

DAILY JOURNAL

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Thursday April 29, 2004

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OPINIONS&LETTERS

Financial support for our citizen-soldiers and their families

by *By Tom Lantos*

For each of the 170,000 National Guard members and reservists now on active duty, there are family members at home making sacrifices. Husbands and wives, sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers are all asked to endure the absence of loved ones and fear for their safety.

And for an estimated 40 percent of these soldiers, the gap between their civilian salaries and military pay makes the separation from their families all the harder to bear. This pay gap forces cutbacks in house budgets, and many family members are forced to work overtime, dip into savings, borrow, or even go on welfare to cover the bills caused by the pay gap.

Faced with deployments that, together with the necessary training, can last up to 15 months, how can we ask these brave volunteers to see their families settle for fewer groceries or school clothes, miss their mortgage payments and confront higher credit card bills?

A year ago, I introduced the Equity for Reservists Pay Act. It will substantially reduce the difference between civilian and military salaries for reservists and National Guard members when they are activated for more than 30 days by requiring federal employers to close the gap, and providing strong incentives for other employers to follow suit. The National Guard Association and the Reserve Officers Association have strongly endorsed this legislation, and it has more than 80 co-sponsors in Congress from both sides of the aisle.

Key portions of this bill sailed through the House Government Reform Committee, but were ignored by the House Republican leadership when last year's defense authorization bill was approved, so my legislation now languishes in a committee and has yet to come before the full House for a vote.

Opponents argue that helping reservists would create a pay disparity with active duty, full-time military personnel. But these disparities already exist: Encouragingly, more private employers are making up the pay gap for their workers who are called to active duty — in fact, the Defense Department has made a point of applauding businesses that follow this practice - and many

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state and local governments have followed suit.

Over the years, the role of the National Guard and Reserve in our military forces has changed dramatically. The days of these forces simply providing short-term replacement manpower for active duty in the event of a conflict are no more. And now, as never before, the longer and more frequent activations, with shorter and shorter deactivation time between deployments, are likely to reduce the ability to recruit and retain qualified personnel for the Reserves and the Guard.

The pay gap is unfair and unacceptable. Our government owes it to our citizen-soldiers to ensure they and their families are not financially burdened when they answer the call to duty. Congress should not miss another opportunity to do the right thing and support the brave troops of the Reserves and National Guard.

U.S. Rep. Tom Lantos, D-San Mateo, represents the Peninsula and part of San Francisco, and is the ranking Democratic member of the House International Relations Committee.

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