



July 2019 ERS & NIFA
Human Resources and Relocation
Frequently Asked Questions

Impacted Employees & Positions

1. Will you be considering RIF letters for employees not in position to move?
 - a. This is not a RIF.
 - b. Please see the sections on CTAP and ICTAP for employment considerations when employees make the decision to not relocate.
2. Will locality pay be available for the new location? If less than DC metro, will USDA make up the difference?
 - a. The pay at the new location will be determined by OPM's salary table and associated locality pay. USDA will reassign the employee at the same grade and step. USDA will not make up the difference if the pay is lower based on locality.
3. What is USDA's approach to addressing the people occupying these impacted positions? Will I be offered a reassignment to another position?
 - a. ERS and NIFA permanent employees will receive reassignments to their positions at the new location.

Directed Reassignments

4. If I am in my probationary period, am I eligible for a reassignment?
 - a. Yes, employees in a probationary period are eligible for a reassignment.
 - b. Only permanent employees will be directed reassigned. There may be few exceptions to this such as Pathways Interns that will be converted to permanent.
5. How will staff with serious illnesses or that fall under ADA requirements be accommodated?
 - a. Directed reassignments will be provided to permanent employees occupying positions that will be moved to the new location.
 - b. The reassignment will be based on the position and not based on any personal circumstances.
 - c. Any ADA accommodations currently provided by the agency will be provided at the new location. Any new requests will be addressed in accordance with applicable policy.
6. If reassignments are offered, what criteria will be used to decide who gets a reassignment offer?
 - a. Since ERS and NIFA are relocating, permanent employees will be provided a directed reassignment into their own position.
7. What is a Directed Reassignment letter and what information is included in the letter?
 - a. A Directed Reassignment (DR) letter notifies an employee that he or she is being reassigned to a position outside of their local commuting area.
 - b. The following information is included in the letters:
 - i. The reason for the directed reassignment.
 - ii. The title, series, grade, salary, office name and city/state of new position.
 - iii. The date you must report to the new position.
 - iv. The name, title, office name, city/state and contact information of the supervisor.
 - v. The point of contact (POC) for travel and relocation information.

- vi. Information, if available, on Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA)/Voluntary Separation Incentive Payment (VSIP) for the impacted employees.
 - vii. POC for retirement/benefit, VERA/VSIP and Discontinued Service Retirement (DSR) information.
 - viii. Link for tool to calculate employee's approximate retirement annuity.
 - ix. POC for reassignment and severance pay information.
 - x. Timelines and instructions for submitting decision.
 - xi. Employee Rights information. Instructions and deadlines for submitting the acceptance/declination form.
 - xii. Information on the consequences of declining the directed reassignment.
 - xiii. The employee Acceptance/Declination Form.
8. What is the acceptance and declination process?
- a. Employees must submit their signed "Offer of Directed Reassignment — Acceptance/Declination" form to the REE Business Center HR email box by the response date indicated in the Directed Reassignment Letter.
 - b. If employee accepts:
 - i. REE Business Center HR will notify the Travel & Relocation Staff to begin coordination of travel orders.
 - ii. REE Business Center will notify agency leadership.
 - a. If employee declines:
 - a. REE Business Center HR will notify the agency leadership.
 - b. REE Business Center HR Personnel and Labor Solutions Staff (PALS) will submit a *Proposal to Remove* letter to the employee with a copy to the agency leadership.
 - c. PALS will follow up with a *Final Removal* letter to the employee with copy to the agency leadership, after giving the employee seven (7) days to confer with the deciding official.
 - b. If employee declines but applies for the buyout (if available):
 - a. REE Business Center HR will notify agency leadership as well as the Human Resources Retirement & Benefits Staff (R&B).
 - b. Employee must submit VSIP request form by the response date indicated in the DR Letter.
9. If a reassigned employee rejects reassignment, does that position remain "unfilled" or vacant?
- a. The position offered to an employee for a directed reassignment will be held for that specific employee through the report date as indicated in the Directed Reassignment letter.
 - b. If the employee declines and does not report by the date indicated in the Directed Reassignment Letter, the agency no longer will hold that position for the employee and may fill the position pending budget and agency priorities.
10. If an employee chooses to decline the reassignment, what is the last day of employment?

- a. The final date of employment will be contingent upon any adverse action proceedings.
11. Employees want a written statement that indicates the reassignment date. Employees want to be sure that if they decline the reassignment, they will continue to be paid.
 - a. Employees will be paid through the effective date of the separation from service regardless of whether that separation is through removal, resignation or retirement unless the employee voluntarily retires or resigns prior to the separation date on the DR.
 12. What happens with benefits for employees that do not receive a reassignment offer?
 - a. All permanent employees whose position will be relocated outside of the NCR region will receive a Directed Reassignment letter.
 - b. Each impacted employee may have different circumstances related to benefits that may need to be addressed individually. If the proposal is implemented, resources will be available to counsel each impacted individual.
 13. If an employee accepts the reassignment and for some unforeseen reason cannot report for duty, what are the consequences? Will the employee still receive severance/retirement benefits or will part of the benefits have to be forfeited?
 - a. Employees who do not respond to the reassignment opportunity by the date indicated in the DR Letter will be considered to have declined the reassignment and HR/PALS will begin the removal process.
 - b. If the employee declines, HR/PALS will begin the process of removal through adverse action procedures.
 - c. After you have received the decision letter but prior to the effective date, employees can choose to resign from their position without jeopardizing the ability to collect severance pay or Discontinued Service Retirement (DSR).
 - d. In order to be able to retire under DSR, the employee must resign or retire after receiving the Final Removal Letter *BUT* before the report date to the new location as indicated in the DR Letter.
 - e. Employees can change their minds regarding their decision up until the Friday before the report date but should be aware of possible consequences. Employees changing their minds from a yes to a no will go through the adverse action procedures beginning with the proposal to remove letter. The estimated length of the process is up to 45 days. Final action on a removal notice could impact when the employee may receive severance if eligible. Specific circumstances will be addressed on a case by case basis.
 - f. If an employee initially accepts the reassignment but then changes their mind, they will be removed through adverse action proceedings.
 - g. Once the employee notifies HR at the email address provided in the DR Letter of their change, HR/PALS will begin the removal process.
 14. What is the grade level of the reassignment for a reassigned employee?
 - a. The employee's grade level is indicated in the Directed Reassignment Letter and will be the same as their current grade level and step.
 - b. If an employee currently holds a position with an FPL that has not yet been attained, upon directed reassignment the Agency will honor the current

- encumbered grade of the employee and honor the full performance level of the existing position based on performance and supervisor approval.
15. Can an employee be reassigned into a position with a higher FPL than their current position?
 - a. No, the employee will be reassigned to their own position in a new location. Everyone will retain their grade and step.
 16. I have 21 years of service and I am 45 years old. Can I freeze my retirement and if so at what age can I draw my retirement without penalty? My minimum retirement age is 56 if still employed by the Government.
 - a. Please contact your servicing REE Business Center HR Retirement and Benefits Specialist for a detailed calculation and response based on your specific Federal employment history.
 17. Will sick leave or a portion thereof be used towards length of service calculation for Retirement? Severance?
 - a. Sick leave does not count toward your severance calculation.
 - b. Sick leave cannot be used to help an employee become eligible for retirement. It can be used to augment service after eligibility is achieved.
 - i. CSRS employees receive 100% credit for sick leave.
 - ii. FERS employees receive 100% credit for sick as of January 1, 2014.
 - c. Employees are not paid for their sick leave hours. The hours remain to their credit and if they return to federal service, the hours will be reinstated.
 18. May reassigned employees compete for positions that may open in the near future with their agency or other agencies even though they already accepted their redirections?
 - a. Yes, should they apply and be selected for another position, they will not have to pay back relocation costs associated with their redirection as long as the employee maintains employment with the Federal government.
 19. I wanted to know if an employee decides not to relocate to the new location what "Action" would be added to the employee's last SF-50? If employees decide to get a job at another government agency, will they be barred from doing so or risk demotion? Will it negatively affect their employment status or work history?
 - a. The agency must use the 5 CFR part 752 adverse action regulations when separating an employee who declines a directed reassignment to a position in a different geographic area. An employee who is removed by adverse action for declining a geographic relocation is potentially eligible for most of the benefits that are available to a displaced employee separated by reduction in force (e.g., intra-and-interagency hiring priority, severance pay, discontinued service retirement, etc.) An employee who declines reassignment to a position in the same geographic area as the present position (e.g., from an Atlanta position to a different Atlanta position) is not eligible for any career transition assistance or other benefits.
 - b. This SF 50 does not prevent the employee from seeking other Federal employment.
 - c. This action will not be based on the employee's performance or conduct.

20. In simple terms, describe advantages to accept/decline sooner rather than later.
 - a. If you accept, travel orders are issued sooner. House hunting trip may be taken, etc. If you decline and are interested in applying for other federal positions, the proposal to remove letter is issued within 5 days of declination and that letter can be uploaded when applying for federal positions with CTAP/ICTAP preference.
21. How should managers manage performance evaluations?
 - a. Current supervisors should conduct interim performance ratings with their staff before they depart the agency. That means they will complete the appraisal form (with a proposed rating filled in). They would also provide documentation on the employee's performance. The departing supervisors would meet with the employee and provide the interim rating. The interim rating sheet and supporting documentation should be provided to the employee's second line supervisor to issue the final rating after the rating cycle ends. If the second line supervisor is not available, it would go to the third level supervisor.

Employee Benefits

22. What happens to benefits for employees that decline a reassignment offer?
 - a. Employees receive 31 days of free health insurance coverage after separation at which time they will have the option of electing Temporary Continuation of Coverage (TCC) Insurance. HR will provide employees information on TCC as well as other personnel issues as part of the separation information package. Under TCC the employee can elect the same plan that s/he is currently enrolled in or a different plan. The cost for this coverage is significantly different than what you pay as an employee. Employees must pay 102% of the premiums (the employee's share, plus the Government's share, plus 2% of the total). Employees may continue this coverage for up to 18 months.
 - b. As long as the employee has had FEHB for 5-years prior to resigning or retiring, they may choose to pay and continue to receive FEHB. (The 5-year rule for FEHB may be waived by OPM's VERA VSIP authority.
23. If I retire on 12/31/2018 for example, with annual leave over 240 hours, will we get paid for the entire amount of hours we have??
 - a. Yes.
24. Life Insurance and TSP are taken automatically out of our paycheck. Can we still contribute on our own from our severance checks from our own money into these accounts/are they still accounts available for us to use and keep going while we are receiving severance payments?
 - a. Life insurance coverage is terminated. Employees are given the option to convert to a nongroup policy. Upon separation the employee's contribution to TSP stops. Employees cannot add monies but can continue to monitor and move the money around via interfund transfers or move it to another qualifying plan.
25. If I decide to resign rather than relocate, can I leave my retirement funds with the Government until I reach retirement age?
 - a. Yes

26. How does health insurance coverage work for relocating employees? Do employees relocating have to wait until open season to make changes, if needed, or does the relocation allow them to make adjustments prior to open season?
- a. A. Relocation is a qualifying life event that allows employees to make changes off-cycle only if your health plan is not recognized in the new state. If you are enrolled in an HMO and you move or become employed outside the HMO's service area (or, if you are already living or working outside this area, you move or become employed further away), you may change your enrollment. Also, you may change your enrollment if an enrolled family member moves outside the service area (or moves further away). You must notify your employing HR office of the move.
 - b. If you are enrolled in a nationwide FEHB plan, you will have coverage even if you move outside the United States. You may enroll or change enrollment when you transfer from a duty post within the United States to a duty post outside the United States or the reverse. You have 31 days before the date you are expected to leave your former duty post and 60 days after your arrival at the new duty post to enroll or change enrollment. If you need assistance, contact your human resources office.
 - c. You should complete an SF-2809 form to change from the old plan to a new plan that provides coverage in your new area. You can make the plan change upon notifying your human resources office of the move.
27. Will we be paid out our annual leave and comp time balances at separation? When does that occur?
- a. Yes, employee will be paid out their annual, credit, regular comp and restored leave hours. (Time off awards, comp time for travel are forfeited if not used.)
 - b. Generally, you should receive your leave payment 2-4 weeks after your final salary check. The agency will send you the payment(s) as soon as possible after the date of your separation but cannot guarantee a specific date. First, the agency must resolve any leave errors, salary offsets, and employee debts to the Government. You will receive it as a lump sum (less Federal income tax withholding, applicable State and local taxes, and FICA/Medicare taxes).
28. Will Social Security Payments stop from our paycheck once we start receiving severance checks? Will they start up once we start working again?
- a. Severance payments are subject to appropriate deductions for income and Social Security taxes. Upon reemployment all applicable deductions will be withheld.
29. If I have a TSP loan, do I continue to make payments or does the involuntary separation mean I have to repay the loan in full?
- a. When you leave federal service, you must repay your loan in full within 90 days after your separation is reported to TSP. Your payment must include any accrued interest on the outstanding principal balance. You will receive a notice providing repayment details from us after your agency notified us of your separation. If you do not repay your outstanding loan balance in full, a taxable distribution of the remaining balance amount of your loan will be declared as taxable income. You can roll the amount of the distribution into a traditional IRA

or eligible employer plan within 60 days of it being declared to avoid taxes and penalties in accordance with internal Revenue Code of Regulations. You will not be able to withdraw your TSP account until your loan is closed by either payment in full or taxable distribution. For more information please refer to the TSP website and the tax notice titled “Important Tax Information About Payments from Your TSP Account.”

30. Does CFC payments continue after an employee’s separation date?
 - a. Yes, payments will automatically stop once you separate. Additionally, CFC payroll deductions may be cancelled at any time, but this is the only change permitted outside the official solicitation period. If you cancel your pledge during the official solicitation period, you cannot submit a new pledge. To cancel contributions: From your pledge screen, select and click on “cancel balance” at the top right. You will be asked to confirm your cancelation. Select and click on “yes, cancel pledge to continue.” Cancellation will then be confirmed at the top of your pledge screen.
31. I have Vision supplement. Would I receive a bill from vision if I want to continue paying under COBRA?
 - a. Payments will automatically stop once you separate. Cobra is not being offered through the FEDVIP program. You cannot enroll or continue FEDVIP enrollment after you leave Federal Service (not retiring). There is no 31-day temporary extension of coverage or opportunity to convert to private coverage. Your coverage ends on the last day of the pay period during which you separate.
32. If I do leave the government, will there be an out-processing checklist available, with information about points of contact in TSP, etc.?
 - a. Yes, HR provides a checklist and Information material that covers:
 - i. FEHB
 - ii. FEGLI
 - iii. Retirement
 - iv. TSP

Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA)

33. What is a VERA?
 - a. VERA is commonly referred to as early out retirement, and that’s exactly what this authority does. It expands the normal retirement eligibility to allow employees to voluntarily retire, with an immediate annuity, before they would otherwise be eligible. There are some basic eligibility criteria under the law. You must also meet USDA criteria. An early retirement may have an effect on your annuity. The VERA is separate from the Voluntary Separation Incentive Payment (VSIP) also called the buyout authority. A VERA or VSIP are not dependent or contingent on the other. An agency can offer one and not the other.
34. Who is eligible for VERA?
 - a. If your agency has received approval for a VERA you must also meet the following additional requirements:

- a. If you are covered by the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS), you must have served in a position covered by the CSRS for at least 1 year out of the 2 years immediately before retirement.
 - b. For employees covered by the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS), this rule does not apply.
 - b. You must be at least 50 years of age with 20 years of service or have 25 years of service at any age. At least 5 years must be civilian service, whether you are retiring under CSRS or FERS. In addition, you:
 - i. Must be in a position covered by the VERA granted by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM);
 - ii. Must not be serving under a time limited appointment;
 - iii. Must have been on the agency's rolls at least 30 days prior to the date of application to OPM for VERA approval;
 - iv. Must not have been notified that you will be involuntarily separated for misconduct or unacceptable performance; and
 - v. Your retirement date must be on or before to the VERA expiration date.
35. Are trainees eligible for VERA?
- a. Trainees such as Pathways Interns, Recent Graduates and Presidential Management Fellows are excluded from a VERA.
36. Can I retire under VERA and still receive a VSIP?
- a. Yes. If you meet the criteria for both, you can retire under VERA and also receive a VSIP if one is being offered by the agency.
37. If I'm eligible for VERA, what rights and benefits would I be giving up to voluntarily retire rather than waiting to be separated involuntarily?
- a. Because you would be leaving voluntarily you would be giving up:
 - i. Selection priority for federal employment under the Career Transition Assistance Program (CTAP) and Interagency Career Transition Assistance Programs (ICTAP). These programs give you selection priority for federal jobs in your area at your same or lower grade, if you apply for them and are well-qualified.
 - ii. Unemployment benefits (depending on your State's rules)
 - iii. Please note:
 - 1. For FERS and CSRS employees that come back to Federal employment after voluntarily retiring, your annuity will continue, and your salary will be offset by the amount of your annuity. If you work as a reemployed annuitant for at least a year but less than 5 years, you will receive a supplemental annuity. If you work for more than 5 years as a reemployed annuitant, your entire retirement calculation will be redone.
 - 2. For FERS employees that come back to Federal employment after involuntarily retiring under Discontinued Service Retirement, your annuity will continue and your salary will be offset by the amount of your annuity.

3. For CSRS employees that come back to Federal employment after involuntarily retiring under Discontinued Service Retirement, your annuity will be discontinued, and you will receive the full salary of the new Federal job.
38. If I retire under VERA and do not take the buyout, can I take a job in another Federal agency?
 - a. Yes however, in this situation, VERAs are tied to buyouts.
 - b. Please note:
 - i. For FERS and CSRS employees that come back to Federal employment after voluntarily retiring, your annuity will continue, and your salary will be offset by the amount of your annuity. If you work as a reemployed annuitant for at least a year but less than 5 years, you will receive a supplemental annuity. If you work for more than 5 years as a reemployed annuitant, your entire retirement calculation will be redone.
 - ii. For FERS employees that come back to Federal employment after involuntarily retiring under Discontinued Service Retirement, your annuity will continue, and your salary will be offset by the amount of your annuity.
 - iii. For CSRS employees that come back to Federal employment after involuntarily retiring under Discontinued Service Retirement, your annuity will be discontinued, and you will receive the full salary of the new Federal job.
39. What if my agency offers a VERA but I am on military duty during the authority time limit?
 - a. Employees on military duty are treated as though they were still on the job and are not disadvantaged because of their military service. Therefore, if you met the eligibility criteria during the offer period, you would have 30 days following your return to duty with USDA to either accept or reject an offer of VSIP or VERA.
40. What does a "time-limited appointment" mean?
 - a. An employee on an appointment with a time limit works only until a specified date and then goes off the rolls. The employing agency sets the ending date when it hires the individual and/or when it extends the appointment. For example, temporary and term employees serve with a time limit, so they are not eligible for an incentive payment or early out retirement. Career and career-conditional employees and permanent employees in the excepted service have no time limit so they may be eligible.
41. What does "continuous service" mean?
 - a. To be eligible for early retirement, you must have been on the rolls of the Department of Agriculture 30 days prior to the request for the VERA, with no breaks. Leave without pay (LWOP), permanent seasonal employment (PSE) off-tour time, and other non-pay status during an appointment are NOT considered breaks in service.

42. Leaving Federal service under VERA is supposed to be voluntary. What if I am offered a VERA or VSIP but do not choose to leave?"
- a. VERA, just like Optional retirement is indeed a voluntary action. A VSIP, when offered is offered to eligible employees as part of a voluntary resignation, early or optional retirement. Employees must not ever be coerced as coercion is prohibited.
43. Does the VERA eligibility change the eligibility for regular optional retirement?
- a. No. If you are under CSRS, you can take regular optional retirement if you are 55 with at least 30 years of service; age 60 with 20 years of service, or age 62 with 5 years of service. If you are under FERS, you can take regular optional retirement if you have reached your minimum retirement age (MRA) with at least 30 years of service; age 60 with 20 years of service, or age 62 with 5 years of service. In addition, an employee under FERS is eligible for an immediate annuity if he/she has 10 years of service and has reached the MRA. (Under this eligibility there is a 5 percent reduction for each year the employee is under age 62.) The MRA chart can be found at the following link: <https://www.opm.gov/retirement-services/fers-information/eligibility>.
 - b. An employee under CSRS must meet the 1-out-of-last-2-years coverage requirement and all employees must have at least 5 years of civilian service.
44. What is the difference between VERA and discontinued service retirement (DSR)?
- a. VERA, just like an optional retirement is voluntary. DSR is involuntary as a result of the employee choosing to not accept a directed reassignment to a position outside of the local commuting area. In general, there are 2 differences.
 - i. Under a DSR, you may be able to receive unemployment depending on the state you live in
 - ii. Under a DSR, you would not have received an incentive payment through a VSIP so you would not have to pay the VSIP amount back to the government if you returned to Federal service within 5 years of Retirement.
45. I haven't been enrolled in the federal employee's health benefits (FEHB) program for a full 5-year period and I accept a VERA, do I lose my FEHB?
- a. Typically, you would lose your FEHB if you haven't been enrolled for the past 5 years, however, under a VERA, OPM typically allows a waiver of the 5 year requirement for employees who have been covered under the FEHB Program continuously since the beginning date of the agency's approved VERA and retire under the VERA.
46. I haven't been enrolled in the federal employees' life insurance (FEGLI) program for a full 5-year period. Do I lose my life insurance when I retire under VERA?
- a. Yes, but you could be eligible under certain circumstances or you might be able to convert your coverage. You should ask your benefits specialist what your options will be.
47. If I take early retirement is my annuity reduced?
- a. CSRS employees who retire under the voluntary early retirement authority will have a reduction in their annuity of 2 percent per year for each year they are

- under age 55. (The reduction is 1/6 of 1 percent for each full month.) This is a permanent reduction in annuity.
- b. Employees with only FERS service will not have their annuities reduced under voluntary early retirement. FERS employees retiring under the MRA+10 provision is subject to a reduction of 5% for each year under age 62.
 - c. Under DSR or early retirement, FERS employees would receive their FERS supplement if under age 62 once they reach their MRA.
 - d. Employees with both CSRS and FERS service will have a reduction only for the CSRS portion of their annuity if under age 55.
 - e. Special rules apply to the calculation of annuities of employees who have part-time service after 1986.
48. How do I know if I have enough time in service to meet the requirements to retire?
- a. Although you can check your retirement service computation date (SCD) on your SF-50 (Notification of Personnel Action); on your yearly statement of benefits from NFC; or on NFC's Employee Personal Page (EPP); you should still check with your retirement specialist BEFORE you decide on accepting a VERA. They can provide you with a retirement calculation and verify that your retirement SCD is correct. Different types of appointments; types of federal service; or if you owe a deposit/redeposit can make a difference in your SCD. The rules are complicated and different depending on the retirement system you're covered under. **Don't just assume your service time is creditable.**
49. Where can I go to get an estimate of my annuity?
- a. Please contact your servicing retirement and benefits specialist in HR.
50. Where can I get more information on retirement benefits?
- a. Click here <https://www.opm.gov/retirement-services/my-annuity-and-benefits/>
 - b. If you have questions or need additional information please contact your servicing retirement and benefits specialist in HR.
51. What is the effective date of my VERA?
- a. You may select the date of your retirement/separation, but it must be effective after the date of the VERA authorization and no later than the date the VERA expires.
52. Can I delay the date of my retirement?
- a. No. An employee must retire by the date established for the VERA/VSIP window.
53. Can my retirement date be delayed by management?
- a. Management may extend your separation date when there is a documented need to retain your skills and knowledge.
54. Can Veterans Preference be applied to be eligible for a VERA?
- a. No. There is no preference for veterans under the VERA authority.
55. Is VERA tied to the VSIP (buyout)? How will we be notified of approval?
- c. Yes, employees may apply for the VSIP during the open period. The human resources division will then notify employees who were not approved and contact who have been approved and ask how they plan to separate: via resignation, VERA, or optional retirement.

Voluntary Separation Incentive Payment (VSIP)

56. What is a VSIP?
- a. A Voluntary Separation Incentive Payment (VSIP) is commonly called a buyout. The buyout program is not a retirement program. This authority allows the agency to offer a lump sum incentive payment to eligible employees who voluntarily leave the workforce (voluntary resignation, early retirement or optional retirement), so that the workforce may be reduced in size or reshaped. You don't have to be eligible to retire to be offered and receive a lump sum buyout.
57. When is a buyout authorized?
- a. The authority for federal agencies to offer buyouts was included in the legislation that created the Department of Homeland Security (Public Law 107-296, the Homeland Security Act of 2002). Agencies must request approval from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and OPM review the plan and decide whether to approve the request.
58. Don't I have a right to a VSIP?
- a. Agencies ARE NOT REQUIRED to use or pay incentives. Incentives ARE NOT an employee right. The incentives are a management tool to help the agency reduce the workforce without having to run costly and disruptive reduction in force (RIF).
 - b. **Note:** In order for you to make an informed choice regarding VSIP and Voluntary Early Retirement Authority ((VERA) also called an early out), it is also necessary to understand options you may have associated with involuntary actions such as Discontinued Service Retirement (DSR), etc. This is discussed in questions below.
59. What rights and benefits would I be giving up to voluntarily take a VSIP to retire or resign rather than waiting to be separated involuntarily?
- a. Because you would be leaving voluntarily, you would be giving up:
 - i. Placement assistance
 - ii. Selection priority for federal employment under the Career Transition Assistant Program (CTAP) and Interagency Career Transition Assistance Program (ICTAP). These programs give you selection priority for federal jobs in your local commuting area at your same or lower grade, if you apply for them and are well-qualified
 - iii. Employment in the Federal Government within next 5 years (without paying back the full gross amount of the incentive payment)
 - iv. Full amount of severance pay, if eligible (e.g., you are not eligible for severance pay if you are eligible to retire)
 - v. Unemployment benefits (depending on your State's rules)
 - vi. Please note:
 4. For FERS and CSRS employees that come back to Federal employment after voluntarily retiring, your annuity will continue, and your salary will be offset by the amount of your annuity. If you work as a reemployed annuitant for at least a year but less

than 5 years, you will receive a supplemental annuity. If you work for more than 5 years as a reemployed annuitant, your entire retirement calculation will be redone.

5. For FERS employees that come back to Federal employment after involuntarily retiring under Discontinued Service Retirement, your annuity will continue, and your salary will be offset by the amount of your annuity.
6. For CSRS employees that come back to Federal employment after involuntarily retiring under Discontinued Service Retirement, your annuity will be discontinued, and you will receive the full salary of the new Federal job.

60. Who could be offered a VSIP?

- a. There are basic eligibility requirements under the law for buyouts, and there are additional eligibility criteria established by the agency in the buyout plan and approved by OPM. The buyout plan describes the general categories of employees that may be offered a VSIP by organizational unit, geographic location, occupational category, grade level, and other pertinent factors, such as skills or retirement eligibility. To receive a buyout an employee must meet the criteria and accept the conditions of the specific buyout window that is offered and must voluntarily retire (early out or optional) or voluntarily resign during the time period covered by the buyout plan.
- b. Employees are not eligible to receive a buyout if any of the following apply:
 - i. They are reemployed annuitants
 - ii. They are eligible for a disability retirement
 - iii. They are serving under an appointment with a time limitation
 - iv. They have not been employed by the Federal government for three (3) continuous years
 - v. They are in receipt of a decision notice of involuntary separation for misconduct or unacceptable performance
 - vi. They have received a buyout before
 - vii. They are covered by statutory reemployment rights from another organization
 - viii. They have received a recruitment or relocation bonus within the 24-month period preceding separation
 - ix. They have received a retention bonus within the 12-month period preceding separation
 - x. They have received a student loan repayment benefit during the 36-month period preceding separation or
 - xi. They are in a position that is not covered by the VSIP or excluded by the agency's buyout plan.

61. What does an "appointment without time limitation" mean?

- a. An employee on an appointment with a time limit works only until a specified date and then goes off the rolls. The employing agency sets the ending dates when it hires the individual and/or when it extends the appointment. For

example, temporary and term employees serve with a time limit, so they are not eligible for an incentive payment. Career and career-conditional employees and permanent employees in the excepted service have no time limit so they are eligible.

62. What does “continuous service” mean?
 - a. To be eligible for a VSIP, employees must have been continuously employed by the Federal government for 3 years without a break in service. Leave without pay (LWOP), permanent seasonal employment (PSE) off-tour time, and other non-pay status during an appointment are NOT considered breaks in service.
63. Can Veterans Preference be applied to be eligible for a VSIP?
 - a. No. There is no preference for veterans under the VSIP authority.
64. If I receive a buyout payment, can I take a job in another Federal agency?
 - a. If you retired or resigned with a buyout payment under this law, you must repay the entire amount (including taxes paid), prior to your first day of employment, if you take a job with any agency of the Federal Government within 5 years of your separation date. This repayment requirement covers any kind of employment (permanent, temporary, expert, consultant, reemployed annuitant), as well as direct or personal services contracts. In very limited situations, the head of the employing agency may request a waiver of this repayment from OPM.
65. If I’m eligible for a buyout, how much would my incentive be? Does everyone get \$25,000?
 - a. The amount of each employee's incentive will vary depending on his/her pay rate, years of civilian service, and age. The MAXIMUM gross amount for each buyout is \$25,000, and not everyone will be eligible for the maximum. The net amount you receive will be EVEN LOWER after the appropriate taxes, Social Security, Medicare, etc., are deducted by the payroll office. (An average estimated net is about \$16,200). The basic formula for calculating your incentive is the same formula used for calculating severance pay. We have included a sample and blank worksheet below to help you ESTIMATE your buyout.
 - b. The following are examples of employees who would receive the maximum gross buyout amount of \$25,000:
 - i. Employee making over \$52,000 a year, have at least 15 years of civilian service, and are at least 43 years old
 - ii. Employee making at least \$40,000 a year, have at least 20 years of civilian service, and are at least 41 years old and
 - iii. Employee making over \$82,000 a year, have at least 13 years of civilian service at any age.
66. What if I am offered a buyout but do not choose to leave?
 - a. Incentives are for voluntary separations, and *coercion is prohibited*; however, the agency can require an employee who has committed to a buyout to follow through on that commitment.
67. I retired from the military and am now a Federal employee. May I apply for a buyout?

- a. Yes, if you are otherwise eligible. The Agency will compute the incentive payment only on the basis of your civilian service and any creditable military service which interrupted civilian service, and which conveyed restoration rights.
68. What is the basic formula for calculating a voluntary separation incentive?
- a. Using the severance pay calculation procedures, the amount of severance pay would be 1 week's basic pay for each of the first 10 years of your civilian service, plus 2 weeks' basic pay for each year over 10 years. An age adjustment allowance of 10% is added for each year you are over 40. (No credit is given for military service unless the service interrupted otherwise creditable civilian service and the employee returned to civilian service through the exercise of a legal restoration right.) Total severance pay may not exceed one year's pay at the rate the employee is receiving immediately before separation. The pay rate used in the calculation includes any locality and/or special pay rate you are receiving. (For the purpose of calculating a buyout payment, severance pay is figured based on the amount of your civilian service as if you would get it; you don't have to actually be eligible for severance pay.)
69. When will I receive my buyout payment? Will it be all at once (lump sum) or monthly? Is it taxable?
- a. Generally, you should receive your buyout check within a couple of weeks of your final separation paycheck. The agency will send you the incentive payment as soon as possible after the date of your separation but cannot guarantee a specific date. First, the agency must resolve any leave errors, salary offsets, and employee debts to the Government. Your buyout is also subject to garnishment for alimony and child support. The incentive payment is taxable. You will receive it as a lump sum (less Federal income tax withholding, applicable State and local taxes, and FICA/Medicare taxes).
70. May I roll my buyout over into an individual retirement account or another form of tax shelter?
- a. No. The buyout is considered fully taxable income and cannot be rolled over into retirement accounts.
71. Are Federal taxes withheld at normal tax withholding rates or a flat 25% rate?
- a. Taxes for the buyout will be at your normal tax-withholding rate.
72. Can I retire under DSR and also receive a buyout lump sum payment too?
- a. No. DSR is based on an involuntary separation. Buyouts are paid to employees who leave voluntarily.
73. I am eligible for FERS retirement (Minimum Retirement Age (MRA) +10); however, I don't want to retire. If I am involuntarily separated, can I receive severance pay?
- a. No. You are not eligible for severance pay if you are eligible for retirement.
74. May I take a buyout and apply for disability retirement later?
- a. Employees may file for disability up to one year after separation. However, *if you have received a buyout and are later found to be eligible for disability retirement, you are then responsible for repaying the entire amount of the buyout* to the agency that paid the buyout to you. This is because a disability retirement is retroactive to the date of separation, and the buyout law excludes

employees having a disability on the basis of which such employee is or would be eligible for disability retirement.

75. I am not eligible for regular or early retirement. Which is better, buyout or severance pay?
- a. Whether buyout or severance pay is better depends on you and your personal situation. Leaving Federal service with a buyout payment is a voluntary action. If you accept a buyout, you will not receive severance pay.
 - b. In general, employees who are not eligible for retirement and are separated involuntarily, and who meet other conditions are eligible for severance pay. This does not include:
 - i. An employee serving under an appointment with a definite time limitation
 - ii. An employee on an intermittent work schedule
 - iii. An employee receiving compensation for work injuries or
 - iv. Separations by removal for cause on charges of misconduct, delinquency, or inefficiency.
 - c. Severance pay is paid to you at your base salary rate, each pay period (like a regular pay check), until paid in full.
 - d. Leaving Federal service with a buyout payment is a voluntary action. If you accept a buyout, you will not receive severance pay. Whether buyout or severance pay is better depends on you and your personal situation.
 - i. If your severance pay calculation is less than the \$25,000 maximum buyout payment, then by accepting a buyout payment you would be accepting your full severance entitlement (if eligible) in a lump sum, less taxes and other deductions.
 - ii. If you are eligible for severance pay and the severance pay calculation is greater than the \$25,000 maximum buyout payment, you will be giving up the difference if you take the buyout.
76. What if I meet the eligibility criteria for buyout (VSIP) but I am on military duty during the offer period?
- a. Employees on military duty are treated as though they were still on the job and are not disadvantaged because of their military service. Therefore, if you met the eligibility criteria during the offer period, you would have 30 days following your return to duty with the agency to either accept or reject an offer of buyout and/or early out.
77. I haven't been enrolled in the federal employee's health benefits (FEHB) program for a full 5-year period. Do I lose my health insurance?
- b. There are two different situations.
 - i. For employees who resign (those who are not eligible for immediate annuity retirement), temporary coverage continues for up to 31 days after the enrollment terminates, with conversion privileges. You would also be eligible for temporary continuation of coverage, which allows you to continue your coverage for up to 18 months. You must pay

- 102% of the premiums (the employee's share, plus the Government's share, plus 2 percent of the total).
- ii. Employees are able to continue their health insurance into retirement, even if they have not been enrolled for a full 5-year period prior to retirement, under the following pre-approved waiver guidelines from OPM that typically is incorporated into new VERA/VSIP authorities:
 1. OPM provides pre-approved waivers for any employee who has been covered under the FEHB program *continuously since the beginning date of an agency's latest statutory buyout and/or early out authority*. To be eligible for a pre-approved waiver, employees must:
 - a. Retire during the agency statutory buyout period and
 - b. Receive a buyout under the agency statutory buyout authority or
 - c. Take early optional retirement as a result of early-out authority or
 - d. Take a DSR based on an involuntary separation due to reduction in force, directed reassignment, reclassification to a lower grade, or abolishment of position.
 2. If you meet these requirements, you do not need to write a letter requesting a waiver. Instead, your agency must attach a memorandum to your retirement application stating that you meet the requirements for a pre-approved waiver by OPM as set forth in revised Benefits Administration Letter (BAL) 04-208. The memorandum should provide the number of the Public Law granting your agency VSIP authority and the beginning and the ending dates of your agency's statutory buyout period.
78. When will we be notified of approval/disapproval of the VSIP?
- a. The goal is to notify employees one week after open period closes.
79. Do we need to submit our retirement application with the VSIP request?
- a. No
80. If I apply for the VSIP/VERA and don't get selected – what happens?
- a. You can choose to resign, voluntarily retire, or if you choose to do nothing, you will be retired through a Discontinued Service Retirement which has the same benefits and annuity as a VERA except that it is involuntary. Employees retired under DSR may be eligible for unemployment-rules in each state vary.
81. Under Discontinued Service Retirement, employee cannot decline a reasonable job offer. What is considered a reasonable?
- a. A position outside of the geographic area is not considered "reasonable" offer .

Career Transition Assistance Plan (CTAP) & Inter-Agency CTAP (ICTAP)

82. What is CTAP?
- b. A CTAP eligible is a current career or career-conditional employee (tenure I or II) in the competitive service who is "displaced" or "surplus" and who has a current

performance rating of record of at least fully successful (Level 3) or equivalent.

c. Eligibility

i. Displaced Employee

1. A current USDA career or career-conditional competitive service employee at the GS-15 (or equivalent) or below who: received a RIF separation notice under 5 CFR 351 and has not declined an offer for a position with the same type of work schedule and representative rate at least as high as that of the position from which the employee will be separated; or received a notice of proposed removal under 5 CFR 752 for declining a directed reassignment outside the local commuting area (positions with mobility statements not covered); or
2. A current USDA excepted service employee serving on an appointment without time limit, at the GS-15 (or equivalent) and below, who: is covered by law providing both noncompetitive appointment eligibility to and selection priority for, competitive service positions; and received a RIF separation notice under 5 CFR 351 or notice of proposed removal under 5 CFR 752 for declining a directed reassignment outside the local commuting area (positions with mobility statements not covered).

ii. Surplus Employee

1. A current USDA career or career-conditional competitive service employee at the GS-15 (or equivalent) and below who: received a Certificate of Expected Separation (CES) under 5 CFR 351 or other official agency notification indicating the employee's position is surplus, such as a notice of position abolishment or eligibility for a discontinued service retirement;
2. A current USDA excepted service employee serving on an appointment without time limit, at the GS-15 (or equivalent) and below, who: is covered by law providing both noncompetitive appointment eligibility to, and selection priority for, competitive service positions; and received a CES notice under 5 CFR 351; or
3. A current excepted service employee on a Schedule A or B appointment without a time limit at a GS-15 (or equivalent) or below and who: received a CES under 5 CFR 351 or other official agency notification indicating the employee's position is surplus, such as a notice of position abolishment or eligibility for a discontinued service retirement; or received a RIF notice under 5 CFR 351 or a notice of proposed removal under 5 CFR 752 for declining a directed reassignment outside the local commuting area (positions with mobility statements not covered).

iii. Period of Eligibility:

4. Eligibility begins on the date the servicing HR Office issues the employee a RIF separation notice, notice of proposed separation

for declining a transfer of function or directed reassignment outside the local commuting area, CES, or other official agency certification.

5. CTAP eligibility for selection priority expires upon the earliest of:
 - a. On the RIF separation date, the date of the employee's resignation, retirement, or separation from USDA (including separation under adverse action procedures for declining a directed reassignment or transfer of function or similar relocation to another local commuting area);
 - b. Cancellation of the RIF separation notice, notice of proposed removal for declining a directed reassignment or transfer of function outside of the local commuting area, a CES, or other official certification (e.g., a notice of position abolishment or a notice stating that the employee is eligible for discontinued service retirement) issued by the servicing HRO;
 - c. Being placed in another position, within the department at any grade or pay, either permanent or time limited before the agency separates the employee;
 - d. Receiving a career, career-conditional or excepted service appointment without time limit in any agency at any grade level;
 - e. Declining a career, career-conditional, or excepted appointment without time limit within USDA for which the employee has applied and has been rated "well qualified;" or
 - f. Failing to respond within a reasonable period of time (recommend 10 business days) to an offer or official inquiry of availability.

83. What is ICTAP?

- a. The ICTAP provides eligible displaced USDA employees with inter-agency selection priority for vacancies in other federal agencies, when applicable. It does not prohibit movement of competitive service employees within a department.
- b. Eligibility:
 - i. An ICTAP Eligible is a current or former career or career-conditional employee (tenure I or II) in the competitive service who is "displaced" and has a current/last performance rating of record of at least fully successful (Level 3) or equivalent.
 - ii. Displaced Employee
 1. A current career or career-conditional competitive service employee at grade levels GS-15 (or equivalent) and below, who has received a specific RIF separation notice, or a notice of proposed removal for declining a transfer of function or directed

reassignment outside of the local commuting area;

2. A former career or career-conditional competitive service employee at grade levels GS–15 (or equivalent) and below, who was separated through RIF, or removed for declining a transfer of function or directed reassignment outside of the local commuting area.
 3. A former career or career-conditional employee who was separated because of a compensable injury or illness as provided under the provisions of Subchapter I of Chapter 81 of Title 5, U.S.C., whose compensation has been terminated and whose former department is unable to place the individual as required by 5 CFR 353.110(b);
 4. A former career or career-conditional competitive service employee who retired with a disability under Sections 8337 or 8451 of Title 5, U.S.C., whose disability annuity has been or is being terminated;
 5. A former career or career-conditional competitive service employee at grades GS–15 level (or equivalent) or below, who received a RIF separation notice, and who after receiving the RIF notice elected to take an optional retirement on the effective date of the RIF or elected to retire under the discontinued service retirement option on or before the effective date of the RIF;
 6. A former Military Reserve Technician or National Guard Technician who is receiving a special disability retirement annuity from OPM under Section 8337(h) or 8456 of Title 5 U.S.C.;
 7. A current Executive Branch employee in the excepted service, serving on an appointment without time limit, at grade levels GS-15 (or equivalent) and below, who has been given noncompetitive appointment eligibility (e.g., non-appropriated fund employees) and selection priority by statute for positions in the competitive service, and who is in receipt of a RIF separation notice or notice of proposed removal for declining a transfer function or directed reassignment outside of the local commuting area; or
 8. A former Executive Branch employee in the excepted service, who served on an appointment without time limit, a grade levels GS-15 (or equivalent) and below, who has been given noncompetitive appointment eligibility and selection priority by statute for positions in the competitive service, and who has been separated through RIF or removed for declining a transfer of function or directed reassignment outside of the local commuting area.
- iii. Period of Eligibility
1. Eligibility begins on the date:
 - a. The servicing HRO issues the employee a RIF separation notice; A department certifies that it cannot place an

- employee eligible under 5 CFR 353;
 - b. An employee eligible under 5 U.S.C. 8337 or 8451 is notified that his or her disability annuity has been or is being terminated;
 - c. The servicing HRO issues a formal notice of proposed separation to an employee for declining a transfer of function or directed reassignment outside the local commuting area; or
 - d. The National Guard Bureau or Military Department certifies that an employee has retired receiving a special disability retirement annuity under 5 U.S.C. 8337(h) or 8456.
2. ICTAP eligibility for selection priority expires upon the earliest of:
- a. One year after separation;
 - b. One year after a department certifies that an individual under 5 CFR 353 cannot be placed;
 - c. One year after an individual under 5 U.S.C. 8337 or 8451 receives notification that his/her disability annuity has been or will be terminated;
 - d. When the employee receives a career, career-conditional, or excepted appointment without time limit in any department at any grade level;
 - e. When the employee no longer meets the eligibility requirements (e.g., the employee is no longer being separated by RIF, or under adverse action procedures for declining a transfer of function or directed reassignment outside the local commuting area, or separates by resignation or non-discontinued service retirement prior to the RIF effective date);
 - f. When an eligible employee declines a career, career-conditional, or excepted appointment (without time limit), for which the employee has applied and been rated “well qualified”; or upon the failure of the applicant to respond within a reasonable period of time (recommend 10 business days) to an offer or official inquiry of availability; or
 - g. Two years after separation, for those employees eligible under 5 CFR 330.407(b).
84. If an employee declines the reassignment, does he/she have preference for other federal positions?
- a. Employees who decline a directed reassignment outside of their current local commuting area are eligible for Agency/Interagency Career Transition Assistance Plans (CTAP/ICTAP).
 - i. The employee is eligible after receiving the Proposal to Remove Letter.

- ii. The employee's ICTAP eligibility expires one year after the Agency separates the employee for declining the reassignment.
 - iii. For ICTAP the employee must apply for a non-USDA Federal vacancy which has a full performance level that is at or below their current grade. The vacancy must be in their current local commuting area.
 - iv. The employee must have a current performance rating of at least "fully successful".
 - v. The employee must be found to be "well qualified" by the announcing Agency's Human Resources office.
 - vi. Information on CTAP/ICTAP can be found at <http://www.ocio.usda.gov/document/departmental-regulation-4030-330-002>
85. Should they choose not to relocate, Will NIFA and ERS employees be given a competitive advantage for, preferential treatment for, or the ability to transfer to (1) other USDA positions (2) agency positions, or (3) other U.S. Department positions?
- a. Please see the response to the previous question.
 - i. Will they get first consideration for currently vacant USDA positions? Please see the response to the previous question.
 - ii. Is it possible to direct USDA hiring officials to write job vacancy announcements that provide preference to displaced employees?
 - 3. No. Consideration will be given per OPM guidance based on CTAP/ICTAP.
 - iii. Will employees that need to stay located in the DC Metro get any preference points such as those offered for displaced federal employees, even though there is no 'reduction in force'?
 - 4. Please see the response to the previous question.
86. How long is the CTAP/ICTAP letter effective? If I apply for a position that exceeds my current Grade potential will I be obligated to submit a CTAP/ICTAP letter with my application?
- a. CTAP provides employees who have been identified as surplus to receive priority consideration for vacancies in other USDA agencies in their commuting area. CTAP eligibility expires after you resign or are separated.
 - b. ICTAP provides employees who have been involuntarily separated due to directed reassignment to receive priority consideration for vacancy positions at other (non-USDA) federal agencies in the local commuting area for 1 year after separation. Employees must apply for the positions they are interested in being considered for and be found "well qualified". ICTAP priority only applies to vacancies at your same (or lower) grade and with no higher promotion potential than your current position.
87. Can employees request the 'surplus employee' letter quickly in order to have the additional points when applying for other Federal Jobs?
- a. Interagency Career Transition Assistance Plan (ICTAP) begins after an employee receives the Proposal to Remove Letter for declining a directed reassignment.
 - b. In order to be eligible for ICTAP consideration, you must meet the following

requirements:

- i. Must have a current performance rating of at least Fully Successful.
 - ii. Occupy a position in the same local commuting area of the vacancy.
 - iii. Apply for a specific vacancy at or below the grade level you are being/or have been separated from that does not have a greater promotion potential from your last position.
 - iv. Meet the application deadline.
 - v. Be found to be "well qualified".
 - vi. ICTAP employees do not have preference over Internal Agency employees or 10-point veterans' preference eligibles.
88. Will USDA/the Administration proactively help employees, who chose not to relocate, identify and transfer to other opportunities either within USDA or within other U.S. Departments/agencies? This includes making resources available to assist staff in their decision making and to help with resumes, job hunting etc.
- a. USDA's official action will be to offer employees the opportunity to retain their position when the position is needed at a different location.
 - b. Employee's decision to not relocate is a personal decision and the employee always has the option to voluntarily seek other employment.
 - c. USDA will not provide assistance with resumes and job hunting.
89. Does a hiring manager have to select a CTAP/ICTAP eligible employee or can they select someone else?
- a. If a CTAP/ICTAP candidate is not selected, hiring manager must provide strong justification as to why the candidate was not chosen.
90. When will I receive my CTAP / ICTAP letter?
- a. The proposal to remove letter is the document that you will submit when applying for federal positions. There isn't a separate CTAP/ICTAP letter. Proposal to remove letters will be issued approximately 5 business days after the declination is received. CTAP preference is used while you are still a USDA employee and ICTAP kicks in after you are no longer a USDA employee.
91. If you have 20 years of service, aren't you able to apply for competitive service only jobs even if separated? I thought you could come back to the government within 3 years of separation applying for competitive (not open to public jobs). What is the difference between this and ICTAP?
- a. If you have acquired career tenure by completing 3 years of substantially continuous creditable service, you have lifetime reinstatement eligibility. Reinstatement allows you to re-enter the Federal competitive service workforce without competing with the public. You may apply for Federal jobs open only to status candidates. Reinstatement eligibility does not give you selection priority. ICTAP provides eligible displaced Federal employees with inter-departmental selection priority for one year after your agency separates you for declining a directed reassignment to another local commuting area.

Severance Pay

92. Am I eligible for severance?

- a. The following are just a couple of points, for your information. More information will be provided if necessary.
 - b. An employee is either eligible for severance or retirement but not both
 - c. At the time of separation, if an employee is optional retirement or early retirement eligible, they can retire but cannot collect severance
 - d. Resignation is typically deemed as a voluntary separation, therefore, not eligible for severance...EXCEPT if the employee resigns AFTER receiving a Final Decision to Remove letter (after they have received a Directed Reassignment letter, they decline and receive a proposal to remove letter)...or worst case, resign after a RIF notice with specific separation date.
93. What is the total amount of time that an employee can receive severance pay? Is the severance pay limit \$25,000?
- a. The total amount of severance pay an employee can receive is for 52 weeks.
 - b. The buyout/VVIP (if available) amount is the lower of either the severance pay entitlement or the \$25,000 buyout/VVIP amount.
94. How often do we receive severance?
- a. Severance payments will be made biweekly because they must be made at the same pay period intervals that salary payments would be made if the recipient were still employed. The amount of the severance payment is computed using the recipient's rate of basic pay in effect immediately before separation. While severance payments may be given for up to 52 weeks, not all employees will receive payments for 52 weeks. It depends on the total amount of severance due and the biweekly salary of the employee.
95. Do I have to stay until the effective date of Separation to receive Severance?
- a. No, employee may receive severance in two ways: by resigning AFTER receiving the final Decision to remove letter (they can choose their resignation date) or by remaining employed until the Friday before the report date and then being removed from service.)
96. If I get a job in DC, will severance payments stop?
- a. Yes for jobs with DC government, same as with federal jobs.
97. If we decide not to go, do we qualify for DC unemployment benefits? If so, can we also take the severance?
- a. This is a question for DC Unemployment Commission. Each state has its own rules/laws regarding unemployment compensation. What we found in our research is that if an employee is unemployed through no fault of their own (as defined by DC law) they may be eligible for unemployment compensation – this may include removal as a result of declination of a directed reassignment or resignation. However, if an employee receives severance they may not be eligible for unemployment compensation, or it may be delayed and not payable until after all severance is received.
98. If an employee is eligible for the buyout (if offered) and chooses not to apply and then turns down the reassignment, does employee get another buyout option or severance pay?

- a. It would depend on whether a planned buyout opportunity is available at the time.
 - b. If an employee declines the directed reassignment to another location, the Agency will issue a Proposal to Remove Letter. This letter will be followed by a Decision to Remove Letter. After receiving the Decision to Remove Letter, the employee has the option to:
 - i. Resign and receive severance pay if the employee is not retirement eligible, or
 - ii. Voluntarily retire on Optional Retirement. If you come back to Federal service, you would be considered a reemployed annuitant and your salary will be reduced by the amount of the annuity, or
 - iii. Involuntarily Retire on Discontinued Service Retirement (DSR). DSR is an option for employees that are under Involuntary Separation conditions that meet the eligibility of optional retirement or early retirement (Age 50 with 20 years in service or any age with 25 years in service). If you come back to Federal service, your annuity will stop, and your salary will not be reduced.
99. If an employee accepts severance pay, are they still eligible for government retirement (FERS) when they reach retirement age?
- a. Yes, as long as the employee does not take a full refund of his/her retirement contributions when they resign.
100. If severance pay ends upon resuming federal employment, at what point does severance have to be paid back? What if a person is receiving severance pay, and they gain employment that is non-federal? Would the severance end in this case as well?
- a. Severance pay does not have to be paid back whether you resume your career with the Federal government or non-Federal employment.
 - b. Severance pay is terminated only when you are reemployed by the Federal government, government of District of Columbia or when your severance fund is exhausted.
101. What guidelines/factors are used to determine how much severance pay an employee who chooses to resign is entitled to?
- a. Employees who meet the eligibility criteria are entitled to a basic severance pay allowance plus an age adjustment factor if they are over 40 years of age.
 - b. The basic severance pay allowance consists of the following:
 - i. One week of pay at the rate of basic pay for the position held by the employee for each full year of creditable service through 10 years;
 - ii. Two weeks of pay at the rate of basic pay for the position held by the employee for each full year of creditable service beyond 10 years;
 - iii. Twenty-five percent for each full 3 months of creditable service beyond the final full year.
 - c. The basic severance pay allowance is augmented by an age adjustment allowance consisting of 2.5 percent of the basic severance pay allowance for each full 3 months of age over 40 years (Regulation 5 CFR 555.708).

102. If an employee, who is not eligible for retirement accepts a reassignment, and subsequently decides not to go to the new location before the reporting date, are they still eligible for severance?
- The first thing you need to do is to notify the Agency of the change in your decision.
 - Yes, you would be entitled to receive severance pay IF you have been employed by the Federal government for over 12 months.
 - To be eligible for severance pay, an employee must be serving under a Qualifying Appointment, have a regularly scheduled tour of duty, have completed at least 12 months of continuous service, and be removed from Federal service by Involuntary separation for reasons other than inefficiency (i.e., unacceptable performance or conduct).
103. What does the basic severance pay allowance consists of?
- One week of pay at the rate of basic pay for the position held by the employee for each full year of creditable service through 10 years;
 - Two weeks of pay at the rate of basic pay for the position held by the employee for each full year of creditable service beyond 10 years;
 - Twenty-five percent for each full 3 months of creditable service beyond the final full year.
 - The basic severance pay allowance is augmented by an age adjustment allowance consisting of 2.5 percent of the basic severance pay allowance for each full 3 months of age over 40 years (Regulation 5 CFR 555.708).
104. How long after an employee separates will it take to get the first severance check?
- Assuming the employee is eligible for severance, the first severance check is estimated to be issued to the employee 4 weeks after separation.
105. Are taxes taken out of our severance checks per our deductions? Will we get a W-2?
- Severance payments are subject to appropriate deductions for income and Social Security taxes. Severance will be included on the W-2.

Relocation Benefits

106. Will all employees currently working for ERS and NIFA be offered relocation assistance including administrative support staff?
- All permanent employees (to include administrative support staff) that accept the directed reassignment will be placed on relocation orders to receive relocation services.
107. How much time will be given for employees to relocate?
- ERS and NIFA employees received Directed Reassignment letters on June 13, 2019 with a report date of September 30, 2019.
108. Do you plan to let people apply for waivers of the relocation so that they can remain in the area if they meet certain criteria?
- All permanent positions not approved to remain in the DC area will be moved to a new location. Employees in these positions will receive a directed reassignment letter. Those employees that accept the directed reassignment will be placed on relocation orders and will receive relocation assistance.

109. Will relocation assistance services be provided for staff that choose to move? Yes.
- a. Will there be a cap on what is provided, how much can employees expect to receive? As per OPM, agencies have broad discretion on relocation expenses (25% – 50% of basic salary).
 - i. The cap is for relocation incentive/bonus. A determination has not been finalized on relocation incentive, but employees will receive relocation services which the following question details.
 - b. What date will the specifics on what will be available be provided to ERS and NIFA staff?
 - ii. The specifics of what will be available for relocation has not changed since October 2018. The specific cost categories are listed in the next question below. Specific question on employees' unique situation can be addressed by the relocation staff. The contact information for the relocation point of contact is on the Directed Reassignment letter.
 - c. If USDA pays an employee's relocation expenses will there be a requirement that the employee work for ERS and NIFA at the new location for a certain amount of time?
 - iii. The Service Agreement is a 1-year service agreement to stay employed by the Federal Government.
 - d. When will the Department's relocation assistance be provided?
 - iv. Relocation assistance is provided via relocation orders. Employees that accept the relocation will be placed on relocation orders. If relocation incentive is authorized, the incentive will be paid in lump sum once the employee has established permanent or temporary residence at the new location.
 - e. Will relocation be paid for directly from USDA or will employees be covered and reimbursed?
 - v. There will be some out of pocket expenses that may be reimbursed but most expenses will be covered by USDA.
110. What relocation benefits are offered if I accept a directed reassignment?
- a. Transportation & per diem for employee & immediate family member(s)
 - b. *Immediate family*--Any of the following named members of the employee's household at the time he/she reports for duty at the new permanent duty station or performs other authorized travel involving family members:
 - i. Spouse
 - ii. Domestic partner- A committed relationship between two adults of the same sex, in which they
 1. Are each other's sole domestic partner and intend to remain so indefinitely
 2. Maintain a common residence, and intend to continue to do so (or would maintain a common residence but for an assignment abroad or other employment-related, financial, or similar obstacle)

3. Are at least 18 years of age and mentally competent to consent to contract
 4. Share responsibility for a significant measure of each other's financial obligations
 5. Are not married or joined in a civil union to anyone else
 6. Are not a domestic partner of anyone else
 7. Are not related in a way that, if they were of opposite sex, would prohibit legal marriage in the U.S. jurisdiction in which the domestic partnership was formed
 8. Are willing to certify, if required by the agency, that they understand that willful falsification of any documentation required to establish that an individual is in a domestic partnership may lead to disciplinary action and the recovery of the cost of benefits received related to such falsification, as well as constitute a criminal violation under 18 U.S.C. 1001, and that the method for securing such certification, if required, shall be determined by the agency
 9. Are willing promptly to disclose, if required by the agency, any dissolution or material change in the status of the domestic partnership; and
 10. **Certify that they would marry but for the failure of their state or other jurisdiction (or foreign country) of residence to permit same-sex marriage.**
 11. Immediate family definition, specifically domestic partner, only applies if the state/country of residence doesn't allow same sex marriage. If the current location allows same sex marriage they must be married or there is no benefit.
- iii. Children of the employee, of the employee's spouse, or of the employee's domestic partner, who are unmarried and under 21 years of age or who, regardless of age, are physically or mentally incapable of self-support. (The term "children" shall include natural offspring; stepchildren; adopted children; grandchildren, legal minor wards or other dependent children who are under legal guardianship of the employee, of the employee's spouse, or of the domestic partner; and an unborn child(ren) born and moved after the employee's effective date of transfer.)
 - iv. Dependent parents (including step and legally adoptive parents) of the employee, of the employee's spouse, or of the employee's domestic partner
 - v. Dependent brothers and sisters (including step and legally adoptive brothers and sisters) of the employee, of the employee's spouse, or of the employee's domestic partner, who are unmarried and under 21 years of age or who, regardless of age, are physically or mentally incapable of self-support. The maximum amount your spouse or

domestic partner may receive if he/she accompanies you while you are performing PCS travel is three-fourths of your daily per diem rate.

1. If your spouse or domestic partner does not accompany you but travels unaccompanied at a different time, he/she will receive the same per diem rate to which you are entitled.
2. For per diem purposes, you and your spouse or domestic partner are considered to be traveling together if you travel on the same days along the same general route by using more than one POV.
3. Immediate family members age 12 or older receive three-fourths of your per diem rate, and children under 12 receive one-half of your per diem rate. (FTR §302-4.203-§302-4.206)

c. Temporary quarters subsistence expense (TQSE)

- i. Allow temporary quarters with a 30-day initial allowance followed by extensions in 10-day increments not to exceed a total of 60 days. In order to qualify for the extensions, the employee must be able to show that a good faith effort to find suitable quarters has been attempted by providing some or all of the following:
 1. Name of realtor/broker
 2. Addresses of quarters considered and reason for declining
 3. Copy of declined rental applications
 4. Copy of refused purchase offers
- ii. TQSE is reimbursed under the actual expense method unless your agency permits the “lump sum” reimbursement method as an alternative. If your agency makes both methods available to you, you may select the one you prefer.
- iii. For lump sum TQSE reimbursement, you do not document your TQSE. For actual TQSE reimbursement, you must document your TQSE by itemizing each expense and providing receipts as required by §301-11.25.
- iv. You must provide a lodging receipt and a receipt for every authorized expense over \$75 or provide a reason acceptable to your agency explaining why you are unable to furnish the necessary receipt(s). (See FTR §301-11, 301-12)

d. Miscellaneous expense allowance

- i. The miscellaneous expenses allowance (MEA) is intended to help defray some of the costs incurred due to relocating.
 1. No immediate family relocating with the employee: \$650 or the equivalent of one week’s basic gross pay, whichever is the lesser amount
 2. Immediate family members relocating with the employee: \$1,300 or the equivalent of two weeks’ basic gross pay, whichever is the lesser amount

e. Sell & buy residence transaction expenses or lease termination expenses

- i. Items that may qualify as sell/buy residence transaction expenses, provided they are required and customary:
- ii. Broker's fee or real estate commission, and advertising expenses not included in commission (FOR SALE ONLY – not allowed for purchase)
- iii. Cost of an appraisal
- iv. Costs of a title insurance policy, preparing conveyances, other instruments, and contracts and related notary fees and recording fees
- v. Cost of making surveys, preparing drawings or plats when required for legal or financing purposes
- vi. Costs of searching title, preparing abstracts, and the legal fees for a title opinion
- vii. FHA or VA fees for the loan application
- viii. Loan origination fees and similar charges
- ix. Mortgage and transfer taxes and state revenue stamps
- x. Mortgage prepayment fees (not to exceed three months interest on loan balance)
- xi. Mortgage title insurance policy, if required by, the lender
- xii. Owner's title insurance policy provided it is a prerequisite to financing or the transfer of the property
- xiii. Requirements for lease termination expenses
 - 1. Itemize expenses because of lease termination (penalty fee, remaining monthly lease amount under agreement, etc.)
 - 2. If the employee shares the lease with someone else, reimbursement is on a pro rata basis for that portion of the lease for which the employee is responsible
 - 3. Note: Residence transactions require that all people on the title be immediate family members. For example, if an employee's mother is on the title then they might not meet the requirement for full reimbursement.
 - 4. The title to the property for which you are requesting an allowance for residence transaction must be:
 - a. Solely in your name; or
 - b. Solely in the name of one or more of your immediate family members; or
 - c. Jointly in your name and in the name of one or more of your immediate family members. (FTR §302-11.101)
- f. Transportation & temporary storage of household goods
 - i. Shipped between old official station and new official station
 - ii. 18,000 lb. allowance
 - iii. Maybe shipped in multiple shipment but total weight cannot exceed 18,000lbs
 - iv. 60 Days (90 days-OCONUS ONLY) of temporary storage at origin, in transit and/or at destination are automatically authorized
- g. Relocation income tax allowance (RITA)

- i. Relocation allowances are taxable as income. Payment of a relocation income tax (RIT) allowance is authorized to reimburse eligible transferred employees for substantially all of the additional Federal, State, and local income taxes incurred by the employee, or by the employee and spouse if a joint tax return is filed, as a result of certain travel and transportation expense and relocation allowances which are furnished in kind, or for which reimbursement or an allowance is provided by the Government.
- h. Property management services
 - i. Property management services are programs provided by private companies for a fee, which help an employee to manage his/her residence at the old official station as a rental property. These services typically include, but are not limited to, obtaining a tenant, negotiating the lease, inspecting the property regularly, managing repairs and maintenance, enforcing lease terms, collecting the rent, paying the mortgage and other carrying expenses from rental proceeds and/or funds of the employee, and accounting for the transactions and providing periodic reports to the employee.
- i. OCONUS ONLY- Shipment of one privately owned vehicle
 - a. Employees currently stationed in OCONUS will be authorized to ship one POV at government expense. ARS will pay for all necessary and customary expenses directly related to the transportation of the POV, including crating and packing expenses, shipping charges, and port charges for readying the POV for shipment at the port of embarkation, and for use at the port of debarkation.
- j. As an option, USDA will provide a House hunting trip

Authorized Relocation Allowances	
Allowance	FTR Authority
(1) Transportation & per diem for employee & immediate family member(s)	Part 302-4
(2) Temporary quarters subsistence expense (TQSE) limited to 30 days, extendable for additional 30 days	Part 302-6
(3) Miscellaneous expense allowance	Part 302-16
(4) Sell & buy residence transaction expenses or lease termination expenses	Part 302-11
(5) Transportation & temporary storage of household goods	Part 302-7
(6) Relocation income tax allowance (RITA)	Part 302-17
(7) Property management services	Part 302-15
(8) OCONUS ONLY- Shipment of one privately owned vehicle	Part 302-9

111. How often do we have to renew our approval for temporary housing?
- Temporary housing must be authorized every 30-days with employees being approved no more than 120-days total.
112. What if I can't sell my house right away does the government cover the cost for a property management company?
- Yes, if you're unable to sell your house right away, the government will pay the expenses for a property management company. However, this allowance will not be paid more than 1-year from the date of your travel orders.
113. How long does an employee have for closing activities?
- All relocations must be completed within one year of the approved travel orders. Employees may request consideration for an additional year, which must be approved prior to the end of the first year. Please coordinate with your Relocation Specialist on identifying what expenses are covered for closing activities.
114. What happens if I'm in temporary quarters and the government shutdown? Who do I contact?
- If the government shuts down employees who are on official travel status will be contacted and assisted. There are always essential employees working to answer questions and provide support during a shutdown.
 - While payments may be made during this period, the government travel card cannot be used. The Travel Specialist will identify all employees in TQSE status and provide travel advances as deemed as appropriate prior to the shutdown if necessary.
115. When does the clock start for expenses being covered by the government for relocation?
- As soon as your travel orders are approved and issued. Your travel orders are good for exactly 12-months from that date. Temporary storage starts from the date that your temporary storage starts.
116. How are the expenses for the house hunting trip covered?
- An employee must be placed on travel orders for expenses to be covered for the housing hunting trip and other relocation activities. A separate travel agency will be used to assist employees with arranging their house hunting trip. An employee can choose to house hunt without travel orders, but it is at their own expense.
117. Are rental cars covered while living in temporary quarters?
- No, employee are authorized rentals only during the house hunting process.
118. Are employees provided administrative leave for the house hunting trip?
- Yes, employees are provided 10 administrative leave days to complete **all** activities associated with relocating. This includes your house hunting trip, packing your home, taking care of any administrative activities such as obtaining a new drivers license, etc.
119. What expenses are covered if you drive to relocate?
- The government will cover the expenses of mileage for up to two Privately Owned Vehicles (POVs). However, an employee is required to drive a minimum

of 300 miles per day. The trip must be completed within 3 to 4 days. Employees will be provided .20 cents per mile

120. Can an employee use government travel cards and for what? What about their spouses? What about my partner (not married)?
 - a. Government travel cards can be utilized for costs associated with en route travel, temporary living quarters, and house hunting trips for all immediate family members that have been noted on your approved relocation travel orders.
121. How long does an employee have to complete all aspects of the move and the extension times?
 - a. All aspects of your relocation must be completed within one year of the approved date of your relocation travel order. Extension requests must be provided prior to the end of the first year.
122. Will the government move us twice since we don't have a permanent duty station? Can we keep our stuff in temporary storage? Here or at the new location?
 - a. No, the government will only authorize one shipment of household goods trip from your old to new duty station per your relocation travel orders. Items from temporary storage may be delivered to your permanent address in Kansas City. The government will not pay for items to be delivered to one location in Kansas City and then to a final location – that aspect would be considered as a personal expense.
 - b. You may keep your items in temporary storage for 150 days maximum at the government's expense. Should you exceed 150 days of temporary storage, you will be responsible for the additional out-of-pocket cost. The assigned move management company will be able to provide you with your personal, monthly costs should you decide to do so.
 - c. Temporary storage may be utilized here or in Kansas City.