

## City lags at helping reserve soldiers

### Workers lose benefits, pay during tours of duty

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With close to 70 Calgary reservists heading to the war in Afghanistan in a few months, the City of Calgary trails behind other Canadian centres in providing benefits, salaries and help to the families of soldiers risking their lives.

Next month, council will consider upgrading a leave policy one alderman calls "skimpy."

In Calgary, about 100 city employees work as part-time reservists. But they are not entitled to full salary or benefits when they are training or serving abroad.

Jeff Taylor, who works in the city's waterworks department, had to take a year leave of absence to cover training and a six-month deployment to Afghanistan.

Because his benefits were cut off by the city, his wife had to apply to the military for health and dental coverage and waited two months for it to go through.

Meanwhile, her daughter needed prescription medication that wasn't covered until the military benefits kicked in.

Having an employer fill the gaps would be helpful, said Jeff's wife Shawna Taylor.

"I'm so happy to hear they're doing that," she said. "Having a leave with benefits would be huge. I don't think we necessarily would've needed a salary top up, but I wouldn't have said no."

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart called Calgary's existing policy "really, really skimpy."

She said both Vancouver and Toronto provide paid military leave for their reservists' training periods.

Colley-Urquhart, who sits on the Canadian Forces Liaison Council in Alberta, said city officials are working on a policy expected to be ready by the Sept. 10 council meeting, which could include paid leave for training and a top up of salaries while the reservist is serving in a military mission.

But the city still needs to consult with the reservists before finalizing the policy, she added.

"We can do a lot better here," she said, noting reservists currently have to take vacation time to complete their military training.

"They go away for two weeks every year, a lot of reservists, and this is really sophisticated training in their area of expertise with the Canadian forces," she said. "We don't want them to have to take their vacation time to go away to do this training."

About 125 Canadian municipalities have military leave policies, with varying content from city to city, said Leo Desmarteau, executive director of the liaison council in Ottawa.

Desmarteau added that Calgary would be at the leading edge if it approved the kind of policy Urquhart described.

"From what I can tell, Calgary -- the new policy they are proposing -- would be very, very much at the forefront in terms of support for reserves."

The liaison council has also been encouraging private employers in Calgary to get involved in developing a military leave policy.

Michael Ervin, a commander in the naval reserve and the council's Southern Alberta liaison officer, said many big corporations have been co-operative, but convincing small- and medium-sized companies can be challenging because losing one key person could really hurt business.

"With the labour shortage it can be a double-edged sword," said Ervin. "When an employee asks for time off, it can be tough to find a replacement, but on the other hand, companies don't want to alienate employees who might come back."

Evan Hu, founder of information technology services company Ideaca and a former reservist, said he can't understand why more companies don't have policies to make it easier for employees who want to serve.

"I've always assumed other companies had generous policies for this, after all, we have a volunteer army," said Hu, whose company employs 160 staff in Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto and Vancouver including local reservist Maj. Chris Coupal.

"In Calgary, it's hard to find good people and reservists are pretty dedicated people. Why wouldn't you try to accommodate them?"

David Watt, president of D.A. Watt Consulting Group, employs a few reservists and said he gets better employees back when they return from training and deployments.

"These guys come to us with quite a lot of leadership, organizational and logistics training," said Watt, who employs civil engineers and land surveyors. "They're disciplined people and good employees.

"And they're serving our country. I feel I should support that."

This spring, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced the Calgary Highlanders will send 64 reservists to Afghanistan early next year where they're expected to serve for up to six months.

There are about 30,000 reservists in Canada, with 45 to 50 per cent having full-time employment and another 45 to 50 per cent being students.

"The ones who are employed, who have a job, they need time off to take courses, to improve their skills -- their trade skills -- and also to learn about leadership and all of these other qualities that you need as a leader or a manager in the Canadian Forces so they can progress in their career from one rank to another," Desmarteau said. "And now there are operations where we are using reservists now more so than ever."

The list of companies that offer some sort of policy for reservists to at least guarantee their job when they come back is growing, but there is still a long way to go.

Up to 25 per cent of those serving in Afghanistan are reservists, according to the liaison council, and many have had to use up vacation time or quit their jobs in order to complete their duties.

The council also works with reservists to teach them how to approach their employers, advising them to give a lot of notice and give the employer a chance to understand what they're doing.

Cpl. Alex Matthew was working as a mechanic at a local car dealership when he found out he was to be deployed to Afghanistan. He began training full time on April 1 and will be deployed early next year.

In total, Matthew was going to need about 18 months leave and, believing that would be too much to ask, simply quit his job.

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