



October 2007, Number 2007-9

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Federal Benefits Open Season Is Coming Soon (and It's Not Just for FEHB Anymore)



Beginning this year, the name of the Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) Open Season has changed to the more inclusive Federal Benefits Open Season. Because of the recent addition of two benefit programs, Federal Employees Dental and Vision Insurance Program (FEDVIP) and Federal Flexible Spending Account Program (FSAFEDS), Open Season is not just for FEHB anymore.

The 2007 Federal Benefits Open Season will be held from Monday, November 12th through Monday, December 10th. Employees need to make decisions during Open Season not only on FEHB, but also on FEDVIP and FSAFEDS.

FEHB. This year, FEHB offers a wide variety of plans and options for coverage to help meet the health care needs of an enrollee and eligible family members. Eligible employees can choose from among fee-for-service plans, health maintenance organizations, point-of-service products, high deductible health plans, and consumer-driven health plans. The FEHB is group health insurance that covers employees, retirees, and their dependents.

FEDVIP. This program provides comprehensive dental and vision insurance. It allows dental and vision insurance to be purchased on a group basis. As a result,



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Law Provides Student Loan Forgiveness

A new law provides for cancellation of outstanding student-loan balances for full-time Federal employees (and certain other public service employees) after 10 years of service and loan repayment.

The pertinent provision is Section [401](#) (titled, "Loan Forgiveness for Public Service Employees") of the College Cost Reduction and Access Act (Public Law 110-084), September 27, 2007.

The loan-forgiveness provision became effective on October 1st. The new benefit is not retroactive.

This provision may encourage Federal employees to remain in Government. It may also prove useful to attract college graduates burdened by debt to career positions in the Department of Defense (DoD) and other agencies.

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More Decisions – FEDVIP, FSAFEDS

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FEDVIP has competitive premiums and no limitations due to a pre-existing condition.

FEDVIP is group coverage on an enrollee-pay-all basis. This insurance is available to Federal employees, retirees, and their eligible family members.



There are seven dental and three vision preferred-provider organization plans from which to choose, including regional, national, and international coverage.

FSAFEDS. This program can help employees save money by allowing them to set aside pre-tax funds to pay for eligible out-of-pocket dependent care and health care expenses. In a nutshell, here is how it works:

- The dependent care flexible spending account (FSA) reimburses non-medical expenses associated with the care of children under age 13, or dependents who are unable to care for themselves. It does not reimburse dependent health care expenses;
- The health care FSA covers eligible health care expenses for the employee, spouse, and eligible dependents; and
- Employees covered by a high deductible health plan with a health savings account may enroll in a limited expense health care FSA for their eligible dental and vision expenses.

RESOURCES. You can find more information about these programs at www.opm.gov/insure. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) posted FEDVIP and FEHB premiums for 2008 in mid-September. You will be able to find specific Federal Benefits Open Season information on the OPM Web site during the first week of November.

DoD employees may enroll or make changes to their FEHB through their Component's employee benefits system (for example, the Electronic Benefits Information System). They may also contact their installation customer service representative. Employees may enroll in FEDVIP and FSAFEDS online through the respective administrators of those programs.

-Benefits and Entitlements



4 Types of Student Loans Covered

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Recent studies show that today's top talent is interested in Federal employment, but college students may lack knowledge about the benefits of working for America. For student loan forgiveness to become an effective Human Resources (HR) tool, agencies need to publicize it appropriately.

The program does not encompass every type of student loan. It applies to the following four types: Federal direct Stafford, Federal direct PLUS (Parent Loan for Undergraduate Students), Federal direct unsubsidized Stafford, and Federal direct consolidation loans.

Under the language of the Act, any remaining interest and principal due on such loans will be cancelled for those borrowers who are full-time public service employees at the time of forgiveness, are not in default, have made 120 monthly payments on the loan after October 1, 2007, and have been employed in a public service job during the period in which they made each of the 120 payments.

For more information, contact the Department of Education call center, 1-800-433-3243, and select the option to speak directly to an operator or representative.

-Field Advisory Services



Federal Benefits Open Season Web Sites

Three separate programs will participate in the 2007 Open Season: FEHB, FEDVIP, and FSAFEDS. For online information, visit:

- FEHB: www.opm.gov/insure/health;
- FEDVIP: www.opm.gov/insure/dentalvision; and
- FSAFEDS: www.FSAFEDS.com.

Information on what each FEHB plan and option covers will be detailed in OPM's FEHB plan comparison tool and individual brochures, which should be available at www.opm.gov/insure in early November.

-Benefits and Entitlements



Exercise Simulates the Impact of Pandemic Influenza on the DoD Workforce

Late this summer, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (OUSD(P&R)) conducted a two-day live exercise simulating the impact that a pandemic influenza (PI) might have on the Department's workforce.

More than 1,000 uniformed service members, civilian employees, and contractors participated in the exercise titled, "Operation Crushbug."

Led by the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (ODUSD) (Civilian Personnel Policy) and ODUSD (Military Personnel Policy), the exercise had two primary objectives:

- To prepare the Department to carry out essential functions in the event of a pandemic health crisis; and
- To provide for the well-being of – and care for – employees before, during, and after a PI.

A working group of action officers from each OUSD(P&R) Directorate began planning the exercise earlier in the year.

Operation Crushbug focused on the basics, such as updating organization charts, recall rosters, orders of succession, and delegations of authority, as well as the more challenging issue of determining those mission-essential functions (MEFs) that had to be accomplished in the event of a PI.

Operation Crushbug also focused on HR issues, including telework, safe haven decisions, communications, and personnel accountability tracking.

The exercise kicked off with the release of a mock memorandum declaring that the homes of individuals in the work-

force would be considered safe havens. Assignments that would have to be accomplished during a PI were also tasked to P&R staff to assess:

- P&R's ability to perform critical work with the reduced workforce that a PI would cause; and
- The effectiveness of P&R's delegations of authority and lines of succession.

(For more about safe havens, see the August 15, 2007, USD(P&R) memorandum, subject, "Evacuation



Payments during a Pandemic Health Crisis," on the CPMS Web site.)

During the exercise, telephone trees for all Directorates were tested to ensure effective communications throughout the organization.

Operation Crushbug also provided an opportunity to identify potential information technology problems that may occur when a high number of users must access servers remotely.

Participants found they needed to practice using Government-furnished equipment to become adept at logging in and accessing files from a remote location.

A major lesson learned from both the September 11, 2001, attack on the Pentagon and Hurricane Katrina was the requirement to account for employees during an emergency.

Mustering tools were used during the exercise, including Web-based report-in

systems and a toll-free phone number, to account for personnel. Participants were able to muster in using these tools, and exercise managers were able to roll up numbers on the status of the workforce.

While minor problems were identified, the tools were able to generate the needed accountability data.

The exercise reinforced the value of such tools during an emergency situation and the need for employees to be trained on, and practice with, the tool well before an actual emergency.

Health-services experts point to improved hygiene habits, such as proper hand washing and "social distancing," as the most effective means to mitigate the spread of germs that could cause a pandemic health crisis.

During the exercise, participants practiced social distancing by teleworking, holding meetings via teleconference or Web cast, and attempting to maintain a distance from each other in the workplace of at least three to six feet.

Operation Crushbug's interactive nature and realistic scenarios highlighted potential problems and gave participants a sense of what PI might really be like.

Planning, preparing for, and conducting the exercise, as well as addressing lessons learned captured during it, will help ODUSD(P&R) Directorates better carry out essential functions during a PI or any health crisis or emergency.

For more information on PI, visit the DoD PI Watchboard at www.dod.mil/pandemicflu.

-Policy and Strategy Support





My Biz & My Workplace Gain New Capability

Effective September 23rd, appropriated fund employees can view and print their own Notification of Personnel Action (NPA) forms (formerly Standard Forms 50) by accessing *My Biz*.

Supervisors and managers can view and print NPAs for their appropriated fund employees by accessing *My Workplace*.

NPAs generated on or after September 23rd are listed under the Personnel Action tab. To access and view them, simply log into *My Biz* or *My Workplace*.

Similar capability for local national and nonappropriated fund employees will be deployed in spring 2008.

My Biz is a tool within the Defense Civilian Personnel Data System that allows employees to safely and securely access, view, and maintain personnel information.

Similarly, *My Workplace* brings key information about employees together in one place for managers and supervisors, thus streamlining their HR decision-making process.

-HR-BITS 

COLA Changes

New cost-of-living allowance (COLA) rates took effect at the start of the first pay period on or after September 17th for white-collar Federal and Postal Service employees stationed in the United States (U.S.) Virgin Islands.

COLA rates there rose from 23 to 25 percent. Additionally, OPM has proposed adjustments for the Pacific and other Caribbean COLA areas.

For Hawaii County, HI, OPM found an increase from 17 to 18 percent is warranted. For Puerto Rico, OPM proposed an increase from 10.5 to 13 percent, superseding the one-percent reduction OPM had previously proposed there.

Locality pay does not apply to non-foreign overseas areas. Instead, white-collar Federal employees in these areas receive a COLA. COLA survey methodology is standardized across allowance areas.

By law (title 5, U.S. Code, Section 5941), OPM must compare costs for specific items in the COLA areas against such costs in Washington, DC, and then adjust COLA rates on the basis of the relative differences.

The COLA program has remained in effect for nearly 60 years, but OPM recently proposed legislation that would extend locality pay to non-foreign areas outside the contiguous 48 states.

Testifying on Capitol Hill late this summer, OPM Director Linda M. Springer explained that approxi-

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Military Retired Pay Includes >30 Years of Service

Individuals retiring from the military now receive credit for service of more than 30 years, except for military members who retire by reason of disability, and Army and Air Force enlisted members who have been cited for extraordinary heroism.

Section 642 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2007 (Public Law 109-364), October 17, 2006, lifted the 75 percent cap previously used in calculating retired pay. This provision became effective on January 1, 2007.

The OPM *CSRS and FERS Handbook for Personnel and Payroll Offices*, Chapter 22, Section 22A4.1-1A.3 gives examples of military service that is not used in the computation of military retired pay.

Please note the second bullet, "Service in excess of 30 years." As a result of

the NDAA for FY07, this bullet cannot be taken at face value, because service in excess of 30 years is no longer excluded across the board.

Since January 1st, employees who retired from the military and are receiving military retired pay must verify with the appropriate branch of service what active-duty military service was used to compute military retired pay.

Doing so serves to avoid an erroneous military deposit of non-creditable military service.

Retired military members may choose to waive the military retired pay and combine the service with their annuity benefit under either civilian retirement system. The rules in the *Handbook*, Chapter 22, Section 22A4.1-1 remain valid, except as noted above.

-Benefits and Entitlements 

FAS' Johnnie Mae Terrell Knows the Power of Endurance

What is Johnnie Mae Terrell's story? You might say it is a story about true grit – and grits – and witnessing history.

"My father served in the military. He died when I was still in elementary school," she begins.

"That left my mother to raise five girls and three boys" in Albany, GA, south of Atlanta.

Her mother held the family together in a three-bedroom home that she regularly filled with the aroma of good, Southern-style food.

"As the fourth-oldest child, I had to fix an after-school snack for the younger ones. Then, when she came home from work, Mother would make us dinner," Johnnie Mae recalls.

After high school graduation, Johnnie Mae chose a career that followed in her father's footsteps. Under a delayed-entry program, in June 1978 she entered on active duty at Ft. Jackson, SC, for basic training and education to become an administrative specialist in the Army.

She was assigned to Bad Kreuznach (pronounced "crews knock"), Germany, with the 8th Adjutant General Company. When the opportunity arose to visit France, she spent a week in Paris, where

she marveled at the Eiffel Tower "and spent some time shopping."

While her overseas assignment had its light-hearted moments, it was also a turning point. "At age 19, this was my first time being away from home."

Still, young Johnnie Mae did not yield to homesickness.

Surprisingly, she found a couple of soldiers in Bad Kreuznach who had graduated from her high school.

She invited them and other friends to her apartment for home cooking. They also enjoyed the local restaurants, which served "excellent German

food. My favorite was the bratwurst with 'Pommes-Frites' – French fries and mayonnaise."

Sports kept the young troops from packing on the pounds. "I played guard on the post basketball team, and we had a winning year. We went all the way to the championship play-offs! There we met our match, Baumholder, who won the championship."

Later, she was assigned to Ft. Benning, GA, with the 988th Military Police Company (MPC). She witnessed history when she traveled with MPC to the Ft. Chaffee, AK, detention center. Riots had broken out among "Marielitos" there.

These were Cuban refugees boat-lifted in 1980 to the U.S. from the port of

Mariel. President Carter had offered to embrace them with "open hearts and open arms."

However, Castro had also released criminals and disturbed individuals among the 125,000 refugees. Negotiations ensued, and the two countries signed an agreement to repatriate more than 2,500 violent offenders.

Irate at the possibility of being returned to Cuba, Marielitos in Federal detention facilities engaged in rioting on five occasions during 1984-7.

Damages totaled nearly \$40 million. The worst riots were those at Ft. Chaffee.

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Johnnie Mae Terrell, Classification and Pay Branch, Field Advisory Services (FAS)

COLA Changes

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mately 50,000 employees currently receive COLAs, rather than locality pay. COLA payments are not subject to Federal income tax, but they also do not count in calculating retirement annuities.

OPM estimates the cost of this proposed legislation at approximately \$109 million during the first 10 years. This reflects higher pay raises to offset the COLAs, as well as substantially higher retirement benefits.

This initiative would be phased in over seven years to ease the impact on retirement systems and agency budgets.

-Classification and Pay



FLSA Rules Amended

The Government's internal rules on the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) were recently amended. These changes harmonize OPM's regulations with the Department of Labor's FLSA rules for the private sector.

Briefly, here is what happened:

- In the September 17th issue of the *Federal Register*, OPM published an amendment to title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 551, Pay Administration Under the Fair Labor Standards Act; and
- The new rules took effect on October 17th.

This amendment sets a salary level (\$23,660) below which positions are presumed to be eligible for overtime.

It also eliminates a former test that focused on the percentage of time the individual spends on duties considered exempt or nonexempt. Previous judicial decisions have rejected that test.

"[T]hese changes update and clarify but do not fundamentally change" previous policies, the *Federal Register* notice says.

It also states that OPM does "not anticipate changes in the exemption status of the vast majority of Federal employees to whom the current regulations were properly applied" ("exempt" employees are ineligible for overtime pay under FLSA).

-Classification and Pay



CPMS Personnel-ity Profile

"You Have to Explore," Johnnie Mae Terrell Says

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Clearly, at the time of the riots, the military police (MPs) had their work cut out for them.

"We had to contain" the Ft. Chaffee detainees, Johnnie Mae says. "The MPs established a perimeter and prevented them from escaping."

Once order was restored, she found Ft. Chaffee a learning experience. "I talked to the detainees about life in Cuba."

Johnnie Mae's other Army assignments included Camp Smith, HI ("paradise," she calls the islands) and a stint with the Defense Intelligence Agency at Bolling Air Force Base, DC.

In 1992, she was honorably discharged from the military after 14 years of service. The private sector came next, and Johnnie Mae worked for Defense contractors in the national capital region until last year.

Then she joined the FAS Classification and Pay Branch as an Administrative Support Assistant, YB-303-1.

"I was chosen this summer to go to the DoD Worldwide HR Conference. It was a lot of work, but I really enjoyed it!

"It let me interact with CPMS employees I don't see on a day-to-day basis and also gave me a chance to meet senior leaders and people from different organizations.

"I like being a team player. You have to explore different things; you never

know what you might like unless you step out there and see."

Living now in Prince George's County, MD, "surrounded by magnolias, lilies, and mountain laurels, brings me daily reminders of my Southern background.

"My 24-year-old lives in Oxon Hill, MD, with her 16-month-old baby girl, my first grandchild. My 19-year-old daughter is at St. Augustine's College in Raleigh, NC, majoring in business management and criminal justice."

In her leisure time, Johnnie Mae says, "One of my hobbies is cooking. I really didn't learn how until I was stationed in Germany – preparing many dishes using various recipes from cookbooks.

"My mother, who is in her 70s, is living with me now. I'm thankful for another chance to find out from her what Southern cooking is all about."

With mother and daughter together in the kitchen, the aroma of fried chicken, collard greens with fatback, and cornbread rises once again in Johnnie Mae's home.

CPMS Employment

CPMS vacancies are posted on USAJOBS. To access employment opportunities for status candidates, click [here](#).

For other CPMS vacancies, click [here](#).