



Pre-deployment Session Guide

HR Professionals

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This guide provides an outline of the topics that Human Resources (HR) professionals should discuss with service members who are getting ready to deploy for extended military service of 30 days or more.

PRIOR TO A PRE-DEPLOYMENT SESSION

Directions: Complete each activity prior to a scheduled pre-deployment session. Place a check mark in the box provided next to the activity when completed.

- Contact the service member to arrange a convenient time to meet.
- Let the service member know that he or she is welcome to bring a spouse, other family member or friend to the session.
- Review the service member's benefits.
- Review the TSP Fact Sheet Publication: TSP Benefits That Apply to Members of the Military Who Return to Federal Civilian Service (3/2002) at <http://www.tsp.gov/forms/oc95-5.pdf>.
- Obtain blank copies of the following forms:
 - *FEHB Authorization to Release Information*
 - *FEDVIP Authorization to Release Information*
 - *LTC Authorization to Release Information*
 - *FSAFEDS Authorization to Release Information*
 - Beneficiary forms (FEGLI, retirement deductions (2), unpaid compensation, TSP on hand)
- Obtain a copy of the USERRA poster from the VA for Vets website.
- Review the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about military leave at <http://vaww1.va.gov/ohrm/WorkLife/Leave/MilitaryLeave.doc>.
- Ensure that the service member's supervisor has initiated a *Request for Personnel Action, SF 52*.

DURING A PRE-DEPLOYMENT SESSION

Directions: Discuss each item with the service member. Place a check mark in the box provided next to the item as it is discussed.

Job Protection

- Provide the service member with a copy of the USERRA poster and ask if he or she has any questions about his or her USERRA rights. Be sure the service member understands his or her reinstatement rights as they pertain to the length of the deployment.
- Inform the service member that USERRA training is available on the VA Talent Management System (TMS).
- Tell the service member that he or she does not have to resign from his or her position to perform active military duty. However, if his or her cumulative active military duty exceeds five (5) years, he or she may be separated from his or her position at VA.

Leave

- Military Leave

The service member has military leave he or she would like to use.

Number of days/hours: _____

Date(s): _____

Time(s): _____

Note: A service member may carry over a maximum of 15 days of military leave into a new fiscal year (FY). Therefore, a service member may potentially have a total of 30 days to use in any one FY. In addition, service members whose military duty spans two FYs may use up to 45 days of military leave at one time.

- 22 Days of Military Leave (5 U.S.C. 6323(b))

The service member is entitled to use 22 additional workdays per calendar year when he or she:

- Performs military duties in support of civil authorities in the protection of life and property, or
- Performs full-time military service because the service member is called to active duty in support of a contingency operation service.

Inform the service member that if he or she elects to use the 22 days of military leave, he or she is entitled to receive the greater of civilian or military pay, but not both. The service member's civilian pay will be reduced by the amount of military pay for the days that he or she uses military leave. The service member must provide a copy of his or her active duty orders and military pay documentation (Leave and Earning Statement – LES) to the HR office to claim this entitlement.

- Annual Leave

The service member wants:

___ accumulated annual leave to remain to his or her credit.

___ a lump monetary sum for the balance of his or her accumulated annual leave.

___ to use part of his or her accumulated annual leave; number of days/hours: _____.

Active Duty Military Leave Without Pay (ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES)

The service member wants to be placed on ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES, beginning _____ (the first civilian day following military leave, annual leave, compensatory time and /or credit hours).

Inform the service member that he or she earns and uses leave on an hourly basis. This means that for each pay period during the leave year when his or her total accumulated hours of ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES equals 80, and each 80-hour increment of ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES thereafter during the leave year, he or she will not accrue annual and sick leave in that pay period. ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES hours in excess of 80, if any, in that same pay period will be carried over to the next pay period. Carryover hours will be combined with ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES hours in the next period to determine whether he or she accrues annual and sick leave during that pay period. This process will be repeated every pay period each leave year.

Inform the service member that he or she earns and uses leave on a daily basis. This means that for each pay period during the leave year when the total accumulated days of ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES equals 14, and each 14-day increment of ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES thereafter during the leave year, he or she will not accrue annual and sick leave in that pay period. ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES days in excess of 14, if any, in that same pay period will be carried over to the next pay period. Carryover days will be combined with LWOP days in the next period to determine whether he or she accrues annual and sick leave during that pay period. This process will be repeated every pay period each leave year.

 Excused Absence

When the service member returns to Federal civilian service, he or she is entitled to five consecutive days of excused absence (paid time off) when he or she returns from 42 or more days of consecutive active military service in connection with Operation Noble Eagle, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, or any other operation subsequently established under Executive Order 13223.

When the service member notifies VA of the date he or she intends to return to duty, the five days of excused absence should be granted before he or she resumes duties. If the service member has already returned to duty, he or she may request to use the five days of excused absence at a mutually agreeable time. The excused absence cannot be used on an intermittent basis after returning to duty and may be used only once per 12-month period.

Compensation

- Inform the service member that when performing active military duty his or her compensation will be based on the terms of his or her military pay grade. The service member will not receive compensation from his or her VA civilian position unless he or she elects to use military leave, annual leave or compensatory time or is entitled to reservist differential.

If the service member elects to take the lump-sum annual leave option and returns to civilian employment before the end of the period covered by the lump sum, he or she will be required to repay all the remaining days or hours of work that the lump-sum payment covered.

The service member may be entitled to reservist differential if his or her military pay is less than his or her civilian pay with VA. The service member must provide a copy of his or her active duty orders and military Leave and Earnings Statements (LES) to claim reservist differential.

Federal Employee Health Benefits (FEHB)

<http://www.opm.gov/insure/health>

- The service member wants to terminate FEHB coverage and have it reinstated upon his or her return to VA.

Tell the service member that he or she must notify HR in writing that he or she has terminated FEHB coverage. Otherwise, his or her FEHB coverage will continue and he or she may be responsible for the premiums.

- The service member elects to continue FEHB coverage.

Tell the service member that he or she should always notify both the FEHB and TRICARE about the dual coverage during deployment so that both health plans can properly coordinate benefits. This is extremely important for covered family members, since the FEHB will pay first before coordinating with TRICARE for possible additional payment. This may save family members some out-of-pocket expenses.

Provide the service member with a copy of the appropriate form, i.e., BC/BS, GEHA, *Authorization to Release Information* form. He or she can complete this form by naming an individual (usually a spouse or parent) who is eligible to receive information from the plan when they call. This form can then be faxed to the appropriate FEHB plan. This eliminates the need for a family member to submit copies of paperwork and power of attorney to obtain information. This is especially beneficial for a spouse trying to finalize claims on him- or herself and/or covered children.

If the service member has family members who will remain covered under the FEHB plan, you may want to provide the service member with a copy of the Benefit Plan Booklet for the appropriate health plan.

- The service member is being called to active duty that does not support a contingency operation and wants to continue FEHB coverage.

Tell the service member that he or she can continue his or her health insurance for up to 24 months while in an ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES status. For the first 12 months, the service member will be responsible for only the service member's portion of the premiums. For the remaining 12 months, the service member will be responsible for the service member's portion and the government's portion plus a 2 percent administrative fee. This means the service member will pay 102 percent of the cost that must be paid currently. The 24-month period will begin on the date the service member's active duty service begins.

- The service member is being called to active duty in support of a contingency operation and wants to continue FEHB coverage.

Tell the service member that VA will pay the service member's share of the premiums for up to 24 months while in an ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES status. The 24-month period will begin on the date the service member's active duty service begins. Please note that if, at any time, the service member receives VA civilian pay during his or her deployment, the FEHB premiums will be deducted from his or her VA salary. For example, if the service member elects to use his or her 15-day military leave entitlement beginning on October 1st of the next fiscal year, because the service member is in a paid status, FEHB premiums will be deducted.

Note: The service member cannot continue health insurance coverage under FEHB beyond the 24-month period. However, at the end of the 24 months, the service member has a 31-day extension of coverage and the option to convert to an individual policy offered through his or her health insurance plan.

If the service member is participating in premium conversion, the service member has 60 days from the start of his or her unpaid leave of absence to waive participation or cancel his or her FEHB coverage. If the service member does not terminate participation in premium conversion within the 60-day limit, the service member cannot cancel his or her FEHB, except during the annual FEHB open season or 60 days after another qualifying event.

Federal Employees' Group Life Insurance (FEGLI)

<http://www.opm.gov/insure/life/>

- Tell the service member that his or her FEGLI coverage (if enrolled) will continue at no cost to him or her for up to 12 months in a nonpay status and will then terminate with an automatic 31-day extension of coverage and right to convert to an individual policy.

Based on a law effective January 28, 2008, the service member may elect to continue his or her FEGLI coverage for an additional 12 months of ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES. During the additional 12 months of FEGLI coverage, the service member must pay the service member's and the agency's share of premiums for basic coverage and the full premium for any optional coverage for which he or she is enrolled. There is no agency contribution for the additional 12 months.

Note: The service member must complete the Employee Notice and FEGLI election form, *Extension of Coverage When Called to Active Duty*, to make the election for the additional 12

months of coverage. This form must be returned to HR before the end of the service member's initial 12 months of ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES. The service member must make arrangements with his or her local payroll office for the payment of these premiums while he or she is away, since the service member cannot pay them when he or she returns to duty under the service member's restoration rights.

If the service member decides to resign from Federal service because of deployment, the service member's FEGLI coverage will continue at no cost for up to 12 months, or until 90 days after his or her military service ends, whichever date comes first, and will then terminate with a 31-day extension of coverage and right to convert to an individual policy.

- Inform the service member that, within 60 days after the date of notification of deployment, he or she may elect Basic, (if not enrolled in FEGLI), Option A and Option B (up to a maximum of 5 multiples physical). They can make this election on the SF 2817 (either hard copy from HR or electronic version from the OPM website). It would be to the employee's advantage to either add FEGLI and/or max out the amount of eligible FEGLI, since VA will pay the premium for up to 12 months in an ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES status.
- Encourage the service member to verify that beneficiary data are up-to-date. If the service member is unsure, recommend that he or she complete new forms.

Thrift Savings Plan (TSP)

<http://www.tsp.gov>

- Ask the service member if he or she has a TSP loan from his or her uniformed service TSP account. If yes, tell the service member that the TSP loan payments will be suspended for the entire period of his or her active military service, and loan payments will resume when he or she returns to VA.
- Ask the service member if he or she has a TSP loan from a civilian TSP account. If yes, tell the service member that his or her loan payments will stop because they come from payroll deductions. Also inform the service member that he or she cannot make payments on that loan from his or her military pay. However, he or she can continue to make loan payments by sending a personal check or money order to the TSP along with a TSP Loan Payment Coupon.
- Ask the service member if he or she would like his or her loan payments suspended until he or she returns to VA. If yes, submit Form TSP-41, *Notification to TSP of Non-pay Status*, for the service member. Submission of this form will suspend the service member's loan payments until he or she returns to VA. Ask for the TSP loan number: _____.
- Inform the service member that if he or she still has an outstanding TSP loan from his or her civilian TSP account when he or she returns from deployment, he or she should tell HR to prepare and submit a second TSP-41 to inform TSP of a return to pay status. Tell the service member that he or she is responsible for reviewing his or her Leave and Earnings Statement and ensuring that correct loan payments are submitted on time.
- Inform the service member that he or she may make retroactive contributions and elections to his or her TSP account. Within 60 days of the service member's restoration to duty, the service member will need to contact HR to indicate his or her desire to make retroactive TSP contributions and elections. VA will make up missed agency contributions for eligible FERS service members.

The service member's retroactive contributions and elections will be reduced if the service member contributed to TSP as a military service member while on active duty. The service member is responsible for providing all Leave and Earnings Statements if TSP contributions were made while on active duty.

- Encourage the service member to verify that beneficiary data are up-to-date. If the service member is unsure whether the data are up-to-date, recommend that he or she complete new forms.

Federal Employees Dental and Vision Insurance Program (FEDVIP)

<http://www.benefeds.com>

- Explain that the service member must pay FEDVIP in order for benefits to remain in effect while the service member is in an ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES status. Tell the service member to contact FEDVIP at 1-877-888-3337 to ensure they have the correct billing address to which to send bills. (FEDVIP will send bills if there are no payroll deductions to pay the premiums.)
Note: Premiums paid by Direct Bill are not pretax.
- Review dental plans for orthodontia waiting periods to determine if it may impact family members at home. Tell the service member that if the dental plan is dropped while he or she is deployed, and there are family members who will need orthodontia treatment, they may have to start the waiting period all over again.
- Provide the service member with a copy of the FEDVIP *Authorization to Release Information* form. The service member can complete this form, naming an individual (usually a spouse or parent) who is eligible to receive information from the plan when they call. This form can then be faxed to FEDVIP. This eliminates the need for a family member to submit copies of paperwork and power of attorney to obtain information. (This is especially beneficial for a spouse who is trying to finalize claims on him- or herself and/or covered children.)
- If the service member chooses to cancel his or her FEDVIP, he or she can cancel 31 days before or 60 days after the date of deployment by calling BENEFEDES at 1-877-888-3337 or TTY 1-877-889-5680. Inform the service member that when he or she returns to VA from military duty, he or she can elect to enroll in FEDVIP within 60 days after his or her orders end.

Federal Long Term Care Insurance Program (FLTCIP)

<https://www.ltcfeds.com/>

- Explain that the service member must pay long-term care (LTC) for benefits to remain in effect while the service member is in an LWOP status. Tell the service member to contact FLTCIP at 1-800-582-3337 to ensure FLTCIP has the correct billing address to which to send bills.
Note: LTC will send bills if there are no payroll deductions to pay the premiums.
- Provide the service member with a copy of the FLTCIP *Authorization to Release Information* form. The service member can complete this form, naming an individual (usually a spouse or parent) who is eligible to receive information from the plan when they call. This form can then be faxed to LTC. Tell the service member that this eliminates the need for a family member to submit copies of paperwork and power of attorney to obtain information regarding LTC.

Federal Flexible Spending Account (FSAFEDS)

<http://www.fsafeds.com>

- Provide the service member with a copy of the FSAFEDS Authorization to Release Information form. Tell the service member that he or she can complete this form, naming an individual (usually a spouse or parent) who is eligible to receive information from the plan when they call. The form can then be faxed to FSAFEDS (1-866-643-2245 toll free; or 1-502-267-2233 outside the United States). This eliminates the need for a family member to submit copies of paperwork and power of attorney to obtain information.
- Inform the service member that he or she may arrange to prepay his or her allotments before entering an ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES status. The prepayment amount would be added to his or her normal payment. This means that his or her biweekly deductions would be increased based on the amount he or she specifies to prepay.

If the service member does not prepay before his or her ABSENT-UNIFORM SERVICES status, his or her FSA will be frozen, and he or she will not be eligible for reimbursement for any expenses incurred during that period until the plan year ends or until the service member returns to his or her VA job and begins making allotments again. When the service member returns, his or her allotments will be made on a catch-up basis. If doubling the amount is not enough to catch up by the end of the plan year, the service member's allotment will be increased proportionately over the pay dates remaining in the plan year, or he or she may pay the allotments directly on an after-tax basis.

- If the service member has a balance in his or her Health Care Flexible Savings Account (HCFSA) or Limited Expense Health Care Flexible Savings Account (LEX HCFSA) and thinks he or she might not be able to incur enough eligible expenses to deplete the account, rather than forfeit those funds (remember the use-or-lose rule for FSA accounts), the service member can have his or her balance refunded to him- or herself. This new feature is for Qualified Reservists only under the Heroes Earnings Assistance and Relief Tax (HEART) Act. The HEART Act (Public Law No. 110-245) contains tax benefits and incentives for individuals in military service. Section 114 of the HEART Act allows qualified reservists to receive a taxable distribution of their unused HCFSA—also known as a qualified reservist distribution (QRD). FSAFEDS adopted Section 114 of the HEART Act, effective January 1, 2009. Tell the service member that the drawback is that the distribution will be taxable wages and that he or she gives up his or her ability to submit eligible expenses for the remainder of the benefit period.
- If the service member decides to resign from VA, his or her FSA will terminate as of the date of his or her separation. There are no extensions. However, for the service member's health care account, he or she can submit claims with dates of service from the effective date through separation date. For the service member's dependent care account, he or she can submit claims for the entire plan year.
- Tell the service member to contact FSA benefits counselors at 1-877-372-3337 if he or she has additional questions regarding FSA.

Return to VA Civilian Employment

- Inform the service member that he or she informs HR of his or her date of return to VA employment.
- Remind the service member that you will work together to arrange a seamless transition back into the workforce and to get the service member's benefits in place.

HR Point of Contact

- Provide the service member with several copies of your business card and/or HR point of contact so that he or she, as well as family members, has a point of contact in the event they have any questions or need to speak to someone from the VA HR department. Tell the service member that he or she may contact you about concerns with continuation of benefits coverage.

Note: If the service member contacts you while deployed, make sure you contact him or her within 24 hours with an answer or to inform him or her that you will get back to them shortly with an answer. If you do not know the answer to the question, find the answer. Also, never put a deployed service member on hold.

Service Member Contact Information (while on Active Duty)

- Mailing address

Ask the service member if he or she will be changing mailing addresses as a result of deployment. Often, the service member may be giving up his or her apartment while deployed and using a parent's address; the service member may need to update VA records with the new address.

- Email address

Obtain an email address that the service member will use while on military deployment. Most service members will provide both a military and a personal email address should HR ever need to make contact.

Service Member Contact Information (while on active duty):

Address: _____ Phone number: _____

 _____ Email address: _____

In Case of Emergency, Contact:

Name: _____ Relationship: _____
 Address: _____ Phone number: _____

 _____ Email address: _____

Miscellaneous

- Provide the service member with copies of all submitted documentation. Tell the service member that he or she should provide a family member or friend with copies of all submitted documentation.
- Explain to the service member that he or she should make sure a family member(s) or a friend(s) knows his or her branch of service, rank, unit, company or battalion name, Social Security Number, last known military location, military unit contact person(s), and contact information. Also, recommend to the service member that he or she consider preparing a power of attorney, particularly including employment issues and benefits.

By signing, you confirm that you have been counseled on each item in this guide and that you understand your options for leave and benefits.

Service Member

Date

By signing, you confirm that you have counseled the deploying service member on each item in this guide.

HR Professional

Date