

Marketing & Regulatory Programs
HR BROADCAST

Quarter 4 – FY 2019 Issue

**DIRECTOR'S
CORNER**

Greetings,

While the Hiring Emergency Incident Command Team (ICT) has stood down, hiring remains a priority for Fiscal Year 2019. Marketing and Regulatory Programs Business Services (MRPBS), Human Resources Division (HRD), is currently developing a plan that focuses on the path to transition from the hiring emergency to the HR operations steady state. Our transition roadmap sets goals with short, medium, and long-term objectives. HRD continues to work closely with our customers to ensure we collectively leverage all of the hiring emergency tactics and strategies.

Most recently, USDA has sent out guidance regarding the priority selection of the Economic Research Service (ERS) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) employees through the Career Transition Assistance Program (CTAP). This is an excellent opportunity to keep the ERS and NIFA employees gainfully employed while placing experienced talent within our organizations.

Additionally, we will continue to focus on increasing the capacity of HR by onboarding 4 hub employees and hiring the remaining 16, utilizing Office of Personnel Management contract support, and integrating 3 contracted HR Specialists. HRD will continue to track metrics and conduct our recurring meetings to ensure we remain focused on the Agency's hiring goals.

Before closing, I want to personally thank everyone on the ICT for all of their hard work during the incident response. And, thank you to all of the hiring managers for working cooperatively with the ICT and HRD to help us meet the goal of hiring more employees.

Beverly Ledford

Beverly Ledford, HRD Director

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We hope that the HR Broadcast is meeting your needs and communicating topics of interest, but if there are items you would like to see included in future issues, please contact our HR Broadcast Layout Editor, Christina Furnkranz, at Christina.S.Furnkranz@usda.gov

Employee Assistance Program

by Tara Abramowitz (Tara.L.Abramowitz@usda.gov, 301-851-2883)

EAP is a professional counseling and referral service to help APHIS employees with personal and professional problems. It is free, confidential within the limits of the law, and voluntary. EAP can assist you with emotional, family, marital, alcohol or drug use/abuse, relationship problems, and other issues.

Services covered:

- Up to 6 free confidential counseling sessions, per problem. Immediate family members (spouse/significant other, children living in household) may also use EAP.
- Elder/child care referral services. Information regarding elder or child care resources, i.e., summer camps, before/after care, special needs, private schools, adult day care centers, home health care, case management, etc.
- Management consultations. Direct assistance and advice on employee interventions.
- Critical Incident Stress Debriefings. Counseling sessions and debriefings after a critical incident has occurred.
- Employee and Supervisory orientations to EAP services. Group orientations to the EAP contract and the services provided.
- Financial Services - ½ hour of free advice per issue on financial matters.
- Legal Assistance - ½ hour of free advice per issue on legal matters.



Obtaining services:

Call 1-800-222-0364 and identify yourself as a USDA/APHIS employee. You can call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The telephone will be answered by a certified counselor who will ask you several questions about why you are calling (triage). If it is an emergency, you will be directly connected to a counselor. If it is not deemed an emergency, you will be contacted by a counselor within 24 hours, who will begin working directly with you.

If you are calling for elder/child or personal care services, you will be transferred to LifeCare.com after being initially triaged. LifeCare.com will then provide you with elder/child or personal care resources.

For additional information:

If you need more information about these services or experience problems contacting EAP, please contact Tara Abramowitz, EAP Program Manager at (301) 851-2883 or via email at Tara.L.Abramowitz@usda.gov. Confidentiality will be maintained.



Technology At Work

Persons with disabilities who need program information in alternate formats (braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 or 844-433-2774 (voice and TTY). <https://www.targetcenter.dm.usda.gov/>





Background Investigations

by **Steve Crescini** (*Steven.A.Crescini@usda.gov*, 612-336-3285)

The U.S. Government conducts background investigations and periodic reinvestigations to determine whether applicants or incumbents either employed by the Government or working for the Government under contract, are suitable to occupy a position and/or are eligible for access to classified information. The Personnel Security Section of the Human Resources Office (HRO) in Minneapolis is responsible for collecting and reviewing the required forms for accuracy prior to forwarding them to the Department of Agriculture's Personnel Document and Security Division (PDSD) or the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) for both Federal and non-Federal personnel.

Agencies are responsible for designating risk levels for every competitive service position within their agency. The HRO Classification Team is responsible for making these determinations. Their determination is based on the position's documented duties and responsibilities. There are three categories of designations. Each position is designated at a low, moderate, or high risk level, depending on the position's potential for adverse impact to the integrity and efficiency of the service (5 CFR 731.106).

- **Non-Sensitive, Low Risk Positions (LR):** Positions which involve duties and responsibilities of limited relation to an agency or program mission, so the potential for impact on the integrity and efficiency of the service is limited.
- **Public Trust Positions:** Positions at the moderate or high risk levels are normally referred to as "Public Trust" positions. Such positions may involve policy making, major program responsibility, public safety and health, law enforcement duties, and operation or control of financial records, with a significant risk for causing damage or realizing personal gain.
- **National Security Positions:** Positions whose activities, duties, and responsibilities involve the nation's war and defense plans, foreign policy, or access to classified information. All positions with National Security duties and responsibilities must have a sensitivity level designation to ensure the appropriate level of investigative screening is done to comply with E.O.10450 and E.O.12968.

When a background investigation is initiated, the following forms/documents are submitted to support the processing of the investigation:

Position Sensitivity Codes/Levels:	Forms for Background Investigations:
1 - Non-Sensitive/Low Risk	SF-85, two Fingerprint Cards: SF-87 or FD-258(1), OF-306, OF-612 or Resume, and SF-86A (2), if necessary
2 - Non-Critical Sensitive (National Security)	SF-86, (completed through e-QIP only), two Fingerprint Cards: SF-87 or FD-258(1), OF-306, OF-612 or Resume, Fair Credit Reporting Form, USDA Justification Form (completed by Supervisor), and SF-86A (2), if necessary
3 - Critical Sensitive (National Security)	
4 - Special Sensitive (National Security)	SF-85P, (completed through e-QIP only), two Fingerprint Cards: SF-87 or FD-258(1), OF-306, OF-612 or Resume, Fair Credit Reporting Form, and SF-86A (2), if necessary
5 - Moderate Risk (Public Trust)	
6 - High Risk (Public Trust)	

Once your background investigation or reinvestigation is initiated in eQIP by Personnel Security, you have a short time period to log in and begin your background investigation. Upon completion, Personnel Security conducts a review, and if all the documents are submitted, Personnel Security completes the review and releases it to OPM for review and adjudication by the PDSD. OPM completion times vary for background investigations but current times range from 110 days up to 360 days.

As mentioned above, ensuring your background investigation is current and commensurate with your job duties and functions is critical in ensuring the security and safeguarding of sensitive material as well as a condition of employment, so when you receive your eQIP initiation notice, please take the time to complete it in a timely manner or work with your supervisor if you have any concerns about completing it on time.

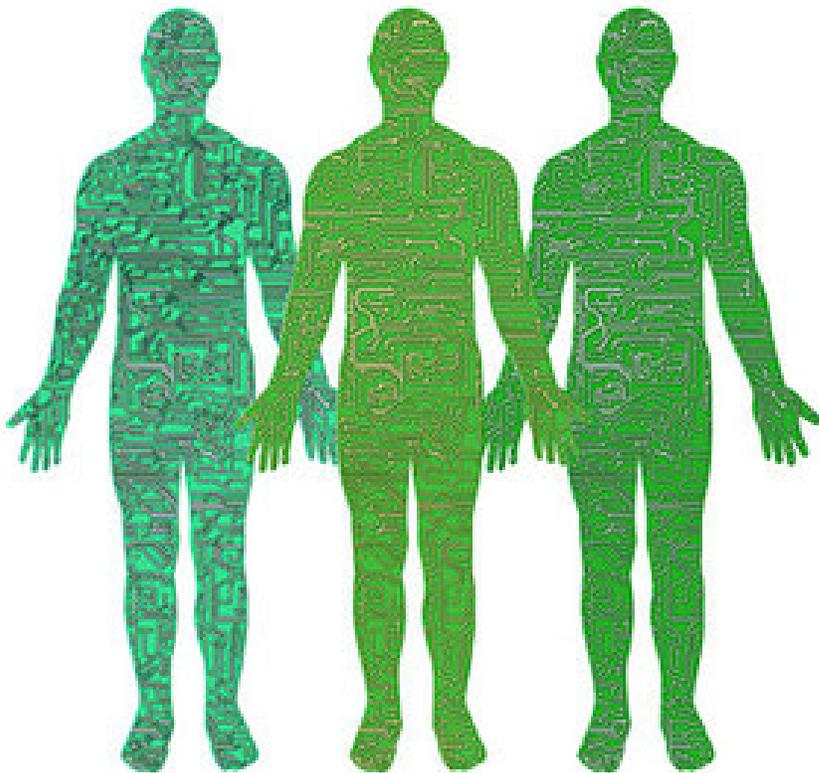


Personnel Security – Not Just for Federal Employees

by Steve Crescini (Steven.A.Crescini@usda.gov, 612-336-3285)

Personnel Security currently services more than 12,000 Federal employees by providing Sponsoring and Adjudication of LincPass Cards as well as providing the critical initial and reinvestigations of the background investigation for Federal employees so they can do their assigned jobs and responsibilities. But, there is another element of employees that Personnel Security supports with LincPass Cards and Background Investigations and those are the non-Federal employees such as contractors, Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs), and even volunteers.

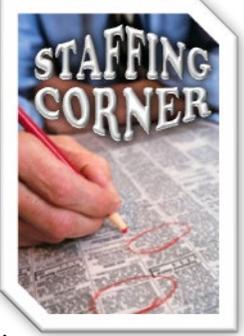
According to Paul Light, a New York University Professor, in his 2017 report entitled “The Size of Government: Tracking Washington’s Workforce,” an estimated 3.7 million contractors supported the Federal government which translated into approximately 40 percent of the workforce. This workforce included the military, Federal employees, and postal service workers. Over the past several years, it is estimated that Personnel Security has sponsored and adjudicated LincPass Cards for an average of 250 – 300 contractors annually to support the various AMS and APHIS programs. In recent years, that number seems to be increasing with special projects and the need for additional help for services. The number of background investigation requests has increased for contractors in the past 2 years and the process is the same for Federal and non-Federal employees when they are initiated into eQIP once the proper documents are submitted.



New contractors are screened as closely as Federal employees when they submit fingerprints, HRO-1197, AD-1197 forms, Fair Credit Reports, and two forms of identification to be reviewed and processed to ensure there are no suitability issues. FSNs posed interesting challenges in getting the needed background investigation documents from various governmental agencies (Department of Homeland Security, Department of State, etc.) as well as the Pseudo Social Security Number (PSSN) for system entries. The FSN process is currently under review and reworking to update it to make it more efficient and effective in support of the various programs.

Regardless of the category of employee (Federal or non-Federal), all are getting the proper screening and review by Personnel Security prior to them supporting the Federal government as documented in Executive Order 10450 to ensure only the highest quality employee is hired and integrated into the Federal workforce.





USA Staffing – Viewing the Announcement Preview

by Kitty Weeden (Kitty.B.Weeden@usda.gov, 612-336-3289)



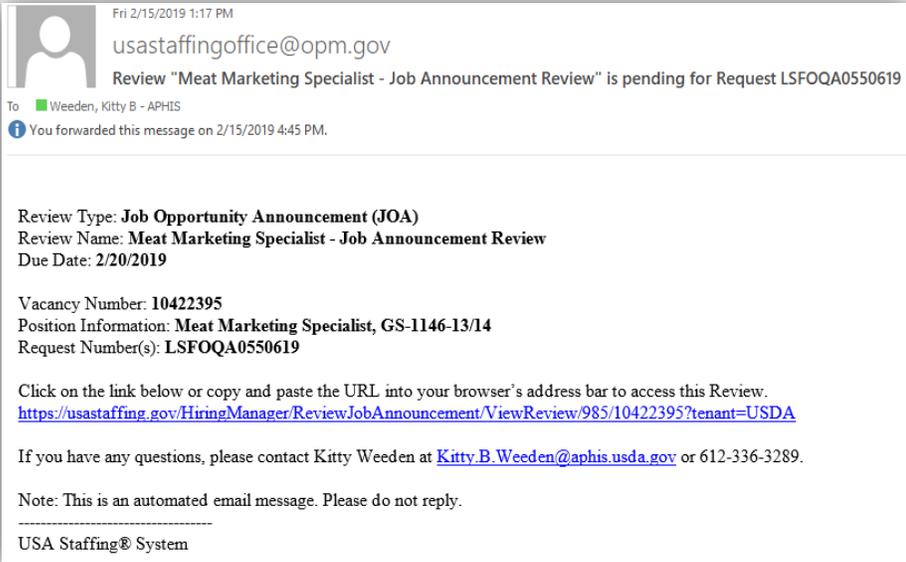
USA Staffing
Great Government Starts Here®

Federal Government's Talent Acquisition System

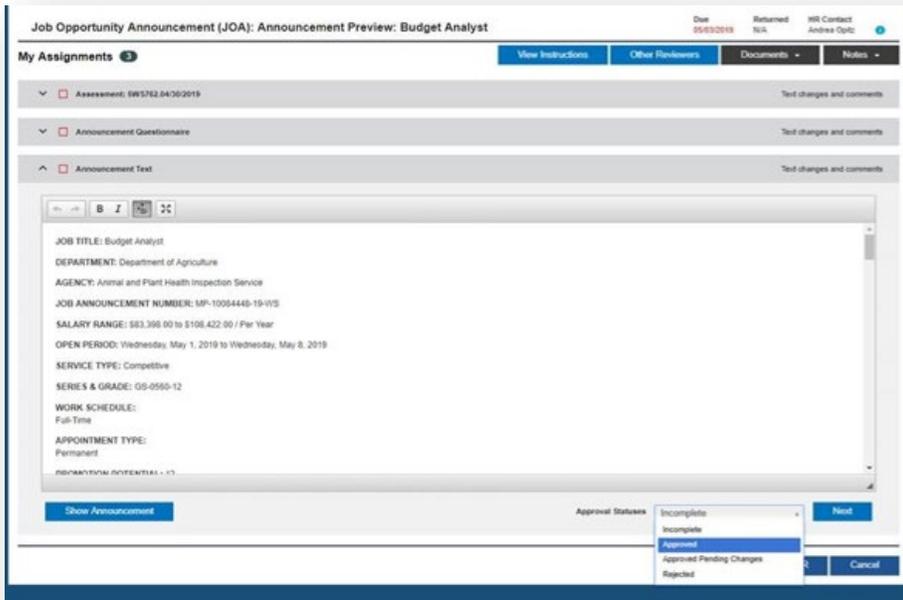
Now that Human Resources has transitioned to USA Staffing for posting Job Opportunity Announcements (JOAs), the way that hiring managers receive a courtesy preview of their announcement has changed. When Human Resources

completes the JOA, the hiring manager will receive an email directly from the USA Staffing System.

The sender will be usastaffingoffice@opm.gov, and it will contain a link to the courtesy announcement preview:



Using the link in the email, you will be able to log into USA Staffing to review the announcement text and assessment questions for your recruitment. You may also make suggested edits or changes to the announcement in the announcement preview. After the announcement is reviewed, please select the appropriate approval status (typically "Approved" or "Approved Pending Changes") at the bottom of the screen. Then click the **Return to HR** button and return the announcement to Staffing.



Please pay close attention to the dates in the announcement preview. If the preview is approved or if the suggested edits/changes are approved, HR will post the announcement to USAJOBS based on the dates in the preview. HR will only contact you again if the requested edits/changes to the announcement cannot be made.

Please note: this is a preview of the announcement. It will not be available in USAJOBS until the opening date of the JOA, and it cannot be shared with anyone other than the hiring manager.

Please contact your servicing staffing team member with any questions.

https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/business-services/contact_us/hrd/hrd



Changes Coming to TSP in Fall 2019

by **Brian Fleming** (Brian.B.Fleming@usda.gov, 612-336-3621)



On November 17, 2017, President Trump signed into law the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) Modernization Act, which provides employees more options for how and when they can access money from their TSP account.

These options will take effect on September 15, 2019, and they fall into the following categories:

- After you separate from service, you can take multiple post-separation partial withdrawals.
- If you are 59½ or older and still working in Federal civilian or uniformed service, you can take up to four in-service withdrawals each year.
- You will be able to choose whether your withdrawal should come from your Roth balance, your traditional balance, or a proportional mix of both.
- You will no longer need to make a full withdrawal election after you turn 70½ and are separated from Federal service. (You will still need to receive IRS required minimum distributions (RMDs).)
- If you are a separated participant, you will be able to take monthly, quarterly, or annual payments.
- You will be able to stop, start, or make changes to your installment payments at any time.
- You will have enhanced online tools to help you make withdrawals in the My Account section of tsp.gov.



For more information on the upcoming changes, please see the TSP's fact sheet entitled [Questions and Answers about Changes to TSP Withdrawal Options](#).

TSP has also announced that effective September 15, 2019, they are eliminating the six-month suspension rule for employees that have taken a financial hardship in-service withdrawal. Some key points to note:

- Participants who received a financial hardship in-service withdrawal and have been suspended from contributing to the TSP will be able to re-start TSP contributions effective September 15, 2019, even though they may not have completed the six-month suspension period.
- Participants whose TSP contributions were suspended as a result of a financial hardship in-service withdrawal will receive a TSP notice alerting them that they can resume contributions as of September 15, 2019.
- Restarting TSP contributions will not automatically happen. You must make an election to resume your contributions. You can do this by using the [Employee Personal Page](#) or sending a [TSP-1](#) form to HR-Benefits.

Please be on the lookout for further information from your HR Benefits Team!

Introducing the New Supervisor Change Email Box

by **Mandy Olson** (Mandy.M.Olson@usda.gov, 612-336-3295)



A new email box has been established to accommodate requests to modify 'reports to' supervisory changes in the National Finance Center payroll system. The change requests submitted to this email box will be entered into the NFC database, which will then flow over automatically to the time and attendance system, webTA.

Please send all supervisor change requests to the new email box titled "APHIS-Supervisor Change" at HR.Supervisor.Change@usda.gov. We will also introduce a new format to submit such requests. Stay tuned for further details. Questions can be directed to Mandy Olson at mandy.m.olson@usda.gov or 612-336-3295.



FY 2019 Performance Year Ends Soon

by **Gwen Montgomery** (Gwen.Montgomery@usda.gov, 301-851-2928)

The FY2019 performance cycle ends on **September 30, 2019**. Managers and Supervisors are required to conduct performance evaluations for all eligible employees. Performance evaluations must be completed within 30 days of the end of the cycle (**no later than October 30**). The [USDA Performance Management Directive \(DR-4040-430\)](#), approved on February 4, 2019, includes new requirements regarding the closeout of each performance year.



Per the new Directive, all employees are **required** to prepare accomplishment reports and submit them to their supervisors no later than **October 1** of each year. Employees should refer to their supervisors to determine the establishment of any internal deadlines for submitting the accomplishment reports. Accomplishment reports must detail performance, contributions, and accomplishments which align with the performance standards and measures at the Fully Successful and Exceeds Fully Successful levels within the employee's performance plan. The Tips for Preparing Accomplishment Reports document is available on the [MRP Performance Management](#) webpage.

The new Directive also requires that rating officials prepare and include narrative assessments supporting each element rating in the performance evaluations. Narrative assessments must specify factual details regarding the employee's accomplishments, contributions, and results relative to each element in the performance plan; and be based on documentary or other evidence that objectively and clearly describes the employee's performance during the appraisal period.

All performance rating sheets must be signed by both the rating and reviewing officials and submitted to Human Resources for entry in the National Finance Center database. Guidance regarding deadlines and procedures for submission of performance ratings to Human Resources will be sent to all supervisors and program contacts in August.

For questions, please contact Gwen Montgomery at (301) 851-2928 or via email at Gwen.Montgomery@usda.gov.

Leave Usage Order

by **Nella Roberts** (Nella.Roberts@usda.gov, 301-851-2910)

The MRP Directive and Human Resources Desk Guide Subchapter 4630, Absence and Leave, [Section B – Annual Leave](#), has guidance on the order of leave usage.

Employees must use leave in the following order:

1. **Use or lose annual leave,**
2. **Compensatory time off in lieu of overtime pay,**
3. **Compensatory time off for travel,**
4. **Time-off award, and**
5. **Any other accrued time, e.g., credit hours, annual leave.**



Always use sick leave as appropriate. Using use or lose annual leave first prevents leave loss at the end of the leave year. If you choose to use earned time off in a different order and it results in the loss of annual leave at the end of the leave year, then leave restoration will not be an option and the leave will be permanently lost.

Please remember that if you had up to 56 hours of annual leave restored due to the recent furlough, then you must use the restored leave by the end of the 2021 leave year. If the leave is not used by then it will be permanently lost.

Your Resource Management Staff/Administrative Office staffs have been advised of the policy and are available to answer questions as well as HRO, Minneapolis. As you are planning your summer vacation, please remember the leave usage order policy.



Religious Compensatory (Comp) Time Off

by Nella Roberts (Nella.Roberts@usda.gov, 301-851-2910)

The MRP religious comp policy allows employees to earn and use religious comp time in order to take time off without a charge to leave when personal religious beliefs require an absence from work. An employee's personal religious beliefs do not need to be officially mandated by a religious organization to which an employee belongs. It's sufficient that the religious belief causes him/her to feel an obligation to be absent from work for a religious purpose.

Religious comp may be earned up to 13 pay periods before or up to 13 pay periods after it is used or a combination of the two. For example, if the religious comp is used prior to earning it, then the 13 pay period timeframe begins on the first pay period after the date it was used. This means that if an employee uses religious comp time during pay period 9, then he/she has 13 pay periods (starting in pay period 10) to earn (repay) the religious comp time used.

Some specific points to remember:

- Always submit a written (or electronic) application, as early as possible, to your supervisor to earn and use religious comp.
- In your request, include: name/description of the religious observance, date(s), time(s) being requested, and a date(s) and time(s) plan to earn the religious comp.
- Religious comp may only be earned for a specific religious observance.
- If you fail to earn the religious comp within 13 pay periods after using it, then you will be charged leave to cover the absence. If you do not have any leave, then you will be charged leave without pay (LWOP) and Human Resources Operations will initiate debt collection procedures.



More detailed information on the MRP religious comp policy may be found in the MRP Human Resources Desk Guide (HRDG) Subchapter 4630, Absence and Leave, [Section G](#). In addition, your Resource Management Staff/Administrative Office staffs have been advised of this policy and are available to answer questions as well as the HRO-Leave and Comp Team, Minneapolis.

Pay Caps? Never Heard of Them!

by Nella Roberts (Nella.Roberts@usda.gov, 301-851-2910)



Yes, there is such a thing! While exceptions (e.g., employees covered by FLSA, employees earning overtime under Title VII) do exist, most employees are subject to three pay caps. These pay caps set limits on the amount of pay a GS employee may earn on a biweekly and annual basis when taking into consideration basic pay, premium pay, and other forms of pay such as differentials, incentives, and awards. The only pay cap that may be waived, with Departmental approval, is the biweekly pay cap. When a waiver is granted, then the annual limit on premium pay cap is applied. Waivers may be due to mission critical work or an emergency. To learn more, click on the links below.

[Biweekly Pay Cap](#)

[Annual Limitation on Premium Pay Cap](#)

[Aggregate Annual Pay Cap](#)

[Obtaining a Waiver to the Biweekly Pay Cap](#)

