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# FEDERAL TIMES

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THE NATIONAL NEWSWEEKLY FOR FEDERAL MANAGERS

## The case for housing pay

Controversial proposal aims to fill jobs in high-cost areas

LOS ANGELES AND  
SAN FRANCISCO

By AIMEE CURL

**Y**olanda Spears gets up at 4:30 every morning to beat traffic on the 83-mile commute from her townhouse in Apple Valley to work in the El Segundo neighborhood of Los Angeles. At the end of the day, it often takes her four hours to get home. Some evenings she doesn't even make it, opting to crash on the couch at a relative's house instead.

**MORE**

**The strategy**  
California execs look for support in Washington  
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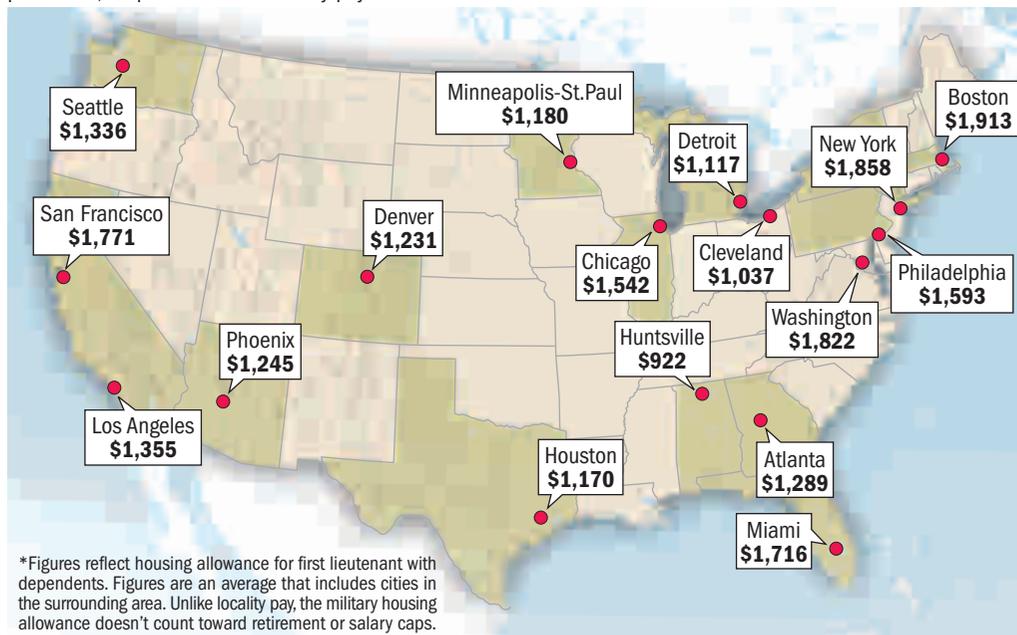
Spears, a single parent and procurement technician who's worked at the Los Angeles Air Force Base for 27 years, said she'd love to buy a home or live closer, but she simply can't afford to on a salary that's less than \$50,000 a year.

"I don't have the American dream, but I'd love to have it," she said. "Just getting to work and getting home again is all I can do."

Stories like Spears' aren't uncommon among federal employees in high-cost cities. Ask around in Los Angeles, for example, and you'll hear about people accepting jobs but leaving

### MILITARY PAYS MORE PER MONTH

A first lieutenant in the military earns more per month with basic pay and Basic Allowance for Housing than a comparably paid GS-9, Step 3 earns with locality pay in selected cities. How much more:\*



\*Figures reflect housing allowance for first lieutenant with dependents. Figures are an average that includes cities in the surrounding area. Unlike locality pay, the military housing allowance doesn't count toward retirement or salary caps.

SOURCE: Greater Los Angeles Federal Executive Board

GRAPHIC BY BRYAN SMITH

families behind, new hires living in their cars, and feds renting rooms in boarding houses or living four to an apartment just to survive on a government salary.

These hardships, coupled with the difficulty of finding federal workers and keeping them in California, have prompted

agency managers in Los Angeles and San Francisco to declare that enough is enough. They've come up with a bold new idea to give feds more money in cities where the cost of housing is skyrocketing. Their proposal: Trade locality pay for a military-like housing allowance.

The Defense Department Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) compensates military members who don't live on base for out-of-pocket housing expenses. BAH rates are set by surveying the cost of rental

See HOUSING, Page 12

## Fewer glowing appraisals, but more bonuses for senior execs

By TIM KAUFFMAN

**M**ost senior executives are earning larger salaries and bigger bonuses under the performance-based pay system that took effect two years ago, new data shows.

When the new performance-based pay system took effect at the beginning of 2004, the average executive earned \$142,000 — about \$3,600 below the Level 3 pay cap. The average salary increased to \$147,100 at the

beginning of 2005 and \$151,000 at the beginning of this year, exceeding the Level 3 pay cap by nearly \$2,000.

While more executives are earning larger salaries, fewer are being rated at the highest performance level by their agencies. About 43 percent of the government's 5,900 career executives were rated outstanding performers in fiscal 2005. That's down from the nearly three-fourths who earned top ratings in fiscal 2002.

"What's really good news is that we've

been able to take advantage of the new statute . . . and executives are getting higher pay," said Nancy Kichak, associate director of the Office of Personnel Management's Strategic Human Resources Policy Division.

Executives on average are being paid more than they were under the old system as more agencies become certified to offer salaries at a higher pay cap, the data shows. Agencies whose performance appraisal sys-

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## Housing

Continued from Page 1

properties in different geographical areas, and are higher for servicemen and women who have dependents. While BAH was originally intended to cover up to 80 percent of housing expenses, today it covers nearly 100 percent.

Representatives from the California Federal Executive Boards are on Capitol Hill this week talking to lawmakers about their idea. Like the Defense Department model, the Variable Housing Allowance pays more for those in higher pay grades. It would not be taxable and would not count toward retirement or the salary cap. Under the proposal, the Rest of the U.S. locality pay rate — which includes all areas in the contiguous 48 states that are not part of a separate metropolitan locality pay area — would become the new base pay.

But many questions remain about how the housing allowance would work. The California executives don't specify which cities would receive the benefit under their proposal or how the benefit would be calculated, but it appears employees in cities where the cost of living is less than the cost of labor would lose money under the proposal. Exactly how much is not known; such details have yet to be hammered out, said Kathrene Hansen, executive director of the Greater Los Angeles Federal Executive Board.

### Recruitment, retention challenges

Created by the 1990 Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act, locality pay was envisioned as a way to close the pay gap between the federal and nonfederal work forces in cities where the difference in wages between the private and public sectors is greater than 5 percent.

But federal managers in California say it's simply not working.

George Dutile, assistant director of management at the Homeland Security Department's Citizenship and Immigration Services' office in Laguna Niguel, said the high cost of housing in the area makes recruitment and retention his greatest challenge.

He said staff at the center has shrunk from 820 to 460 over the past two years. While a reduced workload and attrition account for some of the losses, Dutile said a large percentage of those leaving "have had to get out of here to be able to support their families."

He said people often apply for jobs without an idea of the area's high cost. "They take the job, then they get out here and realize that they can't afford a two-bedroom apartment for their family. It's a heart-breaker."

To avoid this situation, Dutile has started suggesting that prospective employees go online and check out the cost of living before accepting a job.

"Invariably they end up backing out," he said.

Dutile said short staffs are taking a toll. "My people don't take breaks anymore. They're always working, always behind. My biggest job is to get people not to quit and to entice them to stay," he said. "It's difficult for managers to talk to their people with a straight face anymore. . . . There's a humanitarian side to this. The people who serve are not being served."

Dutile, who spent 20 years in the Marine Corps and received BAH himself, helped come up with the housing allowance idea.

"The only way to level the playing field is to remove housing costs from the equation. The best model I've ever seen is the BAH," he said. "The problems are not unknown. The solution is not unique."

Dutile said managers haven't pushed



**Kathrene Hansen, executive director of the Greater Los Angeles Federal Executive Board, has not calculated how much more a housing allowance would cost than locality pay, but says the long-term benefits would outweigh the expense.**



**Yolanda Spears, a procurement technician at the Los Angeles Air Force Base, commutes 83 miles to work each day in order to afford housing.**

hard enough as a group to care for their people.

"We have a service mentality. We're hesitant to appear to be gluttonous leeches on society," he said. "What's motivating us is to see that our employees aren't suffering. It's getting to the point where it's just not right."

At the Drug Enforcement Administration's Los Angeles office, special agent and media representative Sarah Pullen said a big problem is retaining senior-level agents. When they graduate from the academy, DEA agents are assigned to a location, so recruitment isn't an issue.

"But as a general rule people only stay four or five years. Once they get to be GS-13s, they'll often transfer out. We end up with a lot of lower-level agents. We need senior people," Pullen said. "The people that stay at the senior level are the ones that are from here. It's just too shocking for everyone else."

Dana Leigh Marks, an immigration judge in San Francisco and the vice president of the National Association of Immigration Judges, said she's experienced a similar problem.

"We can't groom people at lower levels. If they come here, they don't stay. We have a much higher level of transfers, difficulty retaining people," she said. "You see the constant revolving door, the brain drain."

Marks said a housing allowance seems like a more equitable way of compensating employees in high cost areas.

"It's more fair. It's a way to relax the [salary] cap, but do it in a way that reflects the real costs involved," she said.

### Stewardship of an idea

Hansen, who's led the Los Angeles Federal Executive Board for 11 years, said she felt a "certain amount of stewardship" in the fight for pay parity when she took the post. The executive boards in Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York spearheaded the effort that resulted in locality pay in the 1990s.

"I felt like I had an obligation to speak up

when it wasn't meeting the real intent," Hansen said.

She said it's bad policy to base pay on cost of labor rather than the cost of living or cost of housing when the cost of housing is a better indicator of how expensive it is to live in a given area.

"Since the root cause is housing, why not come up with something to address the root cause?" she said.

Ed Stephenson, senior adviser for human capital programs at the National Academy of Public Administration, agrees the current system is flawed.

"Clearly, overall, the way the current locality pay works in the civil service is not adequate to deal with the cost of living in small areas versus large areas," he said. "Frankly there may be some people overpaid in rural areas, when people in some cities salaries aren't competitive."

Hansen admits a housing allowance would cost more than the current locality pay system, but she has not calculated an estimate. She said it's the intangible costs that keep her awake at night.

"It's about Homeland Security employees not seeing a radiological device coming into the port because they're sleepy from commuting two-plus hours a day," she said. "Those are the costs that are hardest to quantify."

Another concern, said Diana Louie, executive director of the San Francisco Bay Area Federal Executive Board, is the impending exodus of older feds due to something Office of Personnel Management officials like to call the retirement tsunami. OPM estimates that 60 percent of the government's 1.6 million employees will be eligible for retirement over the next 10 years.

"We need smart, bright people coming into government. If we could get this housing allowance, it could be something you could take to the colleges and show them. At least they'd give us a look," Louie said.

### Questions about the proposal

William Martin, director of the Food and Drug Administration's Pacific regional laboratory in Irvine, said he had reservations about taking a position in Southern California because it meant leaving a comfortable life and a large home in Denver.

Martin made the move, but said the transition hasn't been easy. "I've been here for a year and I'm still freaking out" about costs, he said. "I felt like I was financially secure in Colorado. That's not the case here."

While recruiting hasn't been an issue at FDA because of a hiring freeze, Martin said, housing costs are affecting retention.

"I've already lost three people to moves because of housing," he said. "I have a lot of worries for my folks that they won't be able to obtain affordable housing. I personally think everybody deserves a better

quality of life, and that's what's being eaten into. I'm worried about them now, and I'm worried about the future."

But Martin said he doesn't think that doing away with locality pay in favor of a housing allowance is the answer.

"There needs to be both. You need to pay a fair market wage that's based on cost of living and cost of labor. It's not the same thing. There ought to be pay parity for both," he said.

Roland Schank, a contracting officer at the Los Angeles Air Force Base, said he's against trading locality pay for a housing allowance because it wouldn't count toward retirement.

"I'm strongly opposed," he said. "When you start taking away from retirement, you're going in the wrong direction. I'm happy with locality pay."

Schank, who rents an apartment in Los Angeles' Hawthorne neighborhood and has a short commute to work, said being willing to make tradeoffs is what living in the area is all about.

"I have a one-bedroom apartment and I pay \$800 a month," he said. "I'm a minority [as a white man] in the building I live in. Some people wouldn't want to do that."

Outside of California, federal executives view the proposal with mixed emotions. Many are also concerned about locality pay going away.

Cindy Hillman, executive director of the Kansas City Federal Executive Board, said locality pay has been a boon for her area.

"It's been a real plus to get good executives and management types out here. When you don't have a coast, you don't have oceans and you don't have mountains, you've got to have something," she said.

A recent redrawing of locality pay boundaries has put Kansas City back in the Rest of the U.S. category instead of a higher locality pay zone. Hillman declined to comment on the housing allowance idea without seeing the proposal first.

John Palguta, vice president for policy at the Partnership for Public Service, commends the executive boards for taking on the issue, but said he questions whether switching locality pay for a housing allowance is a viable solution.

"I get nervous when you're only looking at one variable," he said. "Any time, particularly in a pay setting, when you have a single variable you're basing your decisions on, you start getting into the realm of unintended consequences."

Palguta said an improvement on the current system would consider a variety of costs such as food, transportation, housing and the cost of labor, by occupation, for different areas.

Mike Mason, executive director of Houston's Federal Executive Board, said the cost of labor still needs to be figured into the federal pay equation for cities like Houston that have a low cost of housing. The cost of an average house in Houston is \$138,100, but the locality pay rate is 3 percent higher than in Los Angeles, where the average house price is \$474,700.

Still, Mason said he empathizes with his counterparts in California.

"It's hard not to be sympathetic when they're drowning trying to pay the rent and put food on the table. I understand their position. Indeed, I would hate to live there myself. You simply couldn't afford to buy a house," Mason said.

He said something must be done to address federal pay as it relates to both the cost of living and the cost of labor in different parts of the country.

"It should've been addressed a long time ago," he said. "I think the government is going to find themselves in a real bind. The problem's been in the making for years."

Email: acurl@federaltimes.com

# 'Hard sell' on the Hill

## California execs hone strategy to get support on pay proposal

By AIMEE CURL

A group of California federal executives are in Washington this week to brief lawmakers on their proposal to give hard-hit federal employees a housing allowance — and they know they face long odds.

"It's a hard sell. Lawmakers look for short-term, cheap solutions. This is a long-term, expensive solution, but it's a viable solution if there's enough political will to implement it," said Kathrene Hansen, executive director of the Greater Los Angeles Federal Executive Board.

Senior federal executives from Los Angeles and San Francisco are proposing to trade in the current locality pay system for a military-like housing allowance. As part of the idea, the Rest of the U.S. locality pay zone would become the new base pay. The housing allowance, which would be tax free, wouldn't count toward retirement or the salary cap.

Henry Romero, who oversaw compensation and performance programs at the Office of Personnel Management in the Clinton administration, said one giant obstacle is that the proposal would mean a wholesale change to the 1990 Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act.

"You're basically upsetting a decades-old pay principle," he said. "It would take some doing to change the law."

Ed Stephenson, senior adviser for human capital programs at the National Academy of Public Administration, warned the plan could also get hung up because of proposed changes to tax law.

"Anytime you start talking about it being tax free, would make it more complicated on the Hill," he said.

While there's no price tag for the proposal because it doesn't specify which metropolitan areas would be eligible for the housing allowance, both advocates and observers agree it would be more expensive than the current system.

"The bottom line is, how much will it cost?" Romero said. "If it's not taxable, then that's a big chunk of receipts not going to the U.S. Treasury. Another factor would be that most of the money would go to high-cost urban areas. Every tweaking is going to have a vested interest that's going to howl."

The California Federal Executive Boards convened a task force more than a year ago to come up with recommendations for how to fix the predicament that federal employees face in high-cost regions — and that locality pay is not solving. The executives say they want policy makers to understand their plight and address it now — before their recruitment and retention challenges worsen as hundreds of thousands of federal managers

and employees retire over the next decade.

Some also say the timing is good because policy makers are already beginning to redesign compensation programs for feds across government, starting with the Defense and Homeland Security departments.

Defense's new pay plan, called the National Security Personnel System, will peg pay raises to job performance. But it also envisions a pay component, similar to locality pay, that aims to make compensation more "market sensitive." To do this, the department intends to calculate a portion of employees' pay using variables such as mission requirements, labor costs, and other relevant factors — a category that could include things like housing and transportation, observers say.

"It's timely that we bring this up now before they change everything," said Diana Louie, executive director of the San Francisco Bay Area Federal Executive Board.

She said the point of the housing allowance proposal is to make sure decision makers understand the challenges faced by managers in high-cost areas.

"Washington might not even know how critical this is because they're not looking at it like we do," she said.

"In Washington, they're far removed from the human toll," Hansen added.

During their visit to Washington, Hansen, Louie and other proponents will brief their proposal to members of the California congressional delegation.

While a grassroots effort is a good way to start, NAPA's Stephenson said it's critical that advocates find people in Washington to take up their cause.

"They need to find a sponsor back here on the Hill" as well as at the Office of Personnel Management or the Office of Management and Budget, he said. "There's tremendous interest in reforming personnel rules in this administration right now."

OPM declined to comment publicly on the proposal, but officials familiar with the idea say privately that the administration is unhappy about the Federal Executive Boards bringing their plan directly to lawmakers.

Romero, now a senior consultant at Federal Management Partners in Alexandria, Va., said this conflict is to be expected because of the natural tension that exists between the Federal Executive Boards and OPM.

"OPM's interest is going to be a political one. The FEBs have an interest in what's best for employees. They are going to be at odds," he said. "The FEBs could've done the right protocol and briefed OPM two months ago, but the proposal would've been dead on arrival. The FEB

# A matter of opinion

The housing allowance idea has California feds talking:



**'I've heard of new hires, GS-7s, not having a place to stay, people staying in their cars. . . . It's difficult to watch people come out here and struggle.'**

Liberty Kaai  
FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION, IRVINE, CALIF.



**'Where's the extra money going to come from? It all has to come out of the same pie. There will be losers as well as winners.'**

Robert O'Loughlin  
FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION, SAN FRANCISCO



**'What would make President Bush want to dish out more money to federal employees when he just cut locality pay?'**

Emily Morrison  
FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION, IRVINE, CALIF.



**'Since I'm approaching retirement and locality pay factors into that and the housing allowance would not, that would be one concern I'd have.'**

Kathy Thompson  
FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION, SAN FRANCISCO



**'Right now I live cheaply. . . . I can't save because of the position I'm in. I'd like to buy a home someday. The Variable Housing Allowance could be a significant factor in whether I stay or not.'**

Brian Paschall  
LOS ANGELES AIR FORCE BASE



**'It's situational. A housing allowance may be good for some and not for others. There should be some flexibility built into the system.'**

James Gill  
LOS ANGELES AIR FORCE BASE



**'A Variable Housing Allowance would help. It would eliminate the worries here. It would help to keep people here if they could live in an area where their families would be safe, where they wouldn't have to worry while they're on the job.'**

Sarah Pullen  
DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION, LOS ANGELES

PHOTOS BY AIMEE CURL

folks know that. That's why they're doing it differently."

Hansen said the California executive boards informed OPM about their efforts when they convened the task force.

Romero said the only way change will occur is if the movement gains broad appeal.

"There has been a groundswell of interest in making changes to the system as a whole because people outside of L.A. and San Fran-

cisco decide [locality pay] is not doing the job," he said. "Everybody must rise up and say the whole system is not only flawed, but here is the impact."

Spokesmen for California Democratic Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein declined to comment on the proposal until they speak with its proponents.

Hansen said she hopes the meetings with lawmakers will be a starting point.

Louie called them "just the beginning."

"We hope to start the dialogue, get the information out there, and make lawmakers and their constituents aware," Louie said.

"It may not be the perfect solution," added Hansen. "The idea is to raise the awareness of lawmakers. The real solution will likely be a compromise."

Email: [acurl@federaltimes.com](mailto:acurl@federaltimes.com)

# Commentary

PERSPECTIVES AND ANALYSIS

## EDITORIAL

THE CASE FOR HOUSING PAY

# Feds must be able to afford to serve

California federal executives are sticking their necks out — and likely incurring the administration's wrath — for advocating a housing allowance for some federal employees. It is beyond unusual for federal executives to actively promote a cause that does not have the administration's blessing.

Hopefully, policy makers — both in Congress and the administration — will lend them an ear rather than the back of a hand.

The California executives feel their situation is desperate enough to warrant a public campaign for housing allowance. Their problem: They find it increasingly difficult to recruit and keep employees because of the high cost to live in many parts of the state. Federal locality pay simply does not do the job in making life affordable for federal employees, especially those at the entry and middle levels.

Given that pay reform is clearly in vogue these days, the California executives see this as an opportune time to bring up their beef with locality pay.

The fundamental problem is that locality pay is designed to help narrow the pay gap that exists between federal employees and nonfeds who do comparable work. It is not designed to help feds cope with high costs of living. For that matter, locality pay, created by the 1990 Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act, has not even lived up to its designated purpose of narrowing the pay gap between feds and nonfeds.

California federal executives make a good case that locality pay does lit-

tle to soothe those living in high-priced regions. As an example, consider this: The combined base and locality pay of a GS-9, Step 3 in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Houston varies less than \$2,000. Yet median housing prices in those three cities varies wildly — from \$138,100 in Houston, to \$474,700 in L.A. to \$641,700 in San Francisco. The result is that feds in Los Angeles and San Francisco cannot buy a house unless they commute for hours, in some cases. And so the problem of recruiting and retention becomes obvious.

But what is less clear is how severe the recruiting and retention problem in California is, and whether it is worse than that of federal agencies across the country. So far, the recruitment and retention problems the California executives cite appear only anecdotal.

Ultimately, the solution here will be neither easy nor cheap. But as lawmakers and the administration proceed with reforming pay for federal employees, they must address this critical problem of how to make jobs in high-cost regions more affordable. If not, the government will increasingly find it simply cannot afford to set up shop there. And given the many critical federal missions and services in California — immigration, port security, border security, environmental protection and forest-fire fighting, to name just a few — this is unacceptable.

The bottom line is that pay for feds must be fair, it must be based on performance — and it must be effective at attracting and keeping employees.

## LETTERS

### GAO recruiting program

Mention of a salary for the Government Accountability Office's Professional Development Program in the June 26 Career Matters column, "Federal internships can make a difference for college students," may have created some confusion in readers' minds.

Rather than an internship program for students, the Professional Development Program supports our recruitment of permanent staff for a range of positions, from entry level to positions requiring advanced degrees and additional experience. Individual salaries are based on the applicant's education and experience.

GAO's student interns are typically hired for temporary summer positions while earning their undergraduate or graduate degrees. The salary for these positions is approximately \$37,000 per year in the Washington area.

JESSE HOSKINS,  
CHIEF HUMAN CAPITAL OFFICER  
Government Accountability Office

### Fairness for FERS employees

In his June 5 letter, George Marchant opposes giving employees under the Federal Employees Retirement System credit for unused sick leave at retirement. He states that FERS and the Civil Service Retirement System "each had its tradeoffs when it was created" and that "the FERS folks want to change the rules in the middle of the game." He suggests that when FERS was created there was some immutable, delicate balance struck between the two plans, and that giving FERS employees some additional benefit would require sweetening the pot for CSRS employees as well.

However, when FERS was initially implemented, FERS employees could contribute a maximum of 10 percent of their

basic pay each pay period to the Thrift Savings Plan; CSRS could only contribute 5 percent. The rules have now been changed so that both CSRS and FERS can contribute up to the IRS maximum, currently \$15,000. This change not only benefited many FERS and CSRS employees, but also provided an additional benefit for CSRS employees, since it put them on equal ground with FERS employees with respect to tax-deferred employee contributions. This shifted the balance heavily in favor of CSRS employees.

Giving FERS employees credit for unused sick leave would pale in comparison to the additional relative benefit CSRS employees have already gotten as a result of allowing them to contribute the same amount to the TSP as FERS employees. Yet Mr. Marchant suggests that such a change would only be appropriate if CSRS employees got yet another benefit, such as retroactive matching contributions to the TSP for CSRS employees. Matching contributions for FERS only was a critical part of the initial "tradeoff." That would not only tip the balance too far toward CSRS, that would knock the scales completely off their moorings.

DAVID HUTNER  
Chevy Chase, Md.

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## FOR THE RECORD

**'We have a service mentality. We're hesitant to appear to be gluttonous leaches on society. What's motivating us is to see that our employees aren't suffering.'**

George Dutile,  
Citizenship and Immigration  
Services, Laguna Niguel, Calif.

On managers advocating for their employees when it comes to a housing allowance **Story, Page 1**



## FEDERALTIMES

www.federaltimes.com

### Editor

Steven Watkins  
swatkins@federaltimes.com

### Deputy Editor

Markie Harwood  
mharwood@federaltimes.com

### Copy Chief

Catherine Anderhalt  
canderhalt@federaltimes.com

### Senior Copy Editor

Toni Maltagliati  
tmaltag@federaltimes.com

### SENIOR WRITER

**Pay and benefits**  
Tim Kauffman  
tkauffman@federaltimes.com

### STAFF WRITERS

**Homeland Security**  
Stephen Losey  
slosey@federaltimes.com

### Procurement

Chris Gosier  
cgosier@federaltimes.com

### Program management

Aimee Curl  
acurl@federaltimes.com

### Work-force management

Mollie Ziegler  
mziegler@federaltimes.com

### CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Dan Davidson  
DavidsonDN@aol.com

Reg Jones  
RegJones33@aol.com

Mike Miles  
mmiles@turnkeyfs.com

Lily Whiteman  
lily.whiteman@verizon.net

### PHOTO DEPARTMENT

**Photo Director**  
Alan Lessig

### Senior Photographer

Rob Curtis

### Photographers

Rick Kozak, James J. Lee,  
M. Scott Mahaskey and Sheila Vemmer

### Photo Reprints

picdesk@atpco.com

### ART DEPARTMENT

**Art Director**  
Mark Fondersmith

### Assistant Art Director

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**Graphic Artists**  
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John Harman, Bryan Smith and Marcia  
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**Robert Hoderne**  
Senior Managing Editor

### Editorial Headquarters

6883 Commercial Drive  
Springfield, Va. 22159-0190  
Telephone: (703) 642-7300  
Fax: (703) 750-8603  
E-mail: fedlet@federaltimes.com