

The Beacon

PROTECTING PUBLIC HEALTH THROUGH FOOD SAFETY

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FSIS will continue to publish *The Beacon* according to our regular schedule. Employees should continue to participate in all-employee town hall calls and look for timely information from their supervisors and the Wednesday Newslines.



Inspection staff at Establishment (Est.) M-86E, a meat plant in Friona, Texas, Under Secretary for Food Safety Dr. Brashears (pictured, left) and FSIS Administrator Paul Kiecker (pictured, second row, second from left) wear face coverings and face shields to help reduce the spread of COVID-19 during their visit. Those pictured in the first row (from left) include Dr. Brashears, Natalie Garza, Frank Rodriguez and Jaime Cigarroa. The second row (from left) Jose Prieto, Kiecker, Hector Orozco and Dr. Mitchell Lewis. Photo by Jaclynn Gilbert, OFO.

On June 28, Under Secretary for the Office of Food Safety Dr. Mindy Brashears and FSIS Administrator Paul Kiecker embarked on a nine-day trip and visited employees at meat establishments in four states. Dr. Brashears and Kiecker thanked in-plant personnel for their dedication to the Agency's mission during the COVID-19 pandemic that America is facing.

Dr. Brashears and Kiecker donned face coverings at each establishment, following the safety requirements and showing their solidarity with field employees. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, properly wearing protective equipment can reduce the spread of the virus, especially when social distancing is not always possible.

To see more photos of Dr. Brashears, Kiecker and your colleagues, see Snapshots from the Field on Pages 6-7.

Continue to Look for COVID-19 Updates

By Laura Reiser, OPACE
Phone: (202) 720-7894

Our inspectors, in-plant supervisors and frontline supervisors consistently demonstrate their professionalism, dedication and resilience as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect our Nation, our Agency and our families. The Secretary, Under Secretary and FSIS Leadership appreciate these characteristics of the mission-critical in-plant personnel (IPP) and others such as employees in the labs and compliance investigators, as well as others who support them.

Town hall meetings continue to be one of the most significant ways of reaching field personnel. The Administrator and FSIS leadership will continue hosting the meetings but have shifted to holding the meetings every other week. Later this year, the meetings may be held once per month and will expand to cover more routine, non-pandemic topics. As new issues arise and situations evolve, please continue to email questions, concerns and

suggestions to the FSIS Feedback box, FSISfeedback@usda.gov. Questions and answers are shared during the town hall meetings. From mid-March to July 15, employees have emailed more than 900 messages to the box. FSIS user notices are distributed as quickly as possible when new information is available, highlighted in the town hall meetings and posted at the FSIS employee information webpage, www.fsis.usda.gov/employees.

That page is on the public-facing website, no eAuthentication or other login is required. Recent issues of *The Beacon* have provided answers to frequently asked questions. Below are more questions and answers, updates and important reminders. Thank you for continuing to ask questions, raise concerns and provide suggestions.

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Share Your FSIS Stories and Snapshots!

Send articles and photos to Beacon@usda.gov. Articles must be original works that have been cleared by your supervisor and contain the author's name and contact information. Submissions should not exceed 250 words. *The Beacon* editorial staff will edit submissions for content and length.

High-resolution photos must be submitted as a separate attachment in .jpg format. Provide a media release form for photos of individuals under 18 years of age.



The Beacon

PROTECTING PUBLIC HEALTH THROUGH FOOD SAFETY

The Beacon Mission Statement

The Beacon newsletter is prepared by the Office of Public Affairs and Consumer Education to provide relevant mission critical information to all FSIS employees.

The Beacon provides employees information about the Agency's proposed regulations, policies and programs; training opportunities; and important employee welfare initiatives to connect employees to the mission and build a cohesive community.

The Beacon enables employees to stay up-to-date with the latest events and see the Agency's mission executed in action.

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- Shayla Mae Bailey, Director & Editor-in-Chief
- Laura Reiser, Managing Editor
- Leo O'Drudy, Deputy Managing Editor
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Deadline for submissions is the first day of the previous month.

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|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Sep. issue – due Aug. 1 | Oct. issue – due Sep. 1 |
| Nov. issue – due Oct. 1 | Dec. issue – due Nov. 1 |

Articles will be considered for publication in the order in which they are received. If your article is time sensitive, please indicate that in the subject line of your submission email. Due to the number of submissions received each month and the limited amount of space, we unfortunately cannot guarantee that your submission will be used.

The FSIS Management Council

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SPOTLIGHT

Hidden Disabilities in the Workplace

Suzanne Hensell, OPACE

Phone: (202) 690-3626

In March, prior to social distancing and building closures, Office of Public Affairs and Consumer Education (OPACE) employees attended and actively participated in a training session on *hidden* disabilities hosted by EEO Specialists Danisha Montague and Valerie Williams. The event was developed at the request of OPACE staff member Tiffanie Newman, a Government Information Specialist on FSIS' Freedom of Information Act Staff. Said Newman, "I requested this training because often I've seen misunderstandings about hidden disabilities in the workplace, and we need to be more mindful that we may not realize people around us have a disability or understand those we are aware of."

The definition of "disability" found in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 is "An individual with a disability is a person who: has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; has a record of such an impairment; or is regarded as having such an impairment." Montague and Williams described a *hidden* disability as a physical, mental or neurological condition that is not visible from the outside, yet can limit or challenge a person's movements, senses or activities. These may include, but are not limited to:

- Autism
- Brain injuries
- Crohn's Disease
- Chronic Fatigue Syndrome
- Chronic pain
- Cystic Fibrosis
- Diabetes
- Epilepsy
- Fibromyalgia
- HIV/AIDS
- Insomnia
- Learning difficulties (e.g., dyslexia)
- Lupus
- Mental health conditions (e.g., depression, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder)
- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Some visual and auditory disabilities.

Because a hidden disability may not be immediately apparent to other people, it can lead to a lack of understanding by them. This, in turn, can affect work, education and social environments of the person with the disability. Montague and Williams offered the following scenario. "Ruth" is 30 and has type 1 diabetes. Ruth goes to the restroom frequently throughout the day to check her blood glucose levels and to administer insulin injections. She frequently suffers from hypoglycemia (low blood sugar levels) as a side effect and is often seen having a sugary snack at her desk to correct it. Some people assume she has a sweet tooth.

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Under Secretary's Column

Growing up on a cattle and cotton farm in Wheeler, Texas, it was normal for me to be in the fields and barns doing daily chores. Like many women in agriculture, my contributions to the field started close to home. Years later, working as a food science professor, I saw how women are a critical part of agriculture and farm operations — not just across the United States, but the globe.



Dr. Mindy Brashears

Yet, for so many women, the resources and means to turn their skills into careers in agriculture are out of reach. Women can face barriers or lack support or mentorship to nurture their interests, introduce them to career paths in science and agriculture, or provide opportunities for advancement. Women navigating their careers, including women in the FSIS workforce, have a responsibility to build a legacy of stewardship, innovation and productivity to help one another succeed in this field. As a female leader at USDA, I am committed to engaging, supporting and recognizing women and their contributions to food safety.

I established an email address, AskFSUS@usda.gov, where employees can share their feedback regarding any issues women face in our workplace. I want to know the specific challenges so that we can address them as an organization. I am hosting a town hall on August 26 at 1:00 p.m. to commemorate Women's Equality Day. We will discuss issues women face at FSIS and celebrate the contributions of the more than 4,200 women that make up the FSIS workforce. Please send comments and questions for the town hall by August 19. Watch for information on how to join the meeting in the Wednesday Newsline and other agency-wide communications.

Women in science, agriculture and public health are a growing community that will only expand as we continue to support each other and strengthen our skills. To the women of FSIS: thank you for choosing to make a difference in the safety of our Nation's food supply and public health.

Administrator's Column

After spending the last several months social distancing in Washington D.C., it was wonderful to be able to visit with field personnel again in June and early July. I had the opportunity to travel to District Offices and regulated establishments in Delaware, Maryland, Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas and Kansas



Paul Kiecker

to meet with inspection personnel face to face — or in this case, facemask to facemask. Under Secretary Dr. Mindy Brashears visited many of these establishments with me. It was truly humbling to see the resolve and dedication of our workforce and to hear firsthand about their experiences over the last few months. I started with the Agency as a food inspector over 32 years ago, and since coming to headquarters, I always appreciate opportunities to return to my roots in the field. Now, more than ever, it is crucial that we bridge the gap between headquarters and field, ensuring that our folks on the front line — all of the in-plant personnel — have the tools and support needed for them to carry out our vital mission.

In addition to traveling to the field, Under Secretary Mindy Brashears and I also had a chance in June to share the story about your efforts during the pandemic with Members of Congress. We told them about your commitment to food safety and about how employees from multiple FSIS program areas and USDA agencies, including the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and Agricultural Marketing Service, continue to step up to ensure inspection coverage. We were crystal clear that our field personnel deserve the credit and recognition for getting us through these challenging times. Members of Congress also expressed their appreciation for everything you do, and for your commitment to ensuring that Americans had uninterrupted access to safe meat, poultry and egg products during these unpredictable times.

The past several months have truly been an “all hands on deck” situation, demanding more of each of us than we imagined. As always, FSIS employees have stepped up and risen to the challenge, working as one team with one purpose. I am so proud of this team. Thank you for everything that you do every day to ensure the safety of our food supply.

April Humbles: On the Road Again

By Suzanne Hensell, OPACE
Phone: (202) 690-3626

As a Compliance Investigator with FSIS' Office of Investigation, Enforcement and Audit (OIEA) Compliance Investigation Division and based in Richmond, Virginia, April Humbles works wherever she is needed in the Southeast Region. After 10 years with the Agency, most of her time is spent in her "mobile office" as she drives to places where products are found after they enter commerce, including distributors, warehouses and food banks.

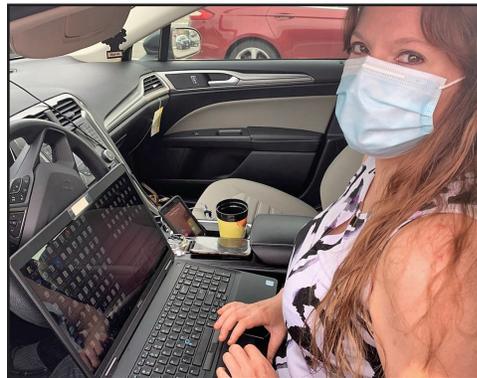
Role of a Compliance Investigator

Humbles investigates violations of food safety, food defense, consumer protection and other requirements of the Federal Meat Inspection Act, the Poultry Products Inspection Act, the Egg Products Inspection Act and the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act, as well as regulations defined in Title 9 of the Code of Federal Regulations. Her responsibilities include controlling misbranded and adulterated products through detentions, civil seizures and voluntary recalls. Humbles develops cases through surveillance and investigation activities to ensure that appropriate criminal, administrative and civil sanctions are carried out according to relevant laws, regulations and directives, often partnering with other government agencies. Supervisory Investigator Craig Seletzky says, "April Humbles' liaison activities with law enforcement agencies in Virginia have increased the ability of FSIS to effectively enforce food safety laws and regulations."

"From the minute I wake up, food safety is on my mind, and I do everything I can to do my job well and enforce the acts, laws and regulations. Beyond that, I make myself available for any special requests like helping the inspection personnel at slaughter plants when needed," said Humbles. Some days she conducts routine surveillances, other days she may interview people affected by foodborne illnesses or meet with distributors to discuss emerging concerns in the food industry. She finds her previous work experience in industry provides valuable insight into the different types of plants, how they work and how problems can occur.

Humbles has participated in foodborne illness outbreak investigations, most recently during last year's multistate outbreak of Shiga toxin-producing *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) O103 infections linked to ground beef. She worked on the plan with the lead investigator, developed traceback and traceforward spreadsheets, worked with investigators all over the country and provided daily reports for updates to headquarters.

Humbles has also played a key role in FSIS' homeland security mission area including preparation, detection, prevention, protection and responses to bio-security threats in the United States. She executes and implements Agency policies related



Compliance Investigator April Humbles checks email in her "mobile office." Photo taken by Investigator Gretta Fuewell.

to criminal investigations throughout the U.S. involving both domestic and imported meat, poultry and egg products. Most of her work involves conducting surveillances which generates her casework. She reviews records,

examines how product is labeled and conducts other research. She has been involved with cases that have spanned multiple regions, states and even the entire nation, depending on the parent company where the issue originated.

FSIS Core Values

Seletzky says Humbles exemplifies FSIS core values, "April collaborates on multiple FSIS work groups and special projects to help develop new policies and procedures that would benefit FSIS employees. She has also collaborated on multiple AssuranceNet/In Commerce System user testing workgroups to improve the efficiency of the computer database that OIEA uses to document surveillance, investigation case files and enforcement actions. April is also a very solutions-oriented investigator. She never identifies a problem without offering a possible solution to the problem she has observed."

Although most of her work is done independently, Humbles said her job also involves teamwork; "Many investigations end up having key players in other parts of the country so we have to coordinate with other team members to assess the whole picture, reviewing case files to ensure accuracy, researching regulations and the acts, and working on FSIS workgroups and special projects."

She enjoys her job and finds her work gratifying; said Humbles, "When people are able to get together for celebrations or just sit down to enjoy a family meal without worrying whether the food will make them sick, I feel proud that I have played a big part in that."

FSIS empowers her to be successful in protecting public health through training. When Humbles was first starting out, she participated in the U.S. Department of Agriculture Investigator

Continued on page 5...

Recent FSIS Retirees

Thank you for your service and dedication to public health.

Name/Position	Duty Station	Years of Service	Name/Position	Duty Station	Years of Service
Ahmed, Taufiq A., CSI	Carpentersville, Ill.	34	Mann, Sonja C., FI-S	Albany, Ky.	8
Ansari, Mohsin, CSI	Chicago, Ill.	22	Masood, Muhammad, SVMO	Norma, N.J.	40
Betts, Dennis L., CSI	Des Moines, Iowa	31	Miksell, Diane R., Sr. Financial Analyst	Urbandale, Iowa	11
Bisby, Edgar E., Supv. CSI	Delphi, Ind.	32	Miranda, Gerardo, CSI	Rincon, Ga.	10
Brase, Terry M., FI-S	Waterloo, Iowa	22	Negrete, Ralph, CSI	Houston, Texas	38
Cannon, Ken R., SVMO	Schuyler, Neb.	14	Paschall, Mary A., FI-S	Springdale, Ark.	31
Cooper, Brian L., FI-PP	Mount Victory, Ohio	30	Pearson, Kenneth M., CSI	Afton, Tenn.	11
Davis, Bonnie J., CSI	Clarksville, Ark.	24	Reynolds, Martha A., FI-S	Springdale, Ark.	24
Dionne, Michael A., Compliance Investigator	Oak Park, Mich.	24	Schrock, Gregory L., CSI	Milford, Ind.	13
Ellsworth, Donna M., FI-S	De Queen, Ark.	25	Seacat, Roger F., FI-S	Dodge City, Kan.	26
Cagle, Susan L., CSI	Jasper, Ala.	35	Stingley Jr., Nadine CSI	Morton, Miss.	22
Greayer, Aleta E., FI-S	Hickory, Ky.	7	Smith, Ladene A., CSI	Kokomo, Ind.	34
Hanna, Michael S., SVMO	Schuyler, Neb.	16	Stewart, Deborah, CSI	Albertville, Ala.	16
Harvey, Barbara A., FI-S	Enterprise, Ala.	21	Thomas, Donald R., CSI	Como, Texas	38
Holifield, Shirley A., FI-S	Morton, Miss.	19	Wemhoff, Pamela J., FI-PP	Wakefield, Neb.	11
Hooks, Linda A., FI-S	Enterprise, Ala.	27	Wilson, Florence A., FI-S	Gadsden, Ala.	11
Jones, Timothy C., FI-S	Dublin, Texas	20	Zachery, Emma L., FI-S	Ashland, Ala.	35

...Continued from page 4

Advanced Training Program offered through the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers and she continues to take refresher training every few years. Interview training through the Federal Bureau of Investigations and simulation training are also essential for a compliance investigator.

Background

A graduate of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) where she earned a bachelor's degree in animal and poultry science with an emphasis on biotechnology, Humbles also received minors in biology and chemistry. She originally chose her major as a pre-veterinarian option. She first learned about FSIS through a consumer safety inspector (CSI) who gave lectures in a college course focusing on beef reproduction. After graduation, she worked for several large meat processing establishments and later served in many roles at federally regulated establishments, including lab technician, production supervisor and quality assurance supervisor. A CSI there encouraged her to apply for an FSIS position. Said Humbles, "These roles taught me the

Faces of Food Safety

fundamentals, processes, implementations and historical data relating to the federal regulations and acts."

Humbles enjoys teaching her two daughters, Shianne and Maia (ages 19 and 12, respectively), about being food safe. "Both my children have learned basic meat and poultry product labeling features, as well as safe preparation, handling and cooking procedures. They joke with me about how I am always looking for violations even when just doing everyday activities such as grocery shopping. They tell me 'Mom, stop doing your job for a minute!'" She has also conducted some outreach at a local high school technical center; "It is wonderful to see the kids get excited about my job and what I do," said Humbles.

When she isn't traveling by car for her work, Humbles enjoys traveling internationally and learning about other cultures. She also likes kickboxing, reading and playing video games to give her mind a break, as well as doing all her own home and car maintenance.

SNAPSHOTS FROM



Amarillo, Tex.

On one of their stops, Dr. Brashears (pictured, right) and Kiecker (pictured, second row, third from left) tour and visit employees assigned to Est. M-245E, a cattle plant in Amarillo, Texas. Pictured, first row, from left: Dr. Muhammad Hafeez, Equilla Green, Maria “America” Perez, Christine Hall, Sue Wilson, Miguel Gonzales, George Escamilla and Dr. Brashears. Pictured, second row, from left: Brittany Melancon, Christopher Rowand, Kiecker, Mark “Hank” Hagberg, Jose Carrillo and Refugio Rodriguez. Pictured, third row: Art Dyke. Photo courtesy of Dr. Muhammad Hafeez, OFO.



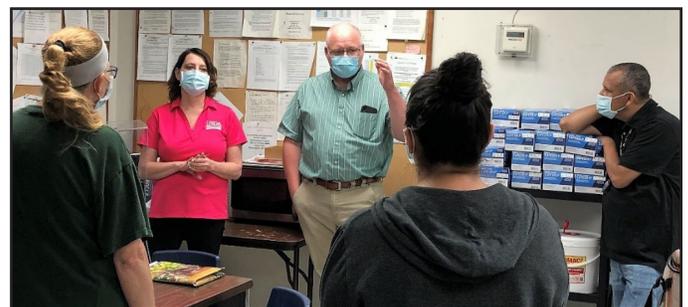
Hereford, Tex.

Dr. Brashears (pictured, second row, right) and Kiecker (pictured, left) at Est. M-675, a beef plant in Hereford, Texas, join Office of Field Operations staff members for a group photo. Pictured, from left: Kiecker, Natividad Perez, Silvia Lopez, Silvia Rodriguez, Pauline Koulavong, Dr. Brashears and Jaclynn Gilbert. Photo courtesy of Jaclynn Gilbert, OFO.



Guymon, Okla.

On June 30, Dr. Brashears and Kiecker visited Est. M-13597, a swine plant in Guymon, Oklahoma. The employees they met and spoke with include (from left) Patrick McCarver, Vince Martinez and Leonel Lopez. Photo by Dr. Muhammad Hafeez, OFO.



Dodge City, Kan.

Inspection personnel at Est. M-86K, Dodge City, Kansas, Dr. Brashears (pictured, far back, left) and Kiecker (pictured, far back, center) practice social distancing during a meet and greet. Pictured, near, from left: Marcia Brown, Dr. Brashears, Kiecker, Teresa Amparan and Jacinto Tonche. Photo by Joe Abbott, OM.

THE FIELD



Cactus, Tex.

FSIS inspection personnel at Est. M-3D in Cactus, Texas, visited with Dr. Brashears (pictured, second row, second from right) and Kiecker (pictured, back row, right) during a lunch break. Dr. Brashears and Kiecker expressed their appreciation for the team's efforts to fulfill the Agency's food safety mission. Pictured, front row, from left: Isela Quezada and Victor Aldaco. Pictured, second row: Dr. Brashears. Pictured, back row: Kiecker. Photo by Dr. Muhammad Hafeez, OFO.



Liberal, Kan.

At Est. M-208A in Liberal, Kansas, Food Inspector Jonathan Mueck provided hands-on training (pictured, left) to Joe Abbott, Office of Management's Chief Human Capital Officer (pictured, front right), for a beef liver inspection. Abbott looked for parasites (liver flukes) in the bile duct. Kiecker (back, green hat) observed the process. Social distancing is not always possible — especially during hands-on training, which is why protective equipment is so important. Photo by Dr. Evan Sumner, OFO.



Holcomb, Kan.

On July 6, Dr. Brashears (pictured, left) and Kiecker (pictured, back row, second from right) started their day at Est. M-278 in Holcomb, Kansas. They met with some of FSIS front-line employees, including Crystal Perez (pictured, front row), Charlie Brannum, Elizabeth Soltero, Cristina Picazo and Teresa Cruz (pictured, back row, from left). Photo by Joe Abbott, OM.



Dodge City, Kan.

Kiecker (pictured, far back, center) and Dr. Brashears (pictured, far back, center right) give words of gratitude to employees at Est. M-262 in Dodge City, Kansas, on July 9. Following the get-together, Kiecker and Dr. Brashears toured the plant. Pictured, back to front, from left: Geovanna DeLuna, Anglita Gonzales, Martina Sandez, Kiecker, Dr. Brashears, Maria Vazquez, Jose Orozco, Agustin Barraza, Bevonica Castillo. Pictured, back of room, from left: Dr. Charles Lange, Dr. Evan Sumner, Dr. Dennis Unruh and Robert Gant. Photo by Joe Abbott, OM.

POLICY UPDATES

FSIS issues notices and directives to protect the public's health. New issuances are available at www.fsis.usda.gov/regulations.

- Notice 32-20, Face Coverings, Disinfectant Wipes, and Hand Sanitizer for the Reopening of USDA and FSIS Facilities
- Notice 33-20, Corrected Item Numbers for Face Shields: Instructions for Open Works Face Shields with Headbands (FSIS-89), Instructions for Open Works Face Shields Attachable to Helmets (FSIS-89A) and Instructions for ERB Safety Face Shields Attachable to Helmets (FSIS-90 and FSIS-90A)
- Notice 34-20, Group Retention Incentive for In-Plant Veterinary Medical Officers/Public Health Veterinarians
- Notice 35-20, Preventing Heat-Stress Illness, Heat Stress Illness Prevention Items
- Directive 5000.8, Verifying Compliance with Requirements for Written Recall Plan Procedures - Revision 2
- Directive 12,600.2, Reimbursable Overtime Inspection Services for Meat, Poultry, and Egg Products - Revision 2

New Retention Incentive Program for In-Plant PHVs

By Bridget O'Connor, OM
Phone: (612) 659-8616

FSIS is pleased to announce the launch of a Retention Incentive Program for in-plant public health veterinarians (PHV) in July 2020. Attracting and retaining veterinarians for our mission-critical in-plant PHV positions is essential to carrying out the Agency's mission and aligns with goals in the *FSIS 2017–2021 Strategic Plan* and the Agency's *FY20 Annual Plan*. In-plant PHVs are key members of the Agency's regulatory team with multi-faceted responsibilities.

FSIS recognizes the significant time, money and effort PHVs invest in the veterinary education to qualify for an in-plant PHV position. The Agency also appreciates the dedication and hard work performed by in-plant PHVs to fulfill the mission. Through this program, eligible in-plant PHVs will be offered a monetary retention incentive based on years of FSIS service in an in-plant PHV position.

- FSIS employees with 5-11 years of service as an in-plant PHV are eligible for bi-weekly retention incentive payments, with no service agreement required.
- Those with 15 or more years of service as an in-plant PHV are also eligible to receive a lump sum retention incentive payment at key 5-year milestones, with the completion of a one-year service agreement, to be paid out in years 15 and at 5-year intervals thereafter — 20, 25, 30 and 35 or more years of service. Eligible in-plant PHVs may enter into service agreements in year 14 and at subsequent 5-year intervals.
- This retention incentive is applicable across all geographic locations where FSIS employs in-plant PHVs.
- Satisfactory performance and conduct are required to receive a retention incentive.

- PHVs will begin receiving a retention incentive payment according to the years of in-plant FSIS service they have completed. The payment is calculated as of the date the program launched, July 1, and at annual reviews thereafter.
- PHVs were placed into a service year group at the time when the program was launched. Service year groups are different from service computation dates (SCDs) and are administratively determined. Recalculations are done at the next annual review.

An employee may not receive a recruitment incentive and a retention incentive simultaneously. Employees with 0-4 years of service are not eligible for a retention incentive. Many PHVs in this category are receiving recruitment incentives. Those receiving recruitment incentives, as well as those who are not receiving recruitment incentives, but have less than the required years of in-plant service for a retention incentive may be eligible for future payments if they meet requirements starting at 5 years of in-plant PHV service. Employee eligibility will be reviewed annually. This incentive program does not replace performance awards. FSIS may unilaterally terminate the program based solely on the management needs of the Agency. Employees under a service agreement are entitled to retain any retention incentive payment attributable to completed service and to receive any portion of a retention incentive payment owed by the Agency for completed service. Termination or reduction of a retention incentive is not grievable or appealable.

PHVs, we thank you for your service and dedication to food safety. For questions regarding the program, email

Continuing Education Program: Tuition Reimbursement for Inspectors

Food inspectors and consumer safety inspectors interested in enrolling in job-related graduate or undergraduate college courses may qualify for tuition reimbursement through the Continuing Education Program (CEP).

Fall 2020 registration is from June 22 to July 27. Applicants must be permanent, full-time employees in good standing with a minimum of one year of FSIS service. Courses must be related to food safety, food science, animal science or meat science and be taken from a nationally accredited college or university. To qualify for reimbursement, courses must be CEP-approved, passed with a grade C or better, and taken on personal time.

The CEP is not a degree program but can support your degree and career development goals. Participants pay tuition up front and are reimbursed a maximum of \$3,000 per fiscal year. There are three enrollment opportunities each year and participants must apply each semester for courses that begin within that semester period.

To apply for the 2020 fall semester, submit your application June 22 to July 27. Download the CEP application and learn more on “IPP Help” at <https://fsishelp.fsis.usda.gov/ipphelp/cep/cep.htm>. For questions or application requests, email the Office of Employee Experience and Development (OEED), at ContinuingEducationProgram@usda.gov or call (301) 344-0734.

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Spotlight: Hidden Disabilities

How should one treat a person with a hidden disability? When aware of the disability, acknowledge the person, be compassionate and helpful, show respect and listen to them. What can we do to help those with hidden disabilities in the workplace? Montague and Williams shared some best practices for managers and colleagues:

- Be open to reasonable accommodation requests and engage in the interactive process.
- Be proactive in responding to requests.
- Provide staff training.
- Participate in awareness events.
- Change the language surrounding disabilities.
- Provide and use a suggestion box.

The Invisible Disabilities® Association (www.invisibledisabilities.org) offers this advice: “the bottom line is that everyone with a disability is different, with varying challenges and needs, as well as abilities and attributes.”

This training event was the first step in bringing awareness to hidden disabilities so that people feel safe and accepted in their place of employment. “I supported the suggestion from Tiffanie and am pleased that the Civil Rights Staff was able to develop a training program on this important topic,” said Carol Blake, OPACE Assistant Administrator.

If you have questions or would like more information about hidden disabilities and the workplace, contact the Office of the Administrator, Civil Rights Staff at AskCRD@usda.gov or 1-800-269-6912.

Tiffanie Newman, OPACE, contributed to this article.

Returning to Work

Reasonable Accommodations

The reasonable accommodation process is designed and intended to find a reasonable solution that *allows the employee to work with an accommodation*. The process is unique for each employee, and each case will be handled and considered individually. All reasonable accommodation requests, including those related to COVID-19, will follow the existing process. There is no special or specific reasonable accommodation for COVID-19 or for employees who have self-certified as high-risk. The outcomes will vary, based on the employee's specific circumstances and the recommendations of their healthcare provider. More information about the Agency's reasonable accommodation program and access to forms is available at ohrportal.fsis.usda.gov/services/reasonable-accommodation-program/ (an eAuthentication account is required). You may also request information and request and submit forms by emailing ReasonableAccommodations@usda.gov.

Question: It appears that the warm weather is not killing the virus that causes COVID-19 and outbreaks are on the rise, especially in North Carolina. The governor has indicated that he may have to re-issue a stay-at-home order. If this happens, will those who have previously self-certified be able to use Code 66, Weather and Safety Leave, again?

Answer: Employees in CDC-defined higher-risk categories still have an option to self-certify. Eligibility for Code 66, Weather and Safety Leave is based on the decision tree provided in the return-to-work guidance for field employees. The guidance also states that if there is a change in circumstances or a change in the criteria in the decision tree, then an employee's eligibility for Code 66 could also change. This would also apply to a situation where a state re-issued a mandatory stay at home order. If this issue arises, contact your supervisor to review your options.

Leave and Leave Codes

Use or Lose Leave

Question: Is there an update on approval to carry over more than 240 hours of annual leave?

Answer: Employees should continue to schedule and take their scheduled annual leave to avoid the possibility of losing an annual leave balance that exceeds 240 hours at the end of the leave year. According to current OPM guidance, agencies may restore annual leave that was forfeited because of "exigency of the public business." This occurs when there is a pressing need for an employee's service and the agency must cancel the employee's pre-approved annual leave because there are no other practical alternatives available to accomplish the work by a given deadline. OPM has determined that COVID-19 represents an exigency of the public business and would apply if FSIS had cancelled any employee's annual leave due to COVID-19. If an *employee* decides to cancel previously scheduled annual leave or to not schedule annual leave because of cancellation of vacation or travel plans due to COVID-19 restrictions, this would *not* constitute an exigency of

the public and would not qualify for leave restoration. There is no new information about the pending requests from USDA and across federal agencies to raise the leave ceiling from 240 to 360 hours. The Department continues to look at solutions, through OPM and within USDA.

FSIS Leave Bank and Voluntary Leave Transfer Program

FSIS offers two programs that can help employees in this situation. *Employees can be recipients of both the Leave Bank Program and the Voluntary Leave Transfer Program at the same time*. The FSIS Leave Bank Program can provide donated leave directly from the leave bank to cover an approved absence from work. Only members of the Leave Bank Program can benefit from donated leave in the bank. The program ran an open enrollment period through May 15. Although the open enrollment period officially closed in June, FSIS will continue to accept new members and donations for those employees that missed the official open enrollment period. To enroll in the Leave Bank Program, complete FSIS Form 4630-6 to donate a minimum of 4, 6 or 8 hours of annual leave, based on your leave category, and submit the form to LeaveBankProgram@usda.gov. The form is available on the FSIS intranet at inside.fsis.usda.gov/fsis/emp/static/global/forms/forms.jsp. Employees without computer access can request a printed donor form from their supervisors and fax it to (202) 720-5124. The long-standing Voluntary Leave Transfer Program is separate and approved recipients can receive donated annual leave directly from their colleagues. To apply for this program, complete Form AD-1046 and submit it to PayandLeaveGuidance@usda.gov. Employees without computer access can request a printed copy of the form from their supervisors. Employees can donate accrued annual leave, use-or-lose annual leave or restored annual leave to the Leave Bank or to a specific individual that is an approved recipient under the Voluntary Leave Transfer Program. Employees concerned that they cannot reschedule their use-or-lose before the end of the year may want to consider donating to these programs to support employees who are experiencing a medical emergency. Full-time employees can donate up to one-half of the leave they earn during the year.

Protective Equipment

Wearing a face covering *and* face shield are mandatory for FSIS IPP as soon as they have access to them. There are enough face coverings, disposable face masks and face shields to provide to all IPP. *Order spare equipment to make sure you have some available in case of an immediate need to replace any damaged equipment*. FSIS has a sufficient supply so IPP can choose the type of covering they prefer to use with their face shield. The Agency is requiring industry to supply inspectors with face coverings when they are providing them for their own employees. If establishments are providing face coverings to FSIS employees, IPP are required to use those to ensure establishment requirements are met.

FSIS has authorized a one-time reimbursement to all FSIS employees who are required to perform FSIS duties outside of their

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residence up to \$50 for the purchase of face coverings or materials to make face coverings. These items must have been purchased prior to May 31 in order to be reimbursed. Specific instructions on how to claim reimbursement are provided in FSIS Notice 19-20.

Claims must be submitted by July 31, 2020.

Question: The plant where I work is no longer requiring their employees to wear face shields. Must we still continue wearing face shields?

Answer: Yes, face shields are still required, as are face coverings with the shields. There is no one solution to COVID-19 or one precaution that people should take to reduce the spread. Social distancing, protective equipment like face coverings and face shields, and proper hand hygiene will continue to be important. Each preventive measure provides some protection from COVID-19, but they provide the most protection when used together. The Agency will continue to require whichever precautions will help keep employees safe, including face shields. Face coverings and masks serve as source control, meaning that they help contain your respiratory droplets. These droplets are problematic when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. Face coverings and masks are effective at protecting the people around you and preventing the spread of COVID-19. Face shields are *both* a source control and personal protective equipment. This means they help protect people around you from your respiratory droplets, and they help protect you against droplets from others.

Question: As state and local public health departments ease restrictions and allow larger public gatherings and social activities, will FSIS also consider easing requirements on face shields and face masks where proper social distancing inside inspected facilities can be maintained?

Answer: The requirement for IPP to wear a face covering and face shield will remain in place for the foreseeable future. States and communities will move at different speeds for lifting restrictions; cases may be increasing in one area and decreasing in another.

Establishment Activities

Enforcing CDC recommendations for COVID-19 or mandating reporting of illnesses falls outside of FSIS regulatory jurisdiction. However, FSIS has been consistent and clear with industry that establishments are expected to follow CDC recommendations to slow the spread of COVID-19 and to inform FSIS of cases of COVID-19 among their employees. FSIS will inform industry of positive findings of FSIS personnel so that each entity can make informed decisions regarding employee health and safety.

Question: Several employees have expressed concerns about establishments adhering to CDC and OSHA guidance for meat and poultry processing facilities.

Answer: FSIS leadership encourages any employee to speak with their local supervisor or frontline supervisor with concerns about establishments not following CDC and OSHA guidelines for COVID-19. This will allow the supervisor to address the issue with establishment management. Employees can also call the FSIS Occupational Safety and Health Specialist assigned to their District. Employees also have the right to call OSHA to report a safety hazard. When calling, the employee should explain that the issue is with the establishment management's adherence to the CDC/OSHA guidelines. The employee should request a response from the establishment's management, not FSIS. For more information, see FSIS Directive 4791-12, Reporting and Correcting Occupational Hazards.

Make Changes to Flexible Spending Accounts

Employees can now make mid-year changes to Federal Flexible Spending Account Program (FSAFEDS) elections. July 1 - Aug. 30, participants enrolled in certain 2020 accounts can make a one-time change to account(s) in which they are enrolled. If re-enrolling for 2021, they may carry over up to \$550 from 2020 to 2021 for certain accounts. To make changes or for more information, go to www.FSAFEDS.com or call 1- 877-FSAFEDS (372-3337).



RECALLS AND PUBLIC HEALTH ALERTS

June 12	A New Jersey establishment recalled approximately 42,922 pounds of ground beef products that may be contaminated with E. coli O157:H7.
June 17	A Texas establishment recalled approximately 83,038 pounds of raw beef products that were not presented for import re-inspection into the United States.
June 28	A Texas establishment recalled approximately 59,800 pounds of fully cooked chicken breast nugget products that may be contaminated with extraneous materials, specifically flexible rubber material.

For more information, go to www.fsis.usda.gov/recalls.

FSIS Leadership Wants to Hear from You

FSIS employees work tirelessly to support our mission to protect the public by preventing foodborne illness. It takes all of us working together to achieve our goals.

Administrator Paul Kiecker encourages employees to send feedback, comments, concerns, ideas, stories of teamwork and more to FSISFeedback@usda.gov.

Your Feedback is Important

Send us comments and successes.

-  Resource sharing
-  Teamwork
-  Solutions



FSIS Employee Connections is an employee-centric publication that focuses on employees' off-duty activities, personal accomplishments and creativity. As a quarterly supplement to *The Beacon*, the *Connections* features the personalities that make up FSIS through employee profiles, inspiring community service and creative visual and literary works.

Send submissions for the Fall 2020 issue by August 15. Email submissions to FSISConnections@usda.gov. Photos should be high-resolution in .jpg format and sent as an attachment and include a detailed description of who is in the image (name, title and program area), what is taking place, the date and location it was taken, and the name, title and program area of the person who captured the image. Include approval from your supervisor. Provide a media consent form for individuals under 18 years of age. If you have questions or need the consent form, contact Laura Reiser at Laura.Reiser@usda.gov or (202) 720-7894, or Felicia Thompson at Felicia.Thompson@usda.gov or (202) 603-2150.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination against its customers, employees, and applicants for employment on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity, religion, reprisal, and where applicable, political beliefs, marital status, familial or parental status, sexual orientation, or all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program, or protected genetic information in employment or in any program or activity conducted or funded by the Department. (Not all prohibited bases will apply to all programs and/or employment activities.)

FSIS employees and applicants for employment wishing to file an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) complaint must first contact an EEO Counselor by calling (301) 504-7755 or 1-800-269-6912, or writing to the FSIS Civil Rights Division at USDA/FSIS, 5601 Sunnyside Avenue, Building 1, Room 2260, Mail Drop 5261, Beltsville, MD 20705. Contact must be made with an FSIS EEO Counselor within 45 calendar days of the date of the matter alleged to be discriminatory or, in the case of a personnel action, within 45 calendar days of the effective date of the personnel action.