

Omaha Executive: 'We Owe It to Them' Some Employers Do More For Their Workers in War

By Kevin Kelly

World-Herald Staff Writer

When Marvin Ammons switched employers from Mutual of Omaha to Uncle Sam, his pay and his civilian benefits remained the same.

The insurance company is one of the major employers in the Midlands that are paying the difference between civilian and military pay and keeping intact other benefits such as seniority, retirement plans and health insurance coverage for families of employees called to military service.

Mutual is paying the difference in salary and other benefits to 15 employees who have been activated for Operation Desert Storm, said Kathy Olson, public relations manager.

Another 56 employees are in military reserve units that have not been called up, she said. If they get the call, they will receive the same benefits.

Wife, Son

Ammons, a member of the 172nd Transportation Company based at Fort Omaha, was called to active duty in October.

Sgt. Ammons' wife, Pasinetta, also a Mutual of Omaha employee, said the company's pay policy and the moral support she has received from co-workers have eased the separation from her husband for her and their 5-year-old son, Marvel.

"At first, when the (military) checks were coming so iffy and spotty, we were worried," Mrs. Ammons said. "With this (company policy) and his rank and overseas pay, we're managing."

Iowa Guard Seeks Businesses to Honor

The Iowa Army National Guard is looking for corporations to honor for their support of employees who have been called to military duty.

Lt. Col. Robert C. King, public affairs officer, said the Guard wants to know about companies that are providing military reservists and guardmen with benefits exceeding the legal requirements.

Those benefits might include making up the difference between civilian and military pay; maintaining group health insurance benefits for families; and continuing profit-

sharing programs.

Federal law requires that corporations hold activated reservists' civilian jobs for four years and that companies give reservists the opportunity to continue group health-insurance coverage at the reservists' expense.

Iowa employers who are exceeding those requirements are asked to contact the Iowa National Guard Headquarters, 7700 N.W. Beaver Drive, Johnston, Iowa 50131-1902, or call (515) 242-5293 by Wednesday.

Based on a spot check, ConAgra, Union Pacific Railroad, Sears, Idelman Telemarketing, First Data Resources, AT&T Omaha Works, First National Bank of Omaha, Nebraska Public Power District in Columbus, Neb., and Midwest Resources Inc. in Des Moines also are providing benefits for periods ranging from six months to indefinitely.

Maintaining civilian pay can cost a corporation thousands of dollars per employee, said Lt. Col. Leonard Krenk, public affairs officer for the Nebraska National Guard.

That kind of support goes far beyond legal requirements, he said from Lincoln.

'Half the Battle'

"The only thing they are required to do by law is to bring the person back at

the same status and same pay as when they left," Krenk said.

Knowing that their families are not hurting financially takes a big load off reservists' minds, he said.

"They know their families will be taken care of, and that's half the battle of being gone," he said. "If you're young militarily, at a low rank, and you have a good job as a civilian, there could be a big cut."

When an employer makes up the pay difference, he said, "it means stability and less worry for the whole family."

Some corporate executives said they felt a moral duty to prevent financial hardship for the families of employees suddenly called to military service.

"It's the right thing to do," said Lynn Phares, ConAgra's vice president of



Yellow ribbon of support... Ideas to help families of workers

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Yellow ribbon of support . . . Ernest Wesolowski and Geraldine Young of AT&T Omaha Works are on a committee that forms ideas to help families of workers involved in the war.

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public relations and community affairs. Bill Henry, executive vice president of First National Bank of Omaha, said, "You could go through all the patriotic issues of why we're doing it. We owe it to them. We're behind them 1,000 percent."

Said Steve Idelman, president of Idelman Telemarketing: "It shows our support for the guys over there."

Mail, Phone Benefits

Some corporations are taking extra steps — beyond the extra steps.

Mutual of Omaha has set up a special mailbox for letters and packages from employees to their loved ones in the Persian Gulf. The company pays the postage, said Ms. Olson, the public relations manager.

AT&T Omaha Works is providing free message service to the gulf for all employees and is giving the families of five Omaha employees on active duty an additional \$50 a month on top of the difference in pay and continued health insurance coverage, said Gene Saab, personnel and labor relations manager.

That money, he said, is a "telephone allowance."

"We're doing that so they can call home," he said. "The money doesn't have to be used for that, but we wanted to provide it."

In addition, AT&T Omaha Works formed a committee of employees to think of new ways to help the families of their co-workers in the military and employees who have relatives and friends in the Persian Gulf.

The committee has decided to have a moment of silence on all three shifts on the third Thursday of every month, beginning this Thursday.

Yellow Encouraged

Employees are encouraged to wear yellow every Thursday to indicate their support, Saab said.

The company has troop support buttons available and has put up two bulletin boards where employees with relatives and friends in the Persian Gulf are encouraged to display photos and mementos.

A 6-foot yellow ribbon has been tied

to a telephone pole near the plant's front entrance.

AT&T has doubled the period it will pay the civilian-military salary difference, to 26, 40 or 52 weeks depending on length of employment, Saab said.

The full year's benefit applies to employees who have been with AT&T for at least one year, Saab said.

Union Pacific Railroad, with 30 employees called to service nationwide and another 65 belonging to reserve units waiting to be called up, began making up the pay difference last fall.

"Our policy for any reservist called to active duty is that we will continue to provide the difference in pay. Their benefits will also continue," spokesman John Bromley said. "This policy started immediately when the reserve units began to be called. I can't say it's indefinite, but we haven't set a deadline for ending it."

New at Idelman

Idelman Telemarketing's policy started last week, Idelman said.

It initially will cover the difference in an employee's salary for up to a year. Idelman said he will review the policy at the end of a year and possibly extend it.

"We'll take a look at it then and see where we go from there."

The pay difference is given to full- and part-time employees, no matter how long they have been employed by the company, Idelman said.

The company has 16 employees who are on active military duty — 12 from Nebraska and others from Kansas and South Dakota, he said.

First National Bank of Omaha is picking up the difference in salary and maintaining health insurance benefits for the families of five employees on active military duty, said Henry, the executive vice president.

The bank has replaced its corporate flags at all 24 locations across Nebraska with U.S. flags. A yellow flag flies under the U.S. flag.

Sears nationwide provides what it calls "encampment pay," which makes up the pay difference to employees who are on active military duty and maintains health insurance coverage. Three Sears employees from Omaha have been activated.

Brad Burwell, Sears' general manager in Omaha, said the corporation

recently extended that benefit for up to a year, with another extension possible if the Persian Gulf war continues.

The program, he said, is not new at Sears.

"We've done it in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War," Burwell said. "It's just the way we take care of our employees. We think we'll get loyal employees when they come back."

First Data Resources makes up the difference in pay and maintains other benefits. It recently extended the program for up to a year from the date an employee is called to active duty, said corporate relations manager Joyce Bunker.

"We are continuing to review that policy and will update it if necessary," Mrs. Bunker said.

Honored by Guard

Midwest Resources Inc., parent company of Iowa Power Inc. and Iowa Public Service Co., which provide electrical and natural gas service to hundreds of thousands of customers in Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota and Minnesota, makes up the cut in pay and maintains benefits for its employees on active duty, spokesman John McCarroll said from Des Moines.

The Iowa National Guard recently honored Midwest Resources for its support.

Nebraska Public Power District, with headquarters in Columbus, gave a month's pay to each of its six employees who are on active duty. The NPPD board ordered the payment in October, NPPD Public Affairs Manager Ron Bogus said from Columbus.

The policy earned NPPD an award from the Nebraska National Guard last month, Lt. Col. Krenk said.

Modern Business Systems, a copy machine and facsimile machine sales corporation that has an office in Omaha, makes up the difference in pay for activated reservists and grants leaves of absence for up to five years.

"Many families are suffering financial hardship due to reduction in income while serving in activated reserve units," said Hallie Gibbs, president of Modern Business Systems, which is based in Jefferson City, Mo. "We do not want the employees of Modern Business Systems who are serving our country to suffer this unnecessary burden."