

BENEFACTS NEWSLETTER

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What is COLA and How Does it Differ for CSRS and FERS Retirees?

When we say the word COLA we are not referring to the thirst quenching carbonated drink we all admire. Instead, we're referring to the Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) that many of us are somewhat familiar with, but not quite sure how it relates to retirement.

A COLA is a type of supplemental benefit passed by Congress designed to counteract inflation, which simply means it's an increase in income designed to offset the increases in the cost of living. COLA is determined by the change in the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which is a measurement that examines the weighted average of prices paid overtime for a basket of consumer goods and services.

The U.S. Department of Labor calculates this change. It does so by examining the CPI for urban wage earners and clerical workers from the third quarter average of the previous year to the third quarter average for the current year to determine the current CPI. Once that CPI is established, it is then up to Congress to determine the amount of the COLA and whether or not legislation will be passed to grant said COLA.

If legislation is passed, Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) retirees' increase is applied to their monthly bene-

fit amount before any deductions.

Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) retirees benefit determination is quite different and is heavily dependent on the CPI. If the increase in the CPI is 2 percent or less, the COLA is equal to the CPI increase. If the CPI



increase is more than 2 percent but no more than 3 percent, the COLA is 2 percent. If the CPI increase is more than 3 percent, the adjustment is 1 percent less than the CPI increase.

For example, if the CPI is 2.8 percent, using the information above we can immediately eliminate the first and the last clause, and use the second clause to deduce that the FERS COLA will be 2 percent, simply because the CPI increase is more than 2 percent but no more than 3 percent.

To get the full COLA, a CSRS or FERS retiree or survivor annuitant must have been in receipt of an annuity payment

for a full year. If not, the increase is prorated under both plans. Prorated accounts receive one-twelfth of the increase for each month they received benefits.

Unlike a CSRS retiree who is eligible for a COLA immediately upon meeting the previously stated requirements, a FERS COLA is not provided until age 62, with the exception of disability, survivor benefits, and other special provision retirements. FERS disability retirees get the adjustment, except when they are receiving a disability annuity based on 60 percent of their high-3 average salary. Also, under FERS, if a CSRS component exist, the component is subject to the CSRS COLA calculation.

Lastly and most importantly, COLA's are effective each December first. The adjustment will appear in payments received on the first business day of January, which is when benefits for December are paid.

For more information visit OPM's website on [Cost of Living Adjustment \(COLA\)](#).

Effective Date of Open Season Enrollment Changes

Did you make the Open Season changes you've been thinking about making last year? If so, this article highlights three key things to be on the lookout for on your Leave and Earnings Statement (LES):

- Effective dates of these election changes
- Pay deductions
- Coverage types (if applicable)

If you made an Open Season enrollment change, it's important to note that the effective date for the new election is the first day of the first full pay period of the next following year for the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program (FEHB) and for the Federal Employees Dental and Vision Insurance Program (FEDVIP); for most employees this will be Sunday, January 6, 2019. The effective date of changes made for any of

arnings Information	Current	Year to Date
al Gross	4,389.30	
uctions	0.00	
itions	0.00	
vertime		
EARNINGS TOTAL	4,389.30	5,277.30
-Taxable Gross	351.14	418.18
able Gross	3,971.12	4,859.12

andatory & Other Deductions	Current	Year to Date
ederal Withholding	311.17	311.17
ditional Federal Withholding	0.00	****
ate Withholding	135.96	135.96
ditional State Withholding	0.00	****
SPD	62.67	55.06
icare	0.00	75.55
icare Buyout	0.00	0.00
te Disability Insurance	351.14	351.14
	0.00	0.00
Retirement	67.04	

the federal dependent care and health care flexible spending accounts (FSA) is January 01, 2019.

Next, review the last LES received for the final pay period of 2018 and compare it against the first LES received for the first full pay period of 2019. Compare the pay deductions, under the "Deductions" block of your LES, to identify the changes from your Open Season elections and enrollment changes. Pay deductions will include state and federal taxes, Medicare and Social Se-

curity (OASDI), as well as any Benefits deductions; all of your Open Season election changes will appear here. For example, a change in enrollment type from Self Only to Self Plus One under FEHB, will increase your pay deductions as well as change your enrollment code. The enrollment code will change to indicate the new coverage type.

If your elections and enrollment changes are not reflected on your LES or if you have any issues regarding your FEHB Open Season elections, you may contact your servicing Benefits Center; for FEDVIP, contact BENEFEDS at www.benefeds.com, and www.fsafeds.com for FSA related questions.

Did you Miss Open Season?



Open Season arrives during a busy time of the year, and before you know it the Open Season election period is over. Perhaps you had good intentions of reviewing your Federal Employee Health Benefits (FEHB) plans to make changes. Maybe you wanted to try a vision or dental plan through the Federal Employee Dental and Vision Insurance Program (FEDVIP). Perhaps you were looking forward to the tax breaks of a Flexible Spending Account (FSA). All hope is not lost! Although Open Season ended December 10, 2018, you are not forbidden to make changes for the rest of the year. You will need to

experience a Qualifying Life Event (QLE) in order to enroll or make changes to your FEHB, FEDVIP, and FSA outside of Open Season. QLEs generally include a change in employment status, change in marital status, change in dependents, and change in dependence eligibility. Be aware that QLEs are not the same for all programs. Review the following links for QLE information for each type of benefit:

FEHB General Information: <https://www.opm.gov/healthcare-insurance/healthcare/>

QLEs <https://www.opm.gov/healthcare-insurance/healthcare/plan-information/changes-you-can-make-outside-of-open-season/>

FEDVIP General Information: <https://www.benefeds.com/>

QLEs [https://www.benefeds.com/Portal/EducationSupport?EnsSubmit=dental-vision-](https://www.benefeds.com/Portal/EducationSupport?EnsSubmit=dental-vision-coverage&ctoken=nFb5WR9w)

[coverage&ctoken=nFb5WR9w](https://www.benefeds.com/Portal/EducationSupport?EnsSubmit=dental-vision-coverage&ctoken=nFb5WR9w)

FSAFEDS General Information: <https://www.fsafeds.com/>

QLEs <https://www.fsafeds.com/public/pdf/FSAFEDS-QLE-Quick-Reference-Guide%20FINAL-s.pdf?h=dwcc8s9ru87mri4dcwei8a35w4n9ddharq6g8b77u5dhrriau3fo>

Not making any changes during Open Season will continue your FEHB and FEDVIP coverage unless your plan was dropped or cancelled from your service area. Your benefits and premiums may have changed as well. Your new plan will not be responsible for providing coverage until the effective date of Open Season enrollment changes which for most employees is January 6, 2019.

If you have a FSAFEDS account and want to continue it another year, reenrollment during Open Season is necessary.

“The legislative intent for the Special Retirement provisions for LEOs and FFs is to provide for an early retirement due to the vigorous demands of the positions”

Special Retirement Provisions

Title 5 of the United States Code, Section 8331(21) was amended in 1972 to allow Civil Service Retirement System employees enhanced retirement benefits for those serving in Firefighter (FF) and Law Enforcement Officer (LEO) positions. In subsequent years, those benefits would be extended to those under the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS). The legislative intent for the special retirement provisions for LEOs and FFs is to provide for an early retirement due to the vigorous demands of these positions, and an enhanced retirement computation. LEO and FF positions fall into two main categories, Primary and Secondary. Primary positions are directly related to fighting fires or the investigation, apprehension, or detention of individuals suspected or convicted of offenses against the criminal laws of the United States. Approving officials are tasked with reviewing individual position descriptions to ensure they are properly classified under the Primary or Secondary category. Prior to December 1993, the approval authority for LEO and FF positions was with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). Currently,



within Department of Defense (DoD), the authority to approve these positions has been delegated to the Under Secretary of Defense (USD), Personnel and Readiness (P&R).

By regulation, the approval process works like this: a DoD Component first establishes a LEO or FF position description to document the physical and emotional demands of the position. The employing office then submits a request for special retirement coverage through Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service (DCPAS) to the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (USD (P&R)). After the USD (P&R)'s approval, employees may be assigned to these positions and may become eligible for the early enhanced retirement annuity.

In March 2004, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) revised the classification standard for fire protection and prevention series, GS-0081, to recognize and address structural fire-

fighting duties and responsibilities. Application of the revised OPM standard resulted in the upgrade of some firefighter positions above the grade levels of the positions previously approved by USD (P&R). The revised OPM standard, GS-

0081, provided coverage for higher graded positions, but due to agency oversight, the newly classified positions had not been submitted for coverage. Upon discovery of this error in December 2008, DCPAS assembled a team of specialists and vigorously led the effort to develop a standardized approval process by working closely with unions, Components, and the Office of General Counsel. As a result of these efforts, DCPAS continues to provide training and new guidelines to assist Components with preparing special retirement packages for approval. If you would like more information on this topic please email us at dodhra.mc-alex.dcpas.mbxz.benefits-contacts@mail.mil.





The New GRB Benefits Platform

The Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) Benefits Service Center has converted its Employee Benefits Information System (EBIS) to the new Government Retirement Benefits (GRB) Platform. This site is a self-service system that allows Department of Defense employees that are serviced by the DLA Benefits Center to have 24/7 access to personal benefits and retirement information. .

The system is a secure website allowing access to an employee's personal data and benefits coverage. The account is CAC enabled and

may be accessed directly by visiting [EBIS Tools](#).

The new site affords fast and easy access to an employee's full range of benefits coverage. Each section allows a review of current coverage and tools to explore benefit elections. In addition, the platform provides a forecast of projected benefits for retirement and Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) annuities. The GRB Platform contains a variety of resources that focus on the various benefit programs, such as, fact sheets, informational videos, electronic forms, retire-

ment calculators, a Resource Library section, a Total Compensation Statement review section, and links to external resources.

The GRP Platform will allow employees to adjust their benefits coverage as necessary over the coming year and review the coverage for each benefit they are enrolled in as well as other benefits they may want to take advantage of in the future. So remember to get acquainted with this new system at your earliest convenience!

Nonappropriated Fund Health Benefits Program: What's New for 2019

The elections made during November's Open Enrollment take effect January 1, 2019. If the Nonappropriated Fund (NAF) Health Benefit Program (HBP) member did not make any changes, their current plan will carry over in 2019, **except** for Flexible Spending Account (FSA) elections which need to be elected each year. The new changes and enhancements for 2019 are:

Interactive Online Tool (Alex)

Alex is an interactive on-line tool that will assist plan participants in making enrollment decisions. It is easy to use as it will walk an individual through medical and dental plan options and FSAs to match benefits to an individual's needs or preferences.

Group health coaching

and support — at no cost to the member

With Healthy Lifestyle Coaching*, the member will be able to work with a wellness coach to address their health goals such as losing weight, quitting smoking, eating better, managing stress, and more! This new program offers weekly interactive, group coaching sessions over a 6-week period as well as one-on-one support.

Two new Teladoc programs*

Dermatology and behavioral health services will be added to the Teladoc program. This expanded service allows a plan participant to upload a dermatologic issue and receive a diagnostic response and treatment plan within 2 days, or schedule a behavioral health

video appointment 7 days a week with a provider (licensed psychiatrist, psychologist, licensed clinical social worker, counselor or therapist). **Not available to Aetna International members.*

Changes to prescription drug benefits

The NAF HBP will adopt the Aetna Standard Formulary in which some drugs will be excluded and others will change their tiering in order to obtain additional rebate savings. For any drugs excluded from coverage, there will be alternative therapeutic drugs available.

Health Incentive Credit program enhancements

To encourage healthy lifestyle actions, employees can earn Health Incentive Credits of up

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Nonappropriated Fund Health Benefits Program: What's New for 2019 (continued)

to \$300 (\$50 more than last year) and families \$600 by participating and completing the program. These earned credits will be applied to your medical deductible and/or coinsurance as claims are processed.

Family medical deductible and out-of-pocket maximum changes

If the member covers self and one or more dependents, their in-network family deductible will be \$1,500, with the in-network family out-of-pocket maximum at \$8,000. Once the family member's claim or a combination of multiple family members' claims meet the overall family deductible, the deductible will be considered met for all family members and

plan coinsurance will then apply. The same holds true for the out-of-pocket maximum. NAF HBP members are highly encouraged to visit www.nafhealthplans.com for additional information on their healthcare needs. Make 2019 the year you focus on your health!

TSP Lifecycle Funds (L Fund)



If you are looking for a simple, low maintenance way of investing money in your TSP account, the Lifecycle Funds may be for you. The process is easy and you don't have to figure out how to diversify your account or how and when to rebalance your funds.

The strategy of the L Fund is to invest an appropriate mix of the G, F, C, S, and I Funds for a particular time horizon or target retirement date.

Each L Fund is made up of the five individual TSP funds (G, F, C, S, and I) and maintains a balance of

investment risks and returns for a particular time horizon. When the L Fund reaches its target date, it will automatically become the L Income Fund which is the most conservative of the L Funds. It focuses on capital preservation while providing little exposure to the riskier Funds (C, S, and I Funds) in order to reduce the effects of inflation. The greater the number of years before retirement the more risk you incur in your TSP account to pursue higher rates of return. However, as you get closer to your target date, your allocation to the riskier funds will get smaller while your allocation

to the more conservative G Fund gets larger.

You have the option to invest your TSP account balance in more than one L Fund account, closest to your time horizon, if your target date falls between the target dates that are offered.

While there are several risks associated with investing in the L Funds, to include: being subject to the investment risks associated with the each Fund, and having periods of gain and losses, just as the individual TSP fund. There are also several advantages. Participating in the L Funds simplifies your fund selection and assures you that your TSP account is broadly diversified. Moreover, you don't have to adjust your investment allocations as your target date approaches since the L Funds will automatically adjust it for you.

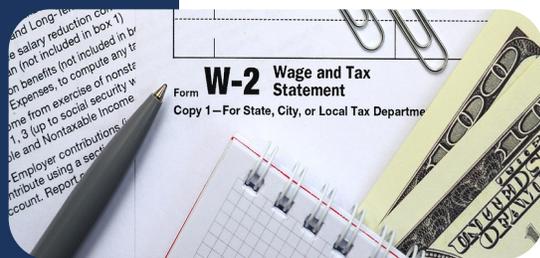
For additional information visit www.tsp.gov.

Getting Ready for Tax Season

As the New Year begins, so does the new tax season. This means gathering documents in preparation for filing taxes. For most Federal employees, these documents will include the W-2, 1095-B and 1095-C forms. Let's take a look at each.

W-2, Wage and Tax Statement

Every employer, including the Department of Defense (DoD), who pays a wage or salary of \$600 or more per year for services performed by an employee, must file a Form W-2 for each employee. *The W-2 provides information on income, social security, and Medicare taxes withheld during the year and other pertinent information critical to filing Federal and State income taxes.* Within DoD, this form is produced by the Defense Financial and Accounting Service (DFAS).



DoD employees who have not opted out of receiving a hard copy, will receive their W-2 in the mail. Employees may also access a digital copy of their W-2 on the [myPay website](#), whether or not they have elected to opt

out of receiving a hard copy. An employee can view, print and save their W-2. If the information displayed on the W-2 is incorrect, employees may contact their local payroll office.

1095-B, Health Coverage

Form 1095-B is used to report information to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and to taxpayers about individuals who have minimum essential health care coverage. *It is the primary document used to verify that a person has had health insurance coverage for the year.* This document is created by the insurance carrier and sent to the policy holder as well as the IRS. It displays the policyholder's information and lists all individuals covered by the policy as well as which months they were covered for in that year. If the information displayed on the 1095-B is incorrect, employees should contact their health insurance carrier.

1095-C, Employer-Provided Health Insurance Offer and Coverage

Form 1095-C provides employees with information about the health coverage offered by their employer. Information such as the lowest cost for an employee to obtain health care coverage through the employer. The most important part to remember, as an employee, is

that this form is about the employer. *It verifies, to the IRS, whether or not the employer offered health coverage to every eligible employee.* For Federal employees, the 1095-C is not used to report whether or not an employee has maintained health care coverage, unless they are covered by TRICARE.

If the information displayed on the 1095-C is incorrect, employees may contact their Agency Benefits Officer. If the information displayed on the 1095-C related to TRICARE coverage is incorrect, employees may contact the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) support office at (800) 538-9552.

NOTE: It is possible for an individual to have had FEHB coverage as well as TRICARE coverage throughout the year and therefore receive both a 1095-B and TRICARE 1095-C in addition to a standard 1095-C.

As tax season approaches, knowing the difference between these forms will help keep the joy of the holidays present as you prepare your taxes. For more information on the W-2, 1095-B and 1095-C go to www.irs.gov or contact a tax professional.

Do Minimum Wage Increases Affect Federal Wage System (FWS) Employees?

Almost a decade ago on July 1st, 2009, the federal minimum wage was raised to \$7.25. Since then, 29 states and over 50 localities have passed minimum wage laws above the federal minimum wage. In 2018 alone, there were 62 minimum wage increases at the state and local levels, ranging from \$7.85 in Missouri to \$15.64 in the City of SeaTac, WA. The growing trend of minimum wage increases requires diligence by the Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service (DCPAS), Wage & Salary Division to be abreast of these changes and remain compliant with local ordinances and FWS laws. Over 50 FWS schedules have been adjusted because of these minimum wage increases.

There are three factors to determine if a minimum wage affects a FWS schedule: 1) the language in the law, 2) the geographic area the minimum wage ordinance is applicable to, and 3) if the minimum wage is above the current FWS schedule.

The language written in the minimum wage ordinance is the first factor reviewed when determining if a minimum wage law is applicable to FWS schedules. The language in minimum wage ordinances can vary in scope; and can apply to certain-sized companies, specific industries, or have exemptions based on benefits paid, such as health or child care. These criteria are assessed to determine the applicability to existing wage schedules.

A minimum wage law's area of application is the second determining factor. The geographic area a state or local minimum wage ordinance covers is compared to the wage areas as defined in the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Operating Manual to determine the scope of the minimum wage change. When an applicable state or local minimum wage ordinance covers any jurisdiction(s) located within the boundaries of an FWS wage area, the wage

schedule for that area is subject to compliance with the ordinance.

The final determining factor is if the highest applicable minimum wage in the OPM defined wage area goes above the current FWS Grade 1, Step 1 schedule rate in that wage area. The FWS schedule is adjusted for the entire wage area, not just the geographic area in which the minimum wage law defines.

If it is determined that a state or local minimum wage increase affects an FWS schedule, the DCPAS Wage & Salary Division will generate amended wage schedules for the applicable wage areas to be implemented on the effective date of the minimum wage law.

For e-mail notifications when new wage schedules are posted, sign up for the WAGE Newsletter at the following link: <https://www.cpms.osd.mil/Subpage/NewsletterSubscribe/>

New Year, New You: Wellness Techniques for a Better Work-Life Balance

Happy 2019! While you may have some resolutions that you may be able to keep, there are others that may not even last a week. Resolutions require change in behavior, and most of us don't want to face the fact that they require many changes in our behavior. Changes that are small and manageable may make a big impact on your lifestyle. Here are three ways that employees can focus on themselves without compromising productivity and their behavior.



Healthier Lifestyle

A healthier you doesn't have to mean a total lifestyle makeover. Sometimes the change starts with small shifts. For example, employees who eat healthy are less at risk of getting sick and missing days from work.

A healthier lifestyle could also be as easy as purchasing a fitness

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What's New in EBA Credentialing in 2019?

The DoD Employee Benefits Advisor (EBA) Credentialing Program is on the move for 2019! This Benefits, WAGE, & NAF Policy (BWNP) Training Program delivered instruction to over 330 HR Professionals during the 2018 training cycle and proctored over 300 credentialing exams.

So what's next? You've requested, we've listened! The BWNP Training Team will be traveling to various sites during the 2019 training cycle to provide HR Employees Professionals, who have attended and successfully passed our benefits training course(s), the opportunity to take the credentialing exam.

2019 Credentialing Testing Dates

Our testing center will be open for Credentialing testing at Levels I, II, & III at the Mark Center,

4800 Mark Center Drive, Alexandria, Virginia, every Monday (except Federal Holidays) beginning October 7th 2019 through December 16th 2019.

The schedule for the external sites is still being finalized and will be made available at the beginning of the CY2019. Stay tuned!

Eligibility Requirements

Credentialing Proficiency Level I:

0-12 months of experience, successfully complete Basic Benefits Course and score 85% or more on credentialing exam (All 0201s and 0203s Human Resources series)

Credentialing Proficiency Level II:

18-24 months of benefits experience, successfully complete Benefits Intermediate Course and score 85% or more on credentialing exam (Only EBA 0201 series)

Credentialing Proficiency Level III:

36-48 months of benefits experience, successfully complete Advanced Benefits Workshop, and score 85% or more on credentialing exam (Only EBA 0201 series)

Successful Completion

Successful completion of the DoD HR Credentialing program demonstrates expertise in the application of principles and core competencies critical to the Employee Benefits Advisor (EBA) and HR Community.

Ready to Test?

Take your career to the next level, receive professional recognition through the DoD HR Credentialing Program. If you are interested in testing please send an email to kisha.l.wilkins.civ@mail.mil.



New Year, New You: Wellness Techniques for a Better Work-Life Balance (continued)

tracker. FITBITS or other fitness devices are a great way to connect employees for a little healthy competition or motivation. Some Federal Employees Health Benefits Program (FEHB) plans, such as Blue Cross and Blue Shield, partnered with the makers of FITBIT to help members create and maintain healthier habits.

Certain health plans are helping to improve your health by allowing access to fitness centers for a fraction of the fee. In this new year, invest in yourself by looking into your FEHB plan to find out what is available to you. Go to your health care provider website for more information.

Saving Money

A lot of times, the goal to save money isn't a big enough priority to delay the purchase of the latest smartphone, television, or even a new car. So we spend our dollars and go into debt to buy the latest items. Sometimes that debt becomes monthly payments that control our paychecks. However, it is never too late to avoid building debts and start saving money.

Monthly debt payments are the biggest obstacles to saving money. One of the fastest way to pay off debt is by using the Debt Snowball Method. This debt reduction method consists of paying off your debts in order from smallest to largest, gaining momentum as each balance is eliminated. Once the smallest debt is paid in full, you utilize the money you were using to pay that debt into the next smallest balance. Once you make paying off your debts and contributing more to your savings your top priority, you be able to reach your financial goals.

Reducing Stress

Work, bills, family, they all add stress to your life. Stress can causes anger, depression, health problems and accidents. The amount of stress that a person can handle depends on them. But knowing how to handle stress is the key to improving your overall health and quality of life.

The first step to dealing with stress is to recognize the warning signs. They can be cognitive, physical or behavioral signs. However they come, they are detrimental to an individual's health and need to be dealt with immediately.

Lifestyle changes can assist to both reducing stress and increasing resilience to stress. By simplifying your life, eating a balance diet and getting enough sleep, you may improve your overall health and quality of life. Though small and simple, their cumulative effect can be transformative.

If you continue to struggle with work life balance contact your agency's Employee Assistance Program representative and start your New Year by making positive lifestyle changes.

DOD Benefits Symposium 2019!



The Benefits, Wage, and NAF Policy Line of Business is pleased to announce that planning for the 2019 DoD Benefits Symposium has begun! If you joined us in 2018 then you understand our excitement. We've enhanced our

Breakout Sessions and added various Workshops. The 2019 Benefits Symposium is scheduled for July 8th-12th 2019. This is an event not to be missed!

The **2019 Symposium** will captivate

all HR Professionals both near and far. The schedule is geared to enhance, yet challenge the knowledge and skills of the Human Resources professional. Prepare yourself to absorb the latest and greatest updates covering an array of Federal Benefits Programs.

It is our goal to ensure that your day to day operations will improve based on the knowledge gained from this spectacular event. Registration details are forthcoming. As always, if you have questions or concerns, please email us: dodhra.mc-alex.depas.mbxz.benefits-contacts@mail.mil.

We look forward to seeing you in July!

Benefits, Wage, and
NAF Policy Line of
Business



BENEFITS • WAGE • NAF Policy
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2019 Mark Center Training Schedule

The Benefits and Work Life Program Division will hold training on Federal Employee benefits at the Mark Center in Alexandria, VA. Each course is four days long and space is limited to 25 participants.

Registrations opens 60 days prior to the start date of each course and will remain open for 30 days, or until the class is full.

Registration is available online, however a DoD CAC is required: <https://www.apps.cpms.osd.mil/cpmstraining/app/training.aspx>



BASIC	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
March 5-8	April 2-5	May 7-10
March 19-22	April 23-26	June 18-21
June 4-7	June 11-14	