

BEST NEWSLETTER

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BEST Line: 1-800-616-3775 – Overseas: Toll-Free AT&T Direct Access Number then 800-997-2378

Hearing Impaired: TDD 1-800-382-0893 or (210)565-2276

FAX: DSN 665-2936 or (210) 565-2936

BEST Homepage: www.afpc.randolph.af.mil/dpc/best/menu.htm

EBIS: www.afpc.randolph.af.mil/dpc/BEST_GRB/EBIS.htm

2004 Edition, Issue 1 – February 2004

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Comments from Our Branch Chief

We're always looking for ways to improve service to our customers. I'm pleased to announce a new on-line web feature that allows users to view a database of frequently asked questions (FAQs).

To reach the FAQs, go to the [BEST Homepage](#) and click the link "Search Our Knowledge Base of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)." We have Q&As on the basics of health and life insurance, retirement, Thrift Savings Plan, and how to access the benefits and entitlements automated web and phone system.

When you reach the FAQ page, you can search for the answer to a question by category or search text. There's also a place within each FAQ where you can let us know if the information provided answered your question, and if not, to provide feedback.

This is an exciting new tool for providing benefits information, and we think you'll like it. Check it out today!

MARIA F. MOLLY
Chief, Benefits and
Entitlements Branch

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New 1-800 Phone Number Update

In the Dec 03 issue of the BEST Newsletter we advised of the **new 1-800-616-3775 toll-free phone number** for contacting BEST. That number is available for all stateside callers, but international access issues are still being worked for overseas callers. Until further notice, overseas callers will contact BEST by dialing the toll-free AT&T direct access number for the country they're in, then 800-997-2378. Hearing impaired callers will continue to reach BEST using our current TDD numbers (1-800-382-0893 or, if calling within San Antonio, Texas, commercial 565-2276).

Having problems reaching the BEST automated system or a BEST Benefits Counselor using the new 1-800 number? Perhaps the following will help. After dialing 1-800-616-3775 you'll hear "Welcome to the Air Force Customer Service Center." Listen carefully to the menu options, and press 2 for "Air Force-serviced civilian employee," then 2 again for "BEST Benefits and Entitlements services." You'll hear several clicks and a few seconds of silence, then "Welcome to the Air Force Personnel Center." Press 2 for the benefits and entitlements services system, then 1 for current Air Force serviced employee. Next, enter your SSN and BEST PIN and verify your current duty phone number. You'll then be at the benefits main menu where you can select the appropriate program area to make benefits elections and/or transfer to a benefits counselor.

Eventual changes within the new 1-800 phone system will streamline and make the selections easier.

If you still have problems reaching the BEST automated system or a benefits counselor, please notify your local Civilian Personnel Office who will contact us on your behalf.

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HEALTH INSURANCE LONG TERM CARE INSURANCE

Verify Your Health Insurance Enrollment

Did you elect a new health insurance plan during the Nov – Dec 03 Open Season? Have you verified you are enrolled in the right plan, with the correct premium deduction? If not, please do so now. Check the Deductions block of your Leave and Earnings Statement (LES) received on pay date 30 Jan 04 (for pay period 11 – 24 Jan 04) to verify your plan code and premium amount. If you made an Open Season change not correctly reflected on this LES, please contact a BEST benefits counselor right away.

Additionally – are you enrolled in a health plan that requires payment of membership dues? Some of the plans that require annual membership fees include the Mail Handlers Benefit Plan, Postmasters Benefit Plan, National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC), American Postal Workers Union (APWU), and the Alliance Health Benefit Plan (AHP). There are others; check your health plan brochure to make sure. Failure to pay membership dues may result in the cancellation of your health insurance enrollment.

It's also your responsibility to notify both your health plan carrier and the union/employee organization sponsoring the plan if you have a change of address. If you have questions regarding your plan's membership dues or need information about where to send those dues, contact your health plan carrier directly. The phone number is on your membership card and in your plan brochure.

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New Groups Eligible for Long Term Care Insurance

In accordance with Section 561 of Public Law 108-136, the National Defense Authorization Act for 2004, signed into law by President Bush on November 24, 2003, the following additional groups and their qualified relatives are now eligible to apply for long term care insurance under the Federal Long Term Care Insurance Program:

- Federal employees who separate from service with title to a deferred annuity may apply at any time. They do not need to wait until they are actually receiving their deferred annuity.
- Retired "grey" reservists, even if they are not receiving their retired pay yet.
- D.C. Government employees who were first employed by the D.C. Government before October 1, 1987.

It's **not** too late to apply for insurance under the largest group long term care insurance program in the country. Call the Long Term Care (LTC) Partners' toll-free phone number now: 1-800-582-3337, TTY 1-800-843-3557. Certified LTC specialists are available Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. Eastern Time.

Visit these web sites for additional information: www.afpc.randolph.af.mil/dpc/best/LTCIns.htm, www.opm.gov/insure/ltc, and www.ltcfeds.com.

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THRIFT SAVINGS PLAN (TSP)

TSP Changes Rules on Loans

Effective 1 July 2004, the TSP is making the following changes regarding TSP loans:

- A \$50 fee will be deducted from the amount of each new loan.
- You may no longer have two general purpose loans at the same time, but still can have one general purpose loan and one residential loan.
- When you pay off one loan, you will not be eligible to apply for another loan for 60 days.

Why the changes? While participants need access to the money in their TSP accounts for legitimate reasons, the TSP advises in recent years they have seen a significant increase in the number of loans. Some participants constantly have two outstanding loans, taking another loan immediately after one is paid in full. TSP states participants should not tap into their funds as if they are a checking or savings account. The TSP believes the changes to the loan program will reinforce the importance of borrowing only as a last resort. The \$50 fee will cover the cost of processing and servicing the loan and will ensure these costs are paid by the 500,000 participants of the loan program, and not by the 2.7 million participants who do not use the loan program. Additional information is available on the TSP Web site at www.tsp.gov/forms/high04a.pdf.

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TSP Tax Credit

If you participated in the Thrift Savings Plan during tax year 2003, you may be eligible for the Retirement Savings Contributions Credit. This credit may be available to participants with an adjusted gross income of no more than \$50,000 if married filing jointly, \$37,500 if head of household, or \$25,000 if single or married filing separately. For information, consult your tax advisor or refer to IRS Form 8880.

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No Open Season for TSP Catch-Up Contributions

Someone told you it's too late to enroll to make TSP catch-up contributions for calendar year 2004? Not true! TSP catch-up contributions are not tied to open seasons like regular TSP contributions. If you're eligible, you can enroll to make catch-up contributions for 2004 at any time as long as you submit your electronic enrollment no later than 11 Dec 04. What are the eligibility requirements? You must turn age 50 (or older) during 2004 and be enrolled and contributing the maximum regular TSP contribution (9 percent for CSRS, 14 percent for FERS) or an amount that will result in reaching the annual elective deferral for regular TSP contributions for 2004, which is \$13,000.

When you enroll, you'll designate the amount you wish to contribute **per pay period**. This can be any amount as long as it does not exceed the amount of your pay after all other required deductions have been made. (Required deductions include voluntary deductions or allotments, including regular TSP contributions and TSP loan payments.) The maximum you can contribute for 2004 is \$3,000. Your contributions will stop when they reach the maximum dollar amount for the calendar year. Eligible Air Force-serviced civilian employees will enroll in the catch-up contribution program through the Benefits and Entitlements (BEST) automated phone system or the Employee Benefits Information System (EBIS) Web application. Phone number and link to EBIS are located at the top of the first page of this newsletter.

Remember, TSP catch-up contributions are **not** the same as **regular** TSP contributions, and you cannot make catch-up contributions by increasing your regular contributions. Additional information is available on the BEST homepage (www.afpc.randolph.af.mil/dpc/best/tsp-page.htm) and the Thrift Savings Plan Web site at www.tsp.gov, or you may contact a BEST benefits counselor if you have questions.

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RETIREMENT Full Service Employees

VERA/VSIP and FEHB Waivers

When you retire, you are eligible to continue health benefits coverage if you meet all the following requirements:

- You are entitled to retire on an immediate annuity under a retirement system for civilian employees (including FERS MRA + 10 retirements); and
- You have been continuously enrolled (or covered as a family member) in any FEHB plan(s) for the 5 years of service immediately before the date your annuity starts, or for the full period(s) of service since your first opportunity to enroll (if less than 5 years). Enrollment in CHAMPUS or TRICARE counts toward the 5 years as long as you are enrolled in FEHB effective prior to retirement.

Are you planning to retire this year and don't meet the 5 year requirement? Well, retiring employees are eligible for an automatic waiver of the 5 year requirement for continuing Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) into retirement if they are retiring due to a Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA) and/or Voluntary Separation Incentive Program (VSIP) under the current statutory authority, which is the 24 Nov 03 National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2004. However, you must be enrolled in FEHB effective prior to 24 Nov 03.

What do you need to do to request the automatic FEHB waiver? This is the nice part...you don't need to do anything. As part of retirement processing, we always check to make sure retiring employees meet the 5 year requirement. If you don't, and you're retiring on an approved VERA and/or VSIP and meet all the above requirements, we'll attach a memorandum to your retirement package indicating you are eligible for the automatic waiver.

VERA and/or VSIP opportunities may be available only if your base is undergoing downsizing or restructuring to avoid reduction-in-force. As a result, VERA and/or VSIP must be offered and approved by your local Civilian Personnel Office.

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Calendar of Events

Thrift Savings Plan Open Season - 15 Apr-30 Jun 04

Federal Employees Health Benefits Open Season - 8 Nov-13 Dec 04

Flexible Spending Account Open Season - 8 Nov-13 Dec 04

Thrift Savings Plan Open Season - 15 Oct-31 Dec 04

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