977 more than 900 Fort Carson families were provided with food stamp assistance.

Similar volunteer-run programs are going on at many other locations and it is safe to assume that the number of young military families given this kind of help totals in the thousands.

A recent report by the Third Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation concluded that even among military families authorized to be reimbursed for some of their moving expenses the average actual cost exceeds the allowable reimbursement by about \$1,000 for each move. Military members are seldom authorized reimbursement for the cost of temporary lodging while hunting for a new home and are never reimbursed for the expense of the home search. Both these reimbursements are common among civilians being transferred by their employer.

Higher-ranking, better-paid military people can absorb this added expense—even though equity argues against the need to do it—but the junior people simply do not have the means to bounce back from this extraordinary burden. This is one of the reasons why official figures show that more than 37 percent of Army personnel work at off-duty jobs.

The injustice for the junior personnel is so obvious that Representative Les Aspin (D-Wis.), most often an avowed military budget cutter, has joined with the chiefs of the armed services in requesting additional funds to lighten the burden on the junior enlisted people. "The real issue here is equity," Aspin told Defense Secretary Harold Brown. "This is not a compensation pay item; it is a reimbursement for expenses, a cost of doing business."

Some cynics have gone so far as to suggest that military personnel be forbidden to marry until they have achieved eligibility for full support under the present law. The impracticality and probable illegality of that suggestion are obvious.

What is needed is a realization on the part of the administration and Congress that the junior military people are just as much a part of the team as their more senior fellows. In an All Volunteer environment there is no reason to treat them any differently.