

FS Direct



Direct Communication to Foreign Service Employees and Family Members
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FS DIRECT SUBSCRIPTIONS

Welcome to the November 2003 edition of *FS Direct*. To keep the publication user-friendly and simple, we have listed the articles in the sidebar to the left. Simply click on those items you are interested in reading. Subscribe using the following links:

Internet: <http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c9156.htm>

Intranet:

<http://hrweb.hr.state.gov/FLO/FLOSubscription.html>

Via AAFSW: Visit the FLO area of the AAFSW web site at <http://www.aafsw.org> and click on FLO newsletters.

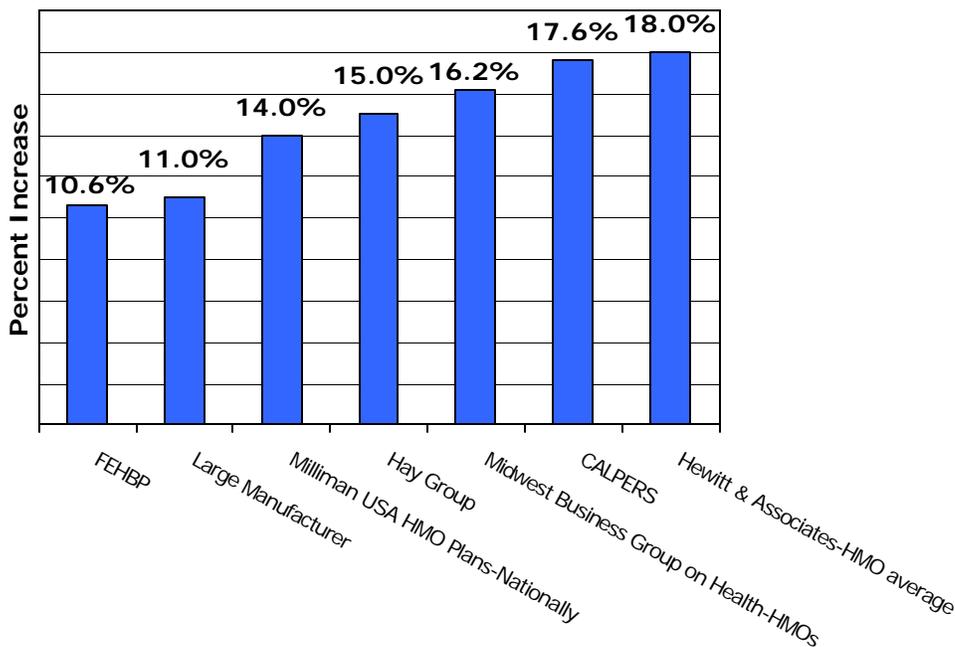
FS Direct is also available on the FLO Internet web site at <http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/rsrscs/pubs/c5709.htm>

2004 FEDERAL EMPLOYEES HEALTH BENEFITS PROGRAM (FEHBP) OPEN SEASON-- NOV. 10--DEC. 8, 2003

By Paula S. Jakub, RHU
Vice President,
American Foreign Service Protective Association

It is no secret that health care costs are rising everywhere. The bad news is that the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program (FEHBP) is not immune to these increases. The good news is that the average FEHBP premium increase for 2004 is 10.6%, on the low end of the national average.

THE INCREASE IN PREMIUM FOR SOME SELECTED EMPLOYER PLANS FOR 2004 ARE:



Source: Office of Personnel Management

The Federal Employees Health Benefits Program remains a model for health care delivery systems throughout the country and, indeed, the world. Among the many reasons are:

- Choice of almost 180 health plans
- Competitive benefit packages
- No pre-existing condition limitation
- Eligible retirees and spouses are covered

Things to look for in the 2004 FEHB Plans:

- Increased calendar year deductibles
- Increased or added inpatient hospital co-pays
- Increased prescription drug co-pays
- Additional preventive care benefits

We encourage you to read carefully **Changes to this Plan** in **Section 2. How we change for 2004** when you receive your 2004 plan brochure.

2004 PREMIUMS (BI-WEEKLY) FOR SELECTED PLANS:

HEALTH PLAN	2004 Bi-Weekly Employee Premium			
	Individual	% Change	Self & Family	% Change
BCBS Standard	\$48.90	+7.1%	\$112.88	+7.3%
FSBP	\$41.28	+5.1%	\$116.91	+5.1%
GEHA High	\$76.24	+13.5%	\$153.05	+13.8%
Mail Handlers Standard	\$32.16	+14.5%	\$69.81	+14.5%
Mail Handlers High	\$95.59	+48.7%	\$180.61	+55.0%

Do not rely on premium costs alone to make your health plan decision. Things like extra deductibles and plan allowances for services, especially overseas, could end up costing you extra money. Customer service and global coverage are of paramount importance for employees and their families serving overseas.

A special reminder for employees assigned overseas:

- Take the time to review your plan's Preferred Provider (PPO) Network benefits and rules BEFORE you return to the U.S. on Home Leave or TDY.
 - Understand the rules regarding access to a specialist, i.e. do you need a referral from a general provider first?
 - Print a copy of the participating hospitals in the area you will be visiting, in case of an emergency admission.
 - Remember that ALL inpatient admissions in the U.S. must be pre-certified. Call the 800 number on the back of your ID card for pre-certification if you are admitted to a hospital here in the states. (Note: Some plans require pre-certification/pre-authorization for some other services such as surgery, outpatient procedures and certain classes of drugs; even overseas.) Please read your brochure carefully.

Open Season runs from **November 10 through December 8, 2003**. The effective date of a change in health plan is the first day of your first full pay period in January 2004.

This is your Open Season. Make the best of it! For more information and instructions: http://mmsweb.a.state.gov/asp/notices/dn_temp.asp?Notice_ID=3369.

Click Your Way to More FLO Resources

FLO Homepage on the Intranet
<http://hrweb.hr.state.gov/flo/index.html>

FLO Homepage on the Internet
<http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo>

FAMILY MEMBER EMPLOYMENT

- **(Updated)** New Bilateral Work Agreement with Democratic Republic of Congo
<http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/rsrscs/pubs/16261.htm>.
For complete list of all 86 bilateral and de facto agreements-
<http://hrweb.hr.state.gov/FLO/employment/BilateralWorkAgreementsbyRegion.pdf>

SUPPORT SERVICES

- **(Updated)** *Adoption Guidelines* has been revised—please go to FLO's Internet site <http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c7155.htm> for contact/order information.
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Not-to-be-Missed Information

REMARKS ON LEADERSHIP FROM THE SECRETARY

Many of us in the Family Liaison Office were fortunate to hear Secretary Powell speak recently on the topic of leadership. The Secretary's speech was part of a program organized by the School of Management and Leadership at the Foreign Service Institute. All DOS employees were invited to attend. The Secretary's remarks illustrate his focus on "taking care of our people." There is a message here for all of us.



Powell (10-28-03) FSI
Leadersh...

THE J. KIRBY SIMON FOREIGN SERVICE TRUST SEEKS PROJECT PROPOSALS FOR 2004

The principal activity of the Trust is to support projects that are initiated and carried out, not in an official capacity and not on official time, by Foreign Service personnel or members of their families, wherever located. The Trust, however, will also consider proposals from other U.S. Government employees or members of their families, regardless of nationality, located at American diplomatic posts abroad. Please note that the fund's web site is under construction and does not yet contain the full description of all 2003 grants.



Kirby Simon Trust --
2004 Invi...



FAMILY MEMBER EMPLOYMENT

DANGER PAY AND COLA FOR EFM EMPLOYEES

STATE 303789 announced the establishment of a policy to include Danger Pay and Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) in the compensation for EFMs on PSAs at those posts where these allowances are paid to Appointment Eligible Family Members on TEMP or FMA appointments. For those posts where danger pay is in place, EFMs on FMAs, TEMPs or PSAs are automatically eligible. However, in order to be considered for the COLA, a post-specific exception must be granted at the request of the relevant Bureau in Washington. Currently, only Tokyo and London have been granted exceptions to pay post allowances to EFMs. The link to STATE 303789 –

http://telegrams.state.gov/aldac/view_telegram.cfm?fname=ALDAC\2003\Oct\28\20031028180347.html&type=ALDAC&mrn=00303789



FLO SNAP JOB ASSISTANCE WEB TOOL

What types of jobs are out there?

Check out the **FLO SNAP Job Search Assistance Web Tool** to find out!

As an information gathering tool for local economy employment opportunities, FLO partnered with Direct Employers.com to create the SNAP employment search engine. Located at <http://state.directemployers.com>, the search engine connects applicants to current job openings with Direct Employers' member companies worldwide. Applicants may also apply online to an individual company's website. Though Direct Employers member companies are not located in every country, they are in many, so check out the search engine to find out if there are opportunities in your area.

The value in using the Internet, for the majority of people, is as a research tool to obtain employment information. The **FLO SNAP Job Search Assistance Web Tool** allows job seekers to view types of jobs currently available in a given country, look at salaries, and get ideas of occupations that might be of interest. Though there is never a guarantee of landing a job by answering an Internet ad, the information obtained on-line may be valuable in furthering a job search.

Using the SNAP employment search engine is easy. Simply log on to <http://state.directemployers.com>, then click on "Worldwide" for an indication of the companies (and the types of positions) looking to hire people in a given region/country.

HIGHEST PREVIOUS RATE (HPR) AND SUPERIOR QUALIFICATIONS RATE (SQR)

How and When to Ask for HPR or SQR

These two government rates can play an important role in establishing a salary level for Family Members applying for a federal government position. To learn more about the difference between the two rates and how to ask for HPR or SQR when offered a position, read below.

- **Highest Previous Rate (HPR)**

If you have worked in a government Civil Service or FMA position (for more than 90 days) and have established a grade and step salary level, you are eligible to be appointed at your Highest Previous Rate. This means that the agency may authorize a rate of pay above the initial step in the position grade to match approximately the employee's previous pay level. For example, if you apply for a position, which is a GS-06, and you have previously worked as a GS-07, you would be eligible to be appointed at a GS-06, step 4. However, it is discretionary on the part of the agency and not an employee right. You should be aware that when applying for a position at an embassy or consulate overseas, post might have a policy limiting the number of steps they will grant because of budgetary restrictions. It is always best to check with post to determine the current policy.

It is important to remember to ask for this at the time when you are offered a position. It is not something you would discuss earlier during an interview, but only when you actually receive the job offer. The HR officer may not always remember to discuss this or apply this automatically, so it is good to be informed. Additionally, it is your responsibility to provide post the Personnel Action (SF-50) documenting your appointment at the higher rate.

- **Superior Qualifications Rate (SQR)**

When applying for a government CS or FMA position, you can also ask for a Superior Qualifications Rate consideration. This is a request to the hiring agency to consider your private sector work skills and experience to obtain a higher step level in the grade of the government position. The 'outside' skills and experience must be relevant to the requirements of this government position.

SQR must be requested at the time of hiring; at the moment you receive the job offer. It cannot be granted retroactively and this is important for the candidate to remember. SQR can be considered at every new appointment. If an employee has not requested it for one appointment, the employee can ask for consideration for subsequent appointments. Again, like HPR, SQR is not an entitlement.

Applicants should be advised that only one of the two rates can be considered and that HPR and SQR cannot be applied concurrently.

UPDATE ON PIT BUYBACK LEGISLATION

PIT buyback language was incorporated into the State Authorization Bill passed in September 2002. A provision in the bill required the Office of Personnel Management to issue the implementing guidelines but did not include a deadline date for implementation. Subsequently, AFSA drafted amended language in order to facilitate an implementation deadline date. This amended language has been incorporated into the current State Authorization Bill still under consideration by Congress.

A new development is that OPM, on behalf of the Administration, sent a request to the Hill on August 26, 2003 to repeal the PIT provision that was included in last year's legislation. AFSA has developed a point by point response to OPM's request and is

working with offices of the sponsors of the original bill on both the Senate and House side to circumvent any legislation repeal.

Family members affected by this legislation should be aware that this is currently an inside legislative battle, requiring no additional action at this time. However, FLO, AFSA and AAFSW will post updates on their respective web sites as information becomes available and will notify family members if events warrant future action.

In the interim, we encourage family members who wish to be kept apprised of updates to send an email to FLOAskEmployment@state.gov as follows:

SUBJECT: PIT Buyback

Please add my name to the distribution list for information and updates on the PIT Buyback

NAME:

CURRENT ADDRESS:

PERMANENT ADDRESS:

PERSONAL EMAIL:

BUSINESS EMAIL:

SERVICE DATES (i.e., 1989-90, 1992-95):

POST OR POSTS WHERE YOU WORKED ON A PIT APPOINTMENT:

APPLYING FOR NATURALIZATION FROM POST

EFMs who are foreign born and qualify for naturalization (please see link below) and would like to apply from post are required to **include fingerprint cards** with the other required documentation and the N-400 form.

One of the most common causes of delay in getting the application adjudicated is the rejection of the fingerprint card. ***The card will be rejected if:***

- The fingerprints are smudged, making them unreadable,
- signatures of either the applicant or the U.S. official taking the fingerprints are missing,
- the address of the embassy or consulate is missing,
- The official stamp of the embassy or consulate (to verify authenticity) is missing.

For further information on the expeditious naturalization process for Department of State spouses, please visit the following websites:

<http://hrweb.hr.state.gov/flo/policy/nature.html> (Intranet);

<http://www.state.gov/m/dg/hr/flo/c1966.htm> (Internet)

UPDATE ON DC JOB SEEKERS NETWORK GROUP

Last September, FLO started a new network group for Foreign Service family members. The **Job Seekers Network Group** is for family members who are committed to a job search in the Washington, DC area. Whether looking for Federal employment or employment outside of government, searching for a job is a challenge.

The group meets every other Thursday at Main State. The first meeting drew in 45 Foreign Service family members. Now, after three meetings, a core group of very interested family members is emerging. These participants are enjoying the job leads and information networking can lead to. Additionally, participants are starting to form smaller subgroups (“buddy groups”) to keep in contact in between the meetings.

The goal of this group is not only to allow networking and information exchange, but to lend moral support as well. Searching for a job can be a challenging, time-consuming, and stressful process; the Job Seekers Network Group helps to keep family members motivated. For more information about the group and specific meeting dates, please contact Jenneke Fijn van Draat, FijnVanDraatJE@state.gov, at the Family Liaison Office.

EDUCATION AND YOUTH

BOARDING SCHOOLS

By Rebecca Grappo, FLO Education and Youth Officer

Did you know that FLO’s Education and Youth officer could help you with boarding school options and placements? Since the beginning of the Family Liaison Office twenty-five years ago, the Education and Youth officer has developed contacts with numerous American boarding schools in the United States and Europe. It is a priority of this office to remain current on the programs and options available in various types of residential programs.

In the last month, I have visited 18 different boarding schools that cover a huge range of programs to include junior boarding schools, all-boys, all-girls, co-ed, post graduate, special needs schools, and emotional growth programs. Websites and viewbooks are helpful, but it really takes an on-campus visit with students, faculty, and administrators to get a true feel for what makes each school unique. Most importantly, **it is vital the school be the right fit for the student and the student’s needs**. I always return from such trips inspired and excited by the huge range of opportunities that exist out there for our kids. If boarding school is in your child’s future, then please contact us at FLOAskEducation@state.gov, or visit the website for “Boarding School Options for the Foreign Service Child” at <http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/14686.htm>. We can help with everything from just a list of possibilities to helping to see through a child’s admission application.

CHANGES TO THE DSSR* FOR SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

More good news regarding changes to regulations affecting those children who currently receive the special needs allowance and might have the misfortune to find themselves on an evacuation. You can see the regulation changes at <http://aoprals.a.state.gov/perdiems/920/920front2003.html#Biweeklys> . It reads:

Section 633.5 - Child Eligible for Special Needs Education Allowance at the Time of Evacuation - A new section added to allow continuation of the special education allowance at the U.S. safehaven for children who qualified at the overseas post under DSSR 276.8. The change allows a child who qualified for special needs to continue under the current education allowance grant through the duration of the evacuation or until a legal Individual Education Plan (IEP) is developed that would guarantee placement in a special education program in the U.S. public schools whichever occurs first.

*DSSR--Department of State Standardized Regulations governing all foreign affairs agencies.

FREE MONEY FOR COLLEGE!

High school seniors and college undergraduates of Foreign Service employees can apply for one-time only academic/art merit awards and renewable need-based financial aid awards sponsored by the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA). Awards range from \$1,000-3,000. The applications submission deadline is Feb. 6, 2004. Visit AFSA's web page at <http://www.afsa.org/scholar/index.cfm> for complete details or contact Lori Dec

at dec@afsa.org or 1 800 704 2372 ext. 504.

DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO TELL?

The Bureau of Public Affairs and *The Washington Post* are teaming up for a new feature in the *Post's Kid's Page*. This section will feature a "Q & A" session with Foreign Service Officers discussing interesting encounters often experienced while living abroad.



WP Kids Page
Announcement.doc

SUPPORT SERVICES

DSSR CHANGES TO TSMA AND EVACUATIONS

- **Chapter 260 - Separate Maintenance Allowance:**
Section 262.3c is added to provide an additional category of transitional separate maintenance allowance (TSMA) to assist employees when they and/or their eligible family members (EFM) cannot return to post through no fault of their own following termination of an evacuation and reversion of post to accompanied status. Example: If the employee and/or EFM is occupying commercial lodging and the agency policy is the employee with family is not allowed to return to post for reasons such as the employee is within 30 days of the end of his/her tour.
- **Chapter 600 - Evacuation allowance revisions:**
Section 610l and 614c are revised to reflect that the Secretary of State must approve an alternate safehaven.

Section 631a(1) - From Post to Family Safehaven Locations - Changed to allow safehaven anywhere in the U.S., including Alaska and Hawaii. (Formerly, only CONUS was recognized as a safehaven. Evacuees wanting to choose Alaska or Hawaii as safehavens had to ask permission of the Under Secretary for Management).

Section 631b. - Transportation Allowance - Transportation allowance amount changed to increase the amount to \$25/day regardless of family size. (Before this change the daily allowance was \$10 for one person, \$15 for two people, \$20 for three or more).

Section 633.5 - Child Eligible for Special Needs Education Allowance at the Time of Evacuation - A new section added to allow continuation of the special education allowance at the U.S. safehaven for children who qualified at the overseas post under DSSR 276.8. The change allows a child who qualified for special needs to continue under the current education allowance grant through the duration of the evacuation or until a legal Individual Education Plan (IEP) is developed that would guarantee placement in a special education program in the U.S. public schools whichever occurs first.

IMMEDIATE BENEFIT PLAN REOPENS

The American Foreign Service Protective Association has announced the reopening of the Immediate Benefit Plan to new enrollees because of the overwhelming response in the final week of the initial open season. This open season will run through **December 31, 2003**. All U.S. citizen Department of State employees are eligible to participate. The IBP is intended to assist loved ones with the extraordinary expenses that inevitably occur in the first days and weeks following a death and before other benefits begin and

insurance plans can make payment. For just \$2.00 per pay period, the IBP will pay \$15,000 to the designated beneficiary(ies) of an enrollee within two workdays of official notification of death. Sign up by December 31 and the policy will take effect on February 1, 2004. For more information on the IBP, contact the Office of Casualty Assistance at oca@state.gov. To enroll, visit AFSPA's website at www.afspa.org. Enrollment forms may be completed on line, but they must be downloaded, signed and faxed or mailed to AFSPA.

CLEARANCE INFORMATION ONLINE

The Office of Personnel Security/Suitability (PSS) is implementing many new initiatives to build a process-transparent and customer-centered program. One such initiative is the creation of a PSS Customer Service Center (CSC). The CSC has the email address of <mailto:securityclearance@state.gov> that has been established on the unclass system and they will soon have an 800 phone number also available for applicant and employee inquiries regarding clearance issues. In addition, individuals with access to the DS Intranet can now visit the new PSS site at <http://dsweb.state.gov/pss>. An Internet site will also be provided in the near future.

DEPENDENT CARE KITS AVAILABLE FROM IQ: INFORMATION QUEST

Dependent Care Kits - Prenatal, Child Safety, and Adult Care kits - are available free upon request to **IQ: Information Quest**. All State Department employees have access to this service

The kits have useful guides, checklists, resource contact information, plus a few practical items like pill sorters & jar openers in Adult Care and safety locks in Child Safety. To request your kit (and to see the wealth of information available from IQ: Information Quest) go to:

<http://hrweb.hr.state.gov/er/worklife/DependentCare/IQ/InformationQuest.html>



PUBLICATIONS

OPENNET PLUS ACCESS TO EFMS AT YOUR POST

STATE 296123 addresses recent changes to 5 FAM 784, granting access to OpenNet Plus to EFMs at post. *This benefit is optional, not a requirement.* DS and IRM security provisions are included in the cable. FLO guidance for administration of the security provisions will be sent to CLOs soon. Link to cable--

<http://hrweb.hr.state.gov/flo/CLO/CableEFMaccessToIntranet.pdf>

MORE ON LIVING THE FOREIGN SERVICE LIFE...

A Portable Identity—A Woman's Guide to Maintaining a Sense of Self While Moving Overseas by Debra Bryson, MSW, Charise M. Hoge, MSW

This just-published book educates women about the effect of moving overseas on identity, and empowers them to take charge of change. The book includes the authors' personal stories as well as exercises for the reader in a workbook style format. This format invites the reader to actively participate in learning about the effect of the move on her identity, and guides her towards making choices for a positive experience overseas. To order from the publisher contact JNwriter@aol.com.

Realities of Foreign Service Life by Patricia Linderman, Melissa Brayer-Hess

A collection of honest, balanced views about living the mobile Foreign Service lifestyle! Writers from the Foreign Service community share their first-hand experiences and insights through essays on Foreign Service life. A great read for newcomers or veterans of the Foreign Service and especially useful for anyone considering a Foreign Service career. To order go to--

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0595250777/aafswsforeign-20>

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