Feds, it’s Open Season!

By FEND Staff

HERE WE GO again. It’s Open Season—that brief stretch each autumn when feds can choose their health and other benefits options for the following year.

This year, Open Season runs from Nov. 8 through Dec. 13. And, as usual, what a lot of options there are to choose from for the following year.

Why is Open Season so important for feds and their families? Chief among the reasons: Because it is a once-a-year opportunity to tailor your benefits—and out-of-pocket costs—to suit your and your family’s needs, avoiding waste or excess expenditure. And, second, because health, dental and vision plans change—some years, quite a bit.

So, feds, take time to do some research—by consulting FEND and our online site, FederalSoup.com, the OPM Open Season home page, various specialty articles on federal health insurance and other information found via online and telephone resources, among others—and optimize your choices.

“Most Federal Employee Health Benefit (FEHB) plans will see benefit and rate changes for the upcoming year,” the OPM Open Season page advises. “Some plans are dropping out of the program and others are changing their service areas or coverage options.”

To see what’s going on with your health care choices, you can start by going to OPM’s informational pages—especially their Federal Benefits Open Season Highlights page—which offer details as well as links to additional resources, with information broken down by state and region, and highlights of health insurance plan changes for 2022. The OPM Open Season Comparison Tool is also a great place to start.

Another excellent first step to take would be to consult a leading private-sector organization event or tool designed to help you choose wisely. For decades, among the best of these
has been the Consumers’ Checkbook Guide to health plans and benefits—which has remained an excellent source for side-by-side comparison of plans. (Checkbook is a reputable, unbiased private-sector informational resource linking directly off OPM’s site.) Remember, some Checkbook resources are offered free of charge to members of federal employee unions, for instance via this link off the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) site and this one off the National Treasury Employees Union (NTEU) page.

For another good source, the website of the Federal Long Term Care Insurance Program (FLTCIP) offers specific information and a series of virtual Q&A “chat days,” where—after registering—you can get specifics.

The point is, during these weeks, you have the opportunity to go over and rationally choose from the options available to you through the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program (FEHB), the flexible spending account (FSA) programs, Federal Employees Dental and Vision Insurance Program (FEDVIP) as well as FLTCI.

As AFGE puts it: “Choosing the right health plan is one of the most important decisions you have to make. Rising costs and changing benefits don’t make it an easy one.”

So true. But during this fall’s Open Season, as in past years, we at FEND and our FederalSoup website will bring you articles and links spotlighting insights and price changes to FEHBP and other benefit plans with dynamic options on offer to federal employees. Let’s get started!

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**Contractor vax deadline on hold**

By FEND Staff

The Biden Administration has hit a potential major snag in its push to use mandates as a means to quickly raise the proportion of Americans—especially working Americans—who are fully vaccinated.

The White House and top health officials are placing great hope in the mandates—as they express concern that, although slowly rising, only around 60% of the total U.S. population (including roughly 70% of adults) is fully vaccinated. Meanwhile, the Delta variant of COVID continues to bounce among regions in furious outbreaks, in recent weeks killing between 1,000 and 2,000 people per day.

Twice in the last two weeks a federal appeals court affirmed a stay on one of the key vaccine mandates promulgated by the White House, the broadest one, intended to apply to all private businesses employing 100 or more employees.

Just days prior to the stay, in the face of growing regional resistance and delays the administration had signaled some flexibility, having announced a vaccine deadline extension—specifically, the vaccination deadline for employees of companies that do business with the federal government was to have been pushed back several weeks, to Jan. 4, 2022.

If and when this federal mandate is permitted to go forward, it will be among those managed according to publicly disclosed plans from offices within the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), among others.

Prior to the stay, over 100 million working people had been scheduled to come under one of the handful of federal mandates issued by the administration—but, for the moment, that number could be pared significantly. For FEND’s audience, principally this means workers who would fall under the direct federal employee mandate, the federal contractor mandate or the HHS health worker mandate. It should be noted that even before the stay, some workers under these mandates could, if eligible, avail themselves of alternative options to vaccination (for example, federal contractors have the option of submitting to weekly testing.)

Federal employees take note: Neither the federal court stay nor any announced extensions to deadlines apply to you. Those employed directly by federal agencies and departments remain subject to the original mandate and the original Nov. 22 deadline. Hence, feds without a legitimate exception or “reasonable accommodation” must be “fully vaccinated” and in compliance by the deadline.
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LETTER: FEDS, REPORT BACK!

A GROUP OF senators is pushing the Biden administration to get federal employees back into their offices and pre-pandemic jobsites, as soon as possible—alleging degraded service to businesses and the public being caused by telework and other COVID-control work procedures.

“Businesses have now reopened, children and teachers have returned to in-person learning, and health care and public safety workers continue to show up for work,” states an open letter from the group, all of whom are Republicans. “Yet we continue to hear from constituents in our states about a lack of responsiveness from federal agencies.”

The lawmakers are insisting that problems with government services could be solved just by taking steps to get people back to their desks.

“We understand the unique challenges that COVID-19 has presented, but Americans continue to face unprecedented delays in accessing their federal government,” the group says. “This is unacceptable, particularly since agency heads have had the ability to address productivity since June 2021, when the Biden Administration lifted its 25 percent cap on the number of federal employees allowed to report to worksites.”

Some agencies—for example, the Social Security Administration (SSA)—are reportedly taking steps toward returning sizable numbers of employees to their traditional worksites. However, the current administration remains committed to more telework for federal workers than did the Trump administration, citing the need to compete with the private sector for recruiting and retaining employees.

BILL TO END WEP PENALTY?

A BILL TO end a significant retirement penalty is on deck in Congress—and is stirring words of support from fed organizations who want an end to this particular long-lived weight on government retirees.

The so-called “Windfall Elimination Provision” (WEP), a Social Security calculation that—though originally set up to prevent overpayment—in effect significantly cuts federal employee retirement payouts from that federal agency, has remained a bugbear to feds and many unions and other advocates who have lobbied for rescinding it for many years.

Recently, there’s renewed hope that a change to the WEP might be around the corner, with appropriate legislative proposals pending. Most recently, Rep. Kevin Brady (R-Texas), House Ways and Means Committee Ranking Member, reintroduced the Equal Treatment of Public Servants Act, H.R. 5834. The National Association of Active and Retired Federal Employees (NARFE), for example, is cheering the prospect.

“Since its inception, NARFE has opposed the WEP as unfairly punishing hardworking public servants through reduced Social Security benefits,” Ken Thomas, the organization’s president, explained. “Amid growing support in Congress for its repeal or reform, NARFE urges lawmakers to coalesce around a workable solution to this four-decade drain on those who dedicated their careers to serving the public good.”

“The latest attempt to repair the damage caused by WEP came last week when Brady introduced his bill, which would provide rebates for those affected now by WEP and create a fairer formula moving forward,” Thomas said.

In the past, there have been other proposals to eliminate the WEP. But so far, no dice. Still, some see real hope in the latest provisions being floated on Capitol Hill.
GAO: COVID SAFETY IMPROVING

In January 2021, the Biden administration built on an already-mostly teleworking government to develop stronger safety standards, via the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force and—as the COVID pandemic was curbed—to plan for a wider return to normal federal workplaces.

Now, a Government Accountability Office report has been released, listing specific agencies and the improvements they’ve made on COVID safety, along with highlights of moves toward greater normalcy at federal workplaces.

Initial reentry plans, the report illustrates, were inadequate. But, in more recent months as the Task Force and other resources have been brought to bear, more consistent and safer minimums have been instituted and clearer post-COVID plans have been laid for the future.

“Guidance issued in January 2021 established model safety principles and specific roles for the Task Force, directing Task Force members to guide and oversee agency COVID-19 workplace safety efforts,” the GAO report notes. “This increased clarity and oversight and supported consistency in workplace safety planning.”

According to the report, all agencies studied now require adequate face masks and physical distancing, all have instituted improved ventilation and air filtration—and all are actively advising employees with “any COVID symptoms to notify supervisors,” and leave the workplace, along with taking other Task Force-advised measures.

While there remain areas with room for improvement, the report notes that “[most] agencies reported either sustained or improved coordination after the establishment of the Task Force.”

“If particular,” the report added, “agencies highlighted the Task Force

Thrift Savings Plan Share Prices

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members’ engagement in workplace safety implementation and responsiveness to questions.”

Twenty-four agencies were scrutinized in the GAO report. These include: the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Justice, Labor, State, Transportation, Treasury, and Veterans Affairs. They also include many of the largest independent agencies such as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Agency for International Development, General Services Administration, National Science Foundation, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Office of Personnel Management, Small Business Administration, and the Social Security Administration.

One major federal employee union, the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), issued a brief summary of the report’s findings, stating approvingly that federal agencies reviewed in the study “are generally doing better in complying with health and safety directives compared with last year.”

Fed: Tighten Cybersecurity

The majority of federal employees polled in a new survey indicated that they want more action—and more enforcement—on steps to ensure greater cybersecurity.

The survey, backed by the computer software firm Tripwire and Dimensional Research, got responses from 306 private sector and government employees.

On the one hand, many feds think they do a better job than the private sector counterparts on cyber. Specifically, 56% of feds working on cyber issues said they perceived government agency efforts as doing a better job of providing protection than the private sector.

(The exact language of the relevant survey question: “In your opinion, how does the security of federal government data and systems compare to the cybersecurity efforts and outcomes of non-governmental organizations?”)

On the other hand, however, fully 99% of feds involved in cyber who were surveyed indicated that “government should do more to protect their own data and systems.”

To see the full survey and its results, go to: https://www.tripwire.com/misc/survey-security-and-federal-government.

Unions: Delay Fed Vax Deadline

Major federal employee unions are pushing back at the Biden administration on the mandate for federal employee vaccination—requesting that this deadline be extended.

The president of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) made the case in a letter to top leaders in the Biden administration—arguing that the federal employee deadline for completed vaccination, currently set for Nov. 22, should be moved instead into January 2022, to match the date being applied to federal contractors.

“This double standard has caused confusion and distress among federal employees due to disparate treatment and incongruent deadlines for people who perform the government’s work in the same settings,” Everett Kelley, AFGE’s president, wrote in the letter, which was sent directly to House Coronavirus Response Coordinator Jeff Zients as well as the heads of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

The National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE), another major union, penned its own letter to the administration requesting a delay until January.

“[W]e respectfully request a revision to the vaccine mandate requirements for federal employees to match the requirements established for the private sector by the recent OSHA rules,” Randy Erwin, the president of NFFE, wrote.