



FFAS HUMAN RESOURCES DIVISION NEWSLETTER



Farm and Foreign
Agricultural Services
Human Resources Division

January 2011

Veteran's Preference NOT Applicable for Non-Federal County Hires

Barbara Boyd, Chief
Policy and Accountability Branch

Just a reminder to FSA State Offices to ensure your County (CO) Job announcements include the statement that these are non-civil service positions and veteran's preference does not apply. With the influx of veterans into the workforce we are seeing an increase in inquiries from potential applicants trying to use veteran's preference to apply for CO positions.

FSA CO positions are not covered by Title 5 hiring requirements. These positions are not part of the civil service, neither competitive nor excepted service. However, CO positions are authorized under Title 7 and while considered employees of FSA, they are non-federal positions as they are legally employees of the local elected FSA county committee (COC). The COC is subject to hiring authorities and standards that are established by the agency. These standards require that potential employees are selected on merit type principals based on qualifications.

While non-discrimination in selections is a requirement and outreach to find highly qualified diverse candidates are encouraged, neither disability nor veterans preferences are applicable to this non-federal workforce.

Qualified veterans can be an excellent pool from which to recruit for qualified applicants when announcements are open to the public but all applicants must meet qualification and eligibility requirements to be considered.

Hopefully this information will help FSA State Offices respond to applicants as well as ensuring they have the statement in the job announcement.

Thrift Savings Plan 2011

Submitted by Maria Rinaldi
Human Resources Assistant
Operations Branch

January processing schedule

- **January 17, 2011** — The financial markets will be closed on this day in observance of the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday. Consequently, the Thrift Savings Plan will also be closed. Transactions that would have been processed Monday night (January 17) will be processed Tuesday night (January 18) at Tuesday's closing share prices.

Thrift Savings Plan 2011 (continued)

- **Quarterly Participant Statements** — For the period October 1, 2010, through December 31, 2010, should be available in My Account later this month and will be mailed to those who requested them.
- **IRS Forms 1099-R** — This form will be posted on TSP's website and mailed by January 31, 2011. Make sure TSP has your correct address. If you have an address change **and are separated from service**, change it in [My Account](#), or call the [ThriftLine](#) and speak to a TSP service representative. If you are **actively employed**, contact your agency for service.

L 2050 Fund — This fund will open on January 31 with an initial share price of \$10. As the L Fund with the most distant time horizon, its investment mix will feature higher percentages in domestic and foreign stocks (the C, S, and I Funds) and lower percentages of Government securities and bonds (the G and F Funds). Participants can begin making contribution allocations and interfund transfers into the L 2050 Fund beginning at 12 noon Eastern Time on January 28. These elections will become effective on January 31.

Beneficiary Participant Accounts — Spouse beneficiaries who inherit the TSP accounts of deceased civilian and uniformed services TSP participants are now eligible to remain in the TSP. Accounts for these beneficiaries are referred to as beneficiary participant accounts on TSP forms, publications, notices, and the website. For more detailed information about these accounts and the plan rules that govern them, visit [Beneficiary Participants](#) on the Plan Participation page.

IRS Contribution Limits — In 2011, you may contribute up to \$16,500 in tax-deferred money to the TSP. If you are a member of the uniformed services, you may contribute a total of \$49,000 in tax-deferred and tax-exempt money. If you will be age 50 or older during 2011, you may also contribute up to \$5,500 in additional “catch-up” contributions if you expect to reach the \$16,500 limit in 2011.

Annual Participant Statement — The TSP will begin mailing annual participant statements in February. The annual statement summarizes the activity in your account during 2010 and provides other useful account information.

Contact your benefits personnel for additional information about the TSP.

Temporary Decrease in the Social Security Employee Tax Rate

Darla Hensley
Human Resources Specialist
Employee/Labor Relations and Benefits Branch

The “Tax Relief, Unemployment Insurance Reauthorization, and Job Creation Act of 2010” provides that during 2011 the Social Security employee tax rate will be temporarily decreased from 6.2% to 4.2%. The temporary reduction in the Social Security tax rate will not affect the employee retirement contribution rates for employees under the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS), CSRS-offset, or the Federal Employees’ Retirement System (FERS). As a result, CSRS-offset and FERS employees will see their payroll deductions decrease by 2% up to the 2011 Social Security maximum taxable income of \$106,800 (unchanged from 2010). There will be no deduction change based on this Act for CSRS employees.

Social Security Employee Tax Rate (continued)

What is the effect of the Social Security tax change for employees under CSRS? Since they do not pay Social Security, this Social Security change does not benefit them and there will be no change in their retirement deductions.

What is the effect of the Social Security tax change for employees under CSRS-offset? Their Social Security tax will be reduced by 2% and there will be no change in their retirement deductions.

What is the effect of the Social Security tax change for employees under FERS? Their Social Security tax will be reduced by 2% and there will be no change in their retirement deductions.

The role of the IDP in Employee Development Planning

Val Cummins, Chief
Leadership and Employee Development Branch

Individual development planning helps identify an employee's career development goals and the strategies for achieving them. Typically, the employee will complete an Individual Development Plan on an annual basis. This plan is intended to encourage the employee to take ownership of his/her career development, provide an administrative mechanism for identifying and tracking development needs and plans, and it also assist in planning for the agency's training and development requirements.

Individual development planning benefits the organization by aligning employee training and development efforts with the mission, goals, and objectives of the agency. Supervisors develop a better understanding of their employees' professional goals, strengths, and development needs—which can result in more realistic staff and development planning. Employees take personal responsibility and accountability for their career development, acquiring or enhancing the skills they need to stay current in required skills.

Supervisors and employees work together to complete the employee's development plan, but employees are ultimately responsible for taking the initiative for their professional development.

Employees should:

- Assess their level of competence vis-à-vis the competencies, skills, and knowledge required in their jobs
- Identify their professional career goals and development needs and various training and development opportunities that will help them achieve those goals and meet those needs
- Periodically assess their progress toward reaching their goals.

Supervisors should:

- Realistically assess employees' strengths and development needs vis-à-vis organizational requirements
- Provide regular (e.g., annual) opportunities to discuss and plan for employees' development
- Ensure the alignment of employees' career goals and development needs to work unit goals/objectives
- Help employees identify appropriate training and development opportunities
- Evaluate outcomes of employees' training and development efforts.

POC: Mark Nelson (Learning Consultant, HRD LEDB) (816) 926-7992

Employee Assistance Program

Juliet McBride
Human Resources Specialist
Employee/Labor Relations and Benefits Branch

Don't hesitate to explore the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to help cope with personal and/or work-related issues and concerns and don't feel alone. From time to time, employees including managers and supervisors may experience personal or work-related issues and concerns that could affect their well-being, conduct, or performance. All FSA, RMA, and FAS employees and their family members may obtain professional assistance from the EAP.

The EAP:

- Empowers employees to resolve personal problems that may impact their well-being, conduct, and performance.
- Provides high quality assessment, short-term problem solving, and referral and follow-up services for Federal employees and their family members.
- Provides comprehensive EAP services that deliver short-term, problem-focused counseling along with a variety of services using professional counselors.

Note: Be proactive and contact the EAP before your issues and concerns become a problem. Employees may receive up to 4 free counseling sessions for each new situation.

- Provides consultation to managers and supervisors including labor representatives in an effort to improve employee job performance affected by personal problems and challenges or behavioral health issues.
- Provides financial and legal advice.
- Provides a variety of health and wellness trainings that can be coordinated for all locations through the FSA EAP Program Manager.

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) is available through the EAP and provides consultation to management officials in the development of plans for handling and responding to traumatic events. Additionally, EAP provides group counseling services to employees who have experienced a traumatic event in an effort to decrease emotional stress and increase overall employee functioning. For example, for threats or actual acts of violence; suicide or homicide; worksite events; natural or man-made disasters; and severe injuries, deaths, or other situations that might have a psychological, legal, and/or impact on the Agency.

Your EAP provider is Federal Occupational Health (FOH). The FOH website www.foh4you.com provides an abundance of information that can help employees, including managers and supervisors balance work and life.

The EAP (continued)

Don't hesitate to contact the EAP. No problem is too small or large. Counseling is free and confidential according to the law. You may contact the EAP 24/7 by calling 800-222-0364, TTY, 888-262-7848. If your call is to report a life threatening situation immediately advise the EAP representative so that assistance can be expedited.

For additional information about the EAP, to request a group CISD or health and wellness training, contact, the FSA EAP Program Manager at 202-401-0683, TTY 202- 205-9057, or juliet.mcbride@wdc.usda.gov.

Minding your Fiscal Health

Submitted by Maria Rinaldi
Human Resources Assistant
Operations Branch

We often highlight our physical health and wellness but what do we do about our fiscal health? As our economy continues to waiver (considering the recent federal pay freeze and health insurance premiums increasing by almost 7%), we as government employees are still required to continue to maintain our fiscal health.

Some may recall that annoying scale outside of the General Nutrition Center (GNC) that asked "Have you checked your weight today?" in an effort to help us support our physical health and wellness. Well, this scale can help with your fiscal health...so...have you checked your [credit report](#) lately? If it's been a year or more, you can order your FREE annual credit report through AnnualCreditReport.com or by calling 1-877-322-8228. The [Federal Trade Commission](#) warns consumers to beware of advertisements for "free credit reports" other than AnnualCreditReport.com. Other products may use the word "free" in their advertising or websites, but often require consumers to spend money.

Each year, you're entitled to get a free credit report from each of the three credit reporting agencies: Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion. You can either space out your requests throughout the year, or request all three reports at once.

Your credit can affect your ability to make large purchases and apply for a loan or mortgage. By checking your credit report, you can ensure that your personal information is accurate and that no fraudulent accounts have been activated.

This is an appropriate time to consider this free service available to all of us which we only get once a year. This information is courtesy of the www.USA.gov website; USA.gov Team FREE Credit Report.

Federal Income Tax

The following link will take you to the OPM.gov website and allow you to calculate your federal tax using their Federal Tax Withholding Calculator [\[more...\]](#)

Emerging Issues

Barbara Boyd, Chief
Policy and Accountability Branch

Federal Pay Freeze: The 2010 pay rates remain in effect for 2011

On December 22, 2010, President Obama signed legislation to prohibit statutory pay adjustments for most Federal civilian employees.

This impacts all FFAS federal employees. It affects the annual pay adjustments, what is commonly referred to as COLAs and increases in locality pay. It does not impact within-grade increases or career ladder promotions. The same provisions are being adopted by FSA for the non-statutory pay adjustments for FSA CO employees. The law also includes a freeze on pay increases for the same period of time for senior executives, senior level employees and senior Foreign Service members. The follow links are to additional guidance and Q&As provided by OPM .

OPM Memorandum: [Freeze on Pay Adjustments for Federal Civilian Employees](#)

OPM: [Questions and Answers on the Pay Freeze](#)

Possible Expansion of Locality Pay Areas

In contrast to all the news about freezing federal pay, six metropolitan areas will be considered for separate locality pay in 2012, according to new recommendations from the Federal Salary Council. Under the recommendations federal employees in Albany, N.Y.; Albuquerque, N.M.; Bakersfield, Ca.; Harrisburg, PA.; Portland, ME; and Charlotte, N.C., could receive locality pay unique to their region and Lansing, MI., would be added to the Detroit pay area. The council also recommended adopting an interim rule granting separate locality pay to workers in Alaska and Hawaii, and determined that no area should receive less than the "rest of U.S." rate.

The council, made up of federal pay policy experts and union leaders, uses information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics to make recommendations to the President's Pay Agent on comparison methods and locality areas and rates. This year's proposals, if adopted, would affect 2012 salaries but with the recent news of a pay freeze might apply at the 2010 rates. [Click here](#) for a more expansive article on this subject at GovExec.

Possible Change in Default Investments for New TSP Participants

The board that oversees the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) is reconsidering the proposal to make life-cycle funds the default investment for participants who don't specify where they want their money invested.

The Chairman of the Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board indicated at the Board's November meeting that he wanted to reopen discussions on shifting the default option from the government securities (G) fund to the L funds, which automatically moves investors to less aggressive and more stable portfolios as they near retirement.

Change in Default Investments (continued)

The L funds are riskier than the G Fund, but are designed to produce higher returns over the long run. Board members agreed that life-cycle offerings are good tools for participants who might not be financially savvy. The Board members also appeared open to re-examining the option of making them the default investment but noted in 2009 the labor unions and federal employee group representatives on the Employee Thrift Advisory Council voiced concern over a bill the House passed in 2008 that would move indecisive investors to the L funds. It was stated that had this been the default for a new federal employee in 2009, they would have lost money. As a result there was a recommendation that the board set up a joint meeting with the Employee Thrift Advisory Council in early 2011 to further explore the possible shift.

OPM Addressing Timeliness in Processing Retirement Claims

The Office of Personnel Management officials stated in October that they were making progress on the backlog in processing claims from federal retirees. Director John Berry told reporters that OPM is trying to reduce processing times, which currently average 138 days, and improve service. Failed attempts to automate claims processing and a decrease in staff, coupled with an increasing workload, have caused the backlog to rise.

OPM has also tried several times to convert its retirement claims processing operation from the current paper-based method to an automated system. The last effort was derailed over concerns for both the timeline and cost. While an updated system for a central place for storing electronic retirement data is needed, before moving ahead on information technology systems, OPM is re-examining how to expedite processing and determining which choke points would benefit from automation.

OPM encourages potential retirees to begin to work early with their [human resources] offices to ensure there is a complete personnel file on record and to obtain estimated annuity payments.

January to March marks the busiest time for retirement claims and OPM is working to build up its workforce before that period but employees retiring in that timeframe should be reminded upfront to expect and plan for up to 6 to 8 months of interim payments before OPM issues a final annuity calculation/payment.

Telework Enhancement Act of 2010

The Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 is now law. The purpose of the bill is to improve and expand teleworking in executive agencies. About 5 percent of the federal workforce is currently reported to use telework to some extent. The bill is projected to cost about \$28 million to implement over a five year period. Supporters of the bill contend it will save money and improve agency productivity and efficiency in the long-term and allow the government to continue to function in situations that would have previously resulted in a shutdown. Weather related closures are one example in which telework could be used to keep the agencies functioning using teleworkers. Supporters also point out that allowing more employees to telework will take cars off the roads, improve air quality and save energy.

The bill requires that an agency use telework provisions to the maximum extent possible; and without diminishing employee performance or agency operations.

Telework (continued)

Agencies will also find new telework reporting requirements in this law. You can review the [Telework Enhancement Act of 2010](#) by clicking this link.

This article is intended to provide a heads up to watch for changes that will be incorporated into our regulations and policies in the future. Not all changes will be immediate as OPM will be developing revised regulation for Agencies to follow and implement and in some case bargaining to revise union obligations may be required before changes are fully adopted.

Key Facts about Influenza & Flu Vaccine

Submitted by Amanda Reina
Worklife and Wellness Ambassadors Intern
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What is Influenza (Flu)

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. The best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu vaccine each year.

Symptoms of Flu

People who have the flu often feel some or all of these symptoms:

- fever* or feeling feverish/chills
- cough
- sore throat
- runny or stuffy nose
- muscle or body aches
- headaches
- fatigue (very tired)
- Some people may have vomiting and diarrhea, though this is more common in children than adults.

**It's important to note that not everyone with flu will have a fever.*

How Flu spreads

Most experts believe that flu viruses spread mainly by droplets made when people with flu cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby. Less often, a person might also get flu by touching a surface or object that has flu virus on it and then touching their own mouth, eyes or nose.

Period of contagiousness

You may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day **before** symptoms develop and up to 5-7 days **after** becoming sick. Some people, especially children and people with weakened immune systems, might be able to infect others for an even longer time.

How serious is the Flu?

Flu is unpredictable and how severe it is can vary widely from one season to the next depending on many things, including:

- what flu viruses are spreading
- how much flu vaccine is available
- when vaccine is available
- how many people get vaccinated
- how well the flu vaccine is matched to flu viruses that are causing illness.

Certain people are at greater risk for serious complications if they get the flu. This includes older people, young children, pregnant women and people with [certain health conditions](#) (such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease).

Flu seasons are unpredictable and can be severe. Over a period of 30 years, between 1976 and 2006, estimates of flu-associated deaths range from a low of about 3,000 to a high of about 49,000 people.

During 2009-2010, a new and very different flu virus (called [2009 H1N1](#)) spread worldwide causing the first flu pandemic in more than 40 years. It is estimated that the 2009 H1N1 pandemic resulted in more than 12,000 flu-related deaths in the U.S. In contrast to seasonal flu, nearly 90 percent of the deaths occurred among people younger than 65 years of age.

Complications of Flu

Complications of flu can include bacterial pneumonia, ear infections, sinus infections, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes.

Preventing seasonal Flu - Get vaccinated

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccine each season. There are two types of flu vaccines:

- **The "flu shot"**—an inactivated vaccine (containing killed virus) that is given with a needle. The seasonal flu shot is approved for use in people 6 months of age and older, including healthy people, people with chronic medical conditions and pregnant women.
- **The nasal-spray flu vaccine**—a vaccine made with live, weakened flu viruses that do not cause the flu (sometimes called LAIV for "Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine"). LAIV is approved for use in healthy people 2-49 years of age who are not pregnant.

About two weeks after vaccination, antibodies develop that protect against influenza virus infection. Flu vaccines will not protect against flu-like illnesses caused by non-influenza viruses. The seasonal flu vaccine protects against the three influenza viruses that research suggests will be most common. The [2010-2011](#) flu vaccine will protect against 2009 H1N1, and two other influenza viruses (an H3N2 virus and an influenza B virus).

When to get vaccinated against seasonal Flu

Yearly flu vaccination should begin in September, or as soon as vaccine is available, and continue throughout the flu season which can last as late as May. This is because the timing and duration of flu seasons vary. While flu season can begin early as October, most of the time seasonal flu activity peaks in January or later.

Who should get vaccinated?

[On February 24, 2010 vaccine experts voted](#) that everyone 6 months and older should get a flu vaccine each year starting with the 2010-2011 influenza season. [CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices \(ACIP\)](#) voted for "universal" flu vaccination in the U.S. to expand protection against the flu to more people. While everyone should get a flu vaccine each flu season, it's especially important that certain people get vaccinated either because they are at high risk of having serious flu-related complications or because they live with or care for people at high risk for developing flu-related complications.

Who is at high risk for developing flu-related complications?

- Children younger than 5, but especially children younger than 2 years old
- [Adults 65 years of age and older](#)
- [Pregnant women](#)
- Also, last flu season, American Indians and Alaskan Natives seemed to be at higher risk of flu complications
- People who have medical conditions including:
 - [Asthma](#) (even if it's controlled or mild)
 - Neurological and neurodevelopmental conditions [including disorders of the brain, spinal cord, peripheral nerve, and muscle such as cerebral palsy, epilepsy (seizure disorders), stroke, intellectual disability (mental retardation), moderate to severe developmental delay, muscular dystrophy, or spinal cord injury]
 - Chronic lung disease (such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease [COPD] and cystic fibrosis)
 - Heart disease (such as congenital heart disease, congestive heart failure and coronary artery disease)
 - Blood disorders (such as sickle cell disease)
 - Endocrine disorders (such as [diabetes](#) mellitus)
 - Kidney disorders
 - Liver disorders
 - Metabolic disorders (such as inherited metabolic disorders and mitochondrial disorders)
 - Weakened immune system due to disease or medication (such as people with [HIV or AIDS](#), or cancer, or those on chronic steroids)
 - People younger than 19 years of age who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy
 - People who are morbidly obese (Body Mass Index [BMI] of 40 or greater)

Who else should get vaccinated?

Other people for whom vaccination is especially important are:

- People who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities
- People who live with or care for those at high risk for complications from flu, including:
 - Health care workers

- Household contacts of persons at high risk for complications from the flu
- Household contacts and caregivers of children younger than 5 years of age with particular emphasis on vaccinating contacts of children younger than 6 months of age (children younger than 6 months are at highest risk of flu-related complications but are too young to get vaccinated)

Use of the nasal spray seasonal flu vaccine

Vaccination with the nasal-spray flu vaccine is an option for healthy* people 2-49 years of age who are not pregnant. Even people who live with or care for those in a high risk group (including health care workers) can get the nasal-spray flu vaccine as long as they are healthy themselves and are not pregnant. The one exception is health care workers who care for people with severely weakened immune systems who require a protected hospital environment; these people should get the inactivated flu vaccine (flu shot).

Who should not be vaccinated against seasonal flu?

Some people should not be vaccinated without first consulting a physician. They include:

- People who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs.
- People who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination in the past.
- People who developed [Guillain-Barré syndrome \(GBS\)](#) within 6 weeks of getting an influenza vaccine previously.
- Children younger than 6 months of age (influenza vaccine is not approved for use in this age group).
- People who have a moderate or severe illness with a fever should wait to get vaccinated until their symptoms lessen.

If you have questions about whether you should get a flu vaccine, consult your health care provider.

Information was provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/keyfacts.htm>.

Career Opportunities in FFAS

All jobs (headquarters and field) open throughout each Agency may be obtained by accessing:

FSA Federal (GS) positions & FSA County Office (CO) positions:

<http://jobsearch.usajobs.opm.gov/a9agfsa.asp>

FAS Positions:

<http://jobsearch.usajobs.opm.gov/a9agfas.asp>

RMA Positions:

<http://jobsearch.usajobs.opm.gov/a9agrma.asp>

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