



Benefits Administration Letter

Number 10 - 106

Date: October 15, 2010

Subject: Benefits Officers Service Delivery Model

Background

The Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) strategic plan includes the strategic goal to *Honor Service* by ensuring recognition and reward for exemplary performance of current employees and honoring the careers of Federal retirees. One of our strategies to accomplish this goal is to improve OPM's service to Federal agency benefits officers by developing an agency benefits officers "service delivery model" emphasizing shared responsibility for benefits/retirement among employees, OPM and agencies; and defining standards for agency benefits officers, measuring their results and recognizing them for exceptional customer service.

The objective of the service delivery model is to furnish information on benefits and counseling services to help Federal employees to make fully informed benefits decisions. Our model defines the shared responsibility for benefits/retirement among employees, OPM and agencies; the standards for agency benefit officers; and how we will measure the results.

This Benefits Administration Letter (BAL) describes the service delivery model and the roles and activities of agency benefits officers. A future BAL will describe the measures of results that will be reported in a Benefits Scorecard. We plan to develop the recognition program during FY 2011.

Roles and Responsibilities

OPM's primary responsibilities in this service delivery model are to provide leadership and serve as a capacity builder, a coordinator and a catalyst for action.

The "building capacity component" means providing and developing the training needs and tools required by benefits officers. In addition to the annual *Benefits Conference and the Fall Festival of Training*, OPM will conduct training symposiums/conferences on various retirement subjects and topics as part of building capacity. Regular contact with agencies is maintained through a listserv E-mail system. The development of informative and useful guidance materials such as *Benefits Administration Letters*, the *CSRS and FERS Handbook* and agency educational tools are all part of this component. OPM provides technical assistance on complex benefits issues to agencies through agency liaisons.

The “catalyst for action component” means developing and conducting model programs and outreach programs to benefits officers. OPM will partner with agencies to develop and implement model programs to improve the benefits administration and delivery. Outreach will include presentations and materials to target audiences such as Chief Human Capital Officers Council, the OPM Management Development Center programs, and the Federal Executive Institute programs as well as conferences that reach Federal managers and executives to increase understanding and level of support for the benefits programs.

The “coordination component” entails representing OPM to outside groups such as the National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association (NARFE). OPM will continue to strengthen its relationships with non-profit organizations by fostering strong partnerships. We will continue to work closely with other Federal agencies such as Department of Labor’s Office of Workers’ Compensation Programs (OWCP), Social Security Administration, Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board, Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, etc.

Agency responsibilities focus on the day-to-day administration of the benefits programs and the delivery of service and support to their employees. Details on roles and principle activities are described below.

Employees must take advantage of the educational opportunities provided so they can stay informed and take responsibility for their own analyses and decision making.

Benefits Officers. Agencies organize the work of benefits officers in different ways. In some small agencies, the headquarters level benefits officer is also the primary retirement counselor and has responsibilities for all benefits programs for the entire agency. In large agencies, the headquarters level benefits officer is part of a team managing the benefits programs, disseminating retirement and benefits information, and resolving retirement and benefits problems and questions. Since each agency is different, our service delivery model focuses on the responsibilities and activities the agencies as a whole should perform. The actual delineation of job duties within the general structure of the roles and activities outlined here is up to the agency to determine.

Agencies use the terms “Benefits Officer” and “Benefits Specialist” in different ways. For purposes of the service delivery model, a Benefits Officer/Benefits Specialist is an agency employee whose primary duties include *one or more* of the tasks below. In the aggregate, these identified tasks should account for 25 percent or more of the employee’s typical workload.

- Counsels agency employees on benefits issues
- Serves as the authoritative resource for one or more benefits content areas
- Develops benefits guidance/education materials (e.g., benefits handbooks, newsletters, benefits updates)
- Develops agency benefits policy

- Represents the agency in external matters related to benefits programs
- Trains and educates agency personnel on day-to-day operations
- Briefs senior management on benefits issues
- Carries out *complex* benefits tasks (e.g., Federal Erroneous Retirement Coverage Corrections Act (FERCCA) determinations)

We've identified five core roles that all Benefits Officer/Specialists perform. The roles are the core functions performed administering the benefits programs. Roles are carried out by performing a set of related activities. The activities described in this BAL are examples of the activities performed in each role. They are not intended to be an exhaustive list. Rarely does an individual benefits officer perform all the activities associated with a role. Depending on the agency's organizational structure, a benefits officer's primary activities may be associated with one role. However, all benefits officers engage in some of the activities for all roles at some time.

The roles are:

- Benefits Administration
- Communications
- Retirement Application Process
- Retirement Readiness Education
- Benefits Officer Development

Benefits Administration is the management of the benefits programs in the agency ranging from conducting the annual Open Seasons, to providing counseling assistance to employees during life events, to the timely processing of benefits elections.

Examples of Benefits Administration activities are:

- Conduct Open Seasons
- Distribute benefits information to employees
- Update agency guidance procedures to reflect changes in OPM guidance, regulations and law
- Attend Benefits Officers Network meetings
- Manage benefits applications and elections for timeliness, quality
- Review retirement coverage determinations
- Identify FERCCA errors; prepare decision packages; and make corrections
- Counsel agency employees on benefits issues
- Provide benefits information to new employees
- Monitor benefits enrollment
- Conduct ongoing benefit education programs for employees
- Provide assistance to survivors filing death in service applications
- Identify changes needed in agency systems
- Maintain reports of number or percentage of employees enrolled in Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) Program, Federal Employees Dental and

Vision Insurance Program (FEDVIP) and Federal Flexible Spending Account Program (FSAFEDS).

Communications means keeping management, employees and other benefits officers informed of changes in benefits programs and upcoming events is a critical element of an effective benefits program.

Examples of communications activities are:

- Communicate information in BALs and other guidance from OPM to appropriate offices
- Conduct regular meeting/teleconferences of Benefits Officers within the agency
- Understand Benefits Officers' network in agency
- Foster working relationships w/other organizations, e.g. payroll.
- Inform OPM of problems or questions w/OPM guidance
- Develop and maintain communication program to keep employees informed about benefits programs and actions required by employees, e.g. military deposits, updating designations of beneficiaries, open seasons
- Develop and maintain benefits information system for distribution of information to employees and component Benefits Officers
- Provide updates to component Benefits Officers and employees of changes to laws, regulations, and guidance

The Retirement Application Process includes managing the preparation and submission of retirement application and assisting employees in understanding their options and completing their retirement applications. The process begins with retirement estimates and continues through ensuring the application package is accurate, complete and timely.

Examples of Retirement Application Process activities are:

- Review OPF/retirement records
- Provide estimates to employees
- Counsel employees on retirement options
- Assist employees in preparing retirement applications
- Manage retirement application process to ensure accurate and timely processing of retirement applications
- Process disability retirement applications

The Retirement Readiness Education focuses on educating employees on the need for retirement savings and investment, providing information on how to plan for retirement, and calculating the retirement investment needed to meet their retirement goals.

Examples of Retirement Readiness Education activities are:

- Develop and implement the agency financial education plan

- Manage the agency implementation of the Retirement Readiness: NOW program
- Evaluate agency Retirement Readiness: NOW program
- Conduct programs for new, mid-career, and late career employees
- Monitor Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) participation and develop programs to increase participation

Benefits Officer Development includes the personal professional development needed to maintain and to improve your skills and competences. Meeting the annual training requirement in 5 U.S.C. 8350 is an important activity in this role.

Examples of Benefits Officer Development activities are:

- Attend benefits training to maintain/improve knowledge
- Monitor training of benefits officers to insure they are qualified to counsel employees
- Maintain internal network of benefits officers
- Conduct internal training for benefits officers

Next Steps

We plan to issue additional BALs describing the measures of results that will be reported in a Benefits Scorecard and updated information on annual agency retirement financial education plans. The BAL on the Benefits Scorecard will describe the measures of results for each of the benefits officers roles. Our objective is to have a limited number of measures for each role that are representative of the variety of activities. The BAL will provide definitions of the measures, data to be reported, and how the measures will be assessed. The BAL on retirement financial education plans will update the plan requirements outlined in BAL 07-102 and provide information on how the plans will be evaluated.

William Zielinski
Associate Director
Retirement Services