



# FFAS HUMAN RESOURCES DIVISION NEWSLETTER



Farm and Foreign  
Agricultural Services  
Human Resources Division

June 2011

## USDA Offers Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA) to Employees

Whilemenia Duncan, Communications Officer  
Human Resources Division, Operations

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has offered early retirements to USDA employees. These offerings are department wide and approved by OPM. A USDA spokesman said that these were difficult decisions but necessary due to budget cuts. USDA’s final FY 2011 budget was reduced significantly with anticipated shortfalls for FY 2012. Critical decisions were required because of reduced funding for a number of USDA programs and projects.

One of the decisions led to the approval of the department-wide VERA (early retirements); which was received on May 13, 2011. If FFAS can achieve needed workforce reductions, then we can increase the chances to potentially avoid the use of other adverse workforce reduction strategies.

VERA is offered to employees who are eligible for early retirement, regardless of title, series, grade, and location. If applicants meet all eligibility requirements for early retirement, approval will be granted unless the early retirement date will severely impede program delivery. In this case, an exception must be requested and approved. Employees are encouraged to thoroughly read PM Notice 2807, which provides a thorough description of the process.

FFAS application windows for each agency in the mission area are:

<u>Agency</u>	<u>Application Dates</u>	<u>Departure Dates</u>
FSA	June 13 – July 8, 2011	July 29 – August 31, 2011
RMA	June 13 – July 8, 2011	July 29 – August 31, 2011
FAS	June 16 – August 30, 2011	July 29 – October 3, 2011

Carefully read all information on the completion and submission of your application.

**Employees who have already submitted their VERA application** and wish to change their effective date of retirement should *only* submit an email to the address shown below for your agency. It is not necessary to re-submit another application.

### Agency E-Mail Address

- FAS employee [FAS-VERA-APPLIC@WDC.usda.gov](mailto:FAS-VERA-APPLIC@WDC.usda.gov)
- FSA employee [FSA-VERA-APPLIC@WDC.usda.gov](mailto:FSA-VERA-APPLIC@WDC.usda.gov)
- RMA employee [RMA-VERA-APPLIC@WDC.usda.gov](mailto:RMA-VERA-APPLIC@WDC.usda.gov)

## VERA (continued)

For general information on the early-out authority and about PM Notice 2807, contact [troy.perry@wdc.usda.gov](mailto:troy.perry@wdc.usda.gov) or telephone at 202-401-0436 in the Policy and Accountability Branch.

For information and counseling on the early-out authority contact the person listed in [Notice PM-2807](#), located in the Benefits and Performance Management Section, HRD.

If you want to calculate your estimated retirement annuity the on-line, web-based Retirement Calculator is available in HRLINK\$ at: <https://connecthrusdaauth.gdcii.com>. Good Luck!

## FFAS HRD and Hiring Reform 2010

Whilemenia Duncan, Communications Officer  
Human Resources Division, Operations



President Obama's memorandum dated May 11, 2010, improving the Federal Recruitment and Hiring Process, makes it easier for Americans to apply for Federal jobs. Hiring reform has undergone a considerable amount of progress within FFAS as the bulk of the positions are now filled using resumes and cover letters; and no longer requires knowledge, skills and abilities statements (KSA's).

### Recruitment

USAJobsRecruit is a tool that OPM offers agencies to improve the hiring process. This offering presents a slate of tools that measures job seekers general skills. One of these tools is called Assess, which FFAS HRD piloted earlier this year. This state of the art assessment technique included simulations and computer adaptive testing's; allowing applicants to take assessments anytime, and re-use their results. USAJobsRecruit also includes a tool named "school sorter", which will help FFAS HRD find the best schools for job fairs or other recruiting events. Users will be able to review universities, schools, etc., to determine which teach students the skills USDA needs most.

### Job Application Process

Applicant dissatisfaction with the notification process when involved in the job application process has been eliminated. Through the utilization of an automated hiring system, notifications are provided at four touch points during the application process; they are:

- An acknowledgement email is generated upon completion/receipt of the assessment questionnaire from applicants through USAJOBS
- HR personnel send Notification/Referral letter informing applicants of eligibility status.
- HR personnel send Notification Referral letter informing applicants of referral.
- HR personnel final notification of selection or non selection to applicants that were referred.

### Website

Recently, HRD introduced FFAS HRD's Hiring Reform Web Site. The website is a collective effort which provides scores of tools to remove the complexities and inefficiencies of existing hiring processes. It includes the location of easily accessible information, links, and products FFAS can use in support of the President's hiring reform initiative. The ability of FFAS to perform its mission effectively depends on a talented and engaged workforce; and a website can

## Hiring Reform (continued)

provide that support and further strengthen our workforce. The site, along with the other Hiring Reform Tools, is essential to maximizing the efficiency and effectiveness of HRD's reformed hiring process. You can access the Website by clicking [here](#).

HRD continues its implementation of all of these reforms. We want to assure that all of the reform initiatives are designed to help FFAS build the workforce needed to achieve our goals. We are also focusing on attracting a more diverse work force which includes people with disabilities and students through the newly implemented Pathways Program. Successful implementation of these reforms will help us achieve our objectives for the farmer; our true customer.

## 2011 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) Response Rate Increases for FFAS

Yolanda Provost  
Human Resources Specialist  
Human Capital Strategic Planning and Initiative Branch

OPM conducted a 2011 administration of the government-wide Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS). Historically, OPM has administered the government-wide FEVS every other year. However, with the revamped survey in 2010 and its positive impact on agencies, OPM and OMB decided to administer the FEVS every year, beginning in April/May 2011.



The 2011 FEVS was a smaller sampling than the 2010. The survey was sent electronically to randomly selected employees so not all FFAS employees received a survey. During the FEVS administration period of April and May 2011, a communiqué was sent from Jacqueline Whitaker via the electronic FFAS Newsletter to all FFAS employees. This initial communication described the FEVS, the purpose of it, and indicated that the sampling was smaller so that not every employee would expect to receive one. Interestingly, several emails and phone calls were received in FSA/HRD from employees who were not selected in 2011, and who actually wanted to receive a survey. This shows a high degree of interest and engagement in the FEVS process, and also shows that employees want their views known to their leadership. Since all views, positive, negative or neutral, are important to improving the employee experience, it was encouraging to find that employees have increased reliance and trust in the FEVS process.

Beginning in May 2011, a reminder to complete the FEVS was sent to all FFAS employees weekly until the survey period closed on May 31, 2011. This frequent communication process produced results and the increase in FEVS responses was terrific. Below is a briefing of the 2011 FEVS response rates.

- The FEVS USDA-wide response rate increased to 50.60% over the 2010 FEVS response rate of 49.60%.
- The Farm Service Agency (FSA) response rate was nine (9) points higher than the Department, at 59.1%, and higher than the FSA response rate of 2010, which was 50.1%. Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) and Risk Management Agency (RMA) had tremendous response rate increases in comparison to 2010, as follows:

## FEVS (continued)

<b>Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) 2011 and 2010 Response Rates</b>		
	<b>2011</b>	<b>2010</b>
FAS	<b>51.1%</b>	28.1 %
RMA	<b>82.0%</b>	59.4%
FSA	<b>59.1%</b>	50.1%

OPM received the final data from paper FEVS surveys (from employees who could not complete the survey electronically) the night of May 31, 2011, and will have total response rate results for Agencies in approximately one week.

The FEVS was updated in 2011 to gather more useful data that will help us improve our workplaces and increase productivity. The survey helps us listen to our employees and focus on employee perceptions that drive job satisfaction, commitment, engagement, and ultimately contribute to the accomplishment of the Agency mission. Final results of the 2011 FEVS must be collated and analyzed government-wide by OPM, and will be ready for distribution to Agencies during fall 2011. As soon as a firm date is known, it will be communicated to you. At this time, we would like to thank everyone who participated in the 2011 FEVS. Your time and diligence in completing the survey is greatly appreciated.

### **Fatherhood is VITAL too**

Wade Wippering, Health and Wellness Ambassador  
Risk Management Agency  
Spokane Washington Regional Office

Fathers are an integral part of their children's lives, both in providing for their children's economic needs and in ensuring a safe and nurturing environment. Fatherhood initiatives have been implemented at the Department of State, Department of Education, Department of Health and Human Services, and Office of Personnel Management.

#### **The Issue**

Today, 24 million children are growing up in a home without their biological father. In the African American community, it is two out of every three children. Stepfathers and Grandfathers can have profound and important leadership roles with children. Like Joseph, who wasn't Jesus' biological parent, stepfathers/grandfathers can offer guidance, love, and encouragement to children under their care.

#### **Why Dads Matter**

Involved fathers enable children to:

- Stay in school and succeed academically
- Develop healthy self-esteem
- Grow up in healthy, safe homes and neighborhoods



## Fatherhood (continued)

### How We Help

National Father Initiative gives dads the tools they need to connect with their kids and develop healthy relationships. Through educational parenting resources, we help men understand the valuable role they have and give them the parenting skills needed to provide a safe and healthy environment for their children <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/>



### Educating New Dads

When fathers don't get involved, young children are more likely to suffer illnesses, injuries and neglect.

### Effective Parenting

Involved fathers provide practical support in raising children and serve as models for their development. Children with involved, loving fathers are significantly more likely to do well in school, have healthy self-esteem, exhibit empathy and pro-social behavior compared to children who have uninvolved fathers. Committed and responsible fathering during infancy and early childhood contributes emotional security, curiosity, and math and verbal skills <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/>



### Support Groups

Support groups bring together people who have similar concerns or difficulties and enable them to share personal stories and helpful information. Members often find it comforting to learn that their problems are not unique. A support group also provides a means of addressing many of these issues in a small group setting where personal information will remain confidential. The OPM publication, “Establishing a Work-Site Parenting Support Groups”, provides complete information for setting up a support group.

### Work/Life Programs

Work/life programs can assist Federal employees who are fathers to be more involved in the lives of their children. These include family-friendly leave entitlements; child care resources; and workplace flexibilities including alternative work schedules and telework. The Employee Assistance Program can offer personal counseling. Employees should ask for information about Federal employee health benefits and child support enforcement procedures.

### How Parenting Patterns Are Learned

It is widely accepted by parent educators today that parenting patterns are learned in childhood and replicated later in life when children become parents. The experiences children have during the process of growing up have a significant impact on the attitudes, skills, and childrearing practices they will use with their own children. Although the concept of intergenerational replication of parenting is easy to accept, understanding the issues that affect the experiences children have while growing up is more complex. Professionals in the helping fields commonly discuss two types of childhood experiences:

- Positive experiences that build strong character and a sense of self-worth and that model a nurturing parenting style.

## Fatherhood (continued)

- Negative experiences that engulf children in parenting models of abuse, neglect, exploitation, and victimization.

### Highlights

Fathers who provide economic support and a physical presence help their children's emotional and social development and lessen the incidence of behavior problems. (Children and Welfare Reform Issue Brief, No. 4, published by the National Center for Children in Poverty, <http://cpmnet.columbia.edu/dept/nccp>.)

- More children are growing up in fatherless homes (22 percent more between 1988 and 1998). More children are being raised by single fathers (a 76 percent increase in the last decade). Bernard, S.N., & Knitzer, J. (1999). Map and Track: State Initiatives to Encourage Responsible Fatherhood (Report). New York, NY: Columbia University, National Center for Children in Poverty.
- While the amount of time employed mothers spend with their children (3.2 hours each workday) has remained constant over the last 20 years, the time employed fathers spend with their children (2.3 hours each workday) has increased significantly by one-half hour per workday. However, seventy percent of all parents still feel they do not spend enough time with their children, and that both fathers and mothers have less time for personal activities. Families and Work Institute. (1998, April 15).

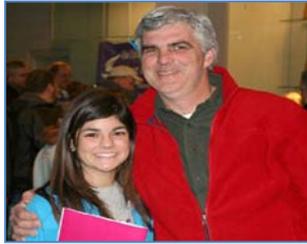
### National Center for Fathering

The National Center for Fathering conducts research and develops practical resources for training men who want to be better fathers. Inspiring stories can be found at <http://www.fathers.com/>.

Dad's are Heroes



"My Dad Holds the Key"



Valentine's Day with your children



### Resources on the Child Welfare Information Gateway Website

Child Abuse and Neglect [www.childwelfare.gov/can/](http://www.childwelfare.gov/can/)

Defining Child Abuse and Neglect [www.childwelfare.gov/can/defining/](http://www.childwelfare.gov/can/defining/)

Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect [www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/](http://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/)

Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect [www.childwelfare.gov/responding/reporting.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/responding/reporting.cfm)

## FFAS Human Resources Division's (HRD) Communications Program

Whilemenia Duncan, Communications Officer  
Human Resources Division, Operations

In October 2009, HRD established a Communications Program; developed to standardize and centralize communications developed by HRD which is issued to our mission area. The program is assigned to HRD Operations, who employs a Communications Officer to coordinate communications developed by HRD employees and issues the same.



HRD's communications do not set policy, but rather clarify and inform the mission area of information essential to support the performance of daily duties. These announcements provide strategic information on various program initiatives; support understanding of specific policies, changes, products and services; and provide access to training.

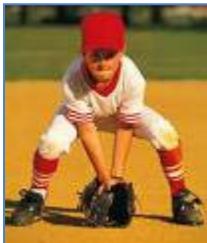
Communications are deliberate based on timelines of specific activities and the overarching objectives of the various audiences it must address. Managing the process ensures accuracy and consistency. Further, a variety of communications media is employed to ensure continuous communications, e.g., E-newsletter, HRD's Website, Leaders' Alert, and various Directors' Announcements issued by the HRD's Director, Jacqueline J. Whitaker.

Going forth, please tap into emails received from *Whilemenia Duncan*, HRD's Communications Officer, they contain news you can use to support your daily work activities.

## Preventing Heat Related Illnesses

Juliet McBride, National Worklife and Wellness Program Manager  
Employee/Labor Relations and Benefits Branch

Summer is approaching and it is important to know how to help prevent heat related illnesses.



Summer heat waves can be dangerous. A very high body temperature can damage the brain and other vital organs. Some health conditions can make it harder for the body to stay cool in hot weather. These include old age, obesity, fever, dehydration, heart disease, poor circulation, sunburn and drug and alcohol use. By reducing excessive exposure to high temperatures and taking other precautionary steps, most heat-related illnesses can be avoided. Heat stroke is the most serious heat-related disorder. It occurs when the body becomes unable to control its temperature: the body's temperature rises

rapidly, the sweating mechanism fails, and the body is unable to cool down. When heat stroke occurs, the body temperature can rise to 106 degrees Fahrenheit or higher within 10 to 15 minutes. Heat stroke can cause death or permanent disability if emergency treatment is not given. To protect your health when temperatures are very high click on the websites below to obtain tips for promoting good health and well-being:

Center of Disease Control: <http://emergency.cdc.gov/disasters/extremeheat/heattips.asp>

National Institute of Occupational Health: <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/heatstress/>



*Next Month's Wellness Corner...stay tuned for more summer health info tips.*

## Emerging Issues

Whilemenia Duncan  
Communications Officer  
Excerpted from applicable Web Sites noted below

### Visit OPM's Retirement Info Center



As the Federal government enters this time of transition it is important to know your retirement programs' features, benefits, and requirements. At this site OPM shares retirement information for new, prospective, and current Federal employees. Click on the link below to find the most up-to-date information on changes, events, and other issues that may affect your Federal retirement benefits.

<http://www.opm.gov/Blogs/Retire/index.aspx>

### OPM Issues Guidance Regarding Employment of Transgender Individuals in Federal Workplace

OPM Director John Berry issued a brief memorandum to all executive departments and agency heads announcing "Guidance Regarding the Employment of Transgender Individuals in the Federal Workplace." The memorandum simply provides guidance to address some of the common questions that agencies have raised. Follow this link to [Read more](#)



### Within-Grade Increases and the Federal Government

Employees are encouraged to be aware of their pay increases. Within-grade increases should never be viewed as automatic or routine. Follow this OPM link for additional information on within-grade increase eligibility [www.opm.gov/oca/pay/HTML/wgifact.asp](http://www.opm.gov/oca/pay/HTML/wgifact.asp)

## Ask the Editor

To turn HRD's Newsletter into a more valuable resource for our readers I want to provide you "listening time" and encourage you to provide me with the information you are looking for in a newsletter from HRD.

I believe the easiest way to find out exactly "what" someone wants to know is simply by asking...so tell me...what topics are you most interested in hearing about...*I'm listening.*

*Provide topics to the Editor at [whilemenia.duncan@kcc.usda.gov](mailto:whilemenia.duncan@kcc.usda.gov) or telephone 816-823-4669.*

## An HRD E-Reader Ask

1. Where can CSRS and FERS annuitants get answers to other questions about retirement benefits?

OPM's Office of Retirement Programs [website](#) provides various categories of information including the questions most frequently asked by annuitants and survivor annuitants.

## E-Reader (continued)

During the year, you may request information such as verification of annuity or the value of life insurance. You may also make changes to your own retirement account, such as federal and state income tax withholding changes, by calling OPM on the toll-free number 1-888-767-6738, TDD for the hearing impaired 1-800-878-5707, or send email to [retire@opm.gov](mailto:retire@opm.gov). The automated telephone system is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

2. Follow this link to view the answer to this question: [I am going to retire soon. What are the requirements to continue health benefits into retirement?](#)



Follow this link <http://www.theworknumber.com/Employees/> when you need proof of employment and income in order to grant credit, monitor your portfolio or a potential employer needing work history?

3. Is there any Email Signature Line requirement?

Netiquette ("net etiquette") strongly encourages the use of signature lines. Signature lines always include a telephone number. If you ever send an email, anticipate questions or objections that may require a telephone conversation for clarification. Including your telephone number allows recipients to call you quicker; they do not have to find the telephone directory or your telephone number in Outlook.

4. Are there any suggestions for placing outbound telephone calls?

Whenever you make a telephone call for yourself or your boss, be sure to leave your telephone number. Although many keep a "frequently called numbers" list within reach yours may not be on it. This requires the returning caller to look your telephone number up in the telephone directory, or in Outlook. Don't assume your number has shown up on the "called id"; some are too small to read. Also, remember us boomers, speak slowly, and it does not hurt my feelings if you say it twice.

## 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>

*Provide feedback and articles for publication to the Editor at [whilemenia.duncan@kcc.usda.gov](mailto:whilemenia.duncan@kcc.usda.gov)*