**Lack of Housing Allowance for Reserve-Component Soldiers Attending Long-term Training**

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After finishing my first year as the Command Inspector General for the Maryland Army National Guard, I was reflecting on the accomplishments my team and I have made over the past 12 months. There is no doubt we have made a difference—completion of over 100 assistance cases, a handful of investigations and inspections, sharing of professional expertise, and numerous other things. I am confident our actions have helped resolve Soldier issues, while also helping improve organizational effectiveness and increasing combat readiness. All in all, a very good year. But even with all of our successes, there is one case that I wish had had a different outcome. Even though I know my office reached the correct decision by working through the IG process, I do not believe that decision was fair.

As IGs, we call the “balls and strikes” for the actions we work. Our profession requires us to be “fair and impartial” and to spend a good amount of time scouring through laws, regulations, and policies. This research establishes our “strike zone” and allows us to resolve issues brought to us. Most of the time, the resolutions make sense and the results are easy to explain. Of course, not everyone is always happy with the outcome—but you are able to walk the complainant or subject through the “why” by referring him or her to the established standards. For the case that troubles me, I believe the “strike zone” established by some laws and policies is not fair; in other words, there is an inequality in the system.

The issue deals with the inability of the “Reserve Component (RC) Soldiers without Dependents” to receive a housing allowance while they are attending long-term training (greater than 140 days). Since the Army considers attendance at the training a Permanent Change of Station (PCS), Soldiers are authorized to ship household goods and are also provided housing at the training location. Therefore, they are not allowed to receive a housing allowance for their primary residence in the community where they normally live and will almost certainly return. This guidance is clearly stated in United States Code (USC), Title 37, and the Joint Travel Regulation (JTR), so the adjudication of the case was easy: *“Dear Soldier, Thanks for trusting the IG with your issue, but after a thorough review, we have determined that you are not qualified to receive a housing allowance for your primary residence. Respectfully, COL IG.”* We clearly called the balls and strikes; but, after a closer look, one has to question whether or not the guidance is fair? Is the strike zone actually over the plate for all Soldiers? In this case, I would argue it is not.

There are several reasons for my opinion. The laws and regulations do not fully consider the RC Soldier without dependents who, after completion of the training course, returns to his primary residence in the community where he lives. Many of these Soldiers have either mortgages or long-term leases and no desire to sell their homes or break their leases. They have established roots in their community, and they have no intention to permanently change where they reside. They are simply attending training and returning to their community following completion.

Making a comparison to other groups helps to clarify the unfairness of the existing rules. First, for “Active Duty Soldiers without Dependents” attending the training, the existing process makes total sense. They simply leave their losing duty station, complete the training course, and then move to their gaining duty station, such as Fort Bragg, Fort Gordon, or Fort Lewis. For this group, they will pack and either ship or store their household goods. They will not maintain a lease or mortgage at their losing duty station. As the laws and regulations are currently written, this is the group for whom the rules fit.

However, what happens with RC Soldiers who have dependents? Since the vast majority, most likely over 90 percent, do not take their dependents with them to attend training, they are authorized a housing allowance for their primary residence. In other words, they are able to attend the training course and receive a housing allowance to pay their mortgage or lease in the community to which they will return once they complete the training. This approach enables them to receive the required training without disrupting their lives or incurring a substantial financial burden. Additionally, their families are able to maintain their normal patterns of life with school, work, friends, and community while the Soldier is away at training.

By comparing the different groups, it is easy to see that the laws and regulations were not written for the RC Soldier without dependents. This point is the inequality in the system to which I referred earlier. The current rules require the RC Soldier without dependents to either permanently move from his existing primary residence or to pay his mortgage or rent from just his base pay. Specifically, mortgages and rents create a substantial financial challenge, since many take a leave of absence from higher paying civilian jobs. This situation is not fair.

How can this unfairness be resolved? Early in my career, I was taught that if you identify a problem, provide a recommended solution, not just a complaint. In order to fix this problem, senior leaders in the Army National Guard, the Army, and the Department of Defense need to recognize the problem and work with lawmakers to change USC, Title 37, which in turn will allow the Joint Travel Regulation to be changed. This change would allow RC Soldiers without dependents to have the ability to *potentially* receive a housing allowance. Yes, I used the word potentially, because I realize that not every RC Soldier without dependents has fully established roots in a community; therefore, not everyone should qualify to receive a housing allowance while he or she is at training. My recommendation is to establish a waiver or an exception-to-policy process, where RC Soldiers without dependents could state their case. The pre-requisites would be to show that an existing mortgage or lease is in place and that the Soldier intends to return to the residence following the school. If approved to receive a housing allowance, the Soldier would not be able to rent or sub-lease his primary residence while attending the training course, nor would he be authorized to ship household goods to the training location.

I believe these changes would provide a way to more fairly take care of RC Soldiers without dependents. It would allow this group of Soldiers to attend required training without being penalized either financially or through the disruption of having to sell homes or break leases. These changes would also make it easier for RC units to get their Soldiers trained and MOS qualified, which in turn would significantly boost unit readiness.

The intent of this article is to raise awareness, since the population this issue affects is relatively small. However, for those in the population and the units that have these Soldiers, this matter is a significant issue. From an IG perspective, leaders have an opportunity to correct an issue that is not treating all Soldiers fairly, which in turn will result in improved readiness. And improving *readiness* has been the primary mission of the Inspector General since General Washington and General von Steuben established the Inspector General system in the Continental Army in 1778—and it remains just as true today!