
Defense Report

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The Military's Unique Housing Problems—Realistic Solutions Are Needed

At times, Congress gives indication of a willingness to face squarely the fact that to get and keep good people in the all-volunteer forces we must adjust their compensation to the realities of the day. Such appears to have been the case when the legislators authorized the variable housing allowance (VHA) in 1980. They recognized that service members obtain housing under a set of conditions different from civilians with similar incomes. Military personnel have little control over assignment areas; their income remains fixed, irrespective of the cost of living or locally prevailing wage scales; the transitory nature of military duty requires that they enter and leave the housing market in different geographic areas with greater frequency than their civilian counterparts.

It was in consideration of these unique conditions of military service that Congress sought to relieve service people of some of the financial penalties of assignment to high-cost localities. Congress rightly believed that these service members should not have to bear the entire burden of the higher costs. Congress provided a variable housing allowance to stateside service members living off base if their average housing costs exceeded 115 percent of their basic quarters allowance. This program reduced the unreimbursed housing costs that service members were then paying from an average of about \$1,300 to about \$500 annually.

Unfortunately, the relief provided by the VHA program was fleeting, lasting just two years. In 1982 Congress imposed a "cap" on the VHA rates which had the net effect of raising members' average unreimbursed housing costs to about \$700 annually. Subsequent congressional limitations have increased the average out-of-pocket costs to \$1,200—right back to the condition existing before 1980. Proposals embodied in the fiscal 1985 defense budget, now before Congress, should help meet the expense of living "off-post," but it appears that soldiers assigned to the highest cost areas will be inequitably treated. If we are to attract and retain the young men and women needed to sustain our volunteer military forces, Congress must insure that their reasonable housing costs are reimbursed.