
Defense Report

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Adjusting Military Allowances— Should a Raise for One Soldier Come out of Another's Pocket?

Not all military people live in barracks or in neat rows of government-owned family quarters. Many thousands of service members are assigned to duties remote from military installations and a perpetual shortage of quarters on the bases themselves causes many more thousands to seek living accommodations in nearby communities. In both these instances the service member is provided with a housing allowance in lieu of government quarters.

While these allowances help meet the expense of living "off-post," there are some basic faults in the allowance system that make it less effective than it should be. First of all, existing law provides the same allowance for every service member of the same rank, no matter where they may be living. The allowance is usually adequate in low-cost areas but not in high-cost areas. Second, only Congress can substantially change the allowance and even then the change applies to everyone, regardless of location.

Almost a year ago the President's Commission on Military Compensation recognized the need for a variable housing allowance, correctly gauging the inequity of forcing service members to live in areas where their allowance does not meet inescapable costs. The Commission, in its report to President Carter, recommended establishment of a variable allowance but did not come down hard on a source for the extra money. It said the money might come from additional appropriations each year, by manipulating the amount of annual cost-of-living pay increases or by simply taking some of the allowance away from people in low-cost areas and giving it to those in high-cost areas.

Of course, only additional appropriated money will do the job that is needed. If part of the annual adjustment to base pay is taken to adjust the housing allowance the service members experience no net increase in their usable income and fall further behind the inflationary spiral. Since it has never been shown that the housing allowance is any more than barely adequate in low-cost areas, to take money away from people living there would simply create another inequity.

When the military services were asked to comment on the Commission's housing allowance plan they objected strongly to the pay-shift option — so strongly, in fact, that the Department of Defense opted in favor of the additional appropriation. Now, however, the White House Office of Management and Budget is reportedly leaning toward shifting money from one pocket to another.

This course of action will weaken military morale. Our service members are tired of being the bell goat for an Administration anti-inflation program that nobody else is following.