



(Left) A U.S. Army Soldier applies camouflage face paint at a land navigation course on Camp Williams, Utah, April 15, 2021. (Right) An AI image generated by the *NCO Journal*.

What is the Purpose of Use or Lose Leave?

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Sergeants Major Academy

Many Soldiers have felt the pain of losing leave because of the U.S. Army's leave policy, especially those in higher positions due to increased responsibilities. It is always good practice to set the example and take leave as a leader, as this shows your Soldiers the importance of rest and recovery, though sometimes it cannot happen because of mission requirements and therefore, leave remains untaken. Considering

what has happened culturally and physically across the globe, the Army should allow for more than 60 days of accrued leave, compensate Soldiers for lost leave or expand government leave programs to prevent Soldiers from the pain of losing earned leave.

The Problem

Why do we even lose leave? Under the Army's annual

leave program, Soldiers lose unused leave days over 60 days accrued at the end of the fiscal year (Department of the Army, 2020). However, where does the leave go? For example, if it is almost October 1st, and a Soldier has ten days of use or lose leave, and they ultimately don't take it, where does that leave go when they lose it? From interviews with Army Civilian Professionals (ACP), they know where the lost leave goes. ACPs willingly participate in a program known as the Voluntary Leave Transfer Program (VLTP) and an additional program known as the Voluntary Leave Bank Program (VLBP).

The best way to prevent losing leave is for Soldiers to use it before the fiscal year's end, mission permitting. Another solution involves donating excess leave to another Soldier. Army civilians have this opportunity. Why don't Soldiers? For example, Soldiers often don't take holiday or unit block leave because they don't have enough leave days. This is especially true for Soldiers who experience hardship in the first year of their enlistment. When it comes time for block leave, if Soldiers don't have anything accrued, and they want to take leave, they must go negative or "in the hole." Why should they have to go in the hole? Solutions to this problem exist, and the analysis of a few possibilities further clarifies the situation.

Voluntary Leave Transfer Program

ACPs and Non-appropriated Fund (NAF) employees possess the capability to voluntarily transfer their accrued leave from one employee to another. Donating leave from one Soldier to another is a concept that doesn't exist in the Army today. The fact sheet (n.d.) published on the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) website explains how, under the VLTP, "a covered employee may donate annual leave directly to another employee who has a personal or family medical emergency and who has exhausted his or her available paid leave" (para. 1). The OPM website provides valuable information and insight into another program known as the Voluntary Leave Bank Program (VLBP). The VLTP and VLBP are available for ACPs and NAF

employees but not for Soldiers.

Offering a program like the VLTP or VLBP to Soldiers promotes the Army's "This is my Squad" team building initiative and is also a way for individual Soldiers to support each other. The two program's



Trainees await transportation from the Solomon Center back to their units Jan. 3, 2020. The trainees had just arrived back on Fort Jackson from Victory Block Leave.(U.S. Army photo by Robert Timmons)

stipulations and differences in calculating time off differ from how a Soldier's leave is calculated, making Soldiers ineligible to use the programs as they are. However, this may allow the Army to overhaul its current leave and pass policy. One such difference revolves around hours of paid sick leave. Government employees participate in shared leave programs to avoid using or running out of paid sick leave or using any unpaid leave option (Bradbury, 2019). Soldiers don't worry about unpaid leave or unpaid time off while recovering from illness or injury. Soldiers receive total compensation unless in an Absent Without Leave (AWOL) status (Department of the Army, 2019).

Soldiers can only accrue use or lose leave once they have served for at least three years. Some Soldiers may not support such a new program because they may not see its

benefits as others. A simple set of surveys between Soldiers and ACPs revealed positive and negative opinions (see Appendix A and B). In the same survey, 30 of 62 respondents strongly agreed they would donate to someone in need if given the opportunity.

Only 12 personnel participated in the survey designed for ACPs. However, of those 12, nearly two-thirds admitted to donating leave to someone in need, and none reported receiving leave from someone else. By donating leave in this manner, respondents embodied the Army Values and showed genuine care for their team.

***For a full review of the surveys, see Appendix A and Appendix B at the end of the article.**

The Solution

Using leave is the simplest solution for those who accrue more than 60 days. If Soldiers use their accrued leave, they cannot lose it, but that doesn't solve the problem of Soldiers going into negative leave balances or needing to take leave for unexpected situations like

family emergencies or medical issues. Leave donation programs help Soldiers and their families just as it does on the Army's civilian side.

One way is for the Army to have a specific Soldier-to-Soldier donation program managed at the battalion level. A Soldier needs leave, and Soldiers within the unit donate the needed leave. A farfetched solution is that a lost leave's accountability and audit process happens at an organization such as Army Emergency Relief (AER). Then AER can donate the exact amount of leave Soldiers need.

Changing federal law offers another pathway to a suitable solution. Per 37 United States Code (USC) 551, Soldiers that accrue any leave greater than 60 days lose that leave unless protected by any Special Leave Accrual (SLA) program or in a missing status (Department of

the Army, 2019). 10 USC 701 provides the foundation for leave accrual and is the abiding body that limits the amount of accrued leave to 60 days.

Conclusion

Concentrating efforts to improve the lives of Soldiers and their families deserves high Army prioritization. Solving old problems or adjusting previous solutions goes a long way toward improving the quality of life. Fundamentally accounting for "lost" leave and ensuring Soldiers don't waste it solves the issues raised here. There is enough reason to brainstorm solutions and dissolve the need for Soldiers to ever go "in the hole." Considering all this, if a Soldier could donate their unused leave to another Soldier in need, they would gladly do so. ■

References

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Office of Personnel Management. <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/leave-administration/factsheets/voluntary-leave-transfer-program/Appendix A>

Appendix A

Use or Lose Leave Survey Administered to Soldiers

(62 Responses)

The author created and shared this 10 questions survey with Soldiers from Fort Bliss, Fort Rucker, and other installations. The survey administration took place via Google Forms and then shared through various forms of communication like text, email, and social media. The survey received 50 responses, with most of the 10 questions answered by all who volunteered to take it. The survey proved non-attributional and did not collect any personally identifiable information or demographic data. The following list depicts the complete set of survey questions administered to Soldiers:

1. Have you heard of the Voluntary Leave Transfer Program (VLTP)?

61.3% responded NO, and 38.7% responded YES

2. Under the Voluntary Leave Transfer Program (VLTP), a covered employee may donate annual leave directly to another employee who has a personal or family medical emergency and who has exhausted their available paid leave. Without knowing more, do you agree/support this program?

90.3% responded YES, 3.2% responded NO, and 6.5% responded UNSURE

3. Why do you or why don't you support VLTP?

This question received 58 out of 62 responses and are available at request.

4. Who do you think should be eligible to participate in the VLTP?

83.9% agreed with DA Civilian participation

53.2% agreed with NAF employee participation

85.5% agreed with Soldier participation

9.7% don't support VLTP

4.8% replied with OTHER

5. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 is least likely and 5 is most likely), how likely would you donate leave if allowed to donate leave to a Soldier in need?

48.4% rated a "5" or MOST LIKELY

24.2% rated a "4"

14.5% rated a "3" or LIKELY

6.5% rated a "2"

6.5% rated a "1" or LEAST LIKELY

6. Prove you are human and select the answer that is most like Apple.

A question entered to ensure a bot did not participate as well as trying to ensure focused answers. All participants responded with "APPLE"

7. Would you do it if you could "cash out" your annual "use or lose" leave?

64.5% responded with YES

17.7% responded with NO

17.7% responded with UNSURE

8. Have you ever received or helped someone else receive support from AER?

69.4% responded with YES

29% responded with NO

1.6% responded with UNSURE

9. How satisfied are you with the Army's Leave and Pass Policy?

11.3% rated a "5" or MOST SATISFIED

24.2% rated a "4"

45.2% rated a "3" or SATISFIED

14.5% rated a "2"

4.8% rated a "1" or LEAST SATISFIED

10. If given the option to donate potential "Lost" leave for AER as a financial contribution, would you consider donating?

54.1% responded YES

8.2% responded NO

36.1% responded UNSURE

1.6% entered their own response and replied: Soldiers should be compensated for lost leave.

Appendix B

Voluntary Leave Transfer Program Survey Administered to Army Civilian Professionals

(12 Responses)

The author created and shared this seven-question survey with the Department of the Army Civilians from Fort Bliss, Fort Rucker, and other installations. The survey administration took place via Google Forms and then shared through various forms of communication like text, email, and social media. The survey received 12 responses, with most of the seven questions answered by all who volunteered to take it. The survey proved non-attributional and did not collect any personally identifiable information or demographic data. The following list depicts the complete set of survey questions administered as well as the synthesized answers:

Are you aware of the Voluntary Leave Transfer Program?

91.7% responded YES, and 8.3% responded NO

Have you participated in the Voluntary Leave Transfer Program?

58.3% responded YES, and 41.7% responded NO

How did you participate?

Of the 12 that responded, 58.3% did not participate in VLTP, and the remaining 41.7% DONATED LEAVE TO SOMEONE ELSE IN NEED

Do you recommend the Voluntary Leave Transfer Program?

91.7% responded YES, and 8.3% responded NO

Did you know that Soldiers don't have the ability to donate leave to each other?

50% responded YES and 50% responded NO

Do you think that Soldiers should have their own version of the Voluntary Leave Transfer Program?

75% responded YES, 16.7% responded NO, and 8.3% were unsure

What is good or bad about the Voluntary Leave Transfer Program?

This question received 10 responses.

1. It is a great program because I feel that if I don't get a chance to use it, I can at least donate it to someone who can. This way it doesn't go to waste.
2. You can help people who really need the leave. Because of work you are not able to use all the hours, it would be better if someone in need can benefit from this program.
3. The positive aspect of the voluntary leave transfer program is it allows personnel to donate their

unused leave to another person who has used theirs but has run into an unfortunate circumstance that would ordinarily not be able to take care without losing pay if the leave were not donated to them.

4. This program affords employees to take additional leave that will exceed their threshold for emergency conditions that is beyond their control.

5. A Soldier may transfer some of their leave to another Soldier in a precarious situation. - A Soldier may do it not conscious of a current or future situation where adequate leave balance may be required. Though individual Soldier manages their leave, when in doubt, the Soldier leadership should be involved to provide guidance and decision making.

6. The Military already has these types of leave: 1. Terminal Leave 2. Ordinary Leave 3. Emergency Leave 4. Convalescent Leave 5. Excess Leave 6. Permissive Temporary Duty (TDY) 7. Block Leave Factor in Holidays, Passes and DONSA days and most military members don't work but 8 months a year. They DON'T need more opportunities for Leave.

7. As with anything, you are going to have people who abuse the program. The good thing is to allow those who do need it. To have that opportunity.

8. It is an effective way for DA civilians who don't have enough leave to get some leave time to help with medical issues.

9. Allowing employees the opportunity to share leave for those who are unable to save leave days.

10. If I have leave to spare, I can share it with those people who need it for emergency leave or PCS leave.

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