

Retiree Corner

Being Legal and Staying Legal in Korea

By Jack Terwiel

Military Retiree Assistance Office

A retiree not covered by the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) is a guest in Korea. The retiree is here because he voluntarily elected to come to Korea or remain in Korea after finishing active duty service or post-service employment under the SOFA.

Except for active-duty members, a passport is mandatory for any U.S. citizen traveling or, in our case, living outside the United States. Last November, Korea changed the rule for visitors, extending visa-free entry from 30 days to 90 days. That means a person with a U.S. passport can enter Korea without a visa and remain for up to 90 days, after which the visitor must leave. Failing to leave will result in a fine that increases for each day that the visitor remains illegally. Retirees who elect to live in Korea as a Resident Alien must have an F-series visa, the type depending on your sponsor. Sponsor? Yes, you must be sponsored by a Korean and normally this means your Korean spouse. That person assumes responsibility for your presence in Korea. Your obligation is to renew the visa before it expires, and to renew the passport before it expires.

Some retirees have decided they know better and don't need to follow these rules. The problems arise when the retiree is forced to leave Korea, either due to illness or death. In both cases, the illegal retiree's status must be repaired, and that means settling with the Korean government by paying the fine for overstaying, and working with the American Embassy to obtain a passport (for a living retiree). In the event of retiree death while illegal, the family members, either in Korea or in the U.S., must settle hospital bills and any other expenses before the body is released.