

Thanks for Your Service ... Now Here's Your Pay Cut

“**T**here are First-World types in the Foreign Service, and Third-World types, but the Gormans,” a friend once said of us, “are Second-Worlders.” It’s true. We always seem to pick those middle-of-the-road places: hard, but not to the point that we can’t take the kids. Our current post, Beijing, is our fourth hardship post (15-25 percent) in a row.

There’s a method to our madness. Because we have three small children, with another on the way, it makes sense for me to stay home right now and care for them — the day-care costs would make short work of my husband’s government salary. But this means we have to find posts where we can afford to live. One of the reasons we bid on Beijing was because of the 15-percent hardship pay.

When you go to a hardship post, you expect hardships. And we’ve had plenty. The pollution here can be so bad that a thick fog settles over everything, making your eyes feel like they’re bleeding whenever you step outside. My husband’s commute — most nights well over an hour — combined with the long working hours required at a vast post such as this pretty much guarantee that we’ll never eat dinner as a family.

In October, my previously healthy husband developed severe breathing troubles. A lifelong runner, he began wheezing as he climbed the stairs; at night, it sounded like he was drowning in his sleep. He was initially diagnosed with reactive airway disease and then a severe sinus infection. After an inhaler, steroids and some four to five courses of antibiotics, his condition improved. But only after a trip to Hong Kong, where the air is cleaner, did his symptoms subside.

And the worst hardship of all, in my opinion? About two months into our tour, I caught a mysterious virus that caused me to go deaf in one ear. The doctors in Beijing weren’t equipped to handle the emergency, so I was medevaced to Hong Kong. There, doctors tried to restore my hearing, though warned that the odds were against me, given how much time had elapsed. Back home in the States, or at a post that was more medically advanced, I would have been able to get treatment at the ER within hours, improving my odds. Here, not so. I’m now permanently deaf in one ear. Then again, as a colleague pointed out, “I suppose that’s one of the reasons you get hardship pay over there.”

I suppose it is. Imagine my shock, then, when a few months later, State decided to reduce our hardship pay. One of the rea-

sons cited was the “improved quality of locally provided health care.” I could relate numerous examples why this simply doesn’t ring true, and so could many other family members here in Beijing. Many of us have a story of some health problem we’ve developed since arriving at post. Another reason cited: improved air quality. We spouses all had a good laugh at that one. At the time, our kids were having an indoor playdate, because the air that day was so bad that they couldn’t go outside. In fact, two days after Christmas the air pollution index was 433 in downtown Beijing, 500 in the suburbs where we live. To put things into perspective, on an unhealthy pollution day in a major U.S. city the API is between 40 and 60.



The Gorman family at the Great Wall of China.

We’re all just a bit suspicious about this pay cut we’ve been slapped with, following as it does on the heels of the decision to take away business-class travel for flights over 14 hours. (Our travel time to post is right around the 14-hour mark.) But, okay. Reduce the hardship pay if you must.

Here’s the thing, though: we chose this post based in part on what it meant for our pocketbook. We knew the risks involved, though we couldn’t have imagined what the reality would be. We need that money,

and it isn’t right to take it from us, and from families like ours, who came here in good faith, believing they would be compensated for the risk they chose to take.

If State needs to reduce hardship pay, for financial or other reasons, they ought to grandfather in the policy. People who are already assigned to post should not be given pay cuts — they should be allowed to keep what they were promised when they moved here. Future bidders can be promised less, and they can make decisions for their families based on their own financial calculations.

But please, don’t try to tell me that the quality of life in Beijing has risen to such an extent that my family deserves a pay cut. Given all that we’ve been through in our first six months at post, I don’t buy that argument — I just can’t afford it anymore. □

Donna Scaramastra Gorman is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in Newsweek, the Washington Post and the Christian Science Monitor. Her family has been posted in Moscow, Yerevan and Almaty. They are currently assigned to Beijing. Editor’s Note: A letter signed by a majority of Foreign Service members at Embassy Beijing — 98 employees — was sent to the director general to express concern about the decrease in the differential.