

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-181](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

About 91 percent of DOD's 811,000 reservists are part-time, performing military service in addition to civilian employment and careers. These reservists may have to travel to perform required military training or other duties.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 contains a provision for GAO to review the cost of travel for members of the reserve components. This report (1) describes the conditions under which reservists may incur unreimbursed out-of-pocket travel expenses in connection with their service, and (2) addresses the extent to which DOD has assessed the effect of reservists' unreimbursed out-of-pocket travel expenses on retention.

GAO reviewed DOD's *Joint Travel Regulations* and interviewed officials to determine conditions under which reservists might incur unreimbursed travel expenses. It also compared DOD's efforts to analyze the effect of such expenses with federal internal control standards, which state that management requires quality information to make informed decisions and evaluate an entity's performance in achieving key objectives.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that DOD collect quality information and conduct an analysis of the potential effects of reservists' unreimbursed travel expenses on retention, and respond to these risks by considering the costs and benefits of any possible actions to address the identified issues. DOD concurred with this recommendation.

View [GAO-18-181](#). For more information, contact Andrew Von Ah at (213) 830-1011 or vonaha@gao.gov.

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RESERVE COMPONENT TRAVEL

DOD Should Assess the Effect of Reservists' Unreimbursed Out-of-Pocket Expenses on Retention

What GAO Found

Reservists may incur unreimbursed out-of-pocket expenses under certain conditions in connection with their service. Although the Department of Defense's (DOD) six reserve components reported paying or reimbursing \$925 million in travel costs for reservists in fiscal year 2015, the most recent year for which data were available, reservists may still incur various expenses that are not reimbursable under DOD's travel regulations.

Officials responsible for travel regulations told us that unreimbursed travel expenses for reservists generally arise because it is DOD's policy to: (1) not provide reimbursement, except in limited circumstances, for the cost of travel to attend Inactive Duty Training (i.e., the "1 weekend a month" training commitment for reservists) and (2) consider longer duration training or assignments as a Permanent Change of Station—a change in reservists' home of record—and not as temporary travel. The National Defense Authorization Act for 2008 established a reimbursement program for Inactive Duty Training travel costs, but reservists must meet certain eligibility criteria, such as serving in a critical occupation, and not all service Secretaries have chosen to participate. Under the program, reimbursement is limited to \$300 for each roundtrip to the training location. Further, DOD's policy to consider longer duration training or assignments as a Permanent Change of Station may also result in unreimbursed expenses. Specifically, according to DOD officials, reservists may have to maintain two households if, because of their part-time status, they decide not to move themselves and their families to the location of Active Duty Training for 140 days or longer, or of other active duty assignments for 181 days or longer.

DOD and the services have conducted a few limited assessments of the potential effect of reservists' unreimbursed travel expenses on the retention of reservists. However, several DOD reports and studies and officials whom GAO interviewed have expressed concern that such unreimbursed expenses may, among other factors, be a challenge for reservists and may therefore negatively affect retention. For example, a 2012 survey commissioned by the Army Reserve of a small sample of reservist officers potentially eligible for battalion command positions reported that unreimbursed travel costs were among several factors that could influence their decision to apply for these positions. DOD and the reserve components are considering changes to reserve travel policy to mitigate the effect of unreimbursed expenses on reservists, by, for example, increasing the \$300 limit for Inactive Duty Training reimbursement. However, without the benefit of quality information, DOD risks not managing the potential influence of these policies on reservists' retention or agency expenditures.