
Defense Report

AUSA



It's Just Like Old Times — The Soldier Is Caught in a Squeeze Between His Landlord and His Boss

For many years our military service members were sent off to duty in the most expensive areas of our country, like New York City and Washington, with no adjustment made to their housing allowance to accommodate much higher rents and soaring utility costs. A sergeant serving on recruiting duty in New York City received the same allowance as one living in a rented house in Columbus, Ga., despite the fact that rent in New York was far greater. It was only after several years of pleading by the military leadership and arguing on the part of associations representing service members that Congress authorized a variable housing allowance based on actual costs in specific areas. Even with this Congressional support the service personnel will not get the whole loaf but only that amount of extra housing money that exceeds 115 percent of their basic housing allowance.

The Department of Defense has now announced the procedures under which the variable housing allowance (VHA) will be paid. One point made in this explanation is that service members should not be surprised when they don't receive the same housing allowance each month. On payday, at the end of a 31-day month, they will get the maximum allowable amount. On payday, at the end of a 30-day month, they will receive a one-day pro-rata reduction and in February they will receive a two- or three-day pro-rata cut. The department did not tell the soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen that they were authorized to tell their landlords they would be short on their rent in those less-than-31-day months. The landlords will be expecting the full monthly rent and the difference can come from only one source, the service members' pockets.

The Department of Defense procedures were set in an arbitrary effort to save money from a program the department did not want to fully implement in the first place. Service members and Congress see DoD's resistance to implementing VHA as still another reflection of the department's drive to have a volunteer military establishment "on the cheap." It was not Congress' intent to have VHA implemented in a way that rekindles resentment and it was certainly not the intent of Congress to leave the DoD loophole through which it can suck back money from VHA's beneficiaries. To set the payment of the VHA on a per-day basis, in the full knowledge that rents are always charged on a flat, per-month basis, is self-defeating pettiness of the first order.

The amount of money involved for each service member drawing VHA may seem small but it represents still another drain on military income that is still far behind the escalation of inflation, in spite of a substantial raise in base pay beginning in October. In the Washington area, and in many others, soldiers leave their place of duty at the end of the day and go to work in gas stations and fast-food restaurants. The majority of the wives of soldiers in those areas also work. Together they manage a not-very-grand standard of living. The parsimonious action by the Department of Defense takes the positive edge from what should be a contributor to the retention of trained soldiers and the attraction of well-qualified recruits.