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County Compensation Proposal: Bridging Benefit Gaps for Employees

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Abstract

The National Guard and Reservists are members of the U.S. military who face wage loss due to their Inactive Training Duty (ITD). This issue stems from contributing factors such as an employer's lack of knowledge of service obligations, inadequate legal protections, and inadequate preparation for ITD. The lack of legal protections while service members attend mandatory training exacerbates their financial burden. These contributing factors lead to severe consequences, such as financial strain on service members. One of these financial strains is using vacation accrual hours to supplement income. Burnout, fatigue, and stress from a lack of paid leave can lead military personnel to experience a decrease in operational readiness. In turn, this impacts recruitment and retention. These reductions can jeopardize the country's safety and the military community.

The Monterey Veterans Affairs Office (MVAO) dedicates its time to bettering the lives of Veterans by offering services, advocacy, and assistance to the families of service members. The MVAO seeks to bridge a gap in benefits for National Guardsmen/Reservists, which will eliminate wage loss due to their ITD. I drafted a policy to help create supplemental income. This policy intends to mitigate the impact of loss of wages. It is expected that the new leave of absence policy will promote an increase in health benefits along with financial security. However, the county has yet to deliberate on the policy. It is anticipated that it will pass by the end of the year.

Keywords: military, service members, National Guardsmen, reservist, financial burden

Agency and communities served

The work that is conducted at the Office of Veterans Affairs of Monterey and San Benito County is as follows: Its mission reads,

The Monterey County Military & Veterans Affairs Office (MVAO) provides advocacy, assistance, and services designed to enhance the lives of the County's veterans who served their country in the Armed Forces, their families, and their survivors. We assist in obtaining entitlements and services from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), U.S. Department of Defense, California Department of Veterans Affairs (CDVA), and local programs for eligible veterans and their families (County of Monterey, 2024, para. 1)

They connect with local Veterans to ascertain their challenges by interviewing them to ask about their service record and how they pertain to said challenges. The interviews are intended as a deep-dive discussion that allows the MVAO to file claims on their behalf. To fully understand their needs, they must meet with Veteran Service Representatives (VSR). Once the claims are filed, they can acquire entitlements, which can be considered financial compensation. Service connection is the determining factor in how they can get this. When the agency says service-connected, it means something related to their cause for a disability. This could be from combat or other related traumas. They also work with other organizations, such as the Veteran Transition Center (VTC), which helps struggling Veterans with transitional housing and support with food. The MVAO holds the federal government accountable for the aftercare for these Veterans regarding benefits.

To provide a brief history of how the agency started, it was through one Veterans Affairs Office doing something beyond the scope of their role. That office led the way in supporting Veterans by helping them get those benefits. Recognizing how impactful funding this type of agency was, California saw how they could save on state funds. The Veterans were then transferred off of state benefits like Medi-Cal and onto federal benefits like Tricare, which saved the state billions in social services for Veterans. Once the state noticed the work being done by the Veterans Affairs Office, it formed its own organization known as Cal-Vet. It became a middleman between the state and the Federal government.

The Veteran community is unique, unlike other populations. What makes it so different is that it is composed of various ethnicities, which comprise its total population. Unlike other populations, which can be categorized by ethnicity and then broken down into social class, the Veterans are a cumulative group of people. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.), Veterans make up 5% of the total population of Monterey County. That is a total population of 15,787 individuals. In San Benito County, 2,362 veterans reside there, making up 5% of the population. It is difficult to pinpoint the population by race for such a huge group because the MVAO does not track the numbers for populations served in the counties. They rely solely on the overall population of California. It is as follows: White alone 1,129,000, Black or African American alone 157,000, American Indian and Alaskan Native 14,000, Asian 112,000, Native Hawaiian & other Pacific Island 7,000, some other race 78,000, two or more races 88,000, Hispanic or Latino 292,000, White alone (not Hispanic or Latino) 961,000. This data was collected in the annual survey of the California Association of County Veterans Service Officers (2022).

When it comes to employment, the Census Bureau, unfortunately, does not fare well in tracking veteran populations because they fall into a niche category. Veterans are a population

composed of many ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, each registered Veteran counts towards the general population. For employment of individuals in Monterey County, they account for 1.5% of the population with 5113. In San Benito County, 13 people are employed, making up only 0% of the total population. Veterans accessing benefits in the two counties are 31.8% (County of Monterey, 2024).

Problem Model Background and Literature Review

Problem Statement

Too many non-active service members of the National Guard/Reservist lose wages over mandatory Inactive Training Duty (ITD). The National Guard is critical for public safety, service members must remain alert and ready for emergencies. Service members can be impacted by burnout, a chronic condition that adversely affects the body and mind. If service members are not at their peak performance, it can jeopardize the lives of the first responders and the public that depends on their service. This can be attributed to the loss of vacation time due to using accrued vacation leave to supplement the loss of income. A survey conducted on service members found that one in four respondents had accumulated around \$10,000 in debt, compared to 16% of their civilian counterparts (FINRA Investor Education Foundation, 2010). Another factor impacting the loss of wages is that military members with families face harsher financial burdens. Service members' spouses are often unemployed due to relocation when soldiers get called into active duty (Keith, 2011). Of those spouses, 26% are unemployed. This puts families in tough positions where an increase in financial strain is placed due to their significant others serving in the military.

The Problem Model in Figure 1 below visually explains the contributing factors and consequences of the problem of National Guard and Reservists losing wages during training.

Figure 1: Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Employer lack of knowledge.	Too many non-active service members of the National Guard/Reservist lose wages over mandatory Inactive Training Duty (ITD).	Financial strain on service members.
Inadequate legal protections.		Reduced operational readiness.
Inadequate preparation for In-active training duty (ITD)		Reduced recruitment or retention.

Contributing Factors

Service members must tread a fine line when navigating the challenges of maintaining a civilian life and choosing to serve one's country. This involves multiple parties, not just servicemen.

Employer lack of knowledge

Employers must play a role in keeping within federal guidelines per the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA). This law protects those serving in the nation's military branches from termination for being called into duty (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2020, para, 49-50). National guardsmen face many challenges. One significant contributing factor is an employer's need to understand what service members are confronted with during their training periods. This can lead to financial constraints due to the limited income obtained due to their training. Service members may be paid according to the rank they possess. The lack of awareness may lead to inadequate accommodations, exacerbating financial burdens. This can force service members to choose between serving or not. Employers may need to understand the scope of the burdens Guardsmen possess fully.

All National Guard members who serve are limited in what benefits they are entitled to. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, "A member under conditions cited in

subparagraph 580105.B, above, is entitled to an increase in compensation equal to one-thirtieth of the monthly special pay authorized under Chapter 19, paragraph 190103, of this volume" (2002, p. 4). This informs Guardsmen about how pay is distributed. This is a prorated rate for their service. When training is conducted, they will earn the equivalent of what they would earn if they were fully active. When Guard members conduct their weekend drills, they endure a financial loss. Members of the armed forces are once again being asked to make further sacrifices to serve their country.

Inadequate legal protections

Employers need to do more to safeguard service members by securing their employment when they serve and extending additional security to prevent them from facing hardships. The impact also goes further beyond the guardsmen, but also into their families. If a service member is called to duty, the spouses must go with those who serve because when it comes to legal protections, this too must be covered under that umbrella, which is USERRA. In a congressional hearing held on March 9, 2023, James Rodriguez, an Assistant Secretary for the U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans Employment and Training Service (DOL VETS), stated that further protections should be considered. He noted that in 2021, 85% of cases where USERRA violations were reported were fixed. However, the remaining 15% still needs to be addressed (*Examining the future of workforce protections for service members*, 2023, p. 5). This shows how employers do not fully understand USERRA rights and how they pertain to veterans. Rodriguez states that USERRA should also be extended to military spouses to minimize barriers to employment when considering new protections.

In a survey conducted to determine what level of reservists were employed by Federal Agencies, it found that a disproportionate amount of service members made up 58% of that

workforce. The survey found that only 4% of those employers didn't like employing reservists, while the vast majority strongly agreed that they viewed reservists favorably. However, when service members were asked whether their employers supported their service, they expressed views that might suggest employers disapprove when they are activated. Amongst the highest rated responses in satisfaction with their employers were those who are working for the federal government (Gates et al., 2013, p. 45). Although USERRA guarantees employment when service members return from active duty, the impact on the employer's perception changes upon activation. This is how the other 15% of cases lead to violations of USERRA rights and impact the service members and employers.

Inadequate preparation for in-active training duty

The most significant factor that someone considers before entering service is determining enlistment benefits. What comes with the role? Is it career, training, or other financial incentives? The answer is all of the above. When considering employment outside of the military, service members tend to seek roles in the public sector, with a rate of 58% of them employed in this field alone (Gates et al., 2013, p. 45). However, in public sector jobs, the typical work week looks like Monday through Friday, but what about the unconventional roles? Members can commonly be found in county roles such as probation, fire department, or other facets of government.

Some conflicts arising from employment include inadequate preparation for inactive training duty. Service members must be aware of the possibilities outside of duty upon enlistment. Navigating those challenges needs to be communicated. For example, what happens when ITD occurs within working hours? The result can end in unpaid leave. This can impact their financial well-being. Belle et al., examine the state of service members' financial

well-being in a survey

In discussing net worth and as compared to respondents who would have money left over after paying all debts, respondents who would be in serious debt ($b = -0.68, p < .001$), have some remaining debt ($b = -0.31, p < .01$), and those who would just break even ($b = -0.23, p < .05$) reported decreased psychological wellbeing. (p.6)

The survey response found that financial resources determined the well-being of the respondents. It also examined whether rank played a vital role in the well-being of the service members, and it found that it did not. If service members already face financial difficulty due to their service, what does that do to those with a mixed career, such as the National Guard/Reservist? The implications of hardship are increased when serving your community, much like in government and county roles.

Consequences

Financial strain

When in-active service members experience a loss of wages, they may have to give up benefits like vacation accrual hours to compensate for the loss of income, which can lead to financial strain. According to the Department of Labor, "While many employers take the commendable step of providing all or part of employees' pay while they perform military service, there is no obligation under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) for them to do so" (n.d., para. 18).

A study by the Department of Defense examined unemployment and anxiety surrounding spouses in the military. According to Romo, "Unemployment rates among reservists' spouses appear to be much lower, comparatively, though at 8 percent it is still twice

as high as nationwide statistics" (2019, para. 9). It was noted that these findings were startling given their education level. More than half of them possessed a bachelor's degree or higher. When compared to other spouses in the country, the national average for unemployment for the year 2017 when it was conducted was 2-2.5% (Romo, 2019). Being a service member's spouse may come with benefits, such as healthcare and access to other programs, but it does not come with financial incentives. A service member may see a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) increase for having a dependent but does not receive any additional stipends on top of that (Military Benefits Association, 2023, para. 22-24). With unemployment already being rated higher than their civilian counterparts, spouses of service members are at a disadvantage. The financial impact can be more significant on in-active service members when they have to take leave from their civilian roles to attend ITD.

Reduced operational readiness

Training can impact other aspects of a service member besides financial burdens. Loss of wages can be consequential to service, but so can fatigue from a lack of paid leave. Herrera writes, "Certain skills are perishable, and health and wellness—both physical and mental—can decrease over time; thus, they must be regularly maintained" (2020, p. 18). The military does view health with a holistic approach. However, one consequence they are not considering is the impact of training for in-active service members. Due to service members having to supplement their loss of pay from their civilian jobs to attend training, it is causing an unintended side effect. That effect is fatigue and burnout from a lack of paid leave. The depletion of those benefits is putting communities and the country at risk, as they rely on the readiness of these individuals.

A study was conducted by the National Library of Medicine where officers and soldiers

were examined for symptoms of burnout. It found that 30% of the participants had experienced higher levels of depression, fatigue, stress, and anxiety as a result of readiness tasks. Given the already stressful tasks that service members experience, having access to paid leave would improve their overall quality of life. The study concluded that it is possible to predict burnout in soldiers and that possible interventions may be implemented if symptoms are caught early enough (Wu et al., 2022, para. 41). Although the military is aware of burnout within their ranks, they have not advocated for an expansion to benefits that could remedy this complication.

Reduced recruitment or retention

With the country's current state, recruitment is already at a record low. The military relies on benefits as an incentive to gain recruits, which puts the country in peril when morale is low. Between 2019 and 2021, the Government Accountability Office reported that recruitment rates were down. Each branch of the military saw a decrease in recruits, for the Navy -33%, the Airforce -43%, the Army -42%, and the Reserves- a decrease of 11% (Davidson, 2023, para. 11-12). Even though the Reserve's branch saw the best recruitment levels, they still face retention challenges. The reason for this is that with the low level of recruitment across all branches, the military is resorting to activating its reserve force. This poses a severe consequence for retention.

A significant factor for individuals to serve in the reservist branches is to maintain a balance between work and life. What happens when that balance is challenged when being activated? The Active Duty Spouse Survey (ADSS) found that financial conditions proved to be a considerable motivator for spouses to encourage service members to leave the military (Office of People Analytics, 2019). Service is not only tied to the individuals enlisted but also encompasses the family paradigm. When reservists are activated, they are unprepared for the

financial consequences, especially if they have a high-paying civilian job (Faber et al., 2008, p. 223). This is magnified when the spouses are unemployed. This puts enormous pressure on the family's structure and impacts their overall well-being. For these reasons, service members choose to do what is best for their families and not so much for their community and country. The dynamics of economics and family determine whether to stay connected to the military or to separate. 14% of service members left the military as a result of financial woes (Woodall, 2022, para. 36). Unless the federal government changes its stance on compensation for ITD and annual training, this will only worsen.

Project Description and Implementation Process

Project Description

What the office of Veterans Affairs of Monterey and San Benito county wants to ask is if the county can address a gap in benefits and provide a service to non-active service members of the military, primarily the National Guard/Reservist. The question Veterans Affairs will be asking is, can the county offer a form of compensation for non-active service members, and should the county be asking people to serve their country without proper compensation? I presented a research report to the Office of Veterans Affairs interim director, who will submit it to the Board of Supervisors for Monterey County. The research report will allow for the argument to be made that there is an intervention that needs to be implemented by the county. Furthermore, I researched the best practices for drafting a policy according to the University of California Santa Cruz (The Policies & Procedures Team, 1994). The policy will act as a companion to the report. It will go in as a proposal, and then they will vote on whether to pass it or not (see Appendix B).

Project Justification

The primary purpose of this proposal is to address the gap in benefits for the National Guard and Reservist, specifically regarding the financial aspect that may cause burdens resulting from inadequate legal protections. What the MVAO wishes to accomplish is for employers to understand the full scope of the dilemma. Improving the leave of absence policy will address the need to provide awareness to the employers in the county regarding financial challenges; it also aims to ensure that service members are not penalized for serving.

Benefits

Approval for the proposed policy will enable in-active (non-active) service members to be fairly compensated for attending their ITD. Compensation will prevent them from depleting their vacation pay to compensate for lost wages. This will enable National Guardsmen and Reservists to enjoy the benefits they have accrued at their county positions and enable them to spend time with their families. It will also promote health and well-being and give them financial security. This will help the agency as its purpose is to serve the men and women of the armed forces. It will also promote the need for an agency such as this within the community.

Expected Outcomes & Assessment Plan

Jack gave me a timeline for the policy to be written by March 27th. All research had to be completed prior to that date. Once that objective was fulfilled, I was instructed to provide the policy that would be accompanied by comprehensive research findings supporting the necessity and potential benefits of the proposed intervention. By the end of the initial quarter of the fiscal year, the county and all stakeholders will have thoroughly examined the suggested policy. The intervention outlined in the research report will be given to Jack, the interim director, and then to the County stakeholders for review.

The assessment plan will entail reviewing multiple components. The first is an exit interview with the Interim Director, Jack Murphy. My mentor and I will discuss the efficacy of the proposed intervention. Jack will receive the proposed policy, which he will review before the meeting. Another meeting will be conducted with the stakeholders later in the year. The policy will be accompanied by comprehensive research findings supporting the necessity and potential benefits of the proposed intervention.

Implementation Process

The MVAO determined, based on the number of denials in leave of absence, that there is a need to improve how paid benefits are administered. Based on the years Jack had been working for the office, Jack determined that there had to be a larger population going unaccounted for in service members asking for paid leave to attend their ITDs. Firstly, I had to research what policies were implemented on a local level and nationwide. After determining that no current policy exists that can be replicated, I would create a draft comprised entirely of new material. This proposed policy would act as an amendment to the existing policy outlined by the federal government using USERRA as its basis. Next, research had to be conducted on what goes into creating an effective policy. An analysis of written policies in other counties was the first step. Federal and local policies often encompass different scopes. Here, for this instance, policies had to be examined at the local level. A policy draft was created after examining various policy writing practices. Lastly, once all research has been completed, all best practices will be applied to the final draft, which will be submitted to Jack for review.

In addition to this process in the future, Jack will submit the documents to the head of the Project Programming Request (PPR). Jack will email it to the Board of Supervisors, the County Auditor-Controller, and other stakeholders to schedule a meeting. This meeting will

happen after July 1, 2024, since the County's fiscal year begins on this date. Jack will also receive support from Adam, the management analyst. Jack and Adam will ask the participating stakeholders to review the policy during the presentation. If the draft does not meet the Auditor-Controller's expectations, they will ask for an amendment.

Project Results.

The policy's anticipated outcome will be the existing policy's amendment. Jack, the Interim Director, felt that the approval, when implemented later in the year, would improve retention. Retention will act as a measurement of success. Second, the policy will offset the use of benefits for loss of pay. The board of supervisors has strongly considered the policy for some time (see Appendix C, Goal 5). The policy will not only improve the county's long-term goal for retention but will enrich all service members, not just those who work Monday through Friday but the unconventional ones who work weekends. This creates equity for all stakeholders. Although the policy has yet to be approved, Jack strongly feels that it will pass, given that it aligns with the goals of the county and the mission of the MVAO. The county of Monterey would like all service members to feel valued and engaged in their place of employment.

Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, the immense challenges faced by the National Guard/Reservists during their mandatory training in ITD underscore the pressing need for an update on the leave of absence policy. Coupled contributing factors such as inadequate legal protections and employer lack of knowledge amplify financial strain. The proposed policy will act as an intervention, allowing the MVAO to address these issues directly. The research conducted will aid by informing stakeholders of the necessity for implementing policy changes on the county level. This initiative upholds the mission of the MVAO to support and serve the families of its

community. Future suggestions: During the board meeting, personal testimonials from service members can be presented to provide tangible evidence and a relatable human perspective that adds value to the policy's smooth transition. This would quell any reservations stakeholders may have that would prevent the acceptance of the proposed policy.

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Appendix A: Project Implementation Plan

Tasks	Timeline/ Deadlines	Parties Involved	Materials/ Services Needed	Deliverables
Determine where there are gaps in benefits	09/08/23	Jack, Adam. Danny	Federal policies, county policies	Documents
Research other policies implemented in other Counties and nationwide	10/23/23	Danny, library staff	Library, Laptop	Research
Research policy writing methods	01/18/24	Danny	Library, Laptop	Methods and practices
Write a policy proposal.	03/22/24	Danny, Jack	Laptop	Policy
Have an exit Interview with Jack	03/29/24	Danny, Jack	Voice recording equipment	Measurable result
Conduct a literature review highlighting the need for a change in current policy	04/19/24	Danny	Library, Laptop	Final Report
E-mail the stakeholders in the county.	07/01/24	Jack/Adam	Laptop	Attached document
Meet with the County Board of Supervisors.	08/1/24	Jack Board of Supervisors	Zoom link setup Policy Proposal	Presentation

Appendix B: Policy Draft

Policy Statement

The need for compensation in the county for Inactive Duty Training underscores the pressing issue of addressing non-active duty service members' financial burdens due to a lack of employer awareness and legal protections. These service members are county employees who must balance civilian roles and military obligations, leading to financial strain and reduced operational readiness. The absence of compensation for service members on the county's part exacerbates their circumstances. The proposed policy seeks to rectify the gap in benefits. The policy will allow service members employed by the county to serve their community and country.

Purpose

The policy outlines the compensation structure. It aims to provide transparency, consistency, and fairness in compensation for inactive (non-active) service member's contributions to the county.

Definitions

Inactive- service members who are not full-time active duty personnel.

Inactive Training Duty (ITD) is authorized training for reservists and guardsmen conducted once a month as mandated by the U.S. military branches.

Supplemental Pay- Monetary compensation given to employees on top of their regular wages.

Compensation for In-Active Duty Service Members

Salary Review Process

Inactive members will submit proof of their military status to the county. Each person is responsible for providing pay statements for all inactive duty training. The state of military status will be subject to periodic review.

Eligible Employees

Members of the armed forces who are classified as inactive, and work unconventional days within the county, such as weekends.

Eligible Positions

Administrative Office, Agricultural Commissioner, Assessor/Recorder, Auditor-Controller, Child Support Services, Civil Rights Office, Clerk of the Board, Cooperative Extension, County Counsel, Department of Emergency Management, District Attorney, Elections, Emergency Communications/911, Health, Housing & Community Development, Human Resources, Information Technology, Library, Military & Veterans Affairs, Natividad Medical Center, Probation, Public Defender, Public Works, Facilities & Parks, Recorder-County Clerk, Sheriff-Coroner, Social Services, Treasurer-Tax Collector, Water Resources Agency.

Pay:

Pay will be calculated based on the average wage of their civilian/county job. A member receiving IDT pay must report the income gained to the Department of Human Services. Human Services will determine their due amount based on the formula (county pay minus ITD pay = supplemental pay). The county will compensate any loss of wages due to their ITD in the form of supplemental pay.

Appendix C County Memo

DRAFT STRATEGIC GOALS AND KEY OBJECTIVE TOPICS SUMMARY

Goal 1

Well-Being and Quality of Life

Description: Create safe and healthy communities where all people can thrive.

Key Objective Topic Areas

Housing:

Permit streamlining; affordable housing; farmworker housing

Community Engagement/Services/Programs:

Community engagement; youth programs; County Park accessibility; expanded wi-fi; dashboard for community feedback

Financial Strategies:

Mental Health Rehabilitation Facility; expanded safety net healthcare; and satellite animal shelters

Goal 2

Sustainable Infrastructure Now and in the Future

Description: Provide for the maintenance, replacement, sustainability and resilience of infrastructure

required for living, working, recreating in and visiting Monterey County

Key Objective Topic Areas

Master Planning and Funding Strategies

Community beautification; County Facilities Master Plan; funding to leverage grant opportunities

Water and Sewer Systems:

Expand Chualar sewage treatment systems; resolve San Lucas potable water; additional water storage

Infrastructure:

Community streetlighting; county road maintenance

Broadband and Communication:

Expand broadband; expand digital skills and learning; promote transparency and civic engagement

Other:

Environmental and green space protection

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Board of Supervisors Retreat

Trusted Advisors Transforming Communities

Goal 3

Safe and Resilient Communities

Description: Provide for public safety, disaster planning and response.

Key Objective Topic Areas

Disaster Planning and Emergency Response:

Expand public safety radio systems; provide disaster recovery facility; Disaster Service Worker training; reduce wildfire and flood risk

Justice:

Public safety investments; justice centers; programs for recently incarcerated

Other:

Broadway Family Connection Project

Goal 4

Diverse and Thriving Economy

Description: Attract and retain businesses that will improve the well-being of County residents.

Key Objective Topic Areas

Partnerships:

Youth/school programs to train workforce; expand access to public utilities for economic development; Enhanced Infrastructure Financing Districts; Agricultural Commissioner satellite office in South County

Goal 5

Dynamic Organization and Employer of Choice

Description: Employees feel valued and proactively engaged by an organization that is a great place to work, is financially healthy, and continuously improves.

Key Objective Topic Areas

Recruitment

Improve overall recruitment and retention process; address military and veteran recruitment and retention

Succession Planning and Employee Resources

Down payment assistance programs; organizational succession plan; opportunities for childcare in